

Mozambique returns to war, as opposition claims electoral ‘fraud’

Journalists and statisticians are trying to determine if Mozambique opposition leader Afonso Dhlakama was cheated out of the presidency, or if he is just a bad loser, write Joseph Hanlon and Johan Ahlback.

Mozambique is usually cited as one of Africa’s post-conflict success stories. The civil war ended in 1992 and Renamo’s guerrilla force was transformed into the opposition in parliament. Renamo head Afonso Dhlakama has contested and lost all five multi-party presidential elections, but he says he won them all and was cheated. Renamo guerrillas began shooting at traffic on the main north-south road in mid-February, and Dhlakama promises an armed takeover of government in six provinces in March.

Losers often claim fraud, and it is not just an Africa problem. In the 1941 US film *Citizen Kane*, newspaper owner Charles Foster Kane is standing for governor. Between the closure of the polls and the announcement of the results, the newspaper awaits with two possible front pages. One is headlined “KANE ELECTED”; the other says “FRAUD AT POLLS!”



Still from the film *Citizen Kane*

Mozambique is unusual in that the press is free and elections are quite transparent. Counting is done at each polling station, observed by parties and media, and the results posted, making parallel counts possible. For the past few elections, Joseph Hanlon edited an election newsletter. More than 100 Mozambican journalists in all parts of the country, many from community radio stations, reported on the campaign, voting and counting. And they reported misconduct. Former liberation movement Frelimo has won all national elections (although the opposition has won local elections in some cities) and it used its predominant position. During the campaign, Frelimo candidates used state cars and police harassed the opposition. But in each election, we reported this in detail, for example with the registration number of state cars being used, names of people arrested, and so on. In this era of mobile phones the response was rapid; there were phone calls for the capital, Maputo, and misconduct was toned down. We reported voting fraud, notably ballot box stuffing and invalidating opposition ballot papers to increase the Frelimo vote – which led to changes in the law.

In 2013 local elections, district and provincial election officials changed the results in the town of Gurué to give the victory to Frelimo. Our reports and the parallel count showed an opposition win. The Constitutional Council, under media pressure, overturned the result and forced a rerun of the election, which was won by the second opposition party, the Mozambique Democratic Movement.

Dhlakama came second in all five presidential elections. Was the fraud enough to have deprived him of the presidency? He is convinced it was and 24 years after the peace accord he has decided to use guns to take the power he thinks he deserves.

But did Dhlakama ever really win? There is a growing area of statistical election forensics and Johan Ahlback has applied statistical tests to the four elections for which we have data. He finds that 1994 and 1999 elections seem clean, and that while ballot box stuffing and invalidation of opposition ballot papers did take place in both 2004 and 2009, it appear much more prevalent in 2009.

We are presenting a [LSE Public Lecture](#) to explain our work on Mozambique elections on Wednesday 16 March, at 6.30 pm in the LSE Hong Kong Theatre, Clement House, on the Aldwych.

So, the obvious question: It is possible Dhlakama won? We don't think so. In the 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections, Dhlakama never won more than 37 per cent of the vote. It would have required massive fraud, involving more than half a million votes, to close that gap. We see fraud, but not massive fraud.

We think the statistics show Frelimo would have convincingly won fair elections. However, the growing fraud suggests that some in Frelimo are increasingly worried that the party cannot win an honest election. And our journalists report those responsible for misconduct are promoted rather than chastised. Afonso Dhlakama is convinced that he won all five elections, and the obvious misconduct only adds to that belief. As Renamo returns to violence, Frelimo and all Mozambicans will see that unnecessary cheating has a higher than expected price.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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