

ACTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY MOZAMBIQUE

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Being an activist in Mozambique is today equated with an act of heroism, treason or economic opportunism. Either way, it's never a normal act. A normal Mozambican "lives his life" away from politics, "without getting into trouble". Those who get involved and end up looking for (and finding) trouble have obscure interests. But is that really the case? Not always. In fact, activism in Mozambique is a social behaviour that lies behind all the big names. The heroes, the traitors, the armed bandits, the reactionaries, those who are moved by the internal and external hand, they are all activists for a social and collective cause. Whether some like or dislike the cause, that doesn't diminish the value of activism and of the activist.

Purpose of the Briefing Note

This Briefing Note aims to clarify the contours of activism as a modern and normal social practice for each and every citizen of modern states. It is a contribution to the process of building active citizenship, and brings as examples important figures in Mozambican activism such as Carlos Cardoso, Alice Mabota, Dom Jaime Gonçalves, and Azagaia. These figures show that activism is something that happens to normal citizens, and is not necessarily created by external/internal hands, as we like to say in the country.

Defining the term

Activism¹ can be understood as militancy or continuous action aimed at social or political change, favouring direct action, through peaceful or violent means, including the defence, propagation and public manifestation of ideas and even open defiance of the law, up to and including the practice of terrorism.

What drives activists is the idea that they can bring about certain changes in the concrete reality of a society. The activist is a citizen who cares about the community and therefore gets involved in these movements in favour of generating social benefits. Their primary concern is society's problems and they propose solutions to achieve changes that will bring about the expected solution².

¹ Ativismo <https://www.infopedia.pt/dicionarios/lingua-portuguesa/ativismo>, extraído a 9 de dezembro de 2023

² Ativista <https://www.infopedia.pt/dicionarios/lingua-portuguesa/ativista>, extraído a 9 de dezembro de 2023



Activism refers to direct action in support of or opposition to a social or political policy in a broad sense, i.e. the transformation of reality through practical action. It is a doctrine or argument that prioritises reality over purely theoretical will. Its roots go back to 1915, when Swedish activists called for an end to the country's neutrality in the First World War. Others argue that the terms activism and activist were used for the first time in the Belgian press in 1916, referring to the *Flamingati* Movement: which fought for the official recognition of the country's official languages, Dutch (in the north) and French (in the south). In the philosophical sense, activism can be described as any doctrine or argument that favours the effective practice of transforming reality over exclusively speculative activity.

Activate is a verb that can define both individual action and the possibility of collective action. Thus, this set of collective actions, carried out by a group of people, gives meaning to the meaning of activism. In a literal sense, activism is defined as any social, political, economic, ecological or even religious movement that aims to promote change. This type of movement brings together a group of people who come together to protest against something or, conversely, to speak out in favour of something. It refers to well-organised groups that can use different forms of protest and are driven by different causes to carry out their activities. The most common ways in which activists demonstrate are strikes, demonstrations, proposals for laws or projects and talks on specific topics.

Activism finds legal backing in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that *Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

It should be emphasised that there are various types of activism, but in essence they all aim to change the way society works. We have used two types of activism here: social activism and political activism, as they best fit the examples of the figures mentioned in this text. **Social activism** is understood as a set of observable behaviours, carried out freely and independently, which aim to change a negative social situation (Pereira, 2006).

With regard to **Political Activism**, it should first be noted that the press sometimes uses the term Activism as a synonym for demonstration or protest. It can also be synonymous with militancy, especially for a political cause. A Political Activist, in this sense, is someone who practices political militancy, who actively participates in favour of a political ideal. It is a set of actions that certain individuals carry out in a broad, dynamic and enthusiastic way with the aim of implementing the ideological principles, plans and programmes of the organisation to which they belong. It is characterised by the participation, initiative and enthusiasm of those who attend work sessions, not least because they obey the orders of the leadership group, spread propaganda, proselytise and collaborate in election campaigns.

Talking about active citizenship means talking about popular participation as a possibility for creation, transformation and control over social processes (Benevides, 1991). The exercise of active citizenship brings us back to knowledge of rights, the formation of values and attitudes towards respecting rights and living them. In this sense, the practice of active citizenship is not limited to the fight for human rights, understood as those that guarantee a person's dignity regardless of their social



class, race, ethnicity, gender, political, ideological, religious or sexual orientation. As Comparato (1999) argued, all human beings, despite the innumerable biological and cultural differences that distinguish them from one another, deserve equal respect as the only beings in the world capable of loving, discovering truth and creating beauty. To deny individual activism is to deny the very manifestation of humanity.

Individual activism in Mozambique

In this reflective attempt to rethink collective memory, we sought out different individuals who influenced Mozambican society, namely figures such as Dom Jaime Pedro Gonçalves, Mária Alice Mabota, Carlos Alberto Lopes Cardoso and Edson da Luz (Azagaia). Each of these was prominent as an activist, even though they were masters or prominent in their field of work: religion, law, journalism and music. These figures show two things: firstly, that activism is a human capacity and not that of organisations, and secondly, that activism is something internal to Mozambique, and is not necessarily the product of projects and people funded by the government, donors or foreign governments. In the end, all activism is political in a way, as it aims to change the way power relations are organised in society to benefit a certain group. What changes may be the instrument used for activism, which from our analysis here, seems to have a lot to do with the person's technical skills.

As a cleric, *Dom Jaime Gonçalves*³ used religion to sensitise the political class to the need for peace as a way of putting an end to the humanitarian horrors experienced by the Mozambican family. He is an undisputed and symbolic figure in the peace process in Mozambique. Dom Jaime's contribution to the state-building process was most notable during the 16-year civil war, with his personal involvement and on behalf of the Catholic Church in sensitising the government and RENAMO to abandon the war. In 1989, after much lobbying and political diplomacy, he managed to convince RENAMO and the Mozambican government to negotiate. When the peace talks between the government and RENAMO began in Rome in July 1990, brokered by the Sant'Egidio Community, he became one of the four mediators who facilitated the negotiations.

Dom Jaime Gonçalves was part of a group of Catholic religious leaders who protested against social exclusion in the country since colonial times. In addition to his work as a facilitator of political dialogue for peace, he was also a pioneer in the decentralisation of higher education in the country, in a context where the government considered the opening of educational institutions outside Maputo to be a threat to national unity. What makes him a great figure was the paradoxical fact that the peace and social well-being that he most wanted for Mozambicans was not the priority of the country's political leadership. In this way, Dom Jaime had the necessary dexterity to understand that these are basic prerogatives of the human being that concretise the demands of dignity, freedom and equality and that they should be part of the positive law of democratic states like Mozambique, but that, although they are not part of the law, their demandability is still legitimised.

As a lawyer, *Mária Alice Mabota* is crowned as a champion of the fight for human rights in Mozambique and the most prominent activist in this area in the country. Her journey in the defence of human rights began in 1993, when she took part in a human rights conference in Vienna, Austria,

³ Ver Dom Jaime Pedro Gonçalves – Curta Biografia CEPCB, <https://cepcb.org.mz/2023/01/12/dom-jaime-pedro-goncalves-curta-biografia-cepcb/>



where she stayed for 45 days. On her return to the country, she left behind her job and the advisory services she provided to various companies to found the Mozambican Human Rights League (LDH) in 1999, where she was president for 25 years.

Mabota stood out in denouncing the human rights violations and corruption that haunt the country. She led several demonstrations in defence of peace and against social inequalities, and was repeatedly threatened. The *Iron Lady*, the nickname by which she was known in the square because of her fierce defence of human rights, gave up the jobs she held at the time and joined the Institute of Sponsorship and Legal Assistance (IPAJ) when it began to accept second-year law students as legal assistants. This is how he became known for his vocation for human rights advocacy, having realised that there was so much lawlessness and injustice against the people of Mozambique.

From human rights to politics, Mabota had her breakthrough when she showed her intention in 2014 to run for president, but it wasn't until 2019 that she put forward her presidential candidacy, thus becoming the first woman to run for office in the country in the general elections to be held on 15 October, representing the Democratic Alliance Coalition (CAD). Because of her struggles, Mabota was honoured in 2010 by the United States of America (USA) with the International Women of Courage Award⁴.

A former FRELIMO activist, she was a fierce mobiliser of the people to achieve freedom and the right to land, which is why she was dismayed when what she called the new settlers seized several plots of land with the approval of the government of the day. Mabota defended the idea of *achieving independence for the sake of future generations*⁵.

Another activist was **Carlos Cardoso**, who used journalism as a weapon of activism. Considered the best investigative journalist in Mozambique, he was murdered on 22 November 2000. Carlos Cardoso, armed with the electronic *Metical* newspaper, fought against the political injustices of both “high finance”, in the theft of 14 million dollars from a bank, and the pettiness of stealing the space and business of the vendors in Maputo's central market under the pretext of "modernization". Cardoso is known for his famous phrase *it is forbidden to put handcuffs on words*.

His death was a blow to journalism in Mozambique. Paul Fauvet of the Mozambique Information Agency (AIM) characterises Cardoso, his first editor at AIM, as an extraordinary professional. Carlos Cardoso, born in Beira, studied in South Africa, where he was expelled in 1974 for demonstrating against the Apartheid system, and began his career in Mozambique as a journalist at the public press (at the time, there was no independent media in Mozambique). In 1982, he was imprisoned for 6 days for writing an editorial about the war in the country and, in 1992, he founded a journalists' co-operative, MediaCoop, and the daily MediaFax, which was followed in 1997 by the creation of a new daily, *Metical*.

⁴ Morreu a moçambicana Alice Mabota, defensora dos direitos humanos, <https://www.voaportugues.com/a/morreu-alice-mabota-defensora-de-direitos-humanos/7307731.html>

⁵ *Temos de alcançar a independência em prol das futuras gerações*, <https://verdade.co.mz/temos-de-alcançar-a-independência-em-prol-das-futuras-geracoes-alice-mabota/>



In articles about the financial scandal written for *Metical Jornal*, distributed by fax and email, Cardoso had named Momad and Ayob Satar, two brothers related to Joaquim Chissano's son and later convicted of organising the crime, among the businessmen involved. With his murder, the Mozambican writer Mia Couto said at the time that not only a Mozambican journalist had died, but also a piece of the country. Mia's statement is supported by the writings of MISA-Mozambique, which state that *Cardoso's murder was one of the worst stains in the history of journalism and governance, and had an impact on the country's image in the field of press freedom*⁶.

Shortly before his assassination, Cardoso had begun investigating the tragedy in Montepuez, made public on 10 November, a case in which at least 83 people sympathetic to RENAMO, detained in a jail in Montepuez with only 21 square metres, died of asphyxiation after being left for several days without water or food (Fauvet & Mosse, 2003).

Music was also an instrument of active citizenship in Mozambique, with *Azagaia (Edson da Luz)* as its greatest contemporary exponent. Azagaia is a modern-day hero, and his contribution to the process of state-building in Mozambique came during the multi-party period, when, at the age of 23 (2007), he released his first album entitled *Babalaze* (hangover in Portuguese), using freedom of expression and artistic expression. It was with this project that he established himself as an artist of social intervention, in which the tracks "*Eu não paro*" (I don't stop), "*As mentiras da verdade*" (The lies of truth) and "*A marcha*" (The march) raise a series of questions about the model of governance in Mozambique, which he considered to be based on corruption.

In "*Mentiras da Verdade*" (Lies of the Truth) he questioned some facts that are considered unquestionable (truths), such as the death of Samora Machel, that the revolution and/or the struggle for independence was not just about songs and cheers - but that there were betrayals, torture and hidden versions among the revolutionary-combatants, and that Mozambique is not as poor as it seems, but rather impoverished. This set of elements led Azagaia to call on the people, the underprivileged layers made up of the unfortunate, i.e. the unemployed, the wronged, the illiterate, peasants, informal vendors, non-partisans, young people, victims of the regime, on the same album for *A Marcha* (Article 51), which aimed to purge the thieves, the corrupt and the murderers from power.

In February 2008, due to the rising cost of living, the city and province of Maputo were paralysed for three days by popular demonstrations, which led to the blocking of the main streets and avenues. Azagaia then released the song "*Povo no Poder*" (People in Power), in which he sang that inefficient policies were the cause of the country's social protests. This earned him an activist summons from the Attorney General's Office, which accused him of inciting demonstrations and jeopardising state security. Azagaia has exercised his activism through music and other media interventions the practices that hinder Mozambique's development⁷.

⁶ Moçambique: fez hoje 20 anos que foi assassinado o jornalista Carlos Cardoso” <https://www.rfi.fr/pt/mo%C3%A7ambique/20201122-mo%C3%A7ambique-fez-hoje-20-anos-que-foi-assassinado-o-jornalista-carlos-cardoso>

⁷ Ver a biografia de Azagaia em Azagaia (Edson da Luz) – Curta Biografia CEPCB, <https://cepcb.org.mz/2023/09/21/azagaia-edson-da-luz-curta-biografia-cepcb/>



Final considerations

In this Briefing Note we have seen how different individuals have been able to use their activism to mobilize the masses and fight for social change in Mozambique. The actions of these men and women show that being active is something that is shared by everyone, and not just those who fought against the colonizer or who fight against "poverty". Activism is thus a quality of all those who fight against injustices, wherever and whenever they occur.

This runs counter to the current perception in Mozambique that activism is the prerogative of an employee of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). In this way of seeing activism as something organized institutionally, individual activism, which is crucial for social change, ends up being marginalized and even denied as desirable behavior. As a result, citizens no longer see themselves as the driving force behind their own destiny, and relegate social change to third parties: be they political parties, donors or civil society organizations and their representatives.

The winners in this process are those who want people to continue to believe that as long as citizens only think about "living their lives" away from politics, "without getting into trouble", it is possible to have a good, prosperous society.

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