

A New Church is Born under Persecution*

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The relationship between the Catholic Church, and indeed all religions, and the Mozambique Revolution is becoming clearer: it is a negative one, for pressure and even persecution by the state are increasing. It must be said, however, that for the Church all has not been lost during these last years. As always happens in times of persecution, the Church is experiencing profound renewal. Christians, purified by suffering, discover how to follow Christ more truly.

Can the past be wiped out?

The Church in Mozambique has always had close associations with Portuguese colonialism. Even in the colonies, the Church and the Portuguese nation have historically been linked together, and their union was made indissoluble through the "Missionary Agreement" signed by the Holy See and the Lisbon Government on 17 May 1940. According to the document, the Portuguese State was to support the Mission and the Mission was to be at the service of the Portuguese State. After 1960, the "year of African freedom" when about twenty countries achieved independence, the independence movements in Portugal's overseas territories began their guerrilla struggle. Meanwhile the Church continued to remain tied to the State's apron strings until the military coup of 25 April 1974 which overthrew the government of Salazar's successor Caetano.

"The Church has been in active collaboration with the colonial régime," wrote Mgr Manuel Vieira Pinto, Bishop of Nampula, the only bishop to declare himself in favour of independence for Mozambique,¹

in that it has helped to spread Portuguese culture, has publicly associated itself with colonial leaders, and has preached a gospel of docile obedience to authority. It has also collaborated passively in that it has allowed itself

*Translated with permission from "Una chiesa nuova nasce dalla persecuzione", *Mondo e missione* No. 22, 15 November 1979.

to be used by the colonial power, it has tolerated the repression practised by the régime, and from fear or prudence has been silent about the crimes and injustices of colonialism—particularly the war of repression and the reprisals which violated the fundamental rights of the people of Mozambique.

The Bishop also recognized other accusations made against the Church as well-founded.²

When Frelimo³ came to power it made use of these failings of the Church (and of other religions which also supported colonialism) in issuing a general condemnation of religious institutions. According to President Samora Machel,⁴

religion is a superstition which pretends that man is dependent on a supernatural being who doesn't exist. Not only is it powerless to solve the actual problems of the people, but it also takes away man's self-confidence and prevents his controlling his own destiny. It isn't religion that inspired Frelimo's fighters in their struggle. Religious superstition must be replaced by a scientific, materialist, that is, Marxist, approach. The Church has always been on the side of the oppressors and is dependent on foreign capitalist powers like the Vatican. It is a reactionary institution which, in all people's democracies, stirs up counter-revolution. To believe or not to believe is a personal matter, but we won't allow Catholics to go round the country any longer trying to force people to become Catholics. Nor will Muslims be allowed to proselytize. Religion is something that divides people. The colonialists have made it serve their own ends in Mozambique. We want to liberate the people from it so as to make them free.

Frelimo has substituted "scientific socialism" for religion. Ideological education is seen as the best means of fighting obscurantism, superstition and religion as obstacles to the revolutionary process which have negative influence on people's mental attitudes and on society as a whole. By means of its "Department of Ideology" the Party sees that what is in effect atheist education is applied universally through the Party and state-run organizations (the school, the army, the press, the radio, the propaganda apparatus and so on).

The Courage of the Bishops

What has been the Church's reaction to the triumph of the Revolution? Let us set out the main facts.¹ The Holy See remained passive during the last years of colonial power: it seemed at that time concerned at all costs to maintain good relations with tottering Portuguese fascism. As soon as events freed it from its obligations of loyalty to this pact with the colonial power, however, it reacted strongly. On 6 December 1974, the year of the transfer of power, it nominated Mgr Francesco Colasuonno as Apostolic Delegate to Maputo and replaced two Portuguese bishops, while about 600 missionaries⁵

left the country. These were mostly Portuguese who were ashamed of the faults of the past and apprehensive in the face of an awakening national consciousness. Partly making up for these losses about fifty foreign missionaries, previously expelled by the Portuguese, came back.

On 30 April 1974 the bishops published a joint letter outlining a positive approach to the future of the country. The letter offered the Church's co-operation with the new independent government, ignoring President Machel's previous threatening statements on religion. The bishops maintained a discreet silence about the past, which was something the Frelimo leaders were not prepared to do. A year later, in June 1975, two further letters, one from the bishops and one from Mgr Vieira Pinto of Nampula, struck a much more realistic note. They were full of praise for the achievements of the Revolution and affirmed that Christians must "support a revolution that seeks to build a society free from all abuses"; they also offered a positive interpretation of Frelimo's slogan "Work, Vigilance, Unity of the People". At the same time, however, the bishops made quite clear their attitudes on the question of respect for the individual (the first sudden arrests and imprisonments without trial had taken place) and on religious freedom.

From the beginning, unlike bishops in many other countries with Marxist-Leninist régimes (e.g. Cuba and Vietnam), the bishops of Mozambique spoke frankly and courageously in opposition to violations of human rights by the régime, while at the same time urging Catholics to be ready to co-operate in building the new society. President Machel seems to have appreciated this frank approach. On 31 January 1976 he had a meeting with representatives of the churches. After making assurances on religious freedom he showed a remarkable willingness to be conciliatory and invited church leaders either to send him in writing or to tell him openly their opinions on the actions of the authorities.⁶ The bishops had sent various letters to the President, some complaining about re-education camps, others documenting violations of religious liberty, and these had, to some extent, led to positive action.

A Church Stripped of Everything

Despite the frankness of relations at a high level the Mozambique Church has gone through the traumatic experience of being stripped of its possessions: in a very short time it has lost what took decades of sacrifice to build. It is sufficient to mention the loss of 4,237 schools of all types and grades (with half a million pupils), 141 community centres, 202 medical centres (1½ million patients were treated in 1973), and the curtailment of much other pastoral and cultural activity (magazines, printing presses) and youth work (various associations, movements, recreational centres and so on). Confiscation was often carried out in a brutal manner, but altogether it left the impression of a carefully conceived plan. First the schools and hospitals were

taken over, and then workshops, the lands on which schools and hospitals relied for maintenance, livestock, plantations, machinery. A short while before this most of the houses of the fathers who had run the schools and missions had also been nationalized. The fathers had to go out and live in simple houses or even in huts just like those of the ordinary people—as they had done when missionary work originally started. Only the church buildings were left; but then the law of April 1978 declared: “All existing religious buildings, with everything in them, are counted the property of the nation because they are the fruit of the people’s labour. Therefore their possessions, utensils, furnishings and so on cannot be sold or given away. The Church is entrusted with the task of preserving, maintaining and correctly administering this patrimony.” In practice these are the same as Soviet laws. The priest is the custodian of the church and is responsible for what it contains; the State owns the property and has overall control, compiles detailed inventories, and then can always find some pretext for penalizing the priest whenever it wants. A seat has only to be broken and the priest is considered responsible. Naturally the application of the law varies from one district to another, “but they always have the whip-hand”, a priest who had returned from Mozambique reported to us, “and state power is absolute.”

“Where do the fathers and sisters live?” we asked.

“In small houses and huts well away from the mission precincts, which have been turned into educational centres where the ‘new man’ is to be formed. We keep before us the ideal of community work. Although living in separate houses, fathers and sisters try as much as possible to live in community and work together. Some sisters work as nurses, others as teachers, others look after the houses. We keep ourselves going with the money earned by the sisters who work for the State, and with what we bring or are sent from Italy. When we return from leave (we can go for only three months or we lose our entrance permits) we bring Italian money or dollars, and the government is glad to get some foreign currency.”

‡ “Are you able to carry out your apostolate freely?”

“Fathers and sisters are very strictly controlled. To move from one place to another you need the Party’s permission. You have to say where you are going, and why, and for how long, and so on. In almost all the missions, they have left us one car, but permission to use it or not depends on the local boss. Now they claim to have a list of everyone who takes part in religious meetings, who the community leaders are and what subjects are discussed.”

“Is there freedom of worship?”

“It is very difficult to give a reply which applies to the whole country. In some regions there is; in others you can’t celebrate the Eucharist or hold meetings without special permission. You have to ask permission for everything. One bishop got permission to go to visit his flock in a certain place. His permit didn’t say he could administer confirmation so he delegated a local priest to do it, but he was then arrested for not having asked permission to

delegate. . . . They try every possible way of wearing us down. Education of young people under eighteen is of course monopolized by the State and in the schools there is strong Marxist propaganda. With regard to baptism, infant baptism is not prohibited by any law, but the officials say it can't be done until the child is eighteen because children belong to the State. Up until 1977 you could give religious instruction to children and young people as long as they asked for it, but now it's a lot more difficult, I'd say almost impossible, because all over Mozambique children and young people under eighteen are forbidden to go to church."

Co-operation with Frelimo Impossible

I spoke to another missionary who had recently returned from Mozambique. We had already met in 1975 when he had been a keen supporter of Frelimo. He was young and had not been there long. He believed in the revolution because he thought it gave a real chance to reform. I asked him what his attitude was now.

"At first nearly all of us had great faith in Frelimo," he told me, "and many of us were really enthusiastic. But from 1975 Frelimo abruptly changed over to a hardline totalitarian policy and common sense was sacrificed. The Church and other religions suffered. There were restrictions, and violence directed against individuals. We began to understand that the road we were travelling was not leading to the well-being of the people. Despite this sharp disillusionment, we young missionaries tried to give the Party the benefit of the doubt, finding excuses for its mistakes, and still trying to be optimistic about the state of affairs in the country. This went on almost until the end of 1977. But now even those who had always been hopeful have come to the conclusion that dialogue with Frelimo is impossible. It's not us alone. The vast majority of the people themselves are opposed to a régime³ of this type. There are still two or three foreign missionaries who claim to support the Party, but even they are discouraged because they are powerless; they just have to do what they are told and keep their mouths shut."

"Perhaps you yourself are basically anti-socialist?"

"Certainly not. We were convinced, and still are, that socialism is the only road that will benefit the people of Mozambique. But we were thinking of communal efforts and of justice and brotherhood based firmly on the traditional African way of life. We were ready, for instance, to give full co-operation in rural development, providing tractors and agricultural experts to aid production. We wanted to live our lives at the same level as our people and we were pleased at the beginning when the Church had all her property, hospitals and schools nationalized. But our co-operation was made impossible in every way, first because what mattered was the Party and Party

ideology and they weren't interested in anything else, even if it was something that would benefit the people economically; secondly because, by insisting on their ideology, they suddenly turned against all religion and African tradition, and used violent methods to impose atheist teachings which the people found repugnant. To sum up, Frelimo wanted power and nothing but power; nothing else mattered; it was not a case of serving the people but of exploiting them."

"When I was talking to an older missionary I heard him say that at first you youngsters were very idealistic about Frelimo and you wanted to show your support by doing something, while the older priests were more cautious. Now instead the roles are reversed; you are very much against Frelimo while the older missionaries advise you to keep cool. Is this true?"

"Yes it is, to some extent, although put like that it is rather a broad generalization. We found ourselves in a Mozambique freed from the shackles of colonialism and we were as ready as could be to give our support to Frelimo. So today it is we who feel the biggest disappointment. Our seniors never expected as much as us, so today they are less upset. They want to collaborate at any cost whereas we feel we must speak out about the violations of human rights."

"Is it only for religious freedom that the Christians make a stand, or for freedom in general—for political and human rights?"

"Increasingly we realize that freedom is indivisible. In his Lenten letter of March 1979 one bishop made this point: by doing away with religious liberty they are attacking a basic human right—a man's humanity is stunted if he doesn't have freedom to make his own decisions and choices or to think or act freely. The Church always begins with man's rights and takes as a basic principle that every person has rights the state must respect: the right to life, to freedom of speech, thought, access to correct information, to free education and so on. The bishops wrote a letter on 3 December 1978 in which they spoke specifically about the rights of man, respect for the individual and liberty. At the start of 1976 we wanted to publish the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights so that the people of Mozambique would know what these rights were, but it wasn't possible then—and today all printing presses are in the hands of the State. All books and magazines from abroad are nowadays vetted by a State body, the National Institute for Books and Records, and sometimes they are confiscated."

A Church Geared for Community and Service

Through talking to various returned missionaries and reading the bishops' documents we gain a clear picture of how the experience of the loss of external structures and of incipient persecution (of which more later) has brought much suffering to Christians but has also borne positive, evangelical fruits.

We do not want to idealize this stripped-down Church, but it is worth noting the positive side of what the bishops call a “transition period”. They write:

Having passed from being a triumphalist Church, too closely tied to the powers that be, to a poor, dispossessed Church, divorced from state control, freed from false security, and with the stirrings of a real internal renewal, we feel we are on the way to becoming a community-based Church, a family Church, one in which mutual service is freely given, a Church made their very own in the hearts of the people, rooted in real life, a leaven in society.

A fundamental sign of renewal was the first National Pastoral Assembly held in Beira from 8 to 13 September 1977, which was concerned with the preparation of Christian groups, and was looking for a common pastoral policy in the light of existing conditions.⁷ The three basic aims were: the formation of small Christian groups; the upgrading of lay ministry; and practical preparation for the laity involved in this. It started by making Christians aware of the value of such groups and then of the personal responsibility of each baptized member of the Church. It did away with the name and role of “catechist”—people formerly paid for their services. Today there are in Mozambique thousands of small Christian groups like those in Latin America (except that they are bigger, with about 100-150 members) in which the faithful themselves allocate the various aspects of ministry, and these “ministers” are then commissioned at a service at which a priest may well not be present. Every year at Pentecost they celebrate a “Festival of Renewal” at which the group reviews these aspects of ministry and decides again who is to do them and then there is a new invocation of the Holy Spirit and a new laying on of hands. In this way the “ministers” are chosen afresh each year. During the festival, which lasts for hours, they renew their baptismal and marriage vows, and married couples are called out from the group to receive blessings. Older ones are asked if they still want to carry on even though they are getting older or have retired, and know their own limitations. All are called to their own particular tasks. At one of these festivals an old missionary was asked by an “elder”: “Father, you left your native land and your family as a young man to come among us; now that you are old, are you content with your choice? Knowing what fate may befall you, do you still want to remain with us? Are you ready to stay here and share our poverty till your death?”

The Church in Mozambique has become less centralized and less clerical. Indeed the number of clergy continues to fall through the expulsion or departure of foreign missionaries. Today there are no more than three hundred left and numbers are not being made up because of the small number of ordinations of native priests — there are only forty of them. The Church however is more soundly based among a large proportion of the community. The fundamental problem for the Church today, from the

pastoral point of view, is the training of those to whom ministerial duties are delegated and of the "elders". It must be said that the grassroots response from the Church is heartening. Christians are attending training courses, despite considerable cost to themselves through having to travel for days on foot, lack of money and social discrimination. The chief ministries are as follows: organizing the groups; reading and expounding the Word of God; arranging for and distributing Holy Communion; choir and liturgical duties; Holy Baptism; preparation for the marriage service; relation with Christians of other denominations; "eldership" in the group.

With this new type of pastoral work, of course, the figure of the dominant missionary who does everything has disappeared. The priest today is responsible for the spiritual organization of the community; he is the trainer of the lay ministry and, of course, he alone celebrates the Mass and hears confessions. We can safely say that the faithful feel very much at home in this new-style Church because they feel it is really theirs. There are still of course difficulties in Church-State relations because the Party sees these Christian groups with their own organizers and their regular meetings as opposition groups to those of the Party. In Mozambique Frelimo alone has the right to run organizations and groups and to address the people. Anything which happens outside Frelimo is suspect. Because of this, the church never uses the term "head of the group" or any term conveying the idea of individual responsibility, and thus indicates that in the groups responsibility belongs to everyone, that all are of equal rank, and that therefore there is no organization but simply a voluntary coming together of people to pray.

War Declared on the Church by the Party

During the course of 1979 the sense of religious freedom definitely diminished. Let us look at some significant facts. On 3 December 1978 the bishops published a letter (*On Being Free to Witness to the Faith*) in which they had the courage to compare the guarantees granted by the Constitution with the realities of everyday life. "We cannot understand," they wrote, "how it is possible to reconcile the recognition of freedom of religion with a systematic attempt to wipe it out. Nor can we see how the constitutional guarantees can be reconciled with certain restrictions on the practice of religion found almost everywhere in the country."⁸ They then give some examples of these restrictions: "the difficulties put in the way of Christians meeting for worship; the limitations imposed on the pastoral activity of bishops, priests and group organizers; the expulsion of missionaries; the scurrilous criticism of religion; the enforcement of atheism: discrimination for religious reasons."

The letter is a serious and open indictment of the régime. A few days after it came out the bishops were summoned to hear a report by the Party

organization on a series of breaches of the law and to receive notification of a number of restrictions, some already in force. To be prohibited were: religious activity except in churches; religious meetings in private houses; all religious activities in factories, schools or the armed forces; all Catholic associations; the import of any book or magazine without state permission; and the printing or duplicating of a single line without previous submission to the censors. Even bishops could no longer issue uncensored statements. Meanwhile restrictions were placed on entry to a seminary or convent.

This however was only the beginning of a general tightening of the reins in the confrontation with religion during 1979, so much so that *Le Monde*, which usually favoured the Maputo régime, wrote: "in the open conflict with the Church, the régime seems to have decided to destroy it along with all internal opposition. In his speech on 1 May Samora Machel has virtually declared war on the Church."⁹ From April to June 1979 the state-controlled press kept up a campaign against the Church, accompanied by public meetings and violent accusations of "counter-revolutionary activity", together with intimidation which led to specific acts of persecution—church closures, the expulsion or imprisonment (if only for a few days) of foreign missionaries, the regrouping of priests and sisters in the cities and so on. Articles published in *Noticias* and *Tempo* had been discussed by Frelimo's Central Committee and it seems that there was some opposition to their publication, but Samora Machel's wishes prevailed. In a speech on 1 May he had in fact commended the journalists who had written the articles.¹⁰ These articles, which were translated into English and French to be sent to all foreign embassies in Maputo, were extraordinarily hostile to the Church, both in reference to its colonial past and to its current opposition to "scientific socialism". In addition to their violent wording they carried slanders and unproved accusations against individual missionaries.

In the above-mentioned speech of 1 May, Samora Machel intensified his attack. Here are some extracts:

Religion is the tool of imperialism . . . the Catholic Church in particular. It is either us or the enemy. Look at these bishops, men who got their promotion through the sacrifices of our people. In the old days they weren't allowed to sit at table with the bishops, who were white men; they couldn't even eat with the priest in charge of the mission station, but had to eat in the kitchen. We proclaimed independence, and they got promotion as bishops and have been turned into shock-troops of political and ideological subversion. Yesterday they stood side by side with the Portuguese colonialists . . . and today they claim to speak in the name of the people! But which people? Apes, or parrots, without honesty, patriotism or morals. Their aim is to fight against organized society. Under the cloak of their religious robes they go all over the place collecting recruits and money. But power is on our side, the people are on our side! These agents camouflaged in religious robes are the tools of imperialism. . . .

This press campaign paved the way for, and then followed up, the publication of the new government regulations concerning the Church dated 29 April 1979,¹¹ which reveal plainly the intention of strangling all church activity. The “new norms” which repeated and spelled out the prohibitions already notified to the bishops in December 1978 (see above) were justified by recalling the Church’s faults in the past and its current opposition to the Revolution. Here is the paragraph introducing the text of the laws:

The Catholic Church in Mozambique was historically the ally of colonialism and fascism . . . it was deeply involved in the colonial war of oppression to hinder the people’s liberation. Today it appears on the side of the forces opposing the progress of the Revolution, trying to win back what colonialism and imperialism lost on the battlefield. After supporting fascism, after being involved with military aggression against our people, the Catholic Church in Mozambique, with the coming of independence, has fought against the victory of the people and is the mouthpiece of the struggle against socialism. . . . We believe that the Church must free itself from the shackles of its past by ceasing to be the tool of subversion in the hands of those who look back with nostalgia to colonialism.

Why this special bitterness against the Church?¹² The reason is clear: the régime sees the Church as the one real alternative to the ideology of “scientific socialism” and to the oppressive, dehumanizing machinery put into motion by Frelimo. References to the past sins of the Church are intended purely to justify current persecution. Indeed, had the bishops and Christians submitted passively to government policy (as in some other countries with Marxist-Leninist régimes) the past would have been forgotten and the “co-operation” between Communists and Catholics praised to the skies—the former co-operate by giving the orders and the latter by carrying them out without protest, as in Vietnam and Cuba. In Mozambique, on the other hand, the Church has chosen the more difficult and dangerous path, but, we believe, the path in line with the Gospel; it co-operates in the sense of working hard for the rebuilding of the country and obeying all the laws of the state, but has not renounced its function as critic of society, a function which belongs to any free man and above all to any Christian and which is his duty as a contribution towards building a better society. For in Mozambique, as the Party journalists themselves admit, “no-one has the right to produce propaganda against scientific socialism”.¹³ The Church is condemned precisely because it tries to produce this “reactionary propaganda”. Here we come to the real crux of the Church-State conflict. Frelimo has adopted a clearly defined ideological line, and intends to pursue it to the end despite the negative results it has so far produced, and of necessity is on a collision course with all those (the Church among the foremost) who want to halt it on the edge of the precipice.

This clearly defined ideological line is now irreversible for another reason

too. Since the end of the war of liberation, the freedom fighters (who held the Church and the missionaries in high esteem, for they had always felt they were behind them and the ordinary people despite the façade of pro-colonialism) have now been replaced by young Party activists, very much like those found in the USSR, Cuba, China and Eastern Europe. Freedom fighters who would not toe the line were removed to “re-education camps”. All the time fresh batches of youngsters, even children, are being sent to other communist countries—children aged twelve to sixteen, taken often unwillingly from their families. Moulded by years in foreign countries, they come back disciplined and with a well-tested Party mentality. There are many Catholic youths among them, just as there are many ex-seminarians and catechists among Party officials. At the start these men left the missionaries to put their superior educational attainments at the service of the State, in the hope that they would have a christianizing effect on future state policies. Their high hopes turned out to be illusory, especially as the Catholics (and many Protestant catechists too) were faced with the dilemma of having to choose between complete loyalty to Frelimo and the State (and to a State ideology in which the struggle against religion is intrinsic) on the one hand and re-education camps on the other.

The ideology chosen by Frelimo, Soviet Marxist-Leninism,¹⁴ is at the root of the conflict between Church and State. Not only that, but it is the fundamental cause of the failure of “liberation” in the economic, social and political fields. When will the people of Mozambique really be free to think out, discuss and choose the road they truly want?

¹ *Passado, igreja e future in “Igreja e Missão”,* Cucujaes, September-December 1975, p. 335 onwards.

² For evidence supporting the Bishop’s statements see C. Bertulli, *Croce e spada in Mozambique*, Coines, Rome 1974, 294 pp., with a vast bibliography.

³ Frente da Libertação do Mozambique.

⁴ It would take too long to cite Machel’s references to religion and the church. We give a selection of phrases taken from his speeches. Full texts can be found in *Le Mozambique, Dossier Pro Mundi Vita*, Louvain, January 1977, pp. 16-19.

⁵ 146 priests, 55 monks and 450 nuns.

⁶ On this encounter see *IDOC Bulletin* (English), Nos. 41-2, March-April 1976, pp. 12-13. Among the Episcopal protests sent to the president were *Church and Society* (January 1977); *Christians Interpret the Revolution* (Mgr Vieira Pinto, 25 June 1977, text in *Mission de L’Eglise*, Brussels, June 1978); *Memorandum on Social Problems* (29 December 1977); *Document from the Permanent Council of the Bishops Conference to the Minister of the Interior, on Religious Liberty* (8 August 1978); *Memorandum on the Restriction of Religious Liberty in the Country* (3 December 1978).

⁷ For the conclusions of this Assembly see *Il Regno-Documentazioni*, Bologna, No. 1, 1978, p. 23.

⁸ See text in *Il Regno-Documentazioni*, No. 3, 1979; *Nigrizia*, Verona, February 1979; *Mondo e Missione*, Milan, June-July 1979.

⁹ Compare *Le Monde*, 2 June 1979.

¹⁰ See *Tempo*, Maputo, 13 May 1979; and *Il Regno-Informationi*, Bologna, 15 June 1979 (“*Samora Machel ai Cattolici; o noi o voi*”). The insulting word *macacos* (“squawking parrots”) and other rude epithets were directed at the bishops by Samora Machel in his speech on 1 May 1979, which was not reported in the official press.

¹¹ Text in *Tempo*, 13 May 1979.

¹²Persecution has been directed not only against the Catholic Church but against all other religious denominations as well. For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses have nearly all been put into re-education camps (about 20,000 according to *Nigrizia*, 1 November 1977; up to 30,000 according to other sources).

¹³*Noticias*, Maputo, 27 April 1979.

¹⁴Reading the monthly *Agencia de Informação de Moçambique* one can see clearly how all Frelimo's foreign policy is at the service of the USSR; and its allies (Cuba, Vietnam, Afghanistan and so on) have close relations with Mozambique.

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