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District elections 2024: time beginning to run out

By 15 April, the government should announce the date of the 2024 presidential, parliamentary, provincial and district elections. However, there is still a great deal to be done: debating the viability of the district elections and drawing up a bill on the elections and the district governments, and a clear definition of the districts to accommodate them.

The electoral legislation stipulates that the date of the elections (presidential, parliamentary and provincial) is fixed at least 18 months in advance, and that they are held by the first fortnight of October in each election year. This means that, if the elections are held on 15 October, the government must fix this date by 15 April this year. And by 15 April 2024, six months before the elections, it must set the date for voter registration.

So far the 2024 district elections are still uncertain, although it is just one year and seven months before the general elections. Last December, the President of the Republic promised to set up a commission to discuss the viability of holding the district elections in 2024. Two and a half months have passed, and the commission has not yet been announced. Likewise, the date for starting the nationwide debates has so far not been announced.

But there's more: the districts have not yet been classified. There are districts whose territory coincides with the municipal territory, where there already exists a municipal assembly. These are districts set up under Law No. 26/2013, namely Pemba, Lichinga, Nampula, Quelimane, Tete, Chimoio, Beira, Inhambane, Maxixe, Xai-Xai and Matola. A clear definition of these districts is needed, otherwise there is a risk of overlapping municipal and district assemblies to inspect actions that occur in the same territorial areas.

A further case is Maputo City, which has the status of a province, with a territory coinciding with the municipal space, but with one peculiarity: the city possesses seven municipal districts. The administrators of these districts are appointed by the Mayor of Maputo, which imposes the need for a special category for Maputo. So that Maputo may have district assemblies, the organic statute of the Maputo Municipal Council needs to be revised, so that the districts cease to be municipal, which is most unlikely. But if this hypothesis is possible, Maputo would have seven district assemblies: KaNhlamankulu, KaMavota, KaNyaka, KaTembe, KaMubukwani, KaMaxakeni and Kampfumu. This scenario would create a situation that is not just unsustainable, but pretty much impractical.

What is most likely is that Maputo City maintains its current status, without district assemblies, just as happened with the implementation of the law on provincial assemblies and governments. Maputo City is the only place with the status of a province which does not have a provincial government or a provincial assembly. It just has a Secretary of State.

As for the other 10 provincial capitals, the Maputo City model could be applied. For this, it would be necessary to abolish the districts whose territory coincides with the municipal territory, and introduce only the figure of the representative of the central Government, who would not be elected, but appointed. But these aspects all need study and profound debate, and time is running out.

In any case, the truth is that the Government and the parliament have a year and a half to decide on whether or not to hold the district elections.

The possible hypotheses on why the government hesitates to go ahead with the district elections

The President of the Republic promised to set up a multi-sector commission for a public consultation seeking to assess the pertinence and viability of the district elections. Two months have passed and the commission has not yet been established. Not even the terms of reference of the debate are known. What is the Government afraid of?

The Standing Commission of the Assembly of the Republic withdrew the bills submitted by Renamo from the agenda for the parliamentary sitting that began last week. At official level, there is no information about why the Government hesitates in advancing to these elections, even though the Constitution demands that district elections be held

But this is not the first time that the President of the Republic, Filipe Nyusi, has shown signs of hesitation about holding district elections in 2024. In May 2022, during the closing session of the 5th ordinary meeting of the Frelimo Central Committee, the Head of State warned of the need for the country to reflect on the viability of district elections, on the grounds that Mozambique may not be ready to hold this event.

Three hypotheses may be behind this hesitation:

The first hypothesis would be fear as to whether the State could pay for the implementation and functioning of 154 district assemblies, when the State is already running a heavy budget deficit, and is highly indebted and dependent on foreign aid. There is no doubt that the creation of district assemblies will represent very high costs, and the possibility that the budget will not be sustainable over the short, medium and long term.

For this hypothesis, one may add the experience of the pandemonium created during the election of the provincial governors and the implantation of the provincial assemblies. These are factors that may lead the Government to be fearful about advancing to a process that would be more complex than that of the provincial assemblies.

The second hypothesis is that Frelimo has understood that the district elections present a greater risk of losing control of some districts, particularly in the central and northern parts of the country. This would mean losing ground to the opposition which, starting from the districts, might organise and create tentacles that would prepare conditions so that in future it might possibly win some provinces. Indeed, elections in the districts have the potential of allowing the opposition, particularly Renamo, to revive its political grass roots who claim they have been abandoned by the leadership. These are local elites, some of which were coopted by Frelimo, through the District Development Funds.

It may also be that hesitation, or fear, results from a combination of the two hypotheses. Renamo and the other opposition parties are not giving up. They want the district elections held by 2024 because they may mean a opportunity to revive their political grass roots, in the case of Renamo, and to win some seats in the district assemblies, for some small parties.

The third hypothesis to be considered concerns the possibility that the district elections have the potential for the emergence of regional parties arising from movements of local citizens.

The final decision lies in the hands of the Government and of the majority group in parliament, that of Frelimo. There is also the hypothesis that Frelimo may propose a specific amendment to the Constitution of the Republic. Such an amendment could be passed without needing the support of any other parliamentary party, since Frelimo has 73.6% of the deputies in parliament. Under the Constitution, a majority of 2/3 of the deputies is required to pass any constitutional amendment.

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