

Cape Verde and Drug Trafficking: A Major Challenge to the Rule of Law

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West Africa has been affected by a range of illicit maritime activities, such as human trafficking, the smuggling of small arms and narcotics, illegal fishing and piracy. In an increasingly interconnected world the rise in these activities in the region does not solely represent a challenge to security and stability. In fact, it has profound implications for the international community, namely the EU and the US. Those activities, drug trafficking in particular, are a major source of income not only for drug cartels in Latin America, but also for jihadi groups in West Africa, the Sahel and the Maghreb, thus threatening international security and stability.

Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde are two drug trafficking hubs in West Africa.¹ While this is hardly a surprise in the case of Guinea-Bissau—some regard it as world's first narco-state—, Cape Verde has been away from the spotlight. The difference can partly be explained by the fact that Guinea-Bissau has become a main transit point of drug shipments to land-routes towards the Maghreb and Europe, therefore representing an apparent more immediate threat to the international community, while Cape Verde is a tran-

sit point between Latin America and the African continent.² Cape Verde, despite being considered a case of success in the continent in terms of socioeconomic development and democratic resilience,³ has faced recurrent difficulties regarding financing and capacity-building of its security forces, which, added to the fact that the archipelago is located in the route between Latin America and West Africa, makes the country extremely appealing for drug traffickers.

Cape Verde's increasing relevance in the expansion of drug trafficking led to the inauguration in 2010 of the Maritime Security Operations Center (COSMAR) in the country's capital, Praia. Financed by the US, COSMAR enables a more efficient collaboration between national agencies responsible for monitoring and controlling illicit activities along the territory. It facilitates the planning of joint operations with other nations. Among other benefits, COSMAR provides access to radar and satellite images. This is the second such center in Africa, the other being based in Morocco and focused on the Mediterranean region.⁴ Cape Verde's choice to be the host for COSMAR indicates the country's increasing centrality in international drug trafficking routes.

Drug trafficking clearly undermines the rule of law. In a recent interview, Cape Verde's ambassador to the UN,

1 A report by the West Africa Commission on Drugs (WACD) reveals that in 2010 the bulk of the cocaine flux from Latin America to West Africa passed through Cape Verde, and from there on to the Atlantic coast of West Africa (where Guinea-Bissau is located). The report also analysis Guinea-Bissau's transformation into a major transit point for drugs in West Africa. See "NOT JUST IN TRANSIT: Drugs, the State and Society in West Africa" (WACD, June 2014).

2 *Ibid.*

3 Cape Verde is one of the few African countries that managed to maintain a democratic regime since independence. The country is also on the right track to fulfil the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and has attained the second place in the 2004 Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance.

4 "PM inaugura Centro de Operações de Segurança Marítima" (*Página Oficial do Governo de Cabo Verde*, 21 May 2010).

* Published also in Portuguese: Gustavo Plácido dos Santos, "Cabo Verde e o narcotráfico: um desafio muito sério ao estado de direito" (*IPRIS Comentário*, No. 6, Outubro de 2014).



Fernando Wahnon, alluded to the threat represented by the spread of drug consumption in the country, and also the greater risk of corruption among the authorities. In his words: "These [criminal] organizations' power of corruption is immense. In a vulnerable state such as Cape Verde [criminal organizations] threaten the rule of law and the institutions themselves".⁵

Therefore, it is clear that Cape Verde's democratic institutions must be robustly supported. Under this line of thought, in 2005 Cape Verde became the third country to join the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a US-backed programme aimed at promoting economic growth in countries that abide by certain criteria of good governance. Cape Verde also managed to become the first African country to complete the programme, and in 2012 signed a second governance pact.⁶

Often regarded as a democratic example in the continent, Cape Verde has been a relevant vector in Washington's strategy for the region's security and stability. Of equal importance, it is considered an important piece in the US campaign against international terrorism. The small African archipelago is not only a center of stability in a volatile region, but also enjoys a strategic location in the South Atlantic. To lose Cape Verde to drug trafficking would be a strategic nightmare for the US and Europe.

Coincidence or not, the new US ambassador to Cape Verde, Donald L. Heflin, previously served as the first official and general-consul at the Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo.⁷ Located in the border with the US, Nuevo Laredo is known for the drug trafficking and bloody clashes between rival drug car-

tels.⁸ Heflin also worked in African Affairs at the State Department for five years, finishing as Acting Director of West African Affairs. However, it is his experience in Nuevo Laredo that makes his nomination to Cape Verde an interesting development. In his testimony to the Senate, Heflin could not have been clearer: "The United States and Cabo Verde are partners on a number of important matters. Among them, maritime security and transnational crime are key. The Government of Cabo Verde strongly supports counter-narcotics maneuvers and is a gracious host to US ship visits. Cabo Verde is a model in the region for strategic partnership".⁹

As Fernando Wahnon affirmed, "Cape Verde's inability to monitor its economic zone lures organized crime". Without means and resources "it would be impossible to do it alone." He concluded that in order to "try to overcome the difficulties [it is necessary] to initiate joint operations with other countries".¹⁰ In the absence of support programmes for maritime monitoring (COSMAR) and socioeconomic development (MCC), Cape Verde would possibly place its democratic regime and rule of law at risk. That does not necessarily mean that the island nation will follow in the footsteps of neighboring Guinea-Bissau. Nonetheless, it is important not to let everything that was achieved in recent years go to waste due to drug trafficking.

Like the US, Portugal should strengthen cooperation with Cape-Verdean authorities in the fight against drug trafficking. The new Indicative Cooperation Programme (ICP) 2015/2017, which will soon be signed by both countries, will surely reflect this.

5 "Cabo Verde admite dificuldades na gestão das águas territoriais" (*Lusa*, 27 September 2014).

6 "Cabo Verde" (Millennium Challenge Corporation).

7 "US Ambassador to Cabo Verde: Who Is Donald Heflin?" (*ALLGov*, 27 September 2014).

8 "At least 23 people killed in Mexican border city as victims hanged, decapitated" (*Fox News*, 5 May 2012).

9 "Statement of Donald L. Heflin Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Cabo Verde Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee" (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 29 July 2014).

10 "Cabo Verde admite dificuldades na gestão das águas territoriais" (*Lusa*, 27 September 2014).

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