



IPRIS Viewpoints

JANUARY 2013

São Tomé and Príncipe: Political Instability Continues

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Introduction

The recent political crisis provoked by the controversial dismissal of Patrice Trovoada's minority government by a censure motion has again drawn the attention to politics in this small impoverished African island republic that has been marked by political instability since the introduction of a democratic constitution based on the Portuguese semi-presidential regime in 1990. Following the end of Miguel Trovoada's ten-year presidency in 2001 his son Patrice has become one of the principal political competitors in São Tomé and Príncipe, while his father retired from national politics and, in 2009 has become executive secretary of the Gulf of Guinea Commission. From his father Patrice Trovoada inherited the leadership of a political party and the rivalry with Manuel Pinto da Costa, the country's President during the socialist one-party regime (1975-1990). Miguel Trovoada and Pinto da Costa had been close personal friends since their childhood, however, in the first years after independence, when the former was Prime Minister and the latter was President, the struggle for power between the two men culminated in the detention of Trovoada without charge or trial from 1979 to 1981. Since then Trovoada and Pinto da Costa have been considered as political archrivals in the archipelago. When Pinto da Costa defeated Patrice Trovoada's candidate Evaristo Carvalho in the run-off of

the presidential elections in August 2011 everybody predicted a tense relationship between the new President and Prime Minister Trovoada. However, the relationship between the two office holders was rather marked by mutual distance. Finally it was a contested censure motion approved by the three opposition parties, which enabled Pinto da Costa to dismiss Trovoada. This article describes the ups and downs of Patrice Trovoada's political career and examines the events that resulted in his recent fall as Prime Minister and the choice of the lawyer Gabriel Costa as his successor. Finally the article discusses the causes of political instability in São Tomé and Príncipe.

Patrice Trovoada's Political Career

On 4 December 2012 President Manuel Pinto da Costa (elected in 2011) dismissed the minority government of Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada (*Accção Democrática Independente*, ADI), twenty months before the end of its four-year term. The political career of Patrice Trovoada, son of former President Miguel Trovoada (1991-2001), has been marked by failures and unfinished jobs. In São Tomé, Patrice Trovoada has gained the reputation of a wealthy businessman, yet nobody knows where his private wealth comes from. During his presidency Miguel Trovoada first appointed Patrice as his economic advisor.



In 2001, at the end of his presidency, Trovoada imposed his son as leader of the ADI, the party founded by followers of the former President in late 1992. Consequently, almost the entire ADI leadership, including Gabriel Costa and Carlos Neves, party leaders from 1993 to 1994 and from 1994 to 2001 respectively, abandoned the party in protest against Miguel Trovoada's imposition. These former leaders then joined the *Movimento Democrático Força da Mudança* (MDFM), the party created by confidants of former President Fradique de Menezes (2001-2011), a few months after his election. The creation of the MDFM embarrassed the Trovoadas, since Menezes had been elected President with the support of the ADI, the Trovoadas and their Nigerian business partner Emeka Offor. The Trovoadas had expected Menezes, a local businessman, to pursue their interests; soon after his election, however, Menezes revealed his own agenda.

Still, in September 2001, Patrice Trovoada became Foreign Minister of a government constituted by President Menezes after he had dismissed Prime Minister Posser da Costa (*Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe/Partido Social Democrata*, MLSTP/PSD), though Posser da Costa's party maintained an absolute majority of 31 deputies in the 55-member National Assembly. Posser da Costa had refused to accede to Patrice Trovoada's appointment as Foreign Minister, as demanded by Menezes on request of the Trovoadas. In February 2002, however, Patrice Trovoada resigned from his post after a conflict with Menezes, who had accused the Trovoadas of considering the country as their personal fiefdom. In September 2003, Menezes reconciled with Patrice Trovoada and appointed him as unpaid presidential oil advisor. Yet in April 2005 Menezes sacked Trovoada from his post on the grounds that he had abused his function to promote his personal business interests during a controversial licensing round for oil blocks in the Joint Development Zone (JDZ) with Nigeria.

In 2006 Patrice Trovoada, supported by the ADI, MLSTP/PSD and several small parties, lost the presidential elections against the incumbent Menezes with a wide margin of 38.8% of the votes against 60.6%. Two years later, Trovoada suffered another blow when he was dismissed as Prime Minister by a censure motion, only three months after having been appointed by Menezes as head of a coalition government of the ADI and the party alliance MDFM-*Partido de Convergência Democrática* (PCD). The censure motion had been submitted by the MLSTP/PSD, but was supported by Trovoada's coalition partner PCD, who accused him of a lack of transparency in government affairs. The PCD's support of the censure motion resulted in the dissolution of the electoral alliance with the MDFM, established in 2002. In February 2008, Trovoada had contributed to the resignation of his predecessor, Tomé Vera Cruz (MDFM), who since 2006 had headed a minority government of the MDFM-PCD, by threatening to disapprove his budget proposal with the votes of the ADI.

Finally, in August 2010, Trovoada's ADI won the legislative elections by gaining 26 seats (42.2% of the votes), fifteen more than in the 2006 elections, but two short of an absolute majority. The MDFM, for the first time running alone in elections and at the time Trovoada's expected coalition partner, suffered a debacle by obtaining only one seat (7.1%), eleven fewer than the twelve it held in the alliance with the PCD in 2006. Initially, the deputy of the MDFM in Parliament supported the ADI government. Together, the MLSTP/PSD (21 deputies) and the PCD (7) had a majority, but they lacked the legitimacy to form a government, since, for the first time, the ADI had received the most votes of any party.

In August 2011, Trovoada suffered another personal defeat when Evaristo Carvalho, president of the National Assembly and ADI candidate in the presidential elections, was defeated in the run-off by Manuel Pinto da Costa, the country's first president during the socialist one-party regime (1975-1991), who ran as an independent candidate, with 52.9% against 47.1% of the votes. Trovoada participated actively in Carvalho's campaign by recalling Pinto da Costa's autocratic rule and economic mismanagement during the socialist one-party regime. Additionally, he stressed that only Carvalho could guarantee political stability, since he was from the same party as the government. Despite Trovoada's warnings, though, as in the archipelago's previous presidential elections, the voters favored the candidate who was not from the same party as the Prime Minister. At the time nobody expected President Pinto da Costa and Prime Minister Trovoada to develop a cordial relationship with each other. In fact, the relationship between the two office-holders never became openly hostile either, since they maintained a certain distance from each other.

During many months the MLSTP/PSD and PCD seemed to accept Trovoada's minority government. Still in December 2011, the ADI government's national budget for 2012 was approved with the vote of the MDFM deputy and the abstention of MLSTP/PSD and PCD. Following the contested election of Aurélio Martins as party leader in January 2011, the MLSTP/PSD had been affected by internal problems. In the presidential elections of 2011, Martins was his party's official candidate, but, including Pinto da Costa, three other candidates from the MLSTP/PSD ran as independents. When Martins obtained the worst result of the four his position as party leader became untenable. The MLSTP/PSD's internal crisis was only resolved in June 2012 when Jorge Amado, hitherto ambassador in Taiwan, was elected the new party leader. Although Amado was considered a rather weak leader, his party became now increasingly disposed to confront the government. Meanwhile, Menezes's MDFM, which initially had supported Trovoada, joined the opposition, which held a majority of 29 deputies in the National Assembly. In May 2012, the MDFM publicly accused the ADI of maladministration and incompetence.



The Dismissal of the Trovoada Government

In late July 2012, the MLSTP/PSD presented a censure motion that was rejected by the president of the National Assembly, Evaristo Carvalho (ADI), who alleged that it did not include relevant issues and thus could justify a censure motion. In early October, Américo Barros, one of the vice-presidents of the MLSTP/PSD, publicly read a party communiqué accusing Prime Minister Trovoada of having been implicated in murky government deals related to supposedly top secret offshore operations carried out by Taiwanese vessels in sight of São Tomé's harbor. In addition, the communiqué asserted that the Prime Minister had signed a bilateral agreement with the Republic of Georgia involving financial rewards, without having informed the competent local authorities.

In response, Trovoada fiercely refuted the accusations as irresponsible and filed a criminal complaint against the MLSTP/PSD and Américo Barros, a director at the country's Central Bank (BCSTP). At the instigation of Trovoada, Álvaro Santiago, BCSTP vice-governor and member of the ADI executive committee forced Barros to make a decision between his political activity and his function as Central Bank director. At the same time, the maritime authorities denied the accusations of the MLSTP/PSD by affirming that the four ships off the coast belonged to the Taiwanese shipping company TMT, which had carried out normal transshipment operations since June 2012. These actions notwithstanding, in separate declarations MLSTP/PSD and PCD continued accusing the government of persecuting political opponents and insisted that there had been a lack of transparency in the offshore transshipment operations agreement. On 19 October, the three opposition parties held an anti-government demonstration that mobilized 5,000 people, according to the organizers. The organizers again accused the Trovoada government of a lack of transparency in government dealings, political harassment of members of the opposition and political manipulation of the local media. After the demonstration, the MLSTP/PSD declared that its aim was not the dismissal of Trovoada, but to defend democracy by struggling against intimidation and persecution of opponents by the government.

Already on 21 November, however, fourteen deputies of the three opposition parties submitted another censure motion against the Trovoada government. The deputies justified their initiative by accusing the Trovoada government of having ignored alterations of the 2012 national budget approved by the opposition to increase expenditures for agriculture, fishing and health at the expense of expenditures for officials' travel abroad. They also accused the government of not having implemented any of the large investment projects promised in the government programme of 2010. Additional justifications for the censure motion were alleged mismanagement and financial irregularities within the state-owned *Televisão Santomense* (TVS). Finally, the deputies accused Trovoada of having ruled the country as if it was his private company.

The next day, after an extraordinary meeting, the council of ministers issued a communiqué in which it fiercely rejected the censure motion by the opposition parties as an assault aiming for the power that they had been denied in the last elections. The government qualified the censure motion as provoking instability, impeding the approval of the 2013 national budget and trying to divert government attention in search of solutions of many problems that had been created by the backers of the censure motion themselves. In addition, the council of ministers accused the opposition of ignoring the simple democratic principle that "who wins rules", and instead was attempting to impose the principle "the country must be ruled by an association of loser parties". Further the communiqué affirmed that since June 2012, the opposition had only engaged in obstructing government action and rejected the justifications given in the censure motion as insufficient in the terms of the regiment of the National Assembly. Later that same day, in the National Assembly, the tensions between deputies of the ruling ADI and the opposition escalated when deputies of the former tried to impede Arzemiro 'Banu' dos Prazeres (PCD) attempt to address the plenary. Levy Nazaré, ADI secretary-general, and Manuel Martins (MLSTP/PSD), as well as José Viegas, parliamentary leader of the MLSTP/PSD, and Domingos Boa Morte (ADI) began to fight with each other, while others started throwing glasses, which smashed on the ground. Consequently, the president of the National Assembly, Evaristo Carvalho (ADI), suspended the session to avoid further escalation.

On 26 November, Carvalho declared his resignation as speaker of Parliament, a function he exercised since his election in August 2010. He justified his decision with the climate of disrespect and behavior of verbal and physical violence in Parliament. While this may have been the situation, his resignation was also an attempt to impede the voting of the censure motion in the National Assembly. Subsequently 28 deputies of the opposition signed a document calling on the deputies to elect a new speaker and discuss the censure motion on 28 November. The day before, the ADI had announced that the party's 26 deputies would boycott the parliamentary session, arguing that according to the established rules only the speaker of Parliament had the right to convene the deputies for plenary sessions.

At the same time, during meetings with President Pinto da Costa, the ADI appealed to the head of state to dissolve the National Assembly and call for early elections, while the opposition parties defended the censure motion as a legitimate part of parliamentary democracy. Irrespective of the absence of the deputies of the ruling ADI, on 28 November, the 29 deputies of the three opposition parties elected Alcino Pinto (MLSTP/PSD) as new speaker of Parliament, and subsequently voted in favor of the censure motion. The Trovoada government immediately declared that it would not recognize the legitimacy of the



censure motion since procedural rules had been violated and announced to file an appeal in the Constitutional Court. At the same time, the ADI called the population to demonstrate in support of the Trovoada government on 29 November. That day, an estimated 5,000 demonstrators shouting the slogan “*povo põe, povo tira*” (the people appoint, the people sack) and demanding early elections marched from the Riboque soccer field via the Presidential Palace to the Government’s Office, where they were received by Trovoada, who thanked the demonstrators and appeared impressed by the popular support in favor of his executive.

On 1 December 2012, President Pinto da Costa held a meeting of the thirteen-member Council of State, constitutionally a consultative body, including his predecessors Fradique de Menezes and Miguel Trovoada, Patrice Trovoada and Alcino Pinto, the newly elected speaker of Parliament. The councilors did not agree on the question of the legitimacy of the approval of the censure motion and asked Pinto da Costa to support the political parties to find a solution to the stalemate. Following the failure of the negotiations between the four parties, on 4 December Pinto da Costa dismissed Prime Minister Trovoada and asked the ADI to present another Prime Minister within 24 hours. In response to Trovoada’s dismissal, the next day the ADI held another popular demonstration in demand of early elections. Trovoada himself accused Pinto da Costa of having sacked a legitimate government. On 7 December, President Pinto da Costa rejected the ADI’s proposal of Patrice Trovoada as Prime Minister and asked the party to present another name for the post. Expectedly, Trovoada, who is the ADI’s irrefutable autocratic patron, refused to do so and announced that his party would continue boycotting parliament. In turn, Pinto da Costa asked the MLSTP/PSD, the second most-voted party, to form a new government.

Gabriel Costa Appointed Prime Minister

On 10 December Pinto da Costa declared he had accepted the MLSTP/PSD’s proposal to appoint the lawyer Gabriel Costa, president of the country’s bar association, as head of the new government. Costa’s appointment came as a surprise, since he does not belong to any of the three opposition parties. Apparently, Pinto da Costa wanted to avoid a Prime Minister from the MLSTP/PSD, the party he co-founded in 1972 and led during many years, since he considered its leaders either as worn-out or incompetent for the office. After independence Gabriel Costa was one of the leaders of the MLSTP youth organization and a deputy of the National Popular Assembly (1975-1980). In the 1980s, during his studies in France where he earned a law degree, he became a confidant of Miguel Trovoada, who lived in exile in Paris from 1981 to 1990. Costa was Trovoada’s legal advisor from 1991 to 1994 and head of his presidential office from 1994-1996. Costa was one of the co-founders of the ADI and the party’s first leader. In

1996 he was Justice Minister for the ADI in the short-lived government of Armindo Vaz d’Almeida (MLSTP/PSD), who was dismissed by a censure motion submitted by his own party. Besides this, Costa was ADI deputy in the National Assembly from 1994 to 1996 and from 1998 to 2000 respectively. In 2000 he became ambassador in Lisbon. In March 2002 he returned from Lisbon when President Menezes appointed him as Prime Minister of a government of national unity. However, already in September that year, Menezes dismissed him, following consecutive conflicts between the two office-holders. In 2005, Gabriel Costa, Carlos Neves and other former ADI members founded the *União Democrática para o Desenvolvimento* (UDD), but the party failed to win a seat in Parliament. Gabriel Costa, who has not been involved in government affairs since 2002, has always maintained a reputation of personal and political integrity. The ADI immediately declared that it would not recognize his government and would fight with all legal means for the re-establishment of the regular functioning of the political institutions.

Gabriel Costa presented a government of ten ministers from the three opposition parties. Only two of the ministers have served in previous governments. The Defense Minister Óscar Sousa “Oscarito” (MDFM), a lieutenant-coronel in the reserve, has been minister of various portfolios in different governments since 1986, while Jorge Bom Jesus (MLSTP/PSD), the Minister of Education, Culture and Vocational Training, exercised the same function in two previous governments. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Natalia Umbelina, an independent, is a trained historian with a PhD earned in France (2007) without any foreign policy experience. The Minister of Public Works, Infrastructure and Natural Resources, Osvaldo Viegas d’Abreu (MLSTP/PSD), was one of the directors of the country’s National Oil Agency (ANP) and until his appointment he has worked several years for the Norwegian seismic survey company Petroleum Geo-Services (PGS). The Minister of Youth and Sports, Albertino Francisco Boa Morte (PCD), hitherto a technician of the *Companhia Santomense de Telecomunicações* (CST), is co-author of a remarkable book titled *Exorcising Devils from the Throne*, which is a harsh critique of São Tomé and Príncipe’s political establishment. Altogether the composition of Gabriel Costa’s council of ministers is rather heterogeneous. Given the relatively short period until the end of the legislature in 2014, empty state coffers, and the lack of experience of most ministers, it seems unlikely that his government will record many achievements.

What Lies Ahead

Gabriel Costa’s government is the country’s 15th constitutional government since the first multiparty elections in 1991. Additionally, the country was twice ruled by a government of presidential initiative, constituted by the presidents Miguel Trovoada and Fradique de Menezes in



1994 and 2001, respectively, after they had dismissed the previous ones. The seventeen governments were headed by fourteen different prime ministers from four different parties (Evaristo Carvalho, Patrice Trovoada and Gabriel Costa have exercised the function twice). None of the governments completed the four-year term. The country's image of political instability was reinforced by two short-lived military coups in 1995 and 2003, respectively. Until 2006, the principal cause of political instability was the frequent power struggles between the prime minister and the president, who, within the semi-presidential system, was not the head of government, but had significant executive powers and could easily dismiss the prime ministers and dissolve parliament. Conflicts between president and prime minister were exacerbated by the fact that, with one exception from 2006 to 2008, they always came from different parties. Following Gabriel Costa's dismissal in 2002 by President Menezes, which was perceived by many deputies as arbitrary, a majority of the National Assembly approved a revision of the constitution that curbed the executive competences of the president in order to impede the easy dismissal of the government. The constitutional amendments were formally ratified in 2003, but only came into effect at the end of Menezes's first term, in September 2006.

Since then, the principal reasons for instability have been minority governments and weak coalitions. The problem is that with four principal competing parties, it has become very difficult for one party to achieve an absolute

majority. The four parties – MLSTP/PSD, PCD, ADI and MDFM – do not differ in terms of political ideologies or divergent programmes, but they rather represent competing interest groups and personalities. In a small and poor country with a political culture marked by patronage, personal loyalties, and venality, the competition for power has closely been related to access to state resources. Therefore, unlike in Cape Verde, in São Tomé and Príncipe a two-party system has not developed. While in power, the presidents Miguel Trovoada and Fradique de Menezes created their own political parties. Instead of being political arbiters, as determined by the semi-presidential constitution, the presidents participated actively in party politics and the struggle for state resources. The nature of politics in the archipelago has been the principal cause for political instability, not the semi-presidential system as such. The example of Cape Verde (three prime ministers since 1991) has shown that the semi-presidential system in a small African Creole society does not necessarily result in political instability. However, in the case of São Tomé and Príncipe, the division of political power between prime minister and head of state has facilitated political conflicts, at least until 2006 when the presidential powers were significantly reduced. Since then parliament has replaced the presidency as the principal stage for the dismissal of governments.

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