



REDE MOÇAMBICANA DOS
DEFENSORES DE DIREITOS HUMANOS

RMDDH



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SOUTHERN AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS SUMMIT

Reimagining Human Rights Defenders' Protection: Including Anonymous Voices Amid Electoral Protests



The Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (SouthernDefenders) held the 2024 Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Summit from November 25 to 26, 2024, in Johannesburg, South Africa. The summit brought together human rights defenders, civil society organizations, grassroots movements, representatives of national human rights institutions, and government officials from Southern Africa to reflect on strategies and pathways to strengthen the role of human rights defenders in promoting citizenship and accountable governance in the region.

Speaking on behalf of the Mozambican Network of Human Rights Defenders (RMDDH), the Executive Director of the Civil Society Learning and Capacity-Building Center (CESC), Paula Monjane, advocated for a necessary reconfiguration of the protection mechanisms for human rights defenders in the context of electoral injustice, which has triggered protests in Mozambique. This reconfiguration, according to the activist and human rights defender, should include:

- Expanding the understanding of human rights defenders beyond the narrow lens of

frontline agents, activists, and organizations to include other actors, some of whom are anonymous and take more informal actions;

- Recognizing the challenges and limitations of the legal framework used in cases of state abuse;
- Implementing proactive and comprehensive responses to address the “beast.”

In the early 1990s, with the general peace agreements between the Frelimo government and Renamo (the main opposition party), Mozambique adopted a democratic political system. Among other political, legal, and administrative agreements, multiparty elections were introduced in 1994. Since then, the country has conducted six more electoral cycles (presidential, parliamentary, and now also local government elections).

In nearly all or all these elections, there is a common denominator: allegations of fraud and post-election conflicts. Except for last year’s municipal elections and this year’s general elections, these conflicts have been armed and ended in secret agreements benefiting Frelimo and Renamo.



Current Protest Scenario and the Need to Broaden Understanding of Defenders

During her presentation at the event, Paula Monjane described the context of mega-fraud in the October 9 elections, referring to the initial strategies used by electoral management bodies to produce results favoring Frelimo and its presidential candidate. She stated that the mega-fraud occurred “in a terrain saturated with social injustices but also with the emergence of a new leader who speaks and embodies aspirations.”

She spoke of mega-fraud spanning legislation, registration, elections, and vote counting, highlighting that legislation, among other things, reduced the role of local courts and gave powers to the Constitutional Council, which is controlled by Frelimo. She also highlighted selective voter registration, deliberate disorganization on election day, which manifested as: people with voter cards being unable to vote or ballots not being available to them; ballot stuffing; many opposition votes being invalidated; and controlled vote counting.

“These post-election protests have been the largest in our history, both within Mozambique and in the diaspora, primarily led by young people steadfastly demanding electoral and social justice,” said Paula Monjane. She explained that as of the Summit date, at least 67 people (10 children, 3 deaths in their homes) had died, 210 were shot (36 children), 1,326 were detained, and hundreds were pursued even into their homes.

“Journalists were also intimidated (some international ones were detained and sent home); activists

and social defenders have appeared on the regime’s intimidation lists,” she said. She added that in this context, there is a mix of structured and unstructured organizations and also anonymous citizens (mainly young people) participating in formal electoral observation, informal monitoring, protests for electoral and social justice, assistance to victims, documentation of violence cases, legal protection, and even strategic litigation.

Faced with this scenario, Paula Monjane posed some reflection questions and then presented response proposals:

How can we expand our understanding of human rights defenders beyond the narrow lens of frontline agents, activists, and organizations to include other actors, some of whom are anonymous and perform more informal actions?

What are the limitations of the legal framework for protecting and enhancing the protection of human rights defenders?

What proactive and comprehensive responses should we consider?

Regarding the responses to the reflection questions, the first stands out, concerning the question of who human rights defenders are, in which she advocates broadening the understanding of human rights defenders to include anonymous actors and those operating under the radar in the fight for social justice—those on the front lines, anonymous individuals persecuted in their homes, and others fighting for social justice.



“Elections Revealed Contrasts Between Countries with Strong Democratic Processes and Those with Eroded Democracies” – Prof. Adriano Nuvunga

Speaking at the Summit’s opening, Prof. Adriano Nuvunga, president of Southern Defenders and RMDDH, elaborated on the elections in some Southern African countries, saying that these elections revealed contrasts between “countries with strong and democratic electoral processes and those where democracy is undermined.”

“In some countries, the elections have been a beacon of hope, exemplifying principles of transparency and accountability,” he said. For this reality, he used examples of Botswana and Mauritius, which recently held elections. According to Prof. Adriano Nuvunga, the power transfer in these countries “showed respect for the people’s will and reaffirmed the integrity of democratic institutions.” In contrast, there are countries where “other elections exposed system failures and deliberate manipulation, posing a clear threat to people’s aspirations.” Mozambique is part of this latter group,

where allegations of fraud led to protests violently repressed by security forces.

In light of the injustices, including electoral injustice and the closure of civic space, Adriano Nuvunga underscored the importance of human rights defenders. For the activist and academic, human rights defenders are crucial for democracy and freedom. “They amplify the voices of the marginalized and protect the oppressed,” he emphasized. Despite the challenges, Prof. Adriano Nuvunga stated that human rights defenders remain at the forefront of justice. They face threats, repression, arrests, and defamation to silence their advocacy. He criticized the shrinking of civic space and reminded the audience that when civic space is closed, the foundation of democracy is lost. Regarding the elections in various parts of the region, Nuvunga noted that they revealed both the fragility and potential of the democratic system in the region.







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Almejamos um país livre e seguro para os Defensores dos Direitos Humanos, um ambiente favorável ao desenvolvimento das comunidades e ao envolvimento da juventude como potenciais Defensores dos Direitos Humanos.

We aspire to a nation where Human Rights defenders can operate freely and securely, fostering community development and empowering youth to become effective advocates for Human Rights.



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