



## Mozambique: More Repression Will Reverberate at Home and Abroad

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# Executive summary

With Frelimo having secured another five years in power following the October 2024 general elections, Mozambique's future seems to hold increasingly repressive rule and socio-political instability. While the country's political elite is aware of its lack of legitimacy and refuses to relinquish power, it also cannot stem the rising tide of popular dissent. This has wider consequences for the entire region. Mozambique holds up a mirror to Frelimo's sister liberation movements, which are also losing support and likely alarmed by events. The country is also the site of a key logistics network for its landlocked neighbours, providing a gateway to and from global markets. This means that its political challenges will be felt across the region's economies. The response from affected leaders should be decisive. Unfortunately, as their actions to date have signalled, this is unlikely to be the case.

## Introduction

Mozambique is at a political crossroads. It has experienced heightened political instability since the October 2024 general elections, which were marked by irregularities – including vote tampering and a biased electoral commission – and higher-than-average levels of popular protest. The results extended the rule of Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), which has been in power since the country's independence from Portugal in 1975. The widespread political protests reveal the loss of legitimacy of the ruling party in the eyes of ordinary citizens – and expose the extent to which socio-economic grievances are burdening the population, particularly the youth.

The unrest has implications beyond the country's borders. As the new administration continues to restrict political debate, this policy insight examines the impacts on the political environment, policymaking, civil society and the Southern African subregion, particularly in light of regional leaders' failure to respond decisively to the crisis.

## Major miscalculations

Less than two weeks after the elections, two opposition members – lawyer Elvino Dias and party election agent Paulo Guambe, from the newly formed Optimistic Party for the Development of Mozambique (Partido Otimista pelo Desenvolvimento de Moçambique [Podemos]) – were shot dead in Maputo. This happened two days before Podemos was due to lead a demonstration against the provisional election results, which showed an early lead for Frelimo in Parliament and for its presidential candidate, Daniel Chapo. Civil society decried the killings as politically motivated<sup>1</sup> – Dias was the attorney

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Tembe, Natasha Booty and Charles Haviland, "[Mozambique Opposition Lawyer Shot Dead](#)", *BBC*, October 19, 2024.

for opposition politician and presidential candidate Venâncio Mondlane, who ran independently but with support from Podemos. Mondlane has long been a thorn in Frelimo's side – in 2023 he contested the mayorship of Maputo under the banner of Renamo (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana), the long-standing opposition party, and mobilised demonstrations when he alleged that fraud and intimidation had handed Frelimo's mayoral candidate the win.<sup>2</sup>

If Frelimo had intended for the political killings to discourage further dissent, the move backfired spectacularly. Not only did the planned demonstration go ahead as scheduled but it also triggered a prolonged period of unrest that only began to subside into an uneasy calm three months later, at the end of January 2025. The protests, initially fuelled by anger at the alleged vote rigging and the likelihood of Frelimo extending its decades-long rule, were inflamed by the attempt to silence the opposition. They soon came to encompass broader socio-economic grievances, including poor infrastructure development and limited employment opportunities. The unrest spread across the country and, beyond Maputo, was most acute in the cities of Beira, Inhambane and Nampula.

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Mozambique's socio-economic challenges are immense. Consumption poverty levels have risen from 46% to 65%<sup>3</sup> in the past decade – meaning that more than half the population earns less than \$1.90 a day.<sup>4</sup> Despite its abundant natural resources – including coal and minerals – the country remains one of the poorest in the world. In an Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2022, youth aged 18–35 identified limited economic opportunities and lack of access to health services, electricity and water as the country's most pressing problems.<sup>5</sup> That two-thirds of the population are under the age of 25 indicates the extent to which this sentiment is widespread.

The violence reached its peak between 24 and 28 December 2024, after the Constitutional Court confirmed Frelimo as the victor, albeit with a reduced vote share. It revised Frelimo's parliamentary share from 78% to 71%, and adjusted Chapo's presidential victory from 71%

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2 Paul Fauvet, "Venâncio Mondlane Resigns from Renamo", *AIM*, June 3, 2024.

3 Government of Mozambique, *Estação Estratégica Nacional 2025–2044* (National Development Strategy 2025–2044) (Ministry of Economy and Finances, 2024).

4 World Bank, "Poverty and Equity Brief Mozambique", April 2021.

5 Afrobarometer, "Mozambican Youth's Dissatisfaction Marked By Concern About Water Insecurity, Jobs", October 28, 2024.

to 67%.<sup>6</sup> Protests during this period were overshadowed by episodes of looting in Maputo, forcing businesses to close and disrupting movement across the city.<sup>7</sup>

The court ruling was particularly striking for the obvious interference by Frelimo, highlighting the extent to which judicial independence is undermined in Mozambique and how separation between party and state is virtually non-existent. The Constitutional Court did not explain how it reached its findings or why these differed from those put forward by the National Electoral Commission (Comissão Nacional de Eleições [CNE]). It also did not explain how the revision did not trigger fresh elections, if it had indeed identified vote-counting errors or interference by the CNE. Ultimately, the episode underscored Frelimo's attempt to quell dissent by strongarming institutions.

### The episode underscored Frelimo's attempt to quell dissent by strongarming institutions

But this too backfired, once more revealing the depth of citizens' frustration with the party, not only for its disregard for the democratic process but also for wider corruption and its impact on development. The hidden debt scandal is a striking example of the extent of theft in the top echelons of government and one that still weighs on the economy in the form of high debt-servicing costs. These costs, in turn, are diverting funds from much-needed development and social support. In 2016, international media revealed that, between 2013 and 2014, a clique of government officials created three state-owned companies that took on \$2.2 billion in debt, ostensibly for a project related to tuna fishing and maritime security.<sup>8</sup> The loans were backed by undisclosed state guarantees and a large portion of the funds went missing. The money has never been repaid. Only former finance minister Manuel Chang, who signed off on the loans, was prosecuted in a US court in 2024, despite the Mozambican government's best efforts to have him stand trial in Mozambique.<sup>9</sup> The failure of Mozambican courts to effectively prosecute senior officials from Frelimo implicated in the scandal is yet another example of the extent to which judicial independence is lacking.

Despite its intimidation tactics only fuelling the unrest, Frelimo continued to mete out a harsh response to protestors, mobilising the riot police, the Rapid Intervention Unit

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6 "Mozambique Top Court Confirms Governing Party's Win in Disputed Election", *Al Jazeera*, December 23, 2024.

7 Paul Fauvet, "Looting Costs 12,000 Mozambicans Their Jobs", *AIM*, December 31, 2024.

8 Fiseha Haile Gebregziabher and Albert Pijuan Sala, "Mozambique's 'Hidden Debts': Turning a Crisis into an Opportunity for Reform", World Bank (blog), April 19, 2022.

9 US Department of Justice, "Former Finance Minister of Mozambique Convicted of Fraud and Money Laundering in \$2 Billion Scheme", Press Release, August 8, 2024.

(Unidade de Intervenção Rápida [UIR]). According to a report by Amnesty International, using information from Mozambican civil society organisation Plataforma DECIDE, more than 300 people were killed during the three months of protests and over 3 000 injured.<sup>10</sup>

## Layers of control

This repressive response is typical of Frelimo, and one of the key ways in which it has responded to its obvious decline in legitimacy, particularly over the past decade. Press freedom in particular has been increasingly curtailed in recent years, particularly under former president Filipe Nyusi (2015–25), with serious threats directed at voices critical of the regime. Notable incidents include the 2020 petrol bombing of the Maputo office of independent newspaper *Canal de Moçambique*<sup>11</sup> and the 2023 killing of newspaper editor and TV Sucesso commentator João Fernando Chamusse.<sup>12</sup> During the post-election protests in early January 2025, *Pinnacle News* editor Arlindo Chissale was abducted and killed, allegedly by security forces.<sup>13</sup>

Press freedom in particular has been increasingly curtailed in recent years

Another common response has been the consolidation of control across all spheres of power. This is evident in Frelimo's dominance over institutions such as the CNE and the courts, where pivotal positions are occupied by party appointees. However, this control extends beyond institutional appointments and aims to ensure that power remains vested in the presidency. A clear example occurred in 2019 when, ahead of the general elections that year, Frelimo created a new provincial position – secretary of state – to lead provincial matters related to investment, development and state sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> This was despite the existing position of provincial governor, which already carries responsibility for these areas. The main difference between the two positions, then, is that while the provincial governor is appointed by the party that receives the largest vote in that province, the secretary of state is appointed directly by the president. This will thus ensure Frelimo total control, regardless of the final tally.

10 Amnesty International, *Human Rights Violations During Mozambique's Post-2024 Election Crackdown*, Report (April 15, 2025).

11 Tom Bowker, "Offices of Mozambican Newspaper Burned in Arson Attack", *AP*, August 24, 2020.

12 Amnesty International, "Mozambique: Authorities Must Investigate Killing of Newspaper Editor João Fernando Chamusse", December 15, 2023.

13 International Federation of Journalists, "Mozambique: Journalist Beaten by Security Forces Has Died", January 28, 2025.

14 "Mozambique: Provincial Secretaries of State appointed – AIM Report", *Club of Mozambique*, January 23, 2020.



Prior to 2019, the provincial governor had been appointed by the president. But, in 2016, Mozambique committed to a decentralisation process as part of a peace deal between Frelimo and Renamo. The latter, in turn, would end the low-level insurgency by its military wing in the centre of the country. In this deal, it was agreed that the party that wins the most votes in a province would nominate the provincial governor.<sup>15</sup> It was a major concession to Renamo. Frelimo, despite winning every general election, had never secured a majority in the central and northern provinces of Nampula, Sofala, Tete and Zambézia, all Renamo strongholds, in the era of multiparty democracy. It thus appeared to signal a new era in Mozambican politics, one with a more equitable distribution of power. It seemed likely that Renamo would be able to appoint its governors for the first time.

However, this prospect clearly alarmed Frelimo, likely worried that losing control over some provinces would jeopardise its overlapping commercial interests – political and business elites are closely intertwined in Mozambique. This fear came in the wake of a resurgent Renamo, which in the 2014 elections had disrupted Frelimo's previously steady electoral gains and dented its representation in Parliament. Until then, Frelimo had been climbing in every election since 2004.<sup>16</sup> Operating under the assumption that it would retain the presidency, Frelimo responded by creating a new provincial oversight position, ensuring it could appoint loyal allies regardless of electoral outcomes at the provincial level.

Ultimately, Frelimo secured, for the first time, the largest vote share in all 11 of Mozambique's provinces. While support for Renamo had dipped following the death of long-term leader Afonso Dhlakama in 2018, it was only after 2023 that it declined markedly, well into successor Ossufo Momade's leadership. It is unlikely, then, that Frelimo gained popularity in areas it had never controlled, especially during the decades-long civil war (1977–92), indicating the extent of electoral fraud.

**The more Frelimo feels its grip on power slipping, the more aggressively it moves to shield itself**

It may seem curious that Frelimo bothered to create new positions if it had rigged the election to such an extent. But Frelimo was worried that its usual tactics of interference with voter registration, voter intimidation and control over the CNE would not be enough. It dominates the campaigning environment by using state resources, it meddles with voter registration drives and engages in voter intimidation on election day, but it does not

15 ACCORD, "Suppressing the Revival of Conflict in Mozambique through Inclusive National Dialogue" (Conflict Trends 2017/1, ACCORD, April 24, 2017).

16 International Foundation for Electoral Systems, "Election Guide: Mozambique Assembly 2014 General", accessed April 30, 2025, <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2410/>.

have control over the final results. The more Frelimo feels its grip on power slipping, the more aggressively it moves to shield itself.

This interpretation also helps to explain the Constitutional Court's December 2024 ruling. Frelimo realised that it had overplayed its hand by gaining implausibly high vote shares for both Parliament and the presidency. These figures were too inflated for even its own electorate to accept or tolerate, and it clumsily attempted to rectify it.

Frelimo, of course, has not abolished the secretary of state positions, despite the increased cost burden they place on an already struggling fiscus. To do so would be to remove a layer of protection it has worked into the system. Instead it stripped provincial governors of their police protection – although these are all Frelimo members, for now – and transferred this to the new secretaries of state. This stubbornness, as well as its undermining of the decentralisation process, shows its resistance, and inability, to reform. This unwillingness feeds into the repressive tactics of which it is so fond, as this is the only way it can maintain the status quo that keeps it at the top of the hierarchy it has constructed so carefully.

## Even more repression

Within this environment, Chapo will be aware that he does not have legitimacy among citizens as the state president, and will spend the next two to three years trying to gain it. There are two ways in which this can be done, the first of which is further repression of dissenting voices to sideline and discourage any challenge to his legitimacy as state president. The second is opening up the political space to facilitate genuine dialogue among stakeholders and incorporate new ideas for the betterment of society. For now, Chapo appears to have chosen the former.

His attempts at dialogue so far have not been genuine. On 5 March 2025 he ratified a peace accord institutionalising a permanent dialogue platform between government and civil society<sup>17</sup> and on 23 March he met with Mondlane to call for an end to popular violence.<sup>18</sup> Yet political killings have continued. The most high-profile event since March is the shooting of musician and vocal Mondlane supporter Joel Amaral (better known as MC Trufafa).<sup>19</sup> Podemos told local media that 106 of its supporters had been killed by state security since the protests kicked off, with police and members of the National Criminal Investigation Service going door to door to hunt down critics of the new administration.<sup>20</sup> Chapo is reportedly amenable to Mondlane's request that those involved in the post-election protests be granted amnesty from prosecution. However, the latter's adviser, Dinis Tivane, was later identified by the Attorney General's office as formally being under

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17 Ashwanee Budoo-Scholtz, "Mozambique's Parliament Approves Inclusive Dialogue Law", *Human Rights Watch*, April 7, 2025.

18 Paul Fauvet, "Chapo and Mondlane Meet", *AIM*, March 24, 2025.

19 Sheila Nhancale, "Head of Mobilisation for Venâncio Mondlane Shot in Quelimane", *The Mozambique Times*, April 14, 2025.

20 Paul Fauvet, "Podemos Says 106 of Its Supporters Have Been Murdered", *AIM*, January 20, 2025.

suspicion of fomenting violence against the state. This curtails his freedom of movement, as he has to inform the authorities if he intends to leave home for more than five days.<sup>21</sup>

Such an authoritarian response is unsurprising and even typical for a former liberation movement. Frelimo has always ruled with a tight fist, allowing little room for dissent and being unwilling to develop strong democratic institutions. To open ranks would be to risk wiping itself out.

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But Chapo faces a daunting task, because he will simultaneously have to shore up his own legitimacy within Frelimo. He needs to begin to put forth his own policy agenda and maintain his position as party president – and state president come 2029, the year of the next general elections. Nyusi has been relegated to the margins, having failed to install his preferred candidate as his successor. Nyusi's predecessor, Armando Guebuza (2005–15), meanwhile, may be keen to use Chapo to regain the political and commercial dominance he has lost in recent years, sidelined as he was by Nyusi. But building up power takes time, and Chapo will likely seek political autonomy from Guebuza's influence throughout his term in office. This means that he is on the hunt for those who will support his own ambitions outside of the historical Frelimo framework.

The task is all the more daunting as he must preside over an economy in trouble and the resultant social upheaval. In recent years, strikes by civil servants, teachers, doctors, nurses and judges, protesting low wages and late pay, have increased, reflecting the higher cost of living and the state's inability to render basic services. Yet his administration will need to rein in high public salaries, particularly if it is to continue receiving much-needed budgetary support from the International Monetary Fund.<sup>22</sup> To manage the threat of further dissent, Chapo may decide that wider repression is his only way forward. His actions to date indicate this is likely to be the case.

## **Business as usual – sort of**

The broader population also appears to have been emboldened by the post-election protests, indirectly challenging private companies to honour their commitments. Since

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<sup>21</sup> "Mozambique: PGR Names Mondlane's Adviser Dinis Tivane as 'Arguido'", *Club of Mozambique*, April 29, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> International Monetary Fund, "IMF Statement on Mozambique", Press Release, April 18, 2025.



October 2024 there have been several protests directed at foreign-owned companies, mostly in the mining sector, with workers demanding that long-awaited promises be fulfilled. In December 2024, workers in Nampula province protested at Irish-owned company Kenmare's mining site over the company's failure to construct a promised bridge.<sup>23</sup> That same month, in Cabo Delgado province, where communities have faced Islamist violence since 2017, citizens gathered at French hydrocarbons major TotalEnergies' Afungi site to protest a violation of land resettlement rights.<sup>24</sup> In January, residents of Chongoene district in Gaza province halted construction at a local port terminal, citing Chinese company Desheng Port's failure to electrify part of the district as promised.<sup>25</sup> More recently, in April, workers at the South African-owned Nsimbi Mining took three managers hostage in a protest over unpaid wages.<sup>26</sup>

Acutely aware of the growing public discontent and the potential threat it poses, Chapo has indicated his administration's intention to renegotiate concession agreements in the mining and forestry sectors. He specifically pointed to the need to revisit the terms of long-standing agreements with several foreign companies, including Australian-owned South32's aluminium maker Mozal, South African petrochemicals company Sasol and Irish heavy sands miner Kenmare. These companies hold licences that are either nearing expiration or awaiting renewal. According to Chapo, Mozambique's development priorities have shifted significantly since many of these contracts were first signed – some more than two decades ago – and they must therefore be re-evaluated.<sup>27</sup>

A meaningful renegotiation of existing contracts remains unlikely. Chapo is trying to garner political capital at a time when Mozambicans are frustrated at not benefitting from the activities in major sectors, and he is trying to increase tax revenue amid severe fiscal challenges. But Chapo is between a rock and a hard place. While he may want to appease the broader population, his administration will also be mindful of not wanting to crowd out investment. The economy is more reliant than ever on the activities of external private investors and contract instability, along with the current political and economic instability, would only spell further trouble for the country.

## Fears of contagion

No country is an island, and Frelimo finds itself vulnerable to the growing sentiment across much of Southern Africa that former liberation movements turned political parties no longer represent citizens' best interests. The subregion is the only one in Africa where former liberation movements still hold power. But the tide is turning. In 2024, three other

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23 Alberto Massango, "Kenmare Pledges to Remain in Mozambique", *AIM*, December 9, 2024.

24 "Area 1: TotalEnergies Settles Compensation Claims in Afungi", *360 Mozambique*, December 11, 2024.

25 "Mozambique: Construction Work on Chongoene Port Terminal Forced to Stop – Watch", *Club of Mozambique*, February 6, 2025.

26 Lisakanya Venna, "All We Want Is Our Money' — Nsimbi Miners After Holding SA Managers Hostage in Mozambique", *Daily Maverick*, May 1, 2025.

27 Alberto Massango, "Mozambique Renewing Contracts with Megaprojects", *AIM*, April 1, 2025.

countries in the subregion held general elections: South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. While their outcomes were different, all saw a strong desire from voters for change and declining faith in the ability of long-serving parties to address mounting socio-economic challenges, such as limited economic opportunities and high living costs.

## Former liberation movements turned political parties no longer represent citizens' best interests

In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), which has ruled the country since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1994, failed to clinch a parliamentary majority, with just 39% of the vote. Its popularity had been declining significantly for more than a decade, tarnished by increasing inequality and corruption scandals amid a sustained period of weak economic growth. The change has ushered in a new era of coalition politics, where the ANC governs with the second-largest political party, the Democratic Alliance, and eight other smaller parties. Of course, it is not entirely impossible that the ANC could go above 50% of the total vote share in the 2029 elections. Part of its electoral decline in 2024 came from the challenge posed by a splinter group, the uMkhonto Wesizwe party under former president Jacob Zuma – the survival of which is difficult to determine at this point. However, it would be an uphill battle among a population that is beginning to place less value on historic liberation credentials.

Change was much more dramatic in Botswana. While the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) is not a liberation movement like Frelimo, the ANC or Namibia's SWAPO, it was the first party to rule the country after independence from Britain in 1966 and enjoyed over five decades in power. Over the past 15 years, however, it has faced declining support. This is primarily the result of popular dissatisfaction with its handling of the economy, which is overly reliant on diamond exports for revenue, and rising unemployment, which disproportionately affects the youth.<sup>28</sup> In the 2024 elections, not only did the opposition coalition Umbrella for Democratic Change secure a decisive victory by gaining more than half of all seats in Parliament but the BDP also captured just four seats. It has become a negligible political voice in matters of policy, at least until the next elections in 2029.

Namibia is yet to usher in regime change, with the long-ruling SWAPO – in power since 1990, following independence from South Africa – securing a victory in both the parliamentary and presidential elections. Its position is tenuous, though. In the 2019 elections, its support in both the parliamentary and presidential polls dropped sharply, after decades of overwhelming support. Disillusionment with the party has grown

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28 Tsaone Basimanebotlhe, "The unprecedented fall of the BDP", *Mmegi Online*, December 20, 2024

amid economic stagnation, high youth unemployment and the uncovering of a major corruption scandal in 2019 that implicated senior officials, including the presidency. The proliferation of opposition parties that SWAPO cannot co-opt is also weakening its grip on power. Since the 2020 local elections, opposition politicians have taken over the major cities of Windhoek (the capital), Swakopmund and Walvis Bay. SWAPO's performance in 2024 showed further weakness in support as it too struggles with legitimacy, with its success partly down to its ability to campaign more widely than its opponents. It will be wary of its chances in the next general elections, come 2029.

SWAPO, then, will be watching events in the region closely, as its sister liberation movements face a swell of resistance to their decades-long rule. So will Angola's Movement for Popular Resistance (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola [MPLA]), which is staring down a similar threat as its 2027 general elections approach. Like Frelimo, the MPLA has been in power since 1975, and since the end of the civil war in 2002 has won all elections. Even with this dominance, in every election since 2008 the MPLA's share of the vote has been declining steadily. In 2022, it clinched just over 50% of Parliament.

The MPLA faces the same crisis of legitimacy, fuelled by entrenched corruption and high inequality. Like Frelimo, it responds to this loss by putting in place repressive strategies. One recent example is from earlier this year, when the government introduced a new electoral legislative package. This package will, among other moves, remove a critical layer of transparency from the vote-counting process, preventing polling stations from publishing summary minutes (which record the number of registered voters, ballots cast and votes for each party).

This is in direct response to the *votou, sentou* ('voted, sat') movement during the 2022 elections, when the main opposition, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola [UNITA]), encouraged voters to monitor the counting process.<sup>29</sup> It also came alongside a parallel vote count that indicated the MPLA could have dropped below 50% of the vote. Angola's CNE declared the *votou, sentou* movement illegal, a sentiment echoed by the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>30</sup> The legislative package before Parliament now seeks to officialise this sentiment in an attempt to neutralise a potential threat.

The electoral reform is not the only indication of the MPLA's growing unease as it observes its regional counterparts falter. In March, the government abruptly deported several prominent African political figures who had been invited to attend a summit by the Platform for African Democrats, co-hosted by UNITA and a South African think tank, the Brenthurst Foundation.<sup>31</sup> The government cited reasons of national security for its actions.

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29 Anita Coulson, "Angolan Elections 2022: Polling Day", Maka Angola, August 24, 2022.

30 "Angola: CNE diz que 'votou, sentou' é ilegal" ("Angola: CNE Says that 'Votou, Sentou' Is Illegal"), DW, August 3, 2022.

31 Sandra Bernardo, "Entre deportações e ex-Presidentes impedidos durante horas de entrar em Angola, Governo angolano continua em silêncio, apesar do 'ruído' a nível internacional" ["Between Deportations and Former Presidents Prevented for Hours from Entering Angola, the Angolan Government Remains Silent Despite International 'Noise'"], *Novo Jornal*, March 13, 2025.

However, it is evident that it was a move to clamp down on UNITA's prominence as the next elections approach and a panicked move to stop any ideas of dissent from taking hold in society. It is also worth noting that one of the deportees was Mondlane: a clear message that an imitation of his behaviour will not be tolerated.

## Intertwined economies

Mozambique's domestic political instability raises more than just fears of regime change among its neighbours – it also disrupts critical regional trade networks and exposes the broader economic interdependence of Southern African countries. The country's coastline is some 2 700km, stretching from its main border post with South Africa up to the East African coastline beginning in Tanzania. This, coupled with the landlocked status of four of its neighbours, means that episodes of unrest have a profound impact on trade flows in the subregion. Probably the most publicised disruption during the post-election protests was that of the Maputo Corridor, a transportation and trade route connecting Mozambique and South Africa. However, Eswatini, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, in varying ways, also rely on Mozambique's ports for key imports and exports, ranging from agriculture to fuel and mineral products.

**Mozambique's domestic political instability also disrupts critical regional trade networks and exposes the broader economic interdependence of Southern African countries**

The Maputo Corridor consists of the N4 toll road, railways, Maputo Port and Lebombo border post (Ressano Garcia in Mozambique). It is the shortest route to deliver industrial and agricultural goods from South Africa's Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces for export. South African businesses' growing preference for Maputo Port has come alongside its improved handling capacity and amid South Africa's struggles with the performance of its own logistics network, owing to theft of rail infrastructure and congestion at its ports.<sup>32</sup> Over 1 000 trucks are processed at the border post every day, underlining the centrality of Maputo Port in South Africa's trade flows.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout November and in early December 2024, South Africa shut the Lebombo border post for days at a time, after trucks on the Mozambican side were torched and looted by protesters. The closures at one stage prompted port operator Grindrod Logistics

<sup>32</sup> Michelle Gumede, "Maputo Port Grows into Regional Economic Driver", *Business Day*, January 16, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Libera, "R10 Million a Day Gut Punch for One of South Africa's Biggest Employers", *Businesstech*, December 10, 2024.

to suspend operations at Maputo Port owing to a fall in cargo reception, indicating the extent to which the port has become reliant on exports from South Africa. It is a symbiotic relationship: the Road Freight Association in South Africa, a national trade association for the trucking industry, estimated that the closure cost the South African economy ZAR<sup>34</sup> 10 million (\$550,000) per day in lost revenue. At the same time, the closure of the border limited foreign exchange earnings for Mozambique, exacerbating a problem the economy has been grappling with for months. Maputo Port was estimated to have lost approximately MZN<sup>35</sup> 384 million (\$6 million) owing to delays in cargo handling, according to the Confederation of Mozambican Business Associations.<sup>36</sup>

Maputo Port also serves Eswatini, particularly its sugar industry, which is a mainstay of the kingdom's economy. Its exports of raw sugar to the US and EU markets depend on a terminal at Maputo Port jointly owned by Eswatini, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The disruption to the port meant its businesses had to divert their products to South Africa's ports, despite the higher costs and delays.<sup>37</sup>

Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia, meanwhile, rely on the Port of Beira, located in Mozambique's central province of Sofala. This is effectively a satellite port for South Africa's Port of Durban, serving as an alternative gateway for the landlocked countries and helping to manage traffic in the region. Zimbabwe, in particular, is the biggest user of the port for mineral and tobacco exports and food imports, and the port forms part of the Beira Corridor, which also includes the Beira–Bulawayo railway line and Machipanda Road. The country receives all its fuel imports from the Beira Oil Terminal in the port complex.

In addition, the port is crucial for Malawi, which uses it to import fuel and fertiliser, among other goods, as well as to export tobacco, tea and sugar. It also receives humanitarian cargo via the port. Zambia, meanwhile, pivoted to the Port of Beira in 2024 for the export of eucalyptus and manganese. In the past it had relied on South Africa's Port of Richard's Bay and Tanzania's Port of Dar es Salaam, but the distance to the former and long border waiting times to reach the latter have seen the route through Mozambique become more attractive.

The post-election unrest led to a decrease in the number of trucks arriving at the Port of Beira. This later caused a surge as the protests subsided, delaying cargo handling and ultimately weighing on vessel operations. The slowdown followed an increase in trade volumes in the first seven months of 2024, when the port's general cargo terminal reported a 24% volume increase compared with the same period in 2023 and container terminal growth of 40%.<sup>38</sup> The growth was the result of increased imports for the

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34 Currency code for the South African rand.

35 Currency code for the Mozambican new metical.

36 Paul Fauvet, "Maputo Port Lost 384 Million Meticals Due to Demonstrations", *AIM*, November 19, 2024.

37 Nokukhanya Musi, "Mozambique Political Unrest Disrupts Eswatini Sugar Exports", *Voice of America*, December 9, 2024.

38 "Port of Beira Hits Record Cargo Volumes", *Freight News*, August 29, 2024.

domestic market, but also because of the rise in wheat, equipment and sulphur imports for neighbouring countries. This indicates the centrality of the Port of Beira to food security in the region.

## The post-election unrest led to a decrease in the number of trucks arriving at the Port of Beira

Malawi is also reliant on the Port of Nacala, located further north in Nampula province, for major imports and exports. It is a general cargo port and, for Malawi, provides a vital alternative to Beira Port. While the Port of Nacala faced fewer disruptions than Maputo and Beira, it was not immune to the unrest. Malawi had to receive fuel imports via the Port of Dar es Salaam during the unrest, which the government said complicated its efforts to end a fuel shortage in the country.<sup>39</sup>

The importance of the smooth operation of Mozambique's trade networks is clear. These landlocked countries will have trouble diversifying their import and export routes without Mozambique, closed in as they are by its long coastline and hindered further by the limited capacity of other ports north of it.

There is the human element, too. Vulnerable populations along Mozambique's borders fled the outbursts of violence, impacting its neighbours. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 5 000 people had fled to Eswatini and Malawi during the escalation in violence,<sup>40</sup> with many having lost their source of livelihood in the clashes. The Malindza refugee reception centre in Eswatini was reported to be four times over capacity during this period.<sup>41</sup>

At the Malawi–Mozambique border there were over 3 000 movements, with reports of people – including many women and children under four years – having made long, sometimes precarious journeys to flee the violence. Responders reported overcapacity, and a new site was being planned to respond to the increase in intake. In South Africa, authorities reported a nearly 3% increase in official border crossings from Mozambique compared to November 2023.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Joseph Mwale, "Malawi Fuel Supply Faces Glitches", *Nation Online*, December 11, 2024.

40 Reliefweb, "Mozambique: Post-Election Violence", January 10, 2025.

41 UNHCR, "Thousands Displaced as Post-Election Unrest Grips Mozambique", December 31, 2024.

42 International Organization for Migration, *Mozambique 2024 Post-Election Cross-Border Movements* (IOM, January 10, 2025).



# Limited regional response

The response to the political crisis in Mozambique from its regional peers has been limited, despite this interconnectedness. On 20 November 2024 SADC congratulated Mozambique, along with Botswana and Mauritius, on a successful transfer of power, despite the persistent post-election violence.<sup>43</sup> Only on 5 January 2025 at an extraordinary summit did it resolve to engage the Mozambican government and the opposition, acknowledging that the prolonged crisis was bearing down on the region.<sup>44</sup> The organisation, however, has been preoccupied with the need for a ceasefire in the Democratic Republic of Congo following the gains made by the M23 rebel group in the east of the country.<sup>45</sup> Only in December 2024 – nearly two months after protests first broke out – did South Africa announce that a delegation representing various ministries would meet with their counterparts in Mozambique regarding the ongoing challenges.<sup>46</sup>

The response to the political crisis in Mozambique from its regional peers has been limited

South Africa's outsize role in the subregion's economy, its proximity to Mozambique and its standing as the continent's strongest democracy mean it should do more. But it has shown a reluctance to interfere in regional conflicts. The most notable example was the 2008 election crisis in Zimbabwe, when then president Robert Mugabe unleashed a wave of violence on his opponents, triggering a mass exodus of refugees to South Africa.<sup>47</sup> This reluctance is underpinned by the ANC's loyalty to its sister liberation movements. Frelimo supported the ANC's struggle for liberation during apartheid and the ANC consistently supported it in previous Mozambican elections.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was quick to congratulate Chapo on his win before it had been ratified by the constitutional court, and was just one of two heads of state to attend Chapo's presidential inauguration in person.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, politics comes first.

43 SADC, "Communiqué of the Extraordinary Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Southern African Development Community", November 20, 2024.

44 SADC, "SADC holds Organ Troika Summit on the Post-Election Political and Security Situation in the Republic of Mozambique", January 5, 2025.

45 Global Conflict Tracker, "Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo", accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo>.

46 Republic of South Africa, DIRCO, "Minister Lamola to Lead a Delegation of South African Ministers to Meet with Mozambican Counterparts", December 17, 2024.

47 Human Rights Watch, *Neighbors In Need: Zimbabweans Seeking Refuge in South Africa* (Human Rights Watch, June 19, 2008).

48 Victoria O'Regan, "Mozambique's Daniel Chapo Sworn In as President Amid Ongoing Unrest", *Daily Maverick*, January 15, 2025.

Chapo has also shown an eagerness to entrench close ties with South Africa.<sup>49</sup> These were somewhat undone during Nyusi's tenure, as he grew closer to Rwanda in getting military support for the insurgency plaguing Cabo Delgado province. The SADC Mission to Mozambique, headed by South Africa, faced resistance from the Nyusi administration in fulfilling its mandate, as well as late payments – and lasted just three years (July 2021 to July 2024).<sup>50</sup>

## Left unaddressed, the uneasy calm in Mozambique is likely to flare up periodically

Left unaddressed, the uneasy calm in Mozambique is likely to flare up periodically. With Chapo and Frelimo unlikely to change tactics, a regional response will become ever more critical. The protests in Mozambique have shown that change is inevitable, and ignoring the desires of populations facing hardship has never been a way to stay in power.

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49 Republic of South Africa, Department of International Relations & Cooperation, "[President Ramaphosa Receives President Chapo of Mozambique](#)", Media Advisory, March 4, 2025.

50 Lenin Ndebele, "[SA-led SAMIM Leaves Mozambique's Cabo Delgado After Some Success, but a Job Not Yet Completed](#)", *News24*, May 14, 2024.

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## Cover image

Fresh anti-government protests erupted in Mozambique on November 27, 2024 after a police vehicle mowed down a woman at a demonstration in the capital, Maputo, for the opposition leader disputing the October elections (Alfredo Zuniga/AFP via Getty Images)

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