

SÃO TOMÉ E PRÍNCIPE MILITARY COUP AS A LESSON ?

In the early morning of August 15, approximately forty young recruits, commanded by second lieutenant Fernando Sousa Pontes, left the barracks on two old trucks, with the aim of attacking the Presidential palace in São Tomé and of capturing President Miguel Trovoada, who had been elected democratically in an unopposed election in March 1991. The Presidential guards surrendered immediately, with the exception of one within the palace, who was shot by the rebels. For two hours the soldiers searched for Trovoada, who had hidden in an underground shelter, but could not find him. He only appeared after Sousa Pontes, locally known as "Craque" because he had been a successful basketball player, had forced the President's wife, Helena, to phone her husband saying that the soldiers would blow up the residential wing, where his family had barricaded itself, if he did not show up immediately. Subsequently, Trovoada, still dressed in his pyjamas and night-gown, and with a portable phone in his hands, appeared and was detained in the barracks of the 600-man army of the tiny twin-island republic. There, second lieutenant Manuel Quintas de Almeida had ordered other troops to surround the airport, the port, the banks, the radio station, and the television building. During the action another soldier was accidentally killed. Quintas de Almeida also called second lieutenant Alfredo Marçal Lima, in charge of public relations and cooperation in the Ministry of Defence, and António Taty da Costa, head of the migration department, and summoned them to appear in the barracks. It became clear that the coup was staged by junior officers, and that the higher ranks were not involved. Worried by the coup, some ministers and their families sought refuge in the Portuguese embassy, while the head of the Central Bank, Carlos Quaresma, hid in the building of the local United Nations representation. At 3.00 p.m., Prime Minister Carlos Graça, who at that time was on the sister island of Príncipe to participate in the annual feast of Saint Laurent, was taken to São Tomé by the military plane *Aviocar* belonging to the Portuguese airforce contingent, stationed in the country for the inter-island connection, and immediately put under house arrest in his residence near the airport surrounded by soldiers.

In a first radio communiqué at 8.00 a.m., Quintas de Almeida announced the constitution of a Junta of National Salvation. In a second communiqué at 1.00 p.m. he imposed a curfew from 8.00 p.m., prohibited

declarations to the press without the allowance of the military and guaranteed the protection of the diplomatic missions. He declared that all institutions had to function as usual, with the exception of the three financial institutions, to prevent the flight of Foreign exchange, and that the borders had to remain closed until further notice. Quintas de Almeida claimed that the plotters had found themselves compelled to take control of the country, because it had become "ungovernable as a result of a lack of institutional loyalty, seriousness, transparent management of public funds due to the selfishness and individualism of some Santomeans who have forgotten their country and their people".

On the same day, the markets remained closed and the weekly plane from Lisbon did not arrive. However, Carlos Beló, an Angolan businessman and political adviser of ex-President Manuel Pinto da Costa (1975-1991), was allowed to land with his private plane in São Tomé. This nurtured rumours that the former President might be behind the coup. Surprisingly, the international telephone lines remained open all the time. Furthermore the ministers continued in office and no state agency, with the exception of the three banks, was occupied by the military. Quintas de Almeida stated that the purpose of the military was not to maintain power, but to discuss with the political parties the formation of a government capable of ruling the country. In the afternoon the coup plotters held a meeting with the small local diplomatic corps to explain the objectives of their coup and to guarantee the personal security of the diplomats. On the same day, ex-President Manuel Pinto da Costa condemned the coup, but offered to mediate between the military rebels and the politicians.

Both at home and abroad the coup came as a complete surprise. On the archipelago, rumours emerged that other political figures might stay behind the takeover, however this is denied by the military. The coup plotters had obviously underestimated the unanimity with which both Western donor countries and African governments alike condemned the coup ; probably because nobody wanted to tolerate such a precedent.

The major external donors, France, Portugal, the United States, the European Union, as well as the United Nations, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Gabon, and South Africa immediately condemned the putsch. All demanded the reestablishment of the constitutional order, and the donor countries threatened to suspend all development cooperation. The deputy spokesman of the US State Department, David Johnson, declared that since the first democratic multiparty elections in 1991, the country had been a model emerging democracy. Portugal forbade the use of the Aviocar and suspended the bilateral technical-military cooperation started in 1992. Angola's President Eduardo dos Santos threatened to cut off all oil supplies, but offered to mediate between the rebels and the state authorities. Omar Bongo of Gabon even asked the international community to take a military action similar to the one which brought President Aristide back to power in Haiti. The French government supported this proposal.

THE BACKGROUND

Although there had been some alleged coup attempts during the socialist one-party state in the late 70s and early 80s, São Tomé e Príncipe had no record of military involvement in politics. Since the introduction of multipartyism in 1990, democratic elections had been held peacefully and without any major incidents. In the early general elections of October 1994, the former sole ruling party *Movimento de libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe/Partido social-democrata* (MLSTP/PSD), which had been swept out of office in the first free elections in 1991 by the *Partido de convergência democrática-Grupo de reflexão* (PCD-GR), won a relative majority of 27 seats in the 55-member National Assembly. Subsequently, the MLSTP/PSD's secretary-general Dr. Carlos Graça was elected Prime Minister. However, for the majority of the 120 000 inhabitants of the poverty stricken country, liberal democracy had not resulted in economic progress. On the contrary, the structural adjustment program implemented since 1987 had brought additional hardships to the poor. The shift away from cocoa monoculture has not been realized yet and despite the highest net Foreign *per capita* aid of about US \$ 378 (1993), there had been an increasing lack of job opportunities for the fast growing population. The bloated state administration was plagued by a lack of institutional capacities and commitment alike, and paralyzed by an overall tardiness. While real wages were rapidly decreasing due to high inflation, a small elite of local politicians and businessmen benefited considerably from the new economic system and external funds alike. Corruption, embezzlement of public funds and other malversations, externally nurtured by development aid and private Foreign interests, have even increased since 1991. When Carlos Graça took office in late 1994, he demonstratively declared his private assets and pledged to combat the widespread corruption. Yet, his government had not taken any concrete measures, let alone that the head of state, or any minister had followed Dr. Graça's example, although such a declaration is ordered by law. Since independence in 1975, not a single minister or senior civil servant has been tried because of accusations of corruption in the local court.

The military did not benefit from the democratization process. Ragged, barefooted and hungry with unpaid low salaries, they felt increasingly neglected by the politicians. At the time of the coup, the soldiers had not received their payment for six months. Due to the deplorable conditions many young men did not show up when they were called for the compulsory military service of thirty months. At the time of the coup, a second lieutenant received a monthly wage of some 24 000 dobras (US \$ 14). The ill-equipped army possesses only two armoured vehicles. It was President Trovoada who had brought some new equipment from Burkina Faso. Fifty-five percent of all the soldiers had ranks of corporal and above, added to which there were five captains and four majors. The latter were all off duty. The coup plotters claimed that ninety percent of the military had joined their action. However, the senior officers did not participate in the revolt, primarily because, to some extent, they had benefited from their positions, whereas the young officers had no access to favours and spoils. Nevertheless, due to a lack of perspectives within the army, many senior officers had asked for unpaid leave and had become taxi drivers or small businessmen. In the 70s, Quintas de Almeida was a member of the MLSTP

party youth and was a member of the Presidential Guard of ex-President Pinto da Costa. He was trained in surface artillery at the *Escola Comandante Benedito* in Luanda (1978) and at the time of the coup was second-in-command of São Tomé's Coastal Guard. Sousa Pontes was a colleague of Quintas de Almeida in Luanda and later specialized at the Superior Artillery School Granma in Havana (1979-1980). He was in charge of the mortar battery in São Tomé.

The coup plotters viewed President Trovoada as being principally responsible for the poor conditions of the officers. Contrary to the deputies of the National Assembly and members of the government, they had no official cars at their disposal nor any other compensations besides their payment. The rebels claimed to have waged a "democratic coup", because they did not intend to take over power. With the democratic order in mind they declared that the vote can legitimate the politicians, but cannot place them above the law, unpunished and irresponsible. Sousa Pontes declared that "democracy with hunger is no democracy". The plotters accused the politicians of enriching themselves without any scruples at the expense of the people. Furthermore they maintained that the World Bank and the IMF were aware of the financial malversations of the local politicians. Preceding their action they had written letters to the minister of Defence complaining about low salaries, lack of uniforms and means, and demanding an improvement of their living conditions. However, they had not received any response from the minister. Consequently, Quintas de Almeida, Sousa Pontes and two cadets began planning the coup.

Social unrest in São Tomé had increased when, in the summer of 1995, the radio employees, school teachers and doctors went on strike in support of salary increases, ranging from 300 % to 1 000 %, whereas the IMF had obliged the government to increase the public salaries by not more than 30 % in 1995. Just before the coup, rumours emerged that Trovoada intended to sack the government of Carlos Graça in order to replace it by an executive of his own choice. This provided the rebels with another justification for their action.

It was no wonder that the military initially met with considerable support from the impoverished population, which has always considered their political leaders, irrespective of their party membership, as people who help themselves instead of serving the nation. Nobody was inclined to defend democracy, which had been brought into discredit by the political class whose main concern have been personal intrigues and the Defence of private and group interests. But the coup plotters seemed to be ill-prepared nor did they possess a concrete program or their own cadres with which to form a government. They were able to explain why they had waged the coup, but they did not know which measures they had to take to govern.

THE COURSE OF THE EVENTS

Due to international pressures and a lack of local cooperation, on August 16, the military suspended their initial aim of forming a Junta of National Salvation. During a press conference, Quintas de Almeida declared that the military would not pretend to take over power. Sousa Pontes added that the political parties would not be dissolved. Instead the coup plotters began talks with the three main political parties represented

in the National Assembly. During these talks the MLSTP/PSD was represented by Prime Minister Carlos Graça and Foreign minister Guilherme Posser da Costa, while the opposition PCD/GR, in power from 1991-94, was represented by its secretary-general João Bonfim and the former minister of Justice Olegário Tiny. For the *Acção democrática independente* (ADI), a party close to Mr. Trovoada, appeared its secretary-general Carlos Neves and the deputy Julieta Graça. All parties declared that they were ready to negotiate, provided that the constitutional order would be restored. The insurgents stated that they wanted to negotiate to form a government of national unity for a minimum of three months to a maximum of a year, whereupon early elections would be held. However, the political parties, backed by the international community, demanded the immediate restoration of the constitutional order and refused to participate in the proposed government of national unity. President Trovoada rejected participating in any government with the military. Surprisingly, in an interview with a Portuguese radio station, only Prime Minister Carlos Graça said that because he had always been in favour of a government of national unity he was ready to participate in a government integrating the military, provided that it was headed by his party and democracy was resumed.

In the afternoon the coup plotters accepted the Angolan mediation, offered by President Eduardo dos Santos. Backed by France, Bongo had also proposed his mediation, however this offer was rejected by the rebellious military. Since his years in French exile (1981-1990) Miguel Trovoada has been seen by many as a representative of Francophone interests. Besides the Angolan MPLA-government distrusted him because of his good relations with the UNITA of Jonas Savimbi. The Angolan mediation was also favoured by the MLSTP/PSD, which had been an old ally of the MPLA since pre-independence times. Moreover, the two countries are linked by historical and cultural ties. Angolan troops stayed in São Tomé from 1978 to 1991 to protect the regime of Pinto da Costa, who is a personal friend of Eduardo dos Santos. Presently, Angola still has a decisive economic influence through oil supplies to São Tomé at preferential prices. Due to unsettled oil bills the bilateral debt with Angola has reached some \$ 20m.

Right from the beginning, it became increasingly clear that President Trovoada was the main target of the coup. The entire Presidential car park had been transferred to the barracks, whereas the government ministers continued to drive in their cars and had access to their offices. Neither was the National Assembly hit by the measures of the military. Also, Carlos Graça could leave his residence on the second day of the coup to talk with the rebels, whereas Miguel Trovoada remained detained in the barracks.

On August 17, only two days after his request, the rebellious military allowed the Portuguese ambassador António Franco to visit Miguel Trovoada in the barracks. On the same day, the curfew was lifted and both the banks and the airspace were reopened. The military commission held talks with the MLSTP/PSD, the President of the National Assembly, Francisco Fortunato Pires, the former minister of Justice, Manuel Vaz, who had resigned in last July, and ex-President Manuel Pinto da Costa (1975-1991), who was accompanied by his former minister of Defence, Raúl Bragança Wagner. A few hours after the meeting with Francisco Fortunato Pires, the insurgents designated him as interim head of state. Quintas de

Almeida justified this appointment with article 80 of the Constitution which determines that during the temporary impediment of the President of the Republic, the President of the National Assembly assumes the function. However, Fortunato Pires, who is considered a follower of Pinto da Costa, refused his appointment.

In a declaration broadcast by TV and radio, Quintas de Almeida repeated that the coup plotters had not been motivated by personal interests, but wanted to bring an end to the political strife and the selfish interests of the local politicians. He accused the politicians of embezzlement of public funds and criticized the government for the absence of a manifest will to combat such acts. Further he deplored the bad housing and living conditions of the military, who were left to their own fate and transformed into beggars. Finally, he demanded that international aid be used correctly and appealed to the donors to visit the country in order to see the deplorable state of the country for themselves.

On August 18, an Angolan 4-member delegation headed by Foreign Minister Vernâncio de Moura arrived in São Tomé. The other members were deputy Foreign minister João Miranda, as well as Aldemiro da Conceição and Vitor Lima, both advisers of President Dos Santos. The Angolan ambassador André Miranda also joined the mediators. Meanwhile, Miguel Trovoada had begun a hunger strike to force his release. Finally, at 7.30 p.m., thanks to Mr. De Moura's mediation, the insurgents transferred the deposed President from the barracks to a government residence in town. Fernando Pontes even explained that Miguel Trovoada would continue to be head of state, adding that the coup was a democratic one not directed against persons, but for the development of the country. In the residence, Mr. Trovoada was allowed to receive visitors and telephone calls, but he could not make public declarations. Subsequently, the Angolans started separate talks with the Military Commission constituted by António Taty da Costa, Marçal Lima, the cadet Armindo Silva, Sousa Pontes and led by Quintas de Almeida, the representatives of President Trovoada, the National Assembly, and the government. The coup plotters demanded a general amnesty for all participants, the appointment of the minister of Defence by the security forces, a review of the role of the President as supreme commander of the armed forces, a restructuring of the army, a reform of the state bureaucracy, and the dismissal of corrupt government officials.

On August 19, a charter flight of the Portuguese airline TAP arrived in São Tomé carrying many journalists. The whole day was marked by consecutive meetings of the parties involved. The Angolans met with the leadership of the National Assembly included in which were members of the three parties represented in Parliament, as well as with the two representatives of President Trovoada, his advisors Gabriel Costa and Alberto Chong, and the representatives of the government, Carlos Graça and Guilherme Posser da Costa. Mr. Trovoada also met with both the rebels, headed by Quintas de Almeida, and the Angolan mediators. Meanwhile, the coup plotters insisted particularly in two demands, a general amnesty for all insurgents approved by Parliament and a review of the constitutional powers of the head of state. The rebellious military wanted to deprive the President of the supreme command of the armed forces and the right to appoint the minister of Defence. Moreover, they intended to cancel the President's right to dismiss the Prime Minister. During a press

conference at night, lieutenant Marçal Lima reiterated that the coup had nothing to do with any interests of groups or parties, but that the only aim was to change the overall situation in the country. Furthermore he denied that he was the ideological brain behind the coup.

On August 20, the Angolan mediators presented a counter proposal of six points, the contents of which were not made public. Neither the President nor the government wanted to negotiate directly with the Military Commission, whereas the latter demanded successive separate talks with the Angolans, the government, and the President. For the coup plotters, who had become increasingly isolated, the concession of a general amnesty had become the key condition for their return to the barracks, while some politicians were reluctant to agree to this demand. However, Foreign minister Guilherme Posser da Costa replied to a Portuguese journalist that he hoped that the rebels would not be punished. The situation in the country remained calm. Only an armoured car behind the gate of the Ministry of Defence and automatic guns visible among the soldiers guarding President Trovoada and some members of the Military Commission suggested that the situation was not as normal as it seemed to be. Like everyday life on the archipelago, the coup, in local terms, was also "leve-leve", *i.e.* quiet, easy, lethargic, and soft.

When the final negotiations began Venâncio de Moura irritated the coup plotters by stating that the coup had shocked the international community and the local population alike. The soldiers even threatened to suspend the negotiations. Whereafter the final negotiations were carried on by four members of the Military Commission, six representatives of the state and the Angolan mediators. The military delegation was constituted of Alfredo Marçal Lima, Armindo Silva, António Taty da Costa and Quintas de Almeida. Negotiating on behalf of the state were Prime Minister Carlos Graça and Foreign minister Guilherme Posser da Costa for the government, Alberto Chong and Gabriel Costa in representation of the head of state, as well as the President of the Supreme Court, José Paquete, and the President of the National Assembly, Francisco Fortunato Pires. In a break, Quintas de Almeida stated to the Portuguese television RTP that the soldiers had taken up arms because they could not go on strike for their demands like other social groups.

Finally, on August 21, the plotters handed over to the mediator a declaration that they would restore the constitutional legality, provided that they were not punished. At 19.15 p.m., after having waited for four hours during a short emergency session lasting twenty minutes, the 36 deputies present of the 55-member Parliament fulfilled the first demand by unanimously approving a law granting amnesty to all coup plotters. During the voting, the Congress Palace, where the National Assembly is accommodated, was surrounded by about fifty soldiers. In the early morning of August 22, the military, the mediators, and the representatives of the state organs signed a *Memorandum of understanding* according to which the deposed state officials were to be fully reinstated and wherein the state organs promised to accomplish the six demands of the insurgents. Furthermore, the Angolan mediators would supervise the accomplishment of the agreement. In terms of the agreement, the review of the constitutional powers of the President was passed on the National Assembly, where such a review requires a two thirds majority. However, the demand that the appointment of the minister of Defence must be approved by the

armed forces was fulfilled. The restructuring of the army including promotions and a salary increase were also promised in the document.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE COUP

On the same day, whilst commenting on their coup, Quintas de Almeida declared himself satisfied with the result. He repeated that the coup leaders never wanted to rule the country, but only intended to give a lesson to the politicians who in the future would now certainly listen to their complaints. He revealed that during the negotiations the insurgents believed that two French frigates might arrive in São Tomé. Therefore, the military had taken measures to avoid the possible landing of French troops. In a press conference, ex-President Pinto da Costa denied any involvement in the putsch.

Then, after having returned to his palace, in a message to the nation, President Trovoada stated that he considered the coup an action which had been exclusively directed against him by political forces who intended to prevent his re-election in 1996. He drew a parallel to 1979 when he was detained for two years without charge and trial by the regime of his former friend Pinto da Costa, following accusations that he was involved in a popular uprising against a population census which was perceived by many citizens as an attempt to introduce forced labour on the plantations. He rejected the accusations by which the coup plotters had justified their action, arguing that according to his function he was not responsible for corruption nor for the poor conditions of the army.

Shortly after the end of the coup, Defence minister Alberto Paulino was replaced by the captain in the reserves Carlos Paquete Carneiro da Silva. The latter had left the army in 1982 for personal reasons and had engaged in private business since then. On September 15, the dismissed army commander Captain António Paquete was replaced by Captain António Nascimento, who had hitherto been head of the country's police. Thanks to pressures of the uncommissioned officers, the government appointed lieutenant Justino Lima, one of the coup plotters, as new second-in-command. Ten days earlier, Prime Minister Carlos Graça had asked the new Defence minister to also take upon himself the function of the commander of the army. However, this decision was fiercely rejected by the military who were of the opinion that Carlos Paquete was a politician and as such he could not be a army commander at the same time.

On September 19, the very same day when President Trovoada left the country for a two-week tour abroad to thank the donor countries for their political support during the coup and to ask them for more Foreign funds for his country, lieutenant António Taty da Costa, the principal negotiator of the Military Commission, distributed an open letter of nine pages, wherein he accused the President of having known about the coup beforehand. However, according to Taty da Costa, Mr. Trovoada had not reacted, because he was of the opinion that not he, but the government of Mr. Graça, would be the principal target of the rebels. Moreover, Mr. Taty da Costa considered President Trovoada as the principal factor for the political instability in the country, as he had dismissed two governments of the PCD-GR in 1992 and 1994 respectively.

In reaction to the open letter, the government asked the attorney-general Silvestre Leite to investigate the truth of the accusations. For his part, while in Lisbon, Mr. Trovoada denied the accusations, and declared that the letter was nothing more than another attempt to destabilize the country and to jeopardize his candidature in the forthcoming Presidential elections. In São Tomé observers supposed that the letter was a defensive action by Taty da Costa, who secured his position by forcing Mr. Trovoada to respond to his accusations. For if the President were to have dismissed the lieutenant, it was believed that it was on the grounds of this accusations. In late September, one day after Taty da Costa was interrogated by the attorney-general, eighty-four officers and corporals signed a letter of solidarity directed to the state organs, wherein they declared that any legal action endangering the physical security and integrity of the lieutenant would be considered as an act against the dignity of the Armed Forces. Consequently, one month later, obviously due to the intimidations by the military, the attorney-general Silvestre Leite decided to stop the inquiry in the accusations made by Taty da Costa in the open letter. However it is not until October 24, in a message to the nation on both radio and TV, that President Trovoada fiercely denied the allegations expressed in the open letter. He called Taty da Costa a coward, because he had protected himself by a letter campaign when he had to appear before the attorney-general. He also criticized the latter for having stopped the inquiry to intimidations by the military. Mr. Trovoada stressed again that the only logic to select him as the only target of the coup was to remove him from power.

CONCLUSIONS

Remarkable aspects of the coup in São Tomé have been that normal life remained almost unaffected and that the coup plotters did not pretend to take over power themselves, or at least quickly abandoned such a purpose. The coup was almost bloodless, proving that despite widespread despair the small creole society has still remained a peaceful one inclined to solve problems by negotiations. External pressures might have played the major role forcing the rebels to successively scale down their demands. Apart from revealing the country's complete dependence on Foreign donor countries, the crisis has shown the complete lack of popular support for the fragile multiparty democracy. The population has witnessed that not social justice and prosperity, but corruption and embezzlement of public funds of democratically elected politicians has increased even under the eyes of the donor community. While liberal democracy has been successfully reinstated in São Tomé, the social-economic crisis remains far from being resolved. The economic adjustment measures was implemented so far in the weak economy, which apparently does not possess the capacity to react positively to the remedies prescribed by the World Bank and the IMF. It seems necessary that multilateral creditors should try to apply a strategy more appropriate to the local particularities, if they are really interested in helping to consolidate liberal democracy in the tiny country. If the democratic system is not accompanied by social-economic development for the masses it is doomed to fail.

The appointment of the new military commanders and the accusations of the open letter directed against the President have shown that for the

very first time, the local military has gained considerable influence on government politics. Probably, the coup has entailed even more political instability by admitting another actor inside the political arena. Besides, Angola, that was forced to withdraw her military contingent in São Tomé in early 1991, is now again able to exert some political influence through the 4-member commission which supervises the implementation of the *Memorandum of understanding* signed in August 1995.

January 1996

Gerhard SEIBERT

Centre of Non-Western Studies, Leiden