EMBRACING THE POWER OF TRADITION:
DECENTRALIZATION IN MOZAMBIQUE, 1992–2000

SYNOPSIS

The government of Mozambique began to decentralize in the early 1990s as the country emerged from 16 years of civil war. The minister of state administration, Aguiar Mazula, pushed for greater citizen involvement at local levels of government, an agenda that opened the sensitive issue of what role would be played by traditional leaders, or chiefs, who wielded strong community influence. Because many chiefs had cooperated with the country’s former colonial powers, the ruling party sidelined traditional leaders and played down related customs when it came to power in 1975. Mazula faced stern political opposition to his belief that the state should recognize the role of traditional interests at a local level. He built diverse support for his ideas, and his successors at the ministry reached a compromise between groups that wanted to involve traditional authorities and factions that regarded the chiefs with suspicion. The move reversed the state’s history of opposition to the chiefs while limiting the chiefs’ influence over local government.

_Tumi Makgetla drafted this policy note on the basis of interviews conducted in Maputo, Mozambique, in January 2010._

INTRODUCTION

When Aguiar Mazula, a young cabinet minister, decided in the early 1990s that the Mozambican government needed to reverse its policy on traditional leaders, he undertook to challenge more than a decade of political orthodoxy. Mazula served as labor minister in the mid-1980s and then minister for state administration until 1994. He was part of a group of young reformers within the ruling party, the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO, or the Liberation Front of Mozambique), who came together to find a solution to the country’s grinding civil war (1977–1992). This circle saw the need to broaden the party’s support base and reach out to groups that the party had historically marginalized. They operated in secret, wary of the security services that regarded them as young upstarts trying to destabilize the old order. The president sympathized with their views but had to tread cautiously, because supporting them would mean taking on party stalwarts who wanted a military victory with no compromise.

The peace agreement ending the war in 1992 gave a green light to reformers such as
Mazula to push more aggressively for change in the highly centralized Mozambican state. “In the beginning, my idea of decentralization [was] to bring power to the people,” he said, explaining that he wanted to make the government more responsive to local concerns. Realizing this vision, however, would require him to change the position of the ruling party on power sharing and working with locally influential individuals, such as chiefs.

The nature of the state was one of the challenges he confronted. Mozambique was a one-party state from independence in 1975 until 1990, under the rule of FRELIMO. Although the state had an administrative network throughout the country, service delivery was top-down and structures of representation were weak. Further, the government’s opponent in the civil war, the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO, or the Mozambique Resistance Movement), had concentrated support in the north and central regions of the country. For the ruling party, creating local opportunities to contest power could mean handing state power to RENAMO on a plate. Mazula’s critics also pointed out that the citizenry had low levels of education and argued that those citizens did not have the capacity to participate in local state administration.

The government’s uneasy relationship to traditional authority also made decentralization a thorny subject for the ruling party. Because chiefs and other traditional authorities wielded significant influence in many parts of Mozambique, any effort to democratize local government would need to address their role in local communities. Historically, FRELIMO rejected traditional beliefs and customs, choosing not to recognize local chiefs out of an ideological commitment to modernization. FRELIMO also dismissed chiefs as “collaborators” because the former Portuguese colonial state relied on many of them as intermediaries. The party developed relationships instead with a parallel form of community organization, a system of grassroots party structures called “dynamizing groups,” led by party secretaries. Yet chiefs retained their local influence, and the guerrilla movement courted their support, capitalizing on FRELIMO’s opposition to tradition. Many chiefs resented their marginalization and were hostile to the ruling party. Mazula believed that the state had to accept and deal with the reality that many Mozambicans held traditional beliefs and respected chiefs. He wanted the state to find a way to work with traditional authorities, a view that put him on a collision course with FRELIMO’s old guard.

Mazula pushed his decentralization agenda against the backdrop of a peace process involving wide-scale democratization and reconstruction efforts. The 16-year war took a heavy toll on the state’s administrative infrastructure: 60% of the country’s primary schools closed and almost 50% of its first-level health posts shut down. About one million people died in the war, and roughly a quarter of the population took refuge in other parts of the country or neighboring countries. Multilateral and bilateral donors played a significant role in Mozambique’s reconstruction after the peace accord in 1992, especially by paying for the demobilization of more than 70,000 soldiers. The country also prepared for multiparty elections in 1994, according to the terms of the peace deal. FRELIMO won 129 seats in the National Assembly to RENAMO’s 112, and maintained significant control over state institutions after winning the presidential election.

The Mozambican experience provides insights into the challenges of decentralizing the state where locally influential groups have been marginalized from formal government structures. Mazula wanted to shift state power to people in the districts and provinces, which would require the state to reverse its policy on
traditional authorities and recognize that many people respected their local chiefs. He prepared the ground for this policy change by building high-level support and public backing for the idea that the government should allow citizens to maintain their traditional beliefs. His efforts to solidify these ideas in legislation slowed with the 1994 elections, which showed that the opposition RENAMO posed a greater threat to his party than anticipated. The final legislation on traditional authorities and decentralization that was passed after the elections therefore embodied a compromise between his expansive vision and the interests within his party that opposed working with local chiefs.

THE CHALLENGE

At the end of the civil war in 1992, the state was heavily centralized. The constitution gave communities little opportunity to shape administration in their locales and concentrated decision-making power in the national government. As a result, the central government had to manage state administration in the country’s 10 provinces and 128 districts. The high degree of centralization meant that district administrators constantly pestered Mazula, in his role as minister for state administration, for advice about trivial matters. One of his advisers, for instance, said that many requests involved tablecloths used at official functions. Because the tablecloths were government property, district staff needed permission to throw them away if, for example, someone burned a hole in one while ironing. “Should we sew them back together or discard them?” administrators asked. Mazula wanted to break this reliance on central government decision-making. He believed that communities were in a better position to make decisions about administration in their areas, not just on matters such as tablecloths but on critical issues such as local budgets.

Mazula's concept of a decentralized state faced formidable challenges. First, the country's generally low levels of education worked against his vision of local decision-making. Mazula’s critics said that education levels were too low for most people to meaningfully participate in state administration. In 1996, illiteracy was 55% for men over the age of 15 and 79% for women. These statistics reflected the twin legacies of the civil war, which disrupted teaching and destroyed schools, and Portuguese colonial rule, under which most black Mozambicans received a poor education.

Mazula’s decentralization proposals also met opposition from people within FRELIMO who thought his program would weaken the state. For much of its history, the party had espoused the need for a strong central government, maintaining its formal commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology until 1989. The party’s old guard continued to resist giving up power, arguing that decentralization would enervate the central government precisely when the country’s reconstruction agenda called for a strong developmental state.

Further, Mazula’s vision of a decentralized state would require the party to alter its position on traditional authorities. Mazula recognized that people still respected chiefs as local leaders. Any effort to allow communities greater influence over state administration locally would need to acknowledge these power structures, he concluded.

Historically, FRELIMO rejected traditional belief systems in its efforts to make Mozambique a modern nation-state. Mozambique is home to many ethnic groups that are concentrated in different parts of the country. In the fight for independence in 1974, FRELIMO stressed the Mozambican national identity over narrower ethnic identities to build a united front against the Portuguese. After independence, President Samora Machel had adopted the slogan “Kill the tribe to build the nation.” FRELIMO’s Marxist-Leninist
philosophy also inspired the party to promote modernization, industrialization and science as ideals and to reject feudal hierarchies and tradition. Thus, in addition to denouncing traditional chiefs, the party rejected healers and local customs such as bridewealth, or payments made by a groom or his family to the relatives of the bride. This ideological stance led the party to ban organized religion.

FRELIMO also marginalized chiefs because they worked with the Portuguese to enforce colonial policies. The Portuguese colonial administration gave chiefs, or regulos, money and uniforms in return for their help in implementing colonial policy. For example, the Portuguese relied on chiefs to force black Mozambicans to work for the colonial state and its companies. The colonial policy of forced labor generated considerable opposition toward the Portuguese, and FRELIMO regarded the chiefs as collaborators and sell-outs. When the party came to power in 1975, it distanced the state administration from traditional authorities, and chiefs lost their colonial privileges. By 1992, some of the party’s leadership was still hostile toward traditional hierarchies.

Another challenge to Mazula’s suggestion that the state cooperate with traditional authorities in local administration was the traditional leaders’ support for the opposition. During the civil war, RENAMO courted local chiefs and often relied upon them to administer the territories that it captured. While official doctrine rejected tradition and traditional authorities, many people continued to observe traditional practices. An anthropologist who worked in Mazula’s ministry described this as the difference between “day talk,” the official discourse hostile to tradition, and “night talk,” that is, clandestine support for traditional institutions. Several studies by anthropologists found that some communities supported RENAMO so that they might freely maintain their traditional beliefs. Mazula said that FRELIMO pushed traditional authorities into the arms of the opposition.

A final problem that emerged when Mazula recommended the state decentralize was a concern for what would happen to the secretaries of the dynamizing groups. These groups emerged in the post-independence period as FRELIMO wiped away many colonial structures of administration. The groups served a dual function, sending communities’ requests up the party hierarchy and communicating messages down to community members. In some cases, the secretaries of these groups came into conflict with the local chiefs. In other cases, reflecting the ambiguities of the society’s attitude toward traditional beliefs, the secretaries were chiefs. Mazula knew that if he wanted to enhance community representation, he would need to reconcile the roles of the chiefs and party secretaries.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

In 1991, Mazula invited anthropologist Iraê Lundin to set up a unit in the ministry to research traditional leadership and to help him make the case for state reforms. Lundin was a Brazilian émigré to Sweden who moved to Mozambique in the mid-1980s. Mazula surprised her with a visit to her office at Eduardo Mondlane University, where she taught anthropology. He told her that he had heard about her work on traditional authorities and asked her to help him with his project. She agreed and began working for him in January 1992. Lundin brought five former students with her as researchers, one to work on each of the country’s five main language groups.

Prior to this invitation, Lundin had developed an understanding of the influence of traditional leadership in Mozambique through her work with the army. The army had asked for her help to explain behavior among villagers. Army officials had described their experiences to her, saying, for example, that they would liberate
thousands of people from areas controlled by RENAMO but the next day, everyone would be gone. In other instances, the army might liberate just a few people, and the next day thousands of other people would join them.

Through her research, she discovered that the key variable was traditional leadership. In the first case, the liberated individuals did not include a traditional authority, and so the people deserted the newly freed territory. In the second case, the liberated individuals included someone with traditional status, such as a chief or healer, so the rest of the community came to join him. This research reinforced Lundin’s perception that traditional leadership played an important role in many communities around the country.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In his efforts to create a space for traditional belief, Mazula needed to move cautiously, building political support and gathering research to back his proposals that the state recognize traditional authorities. He began by securing the president’s backing.

Mazula recalled that he approached then-President Joaquim Chissano while the two were on a flight to the Ivory Coast near the end of Mozambique’s civil war. “We are making [a] mistake denying our social reality,” Mazula told the president. He said that RENAMO had pledged to overturn the state’s position on religion and traditional authorities if it won the civil war. RENAMO leaders said they would offer the chiefs a role in land affairs. Mazula persuaded the president that there was some merit in giving the matter a thorough consideration. “OK, you must start first and bring a project for me to study,” Mazula recalled the president telling him.

With the president’s go-ahead, Mazula created the unit in his ministry to be headed by Lundin in 1991. The Ford Foundation funded its initial work after a series of conversations between the minister and the foundation’s program officer, anthropologist Peter Fry. Fry heard from the U.S. ambassador to Mozambique of Mazula’s interest in working with traditional authorities. Mazula explained to Fry that he wanted to research the role of traditional authorities in the colonial and postcolonial periods to evaluate how the state might reincorporate them into its administration. He later directed Lundin and her five researchers to investigate those issues.

An important development in the ministry’s efforts to recast the government’s line on traditional authorities took place when the research team presented its findings to the public. In April 1993, the ministry organized an international conference for Lundin and her team to present their research. It was a daring move, according to Lundin, because the subject of traditional authority was still taboo. The study confirmed that traditional authorities enjoyed significant support around the country and that many people attributed a number of social ills to the state’s denial of tradition. The researchers recommended that the government officially recognize traditional authorities as it decentralized state structures.

A critical moment occurred when the researchers concluded their presentation and opened the discussion. A prominent member of Mozambican society, Amaral Matos, stood and announced his backing for the study. Matos was a senior FRELIMO member and came from a well-known family. “This is it,” he enthusiastically told the crowd. His eagerness to endorse the findings spurred public support and opened the door to high-level discussions of the importance of tradition and customs in Mozambican culture, said Lundin.

In 1994, the national assembly passed a bill that enabled citizens to elect representatives in rural and urban municipalities. Not long after, the newly elected assembly called for a new law on decentralization, which slowed the momentum of Mazula’s reform efforts.
Lundin’s group began a new project in 1994 with the aim of deepening the team’s previous research and helping the ministry to develop policy proposals on the state’s relationship with traditional authorities. Funding for this project came from the United States Agency for International Development and the African-American Institute as part of a broader program called “Decentralization and Traditional Authority.” Most of the work of the second research project occurred after Mazula left the ministry in 1995 to head the Ministry of Defense.

Alfredo Gamito, who had served as governor in the northern province of Nampula, took over as minister for state administration and served until 2000. In Nampula, a rural province, he had observed firsthand the continued significance of traditional power structures.

Lundin’s new project involved a series of workshops in the countryside. Her researchers coordinated workshops in each of the provinces, selecting rural districts as the sites of these discussions rather than provincial capitals, to prevent an urban bias in the research. Each workshop assembled a diverse group of attendees, including chiefs, government officials, religious leaders, political party members and members of the private sector. An average of 125 people attended each workshop, and participants broke into smaller groups to discuss the role of traditional authorities and decentralization for a day and a half. They then returned to discuss their comments in a plenary session. The workshop organizers recorded the discussions and transcribed them. In addition to reports on the workshops, the researchers wrote five thematic brochures based on the general findings of the project.

This project laid the groundwork for the ministry to draft legislation on traditional authorities in 1996. The law declared that the government’s recognition of traditional authorities was integral to local government, and it proposed that the state pay salaries to chiefs. The national cabinet of ministers decided to shelve the plan, however, and chose to rely instead on informal collaboration with traditional authorities. This law was one of several pieces of legislation on traditional authorities that stalled in the mid-1990s because of opposition from within FRELIMO. For example, Sérgio Vieira, a FRELIMO member of Parliament, managed to stymie a draft law that would have involved chiefs in settling land disputes, by arguing that it replicated colonial distinctions. Vieira said that the legislation resurrected colonial distinctions between assimilated Africans covered by Portuguese law and indígenas, or non-assimilated Africans covered by customary law.

The Ministry for State Administration saw that it would have to improve its framework for working with the chiefs in order to win over opponents like Vieira.

A winning strategy emerged under José Chichava, an economics professor who took over from Gamito as minister for state administration in 2000. Chichava began by meeting with the president to discuss how the state could work with traditional authorities. The minister then organized a group in his ministry to tackle those issues under his management.

Within a year of coming into office, Chichava’s officials drafted a decree for the president to sign that recognized traditional authorities as “community authorities.” Unlike previous pieces of legislation that attempted to carve out a unique role for the chiefs, this law included other community representatives within the category of community authorities. The decree also identified secretaries of dynamizing groups as community authorities, along with the somewhat ambiguous category of other leaders recognized as such by their communities. The decree required subnational levels of government to consult community
authorities on how to involve community members in state projects and programs. The decree represented a compromise between the faction that felt that FRELIMO could not sideline its erstwhile supporters, the secretaries of the dynamizing groups, and those who wanted the state to recognize traditional leadership.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

In order to move forward his proposal to decentralize the state and recognize traditional authorities, Mazula had to deal with a vocal faction of conservative opponents within FRELIMO. This faction comprised hardliners who did not support the party's decision to sign a peace agreement and would have preferred a military victory over RENAMO. Although President Chissano had filled his cabinet with party leaders open to democracy and seeking peace, the hawks still wielded influence through the party's legislative and executive structures.

In a successful effort to counter this opposition, Mazula reached beyond the government and party. He worked hard to build support among diverse groups that shared his dedication to change. He held small group discussions with influential individuals, and he courted leaders of organized religion, realizing that the party's denial of religion caused many people to oppose the government. Chissano had shown tacit support for organized religion by attending church services when his predecessor had died.

Generating enthusiasm for his reforms, Mazula also found that many academics and young Mozambicans sympathized with his initiatives because they felt constrained by the government's restrictions. Mazula met with representatives of these segments of society and like-minded cabinet minister in small meetings where they discussed how to advance the reform agenda. "The people want freedom," he said. "That's what I realized."

ASSESSING RESULTS

Lundin recalled that when RENAMO's leader, Afonso Dhlakama, met her, he said she was "the lady who gave the regulos to FRELIMO." His comments reflected the government's success in winning over traditional leadership to support the state's agenda. The government no longer regarded traditional leaders as thorns in its side but as allies in local government administration. The ministry had a record of about 5,000 traditional authorities that it worked with around the country. The chiefs helped local administrators to collect taxes and promote government programs, among other things.

The resolution of the civil war and the declining fortunes of RENAMO as a political entity reduced the challenge of incorporating traditional authorities into local administration. Immediately after the war, RENAMO controlled about a quarter of the country's territory and lost the 1994 presidential elections to FRELIMO by only four percentage points. A decade later, this margin had grown to more than 30 percentage points.

The state's efforts to develop a relationship with traditional authorities came at a price. In early 2010, each chief, as a community authority, received about 450 meticais (US$13) a month from the national government. This stipend cost the state about US$780,000 a year. The chiefs also received uniforms, army-like outfits with stripes on the shoulders, to indicate their status. The law recognized two levels of chiefs: First-degree chiefs were part of a royal lineage, while second-degree chiefs were appointed by more senior chiefs. In addition, the chiefs received national flags to display at their residences. In this manner, traditional authorities gained state recognition, status and resources.

Recognizing traditional authorities in this way involved an ideological compromise. Communities selected leaders according to their local customs, which may or may not have
involved a democratic process. The ministry could send officials to help a community select a leader in the case of a dispute that local officials could not resolve. There were no regulations to govern the decision, for example, to ensure that all members of the community approved the outcome. This process of selection operated on the basis of tradition as a source of legitimate rule, as opposed to the conventional democratic selection process of electoral competition. The government had not established mechanisms to ensure the accountability of chiefs to their communities.

One of the few protections against recognized chiefs abusing their influence over local administration lay in their limited authority. The chiefs played a consultative role and advised local administrators on decisions affecting their communities. Subsequent policies, however, expanded their involvement in assisting state officials, such as in efforts to decentralize policing.

REFLECTIONS

In early 2010, Mazula, by then retired, looked back at the state’s efforts to embrace traditional authorities and concluded that those efforts had gone too far. “Politicians are making profits for them,” Mazula said, referring to the chiefs. “My idea was not like that.” In his view, the government needed only to acknowledge the reality that many communities respected traditional authorities and held traditional beliefs. He hoped that chiefs would engage in electoral competition to enter the state and represent their supporters, realizing that this might require them to attain higher levels of formal education.

Mozambique’s approach to traditional authorities represented a political compromise. It allowed reformers to push a decentralization agenda to empower local communities and, in the process, make peace with traditional authorities. It gave citizens new opportunities to influence government at the local level.

However, the approach also bolstered the legitimacy of a system of representation that was at odds with some aspects of democratic government. The laws governing the relationship between chiefs and the state did not ensure that chiefs were truly representative of their communities, or accountable to them. Although the system in place in 2010 offered the potential for greater local influence over state administration, there was no guarantee.
Notes:

6 Fry, Peter. p. 3
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