

São Tomé and Príncipe: Heading into political instability as usual?

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In the legislative elections held on August 1st in São Tomé and Príncipe, Patrice Trovoada, the leader of the Independent Democratic Action (ADI), obtained 26 of 55 Parliamentary seats. Unfortunately for him, ADI was two seats short of an absolute majority. Moreover, President Fradique de Menezes' Force for Democratic Change Movement/Liberal Party (MDFM-PL) – ADI's natural ally – got a single seat. Since entering into a coalition with the Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe/Social Democratic Party (MLSTP/PSD) of the outgoing Prime Minister Rafael Branco was not an option, in theory the remaining possibility was to reach a political agreement with the Party of Democratic Convergence (PCD). Yet Trovoada ruled out negotiations with PCD, and consequently, because he lacked alternatives, he had no option but to form a minority government. On August 14th, São Tomé's new minority government was sworn in.

As soon as electoral results were known, political observers immediately predicted that São Tomé was heading "once again for a fragile government", thus "prolonging political instability". Indeed, the failure to form a government coalition, together with São Tomé's track record, fully supports their pessimistic predictions. Since the transition to democracy between 1990 and 1991, São Tomé and Príncipe has had an extensive list of prime ministers heading an equally vast list of gov-

ernments. Since then, no government has lasted a full parliamentary term, even when they were able to form a coalition to support them, and several governments were extremely short-lived. After 1991, on average, a government has not lasted two years. Moreover, political instability was further reinforced with a military coup in July 2003 and one alleged coup attempt in February 2009. Overall, as it follows from above, political stability has not been one of São Tomé's main characteristics.

Moreover, in July 2011, the country also will have presidential elections. Since President Fradique de Menezes could not run for a third mandate, this means that political uncertainty will be added to an already unstable political scenario. If Trovoada fails to guarantee a friendly outcome, then the future of his government becomes even more fragile.

Yet, more than everything else, São Tomé needs to break this cycle of short-lived governments and structural political instability. One could hardly conceive a cycle of economic prosperity in the forthcoming years if this trend is not overcome.

Some political observers and São Toméans might think that the answer to economic prosperity lies mainly in much awaited oil dividends. Indeed, the country is among the few states in the Gulf of Guinea that has not yet developed its oil industry, although it hopes to do so in the next decade. Meanwhile, São Toméans despair,



weighing themselves against neighboring countries such as Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Nigeria – all earning billions from their oil fields. However, these same countries tell a cautionary tale: none is fully democratic, and none ranks well as far as good governance is concerned. Indeed, oil dividends by themselves are not the answer to São Toméans' problems. The experience of these neighboring countries in the last decades proves that the oil bonanza failed to increase quality of life for their citizens.

Obviously, political stability is not the goal. Political stability by itself does not provide good governance. Moreover, the list of stable authoritarian regimes is endless, and some of them are located precisely in the Gulf of Guinea. Yet, political stability is crucial to achieve and maintain good governance. Thus, in order to do so, the country needs to implement two major political changes. The first one regards the electoral system. During the transition to democracy, São Toméans chose to favor democratic representation over political stability. In other words, during this critical stage of the transition and consolidation of democracy, each political party score had a corresponding proportion of seats in Parliament.

As a consequence, in the last twenty years absolute majorities have been the exception, not the rule. Today, one should rethink priorities, and consider ways of making it easier to achieve them. For example, among other possibilities, the possibility of imposing thresholds on the number of representatives and rethinking district sizes should be considered.

The second political change involves São Tomé's semi-presidential system. The fact that both Parliament and the President are elected by popular vote confers them undisputed political legitimacy. Rather than being a clear source of political stability, this dual power structure works the other way around. By now it is clear that the semi-presidential system did not serve the São Toméans well. Thus, the country should adopt a parliamentary system, with a President chosen by Parliament, not by popular vote.

Obviously, the changes suggested above must be approved by a referendum. In August 1990, a referendum approved the constitutional amendments leading the way towards the transition to a multiparty system. Now a new referendum would lead São Tomé into a new cycle of strong rather than fragile governments, and stability instead of political instability.

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