



CASE STUDY: CABO VERDE

Global State of Democracy 2023 Report

Alexander Hudson

Cabo Verde's sustained high level of democratic performance has defied global trends among countries with similar economic and social situations for decades. The country's population of a half-million people is spread across nine volcanic islands located hundreds of kilometres west of the African mainland. This challenging natural environment has limited the possible forms of economic activity throughout the country's history. In spite of this, among the 52 African states that are covered by the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices, Cabo Verde stands out as a consistently high performing democracy. It is the top-ranked country in Africa under the category of Representation (35th in the world) and ranks highly in Rights and Rule of Law, only falling to the bottom half of the global rankings in Participation. These areas of strength and weakness are illustrated with reference to the averages for the whole continent of Africa in Figure 1, using the 17 second-level factors in the GSoD Indices. Several key indicators of countervailing institutions stand out, most notably Judicial Independence.

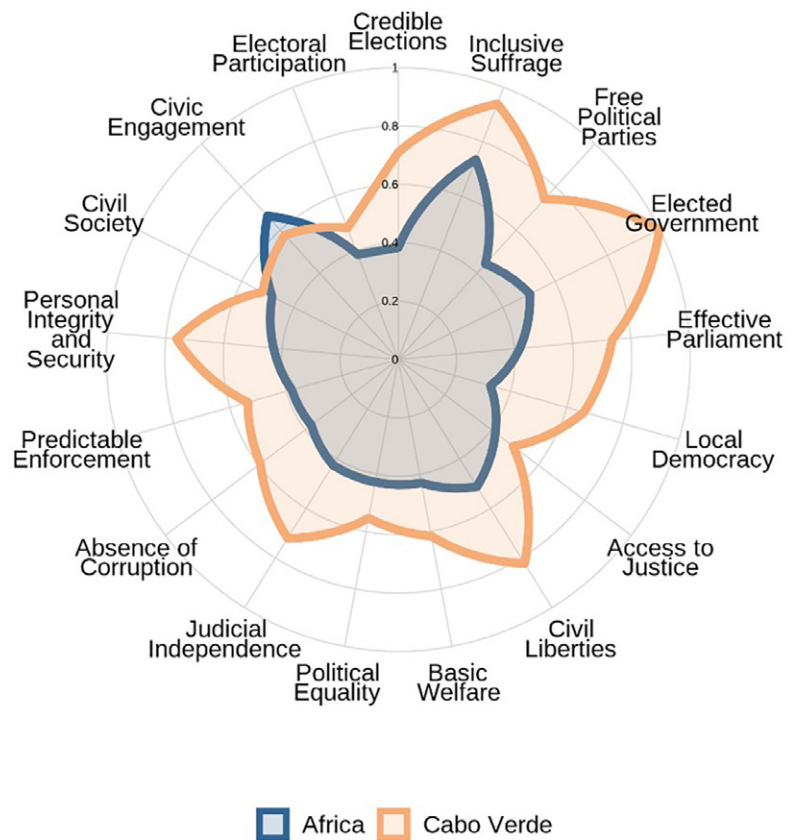
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TWO TRANSITIONS: INDEPENDENCE AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Cabo Verde gained independence from Portugal in 1975 as a one-party state, ruled by the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde (PAIGC; the reference to Guinea was dropped in 1980 and the party is now known as the PAICV). There was some liberalization within the context of the single-party state in the late 1980s, and multiparty democracy emerged with the 1991 election after which the PAICV ceded power to the victorious Movement for Democracy party (MpD). There was a real danger that the country would revert to single-party rule again under the MpD (Barros 2022: 54), but the parties alternated in power again in 2001 and 2016.

However much the connection between democracy and national wealth is discussed, it is not the only thing that matters for democratic consolidation, and Cabo Verde had some starting advantages that are relatively rare on the African continent. For one, ethnicity has not been a politically salient cleavage

Figure 1. Democratic performance in Cabo Verde compared with Africa averages



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices v 7.1, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>>, accessed 28 August 2023.

in the country, and a singular national identity began to emerge during the late colonial period (Evora 2022: 129). Most of the population is of mixed ancestry (though there is a large African minority), and neither of the main political parties has sought to politicize a divide of this nature. Another consequence of the colonial period was that Cabo Verde achieved independence with a relatively high level of popular education and administrative competence (Barros 2022). Indeed, in the late colonial period Portugal came to rely on Cabo Verdeans as administrators in its other colonies. This high level of professionalism in government service is also reflected in the GSoD Indices data, which shows that Cabo Verde already performed at a mid-range level in Rule of Law at independence. A third factor that may have contributed to the consolidation of democracy in the country is that the independence struggle was largely non-violent, and the military has not been a significant actor in the political system (Meyns 2002).

DEVELOPMENTS IN CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

Beyond these starting advantages, Cabo Verdean constitutional law also developed in productive ways in the 1990s. The 1992 Constitution gave international treaties status as domestic law, with particular attention given to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Bogdan 2000: 88–89). The revised Constitution significantly improved countervailing institutions, particularly through improving the balance of power between the president and the legislature (National Assembly), and significantly limiting the power of the president to dissolve the Assembly (Amorim Neto and Costa Lobo 2014). The Constitution was also significantly amended in 1999, creating two new countervailing institutions (a Constitutional Court and an ombuds institution). There were local political reasons to pursue limitations on the power of government (as each party operated on the assumption that at times it would be in opposition), but another significant motivation was the pursuit of closer ties to important trading partners, particularly in Europe. Cabo Verde pursued the fulfilment of a number of international goals for good governance in order to obtain a Special Partnership with the European Union, which it successfully concluded in 2007. The country was also able to obtain new sources of funding from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank on the basis of its high quality of governance (Baker 2009).

Judicial Independence radically improved after the ratification of the 1992 Constitution, and continued to improve as the country pursued the Special Partnership with the EU. While Judicial Independence has declined somewhat of late, the powers and competencies of the judicial institutions have continued to grow. The constitutional amendment passed in 1999 created a Constitutional Court that would take over some functions from the Supreme Court. However, the court was not actually established and staffed until 2015 (Pina-Delgado 2017). The Constitutional Court has broad powers to guarantee the foundations of democracy, including through reviewing the constitutionality of constitutional amendments, adjudicating complaints about electoral processes, and giving effect to the constitutional commitment to international law (Pina-Delgado 2017).

Cabo Verde also joined the trend towards the establishment of fourth branch institutions with the creation of an ombuds institution (Provedor de Justiça) empowered to investigate government actions (and inactions) and human rights practices in 1999 (Bogdan 2000). However, much like the delay in establishing the Constitutional Court, the first ombudsperson was not actually elected by the legislature until 2013 (Teixeira 2013). The Constitution requires that all persons and state agencies should cooperate with the ombudsperson's investigations (Assembleia Nacional 2010). The findings of the ombudsperson have no direct legal impacts, but the Constitution provides that the ombudsperson has the right to publish their reports. This lack of power to secure compliance is a common feature in African ombuds institutions (Ayeni 2018: 226). Combined with the long delay in appointing the first ombudsperson, the Cabo Verdean case illustrates a key limitation of such

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offices: their existence and effectiveness depends to a significant degree on the health of the legislature.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The apparent weakness of Participation in the GSoD Indices data has several components. The first is that politics in Cabo Verde has a tradition of being elite-focused. The transition to democracy was driven by elite politics, not by a popular movement (Evora 2022). Political competition continues to operate through two well-institutionalized parties. Relatedly, Cabo Verde's relative economic health and strong reputation for good governance have combined to reduce its attractiveness to donors of development aid. The lack of such aid has meant that, unlike many African countries, the civil society sector remains predominantly voluntary, and has lower levels of both professionalization and participation than countries that receive more aid. Finally, measures of electoral participation are affected by Cabo Verde's approach to voting rights for emigrants. Cabo Verdeans have emigrated at significant rates for many decades, and at present there are reported to be twice as many Cabo Verdeans living abroad as are living on the islands ([International Organization for Migration n.d.](#)). Voting rights are extended to emigrants who maintain some ties to the islands, for example through visiting at least once every three years ([Ellis et al. 2007: 200](#)). Emigrant voters are important to Cabo Verdean politics, and are understood to have been decisive in the victories of the PAICV candidates in the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections ([Wellman 2021](#)). However, despite their importance to electoral outcomes, emigrants vote at a very low rate. Few emigrants are registered to vote, and even fewer follow through by submitting a completed ballot ([Ellis et al. 2007: 202](#)).

COMPARATIVE LESSONS

Given its unique history, what lessons may Cabo Verde have for other African countries? One key is that a commitment to good governance eases the transitions between democracy and non-democracy, and between parties in power. A broad commitment to good governance and a professional civil service lowered the costs for the ruling party to open the political system to multiparty elections and has ensured stability in the alternations in power that have followed. Another key point is the relative strength of countervailing institutions. The constitutional revision of 1992 introduced a healthy balance of power between the president and the National Assembly. These changes were supplemented by the new institutions created by the constitutional reform of 1999. Elite commitment to limited and accountable government is an indispensable support for many other democratic processes and is not historically contingent. Finally, the case illustrates the potential positive effects of the possibility of partnership agreements of various kinds between established and nascent democracies. Conditioning such agreements on

achieving standards of good governance provides incentives that reinforce domestic considerations.

ABBREVIATIONS

GSoD	Global State of Democracy
MpD	Movement for Democracy
PAICV	African Party for the Independence of Cabo Verde (previously PAIGC: African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study was written by Alexander Hudson, with input from Miguel de Brito and from staff members in International IDEA's Africa and West Asia regional office.

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Design and layout: International IDEA

DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.62>>

ISBN: 978-91-7671-675-5 (PDF)



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