



Sao Tome and Principe — Va-PoReg Country Report

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01/01/1753 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal]: São Tomé and Príncipe were uninhabited before being colonized by the Portuguese in 1486.¹ The islands became a Portuguese crown colony in 1753. On 06/11/1951², Portugal official started to refer to its colonies as Oversea Provinces, in order „to retain the remaining colonies and to appease anticolonial demands from the United Nations”³. From 1900 to 1972, V-Dem’s JCE is classified as robust, indicating strong and regular judicial oversight. Concurrently, V-Dem’s LCE shows no value, which can be cautiously interpreted as indicating an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. In 1973, V-Dem’s JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, whereas V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. In 1974, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. During its colonial time no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held and universal suffrage was absent (LIED). According to LIED political liberties were absent. V-Dem’s PCLI classifies political liberties as absent from 1900 to 1910, not really present from 1911 to 1925 and again absent from 1926 onward.

07/12/1975 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal, Liberal Democracy]/Start One-Party Autocracy: The country gained its independence as Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe. In 1960, the Committee for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe was formed and later became the Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP), which advocated for independence. In 1973, the Organization of African Unity recognized the MLSTP, and Portugal granted the islands local autonomy. After negotiations, independence was proclaimed on 07/12/1975, and a transitional government was formed under MLSTP leadership. Universal suffrage was introduced in 1975.⁴ According to LIED, both executive and legislative elections were held, but they were not categorized as multiparty. The MLSTP was the only party in the country and the institutional setup exhibits all hallmarks of one-party autocracy: centralized party control over candidate selection, restricted political liberties, and highly limited checks on executive power.⁵ All electoral contests lacked genuine competition. These elections served primarily as mechanisms of confirmation for the ruling party’s dominance rather than as arenas of political choice. After the non-competitive election of 1975 Pinto da Costa became the president, and Miguel Trovoada the prime minister (Lansford 2021: 1421).⁶ On 08/22/1990, a constitution introduced by the Central Committee of the Movement for the Liberation of Sao Tome and Principe (MLSTP), was overwhelmingly approved in a referendum on 08/22/1990, which aimed to establish an electoral multi-party regime, while also imposing a two-term limit on the President.⁷ In October 1990, Manuel Pinto da Costa was succeeded as Secretary General of the party (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 56). For the relevant regime period, from 1975 to 1990 V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. As classified by FH 1975 and 1976, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Per FH, from 1977 to 1989, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. According to FH, in 1990, a score between 9 and 10 makes the country not free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather not free. For the given period, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem’s PCLI is classified by us as showing

that political liberties are not truly present until 1989 and are ambiguous afterwards.

01/20/1991 End One-Party Autocracy/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, multiparty legislative elections were held, which were won by the Democratic Convergence Party-Reflection Group, defeating the ML-STP (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 56).⁸ São Tomé and Príncipe held from then on regular, competitive national elections and has undergone multiple transfers of power between rival parties. Civil liberties are generally respected, but poverty and corruption have weakened some institutions and contributed to dysfunction in the justice system. According to FH, in 1991 and 1992, the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. As per FH's classification from 1993 onward, the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. Furthermore, LIED considers that political liberties are present since 2011. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI scores them as present already since the country's democratic transition in 1991. Threats to judicial independence have been a growing concern in recent years.⁹ Overnight on 11/24&25/2022 an unsuccessful coup led by Delfim Neves took place. Universal suffrage is granted and a new constitution, promulgated in 1990, secures civil liberties. Sao Tome is a semi-presidential democracy, the president being the head of state and the prime minister the head of government.¹⁰ The oppositional party ADI won elections in 11/2022, however the process was tainted by irregularities and incompetence of the electoral commission during the voting procedure. Anyhow, based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies the elections as competitive since the country's democratic transition. From 1991 to 2001 V-Dem's CEI indicates somewhat cleanliness scores. Since 2002 constant clean elections were held. The overall election conditions were somewhat free and fair until 2000. For the following nine years free and fair conditions were achieved. From 2010 to 2013 the overall conditions were somewhat free and fair again. Since 2014 electoral freedom and fairness are provided (V-Dem EF&FI). In 1991, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. From 1992 to 2004, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive. From 2005 onward, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive.

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

¹ <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1763/the-portuguese-colonization-of-sao-tome-and-princi/>

² <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/sub-saharan-africa-region/portuguese-mozambique-1951-1975/>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overseas_province

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%A3o_Tom%C3%A9_and_Pr%C3%ADncipe

⁶ See e.g. also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1985_S%C3%A3o_Tom%C3%A9_and_Pr%C3%ADncipe_legislative_election

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990_S%C3%A3o_Tom%C3%A9_and_Pr%C3%ADncipe_constitutional_referendum;
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sao_Tome_and_Principe_2003?lang=en

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_S%C3%A3o_Tom%C3%A9_and_Pr%C3%ADncipe_legislative_election

⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/sao-tome-and-principe/freedom-world/2022>;

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/sao-tome-and-principe/freedom-world/2023>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_S%C3%A3o_Tom%C3%A9_and_Pr%C3%ADncipe

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