

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

South Africa's Marionettes of Destabilisation

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/92p399xb>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 12(1)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Authors**

Fauvet, Paul  
Gomes, Alves

**Publication Date**

1982

**DOI**

10.5070/F7121017182

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 1982 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

SOUTH AFRICA'S MARIONETTES  
OF DESTABILISATION\*

By

Paul Fauvet and Alves Gomes

To ensure its own survival, South Africa's apartheid regime is determined to maintain its grip over all the independent states in the region. Those independent states, working through the mechanism of the Southern Africa Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), are equally determined to break the ties of dependence that bind them to Pretoria.

South Africa hectors, threatens and attempts to destabilise its neighbours. Outright military attacks alternate with economic pressure, with funding subversive activities, and with the occasional shot at bribery.

"MOZAMBIQUE NATIONAL RESISTANCE"

This article looks at the main instrument now in use in efforts to destabilise Mozambique -- the so-called "Mozambique National Resistance," (MNR). When the leaders of the six Front Line states met in Maputo in early March, they stressed in their final communiqué that the South African regime was resorting to "the preparation, training and financing of armed bandits to destabilise the independent countries of southern Africa."

The Front Line leaders can hardly not have had in mind the group calling itself the "Mozambique National Resistance", and its increased activities in recent months, directed particularly against Mozambique's transport routes, so vital for the whole project of the Southern Africa Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) to break with the region's dependence on South Africa.

The MNR presents itself to the outside world as a heroic nationalist organisation struggling against a "communist dictatorship". It speaks of a "second war of national liberation," and even misappropriates familiar FRELIMO slogans for its own use. Thus its bulletin, duplicated in Lisbon, bears the title *A Luta Continua* -- the struggle continues -- the best-known of all FRELIMO slogans. This publication is edited by Evo Fernandes, a former agent of the Portuguese fascist secret police, the PIDE. He was a student in Lisbon in the 1950s, where he used to spy on other students from the colonies for the PIDE.

\* Adapted from *Agencia de Informacao de Mocambique (AIM)* as a supplement to Information Bulletin No. 69, under the title: "The 'Mozambique National Resistance'".

Later on, in Mozambique he was closely linked to one of the most powerful figures in the colonial set-up, Jorge Jardim. Jardim sat on the boards of dozens of companies, owned the newspaper *Noticias da Beira*, set up his own private armies to fight FRELIMO, and had a direct link to the highest government circles through the fact of being a godson of the Portuguese dictator Salazar. Under Jardim's patronage, Fernandes rose to the position of business manager of *Noticias da Beira*. This part of his career came to an abrupt halt in mid-1974, when young journalists on the paper, supporters of FRELIMO, took over and kicked him out.

A further link between the MNR and the PIDE is provided by Casimiro Monteiro. Monteiro was a professional assassin employed by the PIDE. He carried out the murder of Portuguese opposition leader Humberto Delgado in 1965, and there are strong indications that he was involved in the assassination of FRELIMO's first President, Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, killed by a PIDE parcel bomb in February 1969. After the fall of fascism in Portugal, Monteiro disappeared. He was tried in Lisbon in absentia for the murder of Humberto Delgado. Last August the Lisbon courts found him guilty and sentenced him to 18 years imprisonment, but made no attempt to discover his whereabouts. However, an enterprising journalist on the South African *Sunday Times* tracked Monteiro down to a private house in Johannesburg, where he was closely guarded by members of the MNR.

The PIDE agent most involved with the MNR is Jardim's former private secretary, Orlando Cristina. His connection with the foundation and development of the MNR can now be fairly well traced. Much of the murky history of the group has now come to light. Despite the veil of secrecy drawn by the Rhodesian UDI regime, and later by Pretoria, there are now enough sources available for the history of the MNR to be followed with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Defectors from the MNR have told their story, as have MNR prisoners captured by the Mozambican army (FPLM). Former officials of the Rhodesian Special Branch have now loosened their tongues. Documents captured at the MNR base at Garagua, occupied by the FPLM in December 1981, give fascinating insights into the internal life of the group, and its dependence on South Africa.

Perhaps the most important conclusion about the MNR to be drawn from this evidence is that it has never been a Mozambican organisation in anything but name. It has always been a pliant weapon in the hands of foreign interests.

It was set up in 1976 by the Rhodesian secret services, with the knowledge of their South African counterparts. In his book, *Inside BOSS*, the former BOSS agent Gordon Winter gives the

credit for forming the MNR to South African military intelligence. This appears to be a substantial exaggeration. Winter's own part in the affair was that of propagandist, writing articles in the South African government-financed newspaper *The Citizen* in 1976 claiming MNR military successes, before there was any real MNR activity inside Mozambique at all. Fake photos were published allegedly of "MNR guerrillas inside Mozambique," but in fact of black South African troops in the Transvaal.

The first real sign of MNR activity came when a new radio station started broadcasting in June 1976 from Gwelo, Fort Victoria and Umtali. Calling itself *Voz da Africa Livre* (Voice of Free Africa), it was an obvious reply to the Zimbabwean radio programme Voice of Zimbabwe, which was beamed nightly into Rhodesia by Radio Mozambique. *Voz da Africa Livre* broadcast anti-FRELIMO propaganda of a very crude nature in defence of the colonial past.

In its initial broadcasts it even used, as a kind of theme song, the notorious 'Mocambique -- Terra Portuguesa' (Mozambique -- Portuguese Land) by the colonialist songwriter, Joao Maria Tudela. This song contains the memorable line: "Yesterday it belonged to the blacks -- today it's Portuguese territory".

But *Voz da Africa Livre* soon abandoned this approach, and adopted a rather more subtle line. The hand of Orlando Cristina seems evident in the new ploy that *Voz da Africa Livre* and the MNR came to use: they posited an opposition between the original 'real' FRELIMO of Eduardo Mondlane, and the 'communist', 'totalitarian' FRELIMO of Samora Machel, claiming to be the true inheritors of Mondlane's mantle.

#### FIFTH COLUMN

In August and September 1976 the first MNR group received military training at Bindura just north of Salisbury. The operation was set up by the Rhodesian Special Branch, whose former head, Ken Flower, candidly admitted as much after Zimbabwean independence. "It was war," he explained to a Mozambican journalist, "and in war all things are allowed." Mozambique had closed its borders with Rhodesia in March, and provided crucial facilities for Zimbabwean guerrillas, who could use the entire length of the border to cross over into Zimbabwe. The illegal Smith regime considered itself at war with Mozambique, and hit back, not simply at guerrillas, but also at Mozambican economic and civilian targets. In this war, the MNR was used as a convenient fifth column.

But obviously Flower and his men could not provide the Mozambicans who were needed if the MNR was to take on substance. It was here that Orlando Cristina played a crucial role. His

former employer, Jardim, had organised elite military units to fight against FRELIMO, units consisting mainly of black troops, better paid than the regular colonial army, and soon gaining an unenviable reputation for brutality and atrocities. These were known as GEs (Special Groups), GMEs (Very Special Groups -- used for clandestine operations in Tanzania and Zambia), and GEPs (Special Paratroop Groups). These units' primary loyalty was to Jardim.

Shortly before Mozambique's independence Cristina disappeared. So did all the files on the special groups. There seems no doubt that these were taken by Cristina to Salisbury, and formed the basis for the initial recruitment to the MNR. People named in these files received letters threatening exposure if they refused to join the MNR.

For the next four years Cristina was to be based in Salisbury as the "eminence grise" behind *Voz da Africa Livre*.

Figureheads were also needed -- men who were not too blatantly connected with the colonial regime, and could give a veneer of credibility to the claim that the MNR represented the "real" spirit of FRELIMO. So Andre Matsangaiza was elevated to the role of "commander-in-chief" of the MNR. Matsangaiza had been in the FPLM, but after his appointment as a quartermaster in 1975, he had been caught with his hands in the till. Arrested for theft, he was sent to a reeducation centre from which he managed to escape in 1976. The Rhodesians then groomed him as MNR leader.

The man who took over the job after Matsangaiza's death, Afonso Dhladama, has a similar history. He joined the FPLM only in October 1974, after all the fighting was over. Prior to 1974 he had been a conscript in the Portuguese army. In 1975 he too was found guilty of theft and dishonourably discharged from the Mozambican army. A year later he was with the infant MNR in Rhodesia.

Initially the MNR acted in the border zones in the Mozambican provinces of Manica, Tete and, to a lesser extent, Gaza. They concentrated on attacking villages and kidnapping civilians, and disrupting commerce. There was never any serious attempt to take on the Mozambican army, much less to bring down the government. The Rhodesians' aims were much less ambitious. They were simply destabilising the zones used as a rearguard by the Zimbabwean guerrillas.

In 1979, as the war escalated, the Rhodesians ordered the MNR to move deeper into Mozambique and set up permanent bases there. These would be supplied by helicopter from Rhodesia. The most important of these was set up in the thick bush of the remote Gorongosa mountains of Sofala province.

Here Matsangaiza formed an alliance with the local 'feiticeiros' (witch-doctors), who provided him with information on the movement of Mozambican troops (information which Matsangaiza then attributed to supernatural forces). But the Gorongosa feiticeiros became fed up with the MNR, due largely to its indisciplined men abusing local women. They took their revenge by feeding Matsangaiza a piece of fatally false information. They told him the town of Gorongosa itself was unguarded and would easily fall to a surprise attack. So several hundred swept down to loot Gorongosa in October 1979, only to find not simply a strong contingent of Mozambican troops, but also tanks. When the tanks opened fire on the closely-packed MNR group, Matsangaiza himself was one of the casualties. Mortally wounded, he was evacuated by helicopter, but died on his way back to Rhodesia.

A few days later the Mozambican army launched a major offensive to clear the MNR out of the Gorongosa region. Their main base was seized, and in disarray the survivors fled back to the border.

#### INTERNAL DISARRAY...

The death of Matsangaiza provoked an enormous crisis within the MNR. Dhlakama later admitted that the group had been "on the way to total destruction." Lacking any ideology, the MNR had been built around the personality cult of Matsangaiza, and once he had gone, it all began to fall apart. A bitter power struggle broke out. The Rhodesians, oblivious to the fact that their own regime was in its death throes, tried to solve the problem by suggesting that the MNR be divided into two commands, one under Dhlakama and another under Matsangaiza's second deputy, Lucas M'lhanga.

This was not at all according to Cristina's liking, and he decided to patronise Dhlakama. Stealing a march on the Smith regime, Cristina had photos of Dhlakama published in the South African press, proclaiming him the sole leader of the MNR. Reverting to his former trade as an assassin, Cristina tried to remove M'lhanga from the scene, but bungled the job.

The conflict came to a head at an MNR camp at Chisumbanje in southern Zimbabwe in June 1980. A gun battle erupted in which Dhlakama's followers overpowered M'lhanga's. M'lhanga himself was probably killed in the shoot-out. His supporters fled to Mozambique where they handed themselves over to the FPLM.

At about the same time, the MNR's 'political commissar', Henrique Siteo, also defected. He had been appointed to the post a few months earlier by Dhlakama despite the fact that, on his own admission, he knew nothing about politics. Siteo

deserted with three others, one of whom described himself as a 'company commander'. The second one was a skilled radio operator. These defections represented heavy losses for the MNR. Speaking at a press conference in Maputo, these defectors said they had no idea what they were fighting for. Being in the MNR was just "waiting for death."

Dhlakama himself confirmed this sorry state of affairs in a speech to his men November 1980. "In the past year," he said, "many fighters, including commanders and chiefs, have been killed." He feared that the same fate awaited him: "Some people," he said, "are preparing drugs to assassinate me so that they can take over my position."

In early 1980, things were looking extremely bleak for the MNR. On top of their internal problems, they were now faced with the likelihood of losing their base. With the Lancaster House agreement and the resumption of British authority in Salisbury, the MNR was forced to adopt a much lower profile. The British ordered *Voz da Africa Livre* to stop broadcasting, and it went off the air in February 1980.

With the overwhelming ZANU victory in the March election, it was clear that the MNR's days in Zimbabwe were numbered. But help was on the way. The Rhodesians had passed Cristina to the South African embassy in Salisbury, and arrangements were quickly made to switch the MNR base from Zimbabwe to the Transvaal.

The South Africans had earlier assisted in training the MNR, and South African personnel had been stationed at the Gorongosa camp in 1979. Now the South Africans took over the entire task of supplying the MNR bands. Boxes of ammunition dropped to the bands in Manica were marked in English and Afrikaans, leaving no room for doubt as to their country of origin.

A transmitter was quickly rigged up in the northern Transvaal, and by the middle of the year *Voz da Africa Livre* was back in business. The evacuation of the MNR from Zimbabwe took a bit longer, but seems to have been completed by October.

#### ...AND RESURRECTION

Dhlakama's men were accommodated at two camps in the Transvaal, one at Phalaborwa, and the other at Zoabastad. The documents captured at Garagua date from this period of transition. They indicate that a liaison officer from the South African Military Intelligence was allocated to the MNR: he crops up in the documents as 'Colonel Charlie', and on one occasion as 'Colonel van Niekerk'. There is, of course, no way of knowing whether this is his real name. Notes from meetings in October

and November contain fulsome praise and gratitude by Dhlakama for his South African patrons. "We can't do anything without you," he is on record as saying, "you are like our parents."

Whereas the Rhodesians had kept *Voz da Africa Livre* organisationally distinct from the MNR, the South Africans preferred to centralise the entire operation. The radio station was integrated in the MNR, and all was subordinate to Khlakama who now referred to himself as "Supreme Chief".

The MNR had lost their major base inside Mozambique, in the Sitatonga mountains in Manica, close to the Zimbabwe border, in June 1980. Mozambican artillery, moved painstakingly into position over difficult terrain, pounded the hideout into dust. But Sitatonga was soon replaced by a new base, some 300 kilometres further south, at Garagua, near the Save River which forms the boundary between Manica and Gaza provinces.

This base, two kilometres in diameter, included an area set aside for South African 'specialists', and a helicopter landing strip. From the large quantities of aircraft fuel discovered when Mozambican soldiers stormed Garagua in December 1981, it was clear that it also functioned as a refuelling depot for supply flights to MNR bands further north.

The presence of South African 'specialists' with the MNR inside Mozambique was one of the matters discussed between Dhlakama and 'Colonel Charlie'. The latter promised that South African experts would accompany the MNR to teach the use of heavy weapons and sabotage techniques. These 'specialists' would not simply have a back-seat role, but would participate directly in attacks.

The change in rear base also entailed a change in strategy. The targets to be hit now are no longer those which suited the defunct Smith regime, but the ones which fitted in with South Africa's strategy of destabilising the Front Line states. 'Colonel Charlie' gave Dhlakama a list of targets for the MNR's 1981 campaign. These included the Beira-Umtali pipeline, the railways linking Zimbabwe to Mozambique's ports, and the roads in the centre of the country. The border areas with Zimbabwe had lost their previous importance, and the stress was now laid on disrupting the economies of both Mozambique and Zimbabwe by hitting at their most vulnerable point, their communications.

During 1981 Dhlakama's men did their best to carry out their new instructions. 'Colonel Charlie's emphasis on sabotage techniques paid off. In October the road and rail bridges over the Pungwe river were blown up, and effectively isolated Beira.

The expertise with which the road bridge was demolished suggests the presence of South African experts in this operation.



Remarkably, the pipeline, which is carried on the bridge supports, was scarcely damaged in the explosion. The rail bridge withstood the blast. But one supporting pillar was damaged and had to be replaced, and thus for six weeks rail traffic from Zimbabwe to Beira was interrupted.

The destruction of marker buoys at the port of Beira in early November clearly had the same intention -- to disrupt a vital outlet to the sea for the landlocked countries of the region, and to intimate to them that it was unwise to try and break their dependence on South Africa.

Although the MNR immediately claimed the sabotage of the buoys, there is good reason to believe that this was an exclusively South African operation. The high degree of sophistication required makes it more than likely that the job was carried out by a team of South African frogmen.

Emboldened by the unstinting military support received from Pretoria, the MNR started attacking small towns in early 1982. In accordance with lessons on propaganda which van Niekerk had given Dhlakama a year earlier, such raids were trumpeted abroad as major military victories. In fact, of course, looting isolated and undefended towns, holding them for a few hours and then withdrawing when the FPLM shows up, achieves no military objective at all. Nobody has ever won a war that way. But it does keep the name of the MNR in the world's press, and strengthens the suspicion that Mozambique is 'unstable'. This tactic is clearly aimed at scaring off potential Western investment in Mozambique.

Similar publicity-hunting motives were behind the kidnapping of two foreign workers in the Gorongosa National Park in December 1981. According to the Garagua documents, Cristina had advocated this sort of action. Foreign prisoners, he said, could be used to blackmail their countries of origin. In exchange for freeing them the MNR could "demand a particular sum of money, or material assistance." In the case of one of those captured at Gorongosa, the British ecologist John Burlison, the MNR employed this type of blackmail. They implied that Burlison would be released, provided his parents had a letter from Dhlakama published in the British press.

Although this was done, Burlison was not released and fears for his safety have mounted. Two days after the kidnapping, two Portuguese technicians travelling from Chimoio to Tete were taken out of their car and shot at point blank range.

A further MNR target has been a power line taking electricity from the giant Cahora Bassa hydro-electric scheme in Tete province to South Africa. This appears to have been Cristina's

idea: in November 1980 he suggested this in order "to disguise the existence of South African support for the MNR." This would not harm their South African employers, he hastened to add, since only seven percent of South Africa's electricity comes from Cahora Bassa.

#### 'PERSUASION' BY SADISM, SUPERSTITION AND COERCION

This proved to be a miscalculation. South Africa suffered a particularly severe winter in 1981, and, thanks partly to the MNR putting the Cahora Bassa lines out of action, faced a shortfall in electricity supply. The result was widespread power cuts. The MNR is now reported to have promised the South Africans that they will enjoy "a warm winter" in 1982, which amounts to a pledge to leave the transmission lines alone.

Throughout the history of the MNR there are certain common features. One is brutality. Wherever the group has been active, it has left behind a trail of death and mutilation. On arrival in an area, an MNR band's first action is to seek out and murder the local FRELIMO Party officials. Those not actually in the Party, but are believed to be sympathisers, suffer the lesser penalty of having their ears, noses, lips or, if women, breasts cut off. Defenceless peasants, their lips sliced off, are told: "Now you can go and smile at Samora." This cannot be shrugged off as the work of a few individual sadists in the MNR. The reports are so consistent, from all areas where the MNR is or has been active, that it is clearly a matter of mutilation as policy, terror as a deliberate weapon to intimidate the local peasantry.

A second common thread is superstition. In his speech to his men at Zoabastad in October 1980 Dhlakama referred several times to the "spirits". A bomb had recently exploded in the car of Domingos Arouca, a right-wing landowner in colonial Mozambique who chose Portuguese nationality after Mozambique's independence. He had incurred Dhlakama's wrath by using the name of the MNR without permission. Dhlakama gloated over the explosion attributing it to "the spirits of the MNR."

Superstition plays an important role inside MNR camps. Recruits are told that if they desert, then "the spirits" will pursue them, in the shape of lions, and will devour them. Before any military operations, religious ceremonies are held which are supposed to make the participants invulnerable to "communist bullets." "The spirits" are also useful vehicles for Dhlakama's own paranoia. Repeatedly, people accused of being FRELIMO spies are assassinated in the MNR camps -- the information on which these murders are based is given to Dhlakama in his regular interviews with "the spirits."

For the MNR traditional animist superstition replaces political mobilisation. Terror takes the place of persuasion. Foodstuffs are acquired through straightforward looting. The aims of the MNR are not those of a domestic counter-revolutionary organisation -- instead they are imposed on it from outside. It serves the strategies of foreign powers, first Rhodesia, now South Africa.

Does the MNR enjoy any support at all? The answer to this question must be a qualified "yes". Those who lost their old power and privileges when FRELIMO came to power are quite prepared to throw in their lot with the MNR. Apart from the "feiticeiros", these include the "regulos" -- tribal chiefs usually appointed to their posts by the Portuguese, and regarded as colonial stooges. The MNR wins their support by proposing to restore them to their former positions.

Then there are those who attempted to win positions of influence in the new Mozambique, but failed. Both in the elections to the people's assemblies in 1977 and in the FRELIMO Party structuring campaign in 1978, candidates had to be submitted to mass meetings in their villages or workplaces. In this process many were rejected. Some of them, particularly in Inhambane, have now gone over to the MNR.

There have been two main bases for the recruitment to the MNR. One is tribal. The MNR has tried to mobilise the people of Manica on ethnic grounds. Both Matsangaiza and Dhlakama were from that area. The first deputy commander of the MNR, Orlando Macomo, was assassinated by Khlakama "because he was a southerner." Dhlakama immediately stepped into the murdered man's shoes. The MNR attempts to generate ethnic support by peddling the lie that "FRELIMO is controlled by southerners" and discriminates against "the people of the centre and the north."

The other recruitment method is simple coercion. The MNR kidnaps young peasant boys and forces them to undertake military training. They are initiated into banditry at a very early stage, and told that if they surrender to the FPLM, the Mozambican soldiers will slit their throats.

But the attitude of most people in central Mozambique towards the MNR is a mixture of fear, anger and loathing. When in February 1982, President Samora Machel visited parts of Inhambane province affected by MNR activity, he was greeted everywhere by crowds demanding "guns to fight the bandits" -- a demand that will be granted.

The South Africans have always denied their involvement in the MNR, but these protests of innocence are fooling very few people. Pretty well every Western diplomat in Maputo will

privately admit they are convinced of the South African connection. Now the mask has slipped even further with MNR statements on *Voz da Africa Livre* that they will accept support from any country "including South Africa." How long before South Africa officially admits its ties with the MNR?

In conclusion, we can report that Afonso Dhlakama has made up for his short-lived and ignominious career in the Mozambican army by his rapid rise in the South African one. According to MNR sources, he is now a full colonel in the South African army. This rank was attributed to him at a ceremony at Phalaborwa in 1981, attended by South African Defence Minister Magnus Malan. Addressing Dhlakama, Malan said: "Your army is part of the South African Defence Force."

# # #