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Mozambique's role in championing the Timor-Leste independence movement

By Filip Noubel

An interview with scholar Marisa Ramos Gonçalves



Demonstrations at the University Eduardo Mondlane campus, in Maputo, Mozambique, on September 26, 1999, in Indonesia's *Tempo* magazine. Photo by Marisa Gonçalves.

The Southeast Asian nation of Timor-Leste and the East African state of Mozambique are about 10,000 kilometers apart, yet their history is unusually connected. The two former Portuguese colonies are linked through a shared history of colonialism and their solidarity in the fight for independence.

Global Voices talked to Marisa Ramos Gonçalves, a researcher and a lecturer at the Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, about the relationship between the two. Her current research on “Transnational histories of solidarity in the south — researching ‘other’ knowledges and struggles for rights across the Indian ocean” focuses on Timor-Leste and Mozambique. The interview took place over email after an in-person meeting in June in Dakar, Senegal, at the Africa-Asia A New Axis of Knowledge ConFest.



Marisa Ramos Gonçalves, Presentation at Centro Nacional Chegal, in Dili, Timor-Leste 2023. Photo by CNC.

Filip Noubel (FN): What factors motivated Mozambique to provide such extensive support to Timor-Leste during this independence struggle?

Marisa Ramos Gonçalves (MRG): The new Mozambican state, which gained its independence in 1975 and was led by the Frelimo movement and President Samora Machel, lived by the principle of solidarity with all peoples oppressed by colonialism and economic imperialism. Demonstrative of this was the sentence proclaimed often by Machel: “While Timor-Leste is not an independent country, the independence of Mozambique will not be fulfilled.”

Besides being the base of Timor-Leste's external resistance of Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente) between 1975 and the mid-1980s, Mozambique was then a “safe haven” to exiled left-wing political activists from Chile and Brazil and members of several liberation movements, in particular in Southern Africa: the ANC from South Africa, ZANU from Zimbabwe, SWAPO from Namibia.

During its liberation struggle, Mozambique had also received support from Tanzania and other African nations, including the former colonies from Portugal, through CONCP (Conferência das Organizações Nacionalistas das Colónias Portuguesas). Timor-Leste was a territory in Asia; however, it had been connected for centuries to the African colonies through Portuguese imperial networks, and in the 1970s, these connections extended to the exchange of information on liberation from colonialism.

FN: How did the support manifest, and how present — or not — is the memory of this solidarity, in both countries?

MRG: In my interviews, Mozambicans from several sectors of society shared memories of the solidarity with the independence cause in Timor-Leste. The support by the Mozambican government, led by the party Frelimo, extended also to civil society organizations and individuals (journalists, artists, academics), and is most manifest when seen through a web of personal relationships that was established then, in particular during the early period of Mozambican independence until the late 1980s. The Frelimo party provided support to the East Timorese Fretilin cadres who lived in Mozambique, particularly in university training, as well as in political and economic support. The Frelimo government encouraged all Mozambicans to donate a percentage of their salary, corresponding to one day of work, to the Solidarity Bank, to be given to independence movements and refugee groups, among them Fretilin. Also, there was significant coverage in the media.

The focus of Frelimo's support for liberation movements was on training cadres for future independent countries, and this determination was shared with Fretilin's leadership in the country. There was freedom for the students to choose their courses, and the government provided them with jobs in their areas of study. After obtaining their degrees, several East Timorese occupied positions in public institutions. The Mozambique government also provided land for the group to farm and raise cattle. This followed the socialist government principle of “fighting with our own means,” which aimed to instill the idea of self-sufficiency.

Moreover, in the first decade of occupation, the support by the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) to the resolution voting initiatives at the UN assembly was crucial to keeping the Timor-Leste issue on the UN agenda. The PALOP brought the Timor-Leste occupation to debates at the Non-Aligned Movement, facing Indonesian and Indian opposition. They supported the East Timorese who lobbied in the UN, when Portuguese diplomats were attempting to drop the case, and the US, Canada, Australia, Japan, the European countries, the ASEAN bloc, and the Arab countries abstained from condemning the actions of Indonesia in the General Assembly yearly votes.

FN: How do you see different decolonization processes meeting, or clashing in this case since Indonesia was separating from the Netherlands while Timor-Leste from Indonesia. Did Mozambique also attempt to counter Indonesian narratives or influence in the global arena?

MRG: The decolonization processes occurred in different periods: Indonesia in 1945, Timor-Leste in 1975. Under the leadership of President Sukarno (1945–1967), Indonesia was one of the founding countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), whose first summit was held in Bandung in 1955, inspiring various liberation movements in Asia and Africa. However, General Suharto (1967–1998), who benefited from the support of Western powers, pursued a colonial project in East Timor (1975–1999) during the dictatorial New Order period, a situation that has been described