

Cape Verde: a large diaspora and low turnout by external voters

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The Republic of Cape Verde is a small island country with a strong tradition of emigration which goes back to the 19th century, the result of hard living conditions. Despite the citizens' need to emigrate, however, they have never abandoned the bonds that tie them to their home country, and their currency remittances are an important source of wealth for the national economy.

In the light of this evidence, at the time of the first democratic elections held in Cape Verde, in 1991, Cape Verdeans residing abroad were immediately called upon to participate. In 1992, when a new constitution was adopted, the right of Cape Verdeans living abroad to vote was specified in the constitution. However, they can only participate in elections to the legislature under certain conditions:

- (a) they emigrated from Cape Verde not more than five years prior to the date of the beginning of voter registration; or
- (b) they have and are providing for a child or children under 18 years of age or handicapped, or a spouse or older relative habitually residing in the national territory, at the date of the beginning of voter registration; or
- (c) they are serving in a state mission or a public service position recognized as such by the competent authority, or residing outside the national territory as the spouse of a person in that position; or
- (d) if they have been resident abroad for more than five years, they have visited Cape Verde within the past three years.

It should be emphasized that the electoral law did not include any additional requirement for citizens to prove their bonds to the national territory. Cape Verdean nationality is enough, and entitlement is not affected if a person has dual or multiple nationality, even if the other nationality is that of the country where the citizen is resident at the time. It is, however, noticeable that the lawmakers were concerned to provide the suffrage only to those Cape Verdeans living abroad who retain some bonds with the country.

Citizens resident abroad were divided into three electoral districts in accordance with their residency—Africa; the Americas; and Europe and the rest of the world—each electoral district abroad electing one representative.

Those living abroad have the right to vote in presidential as well as legislative elections. Even so, because there were as many Cape Verdean citizens living abroad as were living in the national territory at the time, a solution was chosen that should not compromise national independence—otherwise the votes of citizens resident abroad could have decided the election of a president, whatever the choice of the residents in the national territory. The compromise solution was a system of weighting, as follows. Each citizen residing abroad is entitled to one vote, but these votes must not amount to more than one-fifth at most of the total votes counted in the national territory. If the total number of votes from electors registered abroad exceeds this limit, it is converted into a number equal to that limit and the number of votes cast abroad for each candidate is adjusted proportionately.

Citizens resident abroad can stand for election to the National Assembly (the parliament) but not presidential elections. Candidates for the presidency must have been resident in the national territory for three years prior to the election and cannot have dual or multiple nationality.

For elections to the National Assembly, the provisions in force in 1991 were preserved in the 1992 constitution, but the number of representatives elected by citizens residing abroad was increased, entitling those registered abroad to elect six representatives. The definition of electoral districts abroad and the distribution of seats between electoral districts was left to be determined by legislation, and this was done by the Electoral Law for the Election of the President and the Electoral Law for Elections to the National Assembly, both of 1994. The latter (Law no. 116/IV/94 of 30 December 1994) retained the definition of the electoral districts abroad provided for by the 1991 electoral legislation—Africa; the Americas; and Europe and the rest of the world. Each electoral district abroad now elects two representatives, out of 72, and has as headquarters the city of Praia, the capital of Cape Verde.

The extraordinary constitutional revision of 1995 and the ordinary revision of 1999 kept the established principles unaltered.

Having defined the current constitutional framework, let us analyse how it works in practice.

Registration

A citizen must be registered in the electoral registers in order to vote, and the electoral code establishes specific arrangements for citizens residing abroad. During the annual registration period, which abroad is from April to June (in the national territory it is from June to July), registration takes place in electoral registration commissions functioning at the country's consulates, embassies or diplomatic missions. It is worth noting that during the registration period the electoral registration commissions may, as happens in the national territory, set up mobile teams to promote the registration of citizens as close as possible to their place of residence. Outside this registration period, the consulates, embassies or diplomatic missions promote the registration of every elector residing within the geographical unit for registration who seeks any other consular services. It

can even be said that a citizen residing abroad is in a privileged position compared to a citizen residing in the national territory, since the former can register throughout the year, while a citizen residing in the national territory can do it only from June to July each year.

The management of external voting

The electoral legislation also sets down specific rules for the organization and conduct of the electoral process abroad.

As many polling stations as necessary are organized so that the number of electors for each polling station does not exceed 800. The polling stations are not confined to consulates and embassies; their number and location are determined by the individual in charge of the consular services, in accordance with the rule of the closest proximity to the voter.

The voting process is similar in all aspects to the process on the national territory. There is no postal voting for external electors.

After the polls close, each polling station board proceeds to determine the partial results. These results, together with the other electoral materials, are sent to the respective consular services, which collect all the electoral material from the polling stations under their jurisdiction. The officers in charge of the consular services then send all the elements they have received to the National Elections Commission headquarters in Cape Verde, so that it can proceed to determine the results for the three electoral constituencies abroad.

There is no separate budget for external voting.

Turnout

Despite all the efforts made to engage every citizen abroad in the major decisions affecting the country, few Cape Verdeans living abroad are registered to vote, and few participated in the legislative and presidential elections held in 2001. In 2001, a total of 28,022 citizens residing abroad were registered to vote, distributed as follows for the three electoral districts: Africa 5,720; the Americas 8,120; and Europe and the rest of the world 14,182. Only 7,558 of these registered citizens, or 27 per cent, exercised their right to vote, as follows: in Africa 2,486; in the Americas 2,812; and in Europe and the rest of the world 2,260.

According to available data from 2004, 33,998 citizens residing abroad are properly registered—5,694 in Africa, 8,152 in the Americas and 20,152 in Europe and the rest of the world. The population in the national territory was 434,625, according to the most recent census (in 2000), and projections suggest that it would have risen to 475,947 in 2005. The size of the diaspora is estimated at 500,000, including 265,000 in the USA; 80,000 in Portugal; 45,000 in Angola; 25,000 in Senegal; 25,000 in France; and 5,000 in Argentina. Of these some 50–60 per cent may be eligible to register as electors. The main challenges for the Cape Verdean electoral management bodies is therefore to achieve a higher rate of registration and a higher turnout.

