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A challenge for democracy: low turnout in Mozambique, Lesotho and Zâmbia

Draft

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Free elections are one of the main forms of political participation of citizens in democrátic regimes. They are the mechanism through which citizens can express their judgement on the way government takes care of their interests, deciding on whom will represent them and who will govern. Thus, it is the legitimacy of the political power itself that is at stake in elections: the higher being the participation, the greater will be the legitimacy; on the contrary, a rising abstention erodes the representativity and legitimacy of elected governments. This is why voter turnout is commonly considered an indicator of the vitality of democracy, and is a major concern for political actors in democratic regimes.

In this paper we analyse the context of low turnout observed in four recent elections in Mozambique, Lesotho and Zambia.

How to analise abstention?

What are the reasons why part of the potential electors do not register and why a certain number of registered voters do not vote? In other words, how can we explain abstention? Abstentionists are surely not an homogeneous group and motivations for not to vote can be quite diverse. Some will not vote due to technical reasons such as the absence of their names on their polling station register, others because they were not motivated to go to a polling station that is far from their homes, a certain number because they were sick, or occupied with more important affairs in their point of view, because they have lost confidence on the candidates and political parties, or because they think their vote doesn't really make a difference, etc.

The centrality and importance of abstention, and the great complexity of the phenomenon, explain the growing literature dealing with the subject. A few years ago, Sinnott (2003) produced a synthesis of the different theoretical contributions on electoral participation/abstention which resulted on a typology of the variables affecting voter turnout organised on a analytical matrix (see fig.1). The first step on this exercise was to take in consideration the distinction between facilitation and mobilization when thinking on factors affecting turnout: “Facilitation refers to any process or variable that makes voting easier. Mobilisation is any process or variable that provides an incentive to vote.” (Sinnott, 2003: 4). Mobilisation factors can be found mainly at the level of ideology and political attitudes, and facilitation factors will be those that influence electoral behaviour independently of the motivation of the electors. High facilitation will tend to reduce abstention and, inversely, a low level of facilitation will tend to increase abstention. In the same way, high mobilisation tend to increase participation and low mobilisation will tend to reduce voting. The second step was to distinguish the location of variables in two levels: institutional and individual.

The articulation of the axes facilitation/mobilisation and institutional/individual defines four distinct fields where turnout factors can be included.

Fig. 1 – Typology of the variables affecting voter turnout

		Location of the variable	
		<i>Institutional</i>	<i>Individual</i>
Nature of the effect	Facilitation	<u>Institutional facilitation</u> Features of the regulation of elections and features of prevailing political communication processes that make voting easier (infrastructure of political participation and political communication)	<u>Individual facilitation</u> characteristics of individual electors that make voting easier (election-related capacities and personal circumstances)
	Mobilisation	<u>Institutional mobilisation</u> Features of the political system and the political process that provide incentives for voting (political institutions and party campaigns)	<u>Individual mobilisation</u> Features of individual electors' political outlook that provide incentives for voting (political attitudes and preferences)

Source: Sinnott, 2003.

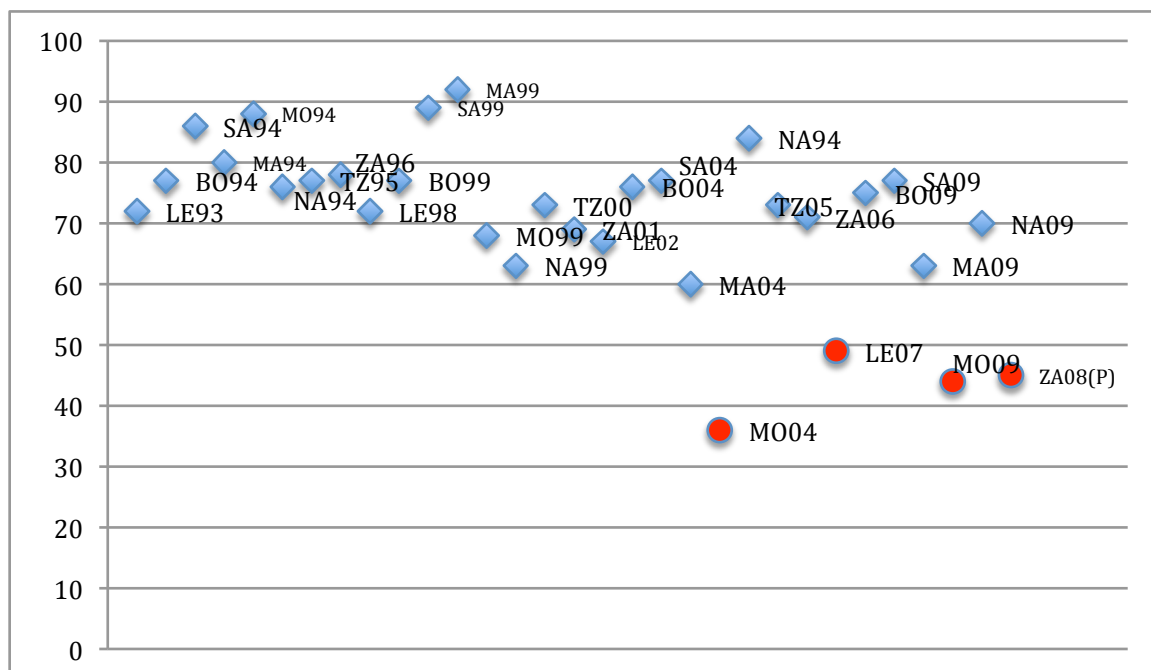
The field of institution facilitation will include factors such as the month and day of the vote, the number and geographical distribution of the polling stations, etc. On the field of individual facilitation will be considered factors such as the level of education, the occupation, etc. The institutional mobilisation field will include electoral campaigns, voters education programmes, etc. Finally, the field of individual mobilisation includes factors related to party identification, confidence on political institutions, civic and political engagement, etc. Obviously these factors interact in a

complex way and, for instance, low levels of facilitation can be compensated by high levels of mobilisation, and inversely, a low level of mobilation can be compensated by a high degree of facilitation.

Voter turnout in Southern Africa since the 1990s

The average voter turnout in the Southern African countries during the last twenty years was 71%.¹ According to Pintor, Gratschew *et al* (2002: 77) the corresponding value for the Western European countries in the same period was around 78%, and for African countries as a whole it was 64%. Thus, the situation in Southern África doesn't seem to be problematic in terms of voter turnout. But a more attentive look at the data shows that there is a clear decline in turnout since the elections of the first cycle (begining of the 1990s). In fact the average turnout reduced since then in 5%, which means a quite fast declining trend. But the more interesting aspect, as can be seen in graph 1, is that in recent years there were in the region several elections marked by an extremely low voter turnout (less than 50%), namely the Mozambique elections of 2004 and 2009, the Lesotho election of 2007 and the Zambian presidential election of 2008.

Graph 1 - Voter turnout in Southern Africa since 1990 (%)



¹ This figure refers to 30 parliamentary elections and one presidential election (Zambia 2008), concerning eight countries (Lesotho, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia). The inclusion of the Zambian presidential election is due to the fact that this election registered a very low voter turnout. Swaziland, Angola and Zimbabwe were excluded due to the absence of real open and competitive elections.

Mozambique: towards a democracy without voters?

The 1990 Constitution defined that Mozambique would adopt a majoritarian electoral system, but this was changed during the Rome negotiations with Renamo and finally the revised Constitution (1992) established that elections would follow a proportional representation model. The Mozambican first multiparty elections, in 1994, counted 6,148,142 registered voters, the 1999 elections 7,099,105 registered voters, the 2004 elections 10,029,689 and the 2009 elections 9,871,949 registered voters. The figures show that there was a growth of 15,5% between 1994 and 1999, which corresponds in general terms to the population growth rate (which is slightly above 2%/year) but from 1999 to 2004 the increase was 28%. This could only be possible in the case that there was a big contingent of citizens not registered that for some reason had decided to register for that election. But this hypothesis is infirmed not only by the fact that there was a much lower voter turnout in 2004 than in 1999, but also because it is known that the voters roll was updated twice since 1999 and that it had not been possible to eliminate the deceased and a big number of double registrations. In practical terms this means that the official turnout for 2004 is clearly underestimated.

The official abstention was 13% in 1994, 30% in 1999, 63% in 2004 and 56% in 2009. It is obvious that the technical problems of the voters roll, even if they are non negligible, cannot explain such a very low voters turnout.

The abstention² observed in 1994 was particularly low. Most probably this can be explained by the fact that the 1994 elections were not only the first multiparty elections in the country but that they had a central role on closing the period of transition from civil war initiated with the General Peace agreement signed between Renamo and Frelimo government in 1992, in Rome. But it cannot be totally excluded that a certain number of citizens registered and voted simply because they were used to obey the instructions given by Frelimo for those that were in government controlled areas, or by Renamo representatives in the areas under control of the rebell movement. In this case, a number of citizens expressed their vote without having a true interest in politics or elections, because they were not yet conscious that they had the freedom to participate, or not to participate, in the electoral process.

In 1999, the abstention rose to 30%. This was already an indication of a growing disengagement from the electorate in relation to the political process. One indication in this sense is the fact that in the capital city of Maputo, where is concentrated the most informed population, the number of registered voters for 1999 was less 2% than it was in 1994 (even if the population of Maputo was growing during that period).

The declining trend of participation was still reinforced in 2004, with abstention

² The analysis of abstention developed here is based on official abstention, which means that the calculation is made in reference to the registered voters and not to the voting age population. For a more rigorous analysis of the phenomenon the reference should logically take also into consideration the voting age population, including therefore those citizens that because they do not register put themselves completely out of the electoral field, but also take into account the rejected votes, corresponding to the voters that were not able, or did not wanted, to express their choice.

attaining the official figure of 63%.³ At the same time, and in contrast with previous elections, there are indications that most citizens don't feel really free to express their points of view (see Brito, Pereira, Rosário, and Manuel, 2006). In 2009 the situation was not much better. In fact, the abstention remained at almost the same level: 56%.

Lesotho: violence and political manipulation

Lesotho is another country of the Southern African region that shows a decline in elections participation since the beginning of the 1990s. In 1993 and 1998 it was registered a voter turnout of 72%. In 2002 the elections registered a little slow down of participation (67%), but in 2007 it dropped to 49%. It should be noted that after independence, Lesotho adopted the first-past-the-post electoral system, following the British model, but since 1998 the country has faced a lot of election related difficulties and a change on the electoral system was decided, but apparently this change did not solve completely the problems.

The proclamation of the 1998 parliamentary elections results originated a situation of political violence in the country that was only contained by the intervention of SADC military forces. In a clear demonstration of the inconvenients of the first-past-the-post system, the governing party, Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), obtained in these elections 78 of the 79 parliamentary seats, with only 60% of the vote. The opposition parties, with 40% of the vote, could only obtain 1 single seat, for the Basotho National Party (BNP), with 25% of the vote!

This crisis opened the way to political negotiations and the introduction of a mixed-member proportional system, the parliament being composed by 80 seats for uninominal electoral constituencies and 40 compensatory seats, supposed to allow for a proportional representation in terms of parties.

In the 2002 elections, the LCD wonned 79 of the 80 district seats with 55% of the vote, the BNP wonned 21 seats with 22% of the vote, and the remaining 20 seats were distributed to eight other small parties. There was some controversy about the results but finally all parties accepted them.

The 2007 elections were preceeded by signs of political violence, there was an "increase on suspected politically motivated killings" (EISA, 2008: 6). This can explain the severe fall in voters participation (49%). Also, the main parties abused the electoral system in a way that, not being illegal, perverted the sense and the results of the election, which were finally accepted after SADC mediation.

Before the elections, the LCD and the All Basotho Convention (ABC), a split of LCD, formed informal alliances with two small parties, respectively the National Independence Party (NIP) and the Lesotho Workers Party (LWP). The strategy was the following: LCD and ABC contested only the constituencies seats and NIP and LWP only contested the proportional list ballot, including candidates from the allied

³ Considering a normal growth of the voters between 1999 and 2004 (aligned with the annual growth rate of the general population, which was around 2.5%), their number should be around eight millions and, in this case, abstention should be around 58% and not 63%.

parties. The result was that LCD won 62 constituencies and 21 compensatory seats for NIP, ABC won 17 constituency seats and 10 compensatory seats for LWP, the remaining 10 seats being distributed among eight other parties (3 seats for the BNP).

Zambia: citizens fatigue?

In Zambia, the democratisation process started in 1990. The following year the country experienced the first multiparty elections of recent times, keeping the first-past-the-post electoral system. Starting with a very low voter turnout of 45% in 1991, the country seemed, in following elections, to be in a process of gradually increasing voters' participation, with 58% turnout in 1996 (UNIP, the former single party boycotted this election), 68% in 2001, and 71% in 2006. But, in the presidential election of 2008⁴ the turnout fell to 45%.

Although since 1991 the country has experienced democratic alternance with the opposition to the former single party gaining the majority in parliament (125 out of 150 seats) and electing his presidential candidate (81%), Frederick Chiluba, political competition has been quite chaotic and elections since 1996 tend to be considered relatively unfair. It is not yet clear if the very low turnout observed in 2008 is the result of the fact it was an election organised in an emergency, or if it expresses a real tendency that will be confirmed in the next parliamentary elections. In which case, Zambia would be facing a similar challenge to the one that is affecting Mozambique and probably Lesotho: a crisis of electoral democracy. This hypothesis is formulated in an EISA's press release, after the 2008 election: "The voter turnout was noticeably lower than in the previous elections. This is a matter of concern as it may point to reduced interest and trust of citizens in the electoral process."⁵

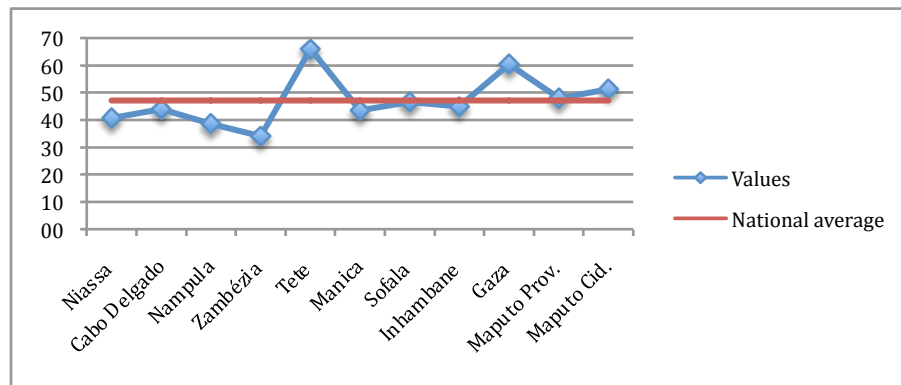
A brief perspective of voter turnout distribution in the three countries

The voter turnout values are national averages, and one interesting aspect is to see if there are different patterns of voter turnout inside a country. In the case of significant variations on abstention, these should be analysed. The following graphs show the data of the four problematic elections that we identified. For each election, it was registered the national average line and the variations observed across the main political-administrative divisions of the territory (11 provinces for Mozambique, 9 provinces for Zambia, and 10 districts in the case of Lesotho). As we can see, there are some differences between the three countries.

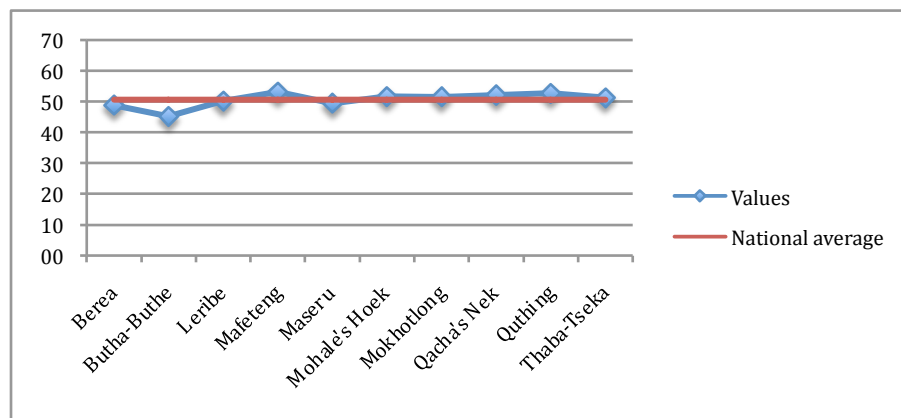
⁴ This was an unexpected election due to the death of the president elected in 2001, Levy Mwanawasa.

⁵ EISA Observer Mission to the 2008 Zambia Presidential and parliamentary by- elections Press Release, Lusaka, 1st November 2008. <http://www.eisa.org.za/PDF/zamis2008.pdf> (accessed 2nd March 2010).

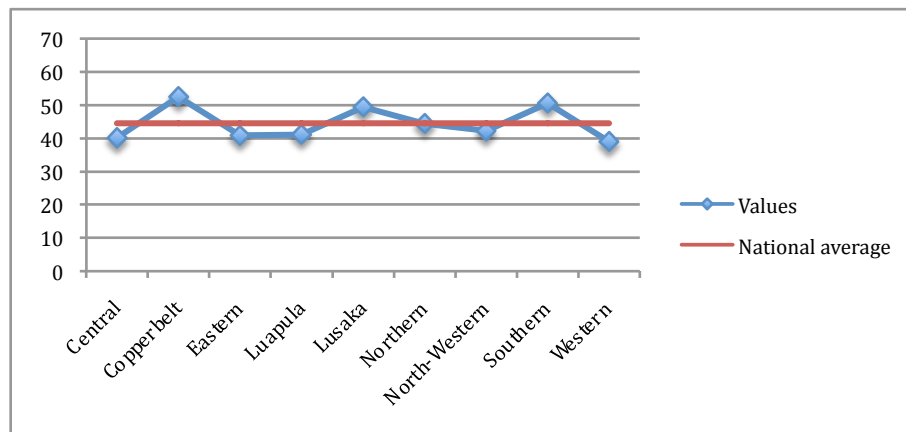
Graph 2 – Mozambique voter turnout by province in 2009 (%)



Graph 3 – Lesotho voter turnout by district in 2007 (%)



Graph 4 – Zambia voter turnout by province in 2008 (%)



Lesotho shows that voter turnout was basically the same in every district, the bigger deviation to the average being observed in Butha-Buthe district (-5.4%), and the amplitude of variation is 8%. In the case of Zambia, there is a bigger variation in terms of provincial voter turnout but the the deviations can be considered not very significant (+6.1% in Southern province; -5.5% in Western province), the amplitude of the variation being 14%. In the case of Mozambique we have a quite different

scenario, with big variations on voter turnout; the bigger deviations are +18.9% in Tete province, and -13.1% in Zambézia province, with an amplitude of 32%.

These data show that there was in all four elections a problem of participation that needs to be explained, but also that in the case of Mozambique the significant deviations from the average indicate the existence of specific regional dynamics that need to be understood.⁶

Some concluding remarks

From the rapid overview of recent elections' experience in Mozambique, Lesotho and Zambia presented in this paper it seems that the identified problem of voter turnout should be probably explained mainly by factors related to the mobilisation fields (institutional and individual) of Sinnott's matrix. The type of electoral system doesn't seem to be a factor on the observed declining of voter turnout, since these countries have three different systems. More: considering that previous elections were held under the same basic institutional regulations and had registered high levels of voter turnout, the facilitation factors do not seem to play an important role.

The observed high level of citizens' political disengagement appears as a symptom of a crisis of the democratisation process, where the main aspect seems to be the incapacity of political leaders and movements to develop a true system of political representation and accountability. In fact, citizens have a very bad image of politicians: according to data from the 2005 Afrobarometer survey in Mozambique, 78% (87% in Lesotho, and 96% in Zambia) of the citizens expressed the opinion that politicians, often or always, just make promises to get elected, and 62% (86% in Lesotho, and 91% in Zambia) have the opinion that they never, or rarely, do keep their engagements after elections (Afrobarometer, Round 3 Lesotho and Zambia databases, and Pereira, J. *et al.* [2006]).

⁶ Part of the explanation is electoral fraud (ballot stuffing), mainly in areas of bigger influence of the governing party, Frelimo, but another very important element of explanation is that Renamo, the main opposition party, has not developed a systematic political effort of mobilization among the population in areas where the party was historically influent.

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