

SALO Public Dialogue: Understanding Mozambique's Political Dialogue Process and Its Implications for Strengthening Civil Society Space



Executive Summary

The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) hosted a virtual public dialogue titled “*Understanding Mozambique’s Political Dialogue Process and Its Implications for Strengthening Civil Society Space*” in partnership with the Norwegian People’s Aid on 30 October 2025. The dialogue sought to explore the dynamics and broader implications of Mozambique’s political dialogue process, particularly civil society’s ability to influence it. Possible inclusive approaches were examined that could help build long-term peace and democratic legitimacy. Additionally, it assessed how

stakeholders could draw linkages between Mozambique's post-election tensions and similar experiences from other countries in the region.

Chaired by SALO Senior Programme Advisor Munjodzi Mutandiri, the discussion featured an expert panel of civil society, religious, women and youth leaders from Mozambique as well as regional stakeholders. They included Dr. Wilker Dias, Executive Director at Plataforma para Democracia, Cidadania, Direitos e Estudos (DECIDE); Rafa Valente Machava, Executive Director at Women, Law and Development Association (MULEIDE); Bishop Manuel Ernesto, Diocese of Nampula; Ambassador Mandisi Mpahlwa, former High Commissioner of South Africa to Mozambique; and Dr. Guilherme Mbilana, elections expert and spokesperson for the Human Rights and Legality Observatory (ODHL).

Context and Importance

Political dialogue process

The panellists reflected on the genesis of Mozambique's National and Inclusive Political Dialogue and its Technical Commission for National and Inclusive Dialogue (COTE). The Dialogue emerged from the 2024 post-election protests, which Dr. Wilker Dias described as the “*worst moment*” of the country's fledgling democracy, citing the humanitarian cost such as the deaths of 400 people and arrests of over 7,000 – with 2,000 still in custody.¹

Besides the election dispute, a combination of factors sparked the protests, including the clamour for electoral and constitutional reforms as well as inadequate provision of basic services such as education, health, water, and electricity. Furthermore, as Ambassador Masindi Mpahlwa noted, the protests happened amid a changing political terrain marked by the emergence of PODEMOS, a FRELIMO offshoot formed in 2018 which gained electoral mileage in 2024, and an increasingly fearless population that organised protests at a scale FRELIMO had not seen before.

Participants also noted that the Dialogue's model is different from the 1992 peace process, which involved two armed protagonists – FRELIMO and RENAMO. In contrast, the current process involves broader sections of society, particularly civil society organisations and common citizens following their confrontation with the government. Despite this key difference, it was felt that the Dialogue needs to draw lessons from failures of past processes, particularly the need to place healing and reconciliation at the fore of resolving the post-election crisis. For instance, past peace processes failed to adequately address the impact of conflict, such as atrocities, on communities, women, families, and other social groups, as Ambassador Mpahlwa noted.

¹ Dias, W. 2025. SALO Public Dialogue: Understanding Mozambique's Political Dialogue Process and Its Implications for Strengthening Civil Society Space. *Southern African Liaison Office*. 30 October. Available: <https://www.salo.org.za/virtual-public-dialogue-understanding-mozambiques-political-dialogue-process-and-its-implications-for-strengthening-civil-society-space-30-oct-2025/> [29 December 2025].

In this regard, the discussion featured calls for intergenerational dialogue involving leaders who were part of the 1992 peace process and the current generation of leaders, particularly the youths.

Civil society participation and influence

Mozambique's 1990 democratic Constitution enabled a significant expansion of civil society in the country. However, the FRELIMO government often allowed civil society organisations (CSOs) to operate freely only when they focused on social issues such as education and health. It often restricted the activities of CSOs it perceived as threats to its political authority, such as those that raised issues of human rights abuses and corruption.²

Against this backdrop of a historically constrained civil society space, contributors emphasised that the Dialogue presents a major opportunity for civil society to influence Mozambique's political future.

"It is an opportunity, to the extent that it also involves participation of CSOs, to open up greater space for civil society to influence the political process and bring about changes to critical areas of Mozambican society," said Ambassador Mpahlwa.

However, there is limited representation in COTE, where Dr. Dias stated that only three of its 21 officials are from civil society. Additionally, CSOs do not have adequate representation in the various groups formed around the Dialogue's 10 thematic areas. Therefore, CSOs such as DECIDE and its partners have been forced to work outside the formal dialogue process to provide training to the relevant stakeholders, Dr. Dias revealed. Speakers thus emphasised the need for greater civil society inclusion. Bishop Manuel Ernesto revealed that to broaden participation, civil society in Mozambique is *"building an architecture where everyone can fit."*

The discussion also raised an important point that CSOs need to develop adequate capacities to engage in COTE's processes and the Dialogue's thematic areas. These areas require sufficient research and adaptation of best practices to Mozambican circumstances.

Gender, Rights, and Inclusion

The discussion emphasised the need to prioritise gender issues, human rights, and inclusion of women, youths and other social groups. In particular, there was a call to prioritise issues such as femicide, gender-based violence, and security. According to Rafa Valente Machava, COTE has expressed willingness to allow women's groups like MULEIDE to meet with representatives of women at COTE. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is also prepared to help organise meetings in this regard. Furthermore, the Women's Forum (Fórum Mulher), which has 90 member organisations, is planning regional women's meetings with COTE.

² European Union. 2021. *EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Mozambique for the Period 2021-2027*. Available: https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/media/122817/download/3b5b65f7-1280-4270-bc38-aa4247192ec9_en [29 December 2025].

Speakers also called for greater inclusion of young people in the Dialogue given their prominent role in the post-election protests, where many of them bore the brunt of the government crackdown. “*The first step is to apologise to this new generation to start healing those who have been hurt or those who are not well,*” stated Bishop Ernesto. Furthermore, unemployment and the broader economic crisis have affected youths the most, yet they have only two representatives at COTE, according to Dr. Dias.

Since many women and young people have been victims, a key question for the Dialogue is how to create safe spaces for them to open up and participate fully.

Regional Dimensions

Another major focus of the discussion was the need to draw lessons from post-election or conflict resolution experiences from other actors in the region. As examples, Bishop Ernesto cited Sierra Leone and South Africa’s democratic transition under Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, who were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts.

Notably, the transition from conflict in both Sierra Leone³ and South Africa⁴ included the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions as well as governments of national unity. These were mechanisms to promote reconciliation, healing, and inclusion as part of efforts to strengthen peacebuilding initiatives. Several speakers similarly cautioned against elite capture of the Dialogue.

As Munjodzi Mutandiri noted, Mozambique can also learn from the pitfalls of Zimbabwe’s post-2018 Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD), “*which was very elite and composed of political parties.*” Despite its five-year period and a big budget, it did not lead to major political or constitutional reforms in Zimbabwe.

At the same time, South Africa is preparing for a national dialogue to discuss its deep-seated economic crisis and other issues. Recent political developments in Zimbabwe, eSwatini, and Tanzania similarly raise the spectre of national dialogues in those countries. Therefore, there is a “*potential for trans-regional civil society engagements*” in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region, as Ambassador Mpahlwa put it.

However, Machava cautioned that while it is important to learn from other experiences in the region, Mozambicans must own their Dialogue process. Ownership thus emerged strongly from the discussion, linked to the need to avoid elite capture and ensure a broad-based, civil society and people-driven process.

Policy critiques

Protestors Remain in Custody

³ Jemma Blacklaw. 2023. Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *African Transitional Justice Hub*. 1 November. Available: <https://atjhub.csvr.org.za/sierra-leone-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-2002-2004/> [29 December 2025].

⁴ South African History Online. 2014. *South African Government of National Unity (GNU) – 1994-1999*. Available: <https://sahistory.org.za/article/south-african-government-national-unity-gnu-1994-1999> [29 December 2025].

- Around 2,000 people, many of them youths, who were arrested during the post-election protests, are still in custody. This undermines the need to win goodwill and greater participation/inclusion of the masses in the Dialogue.

Inadequate representation/Inclusion

- Inadequate representation of civil society, women, youths, and other social groups may hamper the Dialogue process.

Top-Down Process

- Bishop Ernesto noted that the Dialogue is a top-down process led by politicians, some of them from the government whose response to the protests was perceived as heavy handed. This may undermine broader participation and trust in the process while elevating risks of elite capture.

Weak Focus on Reconciliation

- There are concerns that so far, the Dialogue has not given sufficient attention to the need for reconciliation and healing, particularly for those traumatised by government crackdown on protests. This reduces the Dialogue's chances of success and undermines participation.

Inadequate Prioritisation of Gender and Rights Issues

- The meeting heard concerns that the Dialogue has not sufficiently prioritised women's and human rights issues, such as femicide, gender-based violence, and continued detention of protesters. This risks undermining the process.

Policy Recommendations

Releasing Protesters

- DECIDE and other CSOs are involved in efforts to secure the release of protesters who are still in jail. The government must release these individuals as a confidence-building measure for the Dialogue and reconciliation.

Enhancing Representation and Inclusion

- Women, youths and civil society groups need greater representation and inclusion in the Dialogue and COTE to ensure a broad-based and people-driven process.
- There is need reassess the Dialogue's nature and structure to create trust and safe spaces for CSOs, women, and young people to speak freely.

Addressing the Top-Down Process

- Bishop Ernesto suggested the possibility of having other facilitators of the Dialogue to minimise risks associated with a top-down, politician-driven process.
- Civil society must examine whether the Dialogue is a survival strategy by FRELIMO or a genuine attempt at bringing about meaningful change.
- Civil society must not engage with COTE only. It must also engage political parties individually, including FRELIMO, so that they can strengthen the civil society voice at COTE.
- Despite its limited representation, civil society must push for the Dialogue to address the governance system. For instance, there must be governance stability and continuity even with party-political changes; citizen participation must go beyond party-political affiliation; and electoral outcomes must reflect the will of the people.

Addressing Need for Healing and Reconciliation

- Civil society must ensure that the Dialogue is not only for reforms but also for reconciliation.
- The first step to reconciliation is for government to admit that it has failed the people and accept responsibility for actions against the people during the protests. There is need for more civil society organisations to call on the government to accept responsibility in this regard.
- The political community needs to participate in a process of self-diagnosis regarding its role in the root causes of the post-election crisis. This must form part of the healing process.
- Healing should also involve the government apologising to the younger generation, particularly those who were affected by the crackdown on protests.

Addressing Gender and Rights Issues

- The Dialogue must prioritise gender and human rights issues.

Conclusion

By hosting virtual public dialogues, SALO attempts to deepen understanding of key issues and in the process, produce policy critiques and recommendations to help policymakers and other stakeholders address the issues in focus. SALO's 30th October dialogue on Mozambique's political dialogue process and its implications for strengthening civil society space achieved this objective. Participants explored the contextual genesis of the Mozambican National Dialogue and its shortcomings as well as opportunities for civil society to strengthen and influence the process. They raised concerns regarding limited representation of civil society, women, and youths in the Dialogue, reconciliation, gender and human rights, and the Dialogue's top-down nature.

They highlighted how civil society can sustain the Dialogue process and ensure broad-based as opposed to elite ownership. The discussion further emphasised the need for intergenerational dialogue involving senior leaders from the 1992 peace process. Panellists stressed that the Dialogue needs support, especially for peacebuilding

efforts. It must go beyond political, electoral, and constitutional reforms to open up economic participation for all Mozambicans regardless of political affiliation.

The analysis and recommendations included in this report do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the report are the sole responsibility of SALO and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.

About the Southern African Liaison Office:

S A L 

International liaison, dialogue and research

The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy, especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

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