

Obituaries

Anti-corruption crusader was no armchair critic

CARLOS Cardoso, who was assassinated in Maputo at the age of 49, was a cheerful, no-nonsense journalist who made it his life's work to free Mozambique from the scourge of corruption by exposing it. He believed corruption posed the greatest threat to the country's future.

Shortly before his death, he criticised militant hard-liners in Mozambique's ruling Frelimo party and in the opposition Renamo party for instigating nationwide riots that left 41 people dead and more than 200 injured.

He used his publication, *Metical*, which he launched in 1997 and which was faxed to subscribers, to expose the country's growing drug-smuggling syndicates, fraud and embezzlement involving business people and politicians and, more recently, the theft of millions of dollars from the state-owned bank BCM by senior bank officials before it was privatised.

Cardoso and his small team of journalists worked from a converted garage in Maputo's upmarket suburb of Polana. Death threats accompanied each sensitive investigation he was involved in. Beyond ensuring that details of his investigations were confined to those who absolutely had to know - he never shared information about his work with his wife, for example, believing that the less she knew the less likely she herself was to become a target - Cardoso never took defensive measures.

But he certainly didn't laugh off the threats. His attitude towards the possibility of assassination was fatalistic. He told close colleagues once that he would not be surprised if some "crazy person" shot him sooner or later. In the days immediately before his death, those closest to him thought that he appeared uncharacteristically tense.

Cardoso was born in Beira province in 1951. His family left the country around the time of independence in the '70s, but he chose to stay. In 1973, he went to Wits University, where he was a vocal supporter of Frelimo's fight against Portuguese rule.

With his long hair and bearded good looks, not to mention a gold front tooth and the camouflage outfits he liked to wear, he cut a flamboyant figure on campus and was hard to ignore. He started a speaker's corner where students were encouraged to hold forth on whatever took their fancy. He himself was a brilliant and impassioned speaker, and he did what he could to spread the Marxist gospel (at a time when Marxist literature was banned and available to students only under conditions of strictest control) and ensure that the cause of Frelimo was heard loud, clear and often.

He was elected to the students' representative council in 1975 in the face of a growing tide of disaffection among students for those they saw as left-wing radicals, and when it seemed more politically conservative views were gaining ground.

By this time, the South African government had become thoroughly alarmed by the possible repercussions of an Angola and a Mozambique liberated from Portuguese control, and it equated support for the liberation movements in these countries with support for the South African liberation movement led by the ANC.

Indeed, in the minds of most white South Africans "Frelimo" was as much of a dirty word as "ANC". Cardoso must have been under few illusions that his vocal espousal of the Frelimo cause was courting disaster. In July 1975, the security police struck. They raided Cardoso's flat in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, at midnight and arrested him. Within 24 hours, he was on his way back to what had been Lourenço Marques the last time he saw it, but was now, three months after independence, Maputo.

He became a junior reporter on a weekly newspaper, Tempo, before joining Radio Mozambique in 1978. Two years later, he became the director of Mozambique's government news agency, AIM.

Mozambique was a one-party, Marxist-Leninist state, and those who did not toe the official line found themselves in trouble very quickly. For a while, Cardoso experienced no conflict between his views and the official line. But in 1982, he incurred the wrath of President Samora Machel by running a story on the rebel movement Renamo when government policy was that Renamo did not exist. The closest the government came to acknowledging it was in occasional references to the work of "armed bandits".

Cardoso's story brought Renamo out into the open for the first time. Machel retaliated by jailing him for six days. Relations between the two men subsequently thawed. Machel came to respect and trust Cardoso enough to bring him into a select inner circle of journalists he favoured with private briefings.

Just before Machel's death in an air crash in 1986, he told Cardoso that he had identified Frelimo leaders who were betraying him and the country by wartime profiteering. Cardoso angered many inside Mozambique's military establishment by running a story that there were too many senior people in its ranks who no longer served the interests of Frelimo but only their own private interests.

He kept reminding them of the principles they had originally fought for but seemed to have forgotten. While he continued to see himself as a Frelimo supporter, he vowed to fight what he saw as a steady drift towards corruption within the party.

In the late '80s, Cardoso began pushing for a more independent, robust media within Mozambique, and this led to growing tension between him and certain government members. In 1989, he was dismissed from the government news agency.

Subsequently, he played a valuable role in the drafting of Mozambique's media freedom laws. In 1992, he co-founded a group of independent journalists called MediaCo-op, and launched the country's first independent publication, called MediaFax.

Faxed to subscribers, it gained wide respect as Mozambique's only credible and reliable investigative journal. In 1997, Cardoso started Metical, to carry more economically focused investigative journalism.

Cardoso believed his credibility as a journalist would be greater if he became actively involved in government at some level himself. He was sensitive to the danger of people writing him off as an armchair critic who was not prepared to muck in himself to bring about a better country.

He became active in the Together For the City Movement in Maputo, and won a seat on the Maputo council as an independent.

His last editorial before he was killed was a scathing attack on the city council for squandering residents' taxes instead of using the money to provide adequate basic services.

Cardoso viewed moves to liberalise Mozambique's economy with suspicion and was particularly critical of what he felt was undue interference by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the economies of developing nations. He believed the policies these organisations imposed harmed regional economies by removing protective trade barriers and liberalising tariffs and subsidies. He felt such policies had destroyed Mozambique's cashew nut industry.

Cardoso's investigative work earned him an international reputation, and he was recently made a member of the US-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

He is survived by his wife, Nina Berg, a Norwegian lawyer he met through her work with a Norwegian development agency in Maputo, and two children.

Chris Barron

<http://www.suntimes.co.za/2000/12/03/insight/in08.htm>