

Samora Moises Machel 1933 – 1986

The first President of the Peoples' Republic of Mozambique, along with 33 other people was killed in an air crash on the night of Sunday October 19.

Samora Machel was born on September 29, 1933 in the village of Xilembene, in the Limpopo Valley, in the Gaza province of Southern Mozambique. He was the third son of a peasant family, and grew up herding his father's cattle. His early years were influenced by a number of social and historical features of life in Southern Mozambique. The independence of the Gaza state under Ngungunyane had been crushed by the Portuguese in the 1890s, but the history of resistance to colonial rule was a living tradition passed on by elders who had participated in these struggles, and became one of the points of reference for the nationalist movement in the 1960s.

Machel's father, Moises, was an early convert to the Protestant faith of the Free Methodist Church which had established itself in the area shortly after the turn of the century. The colonial administration, with its direct links to the Catholic Church, barely tolerated the protestant churches viewing them, with some justification, as a direct threat to the Portuguese colonial order.

The Catholic church was handed direct control over colonial education following the 1941 Concordat between the Salazarist state and the Vatican, and Machel was himself forced to convert to Catholicism in order to write the 4th grade exam which was the effective hurdle preventing access to jobs above the level of simple manual labour. Machel's access to secondary schooling was blocked by the authorities and he was advised to go to a Catholic seminary instead. He refused, and trained as a nurse at what is now Maputo Central Hospital, pursuing secondary education at night school. His disdain for the Catholic church after independence stemmed from his personal experience of the mystifying and repressive role it played in denying education to black Mozambicans.

The migrant labour system dominating Southern Mozambique also stamped itself on his consciousness. His father had worked on the mines from 1912 until 1926 when he ceased migrating, having managed to accumulate capital sufficient to escape the system and set himself up as a peasant farmer. Machel's older brother did not escape.

- samora machel -

He died on the mines, sharing the fate of thousands of other Mozambican workers since the inception of the system in the 1880s.

In the 1940s the Salazarist state introduced forced cotton cultivation into the valley where Machel's family lived as part of its programme of creating self sufficiency in raw materials to back up its drive to industrialise the metropolitan economy. Direct physical coercion was employed on a large scale, and food production was severely reduced, rendering the peasant economy vulnerable to drought, natural disaster and hunger. The colonial state's preference for a Portuguese peasant-settler option in the post war years saw the creation of large-scale irrigation schemes in the valley, which displaced the African peasantry from the fertile soils and involved the population in forced labour, digging irrigation canals.

Machel's experiences of discrimination at work combined with his observations of colonial society were crystallised during a period of growing nationalism and anti-colonial struggle in Africa and the third world.

Gradually, I saw that nothing would help but collective action. A man on his own couldn't achieve anything. At that stage - it was after 1956 - I began to understand what the key problems were, the key economic and political problems, and just why it was that we Africans were handicapped. Then 1960 taught me more - the independence of the Congo and its tumults. I began to think seriously about the possibilities of Mozambique becoming independent... Then it was that consciousness of being oppressed, deprived, exploited, began to have its effect, as well as those ideas about independence. (1)

FRELIMO

It soon became clear that Portuguese colonialism was incapable of reform and peaceful decolonisation. No political parties were allowed to operate in Mozambique, and so they were formed in exile in various neighbouring countries. In 1960 the colonial authorities massacred six hundred peasants in the northern town of Mueda where they had gathered to protest the arrest of their co-operative leadership. The repression following the massacre caused thousands of Mozambicans to flee the country and begin planning armed struggle.

When the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) was formed in 1962 under the leadership of Eduardo Mondlane, Samora Machel left

Mozambique and made his way to Dar es Salaam where he joined the movement in 1963. He was amongst the first groups of FRELIMO cadres that went to Algeria for military training. On his return to Tanzania he took an active part in launching the war for independence. In 1965 he led the opening of the front in the eastern sector of Niassa province, before being placed in charge of FRELIMO's main rear base and military training centre at Nachingwea in southern Tanzania. It was here that he played a decisive role in laying the foundations for the successful political military line employed by FRELIMO in its struggle against Portuguese colonialism.

After the assassination in 1966 of Filipe Magaia, the FRELIMO secretary of defence, Samora Machel was appointed overall military commander, and was drafted on to the Central Committee. When FRELIMO experienced its first major crisis with the intensification of the struggle between left and right wing factions of the movement for control over its political orientation, Machel's support for Mondlane consolidated the dominance of the progressives. The revolutionary line which emerged much more clearly within FRELIMO in the 1970s had its roots in the concrete realities of mobilising a peasantry for a national liberation struggle. The reorganisation of production and distribution in the liberated zones laid the foundations for the emergence of a socialist practice by FRELIMO.

In FRELIMO we always emphasise the importance of production. To our army we give the tasks of fighting, producing and mobilising the masses. To our youth we give the tasks of studying, producing and fighting. In our discussions, in our documents, we constantly stress the importance of production, pointing out that it is an important front in our fight and a school for us. We can see that production is satisfying our everyday needs at the same time as liberating and uniting us. (2)

After the assassination of FRELIMO's President Dr Eduardo Mondlane by parcel bomb in Dar es Salaam in 1969 Samora Machel was appointed to the three-man council of the Presidency, a provincial leadership body created to block conservative moves to take control of FRELIMO. In 1970 the council was dissolved, one of its members representing the right wing having left the movement, and Machel was appointed President ad interim by the Central Committee.

Having successfully overcome its first major crisis FRELIMO grew in strength under Machel's leadership. In 1970 the Zambezi River was crossed and the armed struggle was opened up in southern Tete

province. FRELIMO withstood a major Portuguese counter-offensive codenamed "Operation Gordian Knot" in 1971, and in 1972 opened up a new front in the strategically important provinces of Manica and Sofala. Following the Lisbon coup of April 1974 Samora Machel, as President, conducted the negotiations culminating in the Lusaka Accords of September which laid down the mechanisms for the transfer of power in Mozambique.

Mozambique since independence

Samora Machel became Head of State of a country deep in crisis. Not only was the economy distorted by the manner of its integration under Portuguese rule into the regional subsystem dominated by South Africa, but it was also in a state of near collapse. Under Machel FRELIMO was faced with the potentially contradictory task of keeping the remnants of the colonial economy together to avoid disaster while beginning the long term structural transformation to which it was committed. The creation of organs of popular power and a series of nationalisations accompanied by the extension of FRELIMO's style of popular leadership developed in the liberated zones enabled the successful management of the first major hurdles of independence.

In 1977 FRELIMO held its third congress and transformed itself into a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party committed to the transition to socialism. In FRELIMO's formulation the working class was to be the "leading force" and peasants the "main force" of the revolution. The formulation was an attempt to deal with the class realities of a situation in which the industrial proletariat was "historically recent, numerically weak and with a low level of class consciousness", while the majority of the working population was either involved in migrant labour outside Mozambique or in various forms of peasant production.

In 1976 Machel announced the closure of the border with Southern Rhodesia and the full application of sanctions against the illegal Smith regime. He played a key role in organising Front Line State support for the Zimbabwean liberation movement, and was deeply involved in the political negotiations leading to the Lancaster House conference and the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980.

The political victory of the Zimbabwean liberation movement and the creation of the SADCC held out the prospects of peace and regional cooperation badly needed by Mozambique, which had paid a high price

for Zimbabwe's liberation in human and economic terms. In 1980 Machel announced a series of new organisational and political offensives designed to combat inefficiency, corruption and bottlenecks in the state run sectors of the economy.

From 1980 the MNR, under South African sponsorship, increased the scale of its operations in a new phase of regional destabilisation by Pretoria. Attacks by armed bandits further disrupted production in many provinces of Mozambique, and exacerbated the growing crisis of the rural areas due to prolonged drought and FRELIMO's failure to develop effectively the peasant economy. FRELIMO's fourth congress held in 1983, at which Machel was re-elected President of the Party, was the occasion for a critical re-evaluation of main policy directions in the face of a growing security threat and the collapse of the rural economy. A strong "grass roots" line re-asserted itself at the congress, and detailed critiques were made of class formation and class struggle within the Mozambican state, society and party.

Trade unions

In 1983 Machel announced the creation by FRELIMO of Socialist Trade Unions. (3) These were to be "weapons" in the "the battle against negligence, apathy, theft, corruption and bureaucracy" in the economy, rather than independently organised expressions of working class power. Emphasis was placed by Machel in his speech on the role of trade unions in raising the technical and scientific capacity of workers and upon their "organisation and work discipline" in the interests of development. The conception of trade unions outlined by Machel highlights some of the ambiguities of a socialist transformation in situations like Mozambique's, where the working class is fragmented and weak, and the vanguard party takes on the historical tasks of the working class, on its behalf.

Machel's diplomatic approaches to the Western European and American states in 1983 were designed to obtain capital investment and aid for an economy in crisis and to persuade South Africa's allies that Pretoria's policy of destabilisation was a major threat to peace in the region. Machel's signature of the Nkomati Accord showed him to be a leader of great resilience and stature who was prepared to risk his political reputation in the interests of avoiding a regional war.

Since Nkomati the South African state has intensified its belliger-

ence in the region, and Mozambique is again faced with the prospect of mass starvation, this time entirely due to the effects of war. Samora Machel's death is a further blow to an embattled people and a setback to the prospects for peace, removing a cool headed and far sighted leader at a crucial stage in the region's history.

Machel was both a Mozambican patriot and an internationalist who made his own very personal contribution to the development of the theory and practice of revolution in the African context. The collective nature of FRELIMO's top leadership will ensure continuity in policy but his individual contribution was irreplaceable. Perhaps more than any other single person Samora Machel symbolised for many Southern Africans the struggle for a future in which the peoples of the region would live in peace and control their own destiny, free of exploitation. His death has not destroyed that goal, but has created another martyr on the road to freedom.

Notes

1. Quoted in B Davidson, In the eye of the storm: Angola's people, Longman, London, 1972
2. Samora Machel, Sowing the seeds of revolution, Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea, London, 1974; B Munslow (ed.), Samora Machel: An African revolutionary, Zed, London, 1985 - contains selected speeches in translation; J S Saul (ed.), A difficult road: the transition to socialism in Mozambique, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1985
3. South African Labour Bulletin 9.4

(Jeremy Grest, December 1986)