

Joachim Chissano's legacy: Pragmatism and compromise

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In October 2007, former Mozambique's president Joachim Alberto Chissano (1986-2005) was rewarded by the Ibrahim Mo Foundation for his role in building a modern democratic Mozambique. Chissano voluntarily stepped down in 2005 while he could have run for another term without readjusting the Constitution. Until then, only Tanzanian Julius Nyerere (in 1962 as Prime Minister and in 1985 as president), Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor (in 1980), and South African Nelson Mandela (in 1999) had voluntarily retired, while the prevailing systems (state party, dominant, and a constitution allowing two-terms, respectively) allowed them to stay on power. Some would say that Beninese Mathieu Kérékou and Zambian Kenneth Kaunda had also done so in 1991. It's true but both Kérékou and Kaunda courageously but not voluntarily retired from office as they conceded defeat to their opponents. I would like firstly to explore Chissano's leadership legacy and, secondly, to understand his voluntary retirement from the political scene.

Good leadership seeds were planted during the independence war period, especially in early 1969 when the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) founding father Eduardo Mondlane was assassinated in Dar es Salaam. Frelimo opted for a triumvirate leadership to avoid internal divisions. Although this did not work, it shows the spirit in which current modern Mozambique leaders grew in. Chissano says that since the beginning 'Frelimo had always been open to ideas within itself', and that decisions were taken after multiple discussions that ended with a consensus. [1] Let me mention that only after one year in office, Chissano recognised the need to have multiple parties, including the externally mentored Renamo. The latter metamorphosed into a political party in 1993 and joined the positive opposition.

When the 1992 peace agreement was signed, Renamo's future was gloomy as the main supporter South Africa had decided to change the course of her history by abolishing the apartheid. The result of this regional geopolitics was that Renamo, was about to collapse on its own. Chissano could have waited a bit and crushed Renamo once and for all, but he opted for wisdom, which makes him one of the most respected African leaders. He summarises his political philosophy as follows:

...for the sake of peace we had to compromise...In some instances we had to compromise even dignity and sovereignty because we felt that peace and reconciliation were paramount. The success of peace in Mozambique lay in our ability to be tolerant of the views of others and to transcend some of our needs for dignity and give away some of our pride. Peace, stability and progress in a democratic environment are the ingredients to restore dignity. [2]

Chissano's success is primarily attributed to his political pragmatism. On the one hand he timely operated changes where needed, and, on the other, he set clear, achievable objectives. [3] That is how the formerly Marxist-Leninist country progressively transformed its ideology into one of the most prosperous market-based economies on the African continent. To achieve

peace, Chissano sacrificed his panafricanist solidarity to the detriment of Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) in the hope that South Africa would loosen her support to Renamo. That unfriendly gesture could be easily interpreted as high treason vis-à-vis non-White South Africans. Chissano violated the sacred principle established by the fathers of panafricanism Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere and which his predecessor Samora Machel had cherished, that their countries would be free and independent if South Africa were. It is only years later that observers recognised Chissano's pragmatism that allowed him to temporarily betray ANC in order to restore peace, the only way Mozambique could move forward.

His retirement from office in 2005 while the gate was wide open for another term is something worth analysing. Even in older western democracies, leaders seek to exhaust all their constitutional terms. One way of understanding that move is the fact that he had achieved what any leader would wish to achieve during his time in office: he had won two multi-party elections by defeating Renamo's rival Afonso Dhlakama (1994 and 1999); he had normalised life in the country; and he had introduced a multi-party democracy. What else would he be seeking by running for another term?

Moreover, Chissano might have felt the need to let another person give a new impulse to the party and the country. This distinguishes Chissano from Robert Mugabe. The latter could have joined the modern Africa immortals if he had retired in the late 80s or early 90s when Zimbabwe was on the top-five list of democratic nations in Africa together with Botswana, The Gambia, Senegal, and Mauritius. [4] Mandela's retirement in 1999 after only one term was motivated by similar reasons.

Finally, another important factor might have played a crucial role: Chissano most likely analysed his scores for the 1994 and 1999 elections. In 1994 he had scored 53.3 percent against 33.7 for Dhlakama. Five years later, his score went down to 52.3 while Dhlakama's steadily went up to 47.7. If Chissano had gone for a third term, there were risks of suffering a defeat. That aspect most likely played a role in his decision to pass the relay to independence war companion Armando Guebuza. The result of the 2005 proved him right as Guebuza won 63.64 percent of the votes against 31.74 for veteran Dhlakama. Frelimo also won 160 seats in the parliament against 90 for Renamo, a more comfortable score than the 129-112 in 1994 and 132-118 in 1999. [5] Chissano's timing was perfect and can only be achieved by illuminated statesmen.

Notes

1. SARDC, *Peace and Reconstruction. President Joaquim Alberto Chissano of Mozambique* (Harare: African Publishing Group, 1997), p. 22
2. SARDC, p. 8
3. SARDC, pp. 2-3
4. Wiseman, John A., *The New Struggle for Democracy in Africa* (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1996), p. 1
5. These electoral results can be found in the SADC Parliamentary Forum's *Election Observation Mission Report: Mozambique Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, December 2004* (Windhoek: 2006: 17 and 33)