

DEMOCRACY ADRIFT AND THE TRAJECTORIES OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

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Abstract: *Since 1990, within the framework of the representative democracy then endorsed in São Tomé and Príncipe, there has been open political competition between political parties. Representative democracy and parties are not realities averse to the prevailing cultural patterns on the islands. However, this does not mean that parties have a role consistent with the idealization, common among São Toméans, about what they should represent and do in a representative democracy. For example, the governance programs or even the number of militants are not always known. Nor do party programs, when made explicit, clearly distinguish the various parties.*

Despite the openness to the creation of new parties, mainly presidential initiatives, the party landscape has been characterized by opposition between the two largest parties, the Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe, the historic independence party, and Independent Democratic Action, which in recent years has asserted itself as the dominant party.

In this text, in addition to the summary characterization of the functioning and performance of the parties – sometimes, one-man parties –, an attempt is also made to characterize the free and open political competition in which the parties have moved from 1990 to the present day. Factors undermining democracy are highlighted, for example, the growing political and social entropy, discouragement and the feeling of loss of determination of individual and collective futures, and even temptations of authoritarian drifts. Strictly speaking, perhaps more than the erosion of democracy, we are witnessing the decantation of disbelief in the country, which contaminates all political action.

Some politicians point out the need for changes in the parties, even for them to have a fruitful action, if not to achieve development, at least to contain impoverishment and greater social fissures. However, the hypothesis that parties will continue to replicate the practices and vices that lead to the gap between parties and society is more plausible, not to say accurate. Incidentally, the recent political history of the island highlights a set of purposes and actions, guided by acrimony and violence, averse to a minimum cohesion, which is why it is difficult to believe in overcoming the obstacles set for the pacification of political and social competition.

Keywords: *Sao Tome and Principe, democracy, political parties.*

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the fantasies concerning the incompatibility of (so-called) Western political models with the (alleged) uniqueness of the African idiosyncrasy presumably inherent in the insular cultural magma, both representative democracy and political parties are not foreign entities in the islands. However, this does not mean that those parties have played a role in line with the most common idealisation, tacitly shared by São Toméan, of what they should represent and do in a representative democracy.

Regarding the parties, we should highlight how little people know about them and about who rules them.¹ Their programmes for government² or the number of members³ are not always known. In this respect, a relatively relevant and reliable reference would be the series of votes in successive elections.⁴

Even due to forced contiguity on small islands, there is bound to be some mutual acquaintance among their members. It is fair to suppose then that where the members of different political parties know each other, they will indeed harbour some doubts about each other's loyalties⁵ or, because of rivalries, might even accuse fellow members of being 'thieves'.⁶ From another perspective, in a framework of (quiet but well-known) duplicity, such scoffing is part of the bargaining of opportunities and favours that, provided to some party members, will be denied to others.

Also, with regard to duplicity in the parties, for the external observer, the meaning of certain attitudes and statements can only be understood after many years and, in other cases, by making assumptions that appear illogical and implausible at first sight when compared with how political parties function in other societies. For example, it is not impossible for members of a given party to work for opposing parties, an indicator of the collapse of the notions of the duties and rights of membership, conditioned as it is by the purposes of survival or the accumulation of wealth.

Many opinion-forming and decision-making processes are haphazard, contingent – confined to the leadership or dependent on personal wishes – and facilitated by the absence of a critical mass and currents of opinion through which any kind of dialogue can flow within the parties and between the parties and society.

Looking at the two largest parties, regarding membership and the consequent leeway for taking personal decisions, it should be said that, in the past, the members of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe (Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe) were not given a say in the decisions of the leadership. Today, without strong leadership, the members of the party have a greater influence on the choices and decisions of the leadership, starting with whom they choose to be there. However, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe has been losing ground. Conversely, in the Ação Democrática Independente party (Independent Democratic Action), currently hegemonic, its members have no say in the

¹ One should highlight that the history of the parties – if history matters because it does not seem to matter anymore, not even to decorate the past – shall be composed essentially of narratives related more to quiet personal quarrels than to actions and programmatic lines that should encourage the debate and the commitment of party members.

² On the occasion of an election, more or less unrealistic intentions are set out – from the development of Dubai to the construction of massive infrastructures – which few will take seriously. The decision to vote is tied to other factors, some of which are approached here.

³ Sometimes, figures are quoted during internal elections (e.g., Têla Nón, 7,792 MLSTP members elected Aurelio Martins President – Têla Nón (telanon.info), accessed: 8 October 2022). However, occasional affiliations or possible indications of implausible figures may not be ruled out.

⁴ Although they do not characterise them, election results indirectly provide elements about the parties, and sometimes also dictate their fate. After the recent parliamentary elections, four parties were eradicated because they did not achieve 0.5% of the vote, see Têla Nón, New Party and CHANGE accept their automatic extinction – Têla Nón (telanon.info), accessed: 8 October 2022.

⁵ I have already been confronted with people who showed me their party membership card, from which they emphatically dissociated themselves, abhorring it (*personal communication*, A. Nascimento). I would not claim that duplicity is rife, but it is not uncommon.

A possible explanation for the duplicity lies in the fact that in the era of the one-party regime, social climbing was excluded for those that were not members of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe. However, and as a hypothesis, it is more useful to bear in mind that duplicity became a ploy that facilitated survival.

⁶ *Personal communication*, A. Nascimento.

matter, complying unconditionally with the will of the leader. Were the logic of recruitment and debate more transparent, we might be looking at a cadre party. But the selection of the entourage seems unrelated to the militant career of the chosen ones. Besides, loyalty to the leader is not excluded outside the party.

In line with the recurrently invoked urgency of inflexion in the course of a society apparently at a loss and deregulated, we shall point out the need for changes in the parties,⁷ not the least for them to have a fruitful action, if not to achieve development, and to mitigate the impoverishment of the people and prevent wider social fissures. However, it is more plausible, not to say certain, that the scenario will continue where the parties replicate the practices and flaws that have led to divisions in their midst, as well as to the abyss between parties and society. In other words, the recent insular history has brought to light a hodgepodge of purposes and actions so adverse to a minimum of cohesion that it is difficult to imagine the country will ever overcome the obstacles to political and social pacification and economic development.

This text attempts to characterise the free and open political competition in which the parties have been engaged since 1990 up to the present.⁸ It also points out factors that have been wearing democracy down, such as growing political and social entropy, hopelessness and the feeling of powerlessness to determine individual and collective futures, and also the temptations of authoritarian drifts. Strictly speaking, it can be said that rather than democracy being eroded, we are witnessing the decantation of disbelief in the country, which has been contaminating all political action.

Finally, a note on the caution that must be taken in this analysis, i.e., the intentions of the politicians should not be valued by their statements, a basic procedure that tends to be forgotten. Moreover, although recent history can explain it, society, parties and politicians have changed so much that to weave an analysis in the light of a (presupposed) meaning that is common to analytical and political lexicons will only lead to perplexity and poor proficiency.⁹

FROM ONE-PARTY RULE TO MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY

In 1970, the archipelago had 73,631 inhabitants,¹⁰ some of whom were plantation workers and their descendants. Today, the archipelago has more than 200,000 inhabitants. After the independence in 1975, a single-party regime was established, with a socialist inclination,

⁷ We will leave aside the parties created outside the archipelago between 1975 and 1990, just as we will not consider the more ephemeral ones, including the Coligação Democrática da Oposição (Democratic Coalition of the Opposition), which still managed to have one MP, and the Aliança Popular (Popular Alliance), created on the basis of a chimeric affinity with Portugal. The Frente Democrática Cristã (Christian Democratic Front), associated with former mercenaries of the Buffalo Battalion, who in 2009, with just a few words, dropped the country into turmoil, showing how fragile and discredited the institutional players were, besides being increasingly irrelevant since the independence.

⁸ In 2017, the observed and estimated population was 197,700 people (see STPinNumbers 2017.pdf, accessed: 5 December 2022). It is estimated that in 2022, there were 226,575 inhabitants (Population of São Tomé and Príncipe 2022 (countrymeters.info), accessed: 5 December 2022). There is an enormous percentage of young people, part of whom were not registered or able to vote in the 2022 parliamentary elections.

⁹ For example, how to explain the agreement to hand over the management of ports and the construction of a deep-water port, announced days after the signing government was defeated in the September 2022 elections? More relevant than the contours of the deal – whose worthiness must be presumed, even if there is no reason to do so – is the inexplicable disregard for fellow citizens, considered ‘indigenous’ (if we are to adopt the lexicon used in Mbembe 2013: 15). The end of colonialism did not eradicate the hubris that had once seemed an exclusive attribute of this morally unsustainable regime of oppression and subjection.

¹⁰ *Statistical Yearbook...* 1973: 9.

under the leadership of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, to whom the country was handed over (Nascimento 2019). ‘Total and full’ independence was proclaimed, with no exploitation of man by man and based on the equality between people of any origin and condition. Under revolutionary democracy, some ‘bourgeois freedoms’ were suppressed, namely the freedoms of expression and association, and private interests and horizontal solidarities were erased. Political rights were reduced to participation in ritualised activities in support of the head of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, the self-claimed forefront of the people, whose true interests were dictated to them. Thus, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe withheld the effectiveness of the proclaimed rights (Nascimento 2011 and 2013b).

This ‘true’ independence rejected neo-colonialism and aspired to development. The failure of the socialist path, hastened by increased global difficulties in the 1980s, led to a stalemate and a change in the regime, which, apart from the popular uprising in 1979 on the pretext of the census and the 1981 demonstration in Príncipe, had not met with any obvious opposition. Nevertheless, most people, exhausted and struggling to survive besides more and more disinterested in pointless political rituals, were increasingly estranged. With no hope of change, the islanders did not challenge the situation but simply distanced themselves from politics. At the same time, if they were even remotely close to politicians, they tried to use these personal ties to mitigate their difficulties or obtain favours.

Governance proved to be infinitely more complex than the expatriate independentists, armed only with an ideological creed and the lure of power, had assumed. Faced with administrative tasks, the party’s dominance over the State and the increasingly impoverished society was eroded. This led to the relative loss of small privileges for party members, including material goods.¹¹ The possibility of sustaining this situation diminished as the notion emerged that the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe had been on the wrong political and economic path, a notion that became more entrenched as the capacity to repress dissent was slipping. The idea that the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, which owed its allegiance to having led the country to independence, could unite the disparate ambitions of leaders and ‘the people’ was a misconception.

Interestingly, the change was initiated by Pinto da Costa, head of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe and the one-party regime.¹² The stalemate into which the country had fallen led him to instigate changes that would eventually lead to the adoption of democracy. In 1990, the population enthusiastically welcomed multi-party democracy, a prospect that had been denied them in the ‘struggle’ for ‘true independence’ back in 1975, which quickly turned into a dictatorship. With multi-party democracy, individual rights, the division of powers and the rule of law were enshrined.

The exhilarating elections of 1991 brought about the defeat of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, a surprise to politicians and observers but not to those who had felt in the streets the contempt of the majority of the much-celebrated ‘people’ for those who, because of an undue accumulation of wealth, were seen as having caused the misfortune that succeeded the independence. In any case, the embrace of democracy did not

¹¹ For Lavroff, after African independences, the party was impoverished to the benefit of State structures, and therefore the party was getting weaker while the state administration was getting stronger so that the new cadres tried their careers directly in the State (1975: 135). In the archipelago, handling money associated with international projects became attractive. Implicitly, this eroded the value of the ideological dictates, already wounded by the perceived duplicity of the leaders.

¹² While the image of African dictatorships in Africa as uniformly weak and non-institutionalised is considered illusory (Meng 2020: 231), San Toméan authors have considered the one-party regime a soft dictatorship (Branco and Varela 1988). On political developments in the archipelago, see also Seibert 2002.

only derive from material conditions.¹³ Although related to survival, aspirations for a society with greater freedom for people to decide on their own lives also had a bearing on the embrace of democracy and the defeat of the historic independence party.

Even if this was not mentioned, partly because, at the time the unquestioned acceptance of democracy meant that any allusion to the idiosyncratic vein was deemed negligible or inappropriate, it seemed that the path that should have been followed after the independence had finally been taken. Just like people had claimed to believe in the socialist path, so they claimed to believe in democracy. Once again, as in 1975, the future could be nothing but rosy.

It was not so. Associated, in principle, with development and well-being, contrasting with the impoverishment that had occurred since the independence, democracy has proven to coexist with worsened privations, economic incoherence, and noticeable increasing inequalities. To this day, most islanders can do little more than scrape a living.

On the political level, although we may consider that democracy cannot be reduced to a multi-party system, most people in the archipelago have no institutional references other than the State and hence the parties.¹⁴ This occurs even though, as the mainstay of social organisation, the State seems more idealised – politicians and people talk about the State,¹⁵ how it is badly run, and the need to restore its authority, which can be confused with that of the ‘boss’ – than actually effective in protecting individuals.

The parties, with no ideological matrices, far from being forums for policy creation, have become agencies for the transaction of loyalties and dependencies.¹⁶ More often than not, they are cemented by the determinations of their leader, if not their owner. While some parties, particularly those of irrelevant political expression, are governed by different rationales, others are instruments of their owners, who have tied up money in them.¹⁷

Contradictory and erratic party trajectories – both in terms of the policies adopted, often on a case-by-case basis, and of the conduct of the parties themselves – have corrosive effects on political confidence and social cohesion. In effect, part of the erratic and misguided nature of these trajectories stems from party leadership, the concentration of decision-making, and the dependence in which, more often than people suppose, party members, especially those in the entourages, find themselves. The conduct of party leaders that has not been erratic has been marked by opacity. The strong-willed leadership is less permeable to the accusation of incongruity. In any case, Pinto da Costa’s evolution from dictatorship to representative

¹³ More than dissatisfaction with the patrimonial order, it was the decline in the resources available to employers that undermined the legitimacy of the political elites (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 37). Moreover, let us not deny the role played by the hopelessness generated by the daily struggle to survive on starvation. But, in a cluster of motivations that are difficult to distinguish, welcoming democracy and defeating the independence party may precisely have been connected to the serious consequences of independence in personal lives.

¹⁴ While it is true that, in large parts of Africa, societies were arranged without any relation to political parties and even without a central State (Gonzalez 2000: 141), in the archipelago, that is impossible because the State and the parties are the channel that permits access to money and crucial goods coming from abroad. However, it is not only because they are vehicles of wealth that the State and the parties are relevant references for the islanders.

¹⁵ In the colonial period, the State was constructed as the centre of politics and, it should be added, of administration. Accepting such a legacy, after the independence, the leaders accepted the functions of the State and, when Marxist, adapted them in the creation of an authoritarian regime to generate the necessary power to reshape politics and society, see Falola 2004: 124.

¹⁶ For Seibert, political loyalties in the archipelago are an extension of loyalties between friends or relatives (1995: 249). The situation has become more complex, and today the parties can be said to be networks where family members no longer play a decisive role and friends are only for the occasion.

¹⁷ Tensions and plurality have intermittently marked the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe. But precisely the loss of a firm hand may be one of the reasons for the decline of its social representativeness.

democracy is clear.¹⁸ As far as Patrice Trovoada, head of the *Ação Democrática Independente*, is concerned, in addition to the absence of specific ideological references, it must be said that his designs remain unfathomable. Plausible conjectures may be contradicted by surprising decisions: for example, while his father, Miguel Trovoada, tied the country to Taiwan, he, without prior warning or discussion, realigned the archipelago with the People's Republic of China. Regarding internal cohesion, based on assertive guidance, and on a leadership that demands unlimited loyalty,¹⁹ the *Ação Democrática Independente* has shown greater effectiveness.

Since 1991, when representative democracy was established, there has been relatively open party competition, with elections that have generally been free and fair – even if they have at times appeared to be marred by ‘vote buying’ or ‘conscience buying’²⁰ – with no disruptive conflicts and leading to the alternation of power.²¹

After years of investing in personalist solutions that supposedly redeemed political and social degeneration, a bipolarisation between the *Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe* and the now prevailing *Ação Democrática Independente* began to emerge, a bipolarisation entangled with the personalisation of parties and power. Simultaneously, the reestablishment of the State's authority was being alluded to – more precisely, the authority of the leader, an opinion held back because discretion still meets with resistance, even if passive – and attempts were being made to establish strong-willed governments, or with opportune smatterings of misused justice, supposedly in response to demands for punishment of ‘corrupt’ politicians.

OPENNESS OF THE PARTY SYSTEM... AND DISCRETION OF THOSE IN CHARGE

Defeated in the first free elections in 1991 by the *Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão* (Democratic Convergence Party – Reflection Group), the *Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe* regained power four years later. This marked the beginning of a changeover in power without any noteworthy conflicts.

In parallel with the normalisation of the alternation in power, the informality of politics, and the deliquescence of the institutions have been accentuated, processes that go back, at least, to the time of the single party,²² when ideological rigidity covered decision-making arrangements made in restricted circles²³ or by a single person, subjecting the institutions,

¹⁸ Although he might have been tempted by ‘purely African democracy’, see Têla Nón, Obiang defends purely African democracy and gives advice to STP leaders – Têla Nón (telanon.info), accessed: 2 April 2022.

¹⁹ Patrice Trovoada holds uncontested authority in the *Ação Democrática Independente*, which, in a sense, he owns. One can only speculate about the cement of this authority, which is often ostentatious. The *Ação Democrática Independente* is not a company, but the relationship may be more rigid than an employment relationship. Moreover, the possibility of bonuses for loyal members should not be ruled out.

²⁰ On the ‘bath’, see, e.g., Frynas, Wood and Oliveira 2003: 51-80.

Logical inferences are often made about the ‘bath’ but without analytical relevance regarding its impact.

²¹ Although one may say that in Africa in the 1990s, there was a tendency to institutionalise authoritarian governments rather than engage in effective political liberalisation (Meng 2020: 229), we should also highlight that this did not happen in São Tomé and Príncipe, where the fulfilment of rights and freedoms became almost complete.

²² In a certain sense, we can even suggest that informality goes back to the colonial period, where, with more or less compliance with the law, expedients were adopted to meet the intentions of governance. Informality is interwoven in different regimes and political situations, which does not imply that it always has the same characteristics and political consequences.

²³ In effect, this does not exclude single-person decisions, or those of a small group, which are difficult to prove but may be inferred from the pattern of party action, regardless of the claimed collegiality. In fact, and as it happens elsewhere, it is not excluded that the supposed collegiality coexists with a myriad of factors – among

including the supposedly representative ones, and the laws to the discretion of the person in charge.

The growing irrelevance of the institutions is rooted in the process²⁴ that made politics more informal, a correlate of the personalisation of power, despite the fact that they are sought as an appropriate framework (and even necessary as a justification) of the informalisation process that has been eroding them.²⁵ In other words, the institutionalisation of the discretionary rule erodes the institutions because it instrumentalises them while appearing to be neither illicit nor discretionary.

Virtually since the first years of democracy, political representation has incorporated a dynamic to which parties have been subjected, namely channelling political and social loyalty not to the parties but to their leaders, judged by other criteria than political programmes or the exercise of power.

Alongside institutional instability, which was initiated early on by President Miguel Trovoada,²⁶ the democratic regime was characterised by opening up to new parties, as well as by the rapid collapse of several of them. The creation of parties had less to do with the representation of social segments or the management of new visions for the country than with the manoeuvring of presidents – Miguel Trovoada and later Fradique de Menezes – or, more recently, with snipers' attempts to gain positions in the possible apportionment of State revenues.

Given, among other factors, the political instability, the failure to keep promises, the drive for redemptive solutions (Nascimento 2013), and the assault made by putative leaders carting presumed fortunes, the regime's openness to the emergence of new parties is wider than in comparable countries.²⁷

Several parties have emerged from one-man initiatives, e.g., Ação Democrática Independente, Movimento Democrático Força da Mudança – Partido Liberal, Movimento de Cidadãos Independentes – Partido Socialista and, although less obvious, probably Basta (Enough). Held hostage to personal designs, these parties are nothing new and represent at best renewed hope or the opportunity for economic and social advancement for some.

In a scenario of growing social anomie, erratic political guidance tends to erode political confidence and social cohesion due to the gap between, on the one hand, the consensus on the democratic formulas of representation and decision-making and, on the other, the constant misappropriation of the purposes of the government's functions. In this context, widespread

them, the pressure of consensus – operative in the shaping of consciences in accordance with the presumed will of the leader.

²⁴ Perspectives on the weakness of the State are suggestive (e.g., Chabal 1993). However, in the islands, where its symbolic weight is greater than in other African political and social contexts, it is difficult to accept that the State only survives as long as society can cannibalise it. To some extent, the State is independent of society, partly because it lives off international advances.

²⁵ In São Tomé, it is not society – abstractly considered – that cannibalises the State as a whole and in equal measure (and, certainly, there will be those who, through the State, suck society dry). When the State is cannibalised, it is done above all by those in charge, and everyone knows who they are and, in this sense, even if they are not named, they are not subsumed by society. With or without consequences, society calls them 'thieves'.

²⁶ With regard to the resilience of democracy, Fleischhacker considered that, since Miguel Trovoada dismissed three governments in two years, the fact that political forces continued to have the constitutional framework as the basis of their activity could be a sign of democratic consolidation (1999: 741). It should be noted that the constitutional framework may survive formally and yet fail to consolidate democracy, one indication of which may be its ineffectiveness in protecting people's rights.

²⁷ The openness of the political system, which is notorious when compared to the relative fixity of the framework in Cape Verde (Sanchez 2015), has to do, not with new paradigms, ideas, projects, but rather with attempts to polarise power in one person.

impoverishment, readily attributed to the pillaging of resources by the rulers, has generated a desire for short-term solutions that are presumed to be salvific, as well as demands for a reparatory policy, tantamount to an act of revenge on ‘politicians’, usually envisioned as ‘thieves’.

The search for immediate revenge (eventually, through authoritarian solutions), replacing the necessary mediation to conceive and implement medium and long-term policies, has been accommodated by the openness of the party system as seen in the ordinary creation of parties, usually by personalities associated with power and wealth. For them to be accepted, the alleged political inclination of the ‘anointed’ has less value than the ostentation of (conjectured) power and wealth (thus was the case of Fradique, and thus is the case of Patrice Trovoada). This pattern of adherence has prevailed, even if time has already shown the failure of some personal political initiatives based on these attributes, especially on the supposed wealth of the putative redeemers.

The parties have given up ideology because they consider it useless. They flee to the terrain of moral verbiage, supposedly regenerating and capable of supporting the incessant new beginning of change. However, all politicians end up being denounced, rightly or wrongly, as perpetrators of immoral acts while in government. At least, this is how they are seen by the majority of the population, whose term of comparison is the previous government and election promises. After the elections, almost always full of unfulfillable promises, the rulers become the object of sarcasm and contempt.

THE PARTIES

The parties are groups whose members, of an unknown number, do not pay any membership fees, seeking instead money or favours, which they exchange for promises of loyalty, often not complied with in elections.

The weakness of the parties is notorious, as they lack programmatic platforms, as well as ideological or ethical values that can induce reflection on political practices and alternatives.

The names of the parties – a combination and recombination of words with little substantive meaning, let alone any binding power – highlight the programmatic emptiness.²⁸ The correspondence of their names with any ideology, when alleged, is nebulous.

Without an ideology, instead of programmes, promises abound, and congruence is not even sought after, let alone acquired. Without history, the past is erased. There is only the present, determined by the dominance within the parties and by their winning or losing position in the insular society.

Today, more than ideological or programmatic mobilising slogans, what really counts in the affirmation of the parties is the willingness to fund clients and the capacity to impose loyalty and obedience on them.²⁹

In the parties, therefore, ideas are far less important than loyalty to the leader. In some cases, this loyalty was so long-lasting that it was sometimes concealed. In these circumstances, such concealed loyalty not only undermined middle management in the State apparatus but maybe also the political leadership of the parties, which appeared to be at the service of opposing factions.³⁰

²⁸ Even when one appears to have a platform of governance principles – see the postscript to Patrice Trovoada’s encomiastic biography – this is worthless.

²⁹ The existence of modern political parties should make clientelism unnecessary; nonetheless, it persists (Gonzalez 2000: 133–134). In São Tomé and Príncipe, it has become the substance of the parties.

³⁰ Obviously, the question of proof arises, but this does not invalidate the hypothesis: consider the obvious ineptitude of party leaders or the very recent transfer of a minister from one government to the next, in this case,

It is difficult not to associate party creation and membership³¹ with the attempt to obtain revenue.³² Party membership, sometimes explicitly negotiated in the streets by ordinary citizens,³³ is not based on ideological principles, but on interests. Membership or migration from party to party has little to do with beliefs or convictions, but rather with the search for survival and, if possible, security in life.

MOVIMENTO DE LIBERTAÇÃO DE SÃO TOMÉ E PRÍNCIPE (MOVEMENT FOR THE LIBERATION OF SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE)

In a meeting held in 1972 in Santa Isabel where the few exiled nationalists were present, the former Comité de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe became Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe. Using a rhetorical device, the small group became the 'Board' of the 'movement'. In 1974, taking advantage of the international circumstances, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe forced the dissolution of the Free Popular Front and in 1975, with the support of the resigning Portuguese authorities, liquidated Civic (*Cívica*), a youth association that seemed about to slip from the party's control. The Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe took on the role of forefront of the people and was entrusted with the governance of the new country.

Despite the alleged collegiality of its bodies, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe quickly proved to be a one-man party. Under revolutionary slogans, it became instrumental in the imposition of duties on the so-called people deprived of the slightest freedom of choice or decision. Rather than being a party of the masses, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe sought to round them up and legitimise its tutelary power in the pretence of defending the interests of the people. Despite claiming to be a party of the masses, and despite the proclaimed collegiality, the decision was concentrated on one man, of whom many comrades were even afraid.

In the mid-1980s, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, which had aspired to be Marxist-Leninist, began its transformation into a party that would embrace everything it had previously criticised.³⁴ The Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe gradually gave in to the virtues of private enterprise and adopted, as reluctantly as conveniently, the directives of the Bretton Woods institutions, especially with regard to the distribution of land, with which it rewarded leaders on the pretext of their supposed entrepreneurial and managerial capacity.

As the veneer of Marxist-Leninist ideology started to lift, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe became an association that recruited cadres for an administration more suited to international demands.³⁵ The younger members faced the older ones, also so-called orthodox, who were concerned with preserving the positions obtained with the expansion of the State after the independence. Although reluctantly, the latter accepted the

of the party that had been previously in opposition. Jorge Amado replaced Óscar Sousa as Minister of Defence in the government of the New Majority and, a few weeks ago, was transferred to the new government, which is certainly not due to the constancy of the island's defence policy.

³¹ Just like the multitude of presidential candidates in the 2021 elections.

³² For a view of parties as patrons, see Seibert 1999: 321.

³³ *Personal communication, A. Nascimento.*

³⁴ On the subject of the erasure of the past, it is worth asking how it is that, having been Marxists, Marxist-Leninists, revolutionaries, etc., not the slightest sign of that past can be glimpsed...

³⁵ For Couto, the decadence of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, an anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist Revolutionary Front, was due to the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe being taken over by the liberals. This coincided with the transfer of power from the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe to the State or government, see 1997: 96 ff.

political change in 1989.³⁶ In addition to the imperative loyalty to the leader, ideological rarefaction (due to the erosion of the worldview subordinated to class struggle or anticolonial struggle) gave way to choices dictated by money.

Before the 1991 elections, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe declared itself social democrat. But it was abandoned by Pinto da Costa, who foresaw the more than likely electoral defeat. Even so, Pinto da Costa maintained some dominance over the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, which was difficult to evaluate due to its informal nature.

Years of unchallenged power accustomed the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe to look down on the other parties, not least because it had regained power as early as 1994. At that time, however, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe was about to face its greatest political adversity, viz., the gradual emergence of an opponent that, for decades, has been unbeatable. In fact, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe has suffered numerous blows by the governments of its archenemy, Patrice Trovoada, whom, it should be noted, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, based on politically indigent premises if not on other interests, even supported in the 2006 presidential elections against the re-election of Fradique de Menezes.³⁷

Even so, the apparent vitality of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe deserves some explanation, not at the programmatic level, but in terms of the competition for its leadership. It is perhaps the only party where competition is effective, but less due to values than loyalties, affections, or possible favours and gains. No strong leadership has been affirmed and, as is well known, no one seems capable of beating Patrice Trovoada.

In the 2018 elections, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe led the fight against the dominance of Patrice Trovoada in the term of office that had just ended, a period marked by tension, the destruction of institutions, and the political and social animosity of the previous four years. However, from 2018 to 2022, the government of the New Majority (*Nova Maioria*), led by the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, was characterised by ineptitude. The government had been caught up in a myriad of pitfalls and mishaps, including tergiversation. In the 2022 elections, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe retained some of its electorate, whose loyalty undoubtedly relied on history and a strong dislike of Patrice Trovoada. But it lost the elections by a landslide and, according to the opinion of a former member, its decline may be irreversible.

In other words, since its removal from power became customary, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe has had different leaders. On one occasion, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe was seduced by apparent wealth, giving itself over to a businessman, Aurélio Martins,³⁸ a supposedly successful entrepreneur, who had no consistent political background to speak of, which became plainly clear in his inability to offer alternatives and create policies.

The reason for the persistent hatred of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe is puzzling. In the 'streets', for reasons that are not always discernible, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe is blamed for everything that has happened

³⁶ From another perspective, we should mention that the revolutionary inclinations of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe had disappeared by 1989 (Couto 1997: 98). However, it is perhaps worth asking if they ever existed.

³⁷ In the meantime, Fradique had broken with the Trovoadas power that had led him to the presidency.

³⁸ After the triumph of Fradique de Menezes, a so-called businessman, following the rise of Patrice Trovoada, supposedly because of money, the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe surrendered to money and elected a business personality. However, for an outside observer and certainly for some of its members, Aurelio Martins did not meet the conditions for the political leadership of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe.

since the independence. People point to the fact that the same leaders have remained in power for decades, and these leaders are accused, regardless of any grounds, of illicit enrichment. One may ask, in fact, to what extent the belief in this guilt does not stem from the existence of an opponent and the desire to adhere to this opponent, a putative winner, whose vaunted wealth (since he does not even live on the land...) does not seem to raise any doubts with significant political and social expression.

As mentioned above, today the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe is struggling with a breakdown and a trajectory of loss for which no reversal is envisioned in the near future. For years, good intentions have been credited to the ‘change’ proposed by the Ação Democrática Independente, but any motto, if proposed by the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, is only met with scorn in the streets. By way of speculation, and without discounting the unpredictable nature of politics,³⁹ an alternative to Patrice Trovoada may be a long time in coming and may not come from the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, which could then be heading for an abyss.⁴⁰

PARTIDO DA CONVERGÊNCIA DEMOCRÁTICA – GRUPO DE REFLEXÃO (DEMOCRATIC CONVERGENCE PARTY – REFLECTION GROUP)

In 1991, the Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão, created during the transition to democracy, once it came to power, had to implement a structural adjustment programme, which had been dragging on and painstakingly adopted under the one-party regime. The Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão paid the price of governing in defiance of its promises – both its own promises and those associated with ‘change’ and capitalism, with which, many believed, the São Toméan people identified. Having to implement a programme that dashed the hopes placed in economic progress and democracy was fatal to the party.

In terms of political action, the Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão – which also gathered the former youth of the now defunct Civic, whose educated wisdom had little to do with politics on the land – paid for their blunder. After offering support for Guadalupe de Ceita, some elements of the Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão reportedly changed their minds to support the presidential candidacy of Miguel Trovoada.⁴¹ For the Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão government, the most damaging action came from Miguel Trovoada himself, whose emerging party, the Ação Democrática Independente, would have to grow in the same space of opposition to the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe.

Claiming to be the party of ‘change’, the Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão saw the word appropriated by the Ação Democrática Independente, created during the presidential mandate of Miguel Trovoada. Evoked on purpose, or without any purpose,

³⁹ In the scope of that unpredictable nature are the dramatic events of 25 November 2022, days after the government led by Patrice Trovoada took office. Officially, there was an attempted coup d’état. However, it must be said that, in addition to this version, other versions, including those based on conspiracy theories, are possible. With no reason for the deaths, given the silence and inconsistencies of the rulers, irrationality stands out as a preponderant factor in politics, perhaps a sign of totalitarian impulses.

⁴⁰ Jornal Transparência – Diário digital de São Tomé e Príncipe (jornaltransparencia.st), accessed: 26 September 2021.

⁴¹ Ceita 2012: 358 ff, 370-371.

Although it does not seem the most likely option, one could say that the error came from an attempt to neutralise him politically. However, Miguel Trovoada took advantage of the power inherent in the position of President to launch a patronising and cavalier attack on the government that had supported his candidacy. At the same time, ‘his’ party was being formed and would bleed the others dry.

‘change’ became an asset of the Ação Democrática Independente, to which some elements of the Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão migrated (Santo 2008: 228, fn. 86) since they wished, regardless of any pretexts, to snuggle up to the strongest man.

Gradually drained and losing ground to presidential parties – the Ação Democrática Independente was followed by the Movimento Democrático Força da Mudança – Partido Liberal, of President Fradique de Menezes – the Partido da Convergência Democrática – Grupo de Reflexão withered away. After being part of the government from 2018 to 2022, it was subsumed into a movement with populist claims, Enough, organised around Delfim Neves, the defeated candidate in the 2021 presidential elections. Contrary to the rupture supposedly underlying its name, Enough launched a renewed call for harmony and unity among the San Toméans in 2022. In a time of enthusiasm, not with harmony and peace, but with rupture and vindication, Enough had a disappointing result, managing to elect only two Members of Parliament in the 2022 elections. The party from whom the ‘streets’ expected a symbolic vendetta was the Ação Democrática Independente. This was the main reason for Patrice Trovoada’s victory.

AÇÃO DEMOCRÁTICA INDEPENDENTE (INDEPENDENT DEMOCRATIC ACTION)

Time has given a particular meaning to the name,⁴² which at first was thought to mean little more than the triviality of the democratic inclination (an inclination, it must be said, that is somewhat contradicted by the more or less generalised prevalence of interdependent personal relationships interwoven in every party). Now, although originally the adjective ‘independent’ in the name of the Ação Democrática Independente might have alluded to the gap in the political practices of the other parties, today, this term is also appropriate to mark the distance that, managing a contained populism, the leader maintains from the members of the party – the Ação Democrática Independente is suspended from his word,⁴³ and no others are expressed – and, it should be noted, from the country that he governs with a new absolute majority.

Not unlike other parties, the Ação Democrática Independente is a one-man party and the history of the Ação Democrática Independente is summed up in the (disclosed) history of Patrice. Born in the shadow of Miguel Trovoada’s presidential mandate, the Ação Democrática Independente’s driving force is his son,⁴⁴ Patrice, who, if necessary, commands the party, the institutions, and the society from a distance. In this respect, the Ação Democrática Independente differs from other parties not only due to the hierarchical rigidity of its relations, including with those closest to it but also to its shrewdness in communicating and mobilising supporters.

In Patrice Trovoada’s Ação Democrática Independente, the decision-making circle may be rather restricted. Few are close to him, and it is doubtful that Patrice Trovoada shares his most significant political intentions with all of them.⁴⁵ For the external and distant observer, the unacknowledged loyalty to the leader is only revealed by involuntary gestures or hasty

⁴² See Patrice’s explanation about the name of the Ação Democrática Independente; according to him, the only intervention of his father regarding the creation of the party, see Santos 2014: 179.

⁴³ As with the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe in the past, we can assume that the Ação Democrática Independente readily accepts the will of the ‘boss’ (an expression used by senior State figures who, paradoxically, called him boss and accepted him as such, *second-hand communication*, *A. Nascimento*). Today, without ideological colouring or a catalogue of policies, the boss is always right, even in crucial decisions announced overnight, without warning.

⁴⁴ Several years ago, when asked by RTP-Africa about the legacy of President Miguel Trovoada, I immediately replied ‘his son’ (*personal communication*, *A. Nascimento*). I would not hold that opinion if I had to concede that part of the political steps taken by the father, Miguel Trovoada, were already due to Patrice Trovoada, a hypothesis that I cannot exclude.

⁴⁵ *Communication-based inference*, *A. Nascimento*.

words. Scarce and apocryphal descriptions of the relationship – besides how the pathetic opposition in the party was politically neutralised while he was absent⁴⁶ – make it clear how unquestionable the will of the leader actually is.

The *Ação Democrática Independente* boasts a sense of discipline uncommon in political parties and, what is more, in society. More than in other parties, instead of bargaining, there is an almost religious ceremony, accompanied by an excellent presence on the Internet, particularly on the *Facebook* platform. Although a one-man party, or a one-owner party, the *Ação Democrática Independente* can mobilise the masses with immense ease. It finds in young people a permanent pool of adherents for the purpose of public demonstrations of strength, which it wisely uses.⁴⁷ Indeed, when necessary, the virtual ties unfold into powerful street demonstrations, competently orchestrated in terms of the message to be conveyed both by word and by deed. Surrounding Patrice Trovoada, prospers a populism based on the sparing use of incisive words – such as ‘Corrupt people, out!’, ‘Thieves, out!’ – and on an idea of government where authority, loyalty, and efficiency are merged, all values needed for the fair ‘revenge’ that the streets demand to be taken on corrupt politicians, from whom Patrice Trovoada appears to distance himself without contemplation.

Apart from the mention of the ‘little people’ and the attacks on the alleged corrupt people, Patrice Trovoada does not have a discourse with measures and goals aimed at people’s lives, although he appears to speak to real people. He does not show himself close to the population, but some of them readily responded to his indications to protest, thus enthroning him as their leader. The *Ação Democrática Independente* holds a degree of control over the behaviour of its members and occasional supporters that other parties might envy. Patrice Trovoada has demonstrated a shrewd intuition for human weaknesses, especially among those surrounding him, and for manipulating the ‘masses’, which he puts under the spotlight for his own benefit.

It is not surprising that, in the one-party regime, Pinto da Costa had a great deal of dominance and authority over his party. Fear was a great help in achieving adherence and compliance with his command. The remarkable thing about Patrice Trovoada is that his authority has grown over almost two decades and was only challenged when he appallingly abandoned the country after his defeat in 2018.⁴⁸ But it was not difficult for the leader to reverse this senseless dissonance. Without him, the *Ação Democrática Independente* would no longer exist or would be irrelevant.

MOVIMENTO CAUÉ, MOVIMENTO DOS CIDADÃOS INDEPENDENTES –
PARTIDO SOCIALISTA
(CAUÉ MOVEMENT, OR INDEPENDENT CITIZENS MOVEMENT – SOCIALIST PARTY)

The *Movimento de Caué* (Caué Movement), the so-called party of the Monteiro Brothers, formerly linked to the *Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe*, became the *Movimento de Cidadãos Independentes* (Independent Citizens Movement), to which later the

⁴⁶ As a rule, when he is not in power, Patrice Trovoada is abroad. Following the 2018 elections, he simply left the Prime Minister’s office and the country.

⁴⁷ In 2010, the support of young people, which would help him win the first elections, was blatantly obvious to anyone walking in the streets (Nascimento 2010). In 2021, after the first round of the presidential elections, and in 2022, when he returned for the election campaign, the mobilisation in the streets was remarkable.

⁴⁸ Obviously cherished by the New Majority government, the election in May 2019 of the new *Ação Democrática Independente* Board, chaired by Agostinho Fernandes, was tumultuous. In July 2020, the new *Ação Democrática Independente* faded away. Agostinho Fernandes and his Board spoke of the vagueness of leadership at the *Ação Democrática Independente* and the consequent weakening of *Ação Democrática Independente*’s assertion in society. However, in 2021, although he was absent, Patrice Trovoada would elect another President of his political convenience.

designation Partido Socialista (Socialist Party) was added.⁴⁹ The emergence of this party seemed very convenient to Patrice Trovoada. Initially, it was a party from the southern region of São Tomé, where it could, as it did, steal mandates from the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe and thus facilitate a majority for the Ação Democrática Independente. In 2018, an absolute majority for the Ação Democrática Independente and the Movimento de Caué narrowly failed.

The interesting fact, improbable some years ago and possibly ephemeral, is the relatively successful transformation into a party with a class or group message.⁵⁰ The Movimento de Cidadãos Independentes – Partido Socialista abandoned the local focus, appealing to most former servants and their descendants.⁵¹ In this case, the group logic, which could eventually be used by the Ação Democrática Independente, was overcome by the diffusion of a message aimed at an electorate that, after some decades, is enticed by the allusion to exploitation and to a kind of necessary reparation owed to the ‘children of the plantation’.⁵² This is a social group with demographic weight, albeit difficult to convert into a political majority. We will see if the Movimento de Cidadãos Independentes – Partido Socialista will become more than an ephemeral party.

MODUS OPERANDI OF THE PARTIES, DIFFERENT... BUT THE SAME?

More than principles and political visions, the parties seem to depend on practices that, although possibly deviant from their purpose, generate acceptance and even adherence. Like a by-product decanted from a cultural broth of dependencies, the trade in favours has become a means of party recruitment. What is more, it has also become a mainstay of the political process, to which no alternative seems to be available. This implies that almost every party is similar, with the exception of the Ação Democrática Independente, which is associated with an idea of order and efficiency, and in this, Patrice differs from the leaders of the other parties. Is it not precisely his ability to impose himself on local politicians that is appreciated?

Given that recruiting party members is usually based on trading in favours, the criterion for distinction is the (presumed) performance of the leader. Thus, when trading in favours does not determine adherence and representativeness, which is always contingent, it may be the case that those parties assert themselves or, on the contrary, wither away, less on the merits of their proposals than on the identification of the majority of the population with the putative winner at each moment. This would explain the irrelevance of the Movimento Democrático Força da Mudança – Partido Liberal,⁵³ which has been dragging on excruciatingly after the end of the presidential term of its initiator, Fradique de Menezes. For some time, the Movimento Democrático Força da Mudança – Partido Liberal was a one-man party. It only gained some importance while Fradique de Menezes was President.

⁴⁹ In the last campaign, calling for solidarity among the children of the plantation, they promised to eradicate poverty (Caué Movement Coalition promises to eradicate poverty in São (panapress.com), accessed: 23 October 2022). Save the implicit allusion to the need for social justice for the ‘children of the plantation’, it is perhaps difficult to find a programme that embodies a socialist inclination.

⁵⁰ Some years ago, the leaders of all parties, which reflected neither economic and social differences nor socio-cultural divisions, were natural (Seibert 1995: 249). In the last few years, this characterisation is no longer accurate, as the Movimento de Cidadãos Independentes - Partido Socialista has come to focus on ethnic and cultural cleavages.

⁵¹ In the September 2022 elections, the appeal to the vote of the ‘children of the plantation’ won five seats. With fewer votes, it won more seats than Enough, which won two seats.

⁵² See António and Nino Monteiro are awakening the ‘children of the plantation’ to conquer political power – Têla Nón (telanon.info), accessed: 23 October 2022.

⁵³ From the patron’s name, he took initials for its name – force of change – to which he added Liberal Party.

The parties, which tend to be the parties of one big man, have dispensed with poor imitations of worldviews or ideological beliefs in favour of the tacit choice to form the entourage of a man capable of imposing himself on society. This means that loyalty to the owner of the party – not because of charisma or ideas, but because of favours and advantages or money in hand – prevails over all other affinities or solidarities.

BIPOLARISATION AND THE END OF ALTERNATION?

After 1990, the party regime showed some open-mindedness with many and constant political initiatives both of a party and individual nature (consider the 19 candidates for the Presidency of the Republic in 2021 and the 11 parties competing in the 2022 general elections). This openness to the political initiative – in most cases, inconsequential – reflected a kind of political ground zero, where words had little value. In fact, the incessant creation of new parties made it possible for many individuals to change parties as it suited them better.

In any case, the system's opening up to the creation of new parties may be changing. Against a background of the overlapping search for redemptive solutions with the assertion of personalist or authoritarian tendencies – which take over institutions, especially parties – the party system may be on the way to crystallising, especially if Patrice Trovoada consolidates his hegemony to the detriment of other parties, including the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe.

For three decades, this bipolarisation has been decanted,⁵⁴ and the outcome will imply the persistence or the end of the alternation in power (Nascimento 2022). To some extent, this will also depend on how muscular and/or assertive governance is, the mistakes made, and the international context.

It was not difficult to foresee Patrice Trovoada's victory in the September 2022 elections: until today, each defeat was followed by an exodus and a new return for a new and wider victory. After narrowly missing out on an absolute majority in 2018, the New Majority government's display of ineptitude opened the door to Patrice Trovoada's victory, more than heralded by the triumph of yet another of his presidential candidates in 2021.

Once the rejection of the country of 'father and son' has died out and the hegemony of Patrice Trovoada has been sedimented,⁵⁵ given the acceptance of the 'strong hand' and personalist drifts, the party system may close down, with consequences such as restrictions on freedoms, a possible inference based on what happened in 2014-2018 and the hazy events of 25 November practically after the inauguration. These events of 25 November opened up a field of uncertainties regarding the future of the country, which, without them, one might say would experience a process of concentration of power in the hands of Patrice Trovoada.

FINAL REMARKS

The first remark to be made is about the difficult characterisation of the parties, their guidelines, moving and elusive, largely determined by the intentions and actions of those in charge, which end up becoming circumstantial, erratic, and opaque.

⁵⁴ The Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, perhaps trusting its prominence, did not anticipate this drift towards bipolarisation. It was distracted by its aversion to Fradique, against whose re-election in 2006 it coalesced with Patrice Trovoada. No one in the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe was prepared to lose to a President known to be ignorant who was running for re-election. But Patrice Trovoada was prepared to lose and to collect future dividends.

⁵⁵ Regardless of judgements about a connection to the land, is it not noteworthy that he never lives on the islands when he is not in a position of power, besides travelling constantly when in office?

Personal and sometimes underground desires and dependencies make it especially difficult to characterise the parties and their actions. They are not distinguished by their projects, nor by their ideology since the poor imitations of ideological thought in each and every one of them are thin and vague. Extending the cultural vacuum left by colonialism and the one-party regime, the value of ideological maxims has waned and has been replaced by a focus on the figures of those in charge.

Not only are political parties tendentially one-man shows, but the degree of institutionalisation of beliefs, programmes, and procedures is low, if not practically non-existent. Therefore, when the power or the money of the leader ceases to flow, entropy and near dissolution are near.

The case of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe could contradict this interpretation, were it not for the fact that the party has been appropriated for less clear purposes. In any case, despite surviving, it has little to do with what it historically wanted to be (and still intends to represent). While, on the one hand, the resilience of the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe should be noted, on the other, its continuous loss and, concomitantly, the Ação Democrática Independente's trajectory of growth should also be highlighted.

Since the 1990s, the democratic environment has not been merely formal. Nor can the density of democracy be diminished by the fact that part of the population lives below the poverty line and is presumably alienated and estranged from politics. There has been alternation, even in years when the atmosphere has been more muscular. Thus, the possibility of a free vote is not insignificant.

Perhaps the problems are different: there are parties with leaders, or owners, but there are no elites – i.e., a group of individuals persistently committed to a differentiated role of political and cultural mediation – nor a civil society independent of the State or foreign countries. Instead of elite performances, we see a myriad of dependencies. Hence the difficulty of promoting change or exercising power without deviating from its purpose. It should be noted, however, that stressing this circumstance that has depleted politics is not tantamount to saying that if the elite and civil society were more powerful, there would be no possibility of autocratic drifts, which have already been hinted at in the archipelago.

Given the open political competition, which has given rise to alternation in power in the archipelago in the absence of long-term agreements on the distribution of resources, the various actors and parties have become excluding and unyielding when it comes to sharing resources. Those who come to power see the opportunity as if it were unique, and stealing and corruption become the motto of the corrosive discourse in the streets about politics where no one is spared.

The result is a search for redemptive solutions or a strong hand. For this reason, and given the bipolar situation in which tensions and resentment are on the rise – compounded by the deaths on 25 November following the alleged coup d'état – São Tomé and Príncipe may institutionalise an autocracy under the guise of democracy and based on competitive and open elections. If this is the case, even if the formalities of democracy are preserved, the authoritarian drive to restore the former regime will certainly accentuate the atrophy of the parties and the weakening of the institutions.

Under the one-party regime, institutions were emptied out and instrumentalised, and have become mere façades, while governance relies more and more on the leader. Under the democratic regime, Patrice Trovoada was able to consolidate his authority through institutional procedures because he was met with unique hegemonic conditions more than once. However, the tensions that arose in 2016–2018 and, in particular, the possible after-effects of the November 2022 events may have jeopardised this possibility.

Due to multiple factors, from which we would like to highlight the decay of the institutions (parties included), it would not be a crass error to maintain that, within a conceivable timeframe, the country will have trouble finding a solution based on a sense of decency and the law.⁵⁶ Or, to quote the San Toméans, based on ‘our values’. Now, even if this is not said, ‘our values’ were those inherited from the urbanity and civic-mindedness – even if alienated – of the colonial era, obviously worn down by time, but above all, outraged by the voracity of the enrichment of some at the expense and to the exclusion of everybody else.

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⁵⁶ In this regard, see Nascimento 2018a, 2018b and 2021.

- _____. 2018a, “São Tomé e Príncipe: recordar os mortos e... que dizer dos vivos?” <http://blog.cei.iscte-iul.pt/sao-tome-e-principe-recordar-os-mortos-e-que-dizer-dos-vivos/>, accessed: 26 January 2018.
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ДРЕЙФУЮЩАЯ ДЕМОКРАТИЯ И ТРАЕКТОРИИ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ ПАРТИЙ В САН-ТОМЕ И ПРИНСИПИ

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Аннотация. С 1990 г., когда в Сан-Томе и Принсипи была введена представительная демократия, в стране существует открытое соперничество между политическими партиями. Представительная демократия и многопартийность не противоречат преобладающим на островах культурным моделям. Однако это не означает, что партии играют роль, соответствующую идеальным представлениям сантомиюцев о том, что они должны представлять и делать в условиях представительной демократии. Например, их программы правления и даже число членов не всегда известны. А когда программы партий оказываются известны, бывает трудно найти в них различия.

Несмотря на открытость созданию новых партий, в основном по президентской инициативе, партийный ландшафт изображается оппозицией между двумя крупнейшими политическими объединениями: Движением за освобождение Сан-Томе и Принсипи, исторической партией независимости, и Независимым демократическим действием, которая в последние годы утвердилась в качестве доминирующей партии.

В этой статье, помимо краткого описания функционирования партий (иногда «партий одного человека»), предпринимается попытка охарактеризовать свободное и открытое политическое соперничество, в условиях которого партии прошли путь с 1990 г. до сегодняшнего дня. Освещаются факторы, подрывающие демократию, такие, как нарастающая политическая и социальная энтропия, разочарование и чувство утраты уверенности в индивидуальном и коллективном будущем и даже искушение дрейфом в направлении авторитаризма. Строго говоря, возможно, еще в большей мере, чем эрозию демократии, мы наблюдаем распространение неверия в нее, которое затрагивает все политические действия в стране. Некоторые политики указывают на необходимость перемен в партиях хотя бы для того, чтобы их деятельность приносила результат: пусть и не приводя к развитию, по крайней мере, позволяла сдерживать обнищание и усиление социальных трещин. Однако гипотеза, что партии продолжают воспроизводить практики и пороки, ведущие к разрыву между политиками и обществом, более правдоподобна, если не сказать верна. Недавняя политическая история островов высвечивает ряд целей и действий, в основе которых – озлобленность и насилие, противостоящих минимальной сплоченности общества. Поэтому трудно поверить в преодоление препятствий на пути смягчения политической и социальной конкуренции.

Ключевые слова: Сан-Томе и Принсипи, демократия, политические партии

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