

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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MOZAMBIQUE

ICTS AND THE SEPTEMBER STREET PROTESTS IN MAPUTO



Polly Gaster

Introduction

On 1 September 2010 many inhabitants of Mozambique's capital city, Maputo, and the satellite city Matola, were unable to get to work. The main routes into the centre of town had been closed by demonstrators protesting against recent rises in the cost of living. The police tried to quell the protests, at some points using live bullets, resulting in violent confrontations.

The government reacted initially by proclaiming its "irreversible" position on the price rises, but backtracked within a week as further demonstrations were threatened. The events in Mozambique cannot be called a "Facebook revolution", in today's fashionable terminology, but various information and communications technologies (ICTs) played significant roles. Recognition of this provoked a government reaction, with implications for the future freedom of ICT-based communications, while the pattern of ICT usage illustrated the gap between the protesters on the street and civil society organisations.

Legal framework

Mozambique's first multiparty Constitution of 1990 and its 2004 revision¹ guarantee freedom of expression, association and the press. They also explicitly state that the "exercise of freedom of expression (...) and the exercise of the right to information shall not be limited by censorship." The Constitution and the 1991 Press Law² are recognised to have played a successful role in promoting press freedom, pluralism of ideas and media diversity.³ While this legal framework generally meets international standards, there are gaps and curtailments which are the object of lobbying and campaigns, for example

limitations on access to information,⁴ and the existence of repressive legislation that is in contradiction with the Press Law.

The Telecommunications Law of 2004⁵ set out to liberalise the sector, aiming to end the Mozambique Telecommunications Company (TDM) monopoly on landlines and infrastructure by 2007 (this has not yet happened) and encourage private sector value-added services. The Mozambique National Communications Institute (INCM) is the telecoms regulator, but is subordinated to the Ministry of Transport and Communications rather than an independent body.

ICT policy and practice

The government approved a National ICT Policy in 2000,⁶ which specifically states that "the State recognises and protects the right of citizens to have access to information and to knowledge spread by ICTs" and adopts the principle of universal access. Internet service providers are not subject to specific licensing, but need to be formally registered with the INCM.

There is no legislation curbing freedom of expression on the internet, and no experience prior to 1 September 2010 of either restrictions (blocking, filtering or otherwise censoring) on access to sites, or arrests or libel cases specifically related to material published on the internet.⁷

Internet access is available via broadband, wireless or mobile phone in Maputo and all ten provincial capitals, and an increasing number of towns in the country's 128 districts. As in other African countries, more and more citizens are turning to the two mobile phone networks (MCell and Vodacom) for internet access, in addition to voice and SMS use, as mobile internet access is more widely available, cheaper and often more reliable. Around six million of Mozambique's 20 million inhabitants now own mobile phones.

1 Assembly of the Republic (2004) *Constituição da República de Moçambique*, Boletim da República I Série nº 51, Maputo, 22 December, Art 48.

2 Assembly of the Republic (1991) *Lei 18/91*, BR I Série nº 32, Maputo, 10 August.

3 MISA-Mozambique (forthcoming 2011) *Assessing Media Development in Mozambique: A study based on UNESCO's Media Development Indicators*, UNESCO Communication and Information Sector, Paris.

4 A draft law on Access to Information designed to rectify this weakness was produced by MISA-Mozambique in a participatory process and submitted to the Assembly in 2005, but has not yet been debated.

5 Assembly of the Republic (2004) *Law 8/2004*, BR I Série nº 29, Maputo, 21 July.

6 Council of Ministers (2000) *Resolution 28/2000*, BR I Série nº 49, 3^o Supplement, Maputo, 12 December.

7 MISA-Mozambique (forthcoming 2011) op. cit.

Increasing poverty

A recent study for the World Food Programme on urban poverty⁸ showed that the cost of living rose sharply from October 2008 to October 2010. The cost of a basic food basket for a household of five went up by 41% to 3,974 MT/month,⁹ while in 2010 the official minimum wage for the formal sectors ranged from 1,500 to 2,700 MT.¹⁰

The study sample of 1,199 households in Maputo and Matola showed that transport and energy (for lighting and cooking) were the main regular expenses in addition to food. It also provided some striking demographic data, for example:

- 68% of the sample were in the age groups covering 0-29 years.
- Of the 28% of young people (18-29) in the households surveyed, 7% had never been to school, 43% were not working, while the majority of the 57% who earned some income were in the informal sector.
- The number of unemployed heads of household had risen from 4.7% in 2008 to 12% in 2010.
- The main income sources were salaries (42%, down from 60% in 2008), casual labour (30%) and petty trade (17%).

The government had been implementing a policy of strategic subsidies to hold down the costs of such vital items as fuel (including paraffin and cooking gas), electricity, bus fares and bread. Elections took place in late 2009, and six months later the re-elected government started trying to reduce or eliminate these subsidies. So on top of all the general price rises, the final straw was a series of badly coordinated announcements informing the public of specific rises in water, electricity and bread as from 1 September.

The riots¹¹

On Wednesday 1 September protesters in Maputo and Matola tried to bring the cities to a halt by blocking the main roads in and out of town with junk and burning tires. Passing vehicles were stoned and some vandalised, and the main bus terminals were also targeted. Some of the symbols of discontent were also attacked

and destroyed or looted, such as electricity company offices, buses, grocery stores and a petrol station. Police used tear gas, rubber bullets and in some cases live ammunition to prevent the demonstrators from marching into the city and to try to clear the roads.¹²

The protesters' strategy was successful and the cities did effectively close down. Those who had got to work or school started walking home, and there was almost no traffic. Though the next day was quieter, with more sporadic rioting in specific locations, there was still no public transport and residents opted to stay at home. By 3 September most of the roads had been cleared and traffic – including some buses – was increasing, but most workplaces, schools, shops and banks remained closed. There was a heavy police presence, and just a few short-lived attempts to set up new street barricades. By the end of the three days of protests, there was a total death toll of thirteen in Maputo and Matola, with 154 injured having received medical treatment, some for gunshot wounds.¹³ A total of 256 people had been arrested, mostly in Maputo and Matola.¹⁴

Over the weekend rumours began to circulate, primarily via SMS, of further demonstrations being planned for the following Monday (6 September). However, no demonstrations took place.

The role of ICTs

Many citizens had advance warning that something was going to happen on 1 September through SMS text messages circulated by mobile phone from unnamed sources, notwithstanding police statements to the contrary. It also became obvious on the day that the level of coordination achieved among many different sites must also have been relying on mobile phone. There was no sign of public mobilisation via internet or Facebook, which is not surprising given that the demonstrators clearly came from the poorer residential areas, where internet access and internet-enabled phones are still rare.

Most of the Mozambican press provided full coverage of the events, and the radio and independent

8 Geography Department, Eduardo Mondlane University (2010) *Estudo de Vulnerabilidade Urbana nas Cidades de Maputo e Matola*, EMU/WFP, Maputo.

9 Food basket designed by the Ministry of Health, price calculations made by the Ministry of Planning and Development.

10 Ministries of Finance and Labour (2010) *Diploma Ministerial 103/10*, BR I Série N° 24, Maputo. 16 June.

11 The data in this section is based on daily English-language newscasts from the Mozambique News Agency (AIM), Maputo, 1-7 September 2010.

12 A report on police tactics and behaviour found that they had believed their own propaganda and no planning had been done for policing protests. The Rapid Intervention Force had not been put on alert, and the regular police force had to cope with little guidance. The police sent to the trouble areas were just coming off their shifts, tired and hungry and badly equipped, while most of the new shift was unable to get to work for two days. This is thought to be one of the main reasons why the riots got out of hand and there were so many casualties. Centre for Public Integrity (2010) *Polícia sem preparação, mal equipada e corrupta*, CIP, Maputo (September).

13 Press announcement by the Minister of Health, 6 September 2010.

14 Attorney-General Augusto Paulino in his annual statement to Parliament, 27 April 2011. 178 people were sentenced to prison terms ranging from three days to two years, 64 were acquitted and the other fourteen are still awaiting trial.

television companies made an effort to provide real-time news. However, in addition to the text messages flying around the city between families and friends swapping updates and advice, the internet came into its own as a place for sharing information, aggregating and re-disseminating news, and promoting comment and discussion.

Some Facebook pages, in particular that of the popular free newspaper @Verdade (Truth),¹⁵ provided immediate space for citizen reporting on places where there was trouble, or roads had been blocked, amongst other updates. This was an extremely useful source of immediate information from multiple sources and locations. @Verdade also ran an Ushahidi-based crowd reporting tool and made some use of Twitter, but the Facebook site was by far the most accessible and important.

Sites also opened themselves up for comment and discussion, throughout both the immediate crisis and the government responses. *Diário de um Sociólogo*,¹⁶ *Reflectindo sobre Moçambique*,¹⁷ the Mozambique Sociology Association¹⁸ and others published a range of contributions on their blogs. They also republished newspaper articles and commentaries, press communiqués and statements from government and civil society, and cross-published reflections from other sites. Videos appearing on YouTube¹⁹ illustrated different aspects of the riots, from police action to looting, and in turn provoked more commentary.

In other words, social media provided space for many voices and opinions to be heard, while the television and radio stations tended to rely on the same pool of analysts (mostly male, mostly journalists or academics) for their studio debates and news programmes.

Government response

Denunciation and backtracking

The first official reactions came from the police, affirming that the demonstrations were illegal because prior permission had not been sought in terms of the law – which was true. This was followed by government ministers on the one hand defending economic policies and the need for price rises and on the other accusing the demonstrators of being “adventurists and bandits”. The cabinet spokesman said that the price rises were “irreversible”.²⁰

However, a mere five days later, following a cabinet meeting on 7 September, the irreversible was reversed. A communiqué was issued announcing a subsidy to maintain the price of bread, cancelling the electricity price rise for social tariff consumers, and reducing the water price rise for the same group, maintaining the tax benefits for tomatoes, potatoes, onions and eggs, and reducing the price of low-grade rice.²¹

Control of communications

One of the most serious aspects of the government response was its move to limit free communication.

On 6 September, when more demonstrations were anticipated, most mobile phone users throughout the country found it impossible to send text messages. The two operators, MCell and Vodacom, both announced that there had been a breakdown and they were working to restore services. Suspicions of interference were unsurprisingly rife, but both the minister of Transport and Communications and INCM publicly denied involvement or knowledge of a government instruction.²² On 10 September the *Mediafax* daily newspaper claimed the operators had received a letter from the regulator ordering them to close down the SMS service, and on 17 September the weekly *Savana* newspaper published an article carrying a confirmation from Vodacom South Africa and a facsimile of the letter, dated 6 September.²³

In a separate incident, @Verdade’s mobile phone accounts went offline before the general shutdown, as did its website (which was quickly mirrored and made available again via other routes).²⁴

SMS services were fully restored on 8 September, followed by an SMS “battle” between messages supporting the government and others strongly critical.

The government’s next step was to accelerate the introduction of a ministerial diploma approving a new regulation on the registration of SIM cards.²⁵ SIM card registration had been under discussion in Mozambique, as in other countries, for some time, but the astonishing feature of this particular diploma was that it defined a time limit of only two months from the date of its publication for all users to register, after which their numbers would be

15 www.facebook.com/jornal.verdade#!/jornal.verdade?sk=wall

16 oficinadesociologia.blogspot.com

17 comunidademocambicana.blogspot.com

18 sociologia-mocambicana.blogspot.com/2010/10/no-olho-do-furacao.html

19 For example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2YqY3Quwhk&NR=1

20 AIM, 1-7 September 2010.

21 Council of Ministers Secretariat (2010) Press release, Council of Ministers, Maputo, 7 September.

22 AIM newscast, 8 September 2010.

23 *Savana* (2010) Grupo Vodacom confirma ordem de bloqueio, *Savana*, 17 September.

24 Interview with Erik Charas, editor of @Verdade, Maputo, 2 August 2011.

25 Ministry of Transport and Communications (2010) *Diploma Ministerial 153/2010*, MTC, Maputo, 10 September.

blocked. At the same time, as *Mediafax* reported on 30 September, the ministry rather unconvincingly denied that the timing of the new regulation had anything to do with the riots.

Unsurprisingly, though the deadline provoked large-scale anxiety and long queues, it proved impossible to register everyone in time, and 7 January 2011 was announced as the new cut-off date. That date came and went in silence from government bodies, and there has been no further official announcement since then. Meanwhile, the Centre for Public Integrity denounced the diploma as being “incoherent, illegal and anti-constitutional”, calling for it to be revoked.²⁶

Communications via internet – email services, blogs, social media – continued throughout and after the crisis period with no interference. In a way this underlines the social split between users: the young people on the streets using mobile phones and the better-off members of the public, commentators and so on using the net to talk about it. In that sense the government’s priorities were logical.

Conclusions

The first obvious conclusion from the above sequence of events is that anybody who wants real change should get out onto the street and make life difficult for the government of the day. Civil society organisations had been publishing studies, surveys and reports showing the implications of rising prices for the poor, and warning of the increasing anger of ordinary people, but the government did not want to listen – the 1 September riots brought an immediate response, in the short term, a victory.

The government’s handling of the issues did not win it any credibility: its initial policies followed by constantly changing positions displayed both weakness and a sad lack of understanding or awareness of the very real problems of the urban poor. Having met all the demands so quickly, it makes a violent reaction to future price rises or other unpopular policies more likely. Government attempts to clamp down on or limit mobile communications and the right to freedom of expression through ICTs were also signs of policy being made on the hoof, but no less serious for that. Perhaps for the first time it felt seriously challenged, and its immediate resort to illegality in this area is a worrying precedent.

This report has used words such as “protests”, “demonstrations” and “riots” more or less interchangeably throughout, and the events of 1 September showed elements of all three. Certainly

there were no clear demands formulated, no visible leadership, and no sign of evolution into a more formal social movement. Established civil society organisations were totally marginalised, though some issued their own statements *post hoc*. However, although the middle classes and inhabitants of the city centre were not on the streets demonstrating, there were clear signs of common cause, since the rising cost of living and the growth in corruption are now affecting everyone but the elite groups. It remains to be seen whether converging (though still very differentiated) interests can be converted into common strategies or new forms of social organisation that are more broadly based.

Within this context, the potential of ICTs in Mozambique as tools for organisation, coordination and expression for civil society in the broad sense is now evident. While mobile phone communications still predominate, the social media networks have a growing influence as a substitute or alternative to dialogue through more formal channels and the information provided by traditional media. They are currently acting primarily as information brokers and opinion formers rather than as mobilisers, but while this is in itself a useful function it could easily become more interventional the next time there is a social crisis, as lessons have undoubtedly been learned by all sides.

Action steps

- Establish a civil society coalition for digital inclusion to lobby for large-scale internet access through mobile phones, wireless and pricing systems and keep a watch on government ICT policies to ensure equality of access, freedom of communication, open data and access to information.
- Campaign for a fully independent telecoms and ICT regulator.
- Promote channels for communication and exchanges between the “formal” and “informal” sections of civil society through social media networks.
- Develop strategies for enabling civil society organisations to integrate better use of ICTs into their work and promote training and use among their own constituencies. ■

²⁶ Centre for Public Integrity (2010) *Observatório de Direito N° 1: Sobre o Registo de Cartões SIM*, CIP, Maputo (November).

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