

COUP D'ÉTAT IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

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During the early hours of 16 July 2003, the small, West African island state of São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) was woken by the sounds of gunshots and exploding grenades. The usually calm and peaceful capital city, also called São Tomé, would soon learn that a coup d'état was underway and that the democratically elected government had been toppled by force. A group of army officers, led by the commanding officer in charge of the Army Training College, Major Fernando Pereira, had taken control of the airport; the radio and television buildings; the central bank and several ministries; and had issued an order to all Government Ministers and Members of Parliament to present themselves at the central police station. Soon after, Prime Minister Maria das Neves, the President of the National Assembly and several ministers were detained and kept in custody at the main army barracks in the capital city.

Confusion reigned in the archipelago as there was no clear indication of who was behind the coup, what their demands were, and more importantly, how the President, Fradique de Menezes, away in Nigeria attending a conference, would react. Many believed, taking clues from STP's recent political history, that this was a 'class action' taken by a minority within the armed forces and not a classical coup d'état. In this sense, the coup leadership would not be interested in taking over government, but had taken such dramatic

steps as a means to achieve demands specific to the armed forces. It is well known that discontent is rife within the Armed Forces of STP (numbering only 1,000) and that long time demands for a revision of salary scales, better career prospects, and new equipment and infrastructure, have never been met.

After all, barely nine months had passed since Fradique de Menezes had dismissed the Government of Prime-Minister Gabriel Costa during September 2002, following a protracted conflict precisely around appointments in the Armed Forces, which allegedly bypassed 'normal channels'. The fragile coalition that constituted Costa's government of national unity succumbed to the pressure, and a new government, now under Maria das Neves was formed. Such political manoeuvring has in fact become a permanent characteristic of politics in the archipelago, described by one expert as highly 'personalistic', where patronage reigns and 'clientelistic' relations determine political allegiance. The size and insularity of the country, as well as its recent history of single-party rule under the Liberation Movement of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP) help explain why politics are for the most part based on personal agendas, kinship and patronage rather than on programmatic or ideological platforms. That the three main political parties in the archipelago are offshoots of the MLSTP (the PCD-GR; the MLSTP-PSD and the ADI) helps explain the absence of a vigorous political debate.

Nevertheless, since the first democratic multi-party election on 20 January 1991, changes of government have occurred, without exception, peacefully and according to constitutional provisions.

As a result, the fact that members of a small political party with no Parliament representation, the Christian Democratic Front (FDC), were seen alongside the leaders of the coup, raised fears that this could in fact be more than just the result of frustration within the army. Speculation continued until the afternoon of the same day when Major Pereira finally addressed the nation introducing the coup leaders as the 'Military Junta for National Salvation'. He announced that the 'Junta' would *de facto* govern the country until such time as elections could be held or a government of national unity formed. To the surprise of many, the Major announced that the 'Junta' had a programme of government ready for the country. The coup suddenly took on a far more serious dimension than had been anticipated.

But there was further reason for concern. Formed in 1990, the FDC, an offshoot of the National Resistance Front of São Tomé e Príncipe (FRNSTP), has had no real political agenda, no party constitution and no declared political program. In fact, it has never gained more than 1.7% of the votes during any of the elections it took part in. Yet, the fact that elements of the FDC, including its leader, and several of the officers involved in the coup received military training with the (in) famous South African Defence Forces' 32 Battalion (a Special Forces battalion involved in insurgency operations in Namibia and Angola for the apartheid regime), was regarded with concern. The incorporation of a number of São Tomenses in the 32 Battalion dates back to 1988 when a splinter group of the FRNSTP attempted a seaborne invasion of the archipelago, then under the single-party rule of the MLSTP. The security forces detained 45 of those involved and imprisoned Santos sentencing him to 22 years, while those who escaped found their way to Walvis Bay in Namibia, having been incorporated in the 32 Battalion for their knowledge of Portuguese. All those involved were eventually pardoned

by former President Pinto da Costa and granted amnesty in 1990. The involvement of several of these soldiers in the 16 July 2003 coup, particularly in view of their tactical training, raised the spectre of possible foreign involvement and became, momentarily, front-page news.

From Abuja, and with little possibility but to follow the course of events from a distance, President Fradique de Menezes expressed grave concern over the situation and requested international support for a return to constitutional legality in the country. He famously attributed the actions of the 'Junta' to the lure of oil, referring to expected windfall that all in the archipelago anticipate will result from the recent discovery of deep-sea oil reserves. In a country of approximately 140,000 people, where economic stagnation, excessive reliance on one single export commodity (cocoa), corruption, poverty and underdevelopment have severely affected the livelihoods of the majority, the recent discovery of oil has created a climate of rising expectations amongst the entire social spectrum in the islands.

Both Angola and Nigeria, countries with close ties with São Tomé e Príncipe, reacted swiftly to President Menezes' unofficial requests for military assistance. Angolan President Eduardo dos Santos issued a strongly worded statement condemning the coup and called an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers to discuss possible military intervention in the islands. The government of Angola decided that it would render support if called-upon and the Angolan Armed Forces' Special Forces based in Cabo Ledo, south of Luanda, was placed on standby. However, President dos Santos decided that any action would be taken in consultation with both Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano, which currently chairs the African Union. From Abuja, President Obasanjo called on the coup leaders to return power to the democratically elected government and convinced Major Pereira to accept meeting with a Nigerian envoy.

At the same time, a storm of international protest gathered over the events as neighbour-

ing countries, the African Union, the United States, the United Nations and the European Union strongly condemned the coup. As current Chairman of the African Union, Chissano was quick to react, having flown to Nigeria for talks with President Obasanjo on possible ways out of the crisis, including political and military intervention. The Chairman of the African Union condemned the illegal overthrow of the government saying that 'this event constitutes a setback to the efforts of the African Union aimed at restoration of peace, stability and economic recovery on the whole continent'.

In São Tomé itself, several efforts were made to avoid an escalation of the crisis. The Portuguese Ambassador to São Tomé, Mario Santos, as well as the mission of the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP), under the leadership of Angolan Deputy Foreign Relations Minister Francisco Romão, were in permanent contact with the 'Junta'. This initial mediation effort, which saw the presence of diplomats from Angola, Brasil, Cabo Verde, Mozambique and Portugal, was later enlarged to include representatives of the African Union and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), as well as Nigeria and the United States. The leadership of the mediation team was given to Rodolphe Adada, the Foreign Minister of Congo-Brazzaville, a country that currently holds the presidency of ECCAS. This unusually large mediation team was able to secure an initial agenda with the 'Junta', which included provisions for the return of the President as well as a return to constitutional normality.

During the negotiations with the mediators, the leaders of the 'Junta' presented a list of demands specific to the armed forces. In addition they demanded that a solution be found to the problem of widespread poverty in the islands as well as to the issue of how to manage the exploration of the country's oil reserves. International pressure, particularly the impending threat of military intervention tilted the balance. On the 23 July, a memorandum of understanding was finally signed by the three parties involved: President Fradique de Menezes, Major Fernando Pereira and Rodolphe Adada, Foreign Minister of

Congo-Brazzaville. Under the deal, President Menezes and the National Assembly re-assumed all their prerogatives, while an amnesty for all involved in the coup and a commitment to deal with the most pressing problems within the Armed Forces was agreed to by Menezes. In addition, the Memorandum created an International Monitoring Commission, presided by the special representative of ECCAS; 3 members of the Armed Forces; 3 members of Parliament; 1 representative of the President of São Tomé, of the AU, of the CPLP, of Nigeria, of the US and of South Africa.

The relatively swift resolution of the crisis in São Tomé has paradoxically led to some competition between the various countries involved as to their role in the success of the mediation. No country has been more vocal than Nigeria in claiming responsibility for ending the bloodless coup. President Obasanjo has gone as far as claiming that 'you may now, no doubt, agree that the return of President Menezes to power, and the restoration of democracy in the DRSTP, was a remarkable achievement for Nigeria's foreign policy'. He went further and said 'it is worthy to note for obvious reasons of our pragmatic role and our core national interest in the ending of the DRSTP crisis, that the Economic Community of the Central African States (CEEAC) and Community of Lusophone Countries (CPLP) delegation left DRSTP unceremoniously, without specific commitments to that country'. Surely the role of Nigeria as an important part of the solution found for the crisis cannot be denied. However, as President Obasanjo clearly puts it, Nigerian national interest guided his efforts. This should not come as a surprise for it relates to the process of bidding for São Tomé's nine deep-sea oil blocks in the Joint Development Zone (JDZ), where Nigeria has 60% revenue sharing interest. The amount that will accrue to Nigeria from the ongoing bidding is estimated by sources close to Obasanjo at \$162 million. In these circumstances one would only hope that the International Monitoring Commission set up in the Memorandum of Understanding does its job.