Portugal Transfers Power to Frelimo

A priority in General António de Spínola’s agenda once appointed new Portuguese head of state following the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) coup of April 1974 was to unravel the colonial crisis. But he intended to accomplish this by implementing the plan he had elaborately dealt with in his book *Portugal e o Futuro* published just prior to the coup. In a nutshell, Spinola’s plan was in no way designed to alter the colonial status quo. As he argued, ‘without the African territories, [Portugal] would be confined to a corner of Europe (...) and its independence totally compromised’. Spinola wanted to establish a Lusophone community of nations by granting greater autonomy to the colonies, though maintaining intact the umbilical cord with Portugal. The peoples of the colonies would be given a say in the running of their own affairs, and put on an equal footing with the respective white communities. As for the nationalist movements fighting for independence, Spinola dismissed them as ‘non-representative of the spirit of African emancipation’.¹

A month after the coup, Portugal began exploratory talks with Frelimo in Zambia. Unhappy with the outcome of the talks, Frelimo stepped up its military operations. The Portuguese Military Command in Mozambique reported incidents in Manica and Cabo Delgado. For the first time since the start of the war, Frelimo resumed operations in Zambézia in July.² The Portuguese reported that a 300-strong Frelimo group approached their garrison at Omar on the south bank of Rovuma River in Cabo Delgado on the night of 31 July. Using megaphones, Frelimo reportedly enticed the military personnel to a meeting near the airstrip, saying that the war was over. Unarmed, the 137 Portuguese soldiers proceeded to the airstrip, only to be surrounded and taken prisoner to Tanzania. Frelimo’s version of the incident was

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that the garrison had surrendered after being warned of an imminent attack.

Amid these reports, the MFA ordered the troops on the ground to limit their operations to a mere defensive role. On 23 July, the MFA committee in Cabo Delgado and Tete stated that they would declare ‘a unilateral cease-fire if a full-fledged cease-fire accord had not been reached with Frelimo by the end of the month’. From that month onwards, the MFA committees ‘would refuse to supply the troops on the ground’. Without consulting Spinola, the MFA resumed talks with Frelimo in Europe as well as in Dar es Salaam. To facilitate the negotiations between the two, Zambia turned its back on Coremo, barring it from talks with the Portuguese delegation that had arrived in Lusaka in early June. Coremo offices in Lusaka were ordered to close down, while the Zambia National Defence Force rounded up Coremo guerrillas assembled in bases on the Mozambique border. Those arrested were subsequently handed over to Frelimo in Tanzania.

In Mozambique itself, the liberalization brought about by the Portuguese military coup resulted in the formation of an unprecedented number of political organizations. Among the first to surface with a political agenda was Máximo Dias, a 37-year-old lawyer of Goanese extraction born in Zambèzia Province. With the agreement of the Portuguese, Dias launched in February 1974 the Grupo Unido de Moçambique (Gumo), which sought to protect the rights of ethnic minorities with the advent of a majority-rule government. According to Dias, the domestic intelligentsia, including Mário da Graça Machungo, an economist trained in Portugal who had opted to work within the colonial establishment, as well as Salomão Munguambe and Domingos Arouca, endorsed the Gumo idea. Arouca had just completed a jail sentence after his arrest by the PIDE in 1964 for sedition.

Also active was Joana Semião, a 37-year-old Makua from Nampula who had split with Frelimo in 1968. After a spell with Coremo, she returned to Mozambique in 1971 and began a teaching career, first in Beira and afterwards in Lourenço Marques. Semião had made her political agenda known in January 1974. Although in the past she had espoused violence as the only means of resolving disputes, Semião was now willing to work with the Portuguese government to fulfil the aspirations of Mozambicans. Like Dias, Semião appealed to the ethnic minorities in the country, urging them to form ‘an internal front’, which, ‘in co-operation with the Portuguese government, would strengthen the participation of leading elements of the [black, mulatto, white, Indian and Chinese communities] in the running of public