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Renamo wins Nampula by-election

The candidate of the opposition party Renamo, Paulo Vahanle, has won the second round of the mayoral by-election in the northern city of Nampula, which was held on 14 March. With results sheets from most of the 401 polling stations counted, Vahanle had around 59 per cent of the vote and his Frelimo opponent, Amisse Cololo, 41 per cent.

These figures come from the parallel count done by the election observers, and both Frelimo and Renamo accept that they are accurate. The official results are expected to be announced by the Nampula District Elections Commission shortly.

In the first round, held on 24 January, Cololo won 32,042 votes (44.51 per cent), while Vahanle took 29,029 (40.32 per cent). The rest of the votes were distributed among three other candidates. Because no candidate won over 50 per cent of the vote, a second round was necessary by law.

Two factors seem to account for Vahanle's victory. First, the Mozambique Democratic Movement (MDM), which won 10.1 of the vote in January, threw its weight behind Vahanle and campaigned for him.

Secondly, there was a significantly higher turnout in the second round than in January – about 32.8 per cent of the 296,590 registered voters cast ballots, compared with only 24.9 per cent on 24 January.

The second round was much better organised than the first. On 24 January, no less than 43 per cent of the polling stations failed to open on time (7 am), and some opened over two and a half hours later.

But this time, 96.3 per cent of the polling stations opened on time. In the remaining stations, the election kits were found to be incomplete, and the Nampula branch of the Electoral Administration Technical Secretariat (STAE) had to supply the missing material. At several stations, it was the flasks of indelible ink, used to mark voters' fingers, as a safeguard against anyone trying to vote twice, that were missing.

This was an election which Renamo had expected to lose, and so, before a single vote had been cast, Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama invented a story of massive fraud by Frelimo, in which busloads of fake voters were being ferried in from all over the country to steal the election. He even threatened to break off his negotiations with President Filipe Nyusi over this claim.

But no busloads of illicit voters showed up, and the atmosphere at the polling stations was largely peaceful and orderly.

Vahanle will only have a few months to enjoy his victory, since nationwide municipal elections will be held on 10 October. Furthermore, he faces a municipal assembly in which Renamo does not hold a single seat.

Constitutional amendments can be improved – President Nyusi

President Filipe Nyusi on 10 March urged the collaboration of all Mozambicans to improve the constitutional amendments on decentralisation that he placed last month before the country's parliament, the Assembly of the Republic.

The amendments arise from the consensus reached in lengthy discussions between the government and the opposition party Renamo – but they are not the last word on the matter.

Speaking at a rally in the town of Dondo, in the central province of Sofala, President Nyusi said he had again been in contact with Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama by phone. "We are continuing to talk about the decentralisation dossier", he said. "I heard an interview the Renamo leader gave in which he said the decentralisation package is still a basic project which can be enriched".

The amendments caused surprise and anger in many quarters because, as currently worded, they abolish the direct election of mayors. Instead only the municipal assembly would be elected, and whichever party won a majority of votes in that election would appoint the mayor. Similarly, for provinces and districts. In the past provincial governors and district administrators were never elected. Now they would be – but only indirectly. The decentralization package envisages the election of provincial and district assemblies, and the party with most votes appoints the governor or administrator.

Among those who regard this as a bad idea is the Political Commission of the ruling Frelimo Party, which issued a statement urging the Frelimo parliamentary group to ensure that mayors, provincial governors and district administrators are elected on a "head of the list model".

The Political Commission appears to have taken the advice of one of the country's senior experts in constitutional law, Teodato Hinguana, who suggested that the principle of "direct suffrage" could be safeguarded if whoever heads the list of a party's candidates for the provincial, district or municipal assemblies automatically becomes the governor, administrator or mayor, if that party wins.

Under a "head of the list" system, citizens need only look at who was heading the party list to know who they were choosing for governor, administrator or mayor. Although there would only be one ballot paper, the voters would be voting simultaneously for an assembly and for the governor, administrator or mayor.

President inaugurates bridges

President Filipe Nyusi on 8 March inaugurated thirteen bridges on the road linking Zambezia and Niassa provinces. Eleven are on the road from Nampevo, in the Zambezia district of Ile, to the Lurio river which forms the boundary between the two provinces. The other two are in the Niassa district of Cuamba. The bridges were built between 2013 and 2017, with funding from the Mozambican and Japanese governments at a cost of US\$47.6 million.

At the inauguration ceremony, on the bridge over the Lurio, President Nyusi stressed the importance of good roads for economic development. They would stimulate agricultural production and marketing, trade and tourism. He believed that the corridor between Zambezia and Niassa could contribute to economic growth and to the economic integration of the SADC (Southern African Development Community) region.

Russian Foreign Minister visits Maputo

Russian Foreign Minister Serguei Lavrov announced in Maputo on 7 March that the Russian company Rosneft, one of the largest oil and gas companies in the world, intends to begin exploring for natural gas off the central and northern Mozambican coast in the near future.

He was speaking at a press conference after a working meeting with his Mozambican counterpart, Jose Pacheco, and a courtesy call on President Filipe Nyusi.

Rosneft is a partner of the US company ExxonMobil and Mozambique's own National Hydrocarbon Company (ENH) in three offshore blocks that were awarded during the Fifth Licensing Round held by the National Petroleum Institute (INP) in 2015.

Two of the blocks are in the Zambezi Delta, in the centre of the country, and the third is near the small port of Angoche, in the northern province of Nampula. In all the blocks ExxonMobil has a 60 per cent stake, Rosneft 20 per cent and ENH the remaining 20 per cent.

Asked whether this consortium is about to break up, due to the political differences between Washington and Moscow, Lavrov said his information is that the consortium is regularising its legal status so that it can start its work in Mozambique.

If there were any disagreements between ExxonMobil and Rosneft, these should be discussed in the first place between the members of the consortium, said Lavrov. "We defend the principle that economic interests should not be influenced or affected by political questions", he added. "Let us see how the economic interests of the companies will or will not be affected by the political positions of the United States government".

Pacheco said that Mozambique also respects the separation of economic from political interests. "Mozambique is open to working with Russia in energy and hydrocarbons", he declared.

In the 1970s and 80s, the Soviet Union was a major partner of Mozambique and provided large amounts of military support. This, however, came to an end with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Lavrov said that Russia is willing to resume military cooperation with Mozambique, but this time the mission would be "to fight against terrorism".

Pacheco also announced that he has accepted an invitation from Lavrov to visit Russia. One of the purposes of this visit will be to prepare a visit by President Nyusi to Moscow. No dates for these visits have yet been fixed.

MPDC investing US\$64 million to reconstruct quays

The Maputo Port Development Company (MPDC) intends to invest US\$64 million to rebuild quays numbers six, seven, eight and nine in Maputo Port, totalling 1,058 metres of berths. According to MPDC, the berthing zone will be deepened to 15 metres, allowing vessels of greater draught to dock. The three quays are currently almost derelict, and rehabilitating them will greatly increase the port's capacity.

MPDC managing director, Osorio Lucas, stated that this project is on a large scale and will be one of the most important landmarks in the company's masterplan for the port. The reconstruction will improve the rate of occupation of berths.

The reconstruction work will begin in July, and the Portuguese company Mota-Engil has won the contract.

The rehabilitation of the four quays follows the deepening of the Maputo port access channel that was concluded in January 2017, at a cost of US\$86 million. The access channel was deepened from 11 to 14.2 metres. Until the channel was dredged, the largest size ship that could enter the port was about 55,000 tonnes.

The dredging increased the cargo capacity in Maputo by 40 per cent, and the capacity of the Matola end of the port by 55 per cent, according to Lucas. The largest ship that used the port in 2017 was the bulk carrier "MV Amani", carrying 96,400 tonnes of magnetite.

Lucas said "the rehabilitation of these quays will allow the port to take maximum advantage of the potential offered by the dredging".

Quay six will be rebuilt this year, and the other three quays in 2019

The volume of cargo handled by Maputo Port increased by 22 per cent in 2017, with 18.2 million tonnes against 14.9 million handled in 2016. These results were positively influenced by the dredging of the channel. MPDC forecasts that this year the port will handle 22 million tonnes.

MPDC is a private-led consortium which holds the lease on the port. The partners in the consortium are DP World of Dubai, Grindrod of South Africa, the Mozambican private company Mocambique Gestores, and the publicly-owned port and rail company, CFM.

Five truckloads of timber seized

Forestry and wildlife officials in the central province of Zambezia on 9 March seized 118 cubic metres of logs from protected species, on suspicion that the trees had been logged illegally. The wood was being carried on five trucks, which have also been seized. The trucks and their cargo are now warehoused in the district of Niocoadala.

The head of the inspection department of the provincial forestry services, Pedro Benjamim, said the logs had been seized because of doubts as to their origin, and the legality of the accompanying documents.

Benjamim added that, since the start of the year, seven trucks have been seized carrying timber during the closed season (January to March), when no logging is allowed. The trucks were seized in the vicinity of the Gile National Reserve, where illegal operators have been cutting down trees and attempting to export the logs through the posts of Beira and Nacala, or overland to Malawi (despite the ban on all exports of unprocessed logs).

In the case of truckloads of timber seized in Alto Molocue district, the operator was fined 540,000 meticaís (US\$8,700) and the timber reverted to the state.

Over two million Mozambicans living with HIV

More than 2.1 million people in Mozambique are living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, Health Minister Nazira Abdula announced in Maputo on 13 March.

Abdula was speaking at the opening of a national meeting of the Programme to Control Sexually Transmitted Infections and HIV/AIDS, which will assess the level of implementation of the Accelerated Response to HIV in the 2013-2017 period.

“The most recent estimates indicate that there are 2.1 million people in Mozambique living with HIV, of whom 64 per cent are aware of their HIV status. Only 54 per cent of these people are undergoing treatment” said Abdula.

The government has been seeking to make citizens aware of the threat and to take precautions against the disease. One of the major challenges, the minister added, was to strengthen communication by ensuring that the messages transmitted were meaningful to Mozambicans.

Abdula expressed concern that men showed less interest in pursuing treatment for HIV infection than women. She warned that stigma and discrimination remain major problems that damage HIV-positive people psychologically. “These two factors have led people to be afraid to look for information, services, clinical care and to adopt safer methods and behaviour”, she said.

“We are in favour of greater effectiveness in preventive action”, said Abdula, “including retaining in treatment those who have already begun anti-retroviral therapy. We shall continue to need the involvement of the community and religious leaders in developing and consolidating behavioural practices”.

The latest estimate for HIV prevalence among Mozambicans aged between 15 and 49 is 13.2 per cent.

Funds needed to fight pests

The Mozambican government needs 160 million meticaís (US\$2.6 million) to prevent and fight against the various pests that threaten agricultural production. But currently the government only has 22 million meticaís for this task, the government spokesperson, the Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism, Ana Comoana, told reporters on 13 March, at the end of the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers (Cabinet).

“The situation is regarded as worrying”, she said, “if we bear in mind that pests contribute to losses in the fields and post-harvest losses of about 30 to 40 per cent of the crops, which affects food and nutritional security”.

The government has a plan of action to prevent and combat agricultural pests. Failure to intervene against pests “would imply costs of about 19 billion meticaís”, she stressed.

“We’ve already begun to feel the effects of pests”, Comoana said. “For example, in Nampula province, there’s been a reduction in the export of bananas. In 2013, we used to export ten containers of bananas a week, but now we’re exporting one a week or nothing at all”.

She added that the infestation affecting coconut palms has resulted in lost exports of at least US\$2.8 million.

“For other crops, about 48,000 hectares are affected, but we have 33,000 of these under control”, she added. “In the case of maize, we have 3,000 hectares that can be regarded as lost”. (She did not say which pest caused this, but she was presumably referring to the fall armyworm).

Pests and blights affect both the economy and food security. Fruit fly infestation, she added, has been reported in all provinces, while other serious threats are posed by the lethal yellowing disease in coconut palms and by the tomato borer.

Government demands bulk cargo be moved by rail

The Mozambican government believes it is urgent to shift cargo intended for Maputo port from road to rail, thus easing the congestion on the EN4 motorway between Maputo and South Africa.

Speaking at a debate in Maputo on 8 March, organised by the Maputo Port Development Company (MPDC), on how to deal with congestion, Transport Minister Carlos Mesquita insisted that bulk minerals should be transported by rail and not by truck “thus maximising the natural advantages that this mode of transport offers for cargo of this sort”.

Mesquita produced some worrying figures. In 2016, 82 per cent of the cargo handled in Maputo port was transported by road, and only 18 per cent by rail. There was some improvement in 2017, when 74 per cent of the port’s cargo went by road, and 26 per cent by rail.

The huge number of trucks using the motorway, Mesquita said, causes deterioration of the road and environmental problems. The trucks also increase the risk of traffic accidents. The number of accidents on the motorway in 2017 increased by ten per cent over the 2016 figure. Last January alone, there were 76 accidents on the motorway, ten of them involving heavy goods vehicles.

Mesquita argued that MPDC should improve its capacity to handle cargo brought to the port by rail. He also wanted to see the construction of a dry port that would operate as a buffer zone in handling traffic entering the port, and an expansion of the opening hours at the Ressano Garcia border post on the frontier between Mozambique and South Africa.

Ressano Garcia only works 24 hours a day at peak holiday times (such as the Christmas and New Year period), but Mesquita clearly believed a 24-hour customs service at the border might help ease congestion on the road.

The pressure on Mozambican roads from excessive numbers of trucks is also felt in other cities, such as Beira and Chimoió in the centre of the country.

Mesquita also noted that less than one per cent of goods traffic inside Mozambique goes by sea, although the country has a coastline that is 2,700 kilometres long.

The government intends to re-launch coastal shipping services, under an agreement between the state shipping company Transmaritima, and the French Peschaud group. Moving goods between southern and northern Mozambique by sea could reduce transport costs, and greatly ease the pressure on major roads.

Inflation remained low in February

Inflation in the first two months of this year, has remained low, at less than one per cent, according to the latest figures from the National Statistics Institute (INE).

Based on the consumer price indices for the country’s three largest cities (Maputo, Nampula and Beira), the INE put monthly inflation in Mozambique in February at 0.36 per cent.

Inflation for January and February taken together was 0.76 per cent. Yearly inflation (from 1 March 2017 to 28 February 2018) was 2.93 per cent. Since a year ago the annual inflation rate was 20.88 per cent, the figures clearly show that the Bank of Mozambique’s anti-inflationary strategy is working.

There were slight differences between the three cities. For the yearly inflation, in Maputo it was 4.67 per cent, and in Nampula only 1.51 per cent. In Beira prices in February 2018 were much the same as they had been in March 2017 – the city had barely measurable annual inflation of 0.04 per cent.

Wildlife slaughtered in Tete

Poachers killed 144 hippopotami and 111 buffaloes between 2015 and 2017 in the area where the Tchuma Tchato community wildlife programme is being implemented in the western province of Tete.

According to Oscar Zalimba of the Tete Provincial Directorate of Land, Environment and Rural Development, the methods used by the poachers included snares and traps, conventional and homemade firearms and poison.

“Tchuma Tchato” is in Cahora Bassa, Changara, Chifunde, Chiúta, Macanga, Mágoè, Marávia and Zumbu districts, where there is great wildlife potential. According to Zalimba, between 2015 and 2017 game wardens found 608 carcasses. In addition to the hippos and buffaloes, the poachers killed 54 elephants, 201 antelopes of various species, 31 monkeys, 53 warthogs and other wild pigs, four crocodiles, four porcupines, two lions and a zebra.

Wardens captured 260 poachers, including Mozambicans, Zimbabweans and Zambians. They seized 13 automatic weapons, 154 artisanal firearms, 16 spears, 34 axes, and over 3,200 snares of various types, among other material used in poaching.

During their 2,883 patrols, the wardens also confiscated two elephant tusks, 46 fishing nets, two motor boats, a tractor, and a quantity of gunpowder.

Zalimba considered the situation as worrying because the true number of animals poached is certainly in excess of 608. This is because the authorities have only been able to count the carcasses they find. Animals taken away by poachers, mostly for meat, will not show up in the figures.

Armed men resume attacks in north

Unidentified armed men killed one person in an attack on 13 March against the village of Chitolo in Mocimboa da Praia district, in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.

According to Radio Mozambique, units of the defence and security forces have now gone to protect the village from further attack. The radio account said the raiders had burnt down 50 houses, but the district permanent secretary, Rosa Pilale, put the number of houses destroyed at only five.

It is assumed that those who attacked Chitolo are part of the same Islamic fundamentalist group who launched armed operations against the government on 5 October last year. The group, known locally as “Al-Shabaab” (but apparently not directly connected with the Somali terrorist organisation of the same name), has carried out sporadic raids in Mocimboa da Praia and the neighbouring districts of Palma and Nangade.

This is the first attack in two months, and shows that the Islamist group is still operational, despite the police announcing in January that they had arrested over 300 people suspected of links with the group.

The group has called for the imposition of sharia law, a ban on the sale of alcohol, and the removal of Christian crosses and secular monuments.

Orthodox Muslim organisations have condemned the Mocimboa da Praia raids, stressing that they have nothing to do with violence and terrorism.

Prime Minister promises business sector reforms

Prime Minister Carlos Agostinho do Rosario on 12 March pledged that the government will do all in its power “to continue creating a macroeconomic and regulatory environment that favours the growth and competitiveness of the national business sector”.

Speaking at the Annual Conference of the Private Sector (CASP), he said the government is committed to reforming labour legislation, the law on bankruptcy, the Commercial Code, the building registry code, and the code on legal costs.

He added that the government is also committed to concluding a proposal on “national content”, which “will create more opportunities for Mozambican business people to increase their participation in the economy through the linkage of the mega-projects with the rest of the national economy”.

It has been a recurrent complaint of local businesses that they are excluded from contracts to provide goods and services for the foreign investment mega-projects.

The Prime Minister added that the government is finalising a Strategy for Improving the Business Environment, updating its Commercial Policy and Strategy, and reviewing its Land Policy. He said the revised land policy “should make this resource increasingly an instrument at the service of the country’s economic and social development”.

The Prime Minister also promised that this year the government will set up the High Authority for the Extractive Industry (AAIE). This is a body envisaged by the Mining Law passed by parliament, the Assembly of the Republic, in 2014. Four years have passed and the AAIE is not yet a reality.

But Rosario declared that the AAIE will “ensure greater benefits from the exploitation of the country’s mineral resources, and greater integration and participation of national content in the extractive industry”.

Rosario promised that the State will this year begin paying off its debts to private companies. He said the 2018 State Budget contains a sum of 2.7 billion meticaís (US\$43.5 million) which will cover just 17 per cent of the State’s debt to private suppliers.

One of the main complaints raised at the opening of the Conference by Agostinho Vuma, chairperson of the Confederation of Mozambican Business Associations (CTA) was that the State does not pay its debts on time. This, plus delays in reimbursing Value Added Tax (VAT), had worsened the difficulties faced by companies in 2017.

Rosario stressed that the empowerment of the private sector, and particularly of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), relies on investing in human capital, which made reform of technical and professional education a priority.

“Implementing the reform of technical education will ensure that Mozambican workers are endowed with know-how, so that they can be competitive in the labour market”, he said.

The Prime Minister also stressed the willingness of the government “to continue improving the mechanisms of dialogue, legislation, and regulation, under the activities agreed with the private sector. We are sure that all of us will play our roles to make Public-Private Dialogue in Mozambique vigorous, robust and sustainable”.

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