

The Bloodless Coup of July 16 in São Tomé e Príncipe*

São Tomé e Príncipe (STP) has not yet extracted a single drop of oil and is not expected to do so until 2007. Nonetheless, due to its potential oil wealth the recent military coup in the small island-republic has attracted a lot of international attention. Many foreign observers have little doubt that oil politics were the cause of the takeover. Some have suggested that it was only matter of time before competition for power ahead of the oil rush evolved into political instability. President Fradique de Menezes was caught by surprise by the coup in his country while he was at the 6th Rev. Leon Sullivan Summit in Abuja attended by thirteen African heads of state. The chairman of the summit, Rev. Andrew Young, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and mayor of Atlanta immediately blamed oil as the cause of the coup. He declared: « I don't know what happened in São Tomé, but I know nothing happened until someone announced there was plenty of oil »¹.

There is no doubt that the prospect of oil wealth has been in the minds of all islanders and has created great hopes. The licensing round for the first nine of the twenty-seven blocks located in the Joint Development Zone (JDZ) jointly managed with Nigeria was started in April and should be completed on October 18, 2003. Available seismic data suggests that the offshore blocks could hold between four and 11 billion barrels of reserves at depths of between 1,500 and 2,500 metres. The Joint Development Authority (JDA) set a minimum signature bonus of \$30 million for each block². As part of STP's 40% of the profits of the JDZ, in early 2004 the country might get about \$100 million in signature bonuses, twice the size of the annual national budget.

However, while oil has certainly played a role in the events, it cannot be considered to be the dominant cause. Such a view would neglect the role of other domestic factors in the genesis of the coup. This article draws attention to both the political developments in STP that formed the background of the coup of July 16, 2003 and the increasing regional and international importance of the tiny country as a future oil producer.

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1. <<http://www.allAfrica.com>>, July 16, 2003.
2. On this procedure see on the Internet <<http://www.nigeriasaotomejda.com>>

Political Instability

The first military coup in the country occurred in August 1995, many years before the potential off-shore oil deposits became known. On that occasion, one guard was shot dead when the rebels detained President Trovoada (1991-2001), the principal target of their action. The insurgents declared that they did not want to take power, but were acting in protest at the deteriorating conditions of the Armed Forces and widespread corruption. After one week of negotiations mediated by an Angolan delegation, constitutional order was restored³. Yet the principal cause of political instability in STP has not been the military, but competition for resources, political divergences and disputes over respective powers of the President and successive governments. As a result of these conflicts, the country has had eleven different governments since the transition to democracy in 1991. In the first two years of Fradique de Menezes' presidency alone the country has had five different governments, creating considerable political instability.

Following the early elections of March 2002, the three parties elected in the National Assembly, namely the MLSTP-PSD⁴ (24 seats), the party alliance MDFM/PCD⁵ (23) and the five-party coalition Uê Kedadji⁶ (8) decided to form the country's first Government of National Unity (GUN) to guarantee political stability in the forthcoming oil era. However, the relationship between President Menezes and Prime Minister Gabriel Costa became increasingly affected by continuous disputes over executive powers between the two office-holders. Consequently, as early as in September of that year, Menezes dismissed Costa's government. Another GUN headed by Maria das Neves (MLSTP-PSD) was appointed. At the same time, however, twenty members of parliament from the MDFM/PCD, the alliance supporting Menezes, cut their ties with the President leaving him with only three supporters in parliament.

Despite threats from Menezes to dissolve parliament, in December, fifty-two members of the National Assembly approved a revision of the Constitution curbing the executive powers of the President and strengthening the position of parliament. In January 2003, the President retaliated by dissolving parliament and calling for early elections. The crisis was settled after two days of negotiations between Menezes and parliament with the mediation of Prime Minister Das Neves and the President of the Supreme Court, Alice Carvalho. The National Assembly accepted that the amendments concerning the reduced executive powers of the President would only come into effect at the end of Menezes' mandate in 2006. The political stalemate had been resolved, at least for the time being. However, the government did not succeed in overcoming the economic hardships that

3. On the 1995 coup see G. SEIBERT, «São Tomé and Príncipe : Military coup as a lesson? », *Lusotopie*, 1996 : 71-80, and *Comrades, Clients and Cousins. Colonialism, Socialism and Democratization in São Tomé and Príncipe*, Leiden, CNWS Publications, 1999 : 214-225.

4. *Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe-Partido Social-democrata*, founded in 1972, from 1975-1991 the sole ruling party.

5. *Movimento Democrático Força de Mudança*, created in late 2001 by President Menezes. *Partido de Convergência Democrática*, constituted in 1990. Ruling party from 1991-1994.

6. Composed of four small parties and the *Acção Democrática Independente* (ADI), the party close to former president Trovoada. In August 2002, the five ADI deputies left the party coalition, leaving the Uê Kedadji with only three seats in parliament.

affected the majority of the people, while the few people linked to political power were demonstrating visible signs of increasing wealth.

On April 11, a group of citizens published an open letter signed by eighty personalities accusing the government and the President of having failed to improve the living conditions of the people. The letter also expressed concern over a lack of transparency in the country's oil negotiations⁷. It blamed the President for not having clarified the remittance of \$100,000 by Nigerian Chrome Oil Services⁸ to the Belgian bank account of his company CGI in February 2002 and of having granted his brother João de Menezes, who lives in Portugal, exclusive rights for the operation of casinos and the airport in São Tomé. In response to the open letter, on April 23, President Menezes held a controversial three-hour press conference in which he accused some of the signatories of the document of having been involved in corruption scandals themselves in the past. He explained that the payment of \$100,000 from the Nigerian oil company was a campaign donation for the MDFM and PCD parties during the previous general elections.

Between the two events, on April 17, a demonstration of young handicraft artists demanding their own selling centre escalated into spontaneous violent riots in front of the government's offices involving many people from the nearby markets. The windows of the government's offices were smashed and part of the building was ransacked by the crowd. The police were called, one man was shot dead, five others were injured by bullets and 35 demonstrators were detained, only to be released five days later. It was not the first anti-government demonstration since independence, but it was the first time that a demonstrator had been killed by the police. Consequently, many people lost confidence in Das Neves, who quickly blamed political opponents seeking to destabilize the country for having provoked the riots. President Menezes's credibility was again questioned in late April when he appointed 32-year old lawyer Adelino Pereira as the country's new attorney-general. The appointment was controversial since Pereira lacked professional experience and is son of a manager of Menezes's private company CGI. In the weeks preceding the putsch of July 16, there were increasing political tensions and signs of social discontent, while the government feared the outbreak of another popular uprising.

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7. On STP's controversial oil contracts see J. G. FRYNAS, G. WOOD & R. do M.S. Soares de OLIVEIRA, « Business and Politics in São Tomé e Príncipe: From Cocoa Monoculture to Petro-State », *Lusotopie* 2003 (Paris, Karthala) : 33-58 ; G. SEIBERT, « São Tomé e Príncipe : difíceis renegociações dos contratos de petróleo », *Africa Hoje* (Lisbon), January 2003, 173 ; K. B. ALSTADHEIM, « I strid med lutfattig land i Afrika », *Dagens Næringsliv* (Oslo), January 13-15, 2003 ; K. SILVERSTEIN, « A Major Stake in Tiny African Nation », *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2003 ; C. MADEIRA, « É o petróleo, estúpido ! », *O Independente* (Lisbon), June 13, 2003 ; A. Dias CORDEIRO, « Quem lucra com o ouro negro do arquipélago ? », *Público* (Lisbon), July 5, 2003.
 8. The owner of this company is the Nigerian business tycoon and politician Sir Emeka Offor, who is close to President Óbasanjo. Since February 2001 another company owned by Offor, Chrome Energy Corp., has controlled the Houston-based Environmental Remediation Holding Corporation (ERHC). This company has signed a controversial oil contract with STP that has been considered as prejudicial to the country's interests. Sir Emeka Offor also funded Menezes's own election campaign in July 2001.
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The Coup

Four days after the 28th anniversary of STP's Independence, early in the morning of July 16, 2003, soldiers seized key sites and government ministers in São Tomé. During the action, gunshots and exploding grenades were heard, but there were no casualties. When the action started, the rebels informed the Presidential Guard and the police and urged them not to intervene. The coup plotters occupied the ministries, television and radio stations, banks and airport. They did not take any action on the sister island of Príncipe. The insurgents took into custody the Prime Minister Maria das Neves, the Minister of Natural Resources, Rafael Branco, the Minister of Defence, Fernando Danquá and the President of the National Assembly, Dionísio Dias. Following problems of high blood pressure during her capture, Das Neves was admitted to the local hospital. There she was guarded by soldiers but could receive visitors freely. At 7.30 a.m., on the local radio, the rebels called the other ministers and the members of the National Assembly to report within two hours to the *Quartel do Morro*, the military barracks, and the headquarters of the National Police. The members of parliament were released the same afternoon, while the eleven detained ministers, among them three women, were kept in an air-conditioned room in the barracks⁹. There, the presidential legal advisor, Aíto Bonfim, and military advisor, Victor Monteiro, as well as the attorney-general Adelino Pereira were also kept in custody. However, they were all allowed to use their cell phones and stay in contact with their families, who could bring them meals. The rebels justified their detention as a precautionary measure to protect them from possible hostilities by the population.

The rebels claimed to have acted in response to the continuing social and economic crisis in the country. They accused the government of corruption, but they did not present concrete evidence of their accusations. In addition, they denounced the deplorable state of the barracks and the poor living conditions of the military. During a press conference, Pereira declared that it was inconceivable that the majority of the population was living below the poverty threshold while a small group of people enjoyed a luxurious life, laughing at the misfortune of the others. Therefore they had sent a SOS to the international community to pay attention to the misery in STP. He said that the coup intended to create the conditions for the organisation of free elections and announced they would constitute a Council of State to rule the country provisionally. However, he did not specify its composition. In the afternoon, the rebels announced the dissolution of all state organs and proclaimed a Junta of National Salvation, composed by Major Fernando Pereira, Alécio Costa and Sabino dos Santos, president and vice-president respectively of the small Christian Democratic Front (*Frente democrata cristã*, FDC) political party. In addition, they declared a curfew from 7 p.m to 6 a.m. and announced that the airport was closed. The plotters stressed that the coup had been bloodless and vouched for the physical safety of the detained politicians. About half of the country's four hundred or so soldiers were actively involved in the coup. The military leadership neither neither took

9. Besides the Ministers Branco and Danquá, the government members Claudina Cruz (Health), Júlia Silva (Agriculture), Arzemiro dos Prazeres (Trade, Industry and Tourism), José Viegas (Youth and Sports), Justino Veiga (Justice), Maria Tebús Torres (Finance) Damião Vaz d'Almeida (Labour) and Fernanda Pontífice (Education).

part in the action nor tried to resist. There was no resistance to the coup among the population either. Parts of the population publicly welcomed the coup, while others did not accept the action, but expressed their understanding of the motives put forward by the insurgents. All the political parties condemned the coup, but asked that the crisis be solved peacefully at the negotiation table. The city remained calm, the markets and shops remained open, and ordinary life went on.

The Coup Plotters

The coup was mounted by local soldiers and the small FDC and led by Major Fernando Pereira, known locally as Cobó. This 48-year officer is of mixed Cape Verdian¹⁰ and Angolar¹¹ descent and married to a social worker. He lives in a modest typical local Creole wooden house with his wife and the ten children he has fathered by several women. Pereira is the head of the office of the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces. He was trained in Angola, Cuba, the ex-Soviet Union, and Portugal. In 1994 he was head of the Military Training Centre. When he refused to train the recruits due to the miserable prevailing conditions, he was sentenced to one year without payment. In 1995 he was transferred for six months to Príncipe, where he commanded the twenty-man contingent of the Armed Forces. A few days prior to the August 1995 rebellion he returned to São Tomé. After the coup, he was reinstated in his former post and received his outstanding payments¹². In 2000, he headed the STP contingent in the regional manoeuvres in Gabon. He has also commanded Santomean contingents in joint operations of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (*Comunidade dos Países de Língua portuguesa*, CPLP). He became known locally when on April 24, 2002 he publicly denounced the poor living conditions in the barracks, the six-months arrears in wages and the obsolete army equipment. However, his complaints remained unanswered. The barracks continued without water and working toilets, while the luxurious mansions newly built by government people in the nearby *Campo de Milho* were immediately supplied with water. The government supplied the whole army with only two million litres of fuel per month. While ministers used to give their secretaries a private car, Major Pereira had to use an overcrowded mini-bus to go to work. At the same time, the children of ministers drove in government vehicles. Recruits received 80,000 dobras (ca. €8) per month, while officials earned 400,000 dobras (ca. €40). The government paid the army only 3,000 dobras (ca. €0.33) per soldier per day. There were no medicines available in the barracks. Under these conditions only the sons of the poor fulfilled their 18-month military service. On June 15, 2003 Pereira sent a letter with the military's demands to both President Menezes and Prime Minister Maria das Neves. Apparently he did not receive the reply he wanted. However, the plotters organised in the FDC party knew about his grievances.

10. During the first half of the 20th century, thousands of Cape Verdians were taken to STP as contract workers for the coffee and cacao plantations.

11. The Angolares are descendants of a former maroon community in the south of São Tomé island.

12. Personal communication from Major Fernando Pereira, São Tomé, September 14, 2003.

The FDC was founded in late 1990 by former members of the *Frente de Resistência Nacional de São Tomé and Príncipe* (FRNSTP). The FRNSTP had in turn been founded in 1981 by exiled opponents of the socialist policies of the ruling MLSTP and President Manuel Pinto da Costa (1975-1991), who had both been in power since independence. The FRNSTP had about a hundred armed men and was based in Libreville where it enjoyed the support of President Omar Bongo, who wanted to avoid the integration of STP into the progressive alliance of Algiers, Conakry, Brazzaville and Luanda. Following the first signs of political liberalisation in STP, Bongo made peace with the MLSTP and expelled the FRNSTP in 1986. Subsequently, the entire group sought refuge in Kribi, Cameroon. Due to internal quarrels, seventy-six men, twenty-three of whom were descendants of Cape Verdian contract workers, left for the then South African enclave of Walvis Bay in Namibia where they were detained as illegal immigrants. After one year of detention, the South African authorities gave them the choice between either continuing in prison or joining the infamous 32nd Buffalo Battalion that had been formed from members of the defeated *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (FNLA) in 1975. The group joined the Buffalo Battalion and was trained in the Caprivi Strip in Namibia. The two thousand-man strong Buffalo Battalion fought in Angola with the *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA) in the civil war and against the African National Congress (ANC) and SWAPO (South West African People's Organization) of Namibia. Altogether fifty-three Santomeans fought in the Buffalo Battalion and nine of them died in action. Due to the services rendered to the Apartheid regime they had all received South African citizenship¹³.

On March 8, 1988 the group of the FRNSTP that had remained in Cameroon landed with an invasion force of forty-four men in São Tomé in an attempt to overthrow the regime of Pinto da Costa and seize power themselves. The almost unarmed invaders, who came with canoes from Cameroon, were easily overwhelmed by the security forces and detained. Three participants in this amazingly amateurish operation were killed during the action. In August 1989, the invaders were tried by the local court and sentenced to prison sentences ranging from two to twenty years. Together with 15 other defendants, Sabino dos Santos was sentenced to 16 years of prison¹⁴. It is an irony of history that the court was presided over by Dionísio Dias, the President of the National Assembly, who was detained by the coup plotters. By April 1990 all the prisoners were pardoned by President Pinto da Costa and released from prison. In December of the same year, they founded the FDC. From the onset, consecutive party leaders were involved in various corruption scandals concerning the embezzlement of party funds. The FDC has never been able to formulate policy options, and has never had a functioning party machine, let alone an appreciable following. In fact, the party has appeared only during elections, without, however, a great deal of success. In the first democratic elections of 1991 the FDC obtained its best result with 1.5% of the votes. In the 1994 and 1998 legislative elections the party gained only 0.6% and 0.5% (156) of the votes respectively. The party did not participate in the legislative elections of 2002.

13. Personal communication from Alércio Costa, São Tomé, September 11, 2003.

14. *Revolução* (São Tomé), September, 26, 1989.

After the dissolution of the Buffalo Battalion in 1993, more than twenty of its Santomean members remained with their families in South Africa, while Alécio Costa and a few others fought in the Executive Outcomes private army in Angola, Sierra Leone and Congo. Following the outlawing of Executive Outcomes in 1998, they returned to São Tomé and joined their old friends, who had organised themselves to form the FDC in the meantime. They were all strongly convinced that somebody should compensate them for the many years they had suffered and fought abroad. They believed that the government should guarantee what they called their social reintegration in STP. During the government of Prime Minister Raul Bragança Neto (1996-1998), the FDC demanded \$130,000 from the government as compensation for one of the boats confiscated during the invasion of 1988. The boat had allegedly gone on to be used by the local army for ten years. Bragança Neto, Defence Minister at the time of the invasion, accepted to pay \$50,000¹⁵.

In June 2003, Prime Minister Maria das Neves accused Sabino dos Santos and his group of having received constant support from successive governments without having worked. She claimed that they had demanded a medium-sized farm and \$70,000 in cash from her government. The Prime Minister accused Dos Santos of laziness, declaring that her government would no longer provide any support to him and his group. Finally, she claimed that Dos Santos had made death threats to her. Her announcement ceasing any payments to the FDC was a reaction to earlier declarations by Dos Santos who, during a press conference, had asked for the dismissal of Das Neves. He had also accused the prime minister of having awarded an order for new equipment for the TV station to a private businessman without any public tender. He criticised the government for having purchased five brand-new cars for the parliamentary leaders, while the TV station had only one single old vehicle. Finally he announced that on July 10th, his party would organize a peaceful demonstration against the government in protest against the increasing costs of living, low salaries and acts of corruption. He said the demonstration would end in front of the Prime Minister's office and the demonstrators would remain there until the announcement of the dismissal of Das Neves¹⁶. The announcement of the demonstration worried the government, who feared that it could trigger violent riots similar to those of April 17th. Besides, the men of the FDC were feared since they had had military training and many had combat experience. At the request of President Menezes, FDC leader Arlécio Costa postponed the demonstration to July 24th shortly before the stipulated date. He justified the postponement by the commemoration of national independence on July 12th and the participation of President Menezes in the summit of the African Union (AU) in Maputo two days before.

In fact, by that point the coup had already been in preparation for a long time. Once the coup was over, Alécio Costa revealed that the preparations for the action had already started eight months earlier¹⁷. The ex-mercenaries called some of their friends in South Africa to join them for the action. Finally, sixteen former Buffalo fighters were in São Tomé altogether to participate in the putsch. Knowing the grievances of the military, they let Major Pereira in on their plot. They told him that they would fight the army

15. *Diário Têla Nón* (São Tomé), July 8, 2003.

16. *Ibid.*, June 26, 2003.

17. *Ibid.*, August 8, 2003.

if the military would not join them. Pereira decided to take part in the action, since he wanted to avoid bloodshed and knew that the experienced ex-Buffalo members had an advantage against the poorly-trained and equipped soldiers. Pereira's condition was that the coup must be bloodless and disciplined. He was the only member of the military who knew about the coup plans¹⁸. Due to the FDC anti-government agitation, rumours emerged that something might happen, however. Two weeks prior to the action, members of the National Assembly were informed of frequent meetings between Pereira and the FDC members. The parliamentarians invited both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence and asked them about a possible action. However, the Defence Minister denied the possibility of any troubles. Due to the threats of the FDC, President Menezes called an extraordinary meeting of the National Defence Council to discuss the social-political situation in the country before he left for the AU-summit in Maputo. Two days before the coup, Menezes received Alércio Costa and Sabino dos Santos in his private residence *Quinta de Favorita*. The coup plotters had postponed their action twice because Menezes had travelled abroad. When he left the country again on July 15th, they decided not to wait any longer.

The Negotiations

On the second day of the coup, Sabino dos Santos said that the names of the members of the junta would be announced and promised the opening of the air port and port the next day. Meanwhile, the American ambassador to Gabon, Frederick Moorefield, who was on a visit to São Tomé when the coup occurred, and the resident Portuguese ambassador Mário de Jesus Santos, met the rebel leaders who justified their action and guaranteed the protection to the foreigners of in the country. The rebels demonstrated their readiness to resolve the crisis by dialogue and accepted international mediation. They talked with representatives of local political parties and spoke by phone with deposed President Menezes. In the evening, the junta called the senior civil servants to the barracks and explained the motives of their action to them. The same day, in Abuja President Menezes condemned the coup in an interview with the BBC, demanded the return to democratic legality and appealed to the world to help in the efforts to re-establish the constitutional order in his country quickly. He declared that after twelve years of democracy, there was no place for such rebellions and observed that the military had sworn an oath to defend the democratic institutions and the Constitution. He also stressed that he rejected a foreign military intervention. Finally, he confirmed that he had received a list of demands from the military before the coup and had received Alércio Costa and Sabino dos Santos in his private residence two days before the uprising, and therefore had not expected such action.

When the coup started, President Fradique de Menezes was in Abuja at the 6th Rev. Leon Sullivan Summit. Foreign Minister « Nando » Rita was in Portugal to attend the 8th annual meeting of the foreign ministers of the CPLP in Coimbra from August 17-18. Not unexpectedly, the meeting was

18. Personal communication from Major Fernando Pereira, São Tomé, September 14, 2003.

dominated by the events in the archipelago. The CPLP condemned the action and demanded the restoration of constitutional order in STP. The coup was quickly condemned by Nigeria, South Africa, Portugal, France, United States, the United Nations and the AU. The United States quickly announced a review of its aid to STP. The World Bank declared it would suspend any assistance to the country, as long as the legitimacy of the political institutions was not clarified. The Nigerian President Olesegun Obasanjo condemned the action and urged the « military adventurers » to hand back power. The Nigerian government declared itself ready to react to any threat to its interests in the Gulf of Guinea. In Abuja, Obasanjo and Mozambican President, Joaquim Chissano, who is also chairman of the AU, reportedly discussed the possibility of military intervention to reinstate the legitimate government in STP, while the AU declared its support for any action by the African neighbours of STP aimed at the restoration of constitutional order¹⁹. A few days prior to the coup, the AU-summit in Maputo had decided not to recognise regimes resulting from a coup.

The former Santomean presidents Miguel Trovoada and Manuel Pinto da Costa also condemned the coup and appealed to resolve the crisis by dialogue. The latter, who was in Lisbon when the coup occurred, said that the action had not come as a surprise since the country had been in constant crisis. He attributed part of the responsibility to President Menezes whom he described as a businessman rather than an experienced politician. He stressed that a military intervention by Nigeria would be the worst stupid reaction possible, complicating the situation even more²⁰. Meanwhile, in Abuja, President Menezes denied Nigerian intentions to intervene militarily in his country²¹. The European Union officially condemned the coup only two days after the beginning of the action. The rebels considered the condemnation of their action as hypocrisy. They said that there was no true democracy in STP since elections were decided by vote buying.

Following the condemnation of the coup, the international community increased the pressures on the rebels to reinstate constitutional order. At the same time, the junta feared a military intervention. Rumours circulated that a French frigate was approaching São Tomé²². President Obasanjo had spoken by phone with Alércio Costa on the first day of the coup. Obasanjo told him that if he was irrational, they in Abuja could also become irrational²³. The foreign ministers of the CPLP in Coimbra also spoke to the rebels by phone²⁴. Consequently, the junta refrained from their avowed intention of constituting a Council of State to transitionally govern the country. Apparently, under the circumstances, none of the local politicians who had been approached by the insurgents was available to participate in such a body. Without support from any neighbouring country the rebels had become completely isolated. It became clear that the crisis would be solved by international mediation within a few days. On TV the junta accepted to negotiate the return of President Menezes, but rejected the return of the government which it accused of corruption and incompetence.

19. RDP July 17, 2003

20. *Público* (Lisbon), July 18, 2003.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Personal communication from Major Fernando Perreira, São Tomé, September 14, 2003.

23. According to President Menezes in an interview with the BBC, July 16, 2003.

24. *Diário de Notícias* (Lisbon), July 18, 2003.

The airport reopened on the third day when a plane of the Portuguese Air Luxor arrived to pick up the 81 foreign tourists retained by the coup. Only about half of them decided to leave the country. The same day, the curfew was lifted and the civil servants returned to work and the public services reopened after the junta had authorised the return to normality²⁵. The junta and the ambassadors of Portugal and the USA signed a memorandum on the terms of mediation for the return of President Menezes and a solution for the crisis. The document asked for the mediation by the CPLP, USA and Nigeria and guarantees from the international community to monitor the accomplishment of the agreement reached. Later that day, the rebels released the president's legal advisor and the president of the National Assembly, as well the three female ministers. However, soldiers kept guard in front of their residences.

The International Mediation

Eight countries altogether were actively involved in the negotiations with the insurgents. It was not only STP's possible future oil wealth that attracted so much attention. The coup was also an opportunity to apply Article 4 of the Constitutive Act of the AU forbidding seizure of power by extra-constitutional means. Furthermore, many African governments were probably concerned with the justifications of the rebels, such as bad government and an extremely unequal distribution of wealth, since their countries face similar problems. The CPLP appointed a delegation headed by Osvaldo Serra Van Dunem, the Angolan Minister of the Interior, which included representatives from Mozambique and Brazil and the Portuguese ambassador to São Tomé. The CPLP went to Brazzaville to meet with the delegation of the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC) that included the foreign ministers of Congo and Gabon, Rodolphe Adada and Jean Ping respectively, as well as the Angolan secretary-general of the CEEAC, Nelson Cosme.

On the 19th, the five-member delegation headed by Jean Ping arrived in São Tomé in an official Angolan airplane. Prior to their arrival, they had met with Omar Bongo in Libreville. A Nigerian delegation had arrived shortly beforehand, while the US ambassador was still in country. The rebels asked the mediators to include a South African delegation in their mission to discuss the demands of the members of the former Buffalo Battalion. Pretoria accepted, since the ex-mercenaries also had South African nationality. The next day, a first three-hour meeting between the delegation of the rebels, composed of seven soldiers and three members of the FDC, and the mediators took place in the local representation of the UNDP. Rodolphe Adada, who arrived later that day, headed the team of the mediators since Congo had assumed the rotating presidency of the CEEAC. During the night, the rebels released the remaining ministers from custody in the barracks, but did not allow them to assume their functions or to influence the international community in order not to endanger the impartiality of the mediation²⁶. On the 22nd, the South African delegation

25. *Público* (Lisbon), July 19, 2003.

26. *Ibid.*, July 22, 2003.

arrived in São Tomé. In the morning the negotiations were broken off after only two hours. An attempt to reconcile the rebels' demands with those of the political parties had failed. The parties did not agree to questions relating to the restoring of the constitutional institutions and the coming into force of the new Constitution curbing presidential powers.

Shortly afterwards, Major Pereira read a communiqué on the radio explaining the reasons for the coup again. He denied that the military wanted to take political power and said that they had acted on behalf of the silent powerless citizens due to the misery and degradation in the country. They had hoped that the democratic mechanisms would work, however, they had not and therefore the military could not wait any longer. He declared that they had felt obliged to act and had done so because they believed in democracy and in a « government on behalf of the people, with the people and for the people ». Pereira finished by saying that the future would not have forgiven them if they had failed to act and guaranteed that all agreements reached were in defence of the citizens. Subsequently, the coup leader prohibited any popular manifestations either in favour of, or against, the rebels. In the following negotiating round the junta dropped its demand for the formation of a transitional government and discussed the terms of the final agreement. As the return of Menezes was no longer in question, the same day the President left Abuja on a Gabonese plane for Libreville where he waited for the signature of the final document.

On the afternoon of the next day, Van Dúnem, Ping and Adada flew to Libreville to present President Menezes the agreement reached with the rebels. When Van Dúnem returned to São Tomé he could not predict when President Menezes would return. Then, surprisingly, a few hours later, at 5.40 p.m. Menezes arrived in São Tomé in the company of his protector President Obasanjo in the Nigerian presidential plane. Two other Nigerian planes brought Obasanjo's presidential guard, Nigerian officials and journalists. Reportedly, Menezes wanted to return alone, but Obasanjo had rushed to Libreville and insisted on accompanying him. His presence underlined Nigeria's interest in the return of Menezes to power. Furthermore, the Nigerian president was eager to appear as a defender of democracy in Africa. The two presidents first went to the Presidential Palace and subsequently they appeared together in the headquarters of the UNDP where the crisis was ended by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that reinstated constitutional order. The document was signed by President Menezes, Major Pereira and Rodolphe Adada, head of the mediation group. In the night the reposed National Assembly unanimously ratified the Memorandum and approved a law providing for a general amnesty of all coup plotters.

The Memorandum

The document, hastily compiled and rather vague, contained four topics concerning the return of the president, the return to constitutional order, mechanisms of monitoring the agreement and national problems. The terms of the first section set the conditions for the return of the President with the promulgation of the law on the general amnesty for all the military and civilians involved in the coup, compliance with the Constitution and the

principle of the division of powers, as well as the organisation of a National Forum for a hearing of the political parties and civil society within three months. Other conditions were the prohibition of the presence of foreign troops outside the constitutional framework and the analysis of the possibility of appointing a new government to guarantee the safeguard of transparency, credibility and morality in the normalisation process.

As part of the restoration of constitutional order, parliament was to approve the amnesty law, respect the Constitution and analyse the possible formation of a new government. In addition, the National Assembly had to approve a law on the use of oil resources and the management of the oil sector. The government was asked to accept the decisions taken by the reinstated constitutional powers. Other terms obliged the judiciary to respect the state organs, not to resort to illegal actions subverting the normal terms of the constitution and fully apply the existing laws against violations of the terms of the agreement.

The Memorandum created a 13-member « Monitoring Commission of the Agreement of July 23, 2003 » presided over by the special representative of the president of the CEEAC to guarantee the application and respect of the terms of the Memorandum²⁷. Furthermore, the Monitoring Commission was entrusted with facilitating the mobilisation of financial resources from the international community to secure the country's economic and social stability. The duration of the mandate of this mechanism would be defined in a joint agreement by the parties involved.

The fourth heading on the national problems included the scrupulous fulfilment of the memorandum, the sound and transparent management of public funds and respect for the existing financial rules, a general reform of the Armed Forces and the creation of mechanisms to deal with questions concerning the reconciliation. Finally, two terms referred to the resolution of both the problems and the demands of the Armed Forces and the paramilitary forces and the members of the ex-Buffalo Battalion by the application of measures permitting their full integration into national life. Two attached annexes contained details of these demands. They were not made public since they contained sensitive information.

With regard to the Armed Forces, the annexes provided for the indispensable financial and logistic means to be made available to guarantee the proper functioning of the institution, including food supplies, repair of armoured vehicles and the concession of financial autonomy. The Supreme Command of the Army was to be kept informed on the country's development policies, particularly the oil dossier. The government had to readjust the payments and provide the military with free medical assistance. In addition, the government had to allocate financial means for the acquisition of uniforms and boots, mattresses and bed-sheets, kitchen utensils, military equipment and vehicles, as well as for the repair of the barracks, and other military infrastructure. Concerning the former South African soldiers, the agreement included the repatriation of the bodies of the nine Santomeans who died in combat and the repatriation of the twenty-three ex-soldiers and their families who still resided in South Africa. The South African government is expected to assist the STP government to solve

27. The Commission includes three members each of the Armed Forces of STP and the National Assembly, one special representative each of the head of state, the CPLP, the AU, the Nigerian President, the USA and South Africa.

the social-economic problems of the former fighters and provide the local army with training and military equipment.

The Memorandum did not include initial demands for the formation of a transitional government or early elections. The appointment of a new government was only a possibility, but not an order. The prohibition of the presence of foreign troops in the archipelago reflected concerns that Menezes might have such intentions. The approval of a law on the use of oil resources by parliament was not a genuine result of the negotiations. Long before the IMF had asked the government to elaborate such a law. In a letter of September 30, 2002 to the IMF, the government promised to submit the respective bill to parliament until September 30, 2003²⁸. Already prior to the coup, the National Assembly had announced the intention to draw up a new law on the sound management of oil income. More remarkable was the fact that the agreement gave the Supreme Command access to information about the oil sector. This provision reflected both the military's concerns regarding the lack of transparency with regard to the oil sector and their intention to participate in the expected oil rush. The agreement essentially safeguarded the corporate demands of the military and the members of the ex- Buffalo Battalion alike. In contrast, political demands were either absent or remained rather vague. The coup plotters expected the international Monitoring Commission to oblige the government and the president to implement the provisions of the agreement fully. They hoped that the multinational Commission could prevent the government from disregarding the Memorandum, as happened with the one that ended the first coup in 1995.

The Aftermath of the Coup

Two days after his return to power, President Menezes addressed the nation. He declared that the coup represented a dark episode in local democracy with incommensurably serious consequences for the country's difficult social-economic situation. Menezes called the coup condemnable and unjustified, but asked people to avoid any manifestation of hatred and to overcome the consequences of the coup that had shaken the country with courage and tolerance. The same day, Rafael Branco, the Minister for Natural Resources, resigned on the grounds that his own party, the MLSTP-PSD, had already negotiated his succession while he was in detention. Subsequently, the Ministers for Health and for Defence, Claudina Cruz and Fernando Danquá, also resigned. Finally, on August 1st, Prime Minister Maria das Neves presented her letter of resignation to the President. She declared that she wanted to give her country the opportunity to search for alternatives.

Notwithstanding, on August 4th, President Menezes reappointed Das Neves as Prime Minister, arguing that the formation of a new government was not an imperative of the Memorandum, but only a possibility. Besides, important pending processes such as the licensing round of the oil blocks in the JDZ with Nigeria and the debt forgiveness by the Bretton Woods institutions required for a continuity of governance, he claimed. The

28. INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND, São Tomé and Príncipe - *Letter of Intent and Technical Memorandum of Understanding*, Washington, DC, September 30, 2002.

MLSTP/PSD leadership welcomed Menezes's decision, but expected that Das Neves would reshuffle the government. Finally, her party with its twenty-four members in parliament reached an agreement with the five independent deputies of the ADI and the three parliamentarians close to Menezes to support the new government. The PCD²⁹ and Uê Kedadji remained in the opposition. On August 9th, the new thirteen-member government that included seven new office-holders took office. The new Minister for Natural Resources was Tomé Vera Cruz, the chairman of Menezes' MDFM party. Two other members of the president's party held the of Foreign Affairs and Justice portfolios, while the Defence Minister was also considered a confidant of Menezes. While the MDFM was overrepresented in the government, the ADI had two ministers in the new executive.

The coup plotters viewed the reappointment of Das Neves as a violation of the Memorandum. Three days after he had confirmed Das Neves in office, Menezes claimed that the members of the ex-Buffalo Battalion had prepared another coup. However, Alércio Costa denied such allegations during a meeting with the President and in the presence of the ambassadors of Congo, Gabon, Nigeria, South Africa and the USA. At the end of the meeting, Menezes demonstratively embraced Alércio Costa to mark the end of the conflict. Despite this, in late September, FDC vice-president Sabino dos Santos publicly announced his party's intention to defeat Menezes in the presidential elections of 2006³⁰.

Following its inauguration, the new government announced the implementation of an Emergency Action Plan worth \$22 million and asked the international community for funding. The Plan was aimed at meeting the most urgent necessities, particularly in the health, education and defence sectors, in the remaining four months of the year. In comparison with the \$50 million of the annual budget the volume of the Emergency Plan seemed rather exaggerated. Critical observers have questioned the government's ability to implement the short-term Plan properly. They have considered the initiative as a government manoeuvre to capitalize on the coup by requesting more external funds³¹. Pretoria started the implementation of the Memorandum in August, when the first South African shipment with non-military equipment for the local Armed Forces arrived. In September, President Menezes announced the reform of the Armed Forces and appointed a new commander. At the same time, the military complained that the government had made promises, but not yet taken any concrete measures to meet their demands. STP's seven members of the Monitoring Commission were not appointed before the end of that month. However, a date for the Commission's first meeting had not yet been fixed.

On the same day that Das Neves was confirmed in office, President Obasanjo wrote in a six-page letter to the Senate that there was an urgent need for Nigeria to take measures to consolidate the security of Menezes. Nigeria and STP had a pending military agreement that was yet to be signed, he explained. Obasanjo announced his intention of hastening the process of signing the agreement in order to put the mutual security and core national interest of both countries on an even keel. He intended to

29. Represented by twenty members of the parliamentary group of the MDFM/PCD.

30. *O Parvo*, September 24, 2003.

31. *Público* (Lisbon), September 9, 2003.

pursue this with President Menezes³². In São Tomé, Foreign Minister « Nando » Rita denied any negotiations of a military treaty with Nigeria. In late August, the Nigerian ambassador in São Tomé declared that his country was ready to support the local army, but did not intend to sign any military pact with STP.

* * *

The principal cause of the coup of July 16, 2003 was not the grievances of the army, but the corporate demands of the FDC, a political grouping created by members of the armed opposition to the socialist regime of the MLSTP in the 1980s. Many of these men had also fought in the infamous Buffalo Battalion of the South African apartheid regime before they returned to STP. Back home, they found the same people in power they had fought against many years before. While the electoral attempts of the FDC to gain access to political power resulted in complete failure, the group's leadership remained convinced that the local government had an obligation to compensate them materially for the years they were forced to spend abroad. They pressured consecutive governments to provide for what they called reintegration in local society. When the government did not meet their demands accordingly, they began plotting a coup.

They found a willing partner for their action in Major Fernando Pereira, who had repeatedly denounced the deplorable state of the Armed Forces, without success. Thanks to military aid from the then socialist countries during the first fifteen years after independence, the situation of the local army was relatively good. In addition, the one-party regime paid attention to the military since it needed their loyalty. After the transition to democracy, the situation of the army deteriorated considerably. Foreign aid for the Armed Forces dropped drastically, while the democratically-legitimated governments neglected the military since they did not feel dependent on their protection. The resulting deplorable state of the army triggered the first military coup of August 1995. This coup was ended after one week of negotiations mediated by one single country, Angola. At the time, a Memorandum of Understanding stipulated that the government would improve the conditions of the Armed Forces. However, most of the promises of the agreement were not fulfilled. Instead, the poor conditions of the army remained largely unchanged and the military continued feeling neglected by consecutive governments. At the same time, they saw that the people in power were able to increase their private wealth by corruption. When the government did not listen to the complaints and demands of the military formally submitted by Major Pereira, he became receptive to the plans of the former mercenaries. He became the leader of the action, since the coup plotters knew that he enjoyed great authority among the ordinary soldiers. When he gave orders to seize government buildings and capture the ministers the soldiers obeyed, nobody resisted. Unlike in 1995, when President Trovoada was the principal target of the insurgents, this time it was the government.

32. Letter of President Obasanjo to Senate President Adolphus Wabara entitled « The Coup d'état in São Tomé and the Restoration of Democracy », August 4, 2003, unpublished.

It was a coup *sui generis* since nobody was hurt during the action, normal life went on and the detained government members were treated well. While in custody in the barracks they could use their cell phones and receive their family members and other visitors. Also remarkable was the active involvement of a political party, another difference with 1995. The coup plotters declared immediately that their intention was not to take power themselves. Nonetheless, the takeover was fiercely condemned by the international community. Apparently, the coup leaders had miscalculated the massive pressures brought to bear by Nigeria and other African countries. They seriously feared foreign military intervention. Consequently, they quickly dropped intentions to form a Council of State and accepted the return of President Menezes. During the negotiations the rebels also refrained from the initial demands for a transitional government and early elections. In the end, they only obtained a general amnesty and promises to meet their corporate demands.

The country's future oil wealth cannot be considered the principal cause of the coup. However, it probably influenced the timing of the coup. The rebels wanted to denounce the unequal distribution of the country's resources before the oil revenue arrived. They were aware of the possibility that, after the arrival of the first petrodollars, the government would be able to buy off any potential opposition. Some African governments rejected the coup in STP not primarily as a threat of democracy, but because they fear similar actions in their own countries. But the crucial factor for the involvement of three inter-state organisations and eight countries in the negotiation process was oil. The small country's status as a future oil producing country has inevitably increased its international and regional importance. Thanks to the excessive protagonism of President Obasanjo in the process, Nigeria succeeded in increasing its influence in STP, a process started with the creation of the JDZ in February 2001. This occurred to the detriment of Angola, STP's most important bilateral regional partner in the first two decades after independence. On the domestic level the outcome of the crisis allowed President Menezes to strengthen his position and increase his influence over government policies, at least for the time being. It is rather unlikely that his local opponents will leave his strengthened position unchallenged. Thanks to the comparatively peaceful character of local society and political culture, future competition for power in STP need not turn violent, despite the possible oil rush.

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