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CASE STUDY

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Venezuela and Mozambique
When arms get the better of popular mobilisation

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INTRODUCTION

Venezuela and Mozambique share the same political tragedy: that of an opposition which, despite its courage and perseverance, comes up against a wall of authoritarianism and impunity.

For years, these two countries have been dominated by regimes that have stripped their institutions of all democratic substance and locked up the political game. In Venezuela, since the accession to power of Hugo Chávez in 1999, followed by his successor Nicolás Maduro in 2013, the country has experienced an authoritarian drift marked by electoral fraud and systematic repression of the opposition. Similarly, in Mozambique, the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) has clung to power since independence in 1975, with elections regularly marred by irregularities and the marginalisation of opposition parties.

Faced with this seizure of power, the opposition and civil society have responded with exemplary mobilisation, persevering and defying oppression. However, these fierce struggles did not lead to positive change. This impasse raises a fundamental question: why, despite popular determination and the scale of the sacrifices made, are these regimes able to maintain themselves? What can be done when peaceful resistance comes up against implacable repressive mechanisms and an inactive international community?

AN EXEMPLARY MOBILISATION

The power of mass movements

In both Venezuela and Mozambique, the street has become the theatre of uncompromising protest.

In Venezuela, the 2024 protests, triggered by yet another fraudulent presidential election, mobilised thousands of people in the streets of Caracas and across all the country's major cities. According to figures compiled by the Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (OVCS), 915 demonstrations against the election results were reported across the country. These rallies mobilised hundreds of thousands of people.



Caracas, 4 August 2024, Dustfreeworld

Similarly, in Mozambique, the general elections of October 2024 sparked a wave of protests after the announcement of the disputed victory of FRELIMO, the party in power since independence. On 29 October, Mondlane called for a week-long strike and a march of 4 million people on Maputo on 7 November to overwhelm the Mozambican authorities in the face of the scale of the demonstration. These demonstrations led to clashes with the police. Mondlane claimed that 1.5 million demonstrators took part in the rally in Maputo on 7 November, denouncing electoral irregularities. On 7 and 8 December, actions carried out throughout the country by opposition supporters partially paralysed the country, including the capital.

The demonstrators freed prisoners, ransacked a hotel complex belonging to the former president, and destroyed statues of emblematic figures of the regime.



5 November 2024, Maputo

Figureshead and symbols of the democratic struggle

Every political struggle is embodied through emblematic figures. In Venezuela, María Corina Machado has become the face of an opposition that the regime is trying to crush: arbitrarily arrested in September 2024, she embodies the price of courage in the face of authoritarianism³.

In Mozambique, Venâncio Mondlane, the opposition leader, was forced into exile after an assassination attempt, but continued to organise the resistance from abroad. His aborted arrest in August 2024, when he was surrounded by security forces during a rally in Matola, became a symbol of the persecution of political dissidents⁴.



María Corina Machado during a demonstration in 2014



Venancio Mondlane, le 5 janvier 2024

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Citizen involvement in election monitoring and the documentation of abuses

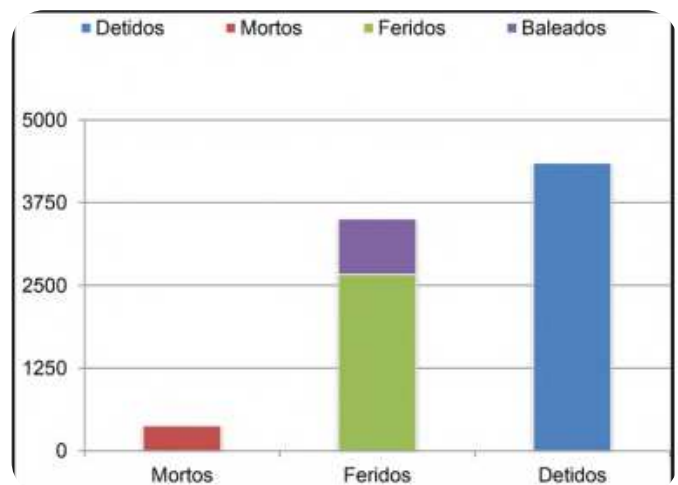
In these repressive environments, civil society plays a crucial role.

In Mozambique, the Decide (Dignidade, Cidadania e Desenvolvimento) platform documents electoral fraud and human rights violations, providing an essential digital counter-power⁵, particularly during the 2019 general and 2023 municipal elections. In 2019, Decide recorded more than 300 cases of electoral fraud, including ballot box stuffing and irregularities in the electoral rolls, mainly in the provinces of Zambezia and Sofala.

In 2023, its observers covered more than 60% of the polling stations in Maputo, making it possible to compare the official results with those observed locally. The platform also documented 42 cases of intimidation or arrest of civic activists during the 2023 electoral process, often related to the publication of critical content online.



Logo of the NGO Plataforma Decide



Extract from a report by the NGO Plataforma Decide on the crackdowns between October 2024 and March 2025 ⁵

In Venezuela, local and international NGOs are methodically recording the regime's abuses, despite intimidation and arrests. The NGO Foro Penal has recorded more than 15,700 politically motivated arbitrary arrests between 2014 and 2023, with 286 to 319 people still detained as of August 2023. The NGO Provea has published more than 50 reports in five years on violations of social rights, particularly in the areas of health, education and access to public services, providing an essential database for the international community.

After the elections, the international community was divided. Some countries, such as the United States, Argentina, El Salvador and several members of the European Union, have expressed their support for Edmundo González, whom they consider to be the legitimate president. Others, on the other hand - such as China, Russia and Iran - have refused to recognise the irregularities of the election and continue to maintain close relations with the Maduro regime.



Demonstrations against the re-election of Nicolás Maduro, 30 July 2024

IN THE TEST OF STRENGTH

The brutality of the repression: deaths, disappearances and political prisoners

While the popular mobilisation is exemplary, the response of the regimes in place has been implacable. In Mozambique, the repression has left at least 360 people dead, according to the local NGO Plataforma Decide. The security forces have used live ammunition against peaceful demonstrators, and numerous cases of forced disappearances have been reported. Several arrested activists were found dead in suspicious circumstances, raising fears of extrajudicial executions.

In Venezuela, 24 protesters were killed between July and December 2024, 3 people died in prison, and more than 2,000 people were arrested. The security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets and sometimes live ammunition to disperse the crowds. In the days leading up to Nicolas Maduro's inauguration, there was an increase in targeted persecution of the families of leading opposition figures.

Videos released by NGOs show police officers violently beating protesters on the ground, while testimonies denounce the use of torture in prisons to make opposition activists confess to fictitious crimes.



Police forces shoot at demonstrators in Venezuela in July 2024

Biased electoral processes and the exclusion of opponents

The democratic veneer that these regimes seek to maintain is fooling no one. Elections, far from being instruments of alternation, have become sham elections legitimising the continuity of power. In Mozambique, Venâncio Mondlane was not even invited to the official consultations of March 2025, which provide for a revision of the Constitution, demonstrating the systematic exclusion of the opposition. Nevertheless, he finally met with the president to initiate an agreement to end the violence at the end of March 2025.

The two figureheads of the opposition, María Corina Machado and Edmundo González, are living in hiding, facing charges of 'inciting insurrection' or 'criminal association'. The mass arrests are legitimised by laws subject to interpretation against 'fascism' or 'hatred' to threaten NGOs, muzzle critical media and justify repression. Detainees face serious charges of 'terrorism' or 'incitement to hatred,' punishable by heavy prison sentences. Some activists have been sent to prisons known for their inhumane conditions, where torture and ill-treatment are commonplace.



Photo taken from a report by the NGO Plataforma Decide on the demonstrations between October 2024 and March 2025

CONCLUSION

Venezuela and Mozambique illustrate the impasse in which democratic struggles can become bogged down when they come up against ruthless authoritarian regimes and a lack of decisive external support. While popular mobilisation commands admiration, it does not stand up to the unpunished use of force by authoritarian regimes, and seems doomed to run out of steam without increased international pressure and a more effective strategy to bring the powers that be to heel. They may have the support of the people, the symbols, the documentation of human rights violations and the support in principle of the international community, but they cannot break through the wall of violent repression that stands in their way.

What lesson can be learnt from this? Recent history shows that successful democratic transitions often reach a tipping point: the question remains as to how this can be achieved in these two countries, where repression, political exclusion and international inaction leave little room for hope, and raise the question of the effectiveness of peaceful opposition methods.

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