

# LOCAL MEDIA OBSERVATION OF MOZAMBIQUE'S ELECTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Local journalists working together in Mozambique have overcome many of the limitations of international and domestic election observation. In a system developed during three pairs of municipal and national elections (2003-4, 2008-9, 2013-4), journalists from community radio and other local media reported to a national daily newsletter on registration, campaigning, voting and counting while continuing to work for their own organisations. Reports of local violence and misconduct were published nationally, usually bringing rapid responses. Evidence from local journalists, together with continued media pressure, forced elections to be re-run. This led to changes in the electoral law which reduced misconduct. Two aspects proved central: accuracy and local knowledge. Nothing was published in the cooperative newsletter unless it had been verified or sourced, thus providing an effective counter to exaggerated or false reports on social media. Local journalists known and trusted in their own communities received complaints about electoral malfeasance and had appropriate contacts to verify or refute these claims. Because central editorial control of their reports demands detail and authentication, these reports are both accurate and trusted. In addition, daily publication also meant that their reports had more immediacy than that of*

*other election observers. As a result, this collaboration by local journalists ensured the accountability of political parties and the electoral system.*

**Keywords:** Mozambique, election, observation, monitoring, fraud, media, newsletter

## INTRODUCTION

Election observation 'has become the flagship of democracy promotion', comments Judith G. Kelley in her study *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works, and Why It Often Fails* (2012, p. 15). International election observation generally involves the observation of voting and counting, and sometimes of registration and the election campaign. Though Kelly uses both 'monitoring' and 'observation' in the title of her book, the use of these two terms is inconsistent. The most widely-used code published by the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (2012) is for 'non-partisan election observation and monitoring by citizen organizations' and always links observation and monitoring. Nevertheless, the *Guidelines for African Union Electoral Observations and Monitoring Missions* makes the following distinction: 'Observation involves gathering information and making an informed judgement; monitoring involves the authority to observe an election process and to intervene in that process if relevant laws or standard procedures are being violated or ignored' (African Commission 2011). In this article we accept that distinction.

The goal of international observer groups is to assess the management of the election<sup>1</sup> and to recommend possible changes in law and practice in a final report. Only in the most egregious circumstances are comments given to electoral authorities during the electoral process. The advantage of international observers is that they have electoral experience from other countries, can assess the election within a regional and international context and are not influenced by local politics. The disadvantages are that they rarely speak the local language and have only superficial knowledge of the local electoral law and system. They are seldom present for more than a few days, only visit areas with easy access that are near reasonable hotels, and usually stay in any individual polling station for only a short period. This problem has been recognised and increasingly the better-funded election observer groups have longer-term missions.

Kelley (2012, pp. 166-9) argues that international observers largely fulfil a verification role, and that they do seem to influence the government and

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1 The terms 'free and fair' are now rarely used, and there is more of an attempt to assess the validity of the election and if it represents the will of the people. (Kelley 2012, p. 163)

sometimes reduce electoral malpractice. Verification and the sense of surveillance, that someone is watching, are important; but even observed elections may be manipulated and international observation has failed to promote improvement in the conduct of elections. Also, international observation simply shifts the misconduct to periods when observers are absent, particularly during the long pre-election period. In their study of 144 elections, Simpsera and Donnob (2012) found that 'on average, high-quality election monitoring has a measurably negative effect on the rule of law, administrative performance, and media freedom'. A study of African elections between 1990 and 2009 showed that the presence of election observers increases the incidence of pre-election violence when observers are not present but has no effect on election-day violence when observers are present (Daxecker 2014).

Because of the limitations of international observation, domestic observation has grown (Grömping 2017). One of the largest studies of the factors influencing electoral conduct, by Birch and Van Ham (2017), shows that 'the effect of international observers is insignificant, while the effect of domestic observers is positive'. They find that the following three institutional checks are far more significant: the independence of the media is the most important, followed by the independence of the judiciary, and then civil society freedom which does, significantly, include the organisation of domestic observation. There is increasing discussion of the 'downward accountability' of electoral management bodies to civil society which is seen to include both nongovernment organisations (NGOs) and the news media (Norris & Nei 2017). Pippa Norris (2017, p. 25) points to the importance of collective action, of 'representatives from political parties observing voting processes and counts, domestic election watch NGOs and the role of the independent media and investigative journalists in providing accurate, impartial, and balanced coverage of electoral malpractices'.

Mozambique has had five multi-party electoral cycles (detailed below) and all have had both observation and monitoring. In Mozambican law, only party-nominated monitors have the right to intervene during registration, voting and counting, and they also have the right to file formal protests. Mozambique thus has both partisan monitors and non-partisan observers.

For the past three electoral cycles, Mozambique has had an unusual combination of media and NGOs in civil society. An election newsletter (detailed below)<sup>2</sup> published by a civil society organisation (CSO) had more than 100

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2 The frequent elections newsletters add the election to the beginning of the title, thus *2013 Local Elections - Mozambique political process bulletin* in English and *Eleições Autárquicas 2013 - Boletim sobre o processo político em Moçambique* in Portuguese. All newsletters are posted on an Open University website, [bit.ly/mozamb](http://bit.ly/mozamb), and the election newsletters from 2013 are also posted on the CIP website <http://www.cipmoz.org>.

journalists across the country as correspondents. A small editorial team of professional journalists within the organisation ensured accuracy, timeliness and limited bias. In this paper, we look at the structure, impact and limitations of that experience, and the potential for linking media and other parts of civil society.

This newsletter satisfies the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (2012) *Declaration of global principles for non-partisan election observation and monitoring by citizen organizations*. The declaration and linked code contain nothing to prevent the inclusion of journalists as non-partisan observers subject to two relevant conditions: that the observer body is 'non-partisan', and that individual observers cannot speak for the group. In one respect, however, the newsletter does better than conventional observers. The *Declaration* commits observer groups to 'issue regularly to the public ... accurate, impartial and timely reports'. International and domestic observer groups rarely do so, while the newsletter does issue regular, accurate, impartial and timely reports.

#### MOZAMBIQUE ELECTIONS AND OBSERVATION

Mozambique has had five multi-party general elections, in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014, to elect the president of Mozambique, 250 members of parliament and, from 2009, 10 provincial parliaments. There have been municipal elections in urban areas for mayor and municipal assembly in 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2013. There is no single electoral code and the group of electoral laws is revised regularly, leading to regular changes in detail. But the system of a five-year electoral cycle, with new voter registration for each pair of municipal and national elections, has remained throughout. Turnout in the three most recent general elections ranged from 43% to 49% (MPPB 28 November 2014).

Mozambique achieved independence in 1975 under the Mozambique liberation movement Frelimo, but subsequently faced a decade-long civil war (1982-92) in which Renamo guerrillas, backed by apartheid South Africa, fought against the government. A peace accord in 1992 led to multi-party elections. In all five national elections, Renamo head Afonso Dhlakama stood for president but lost to the Frelimo candidates Joaquim Chissano in 1994 and 1999, Armando Guebuza in 2004 and 2009, and Filipe Nyusi in 2014. In all five national elections, Frelimo won a majority of seats in the national Parliament. Thus, Mozambique is often described as an elected dominant party state (Rønning 2011). However, opposition parties have won in some municipal elections, and in 2013 they gained mayors and municipal assembly majorities in four of 53 municipalities including the third, fourth and fifth largest cities in Mozambique.

Afonso Dhlakama alleged that he was cheated of victory and had actually won all five general elections. Both international and domestic observers have

largely, albeit increasingly begrudgingly, confirmed the validity of the election outcomes. This is despite reports of ballot-box stuffing and other misconduct, and substantial criticism of the National Elections Commission for the way it conducted the elections and its lack of transparency (Nuvunga 2017; Nuvunga & Salih 2010; Nuvunga & Siteo 2013; Hanlon 2011). After the 2014 election, the *Mozambique Political Process Bulletin* (28 November 2014) ran an article headlined 'Déjà vu again' which said:

After the 2009 election we had an article headlined 'Déjà vu – An unnecessarily tainted election'. We said the Frelimo victory had been 'overshadowed by unfairness and misconduct. Long term readers of this Bulletin will recognise that little has changed in response to harsh criticism of 1999 and 2004 elections; like a film being seen again, the same problems recur.' And they recurred again this year. Inside this Bulletin we again report on the misconduct, unfairness, secrecy, sloppiness and confusion.

#### *Observers and their limitations*

Kelley (2012, pp. 166-9) claims that in Mozambique in 1994 'the environment was so polarized that without international monitors the victor might not have been able to establish a governing mandate.' But this begs the question of whether international observers were much use in subsequent elections. Mozambique's national elections have typically had six or more international observer missions, including those from the European Union, African Union, Commonwealth and Carter Center. These are usually supplemented by local diplomats who speak Portuguese, the official national language. The main benefit of international observers has been their presence, providing the sense that the world is watching. Observer reports have generally accepted the outcome of the elections, thus providing an international stamp of approval. Most have been critical; but these international comments and suggestions are largely ignored by Parliament and the National Elections Commission. However, pressure from media, the courts, civil society and opposition parties has brought changes.

Augmenting international observation, a domestic observation system developed which since 2003 has been primarily by a coalition, the Electoral Observatory. In 2014 the Observatory brought together eight national civil society groups, including the three main religious groups, and observers were chosen locally by the groups in the coalition. Unlike international observers, they stayed in individual polling stations for longer periods of time, sometimes for the entire voting day. As with international observers, the main output was a final report

(*Observatório Eleitoral* 2014). The two problems with domestic observation have been lack of training, so that observers often do not know what to look for, and a failure to adequately collate the large number of observer reports. The only study to look for observer impacts in Mozambique (Leeffers & Vicente 2017) reports that for the 2009 elections 'we find significant effects of domestic observers, suggestive of a reduction in ballot fraud. In particular, ballot box stuffing and the validation of blank votes seem to be deterred. We do not find evidence that the presence of international observers deters ballot fraud'.

Finally, there has been a sample count or PVT (parallel vote tabulation) which combined national and international organisations. In Mozambique ballots are counted at each polling station and the results are posted on the door, making a PVT relatively easy. The sample count was organised by EISA<sup>3</sup> and used observers from the Electoral Observatory to record results from the selected polling stations.

In the 2009 national elections there were 3 678 national observers (1 662 from the Electoral Observatory) and 502 international observers (131 from the European Union) to cover 12 584 polling stations. The parallel count (PVT) covered a statistically selected sample of 967 polling stations, 8% of the total (Hanlon 2011).

### *Local media*

Mozambique has a free press but it is highly polarised. The state owns the largest circulation daily newspaper, *Notícias*, the national radio network (Radio Moçambique, with good coverage and broadcasting in local languages), and television network TVM (largely available in urban areas). These are seen as biased towards the ruling party. A private group has a smaller national daily newspaper (*O País*) and TV network STV, seen to have a balanced coverage. In addition, there is a large group of weekly newspapers and daily e-mail newsletters which see their role largely as that of opposing the government and the ruling party.

National media has limitations. Apart from Radio Moçambique, national media is based in the capital, Maputo, and has few correspondents outside of major cities. This means that election coverage is primarily urban and based in the capital. Furthermore, polarisation means that reports tend to be either for or against the governing party. Finally, competition between newspapers has prevented cooperation on election coverage.

There is, however, a vibrant local media. In larger cities and provincial capitals there are websites, social media and print-based local newspapers and magazines. There are also 114 community radio stations, many based in market towns and predominantly using volunteers. Community radio is a mix of state,

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3 Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, based in Johannesburg.

private and community-owned and with a full range of political sympathies. Their journalists are local people, speaking local languages as well as Portuguese, and with local knowledge, which gives them a very different perspective from the Maputo-based national media. Community radios share information and programmes through a national association FORCOM (Fórum Nacional de Rádios Comunitárias), but they have had little pooling of election coverage.

Social media has not played a major role in election reporting. Facebook is the most widely used in Mozambique, but this is primarily for partisan comments. Various attempts at citizen reporting have been unsuccessful, largely due to lack of participation.

A core problem with election reporting is that traditional media, and even more social media, is based on exception reporting, that is on the extreme and the unusual, such as violence, very large or very small crowds at rallies, long waits at polling stations or no voters at all, and allegations of misconduct. Observer groups attempt to put this in context by trying to assess whether the violence or long waits at polling stations are common; but they report only after the election when most people have lost interest in the issues and it is too late to respond.

#### THE MEDIA ALTERNATIVE

No media organisation in Europe and the US has enough of their own staff to cover all polling stations and counting centres, so their media works together with various pool systems. Organisations cooperate and agree to send reporters to different counting centres and then share the information. Press agencies usually use 'stringers' – reporters who often work for local media and in addition are paid to report to the agency.<sup>4</sup>

Municipal elections in 2003 were held in 33 municipalities and the two authors of this paper established an e-mail election newsletter, with stringers from local media in each municipality and a small editorial office in Maputo. This was under the umbrella of the *Mozambique Political Process Bulletin* which was published from 1992 by the Maputo office of AWEPA (European Parliamentarians for Africa). Despite relatively few correspondents at the start this first election newsletter soon showed that it had better and more integrated coverage than other media.

Meanwhile, the Public Integrity Centre (CIP, Centro de Integridade Pública) had been created in 2005 as a CSO which would use the techniques of

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4 Terminology is not consistent, but normally a 'stringer' is a journalist who contributes reports to a news organisation on an ongoing basis but is paid individually for each piece of published. They may be freelance or may be employed by local media and also report for national or international media. A 'correspondent' is often an employee of a media company reporting only for that company. However, the term 'correspondent' is often used more loosely and is more widely understood, so it is used by the newsletter to refer to its pool of journalists.

investigative journalism to report on corruption and misconduct. CIP has become the Mozambique chapter of Transparency International and continues the style of producing readable but accurate reports exposing corruption and conflict of interest. More recently it has investigated relations with transnational corporations involved in the exploitation of gas and other natural resources. It also works with the authorities in drafting anticorruption legislation and supporting Parliament to improve its oversight role.

This watchdog journalism made CIP a natural home for the *Mozambique Political Process Bulletin* and election newsletter, which moved to become part of CIP. Election coverage continued to expand. For the 2014 national elections, there were 150 correspondents covering nearly all districts, plus an editorial office of three people in Maputo. Voter registration, campaigning, voting, and counting were all covered. A total of 77 election newsletters were issued concurrently in Portuguese (the official national language) and English, by e-mail and on Facebook; frequency ranged from weekly during registration to three times on polling day.

The primary target audience was the media and reports were frequently used, with the independent media citing the election newsletter while state-owned media used the material without citing a source. E-mail subscription was free and the list grew to 5 000; as the newsletter was frequently circulated to non-subscribers, readership figures were probably far higher. It became an important source for diplomats writing reports on elections, and for international election observers.

### *Correspondents*

From the start the goal was not only to provide accurate and balanced reports so that the election newsletter became a trusted source, but also to report as quickly as possible. That required a mix of careful selection and training of stringers, active editing, and the creation of an understanding that all articles had to be accurate and verifiable. Whatever the politics of individual journalists and their own radio station or publication, correspondents learned that they were expected to report on all aspects of the electoral process.

An attempt was made to turn the correspondents' pool into a team that would share information. Stringers were encouraged to use their own local reporting, and to draw on the newsletter for a wider national context for their own publications and radio stations.

Selection and training have been particularly important as some correspondents were community radio volunteers without formal media training. As regional coverage increased, it was not always possible to find experienced journalists and as a result some correspondents were teachers, civil society



activists, or workers with international non-government organisations who lack media training. Correspondents were interviewed, selected and then trained by the deputy editor. Those who proved effective as correspondents in an election were invited to continue, and a few have been correspondents in all six elections.

Newsletter correspondents are known and no attempt has been made to conceal their identity, for three practical reasons. First, many of these communities are not large and people's affiliations are well known, so it would be hard to conceal their identity.<sup>5</sup> Second, it is important to give them access to polling stations and to the district election commission, which means they need to have press credentials for the election. Third, it is important that they make themselves known to party and election officials and the police, so they can make official contacts to ask for information. This also means party officials can contact them with complaints.

Newsletter correspondents must commit to neither standing as a candidate nor becoming active in the campaign of any party. Inevitably this requirement was breached and stringers have been dismissed when strong party links were discovered.

For the most part, the public identity of correspondents has not been a problem. Indeed, local journalists are known and trusted so they are approached by people who have complaints and they have the contacts to verify or refute these claims. In the six elections under consideration there has been only one serious incident compromising the freedom of the press. The correspondent in Mabalane, Gaza province, witnessed and reported a violent incident in which the district administrator, aided by thugs, beat up two market stall holders who had displayed opposition campaign literature (*2009 National Elections* 20, 26 October 2009). The correspondent was arrested for making the report and was released only after high-level intervention by the deputy editor. However, people have been prevented from becoming correspondents; for example in several provinces journalists working for government-affiliated community radio stations<sup>6</sup> are not allowed to freelance as newsletter correspondents during the election.

### *Training*

Correspondents need training in electoral law and procedures as well as on what to look for, including techniques for spotting misconduct and fraud. Few of the correspondents have any formal journalistic training and their experience is often limited, so part of the training is about basic journalistic skills and how to provide key information – the who, what, when, where, why and how of a

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5 An exception is the few journalists in larger cities working for state-owned media who have been allowed to conceal their identity.

6 Run by the government's Social Communications Institute, Instituto de Comunicação Social, ICS.

story. But most of the training is about guaranteeing accuracy and verifiability. Rumour and exaggerated claims are often repeated in social and local media and are a major problem. Reporters are told they must have been present at an event and seen it themselves or have made an effort to verify the facts – for example, where a party spokesperson claims that one of its members has been arrested, the journalist is expected to check immediately with the police. Where a claim cannot be confirmed or refuted it must have a named source, often a party official. A source may be kept secret in exceptional circumstances, but the correspondent must at least identify the source to the editor and explain reasons for believing that the source is credible. The demand for verifiability forces the correspondent to check and thus be able to justify the story to the editor.

Verification is important because of the tendency to exaggerate; opposition parties often say an official has been arrested when there has perhaps been only a verbal argument. The correspondent must check with the police who may respond that no one has been arrested, in which case the correspondent should relay this to the party official. Often the party official will admit that the claim was not true and the police had only shouted at the official. This way the party official learns that he cannot make exaggerated claims to the correspondent. On social media such a claim would never be checked, and this encourages exaggerated claims. One of the most important recent changes has been the availability of smartphones and correspondents now send in pictures as evidence, some of which are published.

Training also highlights particular issues to which the correspondents must pay attention. During the campaign the focus is on violence, the destruction of party posters by opposition parties, and the obstruction of justice. In all these instances correspondents are expected to monitor the neutrality of police and state officials.

The importance of training was underlined in 2014 when the newsletter expanded its correspondents' pool for voter registration. New correspondents were recruited through personal recommendation by telephone and as there was no training prior to the registration period, the performance of the new correspondents was weak. Regional training of these new correspondents took place after registration but before the electoral campaign; subsequently the correspondents' performance correspondents was much improved.

### *Editing and context*

Unlike social media, the election newsletters follow a tight editing procedure. Correspondents submit articles, send text messages<sup>7</sup> or simply phone the editor and provide information. They are asked to report on serious incidents and

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7 The software FrontlineSMS has been used to collect text messages.

problems as well as on normal proceedings. The editor will ask for details, especially with respect to verification, and often ask the correspondent to make further enquiries. The editors may also hear rumours or complaints about events in a particular place and contact the local correspondent asking them to follow up and verify a claim. By 2014 the newsletter had correspondents in almost every district; they in turn were in mobile telephone contact with friends and sources in the area, which considerably expanded their footprint.

Violence and serious incidents grab the normal media headlines, but how common are those problems? Observers in their post-election mission reports try to put incidents into context and suggest the extent of incidents and misconduct. The election newsletter tries to contextualise events within a day or two rather than after the election.

Contextualising events is seen as a central role of the newsletter, and the editors have conducted quick surveys by sending SMS text messages to correspondents. For example, at the start of registration in May 2013 some correspondents reported that voter registration cards could not be printed due to toner cartridges being incompatible with the printer in some areas. The newsletter reported this problem before the electoral authorities were aware of it. Editors also sent out a text message to correspondents to ask how widespread the problem was. The newsletter published lists of registration centres with toner problems as well as others with different problems, and also noted the many registration posts which were functioning normally.

In an overlap between observation and journalism, the newsletter tried to provide a survey of the on-going electoral process with single line or summary reports of those processes running normally. The newsletter was thus able to report that violence did occur but was limited. In contrast, there was widespread and explicitly illegal use of state resources, particularly cars, by the governing party as part of the campaign. As part of the verification demand correspondents were asked to report the registration number of any state cars used, and the newsletter published daily lists of cities and registration numbers of government cars being used in the campaign.

In other instances, problems occurred in specific places. For example, on voting day in Beira in 2014, some polling stations had the wrong electoral register book so could not open.

Finally, correspondents were asked to undertake specific surveys. For example, one hour after polls were scheduled to open on voters' day correspondents were asked to send a text confirming whether polls were open and functioning, and to estimate the length of the queue. Using this information a newsletter was issued in the late morning estimating national turnout and indicating any problem spots. In the early afternoon correspondents again estimated the length of the queue (or

mentioned if there were no queue) and reported on any problems. An afternoon newsletter reappraised the turnout. When polls were due to close correspondents reported on any people still waiting to vote.

After the count at the polling stations the first tabulation took place at district level, which was open to the press for the first time in 2014 following pressure from the newsletter. Correspondents were expected to attend, report on the process, and send in the district results which were used to provide a check on the national tabulation. The reports surprised even the editors, because correspondents reported that as there was no official tabulation procedure each district used a different method, highlighting a major organisational failure.

Providing both surveys and context is one of the most important roles of the newsletter and its correspondents, bridging the gap between media and observation. These allow serious incidents to be contextualised thus indicating whether they are isolated incidents in an otherwise smooth election or are more widespread. A large team also means having a wider perspective to assess the adequacy of responses made by authorities in the capital, Maputo, and the extent to which problems were followed up. Thus, when outlying correspondents reported registration problems with the printing of voters' cards, the Maputo team could follow up on the response and correspondents could then assess whether the problem had been resolved.

### *Technicalities and Number Crunching*

Mozambique has not developed the concept of specialist or sectorial journalists. As a result there are few journalists who regularly cover the electoral process, are familiar with the electoral law or understand the implications of decisions of the National Elections Commission. This is also true of observers and members of civil society, and this lack of insight leads to confusion and unintentional misreporting in the media. In order to address this deficiency, one role of the Maputo editorial team is to report on and interpret actions of Parliament, the election administration and the courts.

Another role of the Maputo team is to assess the statistics, for example by comparing results announced at district and provincial levels with those announced as official at national level and to look for discrepancies. This is important because the National Elections Commission can, and does, make changes to the results in secret and without explanation. Comparison of this kind is the only way to identify such changes, and at present neither observers nor media do this.

Although the election observation team is disbanded at the end of each election, the editor and deputy editor continue to publish as and when necessary,

pushing for legal action in the event of misconduct and parliamentary changes to the electoral law.

### IMPACT

This mix of journalism and election observation on the part of citizen journalists has led to both short-term and long-term responses. At the simplest level, reports of the registration numbers of state vehicles used in the election campaigns had a rapid and noticeable response. Some registration plates were simply covered with paper, making it obvious that it was still a state car. One correspondent told us: 'I met a friend who is working in the Frelimo [governing party] campaign, and he told me: "you guys are causing me trouble. I had a phone call this morning from Maputo to say be careful about the cars"'.

Civil rights are often protected by press coverage; for example, the publication of a verified report of the arrest of an opposition party official does seem to speed their release – probably by prompting an official call from senior officials in Maputo.

Publication has been an important factor in curbing the spread of violence. In Gaza province, at the height of the presidential election campaign on 23 and 24 September 2014, the car of opposition presidential candidate Daviz Simango was repeatedly attacked by organised groups. They used bottles, stones and machetes, causing damage and injury – violence which the newsletter was able to confirm and detail. The president of the Elections Commission promptly issued a statement calling the violence 'disgraceful' and requesting party leaders to desist. Frelimo presidential candidate Filipe Nyusi then called on his supporters to stop the violence, which they did (2014 *National Elections* 47 & 48; 24 & 28 September 2014). While the role of the newsletter is impossible to quantify it is highly likely that its credible and unexaggerated reports spurred official action.

In working with civil society, the newsletter played an important role in forcing a re-run of the municipal election in Gurué, Zambézia province. Official results of the 20 November 2013 election showed that Frelimo's mayoral candidate defeated the MDM candidate by 106 votes. But a parallel count indicated that the MDM candidate had won by only 52 votes. The MDM protested; however, it appeared to have been publicity in the newsletter about the parallel count that forced the Constitutional Council to take up the issue. The Constitutional Council investigated and found 'flagrant violations of the law by polling station staff as well as the Zambézia Provincial Elections Commission' and annulled the election. In the rerun on 8 February 2014, which had a higher turnout, the MDM candidate won by 1 427 votes (2013 *Local Elections* 63, 67, 72; 12 December 2013; 23 January 2014; 9 February 2014).

The newsletter's investigative journalism has also been instrumental in changing the electoral law. Mozambique uses paper ballots which are counted in the polling stations immediately after they close. A ballot paper is considered invalid if it has marks for two different candidates, and all invalid ballot papers – typically at least 500 000<sup>8</sup> – are sent to the National Elections Commission in Maputo to be reconsidered and sometimes accepted. One exception, for example, is when an ink fingerprint has smeared but the voter intent is clear. In the polling station the counting process is slow and can take eight hours or more, and polling stations often have only a single lamp and no electricity. In the 2004 national election, the opposition Renamo party complained to the newsletter that in several polling stations officials in the shadows were invalidating ballot papers for the Renamo presidential candidate by adding an extra inked fingerprint. Checks by the newsletter showed there were polling stations with 10% or more invalid votes, suspiciously high compared to the average of 3%. Newsletter editors in Maputo attended the reconsideration of the invalid ballot papers and found incidents where an entire batch of ballot papers had the same extra fingerprint in exactly the same place, indicating that a group of votes had been invalidated. This was publicised but drew little official reaction. The problem was repeated during the 2009 national election, and this time pictures of improperly invalidated ballots were published (*Mozambique Political Process Bulletin* 31 & 43; 29 December 2004; 18 November 2009). The newsletter showed this to be a serious problem with up to 40 000 opposition votes falsely invalidated and was the only media publication that repeatedly raised this problem, thereby revealing that opposition complaints were justified. When Parliament revised the electoral law in 2012, a change was inserted in the law requiring that all ink be removed from the polling station before the start of the count. That simple change was effective and invalid presidential ballots fell from 4% in 2009 to 3.2% in 2014 (*Mozambique Political Process Bulletin* 43, 52, 56; 18 November 2009; 23 January 2013; 28 November 2014).

### IS THIS A REPLICABLE MODEL?

This mix of journalism and election observation has been successful in Mozambican elections in providing a balanced, impartial, timely, accurate and respected observation of three pairs of elections. But it is not clear whether this was specific to that time and place or could be repeated in Mozambique and replicated

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8 Full data has not yet been published for the 2014 national election, but the limited results published by the National Elections Commission (CNE) show that 213 014 presidential ballot papers were reconsidered by the CNE in Maputo (4.4% of the total vote) of which 41 635 were considered valid and 171 765 (3.2% of the total vote) were considered as invalid. For Parliament, the total was not published but 264 819 were considered as invalid. In addition, a similar number of ballot papers for provincial assemblies were reconsidered in Maputo, but that number was not given.

elsewhere. The operation of the newsletter depends on the existence of a neutral space in a highly polarised environment; this in turn requires tolerance by the state, the willing participation of an adequate pool of journalists in neutral election coverage, and rigorous central editing.

### *Acquiescence*

Frelimo is the predominant party, from having been a liberation movement, then ruling a one-party state, and subsequently winning all five multi-party national elections. The result is a strong Frelimo party presence in state administration and security services. This has been balanced by allowing a vibrant media – not just independent press, but also space for debate within the state-owned Radio Moçambique and the daily *Noticias*. Thus, the newsletter and its pool of correspondents have been tolerated and allowed to operate, despite criticisms by the government and the electoral administration. In some other countries in southern Africa this would not be possible.

However, even in Mozambique there is a fragile acceptance of and reluctant tolerance for journalists and observers. Mozambique is a large country and power within the party and state is significantly decentralised, leading to a wide variation in attitudes, actions and the amount of latitude allowed. As noted earlier, journalists at state-controlled community radios in Zambézia province were not allowed to freelance as correspondents for the newsletter, but this did not occur in other provinces. In the largest province, Nampula, issuance of observation credentials for members of the Electoral Observatory was delayed by several days and began only after the start of voting; again, this was an isolated occurrence and there were no similar problems elsewhere.

There has, however, been some pressure to close the space for debate. In 2013 Rogério Siteo, the respected long-time editor of the state-owned daily *Noticias*, was dismissed. He was replaced with an explicitly political appointment, a Frelimo local government official with no journalistic experience. After the 2014 national elections there was a campaign against academics noted for public comments critical of government. These included vitriolic Facebook campaigns and two academics were shot dead.<sup>9</sup> There have been threatening telephone calls to one of the authors of this paper and to his family. Thus, the newsletter can operate in an open way only on the sufferance of the governing party.

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<sup>9</sup> Constitutional lawyer Gilles Cistac was shot and killed on 3 March 2015 and social sciences lecturer José Jaime Macuane was shot and seriously injured on 23 May 2016. Both were at the country's largest university, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane.

### *Neutrality and Polarisation*

A free press and acquiescence sit side by side with deep political polarisation and a complex history. In 1981, six years after independence, Mozambique became victim of a proxy Cold War. The Frelimo government had socialist policies and was supported by the then Soviet Union; the West backed apartheid South Africa to launch a vicious guerrilla war in which one million people died (Hanlon 1996, p. 16). The 1992 peace accord brought multiparty elections in which the South African-supported guerrilla movement Renamo became the main opposition party. Unusually, Renamo is the main opposition party in Parliament but has been allowed to maintain an armed wing, which from 2013 resumed small military actions and attacked road traffic in central Mozambique. Frelimo remains the dominant party and has won all five national elections and control of most municipalities in local elections. The MDM (Mozambique Democratic Movement) broke away from Renamo and became an independent unarmed opposition party in 2009. Divisions are partly, but not completely, regional. The opposition won majorities in the two largest provinces in 2014, but the Frelimo presidential candidate won 44% and 39% respectively in those two provinces.

Frelimo is accused of using its position as the dominant party to tighten control over the state apparatus, which has led civil society and the independent media increasingly to see their role as providing a check on the state. This also affects election observation. A minority of official observers come from the Electoral Observatory and are non-partisan, but most come from organisations that are aligned. Increasingly opposition-aligned civil society observers see their role as watching the election administration for Frelimo bias, and reporting during polling day on Facebook. In turn, there are now Frelimo-aligned civil society observers watching the opposition-aligned observers.

Mozambique is a poor country and civil society (other than religious groups) is largely donor-driven and -funded. This has created two problems. First, high salaries paid by donors mean that officials of local non-government organisations (NGOs) earn more than they would in Europe or the United States, even though Mozambique is poorer. Second, donor fashion is constantly changing, making it harder to build institutions. And it would appear that the current fashion no longer supports neutral institutions and is more inclined to promote polarisation. Public acceptance of the election newsletter depends on its ability to be seen as neutral in a highly polarised environment. It is not clear whether this can continue.

### *Editing*

The *Mozambique Political Process Bulletin* election newsletter is unusual in Mozambique because of the way it combines a large pool of journalists with rigorous central editing. Many journalists see their role as publishing partisan reporting, and the small staff numbers of the independent press make it difficult



to follow up stories. Meanwhile, there is increasing use of social media for unverified and even fake reports. Thus, the newsletter's stress on verification, neutrality and context can only be enforced through tight central editing. This requires the willingness of correspondents to participate in such a system, but that may be easier for local journalists who have gained experience with a more balanced reporting of very local events. Verification and sourcing are important, as is the demand to be even-handed and report complaints relating to both sides.

### SATISFYING ELECTION OBSERVATION PRINCIPLES

Two decades ago, in the early days of election observation, a speaker at a Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs conference noted that the role of international election observers was most useful in the first elections. This was especially after a violent conflict, when 'the broader democratic process requires "monitors of democracy", but this role is best left to local actors, notably independent media'. However, she continued by noting that 'governments – not only in Africa – have a tendency to dismiss media as "irresponsible" and therefore not very relevant to the democratic process' (van Kessel 2000, pp. 72-3). This is still the situation, with international observers who rarely cooperate with the local media and observers who are consistently briefed not to talk to the press or to post on social media. In his survey of domestic election observation, Max Grömping (2017, p. 414) specifically defines domestic observers as 'non-state, non-profit, non-partisan and non-media'.

The election newsletter challenges this position. Its goal is to make journalists a responsible and relevant part of the democratic process and especially of election observation. Although it was never a specific goal, the stress on neutrality, accuracy and central editing and publication means that the newsletter satisfies the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (2012) *Declaration of global principles for non-partisan election observation and monitoring by citizen organizations*, and in some respects does so better than conventional observers.

That *Declaration* and its linked Code of Conduct contains nothing to prevent the inclusion of journalists as non-partisan observers. There are two relevant sections of the Code. One is that observer bodies will 'report impartially, accurately and timely all observations and findings, both positive and negative, with sufficient documentation of all serious problems to permit verification of the events, and with sufficient documentation of positive aspects of the process to provide an impartial and accurate picture of what took place'. The other is that observer bodies will 'maintain strict non-partisanship, by remaining politically neutral in all activities concerning the election process', and 'work independently of government in support of a genuine democratic election process, without regard to who wins or loses'. These accord very closely with the procedures followed by the election newsletter.

The question of media arises in the Election Monitor Pledge contained in the *Declaration of Global Principles*. Monitors promise that: 'I will refrain from making any personal comments about my observations to the news media or members of the public before the election observation/monitoring organization makes a statement, unless specifically instructed otherwise by the organization's leadership'. That fits closely with election newsletter rules. Journalists are never allowed to speak or write personally as observers or correspondents of the newsletter; they must report to the newsletter editors and the newsletter publishes its own verified report. What is perhaps unusual is that pool correspondents are, according to the rule, 'specifically instructed' to also report for their own media but only as a writer for that media. This distinction is maintained in that they cannot speak for the newsletter as only the editors may do so. At the same time, as journalists they are encouraged to use their material to write for their own website, magazine or community radio, but always in their own name and never as a spokesperson for the newsletter.

Finally, the *Declaration of Global Principles* contains one section which most observer groups ignore. This commits observer groups to 'issue regularly to the public (including electoral stakeholders) accurate, impartial and timely reports, statements and releases that present fact-based analysis, observations and findings'. Failure to do so is the main gap in both international and domestic monitoring, whereas the Mozambique correspondents' pool and newsletter has been able to issue regular, accurate, impartial and timely reports.

Newsletter correspondents never register as observers but always as journalists. However, a tacit recognition has grown of the newsletter's de facto dual status, and there have been closer links and information sharing with domestic and some international observer groups.

## CONCLUSION

In Mozambique, international observer missions are small. In many cases they are on site for only short periods, lack local knowledge and report after the election. Their focus is often a brief press conference at the end of the mission, which gives a simple thumbs up or thumbs down. Detailed reports are frequently critical, but by the time of publication the president will have been installed in office and the report shelved and ignored. For these reasons there has been a move to domestic observation. Mozambique's domestic Electoral Observatory has had better coverage than international monitors, and the PVT has proved particularly important for domestic verification; but the Observatory also reports only after the election. Media and partisan domestic observation groups report quickly but with few checks on accuracy or context.

Conventional election observation in Mozambique does serve an important verification function but fails to influence the immediate conduct of the election because of its delays. It reports only after the election and fails to improve electoral conduct because reports are rarely read or used. Media and partisan domestic observation also has limited influence because of the assumption of bias.

The *Mozambique Political Process Bulletin's* local correspondents pool and election newsletter has attempted to fill important gaps in election observation by bringing together journalistic and observation skills and processes, and by providing accurate information in context during the entire electoral process. This involves four different periods of reporting:

- Firstly, with the Maputo team following the process of changing the laws in each electoral cycle.
- Secondly, detailed and verified coverage of registration, campaigning and voting which involves a large team of correspondents. This is the most high-profile period for the newsletter, but reporting cannot stop at this point.
- Thirdly, reporting on and analysing the confirmation of the election by the Constitutional Council which takes place more than six weeks after the vote, when all observer teams are disbanded. At this point the Constitutional Council often changes the results and make critical comments.
- Finally, and equally important is the follow-up. This requires checking and comparing numbers to look for changes made in secret by the National Elections Commission. It also involves analysing the results for evidence of fraud, campaigning for election re-runs when fraud is obvious, and providing technical input on proposed law changes.

Media is part of civil society but having this special link in which the newsletter is embedded in a civil society organisation, has links to election observation, and obeys observer rules, increases the immediate and longer-term impact of both media and civil society.

The question arises as to whether this experience is specific to the three pairs of Mozambique elections (2003-4, 2008-9 and 2013-4), or is more broadly applicable. The Mozambican experience depends on having community radio and local journalists willing to participate, government acquiescence, and a structure to provide editorial coordination. There are probably few other places where this example could be replicated.

The broader lesson is that it is possible to use a pool of correspondents and central editing to combine journalism and election observation techniques in order to fill the gaps in election observation.

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