

Lopes, Rui , and Natalia Telepneva , ed. Globalizing Independence Struggles of Lusophone Africa: Anticolonial and Postcolonial Politics. London: Zed Books, 2024. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 2 Sep. 2024. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350378339>>.

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Accessed on: Mon Sep 02 2024 15:17:12 Hora de verão da Europa Ocidental

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## Globalizing violence and resistance in São Tomé and Príncipe

Gerhard Seibert and Inês Nascimento Rodrigues

São Tomé and Príncipe is a small two-island nation in the Gulf of Guinea. The archipelago was uninhabited until the late fifteenth century when the Portuguese gradually occupied and colonized the territory with settlers and enslaved Africans. The islands served as a sugar producer and a crucial outpost for the transatlantic slave traffic. After the formal abolition of slavery in São Tomé in 1875, the Portuguese brought in – with different levels of coercion – ‘contract workers’ (*contratados*) from Angola, Mozambique and Cabo Verde, to work in the re-established plantation economy (of coffee and, later, cocoa). The so-called contract work (in practice, forced labour) in the plantations (*roças*) was comparable to slavery, due to its recruitment methods and severe labour conditions.<sup>1</sup> This plantation system was already shaped by key transnational dimensions: on the one hand, the slave-like labour conditions of the *contratados* became the target of a British campaign against ‘slave cocoa’ that in 1909 culminated in a boycott of São Tomé’s cocoa; on the other, Portuguese planters capitalized on the expertise of foreign crop scientists to increase productivity.<sup>2</sup> During the anticolonial struggle, São Tomé’s nationalists denounced the brutal plantation and labour system as part of a wider experience of colonial violence. This legacy played a central role in the state and nation-building process, informing, immediately after independence, the nationalization of the plantations.<sup>3</sup>

As the previous chapters have shown, the Cold War and anti-imperialist thought of the time profoundly shaped the political struggle against Portuguese colonialism and the early post-independence period of Portugal’s former African colonies. The same applies to the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. However, unlike Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, this archipelago – like Cabo Verde – did not experience an armed struggle in its territory. Moreover, until 1974 the local population was practically unacquainted with anticolonial theory. Therefore, only the ensuing international political context, the specific circumstances of Portugal’s decolonization and the cohesion of liberation movements in Portugal’s African colonies can explain that within a few months the left-wing nationalist party – the Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe (MLSTP) – consisting mainly of a small group of nationalists in exile took power mostly uncontested after independence in July 1975.

It is an irony of history that during the Salazar dictatorship the few nationalists from this archipelago and other colonies were politically socialized during their student years in Portugal, where they accessed political ideas inspired by Bandung, the Algerian liberation struggle, the Cuban revolution, pan-Africanism, Marxism and socialism in general, which dominated the debates and discourses within their associations. Many African students were also in touch with Portuguese underground left-wing parties like Movimento de Unidade Democrática (MUD) Juvenil and Partido Comunista Português (PCP). Consequently, many of those students became influenced by Marxism, which Patrick Chabal later categorized as 'at the time the only coherent ideology that opposed the Salazar regime'.<sup>4</sup> Later, this option was reinforced when the regime refused to engage in any form of decolonization.<sup>5</sup> While Portugal's other African colonies continue to receive substantive scholarly attention, the case of São Tomé and Príncipe has been largely ignored even by specialized literature, even though its continuities and particularities can illuminate the extent to which an international framework shaped independence beyond armed conflict. With that in mind, this chapter rebuilds the political history and ideological foundations of the archipelago's first nationalist group, the Comité de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe (CLSTP), created in 1960, and of its 1972 successor, the MLSTP, when analysing the anticolonial and early postcolonial processes of this small and remote archipelago within global history. In São Tomé, the MLSTP never formally adopted Marxism-Leninism, although this was a clear trend in the political project implemented in the first years of independence.<sup>6</sup>

After independence, the country faced significant socioeconomic challenges and was highly susceptible to exogenous events, particularly as far as the then socialist countries are concerned. Several factors prevented a successful reform of the dominant plantations, further weakening the country's economy. The country lacked adequately trained and experienced professionals to properly run the nationalized plantations. Agricultural work on the plantations, which once symbolized slavery and colonial oppression locally, met the same popular resistance as before independence. Additional factors affecting the economy were fluctuations of international cocoa prices, as well as periods of severe drought in the early 1980s, which undermined cocoa production, the country's primary export product. Therefore, the socialist ideology of São Tomé's leaders coincided with the need to diversify the country's foreign relations, both economically and diplomatically, a process with similarities to Cabo Verde, described by Barros, Monteiro and Costa in Chapter 12 of this book. The MLSTP's option was to a certain extent influenced by Cold War dynamics, as it had to rely on both superpowers (and their allies) for the necessary resources and assistance.

The option for a socialist one-party state guided by the socialist countries and the Cuban experience, we argue, was conditioned by Cold War bipolarization, by the consequent socialist option of the liberation movements and by the support of the socialist countries that exported their models to extend their geopolitical influence, as well as by the Portuguese Revolution in 1974/5.<sup>7</sup> However, from the mid-1980s onward, the country's material demands ushered in a change in political direction.

## São Tomé's modest liberation struggle, 1960–74

Due to insularity and limited size, which made it easy for the Portuguese security forces to quash any potential opposition, there was no significant political action, let alone armed resistance against colonialism in São Tomé. Consequently, the liberation struggle was fought exclusively from exile in the political and diplomatic arenas. São Tomé and Príncipe's first nationalist group demanding independence, the CLSTP, was created in September 1960 by Miguel Trovoada and João Guadalupe de Ceita, two Santomean students in Portugal, while they were on holidays in São Tomé, together with local friends Leonel d'Alva, António 'Oné' Pires dos Santos and a few others.<sup>8</sup>

Because the foundation of Portuguese colonialism in the archipelago relied on the exploitation of *contratados* from other African colonies through forced labour, it is not surprising that questions regarding the plantation system were one of the committee's central axes. The CLSTP's political programme demanded the abolition of privileges for whites; the establishment of a republican, democratic, secular, anticolonial and anti-imperialistic regime; and the abolition of forced labour. Further demands included the introduction of an eight-hour workday, free medical care, gradual abolition of unemployment, literacy campaigns and compulsory primary education. Regarding the plantation economy, the programme called for an agrarian reform, the gradual development of planning, the end of agricultural monoculture and the mechanization of agriculture.

Finally, it advocated the principles of an independent foreign policy committed to African unity and non-alignment to the military blocks.<sup>9</sup> Miguel Trovoada, CLSTP chairman, represented the group at the CONCP's foundation meeting in April 1961. Concerning São Tomé and Príncipe, the CONCP's final resolution demanded Portugal's expulsion from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and denounced manoeuvres to create a hostile environment between the Santomeans and the African *contratados* on the *roças*, thus impeding their unity of action against the common enemy.<sup>10</sup> This point referred to the fact that generally the local creole population refused plantation work and lived socially and spatially segregated from the *contratados* confined in the plantations. At the time the islands had a total population of about 63,700 inhabitants, of whom 22,600 were plantation workers from Angola, Mozambique and Cabo Verde.

While in Portugal's other colonies diplomacy was a counterpart to war on the ground, in this case the international arena was the very core of the liberation struggle. In 1961, Trovoada and Carlos Graça established a CLSTP delegation in Libreville, Gabon. At the same time, another group of the CLSTP settled in Accra at the invitation of Ghana's president Kwame Nkrumah, who had established a Bureau of African Affairs that hosted several African liberation movements. In contrast to the movements in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, the CLSTP lacked any rival organization. It was also unable to carry out anticolonial actions in the islands themselves where the Portuguese secret police PIDE (International and State Defence Police) easily maintained tight control. Notwithstanding the absence of significant political actions at home, thanks to the support of other CONCP members, in 1962 the UN General Assembly officially recognized the CLSTP as the sole legitimate representative of the Santomean people.

In September that year, Trovoada addressed the UN Special Committee on Territories under Portuguese Administration where he denounced Portuguese colonial rule in the archipelago.<sup>11</sup> In May 1963, in Addis Ababa, Trovoada and Graça participated as observers in the foundation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Subsequently the OAU recognized the CLSTP as liberation movement, and its Liberation Committee provided the CLSTP office in Libreville with financial aid.

Amidst internal strife, the CLSTP's activities were scarce, and in November 1965, PIDE attributed the absence of nationalist agitation in São Tomé to the insular situation and a lack of organization of the few nationalist-minded individuals.<sup>12</sup> Following their expulsion from Accra after the 1966 military coup, São Tomé's nationalists exiled in different countries met again only in July 1972 when eight nationalists gathered in Santa Isabel (now Malabo) to reconstitute the CLSTP as MLSTP. As Trovoada's leadership aspirations lacked consensus, Manuel Pinto da Costa, who had earned a PhD in economics in East Berlin in 1971, emerged as a compromise candidate and was elected MLSTP secretary general.<sup>13</sup> Like his comrades, Pinto da Costa was part of São Tomé's small, educated elite. Following secondary education in Luanda and Lisbon, he arrived in East Berlin in the early 1960s. His training in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) convinced him that a socialist transition was viable in his country.

In January 1973 the OUA Liberation Committee officially recognized the MLSTP.<sup>14</sup> However, it is worth noting that the Directorate General of Security (DGS, which replaced the PIDE in 1969) in São Tomé was, apparently, unaware of the existence of the MLSTP at the end of 1973. At the time the DGS's fortnightly report stated that 'although we have not received much information from abroad, we have the impression that the CLSTP [*sic*] is inactive or disorganised'.<sup>15</sup> The lack of awareness of the existence of MLSTP on the islands would change only after Portugal's Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974.

### The struggle for independence arrives in São Tomé, 1974–5

On 12 July 1975, the country became independent under MLSTP leadership. When the national flag was raised for the first time and MLSTP secretary general Manuel Pinto da Costa, the country's first president, gave his inaugural speech, the message was one of revolution and unity. The symbolism contained in this statement, in the presence of hundreds of Santomeans and a Portuguese delegation led by Admiral Rosa Coutinho, is not surprising, considering the long history of colonial oppression and the troubled months on the islands following the Carnation Revolution.

The MLSTP – recognized by the Portuguese authorities as the sole interlocutor in October 1974 – set up the transitional government on 21 December the same year. The period from May 1974 to July 1975 was however characterized by diverse conflicts and tensions within the MLSTP, between the MLSTP and other projects as well as by the initial absence of political identification between the MLSTP and the islands' population.<sup>16</sup> Soon after the Carnation Revolution, two groups emerged, the Frente

Popular Livre (FPL) in May and the Associação Cívica Pró-MLSTP in June, which was an instrument of the MLSTP since its leadership decided to remain in Libreville.

The FPL was short-lived, particularly because it was advocating a federalist solution for the archipelago.<sup>17</sup> Moreover they were intimidated and marginalized by their opponents, who denounced them as reactionaries, neocolonialists and enemies of the people. Finally, in August of the same year, the FPL announced its dissolution and the integration of its members into the MLSTP.<sup>18</sup> On 28 August 1974, MLSTP secretary general Pinto da Costa spoke for the first time directly to the population in the radio programme 'The Voice of the People of São Tomé and Príncipe' broadcast from Libreville. He said that the military coup in Portugal had created better conditions for the anticolonial struggle but had not brought independence. He stressed that the MLSTP would struggle not for jobs in the Portuguese colonial administration but for total independence. Further he praised the FPL's dissolution and invoked the unity of all nationalist forces under MLSTP leadership, since a divided people could not defeat the enemy. Echoing the traditional line of CONCP's original movements, he also declared that the struggle was directed against Portuguese colonial oppression, but not against the Portuguese people.<sup>19</sup>

The other competing project would become the Associação Cívica Pró-MLSTP, which intended, in the absence of the party leadership in the territory, to function as its 'legal arm' in the struggle for total independence. Since June 1974, successively more than twenty young students arrived from Lisbon to wage the political struggle. They had been politically socialized by the ideas of pan-Africanism, black power, Marxism and Maoism. Thanks to the determination and militancy of these students, they succeeded in mobilizing the local population and *contratados* alike. But regardless of their participation in the independence struggle, the African plantation workers remained largely absent in the actual political process.

This group of young educated people, inspired by Marxism-Leninism and imbued with a revolutionary discourse, endeavoured to energize a set of actions among the population, from strikes and demonstrations to the invasion of agricultural properties and boycotts to commercial shops, which generated fear among the about two thousand Portuguese residents and antagonism with the newly appointed governor (later high commissioner) António Pires Veloso.<sup>20</sup> One of the most sensitive issues in which they became involved, and which eventually led to the Cívica's rupture with the MLSTP, was related to the Caçadores 7, a colonial troop made up of Santomean soldiers. The students of the Associação Cívica (and two ministers in the transitional government) wanted this military contingent – whom they considered reactionary – dismantled and replaced by a popular militia. Pires Veloso refused to do so, threatening to anticipate the independence date that was defined in the Algiers Agreement, signed on 26 November 1974, and to cut Portuguese funding to the islands after independence, among others. The Cívica wanted to get rid of the troops they saw as a threat for a future socialist regime, whereas Pires Veloso wanted to prevent a (perceived) radical leftist regime after independence. Faced with this situation, MLSTP leader Pinto da Costa returned earlier to São Tomé in March 1975, at which point he gave in to Pires Veloso to neutralize and dissolve the Cívica, which had become a threat to his own power aspirations.<sup>21</sup>

If, during the struggle for independence in 1974–5 the actions of the extinct FPL were recurrently connoted as imperialist, the participation of the *Cívica* in the liberation struggle became, in turn, at least partially silenced during the MLSTP single party regime, so that its elder leadership emerged as the main symbol in the archipelago's liberation from colonialism. In a territory that achieved independence without resorting to armed struggle, in addition to the elections held on the eve of independence, the legitimacy of the MLSTP was sustained, above all, on two axes. On the one hand, in mythical and foundational narratives centred around the binomial of heroism and sacrifice, and considered precursors of the Santomeans anticolonial resistance, such as the Batepá massacre in 1953, when dozens of Santomeans were killed by colonists mobilized by Governor Carlos Gorgulho (a national holiday was established commemorating this event after independence).<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, MLSTP's legitimacy also rested on memorializing its liberation struggle credentials. While there has never been a war in São Tomé, the figure of the combatant remains central, even if this combatant does not carry a weapon 'in his hand', as alluded to in the lyrics of the Santomean national anthem composed by the renowned poet and nationalist Alda Espírito Santo.<sup>23</sup> The case of the two men who accidentally died on 6 September 1974 are a particular example of this move. They are the only fatalities registered during the independence struggle. On that day, Santomean soldiers, alarmed by demonstrators, discovered weapons hidden in boxes loaded on a lorry in front of a bakery in the city. Alarmed by the agitation among the about two hundred people present, the Military Police appeared on the scene and fired in the air. After the incident the stevedore Manuel Rodrigues Pita known as *Giovani* was found dead hit by a stray bullet in a hollow some seventy metres away from the bakery. On the same day, Paulo Ferreira, a young Santomean soldier, died after falling from a moving jeep because he was overtired following a long mission. After independence, 6 September became a holiday called Day of National Heroes (in 1980 renamed Day of the Armed Forces) in homage of the two men who lost their life by accidents on that day.

The conflict between the elder MLSTP leadership and the *Cívica* was not only ideological, but to some extent also generational since most of the student activists were in their twenties. In the end it was a power struggle that was decided in favour of the moderate faction thanks to the active intervention of Pires Veloso who succeeded in turning most of the people against the *Cívica*. In addition to Pinto da Costa's eagerness to ensure his leadership, Pires Veloso wished to prevent a group he labelled 'radicals' from gaining power.

### São Tomé's socialist one-party state, 1975–90

Like the movements who came to power in Portugal's other former African colonies, MLSTP adopted a political and economic model based on a sole ruling socialist party as the guiding force of state and society, and a centralized planned economy.<sup>24</sup> At the time of independence São Tomé and Príncipe had a population of about 80,000 people. Socialism would coexist with other currents of political thought, as well as with the

characteristics of small island states, such as the prevalence of face-to-face interactions and a tendency to personalize and patronize the political process.<sup>25</sup>

The ruling party selected the national flag, based on its own flag with the pan-African colours of Ethiopia, as well as the national holidays and historic heroes. It renamed Christmas Day on 25 December 'Day of the Family' to emphasize the socialist state's secular nature.<sup>26</sup> For the same reason, the MLSTP replaced the islands' traditional local Catholic feasts by secular district festivals organized by the party. Many Portuguese names of streets and those of schools were replaced by the names of progressive African leaders.<sup>27</sup> However, the MLSTP did not assign streets the names of non-African revolutionary leaders as, for example, FRELIMO did in Maputo.

In foreign policy, São Tomé and Príncipe's government looked to the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) as natural political allies, and while officially non-aligned, socialist states were also regarded as such. At least until 1989, Portugal was the only non-socialist country with a resident ambassador in the country, while the Soviet Union, GDR, Cuba, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Angola maintained embassies in São Tomé. Governmental trips also reflected São Tomé's ties with socialist countries. In December 1975 President Pinto da Costa made his first official visits to Romania, PRC and North Korea.<sup>28</sup> Prime Minister Miguel Trovoada paid visits to Cuba in September 1976 and the USSR the following month.<sup>29</sup> In April 1977 Pinto da Costa visited the GDR.<sup>30</sup>

The following year São Tomé signed its first economic cooperation agreement with East Berlin, while the MLSTP endorsed a partisan cooperation arrangement with the ruling United Socialist Party of Germany (SED). The socialist countries were also the most important providers of higher education training. Until 1984 more than seven hundred students from the islands had been sent for technical and university courses abroad, predominantly to Cuba, the USSR, GDR, Romania and other socialist countries.<sup>31</sup> When they returned home, they were provided with jobs in the expanding state apparatus and state-owned enterprises. Particularly the students who departed during the first years after independence could advance considerably after their return. Many would become government ministers and high officeholders in the state administration or occupied key positions in the state-run economy.<sup>32</sup>

The USSR and Cuba supported the country less economically and more on a technical level (health, education, security, etc.). The USSR provided mainly military aid, advisors and training. In 1981, São Tomé and Moscow signed a fishing agreement that allowed the Soviets to fish and do maritime scientific research in the archipelago's waters. Also included in the agreement was assistance in training national cadres and feasibility studies for the establishment of a joint Soviet-Santomean fisheries enterprise.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, it was reported in the Portuguese press that Soviet technicians would be setting up a radar station near the Monte Café property.<sup>34</sup> The ties with socialist Cuba were more central. The MLSTP looked to Cuba, a tropical island with a plantation economy which had successfully constructed a socialist society and economy, as an example. Still in 1975 the first group of Santomean students left for Cuba and in July the following year eighteen soldiers were sent there for military training. When Trovoada visited Cuba in October 1976 he told his hosts that he was convinced that Cuba would succeed in constructing a communist society.<sup>35</sup>



During a one-week visit to Cuba in November 1978 Pinto da Costa was bestowed by Fidel Castro with the highest National Order 'José Martí'. In his acceptance speech Pinto da Costa assured his host that his own country was also 'determined to advance on the luminous path of constructing a society without exploited or exploiters'.<sup>36</sup> At that time some 140 Cuban experts had already moved to São Tomé, creating a parallel administration on all decision-making levels.

Among the PALOP, Angola was the most important ally. It provided São Tomé with fuel supplies at preferential prices that were significantly below world market prices. In addition, for years Angola's national airline Transportes Aéreos de Angola (TAAG) maintained the only regular flight connection to and from São Tomé. In 1978, at the MLSTP regime's request, Angola sent troops to São Tomé to protect the local regime against a supposed external imperialist threat.<sup>37</sup> Contrary to the times of colonialism, when the Portuguese were practically the only foreigners in the islands, the independent nation became increasingly internationalized, in the first fifteen years predominantly with people from the then-socialist countries.

In spite of a prevalence of political and diplomatic ties with the socialist bloc and the Portuguese and French-speaking African countries, São Tomé's foreign economic trade was strongly engaged with Western capitalist countries (in particular with Portugal, but also with the Netherlands, the main destinations of national exports, among others).<sup>38</sup> If in July 1975, São Tomé and Príncipe joined the OAU and implemented its resolution that prohibited South African Airways and other airlines flying to or from South Africa to enter its national airspace, in August that year São Tomé submitted its application for membership of the Lomé Convention, a trade agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC). In September 1975 the archipelago became the 140th member state of the UN. São Tomé's first foreign embassy was opened August 1975 in Lisbon, while the first bilateral cooperation agreement with Portugal was signed in December that year. As part of this agreement, in early 1976 the first seventeen of a group of thirty-two Portuguese teachers arrived in São Tomé.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding nation-state-building processes, 'without openly espousing Marxism-Leninism as an ideology', the one-party regime adopted 'the design of "social revolution" and anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist unity'.<sup>40</sup> The newly independent country's political Constitution and its successive amendments reflect this commitment. At independence the Constituent Assembly authorized the MLSTP Political Bureau to approve a provisional Fundamental Law of twenty-two articles. Under this law São Tomé and Príncipe became a one-party state where the seven-member MLSTP Political Bureau exercised the sovereign powers of the state.<sup>41</sup> In November 1975 the Political Bureau and the Constituent Assembly approved the political constitution. The preamble defined the construction of a society free from exploitation of man by man as the outcome of a democratic and popular revolution guided by the MLSTP.

Under this constitution the MLSTP had the duty to determine the state's political orientation. Private property was not abolished, but state property was considered the preponderant driving force of the national economy. The legislative power was vested in a thirty-three-member Popular National Assembly (ANP) with a four-year term that held two sessions per year. Its members were not elected but composed of the seven members of the Political Bureau, four government members, thirteen local party

committee delegates, two representatives of the women's organization and the party youth, and five capable citizens appointed by the MLSTP. The ANP elected the head of state for a four-year term and appointed the members of the Supreme Court proposed by the MLSTP. In its inaugural session in December 1975 the ANP duly elected Pinto da Costa as president.<sup>42</sup>

By then, almost all Portuguese settlers had left the islands, depriving the country's administration and economy of trained and experienced personnel. Since Portuguese colonialism had prevented adequate school education and professional training for Africans, at the time of independence there were very few nationals with a university education. Many of the locals who replaced the departed Portuguese in the public administration, the plantation economy and trade were inadequately prepared for their jobs. The plantation economy based on cocoa monoculture remained the dominant sector of the national economy, since it employed about half of the wage earners and provided the bulk of the country's export income. The MLSTP regime aimed to use the export income generated by the cocoa plantations to diversify the economy and to finance social programmes. Already in a message in February 1975, the MLSTP leadership announced that 'with cocoa money we shall be able to create hospitals, crèches, schools, and contribute to the establishment of certain industries, which will not have any other objective than to serve the people, and consequently the workers themselves'.<sup>43</sup>

After independence most Angolan and Mozambican plantation workers returned to their home countries, whereas the about nine thousand Cabo Verdeans did not leave.<sup>44</sup> They remained in the estates due to a tacit agreement between the governments in Praia and São Tomé, since at the time the former was not in the condition to receive thousands of returnees, while the latter needed their labour for the plantation economy. As during colonialism, despite changed ownership after independence the local population did not accept plantation work and therefore refused to replace the repatriated *contratados* on the agricultural estates.<sup>45</sup>

Two months after independence, President Manuel Pinto da Costa had announced the nationalization of the plantations, perceived as the symbol of colonial oppression. On 30 September 1975, at a mass meeting in the capital, Pinto da Costa proclaimed the nationalization without compensation of the twenty-three largest Portuguese-owned plantations that were placed under the management of so-called Provisional Administrative Commissions. In October 1978 another twenty-seven privately owned plantations were nationalized and in March the following year the nationalized estates were reorganized into fifteen large State Agriculture and Livestock Enterprises (EEA), whose total area ranged from 2,370 ha to 17,054 ha. The area of the newly created agricultural state companies, including two in Príncipe, covered 92 per cent of the archipelago's total land area. The MLSTP praised the nationalization of the Portuguese-owned plantations as 'a great victory of the forces of popular emancipation over the greatest symbol of colonial oppression'<sup>46</sup> and declared 30 September a national holiday (initially called 'Anniversary of the opening of the New Front in the Struggle for Economic Independence', then in 1980 renamed 'Agricultural Reform Day').

While their social status remained practically unchanged, plantation workers had thirty days of annual leave and could leave the estates outside working hours.

The state also nationalized a few existing companies in the hotel, beverages, energy, fuel, construction, insurance and telecommunication sectors and established new companies in the fishing, poultry, clothing, pharmaceutical and ceramics sectors. The regime also set up a retail trade network of so-called *Lojas do Povo* (People's Shops) in abandoned buildings, which sold essential goods at subsidized prices. Consequently, the state legally controlled all economic activities by fixing prices and salaries, handling imports and exports and marketing consumer goods.

However, because of various constraints, including poor management and a lack of a sufficient number of national cadres during first years of independence, the planned socioeconomic transformations did not achieve the desired results. The Ministry of Agriculture, in charge of the management of state-owned estates, appointed directors from the capital without agricultural or management experience. It soon became evident that neither the ministry nor the directors were prepared to efficiently allocate labour, inputs and equipment to the large estates. At the same time, despite the regime's socialist rhetoric, the status of plantation workers did not improve after independence since they were still widely perceived as second-class citizens, thus mirroring the sociocultural and spatial segregation between Santomeans (*forros*) and the African plantation workers during colonialism.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the *roças*' nationalization, little had changed within their hierarchy: most positions of responsibility were occupied by members of the MLSTP; more technical intermediate positions, such as foremen, as well as more administrative positions, were left with those who already held them before independence, and the former *contratados* continued to have the same place as agricultural labourers of the plantations, that is, the same symbolic and structural place of social invisibility.<sup>48</sup>

As a result, the number of plantation workers steadily declined since they abandoned the ailing estates and migrated to the capital. In addition, the state failed to provide adequate investments for nationalized plantations. Thus, instead of the announced rupture, what existed was a system of continuity with the colonial years, where the *roça* remained a structure that hierarchized society and its various segments, assigning agricultural workers the space at the base of the pyramid, even though their presence was understood as fundamental for the islands' economic sustenance.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the agricultural sector was underfunded. In fact, between 1975 and 1987 only 22 per cent of total investments were allocated to the agricultural sector.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the country's cocoa production began to drop when productivity decreased, and the original infrastructure had been run down. Consequently, São Tomé's export revenue fell from \$27 million in 1979 to \$9 million in 1981. In 1985, in his official address on Independence Day, President Pinto da Costa admitted that his regime had lacked both adequate structures and technical means to transform the plantations into an instrument of socioeconomic development of the new society.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the poor performance of cocoa production – due to a combination of various factors, including a lack of qualified personnel, mismanagement and a severe drought in 1982 that exacerbated the problem – Santomean officials used Cold War alliances to assert some material claims, as Immanuel Rafael Harisch demonstrates. For example, they secured a barter agreement with the GDR, from 1982 to 1987, fixing prices on cocoa that were approximately 10 per cent higher than the global market

price.<sup>52</sup> It is, however, difficult to ascertain how the actual implementation of this barter agreement took place and whether cocoa exports were actually redirected to the GDR. For example, Vogt claims that the GDR did not import the cocoa shipments, but sold them in Rotterdam to satisfy its foreign exchange needs.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, in the context of rapid declining prices of cocoa and ‘insinuating “socialist solidarity” against a devastating capitalist system’, in 1982 São Tomé would still appeal to its socialist allies as natural partners, a role that they soon proved to be unprepared (or unwilling) to play.<sup>54</sup>

Other sectors of the economy suffered from the same problems as the agriculture, namely a lack of adequately trained personnel, maladministration and clientelism. Moreover, many state-owned companies were damaged by corruption and fraud by their own management. As a result, none of the economic sectors accomplished the objectives established in the regime’s consecutive economic plans. Most public enterprises became loss making, further worsening the state finances that were already negatively affected by the increasing debts of the large agricultural enterprises. The precarious economic situation led the MLSTP regime to review its foreign policy in search of aid, which the socialist countries were not able or inclined to provide. In turn, the political price for the aid was a rapprochement with the Western countries and the abandonment of the Soviet model.

In the meantime, Pinto da Costa progressively removed his opponents and rivals after independence, while the MLSTP claimed to have discovered several alleged attempted coups to topple the Santomean president. The Special Court for Counter-Revolutionary Actions (TEACR) – established in December 1975<sup>55</sup> – tried and sentenced several alleged coup plotters to prison terms ranging from a few months to twenty-four years. At the same time, his regime set up militias, called Grupos de Vigilância e Defesa Popular (GVDP), to defend the country against an alleged external imperialist aggression allied with internal reactionaries. In 1979, the erstwhile close personal relationship between Pinto da Costa and Trovoada became increasingly affected by the power struggles within the regime. In April, Pinto da Costa demoted Trovoada from prime minister to minister of economy, cooperation and tourism. In September, Trovoada was arrested under the accusation of complicity in the so-called census riots of the previous month. For two days, people demonstrated against the MLSTP regime since they had perceived the population census as the regime’s attempt to force the local population to work on the nationalized plantations.

In addition, people feared that the state intended to confiscate their domestic animals and other private properties. More than a hundred demonstrators were detained by the security forces. The MLSTP leadership explained the cause of the anti-government demonstrations by two intertwined factors: the poor living conditions of the population and their lack of information and deficient political and ideological education. Upon the removal of Trovoada, the regime became more repressive, while Pinto da Costa gained greater personal power. Trovoada remained in prison without charge or trial until July 1981 when he was allowed to leave for Paris into exile.<sup>56</sup>

The MLSTP’s second extraordinary assembly held in December 1981 reflected the increasing political and economic problems. The delegates regretted that not all party members were the most conscious, most decisive, and most responsible people who

were truly engaged in constructing a dynamic and prosperous society without the exploitation of man by man. Nevertheless, given the existing antagonist interests within society, it was decided to create the conditions for the progressive transformation of the MLSTP into a vanguard party of the working class.<sup>57</sup> At the party's third extraordinary assembly in December 1982 Pinto da Costa accused the local petty bourgeoisie of exploiting its privileged positions within the administration and the state companies and of infiltrating the MLSTP to seize political power. He criticized a low educational and ideological level of most party members and a prevalent mentality that only valued gaining a position within the state administration as advancement. Concerning the economy, Pinto da Costa admitted that the production costs of the state-run companies were higher than the value of their output, while they were plagued by theft, fraud, misappropriation of public property, hoarding and speculation. Despite the problems denounced, the delegates approved that the ultimate political goal still was to end the exploitation of man by man by constructing socialism.<sup>58</sup>

At that time, Pinto da Costa had reached the height of his personal power. He was simultaneously head of state and government, party leader and commander of the armed forces. Only exiled opponents challenged Pinto da Costa's autocracy. The most important exiled opposition group was the Frente de Resistência Nacional de São Tomé e Príncipe (FRNSTP), based in Libreville, where it was supported by President Omar Bongo.<sup>59</sup> However, while his personal dictatorship had become uncontested, the worsening economic crisis forced his regime to abandon Soviet-style socialism as an adequate model for national development. One of the first signs of political change appeared on Independence Day 1984 when Pinto da Costa publicly admitted the severe problems in the economy. He confessed that the regime's domestic and foreign policy options had not always corresponded to the country's realities.<sup>60</sup>

As the socialist countries were unable and unwilling to provide adequate support to overcome the crisis, the MLSTP regime approached Western countries, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In December 1984 São Tomé accepted the so-called Berlin Clause, according to which West Berlin was an integral part of West Germany. São Tomé's new foreign policy was rewarded by two round-table conferences held in December 1985 and May 1986 where Western donors promised the country development aid totalling almost \$75 million. In turn in 1986 Pinto da Costa consecutively visited France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, the United States and the UN in New York. At the UN General Assembly São Tomé embarrassed its former allies by voting in favour of a motion in demand of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.<sup>61</sup> In 1987 the MLSTP regime signed an agreement with the IMF on a Structural Adjustment Programme.

Another proof of political reorientation was the MLSTP's renouncement of Marxism and the regime's reconciliation with former dissidents. At the MLSTP's 2nd Ordinary Assembly in September 1985 the party was redefined as a broad front open to all citizens and dissociated itself from Marxist ideology. In 1986, Pinto da Costa even declared that most people, including the MLSTP leadership, knew nothing about Marxism and that the association with it was more an opportunist attitude than anything else.<sup>62</sup> At a meeting of the MLSTP Central Committee in October 1987 various resolutions were adopted that explicitly sought to add political reform measures to

the so-called structural adjustment of the economy. In the following years, Pinto da Costa made several government reshuffles in line with his new political orientation. In 1988, he appointed Carlos Graça (who had returned from exile in Gabon) as foreign minister of the newly formed government, which was led by a prime minister for the first time since 1979, when Trovoada had been deposed. At the same time Pinto da Costa reconciled with the pro-Western Omar Bongo. Finally in early December 1989, less than a month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the MLSTP held a national conference with the participation of non-members and local opponents that pioneered the introduction of multiparty democracy and a market economy.

This far-reaching decision came as a surprise since initially the MLSTP only intended to change the ideological orientation of the one-party system but not to abolish it. At the PALOP summit in Praia later that month the other four countries unanimously disapproved the MLSTP's decisions as unsuitable in the African context. In contrast, Portugal, France and the United States explicitly welcomed the MLSTP's decisions. Despite fellow PALOP reluctance, political and economic liberalization seemed inevitable after the end of the Cold War. In August 1990 a popular referendum was held to ratify a new democratic constitution elaborated by the MLSTP with Portuguese assistance. A large majority of 81 per cent of the 42,000 voters approved the new democratic multiparty constitution.

## Conclusion

From the beginning, São Tomé and Príncipe's small group of nationalists in exile shared the dominant political thoughts of the main liberation movements of Portugal's other African colonies (since 1961 organized in the CONCP). The members of CONCP had not only a common enemy, but also a common objective: the construction of a socialist society. While the MLSTP's ultimate goal was to build a society without the exploration of man by man, it would never claim to be Marxist. It is important to note that while the MLSTP was recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Santomean people by both the UN and the OAU, the small group remained largely unknown in the archipelago. The Carnation Revolution quickly shifted the landscape, creating an opportunity for political action towards the islands' formal independence. A group of left-wing students who had returned from Lisbon successfully waged the struggle on behalf of the MLSTP, whose leadership remained in Libreville. Alternative projects of a federation with Portugal that initially existed in Lisbon and São Tomé became quickly unfeasible given the international and domestic context of Portugal's decolonization at the time.

However, soon after the transitional government formed by the MLSTP had assumed office, the question of the dissolution of the local colonial troops opposed the different factions within the party. With the assistance of Portugal's High Commissioner, the moderate faction was able to settle the conflict in their favour. Ironically, after attaining independence, this moderate faction embraced increasingly the socialist rhetoric and implemented policies that would appease their allies from the socialist countries, who provided most of the development aid.

Due to a number of shortcomings and despite its ideological commitment to socialism, the MLSTP was mainly driven by pragmatism. The result was that socialist ideology could not be implemented socially and politically in a more consolidated manner. Consequently, when the regime's economic policies failed, it was easier for Pinto da Costa to instrumentalize socialist rhetoric to legitimize his growing power. Afterward, when his regime was no longer sustainable economically, he decided to drop the socialist option and replace the socialist one-party state by liberal democracy. The MLSTP regime's shift away from the socialist model was a gradual and peaceful process largely pursued by the party leadership that lasted about five years. The political transition started years before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the decision to introduce multiparty democracy was opposed by the other PALOP countries at a summit in Praia in December 1989. The decline of the Soviet Bloc in the 1980s and external and domestic pressures did not initiate the process of political change but had given it its final direction.

## Notes

- Inês Nascimento Rodrigues's work on this chapter was supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology under contract 2022.08058.CEECIND/CP1754/CT0004.
1. Pablo Eyzaguirre, 'Small Farmers and Estates in São Tomé' (PhD diss., Yale University, 1986).
  2. See Catherine Higgs, *Chocolate Islands: Cocoa, Slavery, and Colonial Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012); Marta Macedo, 'Coffee on the Move: Technology, Labour and Race in the Making of a Transatlantic Plantation System', *Mobilities* 16, no. 2 (2021): 262–72.
  3. Marina Berthet, 'São Tomé e Príncipe: reflexões sobre alguns aspetos da sua história agrícola no pós-independência', *Estudos Ibero-Americanos* 42, no. 3 (2016): 968.
  4. Patrick Chabal, David Birmingham, Joshua Forrest, Malyn Newitt, Gerhard Seibert and Elisa Silva Andrade, *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (London: Hurst, 2002), 59.
  5. Patrick Chabal, 'The Postcolonial State in Portuguese-Speaking Africa', *Portuguese Studies* 8 (1992): 191.
  6. Michel Cahen, 'Arquipélagos da alternância: a vitória da oposição nas ilhas de Cabo Verde e São Tomé e Príncipe', *Revista Internacional de Estudos Africanos* 14–15 (1991): 113–54.
  7. As recalled by the MLSTP's leader at the time, thirty-five years after independence: Manuel Pinto da Costa, *Terra Firme* (Porto: Afrontamento, 2011).
  8. Gerhard Seibert, *Comrades, Clients and Cousins: Colonialism, Socialism and Democratization in São Tomé and Príncipe* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 89; Carlos Espírito Santo, *O Nacionalismo Político São-Tomense* (Lisbon: Colibri, 2012), 222.
  9. *História da República Democrática de São Tomé e Príncipe: Esboço do desenvolvimento social, económico, político e cultural* (S. Tomé: 1985), 308.
  10. Ronald H. Chilcote, *Emerging Nationalism in Portuguese Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 511. For ILO as a site of imperial resilience, which was used by the *Estado Novo* to restrain juridical demands and defend its imperial legitimacy, see Míguel Bandeira Jerónimo and José Pedro Monteiro, 'Colonial Labour

- Internationalised: Portugal and the Decolonization Momentum (1945–1975)', *International History Review* 42, no. 3 (2020): 485–504.
11. *Ibid.*, 325.
  12. Arquivo Nacional, Torre do Tombo (ANTT), PIDE subdelegation in São Tomé, report no. 21, 1–15 November 1965.
  13. His PhD thesis is on the utilization of foreign capital in planned industrialization.
  14. Augusto Nascimento, 'A inelutável independência ou os (in)esperados ventos de mudança em São Tomé e Príncipe', in *O adeus ao Império: 40 anos de descolonização portuguesa*, ed. Fernando Rosas, Mário Machaqueiro and Pedro Aires Oliveira (Lisbon: Nova Vega, 2015), 181.
  15. ANTT, DGS subdelegation in São Tomé, report no. 23, 1–15 December 1973.
  16. Hilda Varela, '“¡Noche de gran luna y destino ignorado!” La historia política de la Republica de São Tomé y Príncipe (1975–1996)', *Studios de Asia y Africa* 32, no. 3 (1997): 479.
  17. Nascimento, 'A inelutável independência', 182.
  18. Gerhard Seibert, 'A Política num Micro-Estado. São Tomé e Príncipe, ou os conflitos pessoais e políticos na génese dos partidos políticos', *Lusotopie* 2 (1995): 243.
  19. Cruz, *S. Tomé*, 86–9.
  20. Seibert, 'A Política', 242; Nascimento, 'A inelutável independência', 182. Pires Veloso arrived in July 1974 as governor. In the Algiers Agreement, his function was renamed high commissioner.
  21. Nascimento, 'A inelutável independência', 187. See also Augusto Nascimento, 'A Farsa da Tropa Nativa na Transição para a Independência em São Tomé e Príncipe', *Revista Tempo, Espaço, Linguagem* 7, no. 2 (2016): 230–73.
  22. On Batepá, see Gerhard Seibert, 'The February 1953 Massacre in São Tomé: Crack in the Salazarist Image of Multiracial Harmony and Impetus for Nationalist Demands for Independence', *Portuguese Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (2002): 53–80; Inês Nascimento Rodrigues, *Espectros de Batepá. Memórias e narrativas do 'Massacre de 1953' em São Tomé e Príncipe* (Porto: Afrontamento, 2018).
  23. Inês Nascimento Rodrigues and Miguel Cardina, 'Who Is the Combatant? A Diachronic Reading Based on Cape Verde and São Tomé e Príncipe', in *The Portuguese Colonial War and the African Liberation Struggles: Memory, Politics, and Uses of the Past*, ed. Miguel Cardina (London: Routledge, 2023), 177–91.
  24. Chabal et al., *A History*, 26.
  25. Gerhard Seibert, 'São Tomé e Príncipe', in *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (London: Hurst, 2002), 291.
  26. Law no. 2/76, 22 December.
  27. E.g., Law Decree no. 14/76, 15 April, and Resolution no. 2/87, 31 July.
  28. *Revolução* no. 28, 15 October 1976.
  29. *Revolução*, special number, 21 December 1976.
  30. Espírito Santo, *A Primeira*, 189–91.
  31. Seibert, *Comrades*, 132.
  32. *Ibid.*
  33. *Revolução* no. 124, 12 December 1981.
  34. Alexander Sloop, 'Soviet Military Presence Reported in African Archipelago', *United Press International*, 20 March 1984, [www.upi.com/Archives/1984/03/20/Soviet-military-presence-reported-in-African-archipelago/2545448606800/](http://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/03/20/Soviet-military-presence-reported-in-African-archipelago/2545448606800/).
  35. *Revolução* no. 28, 15 October 1976.
  36. *Revolução* no. 46, 23 February 1979.



37. They would remain in São Tomé until the first multiparty elections in 1991. Cf. Seibert, *Comrades*, 145.
38. Tony Hodges and Malyn Newitt, *São Tomé and Príncipe: From Plantation Colony to Microstate* (Boulder: Westview, 1988).
39. *Revolução*, no. 14, 16 January 1976.
40. Nascimento, 'A inelutável independência', 189.
41. Seibert, *Comrades*, 137.
42. *Ibid.*, 138.
43. Ceita, *Memórias*, 249.
44. Eyzaguirre, 'Small Farmers', 350.
45. Cahen, 'Arquipélagos', 125–6.
46. Seibert, *Comrades*, 161.
47. Eyzaguirre, 'Small Farmers', 363. 'Forros' is a category that refers to the offspring of freed enslaved people, and it also includes the 'children of the land' and their successors, that is, the descendants from a creole elite of the first European and African settlers of the islands. As such, the latter would come to occupy intermediate social positions during Portuguese colonialism, holding posts in the colony's public administration and/or owning plantations.
48. Berthet, 'S. Tomé', 971.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Seibert, *Comrades*, 166.
51. *Ibid.*, 169.
52. E.g., Immanuel Rafael Harisch, 'Bartering Coffee, Cocoa and W50 Trucks: The Trade Relationships of the GDR, Angola and São Tomé in a Comparative Perspective', *Global Histories* 3, no. 2 (2017): 43–60. See also *Revolução* no. 126, 6 February 1982.
53. Ina Vogt, *Wege im Schatten der Kakaobäume. Meine Zeit auf São Tomé und Príncipe 1986/89* (Berlin: Verlag am Park, 2022), 113.
54. Harisch, 'Bartering', 56–7. It was announced in 1982 that a hydroelectric dam would be constructed by the URSS, as was the construction of the People's Palace by China, a country that had also granted credit to the islands in 1975. A clay factory (pottery) was also inaugurated in cooperation with the GDR the following year. Cf. *Revolução* no. 181, 21 July 1982; *Revolução*, no. 257, 25 November 1982; and *Revolução*, no. 357, 16 April 1983.
55. Law-decree, no. 32, 29 December 1975.
56. He did not return to São Tomé before 1990 when the democratic transition had already begun.
57. Seibert, *Comrades*, 176.
58. *Ibid.*, 178.
59. Seibert, 'São Tomé', 299.
60. *Revolução*, no. 425, 28 July 1984.
61. Seibert, *Comrades*, 187.
62. Interview, *Africa Report*, January–February 1986.