

# Coup d'état in São Tomé e Príncipe

## Domestic causes, the role of oil and former 'Buffalo' Battalion soldiers

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### INTRODUCTION

São Tomé e Príncipe (STP) has not yet extracted a single drop of oil and is not expected to do so until 2007. Even so, because of its potential oil wealth the recent military coup in the small island-republic has attracted a lot of international attention. Many foreign observers are convinced that oil politics are at the bottom of the takeover. Some have suggested that it was only matter of time before competition for power ahead of the oil rush would degenerate into political instability. President Fradique de Menezes was surprised by the coup in his country at the 6th Rev. Leon Sullivan Summit in Abuja, attended by thirteen African heads of state. The chairperson of the summit, the Rev. Andrew Young, a former US Ambassador to the United Nations and Mayor of Atlanta, immediately blamed oil as being 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."<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that the prospect of oil wealth has been uppermost in the minds of the islanders and has created great hope among them. The licensing round of the first 9 of 27 blocks located in the Joint Development Zone (JDZ) jointly managed with Nigeria started in April and should be completed on 18 October 2003. Available seismic data suggest that the offshore blocks could hold between 4 and 11 billion barrels of reserves at depths of between 1 500 and 2 500 metres. The Joint Development Authority (JDA) has set a minimum signature bonus of \$30 million for each block.<sup>2</sup> As part of STP's 40% of the profits of the JDZ, the country might receive about \$100 million in signature bonuses in early 2004. This amount is twice the size of the annual national budget.

However, while oil has certainly played a role in recent events, it cannot be regarded as the dominant cause of the coup. Such a view would overlook the

role of other domestic factors in the genesis of the coup. This article draws attention to the political developments in STP that formed the background to the coup of 16 July 2003, as well as to the increasing regional and international importance of the tiny country as a future oil producer.

### THE COUNTRY

STP is the second smallest independent country in Africa, with a population of 140,000 and a total area of 1,001 square kilometres. The archipelago was colonised by Portugal in the 16th century. The majority of the islanders are descendants of early Portuguese settlers and African slaves. STP is a peaceful Creole society without ethnic, linguistic or religious cleavages. After 500 years of Portuguese domination the archipelago became independent in 1975. Constitutionally, the country became a socialist one-party state modelled on the Soviet example. Within a few years the nationalisation of the entire economy and the socialist policies brought about total economic failure. From 1985 onwards, the regime therefore dropped the socialist dogmas and gradually liberalised the economy.

In 1990 STP introduced a multiparty democracy. The elections that have been regularly held since then have been considered free and fair, although vote buying has increasingly become an integral part of the electoral process. Defeated parties and presidential candidates have always recognised the election results. Various conflicts between the Presidency and government have, however, resulted in frequent changes of government, and this political instability has negatively affected the social and economic development of the now impoverished country. Since the end of the 19th century cocoa has been by far the most important export product, and until recently the local economy was dominated by the plantation system. However, cocoa output has steadily

## Nationalisation of the entire economy and the socialist policies brought about total economic failure

decreased since the end of World War I and almost collapsed after independence. As part of an agricultural reform initiated in 1993 the large estates were dismantled and the lands distributed to small farmers.

Potential growth sectors of the weak local economy are agriculture, fishing and tourism. Great hopes are vested in the country's recently discovered off-shore oil deposits. For the time being, however, the island-state will remain completely dependent on foreign aid.

## POLITICAL INSTABILITY

The first military coup in the country occurred in August 1995, many years before the existence of off-shore oil deposits became known. At the time one guard was shot dead when the rebels detained President Trovoada (1991-2001), the principal target of their action. They declared that they did not want to take power, but had acted in protest against the deteriorating conditions of the armed forces and widespread corruption. After one week of negotiations, mediated by an Angolan delegation, the constitutional order was restored.<sup>3</sup> Yet the principal cause of political instability in STP has not been the military, but resource competition, political divergencies and disputes about areas of competence between the President and successive governments. As a result of these conflicts, the country has had eleven different governments since the democratic transition in 1991. In the first two years of Fradique de Menezes's presidency alone, the country has had five different governments. All of this has created considerable political instability.

Following the early elections of March 2002, the three parties elected in the National Assembly, namely the MLSTP-PSD<sup>4</sup> (24 seats), the party alliance MDFM/PCD<sup>5</sup> (23) and the five-party coalition Uê Kedadji<sup>6</sup> (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 was increasingly affected by continuous disputes about the executive powers of the two office-holders. Consequently, by September that year, Menezes had dismissed Costa's government. Another GUN, headed by Maria das Neves (MLSTP-PSD), was appointed. However, at the same time 20 deputies of the MDFM/PCD, the alliance that supported Menezes, dissociated themselves from the President, leaving him with only three supporters in parliament.

Despite threats by Menezes that he would dissolve parliament, in December 2002, 52 deputies of the National Assembly approved a revision of the constitution that curbed the President's executive powers and strengthened parliament's position. 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, mediated by Prime Minister Das Neves and the President of the Supreme Court, Alice Carvalho. The National Assembly accepted that the amendments to reduce the President's executive powers would only come into effect at the end of Menezes's 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 affected the majority of the people, while among the few people linked to political power there were visible signs of increasing wealth.

On 11 April 2003, a group of citizens published an open letter, signed by 80 prominent citizens, which accused the government and the President of having failed to improve the living conditions of the people. The letter also expressed concern over the lack of transparency in the country's oil negotiations.<sup>7</sup> It blamed the President for not having clarified the remittance of \$100,000 by the Nigerian Chrome Oil Services<sup>8</sup> to the Belgian bank account of his company, CGI, in February 2002 and accused him of having conceded the exclusive rights for the exploration of casinos and the airport in São Tomé to his brother, João de Menezes, who lives in Portugal. In response to the open letter, President Menezes held a controversial three-hour press conference on 23 April, during which he accused some of the signatories to the document of having been involved in corruption scandals themselves in the past. He explained that the \$100,000 received from the Nigerian oil company was in respect of a campaign donation to the MDFM and PCD parties during the previous general elections.

Between these two events, on 17 April 2003, a demonstration of young handicraft artists demanding their own selling centre escalated into a spontaneous, violent riot in front of the government's office and involving many people from nearby markets. The windows of the office 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, but released five days later. This was not the first anti-government demonstration that had been held since independence, but it was the first time that a demonstrator had been killed by the police. Many people lost confidence in Prime Minister Das Neves, who quickly blamed political opponents who, she claimed, wanted to destabilise the country.

President Menezes's credibility was again questioned in late April when he appointed a 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 CGI, Menezes's private company. In the weeks preceding the putsch of 16 July, political tensions and signs of social discontent increased, while the government feared the outbreak of another popular uprising.

## THE COUP

Four days after the 28th anniversary of STP's independence, in the early morning of 16 July 2003, soldiers seized key sites and arrested 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 conspirators occupied the ministries, the television and radio stations, the banks and the airport. They did not take any action on the sister island of Príncipe. 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, were taken into custody. 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 07:30, the rebels broadcast a call to the other ministers and the deputies of the National Assembly to report to the Quartel do Morro, the military barracks and headquarters of the national police force, within two hours. The deputies were released the same afternoon, while the 11 detained ministers, among them three women, were kept in an air-conditioned room at the barracks.<sup>9</sup> The presidential legal advisor, Aito Bonfim, the military advisor, Victor Monteiro, and the Attorney-General, Adelino Pereira, were also kept in custody at the barracks. However, they were all allowed to use their cell phones and keep in contact with their families, who could bring them meals. The rebels justified the detentions as being a precautionary measure to protect the detainees from potential hostile actions by the population.

The rebels claimed to have acted in response to the country's continuing social and economic crisis. They accused the government of corruption, but did not back up their accusations with concrete evidence. They also denounced the deplorable state of the barracks and the soldiers' poor living conditions. During a press conference, Major Fernando Pereira, the leader of the coup, declared that it was inconceivable for the majority of the population to live below the poverty threshold while a small group of people enjoyed a luxurious life, laughing at the humiliations suffered by the rest. The rebels had therefore sent an SOS to the international community by means of the coup to pay attention to the misery in STP. He said the coup was intended to create conditions for the organisation of free elections and announced that they would constitute a Council of State to rule the country in the interim (although he did not specify its composition).

That afternoon the rebels announced the dissolution of all state organs and proclaimed a Junta of National Salvation, consisting of Major Fernando Pereira, Alécio Costa and Sabino dos Santos, President and Vice-President respectively of the small political party, the Christian Democratic Front (FDC). In addition, they declared a 19:00 to 06:00 curfew and announced that the airport had been closed. The insurrectionists stressed that the coup had been bloodless and guaranteed the physical integrity of the detained politicians. About half of the country's estimated 400 soldiers were actively involved in the coup. The military leadership did not participate in the action, nor did it try to resist. There was no resistance to the coup by the population either. Parts of the population publicly welcomed the coup, while others did not accept the action but expressed understanding of the motives claimed by the insurgents. All political parties (apart from the FDC) condemned the coup, but asked that the crisis be peacefully resolved at the negotiation table. The city remained calm, the markets and shops remained open and ordinary life went on.

## THE CONSPIRATORS

### Major Fernando Pereira

The coup was mounted by local soldiers and the small FDC, and led by Major Fernando Pereira, who is locally known as Cobó. The 48-year-old officer is of mixed Cape Verdian<sup>10</sup> and Angolar<sup>11</sup> descent and is married to a social worker. He lives in a modest, typically Creole wooden house with his wife and the 10 children he has fathered by various women. Pereira is 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 headed the Military Training Centre. When he refused to train the recruits because of the miserable conditions that then prevailed, he was sentenced to a year's service without payment. In 1995 he was transferred to Príncipe for six months, where he commanded the 20-strong 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 payments.<sup>12</sup> 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 Lusophone Countries (CPLP).

Major Pereira became something of a public figure when on 24 April 2002 he denounced the poor living conditions in the barracks, the salary payments that were six months behind and the obsolete army equipment. However, his complaints went unheeded, and the barracks continued to function without water and working toilets, while the newly-built luxury

mansions of government officials in the nearby Campo de Milho were immediately provided with water. The government supplied the whole army with only two million litres of fuel per month and people like Major Pereira had to use an overcrowded mini-bus to get to work, while the ministers gave their secretaries cars for their personal use and their children drove around in government vehicles. Army recruits received 80,000 dobras (ca. €8) per month, while army officers 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 months of military service. On 15 June 2003 Major Pereira sent a letter stating the military's demands to both President Menezes and Prime Minister Maria das Neves. Apparently he did not receive the desired reply. However, the conspirators organised in the FDC party knew about his grievances.

## The FDC

The FDC was founded in late 1990 by former members of the Frente de Resistência Nacional de São Tomé and Príncipe (FRNSTP). The FRNSTP in turn had been founded in 1981 by exiled opponents of the socialist policies of the ruling MLSTP and President Manuel Pinto da Costa (1975 to 1991), both of whom had 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 prevent the integration of STP into the progressive alliance of Algiers, Conakry, Brazzaville and Luanda. Following the first signs of political liberalisation in STP, Bongo became reconciled with the MLSTP and expelled the FRNSTP in 1986. Subsequently, the entire group sought refuge in Kribi, Cameroon. Due to internal quarrels 76 men, 23 of whom were descendents 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 a year of detention, the South African authorities gave them the choice of either continuing in prison or joining the infamous 32nd Buffalo Battalion that had been formed by members of the defeated Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) in 1975. The group joined the Buffalo Battalion and were trained in the Caprivi Strip in Namibia. The 2,000 strong Buffalo Battalion fought in Angola with UNITA in the civil war and against the African National Congress (ANC) and SWAPO of Namibia. Altogether 53 Santomeans fought in the Buffalo Battalion, nine of them dying in action. Due to the services they had rendered to the Apartheid regime they all received South African citizenship.<sup>13</sup>

On 8 March 1988 the FRNSTP group that had remained in Cameroon landed in São Tomé with an invasion force of 44 men and attempted to overthrow the Pinto da Costa regime and seize power

themselves. The almost unarmed invaders, who came in canoes from Cameroon, were easily overwhelmed by the security forces and detained. Three participants of the amazingly amateurish operation were killed during the action. In August 1989 the invaders were tried by the local court and sentenced to custodial sentences ranging from 2 to 22 years. Together with 15 other defendants, Sabino dos Santos (now Vice-President of the FDC) was sentenced to 16 years of prison.<sup>14</sup> 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 2003 conspirators.

By April 1990 all prisoners had been pardoned by President Pinto da Costa and released from prison. In December that year they founded the FDC. From the outset, consecutive party leaders were involved in 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 emerged only during elections, without, however, a great deal of success. It obtained its best results in the first democratic elections of 1991, 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. It did not participate in the legislative elections of 2002.

After the dissolution of the Buffalo Battalion in 1993, more than 20 of its Santomean members remained with their families in South Africa, while Alécio Costa (now the FDC's President) and a few others fought with the private army, Executive Outcomes, 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 meanwhile formed the FDC.

They are all strongly convinced that they deserve compensation for the many years they suffered and fought abroad. They believe that the government should guarantee what they call their social reintegration into STP. During the government of Prime Minister Raul Bragança Neto (from 1996 to 1998), the FDC demanded \$130,000 from the government as indemnity for the confiscation of one of their boats during the 1998 invasion of 1988. They alleged that the boat had subsequently been used by the local army for ten years, and Bragança Neto, Defence Minister at the time of the invasion, agreed to pay them \$50,000.<sup>15</sup>

## RUN-UP TO THE COUP

In June 2003, Prime Minister Maria das Neves accused Sabino dos Santos and his group of having received constant support from successive governments without doing any work in return. She maintained that they had demanded a medium-sized

farm and \$70,000 in cash from her government, and reprimanded Dos Santos for his laziness, declaring that her government would no longer provide any support to him and his group. She claimed, as well, that Dos Santos had threatened her with death. Her statement that no further payments would be made to the FDC was a reaction to earlier declarations by Dos Santos who, during a press conference, had asked for her dismissal. He had accused the Prime Minister of having allocated an order for new equipment for the TV station to a private entrepreneur without calling for public tenders and criticised the government for purchasing five brand-new cars for the parliamentary leaders while the TV station had only a single old vehicle. In conclusion he had announced that his party would organise a peaceful demonstration against the government to take place on 10 July in protest against the increasing costs of living, low salaries and acts of corruption. The demonstration would end in front of the Prime Minister's office and the demonstrators would remain there until Das Neves's dismissal had been announced.<sup>16</sup>

The announcement of the demonstration worried the government, which feared this could trigger violent riots similar to those of 17 April. Besides, the men of the FDC are generally held in some awe, with their military training and combat experience. At the request of President Menezes, FDC leader Alécio Costa postponed the demonstration to 24 July, shortly before the stipulated date, giving as his reasons the commemoration of national independence on 12 July and the participation of President Menezes in the summit of the African Union (AU) in Maputo two days earlier.

In fact, preparations for the coup had been under way for a long time. When the coup was over, Alécio Costa revealed that preparations for the action had already started eight months earlier.<sup>17</sup> The ex-mercenaries had called upon some of their friends in South Africa to join them in the action, and at the time of the coup, 16 former Buffalo fighters were in São Tomé. Knowing the grievances of the military, the insurrectionists drew Major Pereira into their plot. They told him that they would fight the army if the military did not join them. Pereira decided to participate in the action, since he wanted to avoid bloodshed and knew that the experienced ex-Buffalo members had an advantage over the state's poorly-trained, ill-equipped soldiers. Pereira, who was the only member of the military who knew about the coup plans,<sup>18</sup> set the condition that the coup be bloodless and disciplined.

Due to the agitation of the FDC against the government, rumours emerged that something might happen. Two weeks prior to the action, deputies of the National Assembly were informed about frequent meetings

between Pereira and members of the FDC. The parliamentarians invited the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence to comment about a possible action. The Defence Minister denied the possibility of any trouble, but the threats of the FDC prompted President Menezes to call 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 Alécio Costa and Sabino dos Santos at his private residence, Quinta de Favorita. The conspirators had postponed their action twice because Menezes had travelled abroad. When he left the country again on 15 July 2003, 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 that the air port and port would reopen 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 safety of foreigners in the country. The rebels demonstrated their readiness to solve the crisis by dialogue and to accept international mediation. They talked with representatives of local political parties and spoke by phone with the deposed President Menezes. In the evening the junta called the senior civil servants to the barracks and explained to them the motives for their action.

## President Menezes condemned the coup in a BBC interview that took place the same day

In Abuja, President Menezes condemned the coup in a BBC interview that took place the same day, demanded the reimposition of democratic legality and appealed to the world to help with the speedy re-establishment of constitutional order in his country. He declared that after twelve years of democracy there was no place for such rebellions and reminded his audience that the military had sworn an oath to defend the country's democratic institutions and its constitution. He stressed that he rejected foreign military intervention. Finally, he confirmed having received a list of demands from the military before the coup and meeting Alécio Costa and Sabino dos Santos at his private residence two days before the coup, and had therefore not expected such an action. As already observed, President Fradique de Menezes was in Abuja at the 6th Rev Leon Sullivan Summit when the coup took place. Foreign Minister "Nando" Rita was in Coimbra, Portugal to attend the 8th annual meeting of CPLP foreign ministers from 17 to 18 July. Not unexpectedly, the Lusophone meeting was

dominated by discussions of the events on 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, and the US announced a review of its aid to STP. The European Union officially condemned the coup only two days after the beginning of the action. The World Bank declared it would suspend any assistance to the country until the legitimacy of the political institutions was clarified. The Nigerian President, Olesegun Obasanjo, condemned the action and urged the "military adventurers" to return the power to the country's democratically elected representatives. Moreover, the Nigerian government declared itself ready to react to any threat to its interests in the Gulf of Guinea. In Abuja, Obasanjo and the Mozambican President, Joaquim Chissano, who is also chairperson of the AU, reportedly discussed the possibility of a military intervention to reinstate the legitimate government in STP, while the AU declared its support for any action by STP's African neighbours aimed at the restoration of constitutional order.<sup>19</sup> 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 for resolution of the crisis by dialogue. Pinto da Costa, who was in Lisbon when the coup occurred, said that the action had not come as a surprise since the country had, in recent years, been in constant crisis. He attributed part of the responsibility to President Menezes whom he characterised as an entrepreneur rather than an experienced politician. He stressed that a military intervention by Nigeria would be the worst stupidity and would simply complicate the situation.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, in Abuja President Menezes denied there were any intentions on the part of Nigeria to intervene militarily in his country.<sup>21</sup>

The rebels regarded 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 pressure 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 Tomé.<sup>22</sup> President Obasanjo had spoken to Alércio Costa by phone on the first day of the coup, and told him that if he was irrational, they in Abuja could also become irrational.<sup>23</sup> The foreign ministers of the CPLP in Coimbra also spoke to the rebels by phone.<sup>24</sup> The outcome was that the junta did not carry out its announced intention of constituting a Council of State to take over transitional government of the country. Apparently, in 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, and it was soon clear that the crisis would be resolved by international mediation within a few days. The junta stated its willingness, in a TV broadcast, to negotiate the return of President Menezes, but rejected the return of the government, which it accused of corruption and incompetence.

The airport reopened on the third day after the action, when a plane of the Portuguese Air Luxor airline arrived to pick up the 81 foreign tourists who had been stranded by the coup. Only about half of them decided to leave the country. The curfew was lifted the same day, while the civil servants returned to work and the public services resumed after the junta had authorised the return to normality.<sup>25</sup> The junta and the Ambassadors of Portugal and the US signed a memorandum on the terms of mediation for the return of President Menezes and a solution to the crisis. The document asked for mediation by the CPLP, the US and Nigeria and sought guarantees from the international community to monitor implementation of the terms of the agreement. 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.

## INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION

Altogether eight countries were actively involved in 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, which forbids seizure of power by extra-constitutional means. Furthermore, many African governments were undoubtedly concerned about the rebels' references to bad government and an extremely unequal distribution of wealth as justifying their action, since their countries face similar problems. The CPLP appointed a delegation headed by Osvaldo Serra Van Dunem, the Angolan Minister of the Interior, and including representatives of Mozambique and Brazil and the Portuguese Ambassador in São Tomé. The CPLP then left for Brazzaville to meet with a delegation of the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC), which 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 19 July 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 before, 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 were South African nationals. The next day, the first meeting, lasting three hours, took place in the local UNDP offices between the delegation of the rebels, comprising seven military and three members of the FDC, and the mediators. Rodolphe Adada, who arrived later that day, headed the mediator team since Congo had assumed the rotational presidency of the CEEAC. That night the rebels released the remaining ministers from custody in the barracks. They were not, however, allowed to resume their functions or to influence the international community to avoid endangering the impartiality of the mediation.<sup>26</sup> On 22 July the South African delegation arrived in São Tomé. In the morning the negotiations came to a halt after only two hours. An attempt to reconcile the rebels' demands with those of the political parties had failed. The parties did not agree on questions related to the repositioning of the constitutional institutions and the implementation of the new Constitution, which curbed presidential powers.

Shortly after, Major Pereira read a communiqué on the radio in which he again explained the reasons for the coup. He denied that the military wanted to take political power and said that they had acted on behalf of the country's silent, powerless citizens and because of the misery and degradation in the country. The military had hoped that the democratic mechanisms would work, but they had not and the military had therefore been unable to wait any longer. He declared that they had felt obliged to act and had done so since 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 had they not taken action, and guaranteed that all agreements reached were in defence of the citizens. The coup leader then prohibited any popular manifestations either in favour of or against the rebels.

In the next 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 at issue, the President left Abuja the same day, taking a Gabonese plane to Libreville where he waited for the final document to be signed.

In the afternoon of the next day, Van Dúnem, Ping and Adada flew to Libreville to present President Menezes with the agreement reached with the rebels. When Van Dúnem returned to São Tomé he could not predict when President Menezes would return. Surprisingly, however, he arrived in São Tomé a few

hours later 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 had wanted to return alone, but Obasanjo had rushed to Libreville and insisted on accompanying him. His presence underlined Nigeria's interest in Menezes's return to power. In addition, 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 appeared together at the UNDP headquarters, where the crisis came to an end with 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. That evening the reinstalled National Assembly unanimously ratified the Memorandum and approved a law providing general amnesty to all the conspirators.

## THE MEMORANDUM

The document, which was hastily compiled and is rather vague, covers four topics: the return of the President, the reimposition of constitutional order, mechanisms for monitoring the agreement and national problems. The terms of the first section make the return of the president conditional on the promulgation of the law giving a general amnesty to all military personnel and civilians involved in the coup, respect for 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 to take place within three months. Other conditions are the

prohibition of the presence of foreign troops outside the constitutional framework and an investigation into the possibility of appointing a new government to guarantee the safeguarding of transparency, credibility and morality in the normalisation process.

As part of the restoration of constitutional order, parliament has to approve the amnesty law, demonstrate its respect for the Constitution and investigate the possible formation of a new government. In addition, the National Assembly has to approve a law on the use of the country's oil resources and the management of the oil sector. The government is asked to accept the decisions taken by the reinstated constitutional powers. Other terms oblige the judiciary to respect state organs, not to resort to illegal actions that subvert constitutional normality and to fully apply the existing laws against violations of the terms of the agreement.

The reinstalled  
National Assembly  
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providing general  
amnesty

The Memorandum creates 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 application and respect of the terms of the Memorandum.<sup>27</sup> The Monitoring Commission is also 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 is to be defined in a joint agreement by the parties involved.

The fourth section, on national problems, includes 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 clauses refer to the resolution of both the problems and the demands of the armed forces, the paramilitary forces and the members of the ex-Buffalo Battalion by the application of measures that permit their full integration into national life. Two annexures contain details of these demands. They were not made public since they contain sensitive information.

With regard to the armed forces, the annexures provide that the necessary financial and logistic means are made available to guarantee the proper functioning of the institution. This includes food supplies, repair of armoured vehicles and the concession of financial autonomy. The Supreme Command of the Army must be kept informed of the country's development policies, particularly the oil dossier. The government has to readjust its payments and must provide the military with free medical assistance. In addition, the government has to allocate financial means for the acquisition of uniforms and boots, mattresses and bed sheets, kitchen utensils, military equipment and vehicles, for the repair of the barracks and for other military infrastructure. Concerning the former South African soldiers, the agreement includes the repatriation of the bodies of the nine Santomeans who died while fighting with the South African government forces in Namibia and the repatriation of the 23 ex-soldiers and their families who still reside in South Africa. The South African government is expected to assist the STP government to solve the socio-economic problems of the former fighters and provide the local army with training and military equipment.

The Memorandum does not include any of the initial demands for the formation of a transitional government or the holding of early elections. The appointment of a new government is only a possibility, not a prerequisite. The prohibition of the presence of foreign troops in the archipelago reflects concerns that Menezes might have such intentions. The approval of a law on the use of oil resources by parliament is not, strictly speaking, an outcome of the

negotiations. The IMF had asked the government to formulate such a law many months before the coup. In a letter dated 30 September 2002 to the IMF, the government promised to submit such a bill to parliament by 30 September 2003,<sup>28</sup> and prior to the coup, the National Assembly had announced its intention to elaborate a law on the sound management of oil receipts. What *is* remarkable is that the Memorandum gives the Supreme Command access to information about the oil sector. This provision reflects the military's concerns about the lack of transparency regarding the oil sector as well as its intention to participate in the expected oil rush.

The agreement essentially safeguards the demands of the military as well as those of the members of the ex-Buffalo Battalion. In contrast, political claims are either absent or remain rather vague. The conspirators expect the international Monitoring Commission to compel the government and the President to fully implement the provisions of the agreement. They hope that the multinational Commission can prevent the government from disregarding the Memorandum, as happened with the agreement that ended the first coup in 1995.

## 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 of local democracy with incommensurably serious consequences for the country's difficult socio-economic situation. Menezes called the coup condemnable and unjustified, but asked the people to avoid any manifestation of hatred and to overcome, with courage and tolerance, the consequences of the coup that had shaken the country. The same day, Rafael Branco, the Minister of Natural Resources, resigned on the grounds that his own party, the MLSTP-PSD, had already taken a decision on his succession while he was detained. Subsequently, the Ministers of Health and Defence, Claudina Cruz and Fernando Danquá, also resigned. Finally, on 1 August, 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.

Nevertheless, on 4 August 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, he claimed, important pending processes such as the licensing round of the oil blocks in the JDZ with Nigeria and the debt forgiveness by the Breton Woods institutions required a continuity of governance. The MLSTP/PSD leadership welcomed Menezes's decision, but expected that Das Neves would reshuffle the government. In the end her party, which has 24 deputies 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 PCD<sup>29</sup> and Uê Kedadji remained in the opposition. On 9 August the new 13 member government, which includes 7 new office holders, took office. The new Minister of Natural Resources is Tomé Vera Cruz, chairperson of Menezes's party, the MDFM. Another two members of the President's party hold the portfolios of foreign affairs and justice, while the Minister of Defence is also considered a confidant of Menezes. Whereas the MDFM is overrepresented in the government, the ADI has two ministers in the new executive.

The conspirators viewed the reappointment of Das Neves as a violation of the Memorandum. Three days after he had confirmed Das Neves in office, Menezes revealed that the members of the ex-Buffalo Battalion had prepared another coup. However, Alércio Costa denied the allegations during a meeting with the President and in the presence of the Ambassadors of Congo, Gabon, Nigeria, South Africa and the US. At the end of the meeting, Menezes demonstratively embraced Alércio Costa to mark the end of the conflict. Despite these manifestations, in late September FDC Vice-President Sabino dos Santos publicly announced his party's intention to defeat Menezes in the 2006 presidential elections.<sup>30</sup>

Following its inauguration the new government announced the execution of an Emergency Action Plan worth \$22 million and asked the international community for funding. The Plan aims to meet the most urgent necessities, particularly in the health, education and defence sectors, in the remaining four months of the year. Compared with the \$50 million of the annual budget, the size of the Emergency Plan seems exaggerated, and critical observers have questioned the government's capacity to properly implement the short-term Plan. They regard the initiative as a government manoeuvre to capitalise on the coup by requesting additional external funding.<sup>31</sup>

Pretoria started the implementation of the Memorandum in August when the first South African shipment of 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 had not yet taken any concrete steps to meet their demands. STP's seven members of the Monitoring Commission were not appointed until the end of September, but 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 Nigerian 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. He went on to announce his intention of hastening the process of signing the agreement in order to place the mutual security and core national interest of both countries on an even keel. He intended to pursue this with President Menezes.<sup>32</sup> In São Tomé, Foreign Minister "Nando" Rita denied there had been any negotiation 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.

## CONCLUSION

The principal causes of the coup of 16 July 2003 were not the grievances of the army but the demands of the FDC, a political grouping created by members of the 1980s armed opposition to the socialist regime of the MLSTP. Many of these men had also fought in the Buffalo Battalion of the South African apartheid regime before they returned to STP. Back home they found the same people in power whom they had fought many years before. Although the FDC's electoral attempts to gain access to political power were a complete failure, the group's leadership maintained the conviction that the local government was obliged to compensate them materially for the years they had been forced to spend abroad. They placed pressure on successive governments to provide for what they called their reintegration in local society. When the government did not meet these demands they began plotting a coup.

They found a willing partner in Major Fernando Pereira, who had repeatedly denounced the deplorable state of the armed forces and met with no success. Thanks to military aid from the then socialist countries, during the first 15 years of STP's independence the situation of the local army had been relatively good. In addition, the one-party regime paid close attention to the military since it needed the loyalty of the armed forces. However, after the democratic transition the situation of the army deteriorated. Foreign aid for the armed forces dropped drastically, while the democratically elected governments neglected the military since they did not feel dependent on their protection. The deplorable state of the army triggered the first military coup of August 1995. This coup was brought to an end after one week of negotiations mediated by a 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 set out in the agreement were not met.

## The conspirators viewed the reappointment of Das Neves as a violation of the Memorandum

The condition of the army remained largely unchanged and the military continued to feel neglected. At the same time, members of the forces saw that people in power were able to increase their private wealth by corruption. When the government did not listen to the complaints and/or take note of the demands formally submitted by Major Pereira, he became receptive to the plans of the former mercenaries. He became the leader of the action, since the conspirators knew that he enjoyed great authority among rank and file soldiers. This explains their prompt obedience to his orders for the seizure of government buildings and the capture of ministers the soldiers obeyed. Whereas in 1995 President Trovoada was the principal target of the insurgents, this time it was the government.

It was a coup *sui generis* since nobody was hurt during the action, 'normal' life went on in the archipelago and the detained government members were well treated. While in custody in the barracks they could use their cell phones and receive their family members and other visitors. The active involvement of a political party was another remarkable feature of the coup, which also distinguished it from the 1995 action. The conspirators declared at once that their intention was not to take power themselves.

Despite all of this, the takeover was fiercely condemned by the international community. Apparently, the coup leaders had miscalculated the massive pressure that would be brought to bear by Nigeria and other African countries. They seriously feared a foreign military intervention, and accordingly they quickly dropped their intention to form a Council of State and accepted the return of President Menezes. During the negotiations the rebels also refrained from

insisting on their initial demands for a transitional government and early elections. In the end, they obtained only a general amnesty and promises to meet their corporate demands.

From this it is clear that the country's future oil wealth cannot be considered the principal cause of the coup, although it probably influenced its timing. 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 once the first petrodollars started flowing in, the government could buy off any potential opposition.

Nevertheless, 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 that had already 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.

At the domestic level the outcome of the crisis allowed President Menezes to strengthen his position and increase his influence on government policies, at least for the time being. It is unlikely, however, that his local opponents will leave this reinforced position unchallenged. Thanks to the comparatively peaceful character and political culture of STP's population, future competition for power in STP will not necessarily turn violent, despite the possible oil rush.

## NOTES

- 1 allAfrica.com (16 July 2003).
- 2 On this procedure see [www.nigeriasaotomejda.com](http://www.nigeriasaotomejda.com).
- 3 On the 1995 coup see Gerhard Seibert, São Tomé and Príncipe: Military coup as a lesson? *LUSOTOPIE. Enjeux contemporains dans les espaces lusophones* 1996, pp 71-80, Paris: Éditions Karthala. Idem, *Comrades, Clients and Cousins. Colonialism, Socialism and Democratization in São Tomé and Príncipe*, Leiden: CNWS Publications 1999, pp 214-225.
- 4 Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe, founded in 1972, from 1975 to 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 to 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 Kedadjí with only three seats in parliament.
- 7 On STP's controversial oil contracts see J G Frynas, G Wood & RMS Soares de Oliveira, Business and politics in São Tomé e Príncipe: From cocoa monoculture to petro-state, *African Affairs* 102, 2003, pp 51-80; G Seibert, São Tomé e Príncipe: Difíceis renegociações dos contratos de petróleo, *África Hoje* 173, January 2003; KB Alstadheim, I strid med lutfattig land i Afrika, *Dagens Næringsliv*, 13-15 January 2003; K Silverstein, A major stake in tiny African nation, *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 2003; C Madeira, É o petróleo, estúpido!, *O Independente*, 13 June 2003; A Dias Cordeiro, Quem lucra com o ouro negro do arquipélago?, *Público*, 5 July 2003.
- 8 The owner of this company is the Nigerian business tycoon and politician Sir Emeka Offor, who is close to President Obasanjo. Since February 2001 another company owned by Offor, Chrome Energy Corporation, has controlled the Houston-based Environmental Remediation Holding Corporation (ERHC). This company has signed a controversial oil contract with STP, regarded by some as prejudicial to the country's interests. Sir Emeka Offor also funded Menezes's own election campaign in July 2001.
- 9 Besides the ministers Branco and Danquá, the government members were 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).
- 10 During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of Cape Verdians were taken to STP as contract workers on 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, 14 September 2003.
- 13 Personal communication from Alércio Costa, São Tomé, 11 September 2003.
- 14 *Revolução*, 26 September 1989.
- 15 *Diário Téla Nón*, 8 July 2003.
- 16 *Diário Téla Nón*, 26 June 2003.
- 17 *Diário Tela Nón*, 8 August 2003.
- 18 Personal communication, Major Fernando Pereira, São Tomé, 14 September 2003.
- 19 *RDP* 17 July 2003
- 20 *Público*, 18 July 2003.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Personal communication, Major Fernando Perreira, op cit.
- 23 According to President Menezes in an interview with the BBC, 16 July 2003.
- 24 *Diário de Notícias*, 18 July 2003.
- 25 *Público*, 19 July 2003.
- 26 *Público*, 22 July 2003.
- 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 US and South Africa.
- 28 International Monetary Fund, São Tomé and Príncipe – Letter of Intent and Technical Memorandum of Understanding. Washington, DC, 30 September 2002.
- 29 Represented by 20 deputies of the parliamentary group of the MDFM/PCD.
- 30 *O Parvo*, 24 September 2003.
- 31 *Público*, 9 September 2003.
- 32 Letter of President Obasanjo to Senate President Adolphus Wabara entitled "The Coup d'état in São Tomé and the Restoration of Democracy", 4 August 2003.

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## About this paper

São Tomé e Príncipe (STP) has not yet extracted a single drop of oil and is not expected to do so until 2007. Even so, because of its potential oil wealth the recent military coup in the small island-republic has attracted a lot of international attention. Many foreign observers are convinced that oil politics are at the bottom of the takeover. Some have suggested that it was only matter of time before competition for power ahead of the oil rush would degenerate into political instability. There is no doubt that the prospect of oil wealth has been uppermost in the minds of the islanders and has created great hope among them. However, while oil has certainly played a role in recent events, it cannot be regarded as the dominant cause of the coup. Such a view would overlook the role of other domestic factors in the genesis of the coup. This article draws attention to the political developments in STP that formed the background to the coup of 16 July 2003, as well as to the increasing regional and international importance of the tiny country as a future oil producer.

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