

São Tomé and Príncipe: an election to divide them all?

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Against all odds, becoming the next President of São Tomé and Príncipe is quickly turning out to be one of the most coveted political races in the entire region. Indeed, judging from the multitude of pre-announced – already formalized or soon to be – candidacies, the next few months in the small archipelago promise a divisive campaign with no clear frontrunner in sight.

This set of circumstances originates, of course, from the end of current President Fradique de Menezes' second term and the legal impediment that prevents him from running a third time. As such, since mid-2010, São Tomé and Príncipe's political class has been full of expectations and predictions as to who would run for office. However, party strategy or planning were naturally contingent on the legislative elections that took place in early August 2010 since the winner at the ballot would inevitably set the tone for the following electoral stage.

In that sense, beating out the ruling MLSTP-PSD (Movimento para Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe-Partido Social Democrata) and Prime Minister Rafael Branco – who had just won the country's local elections – main opposition party ADI (Acção Democrática Independente), headed by Patrice Trovoada, won the most votes and was therefore entitled to form government, albeit without a clear parliamentary majority. With these changes in mind, the country then started to prepare for the remain-

ing election, scheduled by President Menezes himself for July 17th. But as the date grows nearer, so does the horde of tentative candidates from all political spectrums vying for the Presidency.

As of May 2011, it was already possible to account for nine declarations of interest and/or formalized candidacies, either with structured party support or as independent offshoots. Nevertheless, the latter can only be really applied to architect Liberato Moniz, the sole candidate with no political affinity or links of any sorts. But also claiming this 'status' are Filinto Costa Alegre – a founding member of the PCD (Partido da Convergência Democrática) – and Fernando Rita – a PCD parliamentarian and former Trade Minister – who have yet to receive any official endorsement by their own party. On the other hand, musician Gilberto Gil Umbelina from São Tomé and Príncipe's PS (Partido Socialista) also announced his candidacy on April 20th, while Manuel Pinto da Costa, a MLSTP-PSD historical but straying figure and a former President himself from 1975 to 1990, announced similar intentions.

However, as expected, the spotlight has understandably focused on the country's two biggest parties – the ADI and the MLSTP-PSD – who are now faced with opposite dynamics in comparison with 2010. Indeed, the tables of national politics were once again turned by the 2010



elections, with ADI currently in power and the MLSTP-PSD – who coincidentally had forced Trovoada and ADI out of government in 2008 with a no-confidence vote – back in the opposition trenches.

In this context, Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada has primarily sought to tighten his grip on the country while dealing with the inherent social-economic challenges that São Tomé and Príncipe continues to face. Still, to much dismay within ADI ranks, he consistently failed to provide any direct orientations in his own party's internal debate regarding a possible candidate for the upcoming presidential elections. Moreover, rumors began to surface in local media about a possible candidacy by Trovoada himself, who would then have to resign as Prime Minister in order to successfully and legally run for President.¹ The actual outline of such an outcome was never really explored or publicly vented for that matter, but its mere possibility was enough to raise some concerns throughout São Tomé's civil society. Seeking to put such unsettling speculation to rest, on May 13th ADI finally announced that it would formally back current National Assembly President and longtime party member Evaristo Carvalho in the upcoming election.

But if ADI struggled to find a single candidate, MLSTP-PSD on the other hand could not really complain of lacking a wide array of possible contenders to choose from. After the significant loss of last August, the MLSTP-PSD went into disarray with party leader and former Prime Minister Rafael Branco calling for a congress on January 15th, to elect a new leadership. Facing off Jorge Amado and Amaro Couto, businessman Aurélio Martins eventually won the preferences of his fellow party members and was elected as their president.

However, according to reports at the time, Martins succeeded in uniting the party around him in large part thanks to the role of former Prime Minister and current Vice-President of the National Assembly Maria das Neves, who apparently only asked for Martins and the MLSTP-PSD's endorsement of her own presidential aspirations in return. If at first this candidacy was seen as a shoe-in, shortly thereafter former Defense Minister Elsa Pinto also decided to enter the race for the party's official backing. As such, it was widely expected that sooner or later, the MLSTP-PSD would choose one or the other as its formal candidate.

Yet, all bets were off after April 2nd when in a mostly unexpected but classic political maneuver, Aurélio Martins managed to secure the MLSTP-PSD's nomination in the party's National Council by claiming that none of his fellow opponents showed signs of backing down in the name of the party's consistency for the upcoming election, and that a third way was therefore necessary.

As expected, both Neves and Pinto immediately set off a wave of protests regarding the legality of these developments and have since then vowed to continue on with their independent campaigns.² Inevitably, this internal squabbling only helps undermine the MLSTP-PSD's chances, a party which for all purposes has not managed to elect a President since the transition to democracy in 1991.

All in all, when taking the above mentioned candidacies in consideration, one cannot fail to recognize them as sheer expressions of a laudable democratic environment in São Tomé and Príncipe. Indeed, multiple contenders to the country's highest office – albeit mostly ceremonial – are clearly an indication of the maturity of the country's political class and should therefore be dully welcomed and stimulated. Nonetheless, at this point, every indication points to a probable second round being necessary, given the diversity of personalities currently in the race. Two natural frontrunners, Aurélio Martins and Evaristo Carvalho, are clearly ahead for the time being. Although lacking national mass appeal or instant public recognition, with the full support of their respective party apparatuses, they are now in much better logistical and financial conditions to stage an effective campaign than their competitors and can probably mitigate their unfamiliarity towards the general population by building on their party name and legacy throughout the archipelago. Moreover, both Martins and Carvalho can lean on significant support that could propel their candidacies even further: the former has already accentuated MLSTP-PSD's historical connections with Angola's MPLA, while the latter will surely have Prime Minister Trovoada by his side in the days ahead of the campaign, providing a highly valued official clout.

However, one should also bear in mind the possibility of a dark horse gaining traction in the early days of the campaign or even managing to reach an eventual second round. In this category, Maria das Neves clearly has the lead not only because of her past governing experience and credibility, but also because the endorsement of incumbent Fradique de Menezes still carries significant political weight.³ On the other hand, the amount of influence that Pinto da Costa, an unavoidable national figure embedded in São Tomé and Príncipe's own history, continues to retain in the country is not yet clear, but he could certainly have a spoiler role in this election since it is fairly predictable that he will divide the MLSTP-PSD vote even further. Either way, the possibility of a future forfeiting by any of the smaller/independent candidates

1 Abel Veiga, "Patrice Trovoada disposto a concorrer às eleições Presidenciais" (*Téla Nón*, 9 May 2011).

2 José Kaliengue, "Elsa Pinto 'A pobreza no nosso continente tem o rosto de mulher'" (*O País*, 20 May 2011). Abel Veiga, "Maria das Neves não abdica da intenção de ser Presidente da República" (*Téla Nón*, 6 April 2011).

3 "Fradique de Menezes apoia candidatura de Maria das Neves à presidência" (*Jornal ST*, 9 March 2011). Interestingly enough, it was Menezes who dismissed Neves from her post as Prime Minister in September 2004 due to allegations of corruption.



is real and highly likely, and for that reason any accurate predications concerning who will actually stay in the race are still very premature.

Nevertheless, from a different perspective, it is already safe to say that Fradique de Menezes' exit from São Tomé and Príncipe's Presidency is nothing short of the end of an era for the country.⁴ Despite the ups and downs of his two terms – including the brief coup d'état on July 2003 and the failed plot discovered on February 2009 –, his ten years as President were essentially marked by tense cohabitation, to say the least, with an endless number of cabinets and a total of nine Prime Ministers⁵ since first taking office in 2001, with natural reflections on the conduction of national daily affairs. As such, the obvious lesson to be learnt from this experience is that a stable institutional relationship between the holders of the country's two highest positions is fundamentally required, in order to keep São Tomé and Príncipe on a steady path of development. Subsequently, whoever comes out of the upcoming elections as the country's next President will inevitably have to reach a minimum and feasible working understanding with Trovoada's government. Still, for the time being, the country is undoubtedly more focused on the current multiple candidacies than the post-electoral context. In that sense, while not discarding a second round, July 17th will surely provide some much awaited answers about the next chapter in São Tomé and Príncipe's history.

4 Adding further substance to this claim, Fradique's own party, MDFM (Movimento Democrático Força de Mudança), only managed to elect one representative in the last legislative elections, as opposed to the 23 elected in 2006 in a coalition with the PCD.

5 Ten, if we count Patrice Trovoada's first term from February to June 2008, as well as the current one.

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