



Parliamentary Elections under Covid-19: The Case of Cabo Verde

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Parliamentary Elections under Covid-19: The Case of Cabo Verde

Edalina Rodrigues Sanches

1. Introduction

On 18 April 2021 Cabo Verde held its seventh parliamentary elections since democratic transition in the early 1990s. Parliamentary elections take place every five years and not only meet high quality standards but promote peaceful alternation of power between major parties that generally accept the rules of the game (Sanches 2020a; Sanches et al. 2021). However, this time, as elsewhere, the country faced an unprecedented dilemma due to the Covid-19 pandemic: to either postpone or go ahead with the elections, while balancing democratic and human security imperatives. Unlike most countries, Cabo Verde decided to move forward as scheduled. The holding of local elections in October 2020 constituted a crucial pre-test, helping to inform the mitigation measures needed to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and guarantee a safe voting environment.

Special arrangements included early voting, earlier opening of polling stations and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) for voters and polling staff. An international electoral observation mission (EOM) monitored the elections, contrary to what had happened in several elections held in Africa in 2020 (Slim 2020; Matlosa 2021a, 2021b): first, international organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union only started deploying observers in the second half of 2020 due to the pandemic and second, the Covid-19 measures in place (e.g. lockdowns, testing and quarantine) eventually led to the absence of EOMs in countries such as Burundi, Malawi and Seychelles, to mention just a few examples (Matlosa 2021b: 12–13; see also Asplund et al. 2021).

The 2021 parliamentary elections in Cabo Verde were generally well administered and enhanced the country's track record of free and fair elections. However, turnout decreased (albeit not to historic lows), and there were some logistical challenges. The lesson to be learnt from Cabo Verde is that, even in adverse circumstances, confidence in the electoral process can be built if electoral authorities have an effective planning and communication strategy and politicians behave in a democratic manner.

2. Background: institutional context and prior local elections

Cabo Verde is one of the better-performing democracies in Africa (International IDEA n.d.). It combines a highly institutionalized party system with unique institutional features such as a balanced semi-presidential constitution that favours mild intra-executive relations (Sanches 2020a). Politics revolves around two major political parties—the African Party of Independence of Cabo Verde (PAICV), and the Movement for Democracy (MpD)—which have been able to rotate in power through peaceful, fairly clean elections and to form one-party cabinets with comfortable parliamentary majorities (Sanches 2020a). Unified governments in which the parliamentary majority and the president share the same political colour have been the rule in the country (the only exception being in 2011–2016), constituting an additional factor of stability and government effectiveness. Elections in the country are run by the National Election Commission (NEC), an independent electoral management body (EMB) which has its own competencies defined by the Electoral Code and is endowed with administrative and financial autonomy (Cabo Verde 2010). The NEC supervises, organizes and oversees the electoral process, ensuring its regularity, integrity and credibility. It also has a role in informing and mobilizing citizens for the electoral process.

Since 2016, the country has been led by a unified MpD government with Ulisses Correia e Silva as Prime Minister, and Jorge Carlos Fonseca as President. This configuration has enabled effective decision-making since the Covid-19 outbreak. On 18 March 2020, and with no cases confirmed, the government decided to close the national frontiers; and on 28 March, only eight days after the first case was registered, the President declared a state of emergency for the first time in the country's history (Antena 1/RTP Notícias 2020). The state of emergency initially lasted 20 days and encompassed the entire territory, but was successively renewed, albeit with geographical variations (Agência Lusa/DW 2020). The Prime Minister announced the gradual lifting of restrictions imposed by the state of emergency in May (Covid-19.cv 2020a), and in October the reopening of international flights (Covid-19.cv 2020b).

Throughout this period, the President and the Prime Minister provided regular updates on Covid-19; these were further complemented by daily press conferences by the director of the Prevention and Control of Disease and Priorities Service, Jorge Noel Barreto. Information was also channelled through the country's Covid-19 website, as well as the presidency and government Facebook pages.

3. The 25 October 2020 local elections

Local elections offered a first test of the country's and the EMB's capacity during a pandemic. As many other countries had decided to postpone elections due to Covid-19, this trial run had implications for credible elections externally also (Matlosa 2021b; International IDEA 2021b). Various arrangements were put in place to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and create a safe environment for campaigning and voting, which had the wide support of political parties (NEC 2020a). With public gatherings and rallies banned and door-to-door contact limited, the candidates resorted to other strategies to mobilize voter support using social networks, sound trucks, posters and billboards to spread their messages (NEC 2020b; *A Semana* 2020). Polling stations opened one hour early on election day and voters were required to wear masks, wash their hands at the entrance of each polling station and observe social distancing of at least 1.5 metres. Furthermore, a new programme of accessible voting was implemented to facilitate the exercise of voting rights by persons with disabilities, including materials in braille for blind voters, and ramps for wheelchair users (NEC 2020b).

The President and the candidates encouraged people to vote, and the NEC released a video with the key message ‘Voting is the safest action of your week’. In the end, no major incidents were reported, and the quality of elections was praised by the President and the electoral authorities (Sanches and Costa 2020; Agência Lusa 2020). The MpD was the most voted for party despite losing mayorships to the PAICV, the number of citizens’ lists of independent candidates increased, more women were elected, and turnout went up 2 percentage points from 58.2 per cent in 2016 to 58.4 per cent (Inforpress/*Expresso das Ilhas* 2020; Agência Lusa 2020). In a press conference held two months after the local elections, the NEC president recognized that Covid-19 did not impact on electoral competition but noted important challenges to be taken into consideration for future elections, namely the need to create a legal framework to allow Covid-19 inpatients to vote and to improve voter registration procedures in order to avoid delays (Agência Lusa 2020).

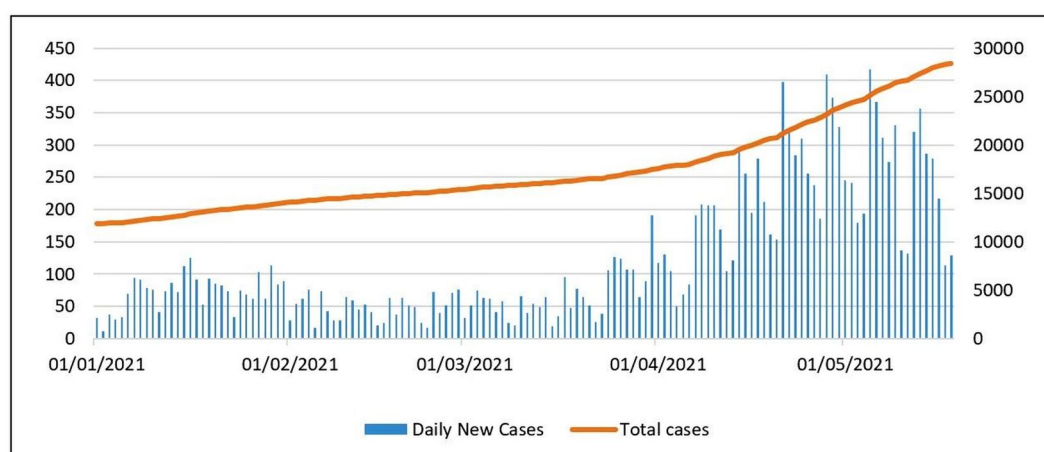
4. The parliamentary elections

Cabo Verde holds parliamentary elections every five years. The 72 parliamentary seats are apportioned to 13 districts based on their registered voters, through a proportional representation closed list electoral system. The previous elections were held in March 2016. Due to the pandemic, after consulting with political parties, electoral authorities, members of civil society, and the Council of the Republic, the President decided to set the date as 18 April 2021 (Agência Lusa/DW 2021). This was to allow more time for voter registration, particularly in the diaspora. However, the new date, while later than in previous years, still fell within the constitutional limit.

5. Registration and voting channels

In early January 2021, when the President first announced the holding of parliamentary elections, the country had registered over 10,000 cases of Covid-19 but the number of daily cases increased visibly in the two weeks preceding the vote, reaching new peaks in the weeks following the elections (Figure 1). The parliamentary elections were therefore conducted with some operational adaptations, given the increased risk of infection during the campaign and on voting day. In this context, the organization of local elections just six months earlier had helped build confidence and trust in the electoral process. When the President announced the election date, the NEC president, Maria do Rosário Gonçalves, promptly reaffirmed the electoral body’s capacity to organize safe elections.

Figure 1. Covid-19 daily new and total cases, pre-and post-parliamentary elections (18 April)



Source: Author, based on data available at <<https://covid19.cv/>> as of 14 July 2021.

The NEC encouraged all eligible citizens (aged 18 and over by election day) to register by 11 February 2021 in order to exercise their right to vote. Voter registration kits were made available in several locations around the country and in the diaspora. However, the process was more complicated in the diaspora due to not only logistics issues but also the prevailing Covid-19 measures, including state of emergency measures in several countries. A total of 340,241 voters registered in the Cabo Verde archipelago and 52,752 in the diaspora (across 21 countries), representing an overall increase of 13 per cent since 2016.

Early voting, provided for in the Electoral Law for several categories (e.g. military personnel, police or security services personnel, health or civil protection workers, prisoners and inpatients) (Cabo Verde 2010) was encouraged through voter-friendly leaflets made available on the NEC website and social media. On this matter, the NEC president lamented the fact that voters with Covid-19 or who were self-isolating could not exercise their voting rights. Calls had been made for the creation of an exceptional regime of early voting to include these voters, but due to time constraints these had not been followed up by the National Assembly.

The NEC called for ‘a massive, orderly, peaceful participation’ and reassured the public that ‘the whole process was carried out as normal, despite the constraints linked to the pandemic’ (Branco 2021a). As with the local elections, special voting arrangements were put in place to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and to raise confidence in the electoral process (NEC 2021a, 2021b). These measures came at a time when the epidemiological situation in Cabo Verde was worsening (Figure 1). These did not require legal change to be implemented, and were as follows:

- earlier opening of the polling stations;
- provision of PPE such as face masks, gloves and hand sanitizers for polling station members;
- limitation of the maximum number of voters per polling station to 350 voters;
- minimum social distancing of 1.5 metres;
- provision of hand sanitizers and masks for voters;
- adequate ventilation of polling stations;
- priority for voters from at-risk groups, namely the elderly and those with long-term health conditions;
- presence of security forces to ensure the prohibition of (a) the sale of alcoholic beverages near the polling stations (to avoid crowds); and (b) the parking of vehicles in front of the polling stations.

6. Media and monitoring

These measures were reinforced with voter awareness activities, with the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders. Political parties were generally supportive of these measures, and promised in particular to respect those relating to campaign rallies (Inforpress/*Expresso das Ilhas* 2021). This declaration by the NEC president is also illustrative: ‘the elections will be safe. We are working to ensure this, but it will not depend solely on election authorities.

There are many external factors that we will not be able to control, namely citizens' and political parties' behaviour. I think that if political parties commit to the goal of guaranteeing safe elections, we will achieve this' (Branco 2021b).

The NEC's communications concerning mitigation measures relied on various channels—traditional media, video, print advertising; its website and Facebook page—to boost public awareness of the safe environment for campaigning and voting. Specific videos elicited the participation of youth (e.g. a rap-style song in Creole stated 'your vote is your voice') and of women (e.g. messages in Creole from women from all Islands).

A mission from ECOWAS monitored the elections. It arrived in Cabo Verde on 14 April 2021 and remained in the country until 25 April to observe the post-election period. The mission was composed of 70 people, 45 of whom were observers (Fortes 2021). A delegation from the African Union was also supposed to be present but was unable to arrive in the country in time, due to travel restrictions. The presence of EOMs is yet another feature that sets the electoral process in Cabo Verde apart from other African countries during the pandemic (Slim 2020; Matlosa 2021a, 2021b), although EOMs have over time developed innovative strategies to adapt to Covid-19 restrictions such as operating virtually (e.g. Malawi, Seychelles and Tanzania) or with local observers (e.g. Myanmar) (Asplund et al. 2021). Table 1, summarises all the main mechanism implemented for the parliamentary elections.

Table 1. Summary: mechanisms for conducting credible elections during the pandemic

Component	Description
Voter registration	Suspended in Cabo Verde from 11 February 2021 to 18 April 2021 in the country and diaspora
International electoral observation missions	ECOWAS
Covid-19 measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protective equipment, hand washing facilities, masks, social distancing • Presence of security forces to enforce Covid-19 measures (during the campaign, and on election day) • Earlier opening of polling stations • Control of gatherings during campaign and voting day
Electoral commission role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Party and voter education • Communication and information
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional media • Social networks • Use of videos and social marketing

7. The campaign

Elections are highly competitive in Cabo Verde. The centre-right MpD and centre-left PAICV both have realistic expectations of forming one-party cabinets. The ideological and electoral distances between them are small as they compete at the centre of the political spectrum, seeking to attract the average voter (Sanches 2020a). These two are by far the most institutionalized parties and, on average, capture 95 per cent of the seats at stake. Several other parties have run in the elections, but only one has managed to also gain a seat in

parliament—the Democratic and Independent Cabo Verdean Union (UCID). Programmes and policies are relevant for mobilizing voters, but candidates also rely on vote buying and personal networks to build support, albeit to a lesser degree than in other small island states (Sanches et al. 2021).

Six parties competed in the April 2021 elections—the MpD, PAICV, UCID, Labour and Solidarity Party (PTS), Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Popular Party (PP). The MpD, PAICV and UCID ran in all constituencies; PP in six constituencies (Santiago Sul, Santiago Norte, Boa Vista, and the diaspora constituencies of Africa, America, and Europe and the rest of the world); PTS in six constituencies (Santiago Sul, Santiago Norte, São Vicente, Africa, America, and Europe and the rest of the world); and PSD in four constituencies (Santiago Norte, Santiago Sul, Africa and America).

The 2021 elections were an important test for the incumbent party, the MpD. The pandemic had widened social inequalities already present in the country, and exposed its structural vulnerabilities. Cabo Verde is highly dependent on imported food and energy and on external capital inflows. Economic performance is mainly underpinned by the activities of the tertiary sector: trade, transport, tourism and services represented more than 74 per cent of GDP in 2016 (AICEP 2018). Recent reports reveal a recession in all tertiary sector activities between 2019 and 2020: – 20 per cent in trade, – 32,9 per cent in transport, – 70 per cent in accommodation/food service, and – 58.8 per cent in number of tourists (Banco de Cabo Verde 2021; Ministério das Finanças 2020). In 2000, tourism represented 7.5 per cent of GDP but is now hovering around 25 per cent; in other words, the limits on mobility and tourism imposed by Covid-19 measures had a strong impact on the economy (Sanches 2020b). Moreover, a United Nations Development Programme report revealed that about 30,000 informal workers were at imminent risk of poverty and social marginalization (UNDP 2020).

In an interview given in May 2020, Prime Minister Ulisses Correia anticipated a recession of 5.5 per cent, a fall in fiscal revenue and escalating public debt (Rodrigues 2020). Although the government received external support from the EU and other donors to fight the pandemic, its social and economic impacts were the dominant issue in the campaign. It was vital for the MpD to demonstrate the government’s capacity to respond to the crisis. ‘We governed in an abnormal situation. No democratic government in Cabo Verde has ever experienced such a difficult context as this and, even so, the country has advanced and we have conditions to advance much further in a situation of normality. We are going to win and with an absolute majority’, Ulisses Correia e Silva told the media (Branco 2021c).

On the opposition side, the 2021 elections provided an opportunity to convince the electorate that the government’s response to the pandemic had been inadequate. Janira Hopffer Almada, the leader of the largest opposition party PAICV, stated: ‘The top priority at the moment is to ensure a safe country in terms of health, so we prioritize vaccination. Our goal is to ensure the vaccination of 70 per cent of the Cabo Verdean population by October in order to save the next tourist season because tourism is the engine of the country’s economy’ (Branco 2021c). Smaller parties brought other issues to the fore, notably regionalization, and criticized the government’s management of the crisis as well as the bipartisan nature of the political system.

During the campaigning period (1–16 April) the pandemic situation got worse with daily cases reaching new peaks (Figure 1). Following President Jorge Fonseca’s public calls, the government redoubled enforcement of Covid-19 measures by the police, namely restrictions on public gatherings on the beach, at private parties and in election campaigning (Agência Lusa 2020). Rallies were common during the campaign, contrary to what happened during local elections when they were prohibited. Though some events were on a smaller scale with fewer attendees (the *mini-comícios*), political analysts were particularly critical of the two major parties (PAICV and MpD) for using their social networks and the media to

disseminate images of crowds and gatherings of people, many without masks. This behaviour was seen as irresponsible since all the parties had supported the health authorities' recommendations to avoid gatherings, maintain distancing and wear masks. Gatherings organized by smaller parties (UCID, PSD, PTS and PP) were not so common due to their more limited support base and lack of resources.

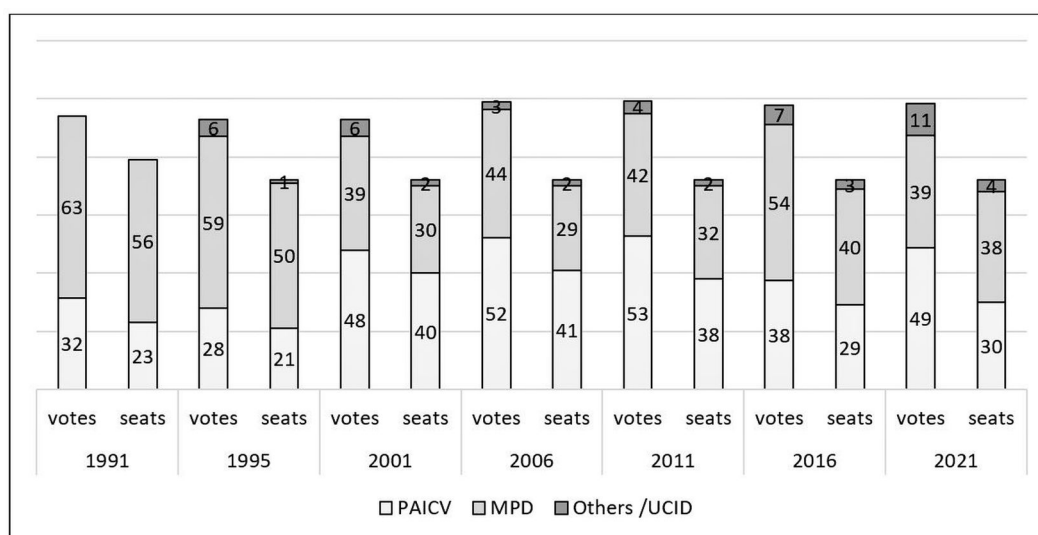
Parties' and candidates' social media were actively used to convey their key messages, and TV and radio broadcasting was yet another tool to reach a larger pool of voters, particularly given the recommendations to avoid public gatherings. However, the playing field was not even: public funding benefits parliamentary parties and thus the two largest parties. Access to broadcast media was also uneven; leaders of smaller parties—PTS and PDS—petitioned the NEC to have their limited access to the media increased.

8. Turnout and results

Voting day proceeded with only minor incidents, including delays in opening, and/or crowding, at some polling stations. Projected results started to be broadcast on TV and the Internet as soon as the voting ended.

The incumbent MpD was the most voted for party with 49 per cent of the vote cast, winning 38 out of 72 seats in parliament (Figure 2). The incumbent was therefore not abandoned by the electorate, which is in line with patterns observed in prior elections: parties usually rotate in power only after two consecutive terms have been served. The PAICV was apparently unable to convince the electorate that it could offer a better response to the crisis. The UCID won one additional seat in these elections. Despite being broadly accepted by the main competing parties, some of the smaller parties did not consider the elections fair.

Figure 2. Parliamentary election results (% share of votes and seats), 1991–2021

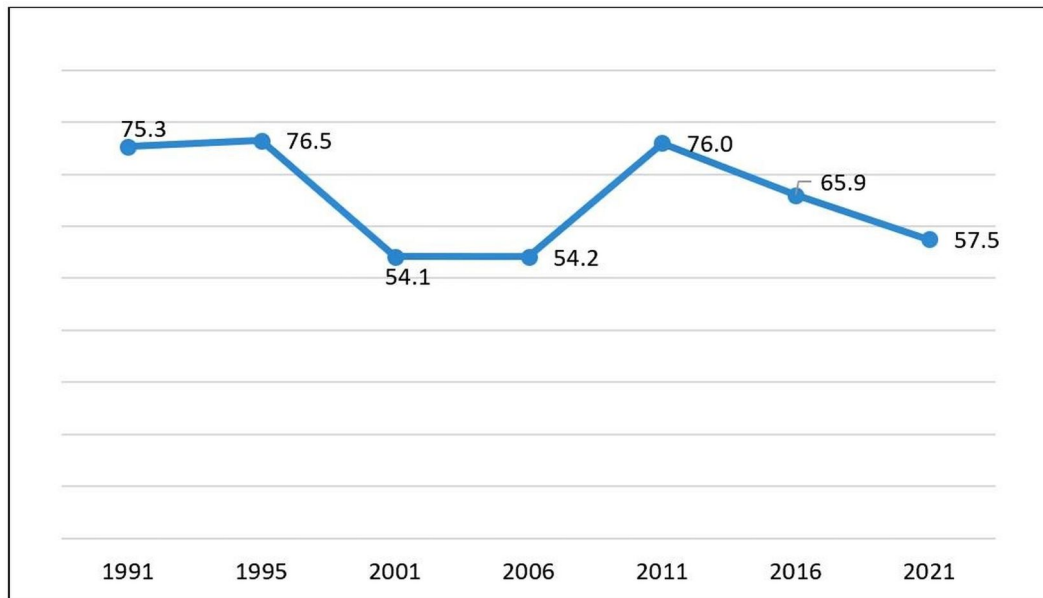


Source: Author's elaboration. Data: Cabo Verde National Electoral Commission.

The downward trend in turnout observed since 2011 continued (Figure 3). While electoral authorities had high hopes that the increase registered in local elections would be replicated in parliamentary elections, this was not the case. However, from a longitudinal

perspective, these elections did not have the lowest turnout levels: historic lows were registered in 2001 and 2006 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Cabo Verde: Turnout (%) in parliamentary elections 1991–2021



Source: Author's elaboration with data from International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>>, accessed 14 July 2021.

The ECOWAS mission report praised the quality of the elections: 'At this stage, the Mission welcomes the efforts made by the authorities and bodies in charge of the elections to ensure the smooth running of the elections. The Mission congratulates the people of Cabo Verde for their exemplary democratic behaviour and the calm observed throughout the electoral process' (Fortes 2021). ECOWAS also highlighted the systematic compliance with Covid-19 protocols, including hand sanitizing, social distancing and the wearing of masks, and the level of professionalism of electoral officials—and speed and transparency in the transmission of provisional results (ECOWAS/CEDEAO 2021).

The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, also underlined the country's high democratic credentials and applauded 'all parties for the peaceful and harmonious conduct of the campaigns and polls' in the country (A Nação 2021a). As for national authorities, the NEC stated that all logistics had been implemented successfully, and that the campaign period had progressed reasonably well given the pandemic situation (RTC 2021); moreover, the police gave an extremely positive appraisal, stating that no serious incidents had been registered during the campaign or on election day (A Nação 2021b). At the inauguration ceremony of the new government (21 May), the president paraphrased the ECOWAS mission report stating that Cabo Verde was a democratic role model for other African countries (Fonseca 2021).

Unfortunately, the pandemic situation continued to deteriorate as demonstrated in Figure 1, and a state of calamity was declared in all Islands but one (Brava) on 30 April 2021. (Following improvements, the country shifted to a state of contingency on 30 July.) Several analysts had predicted the number of cases could rise as political parties had not fully complied with Covid-19 measures, in particular limits on mass rallies (A Semana 2021;

Amado 2021). The data presented in Figure 1 indicates the possible impact of the elections on Covid-19 numbers, as the number of daily cases increased sharply in the weeks following the elections, reaching new peaks.

9. Conclusion

Elections held during the pandemic necessitate rapid changes and innovations in electoral processes. The capacity of electoral bodies to administer elections is tested along with their ability to improve levels of trust and transparency. It is essential to guarantee procedural legitimacy, namely, to do everything to ensure a safe voting environment without neglecting logistical and legal issues that could undermine the exercise of voting rights. Moreover, the legitimacy of the outcome must also be assured, that is, that the elections are clean, credible and therefore accepted by the citizens and key political actors.

Just as elsewhere, the Covid-19 pandemic posed a challenge to the integrity of the elections in Cabo Verde, but special voting arrangements were implemented to mitigate the various risks. Overall, both domestic and international actors praised the quality of the elections, and the country passed an important test of democratic resilience (RTC 2021; A Nação 2021a, 2021b; ECOWAS/CEDEAO 2021). The case of Cabo Verde offers lessons to other countries holding elections during the pandemic. First, communication needs to be straightforward and publicized in different platforms; using traditional and social media to spread the message helps raise awareness and build confidence. Voter education messages should encourage registration and participation by guaranteeing that it is safe to vote in person and that all voting equipment is properly sanitized. Second, effective planning is key: coordination between electoral, security and health authorities in the design and communication of mitigation measures is central to their success in managing Covid-19 and other operational risks during elections.

As for future steps, there is an opportunity to revise the electoral law to contemplate other voting methods for inclusivity, besides early voting. For example, across Africa voting by proxy is available in 13 countries (e.g. Algeria, Benin, Gabon, Mali, Mauritius and Togo), mobile ballot boxes in 5 countries (Algeria, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia and South Africa), and postal voting in 2 countries (Angola and Zimbabwe) (International IDEA 2021b). Voting channels matter not only for the resident population, but also for those living abroad: double the number of residents in the Islands, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM n.d.). Greater effort should also be made to improve local monitoring of elections (by civil society and citizen-led initiatives) to counteract the absence of international observation missions.

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