



Strengthening Democracy in Mozambique

Despite more than a decade of peace, an expanding economy, and the reputation as a model of war-to-peace transition, Mozambique's democracy remains fragile. Elections have been marred by conflict since Mozambicans first went to the polls ten years ago. One political party, FRELIMO, has held power for twenty-seven years.

Opposition parties boycotted the nation's first municipal elections in 1998. A year later, the main opposition party RENAMO accused FRELIMO of stealing the presidential election after officials declared tally sheets containing some 300,000 votes illegible - more than the margin of victory - and refused to count them. Demonstrations followed, leading to the death of more than 100 protestors.

Not surprisingly, political tensions ran high as the second municipal elections approached in 2003. The November vote for mayor and city council in thirty-three cities and towns represented a critical test for democracy in Mozambique. Fearing that political tensions and disputed results could lead to violence, citizen groups including Christian and Islamic councils formed a partnership called the Electoral Observatory. With USAID funding, the Observatory trained and deployed more than 400 citizens as poll-watchers. Unlike most election observers, their role was to conduct a separate vote count to compare to the official results in ten key municipalities.



Photo: Mozambique Technical Secretariat for Election Administration

Voters cast their ballots on the day of Mozambique's second municipal elections.

USAID provided key assistance, training, and logistics services including equipment and transportation in an effort to ensure a peaceful and impartial municipal election. In the town of Marromeu, population 21,000, the project revealed probable election fraud in the mayor's race. Preliminary official results gave FRELIMO a two-vote victory, but the parallel count showed otherwise. In the end, the National Elections Commission accepted the Observatory's numbers and declared the opposition candidate the winner.

The Observatory also played a vital role in Beira, Mozambique's second-largest city, where a crisis erupted when an election official was caught altering vote tally sheets. Other tally sheets were reported missing. For three days, election officials were silent. Meanwhile, a growing crowd of opposition supporters awaiting the results became increasingly agitated. The Observatory poll-watcher was credited with keeping the peace by serving as a mediator and objective information source until the problems were resolved.

“We exceeded our own expectations by far. Now we want to continue with the same determination and show the people what is possible.”

- Armando John, Program Officer, Mozambican Association for the Promotion of Democracy

The 2003 municipal elections marked a new stage for democracy in Mozambique. Today, the two main political parties - adversaries in war not that long ago - peacefully share power at the municipal level for the first time in history. And the Observatory is planning a bigger project - a parallel vote count for the upcoming presidential election.

Success Story

