

A Bloody Start: Daniel Chapo's Controversial Rise to Power in Mozambique

by Nyasha Mpani



Daniel Chapo, representing Mozambique's long-ruling FRELIMO party, was sworn in last week as president amid widespread controversy and unrest. Chapo's victory sparked months of protests, met with a brutal government crackdown that has left many dead. These post-election protests are the largest against FRELIMO in Mozambique's history and have affected foreign businesses operating in the resource-rich Southern African country of 35 million people. Dubbed by some analysts as the worst inauguration in the country's history, the sparsely attended ceremony graced by only a few heads of state, including South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa, was overshadowed by bloodshed, protests, and fear.

The dreadful events in Mozambique ever since the October 9 election underscore a harsh reality. Mozambique is proving that the more a country is endowed with mineral wealth, the more likely it is to struggle with democracy and economic growth. This fits the paradox of plenty, or the "resource curse," where resource-rich nations often face poor governance, corruption, and economic instability instead of prosperity and progress.

As Chapo assumed office, Mozambican civil society organizations (CSOs) submitted a petition to the African Union, urging it not to recognize his presidency. They cited allegations of electoral fraud and human rights violations. International observers, including the European Union (EU) mission, condemned the election for being marred by irregularities, with the EU calling out the "unjustified alteration of election results." The announcement of Chapo's victory sparked months of protests, met with a brutal government crackdown that has left many dead.

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In response, Mozambique's CSOs escalated their efforts, submitting a detailed report to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in Banjul, Gambia. This document demands the case be referred to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and calls for the African Union to address the irregularities.

Adding to the political turmoil, opposition leader Venancio Mondlane, who officially came second in the election, maintains that he won. Declaring himself the rightful president, Mondlane has proposed a 24-point plan for his shadow government's first 100 days. His measures include ending state violence, releasing detained protesters, providing free healthcare for survivors, compensating families of those killed during the protests, and addressing poor road infrastructure.

The unrest shows no signs of no surrender. Just days after Chapo's inauguration, public servants announced a general strike starting January 20, protesting unfulfilled promises of a 13th salary payment. The government's failure to communicate this delay revealed only through a journalist's question to the Minister of Economy and Finance has further inflamed public anger.

In his inaugural speech, Chapo announced measures to reduce government costs, such as eliminating the position of Vice Minister. However, these changes do little to address the broader discontent. Mozambique faces significant economic and social challenges, as underscored by Afrobarometer data.

A narrow majority (54%) of Mozambicans believe the country is heading in the "right direction," a sharp decline from 71% in 2012. Fewer than half (46%) rate the nation's economic condition as "fairly good" or "very good," while 38% describe it as "fairly bad" or "very bad." Only 35% are satisfied with their personal living conditions, and a mere 22% feel the economy has improved in the past year, compared to 45% who believe it has worsened. Dissatisfaction with the government's economic management is widespread, with 79% critical of efforts to stabilize prices, 76% unhappy with job creation, and 74% dissatisfied with improving living standards for the poor.

Additionally, Afrobarometer data reveals that trust in the ruling FRELIMO party has declined from 64% in 2002 to 53% in 2022, while trust in opposition parties has risen from 24% to 41% over the same period. The trust gap between the ruling party and opposition is now 12 percentage points, a significant shift from the 58-point gap recorded in 2008. This declining trust in FRELIMO exacerbates public disillusionment with Chapo's presidency, as citizens feel increasingly alienated by the party in power. A majority (57%) of Mozambicans believe elections help ensure that voters' views are represented in the National Assembly, but fewer than half (43%) believe elections are effective in removing unrepresentative leaders. These sentiments reflect the broader skepticism towards Chapo's legitimacy and his ability to fulfill his promises,

overshadowed by concerns over corruption, electoral manipulation, and a lack of government accountability. Daniel Chapo is inheriting a population whose trust in the ruling FRELIMO party has significantly diminished, and whose faith in elections as a means to remove unrepresentative leaders has decreased, weakening his position as the electorate grows increasingly alienated and skeptical of promises from those in power.

Mozambique stands at a very difficult time. Daniel Chapo's presidency begins under the auspices of contested elections, violent crackdowns, and growing public disillusionment. His promises of reform appear hollow in the face of widespread grievances and the bloodshed surrounding his rise to power.

To come out of this crisis, the Chapo administration must take immediate and decisive steps. These include holding those responsible for the killings during protests accountable, undertaking comprehensive electoral reforms to restore public trust, and empowering civil society to advocate for justice and democratic governance. Regional and international bodies, particularly the African Union and SADC, must prioritize

Mozambique's democratic integrity and human rights. Chapo now faces an important choice to either dismantle the repressive system gripping Mozambique or allow his tenure to become another chapter of violence and corruption.

President Chapo's inauguration is not the end of Mozambique's challenges. The violence and loss of life since last year's elections cannot be erased by a ceremony or the installation of a new leader. These events reflect deep-seated, unresolved political tensions that an election alone cannot resolve. It is crucial for the newly and controversially elected President Chapo to return to the drawing board, address the root causes of the conflict, and work towards lasting peace by engaging all aggrieved parties.

The strength of a democracy lies in its ability to accommodate dissent and foster peaceful political dialogue. President Chapo must recommit Mozambique to these principles to ensure stability and democratic progress. Whether he will rise to this challenge or further deepen Mozambique's divisions, effectively making it a country of two presidents, remains to be seen.

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