

São Tomé e Príncipe: A Lost Opportunity towards Changing the Political System

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Legislative elections were held in São Tomé and Príncipe on October 12, with the electoral results being subsequently validated by the Constitutional Court, thus confirming the absolute majority achieved by Patrice Trovoada's Independent Democratic Action (ADI).¹ As established by Article 110 of the Constitution, and at a time when the new Parliament has not yet taken office, the country's President, Miguel Pinto da Costa, initiated the process of auditing the political parties, a standard procedure that precedes the new Prime-Minister's nomination.

Naturally, ADI's absolute majority leaves no room for doubt over the future Prime-Minister's identity. Having said this, São Tomé's turbulent political past indicates that Patrice Trovoada's landslide victory does not automatically guarantee the completion of the legislative term. In fact, the poor relationship between the ADI's leader and the President further reinforces perceptions that São Tomé is not heading towards tranquil political times.

Ever since the transition to democracy in 1990/1991, São Tomé has had a long list of prime-ministers in charge of an equally long array of governments. Not a single executive has completed a full term, even when enjoy-

ing a parliamentary majority. Some governments had extremely short life expectancies. On average, from 1991 until today, not a single government has lasted two years. Moreover, political instability has often been accompanied by military instability. As Gerhard Seibert has noted, "since 1991 there were sixteen governments—not including reshuffles—of which two were presidential initiatives, namely in 1994 and 2001. Twice, in August 1995 and July 2003, the democratic regime was shaken by a military coup".² In general, political stability has not been São Tomé's trademark.

Nevertheless, more than anything the country has to put an end to this historical tendency. It is worth noting that political stability is not a goal in itself, or a source of good governance, however it is crucial for the attainment and maintenance of good governance. In short, while political stability is a necessary condition, it is not alone sufficient. Therefore, the question that needs to be asked is: how can São Tomé overcome institutional problems and constant government changes? In other words, how can the conundrum resulting from political instability be resolved?

Gerhard Seibert considers that until 2006 the main cause of political instability was the power struggle between the Prime-Minister and the President, something that was

1 ADI obtained 38.01% of the votes and 33 mandates; the MLSTP got 17.8% and 16 mandates; the PCD 7.91% and 5 mandates; and the UDD 1.35% and one mandate.

* Published also in Portuguese: Paulo Gorjão, "São Tomé e Príncipe: ainda não é desta vez que se altera o sistema político" (*IPRIS Comentário*, No. 7, Outubro de 2014).

2 Gerhard Seibert, "Instabilidade política e revisão constitucional: semipresidencialismo em São Tomé e Príncipe", in Marina Costa Lobo e Octávio Amorim Neto (eds.), *O Semipresidencialismo nos Países da Língua Portuguesa* (Lisboa: *Imprensa de Ciências Sociais*, 2009), p. 205.



exacerbated by the semi-presidential system, and which was even worse when both belonged to different political parties. To a certain degree this problem was alleviated with the constitutional revision that came into force in 2006. Furthermore, and still according to Seibert, the main reason behind political instability is the dominance of minority governments and weak coalitions, as well as the difficulty inherent in attaining absolute majorities.³ Precisely to solve the problems identified by Seibert, I argued in 2010 that to change the data of the equation it would be a positive development to make changes in the electoral system. In the transition to democracy São Tomé gave priority to the primacy of democratic representation to the detriment of political stability. As a result, absolute majorities have been the exception and not the rule for the past 25 years. It is therefore necessary to rethink priorities so as to facilitate the attainment of a majority in Parliament. The current absolute majority is not the rule and indeed it is unlikely that there will be another one in the years to come if the electoral system is not changed.⁴ The second change concerns the semi-presidential system itself. The fact that the Parliament and the President are elected via universal suffrage, and direct and secret vote, provides them with unquestionable political legitimacy. Nevertheless, instead of being a beacon of stability, this dual power structure works otherwise. The last 25 years demonstrate that the semi-presidential system has not been very useful for São Tomé, even in the aftermath of the 2006 constitutional revision.

3 See Gerhard Seibert, "São Tomé and Príncipe: Political Instability Continues" (IPRIS Viewpoints, No. 111, January 2013), p. 5.

4 Paulo Gorjão, "São Tomé and Príncipe: Heading into political instability as usual?" (IPRIS Viewpoints, No. 16, August 2010), p. 2.

The question whether São Tomé should move towards the adoption of either a presidential or parliamentary system is open to debate. At some point in time I favored the second option,⁵ but as of today I see greater advantages in the first. What clearly matters is that São Tomé attains, in the near future, a single power center legitimized by universal suffrage.

While the exercise of a referendum on changes to the constitution is not possible under Article 71, any constitutional revision is contingent, under Article 151, on a favorable vote from three quarters of the members of Parliament. In other words, and considering the new parliamentary composition, in the event the ADI intends to proceed with a constitutional revision it will necessarily require an understanding with the Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP).

However, it is also worth noting that to date, Patrice Trovada has not given any sign of being interested in waging this political battle. His decision to reject a coalition scenario shows his little strategic interest in widening the support base for his future government.⁶ On the other hand, being out of power, it is unlikely that the MLSTP will validate a structural revision of the political system, even if sooner or later it may produce benefits for itself. Independently from all of this, the window of opportunity will soon begin to close. In the way as it has always happened in São Tomé, even with an absolute majority, it will be a matter of time until the return of political friction and instability.

5 *Ibid.*

6 "PM eleito afasta formação de Governo de coligação" (ANGOP, 24 Outubro de 2014). Also noteworthy is the fact that it is not clear whether MLSTP would be willing to contribute to an alteration of the political system.

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