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**São Tomé and Príncipe and COVID-19 :  
economic, political and social prospects within  
and out of the Gulf of Guinea region**

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**SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE AND COVID-19:  
ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PROSPECTS WITHIN  
AND OUT OF THE GULF OF GUINEA REGION**

**SÃO TOMÉ ET PRÍNCIPE ET COVID-19:  
PERSPECTIVES ÉCONOMIQUES, POLITIQUES ET SOCIALES DANS  
ET HORS DE LA RÉGION DU GOLFE DE GUINÉE**

**SÃO TOMÉ E PRÍNCIPE E O COVID-19:  
PERSPECTIVAS ECONÓMICAS, POLÍTICAS E SOCIAIS DENTRO  
E FORA DA REGIÃO DO GOLFO DA GUINÉ**

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**Abstract:** São Tomé and Príncipe, a Small developing island State (SDIS) was particularly affected by COVID-19 social, political and economic effects; the same effects reached, to a greater or lesser extent, the other States of the Gulf of Guinea region. How these effects reached, the other States of the Gulf of Guinea region. How will these States respond to these challenges? Will regional integration processes in Africa be important in trying to respond to the crisis? Or will the answer be found in extra-continental actors? In this article, we will try to find clues to the answers to these questions.

**Keywords:** São Tomé and Príncipe; Covid-19; Gulf of Guinea; African responses; Regional integration.

**Résumé:** São Tomé et Príncipe, un petit État insulaire en développement a été particulièrement touché par les effets sociaux, politiques et économiques du COVID-19; les mêmes effets ont atteint, dans une plus ou moins grande mesure, les autres États de la région du golfe de Guinée. Comment ces effets ont atteint, les autres États de la région du Golfe de Guinée. Comment ces États répondront-ils à ces défis? Les processus d'intégration régionale en Afrique seront-ils importants pour tenter de répondre à la crise? Ou la réponse se trouvera-t-elle dans des acteurs extra-continents? Dans cet article, nous allons essayer de trouver des indices pour répondre à ces questions.

**Mots-clés:** São Tomé et Príncipe; Covid-19; Golfe de Guinée; Réponses africaines; Intégration régionale.

**Resumo:** São Tomé e Príncipe, um pequeno Estado insular em desenvolvimento foi particularmente afectado pelos efeitos sociais, políticos e económicos da COVID-19; os mesmos efeitos afectaram, em maior ou menor grau, os outros Estados da região do

Golfo da Guiné. Como é que estes efeitos afectaram os outros Estados da região do Golfo da Guiné? Como é que estes Estados vão responder a estes desafios? Os processos de integração regional em África serão importantes para tentar responder à crise? Ou a resposta será dada por actores extra-continentais? Neste artigo, tentaremos encontrar pistas para responder a estas questões.

**Palavras-chave:** São Tomé e Príncipe; COVID-19; Golfo da Guiné; Respostas africanas; Integração regional.

## 1. Introduction

São Tomé and Príncipe, the small island-State in the Gulf of Guinea, achieved its independence from Portugal, the former colonial power, in 1975. Like many other former African colonies, it embarked on a single-party Marxist regime and an economy of central direction. This situation lasted until 1989, when there was a democratic transition and a liberalization of the economy, being one of the first African countries to do so. Since then, the country has been the scene of great government instability and mediocre economic performance, which make it extremely dependent on foreign aid. However, regarding just the political indicators, the country is quite well according to international rankings, being considered a free country. With regard to security/safety, it has also been a stage of stability, with no civil, ethnic or religious conflicts, which unfortunately plague a large part of African countries. Crime is low and the country is considered quite safe. However, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic will be very hard, both in social and economic terms, but also at the political level. Unfortunately, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to be exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, the global economic recession, the rise in raw materials and interest rates. The economic situation worsened to such an extent that, in December 2022, the Portuguese government had to provide emergency aid - direct support to the São Tomense budget - of fifteen million US dollars to help this Lusophone African country deal with the crisis. Inevitably, accusations of government incompetence and total inability to cope with the enormous economic and social problems arising from all these shocks arose. On a strictly political level, the current government of Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada - who enjoys an absolute majority in parliament and a President of the Republic of his own political colour - has shown

itself to be incapable of responding to the enormous challenges facing São Toméan society. The attempted coup d'état - in November 2022 - is also, although not exclusively, due to this situation, which is considered unbearable by large sections of the population. Some continental and regional responses are already on the ground, but will they be enough? São Tomé and Príncipe will need not only the support and cooperation of its African partners, but also of other extra-continental actors to face the challenges that lie ahead.

## **2. São Tomé & Príncipe characterization**

The archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe was discovered by Portuguese navigators João de Santarém and Pedro Escobar in 1470/71. The occupation and subsequent colonization lasted for 505 years until the independence proclaimed on 12 July 1975. São Tomé and Príncipe is the second smallest country in Africa (the smallest is the archipelago, located in the Indian Ocean, of the Seychelles), with a territorial dimension of about 1000 square kilometers, its population, according to data from the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), will be around 200 thousand people.

### **Brief political, economic and social characterization**

São Tomé and Príncipe, as we have already mentioned, became independent on July 12, 1975. It adopted a single-party, Marxist constitution and embraced a centrally-directed economy. The single party, the MLSTP (Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe) appointed Manuel Pinto da Costa as the first President of the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe. In 1989, São Tomé and Príncipe became the first Portuguese-speaking African country to announce the abolition of the one-party regime; on March 28, 1990, in a joint session, the MLSTP Central Committee and the People's National Assembly unanimously approved the democratic Constitution. Presidential and legislative elections were announced. These actually took place on January 20, 1991 (legisla-



tive) and March 3 of the same year (presidential); the MLSTP lost both elections and Miguel Trovoada was elected President of the Republic. The constitution of São Tomé, very based on the Portuguese constitution, establishes a system of semi-presidential government, where President and Prime Minister coexist. The president has broad powers, namely in terms of defense and foreign affairs, and it is also his duty to appoint the government and dismiss it; he has a five-year term and can be re-elected once. President Miguel Trovoada served two terms (1991-1996 and 1996-2001), in 2001 Fradique de Meneses was elected president and served his first term between 2001 and 2006 and his second term in 2006 - 2011. In 2011, President Manuel Pinto da Costa was elected, (this time democratically), and ended his term in 2016. In that year - and after the resignation of Manuel Pinto da Costa, who was running for his own succession - Evaristo Carvalho was elected and fulfilled his term in 2021. The incumbent President, Evaristo de Carvalho, didn't run for a possible second mandate and the presidential elections were held in July 2021. Nineteen presidential candidates were approved by the constitutional court. Since none of these candidates achieved an absolute majority, a second round took place with the two most voted candidates. However, the results were contested and there was a period of some confusion, with different and contradictory decisions by the Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Court. The result was the delay of the second turn of the elections. It was visible during this period the fragility and weakness of São Tomé institutions that were judging and producing decisions according to family and political ties and not by the impartiality of the rule of law. Finally, the second round of the elections took place, in September 2021, and the winner was Carlos Vila Nova. The elections were considered free and fair and were held with calm and stability. If in presidential terms the political system has functioned with stability, in spite of these recent events, the same cannot be said of the executive that has suffered great instability, with successive falls of governments and countless prime ministers who succeed each other in office (Monteiro & Pavia, 2021).

This quarter of a century of deepening and consolidating the democratic system has allowed São Tomé and Príncipe to be one of the few African countries best ranked in terms of freedom and political governance indices. Thus, according to the 2021 Freedom House ranking (Freedom House, 2021), the country had an overall score of 84 out of 100 nations considered *free*, while the Mo Ibrahim Foundation ranked São Tomé and Príncipe 12th out of 52 African countries (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020). The economy of São Tomé, like that of small island developing states, is strongly affected by the insular nature of the country, its fragility, limited resources and weak absorption capacity. As a result, the extreme vulnerability to external shocks and the heavy reliance on Official Development Assistance (ODA), which finances more than 90% of investment expenditure. The tertiary sector, largely informal, represents around 60% of GDP and employs 60% of the working population, while the primary and secondary sectors each contribute 20% of GDP. Since the advent of democracy, as it was already mentioned, the country has lived in a climate of permanent political instability, with successive falls of government, having known, in a period of twenty-seven years, sixteen governments. In economic terms the archipelago went through several phases; during the colonial period there was a phase of sugar plantation monoculture which later gave way to cocoa plantation monoculture, after independence there was a phase of centrally run economy that lasted from 1975 to 1991, then the economy was liberalized but continued extremely dependent on cocoa exports. More recently, the country entered the oil development phase, although nothing has yet been extracted from the Joint Exploration Zone, which belongs to São Tomé and Príncipe and Nigeria; however, prospecting appears to be quite promising and it will soon enter the phase of exploration. (Autoridade de Desenvolvimento Conjunto da Nigéria São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021). This will be the biggest challenge that the political and economic elites of São Tomé will face in the coming years: Getting any revenues from the oil wealth to be used well, that is, to be used in favor of the São Tomé people and its economic, social and cultural development.

In diplomatic terms, São Tomé, in the period following independence, established diplomatic relations with countries of the former Eastern bloc, with the People's Republic of China, with Cuba, with Portugal and other Portuguese-speaking states, with Nigeria, Gabon, France, etc; it also belongs to various international organizations including the UN (United Nations), CPLP (Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries), AU (African Union), CEEAC (Economic Community of Central African States), etc. There was, however, in 1997, on the initiative of the then president, Miguel Trovoada, a sudden turnaround in the relationship with the People's Republic of China as diplomatic relations were established with Taiwan. This situation led to the break of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. However, by the irony of fate, it will be his son, Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada, who in 2016 will break diplomatic relations with Taiwan and re-establish them again with Beijing, following promises of substantial investments, which would be made under the One Belt One Road project (Hsu, 2016).

### **3. The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects**

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern", and the pandemic situation was declared on the following March 11. The pandemic caused enormous social, political and economic disruptions worldwide, leading to a global recession, the biggest since the great depression of 1929. These negative effects were felt, in particular, in the most vulnerable countries, a situation in which that are found in a very significant part of African countries. The abrupt decrease in trade, economic and financial flows and the almost total interruption of international travel had a profound impact, particularly in Africa. It was not the first time that a disease had such sudden effects on the African continent; also, between 2014 and 2016 an epidemic was declared – limited to West Africa – Ebola, which had a very significant impact, namely in Guinea-Conakry, Sierra Leone and Liberia and, to a lesser extent, in Nigeria, Senegal and Mali. However, this time

it was a pandemic, thus affecting the entire world, and in a more profound manner and within an extended period of time. Africa was not prepared for a problem of this magnitude, nobody in the world was. A small example illustrates the situation well: at the beginning of the pandemic, in forty-one African states there were less than 2000 ventilators, compared to the 170,000 that existed in the United States of America alone (Zakaria, 2020, p. 152). In terms of social indicators, Covid-19 has significantly increased the at-risk-of-poverty rate, with the number of people living in extreme poverty likely to increase from 449 million (pre-covid) to 478 million in 2022 (What if africa stops receiving foreign aid? | european union institute for security studies, no date). Health systems – already weak – suddenly found themselves completely overwhelmed and unable to respond to the significant increase in cases; spending on health systems further burdened public budgets. Movement restrictions, confinements and the economic-financial impact also had significant effects on education, with the year 2020 being considered a “lost” year in many education systems. Many of these effects will last for years, and there is already talk of a long-Covid situation, which will drag on far beyond the disease itself. Also in political terms, the pandemic had a significant impact, with some governments taking advantage of the situation to impose more restrictive measures in terms of individual freedoms. There has also been a resurgence of coups d’état, or attempted coups d’état, in several African countries. Many leaders took advantage of the situation by trying to prolong their terms of office or postponing planned elections (The Covid-19 Pandemic in Africa, no date). As if all these consequences and negative effects were not enough, the disproportionate responses of Western countries to the appearance in South Africa of the Omicron variant further exacerbated the situation. The quarantine to which Southern Africa was subjected was completely exaggerated and disproportionate, causing even greater damage to the already compromised economic situation. Also, the delays in the supply of vaccines and their very poor distribution, did not help to make the response timelier and more effective. All these consequences could have been mitigated if there had been greater international concertation, less nationalist selfishness and, eventu-

ally, greater integration of African countries in order to enhance and optimize the responses and measures that were taken.

#### **4. African Regional and Continental responses**

Regional integration processes have advanced all over the world and Africa has been no exception. One could ask how the processes of regionalization and globalization that we have been witnessing are compatible. Apparently, they would be incompatible dynamics, but reality shows us exactly the opposite. In the process of globalization that we have witnessed, the main actors are companies, namely multinationals, which are committed to the liberalization of markets, trade, free movement of goods, services, capital and, to a lesser extent, labour. In regionalization processes, however, the States are the main actors, since they are the ones who sign the agreements that give rise to the regional blocks, which then have different phases, depending on the greater or lesser depth and intensity of integration. Economic theory (Medeiros, 2013) normally speaks of six phases in regional integration processes, namely: PTA (Preferential Trade Area), where States in a given geographic area agree to lower customs tariffs and customs obstacles to some classes of goods, that circulate among them, thus creating a regional “preference”. It is the most incipient phase of regional integration processes, but this is where it usually starts. The big difference compared to the next phase – the FTA (Free Trade Area) – lies in the fact that in the first case (PTA) there is what is called a positive list of products on which tariffs are to be reduced; while in the second case (FTA), there is a negative list on which duty is not reduced or eliminated. In both situations, member states maintain their own customs tariff vis-à-vis third countries. In the third phase, the Customs Union, the member states will adopt a common customs tariff vis-à-vis third countries, in addition to deepening the free movement of goods. In the fourth phase, the Common Market, we should already find the free movement of goods, services, capital and people, these are the well-known four freedoms. In the fifth stage, the Economic Union,

we will also find the adoption of common economic policies, such as trade policy, or agricultural policy, among others. Finally, in the sixth stage, in Economic and Monetary Union, we will also find the adoption of a common monetary policy and the adoption of a single currency. As is evident, in many concrete processes of regional integration, this taxonomy described may not occur exactly like this, with mixed processes that adopt separate measures, more in line with their own economic and political reality. This is the case of Africa with its eight regional integration processes and its continental integration process, the AfCFTA (African Continental Free Trade Area). Many of these RECs (Regional Economic Communities) have also adopted a political and security dynamic, by creating bodies and mechanisms for conflict management, monitoring of respect for human rights and clauses relating to the rule of law, as is the case with SADC (Southern African Development Community) or ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). In turn, the great organization of essentially political nature is the African Union, to which all African States belong.

São Tomé and Príncipe, obviously, belongs to the African Union and also to ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States) (ECCAS, no date), CEN-SAD (Community of Sahel-Saharan States) and AfCFTA. The main challenges to be overcome regarding the progress of these African, regional and continental integration processes, are found in the low level of intra-African trade, in the difficulties of connections between the different countries and in the obstacles to the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. This situation finds a historical explanation in colonialism, which precisely encouraged trade and investment flows between the metropolises and the colonies, often creating obstacles to intra-African trade. The transport infrastructures themselves – ports, railways, roads – were conceived in a logic of connection to the metropolis and, therefore, extra-continental. On the other hand, already after independence, many African countries embarked on the adoption of import substitution development processes, which are protectionist in nature, which discouraged trade and the free movement of production factors. Furthermore, the very political dynamics of



the Cold War encouraged barriers to trade and reorientations dictated by political motives and not by the optimization of free trade. The multiplication of regional economic communities itself can also have a positive effect on the countries that are part of this integration process, but it can condition trade with other African countries that are not part of it; trade creation effects apply here as positive data, but trade diversion effects also occur as negative data. This situation could be overcome if the AfCTA were to encompass and eventually replace all eight regional processes that now exist.

With regard specifically to the Covid-19 disease and its effects, the African continent was by no means the most affected region of the world. According to data from April 2022, there had been about 11,389,794 million cases reported, which caused a total of 251,874 deaths (Africa Cdc - Covid-19 Daily Updates, no date). The United States of America alone had about five times as many deaths. The reasons for this discrepancy in cases between Africa and other regions of the world could be due to several factors; from the outset, a possible faulty accounting of cases in Africa, which may be the most obvious answer, but we can also find answers in the climate and in the lower resistance and transmissibility of the virus at higher temperatures, or even in the fact that the majority of the African population is younger and therefore less likely to contract the disease. Whatever the causes, African authorities, both at continental and regional levels, have not stopped trying to find answers to this problem. Some of these initiatives were taken through the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) and also through The African Vaccine Acquisition Trust (AVAT) (COVID-19 Vaccines, 2021). For its part, COVAX, the vaccination element of the ACT-Accelerator program, led by the World Health Organization (WHO) and its international partners, works to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are accessible to both developed and developing countries (Covax, 2021). As we know, there were several criticisms of the way this mechanism worked, and the African continent was a victim of this malfunction resulting from nationalistic and selfish policies of the countries producing these vaccines. The current objective is to give production capacity to some African countries

(Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia), namely through the lifting of patents and the transfer of technology so that they are able to produce them locally (February 2022, 2022).

Several criticisms have been made, namely by African countries, of the current functioning of barriers imposed on the circulation of some goods – such as vaccines – due to issues related to intellectual property. Many of these barriers are imposed by TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) within the WTO (World Trade Organization). The delegations of India and South Africa have already proposed to the WTO a bid to temporarily waive intellectual property on COVID-related vaccines, treatments and products, but the European opposition has stalled the proposal (January 2022, 2022). This important issue was raised, by Africans, in the last EU-AU summit, held in Brussels, on 17-18 February 2022, but the answer was not entirely satisfactory. The priorities for Africa and its responses to the challenges it faces are Agenda 2063, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union Green Recovery Action Plan (EU-AU Summit 2022, 2022).

## **5. São Tomé & Príncipe prospects**

São Tomé and Príncipe was – in proportion to its size – particularly hit by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic ((Impacts of the covid-19 pandemic in sao tome and principe | green growth knowledge platform, no date). The growth prospects, before the pandemic, were particularly encouraging. The combined effects of the increase in tourist flows, together with the investment promises of some international partners, namely RPChina, after the government of São Tomé and Príncipe re-established diplomatic relations with Beijing, following the break with Taiwan, at the end of 2016, as it was mentioned earlier, opened new perspectives, mainly because under the Belt and Road Initiative (Huang & Steger, 2016), the construction of a new deep-water port and a significant improvement of communication routes and energy supply were planned. Furthermore, the prospects for the sale of oil exploration blocks – and



their eventual entry into operation – could make São Tomé and Príncipe a new oil producer in the Gulf of Guinea sub-region, with the consequent benefits that would ensue. However, such perspectives came to an end, largely as a result of the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic (São Tomé e Príncipe, no date). In terms of tourist flows, these almost dropped to zero, given the interruption of international travel; also, the promised investments – namely by Beijing – ended up being postponed, in some cases *sine die*, which caused the consternation of the São Toméans authorities. As far as oil exploration is concerned, it has been postponed because of the drop in the price of oil in international markets, due to the global economic slowdown. If to all this we add the social effects of the pandemic, namely the number of deaths and bedridden, together with the increase in public spending on health and social support, we have the “perfect storm” that caused, in 2020, a contraction of the GDP of 9.5%, which was São Tomé and Príncipe’s first recession since 1990 (São Tomé e Príncipe, no date).

As if all these effects were not enough, we also had, in 2021, a situation of intense rains that caused floods and destruction in several parts of the country (Chuvas deixam dois mortos, seis desaparecidos e muita destruição em São Tomé e Príncipe, no date). Many communication infrastructures, such as roads and bridges, were destroyed creating even more obstacles to economic revitalization. There has also been an increase in malaria cases in the country, which creates even more pressure on health systems. On the other hand, tourist flows may be affected by this situation. The two situations described can be framed in the consequences of climate change which, as is known, disproportionately affect SDIS. The case of irregular rainfall is notorious and also the increase in the prevalence of mosquitoes - due to the increase in rainfall and the lack of water treatment and fumigation of houses - makes the prevalence of malaria more acute. Although, in the latter situation, the abandonment of cooperation with Taiwan – São Tomé and Príncipe re-established diplomatic relations with Beijing at the end of 2016 – was pointed out by health officials as the main responsible for the increase in the prevalence of malaria, since the cooperation Taiwan

had achieved excellent results in this area (International Cooperation and Development Fund, 2015). To be completely correct, it has to be said that Beijing also has co-operation projects in this area, such as the Anti-Malaria Co-operation Agreement, which aims to eradicate this disease in the archipelago by 2025.

We should point out, however, that if the social and economic situation worsens – as unfortunately seems to be the case – the consequences could also worsen, namely of deep discouragement, disenchantment and lack of opportunities. This situation is reflected in the fact that São Tomé occupies the top positions of the emigrant population and in those who wish to do so. There is a growing “divorce” between the overwhelming majority of the population and a ruling class that is normally considered corrupt and incapable of solving the country’s pressing problems (Seibert, 2001). Therefore, the future seems to be always postponed for the vast majority of the population and especially for the young people who despair of this situation that seems irresolvable.

São Tomé and Príncipe is a case study regarding the combination of several indicators that are not normally present, at the same time, in a political society. What is usual is to find situations where if there is political instability, very large percentages of poverty and relatively high levels of corruption, as well as a general distrust of citizens towards political institutions, we also find high crime rates, generalized insecurity or violent conflicts, in addition to illiberal or even authoritarian political systems.

This is not the case in São Tomé and Príncipe. This small Island-State manages to reconcile lively competitive elections and is rated as “free” by Freedom House (2021), with high scores on both political rights and civil liberties. At the same time performs most strongly in Personal Freedom and Safety and Security (São Tomé and Príncipe (Ranked 98<sup>th</sup>), no date). However, in what concerns to corruption indicators, confidence in the institutions and prospects for a better life, São Tomeans are quite pessimistic. According to the most recent study of Afrobarometer, these are the key findings ((AD200: Weak public trust, perceptions of corruption mark São Tomé and Príncipe institutions | Afrobarometer, no date):

- “São Tomeans are remarkably mistrustful of state institutions and leaders: Not a single institution that the survey asked about is trusted even “somewhat” by a majority of citizens.
- A majority of São Tomeans see at least “some” officials in most key institutions as being corrupt. The police and judges/magistrates are most widely seen as involved in graft.
- A substantial proportion of citizens say they had to pay bribes to obtain public services during the previous year, especially to the courts and the police.
- Half (52%) of respondents who acknowledge paying a bribe during the previous year say they did not report the incident to the authorities.
- Half (50%) of respondents say people don’t report corruption to the authorities because they’re afraid of the consequences.
- Citizens who see state institutions as corrupt are less likely to trust those institutions.”

Elite level corruption has been illustrated by an ongoing case over allegedly illegal loan contracted by the former ADI government from the China International Fund (USD30 million) and the Kuwait Fund (USD17 million) ((São Tomé and Príncipe, Africa | country profile | crisis24, no date). The allegations were against Prime-Minister, Patrice Trovoada, who was the first head of government of the democratic period, to end a government legislature, without being overthrown before the end of the term (2014 – 2018). Despite winning the elections, in 2018, he did not get an absolute majority to form a government, being replaced by a coalition of several parties, led by the previous prime minister, Jorge Bom Jesus. Two months after these events, Patrice Trovoada left for Portugal, for reasons of “security”, only returned to the country to take part in the legislative elections of September 2022, which – this time - it won with an absolute majority. Other examples of situations of corruption and embezzlement are recurrent in São Tomé and Príncipe (Veiga, 2020). The distrust shown in the surveys finds support in the successive cases that affect the political and judicial class.

Finally, in political terms, the situation has also deteriorated. The social unrest in the last presidential elections (2021) was notorious, in which there were accusations of irregularities, requests for a recount of votes and the postponement of the second round. In the end, the result was accepted. However, there has been social and political unrest that has resulted in the creation of a new “Enough!” movement with populist, illiberal and anti-systemic characteristics, very much in line with similar movements in Europe (STP, 2022). In the last parliamentary elections, held as we have seen in September 2022, Patrice Trovoada ended up fulfilling his long-desired objective: he won the elections with an absolute majority of deputies and also has a close ally as President of the Republic. This fact has a possible explanation that also derives from the political, economic and social consequences of COVID-19. The previous coalition government, led by Jorge Bom Jesus, was unable to alleviate the harmful effects that COVID-19 brought to São Tomé and Príncipe. Voters accused this government of incompetence and laxity – in some cases even some insensitivity – in the face of the very serious needs affecting the country. When Patrice Trovoada returns, he is full of promises and offers, thus opening up new hope to São Tomé voters that things could improve. The electoral campaign thus took place in an environment in which Patrice Trovoada promised everything to everyone in the best populist style. As we saw, he ended up winning the elections with an absolute majority. It is hoped that the political situation will not deteriorate given that this has been the great added value of São Tomé and Príncipe, which maintains enviable indicators in the international rankings in this area; in fact, making a very positive contrast with many other countries in the sub-region of the Gulf of Guinea where it is inserted.

### **Recent worrying political developments**

On 25 November 2022, an assault took place on the headquarters of the São Tomé and Príncipe Armed Forces, with the aim of “revolutionising the constitutional order”, according to the archi-

pelago's Public Prosecutor's Office. The attempt took place in the early hours of that day, between 00.45 and 05.00 in the morning, and ended with the capture of four São Toméan citizens. The assailants were mercenaries from the former "Búfalo battalion", who died after being arrested by the military. Among them is Arlécio Costa, a former officer of the "Búfalo battalion" who was convicted in 2009 of attempting a coup d'état in 2003. The information was given to the press by the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Brigadier Armindo Silva.

These events caused considerable concern in the international community, as the situation was considered to be an attempted coup d'état, similar to what had been happening in several African countries. As we have already pointed out, São Tomé and Príncipe was thought to be a kind of "oasis" in the face of the instability and violent political changes that are recurrent in several African countries. Unfortunately, this episode ended up putting São Tomé and Príncipe in the statistics that report that in recent times there has been an "epidemic" - this time not of COVID-19 - but of coups d'état and attempted coups d'état in Africa.

This coup attempt is also said to have been against the near "monopoly" that the current prime minister, Patrice Trovoada, has on control of the executive and legislative powers, following the last legislative elections, as we have also indicated above. The situation is unprecedented in São Tomé and Príncipe, since there has never been a concentration of power of this magnitude in the democratic period.

The situation is now apparently calmer and, according to recent data from Freedom House (Freedom House, 2024), São Tomé and Príncipe occupies third place in Africa in terms of respect for political rights and civil liberties, coming in first place, Cape Verde, another Portuguese-speaking country. This phenomenon contrasts with what has happened in Africa in recent times where freedom and respect for the rule of law and constitutional norms have declined sharply in the last decade.

## 6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous effect on São Tomé and Príncipe. Its consequences will take years to overcome. São Tomé and Príncipe, already a SDIS, suffered from the effects of its small size, its geographical position and its weaknesses in terms of economic and social indicators. However, there were a number of very positive expectations in terms of tourist flows, international investments and the prospect that oil exploration could finally begin to bear fruit. As a country that does not have the problems of insecurity and instability that other neighbors suffer, in addition to enjoying a very positive position in international rankings for democracy and respect for human rights, everything seemed to be heading towards São Tomé and Príncipe could “take the leap” and continue on the path of development and improvement of socio-economic indicators. The pandemic ended up conditioning all this, and the country entered a deep recession, from which it will take some time to recover. Nevertheless, the recovery path has already started; tourist flows started to increase again, the price of the barrel of oil rose significantly on international markets, which makes the exploration of oil blocks in the São Tomé and Príncipe area, acquire new interest and a new priority. The regional integration processes to which São Tomé and Príncipe belongs, namely EC-CAS and, above all, the AfCFTA, constitute opportunities that the country should not miss out on. All projections point to significant growth in trade and investment flows. The geographical position of São Tomé and Príncipe must be strengthened and, instead of being a negative factor, it could become a commercial, logistical and financial outpost located in the center of one of the most dynamic sub-regions in Africa, the Gulf of Guinea. Also, extra-continental actors, such as the European Union, the United States, RPChina and other new actors in Africa, such as Turkey, Japan, India, Brazil, etc. should contribute in a way that São Tomé and Príncipe could quickly overcome this situation. We must have no doubt that the major boost in terms of investments, financing and trade will still come from extra-African actors, but other regional actors, such

as Angola and Nigeria, will also make a decisive contribution for greater intra-African integration. The intrinsic contribution that São Toméan civil society and political system can also make is of enormous importance if all these potentialities and objectives are to be fulfilled. Issues related to institutional and political stability necessarily mark the difference between countries that are “friendly” to investment and those that are not. As already mentioned, São Tomé and Príncipe has some positive factors, such as the absence of ethnic and/or religious divides and a positive image in terms of democratic indicators. Unfortunately, however, it also has great institutional and human weaknesses, some government instability and weak endogenous resources, which strongly condition all development strategies. Thus, maybe we need an investment in the most important part of the good governance: the participation, the empowerment of people with the political, but also social and economic rights and the inclusion of the ones who are systematically disenfranchised could be the trigger for a change? The main vulnerability indices in São Tomé could be the governance and institutional dimension, thus the importance of an investment in politics and a measure of that investment; after all, politics will impact on all the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and – we can add – in all aspects of society.

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