



## GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE – MAY 2021

### COUNTRY REPORT – SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

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#### INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

##### Geography

São Tomé and Príncipe is a country located in the Atlantic Ocean in the Gulf of Guinea, close to the Gabonese and Equatorial Guinean coast (Maps of São Tomé and Príncipe, 2021). It is one of the smallest African countries, composed of two main islands: São Tomé and Príncipe. Many other tiny islands are part of the country, having been raised from past volcanic activity within the region, which has also resulted in the country having a mountainous landscape. The country has a big natural reserve on the different islands, with some having been recognized by UNESCO, such as the island Tinhosa (Maps of São Tomé and Príncipe, 2021).



(Maps of São Tomé and Príncipe, 2021)

## **History**

The country of São Tomé and Príncipe was first invaded by the Portuguese in the late 1400s (Eyzaguirre, 1989). The indigenous population rejected Portuguese and Jews in exile as well as Africans from Benin, Calabr, Loango and Congo. The aim of the Portuguese government was to expand its sugar business, which started on Madeira Island (Eyzaguirre, 1989). During the mid-sixteenth century, Madeira was the main African sugar producer (São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021). The islands also became a place of transit for slaves from Africa (Eyzaguirre, 1989). In the mid-1600s, large numbers of white people and “mulatto” (mixed-race), the elite, fled to Brazil or the Caribbean because of continual insurrections by poor free Africans and slaves (Eyzaguirre, 1989).

The Portuguese came back to reassert their authority over the island in the mid-eighteenth century (Eyzaguirre, 1989). This came with the expansion of imperialism; thus, Portugal reduced the political capacities of these islands to gain control over its Lusophone territories (Eyzaguirre, 1989). Later in the nineteenth century, cocoa and coffee overtook sugar as the primary crops for cultivation (São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021). This new plantation organisation, focused on cocoa and coffee production, was called the roças under the colonial leaders in Angola and Mozambique (Eyzaguirre, 1989). Slavery was officially outlawed in 1876; however, the roças system perpetuated dynamics of slavery by exploiting human labour into the twentieth century (São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021). The country went through many uprisings from the workers, including the “Batepa Massacre”, in which many workers died in a confrontation with the Portuguese elites (São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021).

## **After the independence**

The islands obtained independence in July 1975 after the Portuguese dictator Marcello Caetano was overthrown in 1974 (Eyzaguirre, 1989; BBC News, 2018). The Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP) became the main political party and arranged the transfer of power from the Portuguese government to the Santomean population (BBC News, 2018; São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021). The Portuguese fled once again and the remaining locals regained control over the plantations of the roças (Eyzaguirre, 1989). The

land used by the previous roças leaders was 90% of the land in the country, which was then nationalised (Eyzaguirre, 1989). The new Santomean government had ties to communist countries (BBC News, 2018). In 1990, a constitution was defined by the government body as a multi-party democracy which allowed the opposition to enter politics. This system gives the president a role of mediator, but the prime minister has the dominant role (BBC News, 2018).



Furthermore, the freedom of expression is ensured by the constitution and works in practice even though the state manages the TV stations and the single radio; there are no regulations barring citizens from having private stations (BBC News, 2018). Moreover, the U.S. aims to bolster the

Santomean army through foreign aid to protect its coasts and waters (US Department of State, 2021). This region needs protection because it is rich in hydrocarbon resources (US Department of State, 2021). This is also the reason why São Tomé and Príncipe take part in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and in the U.S Navy's Africa Partnership Station (US Department of State, 2021). Another important element of the Santomean foreign relations is its participation in international organisations such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank (US Department of State, 2021). São Tomé also has an observatory position at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (US Department of State, 2021).

Currently, the main languages are Portuguese, Sãotomense, and Principense. The main religion is Christianity (BBC News, 2018; Minority Rights Group International, 2007). São Tomé and Príncipe is divided into six departments located on the Island of Sao Tomé: Agua Grande, Cantagalo, Caué, Lembá, Lobata, and Mé-Zóchi (World Atlas, 2021). Príncipe has had an autonomous administration since 1995 and consists of only one district (World Atlas,

2021; BBC News, 2018). The most populated department is Agua Grande, where the national capital São Tomé is located (World Atlas, 2021).



Pan-African colours: green, red and yellow.

Green: rich vegetation of the country; Red: struggle for the independence; Yellow: cocoa

The two stars represent the two main islands.

(São Tomé e Príncipe, 2021).

### **Political situation**

According to the World Bank, São Tomé and Príncipe is a democratic model for Central Africa (2020). The country is led by the MLSTP-PSD thanks to a majority in parliament (World Bank, 2020), with the next elections planned for July 2021 (World Bank, 2020). Similar to other small island states, it is isolated and the economy is described as weak, especially regarding external economic factors (World Bank, 2020). Furthermore, much of the country's GDP relies on tourism (World Bank, 2020). The Santomean economy was slightly affected by the pandemic of COVID-19 as the economy grew by 3.1% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020).

### **Title: Population**

The country has over 215.000 inhabitants (World Atlas, 2021). The different groups which came from Portugal - such as criminals, people rejected from the Portuguese society, or Jewish people - as well as the country's history of slavery created a particular population on the island (Eyzaguirre, 1989). The elite was composed of the white people and "mulattos" (mixed-race), who were usually businessmen and slave owners (Eyzaguirre, 1989). Data for minority groups come from the US State Department, because they are not available from a national source (Minority Rights Group International, 2007). The population can be divided in six groups: the "Mesticos" or "filhos da terra" for the descendants of slaves; "serviçais" are the African plantation workers from other Portuguese speaking countries (Angola,

Mozambique and Cape Verde) and their descendants born on the islands called the “tongas”; the descendants of Angolans who arrived in the 16th century; and finally the Europeans, coming mostly from Portugal (Minority Rights Group International, 2007).

### **Title: Human Rights in General**

São Tomé and Príncipe is a small, relatively unknown country. Thus, it is hard to find information from international organisations about the state of human rights locally. For instance, Human Rights Watch does not produce reports on Santomean human rights. The World Bank estimates that the population is overwhelmingly poor; for instance, a third of the Santomeans live with less than 1.90\$ per day, which is considered as the international poverty line (World Bank, 2020). However, São Tomé and Príncipe has a higher Human Development Index (HDI) than the rest of the Sub-Saharan countries thanks to high rates of school enrolments, higher life expectancy, etc. (World Bank, 2020).

A change in the criminal code in 2012 brought great improvements to the state of human rights in São Tomé and Príncipe (Lopes, 2012). The previous criminal code dated from 1886 and was completely disconnected from the current society (Lopes, 2012). For example, with this new criminal code, women are no longer punished for having sex outside of marriage (Lopes, 2012).

As a whole, according to the Freedom of House measurement, civil liberties are generally respected and the country is classified as “free” with a grade of 83/100 (Freedom House, 2020). The main problem is the flawed judicial system due to corruption and poverty. The transparency of independent media is lacking, even though the freedom of expression is respected, and there have been reports of self-censorship. Though the population considers themselves to be relatively safe, police have been accused of violent behaviours; for example, in 2018 1 man died from police violence during an arrest (Freedom House, 2020).

Same-sex intercourse is not punished by law, however, LGBTQ+ people are discriminated against and the law does not recognize such problems (Freedom House, 2020).

In the case of women’s rights, there exists a potential problem of forced marriages, as the minimum legal age to get married is fourteen years old for girls and sixteen for boys with the

consent of their parents. Due to this legislation, one-third of girls are married before 18 which can be an indicator of forced marriage (Freedom House, 2020).

Finally, the law forbids forced labour, and the labour of children is limited as well. However, the law is not always enforced well, so forced labour can occur in (informal) agriculture in particular (Freedom House, 2020).

### **Death Penalty**

São Tomé and Príncipe abolished the death penalty in 1990 (Peine de Mort, 2021). The country also ratified the UN treaty on the abolition of death penalty, and capital punishment has not been used since the country's independence (Peine de Mort, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

As a whole, the human rights situation in São Tomé and Príncipe has improved since the last decades. Generally speaking, the political regime respects the rights of its citizens. However, salient problems persist in the form of high poverty rates, corruption, the lack of protection of women, and discrimination against the LGBT+ community.

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