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Democracy in Cape Verde

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Democracy in Cape Verde

THE NEWS FROM AFRICA usually carries headlines about natural disasters, coups, civil wars, human rights abuses and famine. Despite these tragic cases, there is also a bright side — the upsurge of a new movement of democratization.

Examples may be drawn from all corners of the continent: Gabon, Togo, Kenya, Zambia, Sao Tome and Principe, Mali, the Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Ghana, Senegal, The Gambia, Nigeria, the Seychelles, Congo and Uganda — all have achieved or moved toward forms of democracy in recent years.

Cape Verde offers a good example of this African democratization.

The Cape Verdean archipelago is about 350 miles off Senegal. Its land area is slightly greater than Rhode Island. Often drought-stricken, Cape Verdeans have a long tradition of emigration that has connected our two nations; there has been a large diaspora of Cape Verdeans in New England for more than a century.

Cape Verde has a special significance because its Prime Minister and his delegation will be visiting New England, including Providence, in the next few days.

Cape Verde only became independent in 1975, after more than five centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, and after 11 years of armed struggle on the African mainland. This guerrilla war was led by the liberation movement known as the PAIGC (The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) which had been founded in 1956. The protracted battles in Guinea, Angola and Mozambique had so weakened the Portuguese government that it was easily toppled in 1974 by a revolution led by junior military officers. Even though

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the war was not fought on the Cape Verde Islands, the policy of the PAIGC and its heavily Cape Verdean leadership was always that Guinea and Cape Verde were to be considered as one. In fact, from 1460 to 1879 Portugal had administered both lands as a single entity.

But after complex negotiations, and an internationally supervised referendum, Cape Verde hoisted its own flag, and opened its new National Assembly in 1975. The national liberation movement became the single ruling party. Other very small political groups were marginal either because they had supported Portugal, and/or because they had opposed the PAIGC.

Nation-building followed a model of a state-centered economy and international non-alignment. There were certain socialist affinities. From 1975 to 1980 the new government made great advances in social and health services, in soil and water conservation and in the equitable treatment of its citizens. It was highly regarded as a model of Third World development, with a stable currency, little corruption and a mass base of support. But then came the dissension and frustrations of the 1980s.

Part two of this two-part essay will appear tomorrow.

Richard Lobban is the director of the Program of African and Afro-American Studies and professor of anthropology at RIC. He has just returned from a month and a half in Cape Verde and West Africa.

Democracy in Cape Verde

The first of this two-part essay was published yesterday. Cape Verde's Prime Minister is visiting New England, including Providence, during the next few days.

IN THE EARLY 1980s the situation began to change in Cape Verde. A military coup in Guinea-Bissau toppled the established PAIGC and Cape Verdean leadership there. In quick response, the Cape Verdean branch of the PAISG reconstituted the party as the PAICV (to represent only Cape Verde). The long-fought-for unity with the mainland was broken. The PAICV was reorganized and a few internal dissidents were dismissed.

Some steps taken against the opposition were not forgotten. Further, the broadly welcomed Agrarian Land Reform in 1982 had inevitably antagonized some large landowners. Support for abortion rights and criticism of the Catholic Church's support for colonialists also had built up some grievances.

As the 1980s progressed, a younger generation began to come forward. These had not experienced the armed struggle in the forests of Guinea, and they wanted to fulfill their own ambitions. The path to achievement in a one-party state inevitably led through the PAICV. Just when the younger generation wanted more influence, the party's old-guard, ex-guerrilla leaders, such as Prime Minister Pedro Pires and President Aristides Pereira, decided to tighten membership and ideology. Something had to give.

One release came in expulsion or voluntary departure from the party and government. Such was the case of the young Atty. Gen. Carlos Veiga, who went into private law practice and was unwilling to serve the party in this time of transition.

Into the mid- and late- 1980s, the PAICV found itself the subject of increased frustrations and declining popularity. The demand for freer and diverse expression could no longer be contained by the PAICV.

It was no longer enough for the party to hold the symbols of political legitimacy, such as the martyred leaders lost in the war years, and

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notable advances in social and ecological development. Indeed, fearing greater centralization of PAICV party power, the National Assembly began to try to protect and express itself. Luckily, the Assembly was guided by a spirit of fair play and internal democracy, albeit of the one national party. Within the Assembly, a growing number of dissidents successfully marketed their grievances to a receptive public.

On its side, the PAICV feared a greater erosion of power and credibility and finally agreed to a national referendum to prove its popularity. The genie was out of the lamp.

Under the scrutiny of international observers, rules were set for a national election between the PAICV supporters and those of the group that had coalesced in March 1990 as the Movement for Democracy (MpD). By September 1990, the PAICV and the MpD had agreed on a transition to political pluralism. In November the MpD published its first political program. Elections held in January 1991 for the 79 seats in the National Assembly turned things upside down. The MpD won 56 of the seats and majority control as an expression of the frustration with the PAICV. Even American Cape Verdeans were represented; their single seat went to the PAICV.

No one could question the spirit of democracy when the ruling party willingly stepped aside without bloodshed. Assembly members promptly elected Carlos Veiga of the MpD as the Prime Minister, with the PAICV as the loyal opposition.

Under Prime Minister Veiga there have already been many changes. He rapidly took steps to expand the free-market part of the economy and to end the socialist system. He seeks a mixed economy guided by private initiative and an irreversible multi-party democracy guaranteeing human rights. It is too soon to judge the effects of privatization, since practical discussions only started in the month just ended. No doubt some inefficient enterprises

will be scrapped completely. One fear is that the only things that won't be sold off would be unprofitable public enterprises — leaving the state burdened with them.

A new constitution has already been approved, and the MpD seeks to rule by consensus and local-level empowerment. The constitutional changes have included adopting a new national seal and national flag.

The debate about the flag has been particularly intense. Did the old flag represent the Cape Verdean nation born in armed conflict, or only the PAICV that led the struggle? Was the old flag a symbol of Cape Verdean unity with Guinea-Bissau, or only of an African-based power that toppled a very sick colonial state? Does the new flag represent the nation or only the MpD?

The old flag had colors common to many West African nations. The new colors and design are similar to the European Community's.

With defeat, former Prime Minister Pedro Pires philosophized by noting that his role in freeing Cape Verde from colonialism had ultimately made democracy possible.

Many are very pleased about the MpD victory because of the personal, political and economic freedom it has already brought. But some complain that the MpD has taken too much license with its success, which was perhaps as much a protest against the ruling PAICV as a vote for the MpD.

Clearly, a Cape Verdean era is over. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist regimes has intensified this change. These governments had been strong supporters of the former Cape Verdean government.

The MpD stresses that the election of 1991 represents a revolution of historical proportions. Congratulations to the MpD for its victory for all Cape Verdean people.

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