Smallness, islandness and cross-party dialogue: Lessons from Cabo Verde

Abrak Saati
Umeå University
Umeå, Sweden
abrak.saati@umu.se

and

Matheus de Abreu Costa Souza
Umeå University
Umeå, Sweden
matheus.souza@umu.se

ABSTRACT: This article explores political dynamics in Cabo Verde, a small island African state. Interviews with members of parliament (MPs) from the two major parties in Cabo Verde illustrate that their experiences of practicing politics align with those of their counterparts in other small island jurisdictions. Smallness and closeness make it easier for representatives to gauge the temperature of the electorate, leading to more appropriate and effective legislation. But closeness, stemming from smallness, also provides fertile soil for friendship corruption and patronage, especially when it comes to the appointment procedures of anti-corruption agencies. This study also brings new insights to the research field of smallness, islandness and democracy. It shows that Cabo Verdean MPs view islandness as a protecting shield from authoritarian tendencies on the continent, facilitating democratic consolidation in their own country. Moreover, it shows that repeated occasions for cross-party dialogue compensate for some of the drawbacks of small state politics.

Keywords: Cabo Verde, cross-party dialogue, democracy, islandness, small states,

Introduction

Research suggests that small population size and islandness have political consequences, both good and bad (Baldacchino, 2012; Saati, 2022; Veenendaal, 2020; Corbett, 2015). The virtues of being a small island state include proximity – both physical and, equally important, mental and emotional – between voters and political representatives (Hirczy, 1995). This makes the latter well informed about the needs of the former. When voters are also acquaintances, neighbours or even friends and relatives, grievances are conveyed not only in formal settings such as townhall meetings but also at the supermarket, at the children's soccer game and at the barbeque party (Saati, 2022; Veenendaal, 2013). In other words, in small island states, members of parliament are particularly well positioned to gauge the temperature of the electorate. This, of course, enhances the probability of being able to formulate legislation and policies that accurately target the needs of the voters (Saati, 2022). On the other hand, smallness comes with distinct drawbacks. The same proximity and sense of closeness that make the electorate comfortable to approach their representatives with relative ease put a lot of pressure on politicians. Studies have shown how boundaries get blurred when members of parliament are confronted with voters at their doorstep, at the mall, at church and at other recreational arenas asking for favours ranging from monetary handouts to securing contracts and stable employment (Veenendaal, 2013; Saati, 2022). In such circumstances, even if the intent of the individual politician might be to avoid engagement in fraudulent behaviour, he/she does exactly

that when money and other favours trade hands in what can only be described as quid-pro-quo situations (Saati, 2022). Expectations to deliver personal favours to those who have voted you into public office are high, and if expectations are not met, the voter base may be jeopardized at the next election cycle (Saati, 2022; Veenendaal, 2013).

Thus, small state politics implies a specific dynamic that has consequences for democratic processes and procedures. However, the field of research that engages with small state politics and democracy suffers from what can best be described as a double blindness: the literature on the political effects of smallness and islandness overlooks small states in Africa, while the literature on democratization in Africa does not pay particular attention to smallness and islandness (Sanches et al., 2022). By focusing on the case of Cabo Verde – an African island state with 560,000 inhabitants (UN, 2021) – this article sets out to contribute to this research gap. It does so by drawing on interviews with Cabo Verdean members of parliament (MPs). The results show that their experiences of practicing politics align with their counterparts in other small (including island) jurisdictions, with similar experiences of both difficulties and advantages (Veenendaal, 2013; Saati, 2022; Saati, 2023a; Corbett, 2015). This deepens and substantiates awareness of the political dynamics of small island states. This study adds to previous knowledge by drawing attention to how Cabo Verdean MPs discuss and understand one specific advantage of being an archipelagic state. The interviews illustrate that the MPs view "islandness" as a protecting shield; a shield that safeguards the country from undesired political turbulence and violent conflict from neighbouring states on continental Africa. Moreover, this study shows that just as smallness and islandness bring MPs and the electorate closer to each other, they also bring MPs from different political factions closer to each other. Repeated occasions of cross-party dialogue in formal as well as informal settings appear to have contributed to democratic maturity and consolidation in this island jurisdiction. While each small island state is unique when it comes to political dynamics and its effects on democratic processes, there are patterns that run through many of these states regardless of geographical location (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2016; Corbett, 2015; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020; Veenendaal, 2013; Veenendaal, 2020; Veenendaal, 2021; Saati, 2022; Saati, 2023a; Saati, 2023b). Observing how both formal and informal cross-party interactions have deepened democratic processes in Cabo Verde, we suggest that establishing formal institutions requiring political opponents to consensually agree on significant political matters could be beneficial. This approach may be considered in other small island jurisdictions in Africa but also beyond. We theorize this idea by referring to the work by Higley & Burton (2006) and Cheeseman (2011), to which we will return shortly.

This article is organized in four sections. After this introduction, we will establish what constitutes a 'small' island state and present the theoretical points of departure for this study. Next, we will present our method for conducting the inquiry of this study. In this section, we will devote special attention to explaining how we choose to present the results from the interviews that we have conducted in Cabo Verde, and why. As will become clear, conducting and presenting interview findings poses certain challenges in a small state where the total number of MPs is low, making it quite easy to determine the person behind specific statements. We then present our empirical results, relating them to our theoretical points of departure. In the final section, we discuss the implications of our results for small (island) states in Africa and beyond, focusing especially on the potential benefits of repeated, and institutionalized, cross-party dialogue and cooperation in assuaging some of the drawbacks of smallness.

What is small, and what do we know about the political implications of smallness?

'Small' can refer to various aspects of a country's size, including its GNP, geographical land area and resident population (Ott, 2000; Srebrnik, 2004). When we refer to 'small' in this study, we deal with states that have a small population size. In the literature that covers the comparative study of the political systems of states, and in particular the vein of research that is interested in the comparative study of small states, the cutoff point for what constitutes 'small' can vary (e.g. Ott, 2000; Srebrnik, 2004; Veenendaal, 2015). When we refer to islandness, we mean island states, that is, states that are surrounded by water. For the purposes of our inquiry, small island states are island states with a population size of around 500,000 individuals. Cabo Verde, the empirical interest of our inquiry, fits these criteria.

When it comes to the political implications of smallness and islandness, we argue that the theoretical literature is divided into two distinct factions where one is almost overwhelmingly convinced of the benefits, whereas the other is almost equally focused on the drawbacks. As shown in recent empirical work (Saati, 2022; Saati, 2023a), the reality of small island states – perhaps not surprisingly – fall somewhere in between. This is also true for Cabo Verde, which we will bring to evidence in the next section of the article. For now, we will account for the most prevalent theoretical notions concerning smallness and islandness, beginning with the assumed positive aspects, followed by the proposed disadvantages. We will conclude this section with a theoretical discussion on how repeated and cordial interactions between political elites from rival political parties can help establish what Highley & Burton (2006) refer to as a "consensually united elite". Such an elite can trump some of the potential disadvantages of smallness and islandness, thereby supporting democratic consolidation.

Earlier scholarship, which dominated the field of small state studies for quite some time, suggested that the mere circumstance of being small and islanded is a facilitating factor for democracy (Anckar, 2002; Anckar, 2010; Anckar & Anckar, 1995; Ott, 2000; Srebrnik, 2004). These scholars have, by means of quantitative methods, observed a relation between smallness, islandness and democracy. Simplified, the argument is that small is beautiful, because small is democratic (Anckar, 2010). While this is certainly an intriguing observation, this line of scholarship has not addressed the lingering questions of *why* these small island states rank highly in democratic measures (Veenendaal, 2015) and *how* democratic they really are. The *why* question is a theoretical puzzle, whereas the question of *how* is an empirical inquiry. There are scholars who have attempted to understand the matter of *why*, proposing that a small population size combined with islandness might bring a sense of cohesion and togetherness that is beneficial for social trust and, consequently, democracy (Baldacchino, 2005; Veenendaal, 2020). Furthermore, in a state where many – including political representatives – are personally acquainted or related, there is an explicit or implicit norm to avoid conflict and solve issues in an amicable and non-confrontational way (Dahl & Tufte, 1973).

The surrounding sea and the absence of neighbouring countries easily accessible by way of land transportation also leave individuals in island jurisdictions with a sense of being left to their own devices, furthering social cohesion of individuals who reside in these states (Anckar & Anckar, 1995, p. 220). Another positive side effect of being an island state is that violent conflicts in neighbouring countries cannot spill over into the territory of the island state, simply because it does not share borders with any other country. It is not unlikely that this specific circumstance is of particular relevance in an African context where arbitrarily drawn borders have led to severe consequences, including violent conflicts over territorial disputes (Herbst, 2014). Some strands of democratization literature argue that having democratic neighbours increases the possibility of imitating, developing and consolidating democracy in one's own state – and the opposite may also hold true (Levitsky & Way, 2005; Teorell, 2010). Having

authoritarian neighbours may make it even harder to consolidate democracy in one's own state. Particularly in an African context, islandness can be understood as a protection from continental trends that unsettle democratic development and consolidation (Veenendaal, 2020). Also, as mentioned above, smallness and islandness bring political representatives and voters close, physically as well as emotionally and mentally. This makes it more straightforward for the latter to approach the former with their wants and needs, and for the former to better formulate and tweak legislation that corresponds to these needs (Saati, 2022).

Moving on to the potential disadvantages of smallness and islandness, scholars have proposed that, while being small and islanded may be advantageous in some respects, there are drawbacks looming on the horizon. To begin with, in small island states, social norms tend to be particularly rigid. This might not be a problem, if one conforms to these norms (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 112). It however becomes problematic if or when individuals try to break free from what is socially, and politically, accepted behaviour (Baldacchino, 2012; Saati, 2023a). The cost can be so high that individuals, whether ordinary citizens or political representatives, are ostracized from the community to the extent that they may feel that their only option is exile / ex-isle (Baldacchino, 2012; Saati, 2022). Dahl & Tufte (1973), pioneers in the literature on the political implications of smallness, discussed this potential drawback over 40 years ago. They proposed that small states tend to develop a "single code of conduct" (p. 92) of homogenous values that individuals (at least formally) must adhere to for social cohesion to prevail. While Dahl & Tufte (1973) generally have a quite positive outlook on the political implications of smallness, they acknowledge this as a particularly imminent disadvantage.

Smallness, islandness and the pressure to conform to "a single code of conduct" can give rise to other political effects. Veenendaal (2020) has proposed that it is likely that political platforms become streamlined, that is, several political parties may exist but the extent to which their ideologies differ may not be that vast. Instead, smallness and islandness lead to a personalization of politics. When "everybody knows everybody" (Corbett, 2015), it also follows that everybody knows the politicians and that the politicians know the voters either directly or indirectly. This dynamic inevitably provides fertile soil for corruption, patronage and clientelism (Farrugia, 1993; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Hinds, 2008; Veenendaal, 2013; Corbett, 2015; Saati, 2022). Proximity can thus be regarded in both a positive and negative light. On the one hand, it is advantageous for MPs to be able to easily reach out to the electorate and inquire about their needs, and for the electorate to easily get in touch with their MPs. On the other hand, from the perspective of strengthening democratic processes and procedures, close relationships between voters and elected officials can facilitate corrupt practices.

Our empirical inquiry on Cabo Verde also shows that this is a small island state in which political representatives have grown accustomed to engaging in cross-party dialogue, repeatedly and in a respectful manner. While this does not occur all the time or on all political issues, it happens frequently enough to ensure that democratic processes are respected and adhered to. This contradicts theoretical points of departure highlighting that, in small island states, individual MPs can be ostracized from their community – in this case, the political party – if they do not conform to the party line, disobey, or "sell out" to a rival political party. This notion has also been empirically validated (Saati, 2022). What we empirically observe in Cabo Verde thus begs a theoretical answer. In this context, we find Higley & Burton's (2006) idea about a consensually united elite to be a useful stepping stone in combination with Cheeseman's (2011) conception of path dependency specifically related to political elite relationships. Highley & Burton (2006) argue that a consensually united elite implies political representatives from opposing factions who, despite being political rivals, consensually agree on the political rules of the game. In other words, everyone agrees that the constitution must be respected. We believe that this baseline understanding ought to imply that political elites from opposing parties

are able to reach agreement on important issues, that they share codes of conduct and that their interaction patterns are predictable. Disunited elites, on the other hand, would operate in the opposite manner: with disagreements on fundamental issues, with no real communication among themselves, and, consequently, no predictability of their patterns of interaction (Burton & Higley, 2001, p. 182).

In the empirical section of this article, we will investigate these propositions as well as the other theoretical postulates brought to attention above. Before doing so, we will devote the next section to presenting and discussing issues related to our methodological choices.

Conducting and presenting results from fieldwork in Cabo Verde

Since the democratisation process in 1990, Cabo Verde has adopted a multiparty political system (Reis et al., 2023). In practice, however, two major political parties – the Movement for Democracy (MpD) and the African Party for the Independence of Cabo Verde (PAICV) – have alternated in power and securing a majority of the seats in the National Assembly of Cabo Verde (Reis et al., 2023). This was the political context we faced in March 2023 when we travelled to Cabo Verde to conduct interviews with elected MPs. At that time, the National Assembly was composed of 72 MPs: 38 from the MpD, 30 from the PAICV, and 4 from the Democratic Union of Cabo Verde (UCID).

Given the domination of the two major political parties, we conducted interviews with 8 MPs from MpD and 5 from PAICV. We first attempted to contact interviewees via email but this proved to be an unsuccessful strategy. As an alternative, we reached out to other researchers familiar with Cabo Verde's political system, who facilitated connections with elected MPs and recommended us to get in touch with MPs via social media platforms such as Facebook. Thus, most of the MPs interviewed were either recommended by other researchers or MPs who returned our contact via social media. Using a snowball sampling approach while in Cabo Verde, we recruited additional MPs willing to participate in interviews. Two main criteria guided our selection process. First, we considered party representation and prioritized interviews with members of both the MpD and PAICV, conducting eight interviews with MpD representatives (the majority party at the time of the interviews) and five with MPs from the PAICV. Second, we aimed at reaching a gender balance in the sample and conducted seven interviews with male MPs and six with female MPs. The interviews took place at the National Assembly in Cabo Verde. Each interview lasted around one hour. Prior to our meetings, all interviewees received information about the research project, the purpose of the interview, their rights as participants and the possibility to withdraw their participation at any time. No interviewees asked to withdraw. Before the start of the interviews, we asked all interviewees to re-read the information sheet, sign a consent form, and feel free to ask any questions. One of us (MS) is a native Portuguese speaker; so the interviews could be conducted in the official language of Cabo Verde, allowing interviewees to elaborate freely on the issues. The interviewer's nationality (Brazilian) also proved to be an asset on quite a few occasions when elected MPs brought up challenges in the Brazilian democratic system (e.g., corruption) to elaborate further and trace parallels with the political landscape in Cabo Verde. All the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed in Portuguese and later translated into English.

The interviews followed a theoretically informed set of interview questions, which touched upon the relationship between islandness, low population numbers and the democratic functioning and democratic bodies of Cabo Verde. Follow-up questions were posed to clarify some of the MP's arguments and views and to unveil aspects of relevance to the research. The number of interviews was sufficient to show that MPs have similar perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of islandness and democratic politics, which we elaborate further

in our analysis. For instance, they had similar views on how islandness can serve as a foil to authoritarian politics and violent conflicts in neighbouring countries; the disadvantages of corruption in small island states and the appointment procedures of anti-corruption agencies; and that formal and informal cross-party discussions and negotiations are important to secure an ongoing dialogue between politicians within different branches of government and within the executive (between the president and the prime minister). Despite differences in political affiliation amongst our interviewees, the interviews thus point to a convergence of opinions across the current political landscape in Cabo Verde.

For ethical reasons, we have opted to not disclose the gender, age, number of terms in office and party affiliation of interviewees. Providing such information would compromise the anonymity of the MPs interviewed. Women would be particularly vulnerable, given that there is a gender imbalance in the number of men and women elected as MPs in Cabo Verde.

In the following section, we present our findings and interpretations without disclosing identity markers to secure the anonymity of our interviewees.

Findings from interviews with Cabo Verdean MPs

The advantages of smallness and islandness as experienced by Cabo Verdean MPs

In our earlier discussion on different theoretical postulates that relate to smallness, islandness and democracy, one of the notions raised concerned how smallness and islandness contribute to a sense of societal cohesion and togetherness that builds social trust and, consequently, democracy (Baldacchino, 2005). The interviews with Cabo Verdean MPs lend support to this idea. One respondent captured the very essence of this proposition:

> [Closeness] is a huge advantage because politics, from my point of view, is made of relationships, personal and institutional relationships. And this relationship must be one of trust. I have a relationship of trust with my voters; we are a small country, everybody knows each other. It's not just a political relationship of trust, but also a friendship, many of us are neighbours as well.

Another potential advantage of smallness and islandness that previous research has brought to attention relates to how these specific circumstances bring voters and political representatives closer to each other, not only geographically but also mentally and emotionally (Veenendaal, 2013; Saati, 2022). This, in turn, can make the latter more aware of the grievances of the former. Almost all the interviewed MPs expressed sentiments to this effect. For example:

> You can see things closer; you can really understand the problems, analyse things better, and you are closer to what needs to be done and who needs it. You can also more easily analyse the impact of policies, measures and legislation on the population, on people's daily lives.

One respondent tried to imagine what it would be like to be a political representative in a populous country. This individual emphasised that, in larger states, many important political debates appear to be handled through the media. When the population is "huge, political action from door to door is perhaps not as usual or effective". MPs being so approachable was, in this respondent's view, a virtue of Cabo Verdean democracy:

> When I, as a MP, go out there on the street, anyone can hug me. We then talk and we discuss. These are things you do not see in [larger] countries, right?

While other respondents echoed these advantages, the MPs were equally straightforward in acknowledging the drawbacks that smallness, islandness and closeness also imply. In the following section, we will turn our attention to such experiences.

The disadvantages of smallness and islandness as experienced by Cabo Verdean MPs

Many of the experiences conveyed during the interviews substantiated theoretical notions that stress potential disadvantages of smallness and islandness. While close relations between the populace and MPs have their merits, this same closeness can also put pressure on MPs to deliver personal favours to voters. Numerous experiences to support this notion were expressed. For example, one MP said:

> Sometimes [closeness] becomes a disadvantage because as a MP, I feel that they [the voters] put pressure. The population demands things from the MP.

Another respondent expressed it thus:

> People always go after the MP to ask for help to deal with different difficulties. So, we have hundreds of messages, phone calls asking…basically asking for money. To pay for university, to solve a specific health problem, to help their child with something, to pay for a ticket to emigrate, to pay for ticket to visit their mother or father. This is our reality.

A third MP expressed a similar sentiment:

> A disadvantage is that a good percentage of the population have the idea that politicians put their hands in their pockets and money comes out….When people look for you, they also look for you to solve social problems, economic problems.

These experiences tie into the broader, and perhaps more serious, matter of nepotism, patronage and friendship corruption. We turn our attention to these issues in the next section.

Smallness and corrupt practices

As previous research has shown (e.g., Hinds, 2008; Veenendaal, 2013; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020; Saati, 2022), closeness and the resulting pressure from voters can give rise to challenging situations in which MPs knowingly, but sometimes also unintentionally, behave in unethical ways (Saati, 2022). During the interviews, it became clear that the representatives' experiences align with those of political representatives in other small island jurisdictions (Veenendaal, 2013; Corbett, 2015; Saati, 2022). Respondents argued that, when faced with voters' grievances in situations in which such voters are also friends and relatives, it is difficult *not* to act with urgency even if this implies stepping outside formal avenues through which different types of issues ought to be dealt with. It is simply too difficult *not* to pull strings to get someone a position within the civil service, *not to* help someone get a doctor's appointment or *not* to contact someone that you know at the admittance office of the university:

> Then you often use your influence, a friend who is there, who is well placed, and you try to solve some of the problems that way, right?

On the same subject, another MP admitted that assisting individual voters is problematic from an ethical perspective:

> I am not endorsing the act of trying to solve the problem… And we should not do it, but sometimes some circumstances make us do it as a human being, not as a MP. The MP is a legislative actor who knows her duties and limitations. But, as a human

being, who is also inseparable from the figure of the MP, I believe that if this is happening, it is for sentimental reasons and not to condone clientelism.

Even though the act of extending favours is not conducted with the intent of acting in an unethical way or engaging in friendship corruption, the practical exercise of doing so is still problematic. One of the respondents conceded that favours were habitually granted, and still – paradoxically – went on to argue that they would not appreciate it if another MP extended favours to *their* relatives:

> I do not promote what I do, right? But sometimes I tend to help with money, in cash. Of course, I would not want my family members – who also have difficulties – to be helped with the expectation to give something in return.

One respondent discussed the matter of friendship corruption, patronage and clientelism at length, especially when pondering the matter of whether such practices work their way into the appointment of positions within anti-corruption agencies, such as the Court of Accounts (Tribunal de Contas do Estado), the police force and other institutions. This MP had an honest and a self-declared 'realistic' take on the matter:

> No political interference [in anti-corruption institutions] means that you are not political, and there are no apolitical people in the world. I believe that to be political you need only to be human. But can you separate the party you are a member of from your own thoughts when analysing cases of corruption? I think so. Definitely, yes.

Several of the other respondents were unconvinced about whether professionalism and meritocracy triumphed over political interference regarding appointments to anti-corruption institutions and agencies. Even though the problem might not be "scandalous" as expressed by one MP, there is no "denying the fact that it occurs" according to another. All respondents who agreed that smallness and islandness have this particular side-effect of politicians granting personal favours and filling vacancies within anti-corruption agencies with the "right people", shared the view that the main issue had to do with the appointment procedures to these specific institutions. One of these sentiments is worth quoting at length:

> I have my doubts that these institutions work without political interference, and it has to do with how these people get these positions. I believe that the Court of Accounts has acted in a way that gives the impression that it has received instructions to act in a certain way. The same thing when it comes to the Attorney General's office. There are for example leaks of information that even point to interference by the AG's office in certain cases of justice that involve senior leaders in government. Government should never be allowed to appoint these people. This needs to be reviewed.

Some of the MPs also discussed that a serious review of appointment procedures is long overdue. One interviewee mentioned independent commissions that consist of individuals who are not presently, or have recently been, in political office as one strategy to secure appointments based solely on merits:

> …we need to see more independence [in these anti-corruption institutions], and it does not help that we are such a small state. But it is also a matter of attitude and integrity.

Islandness as a protecting shield

Judging from the accounts expressed above, it does appear that Cabo Verde faces challenges that pertain to corrupt practices, and that smallness brings certain disadvantages that place an overwhelming amount of pressure on individual MPs to assist members of the electorate: sometimes financially, but also by means of using their contacts. At the same time, Cabo Verdean democracy is stable, with regular parliamentary and presidential elections and peaceful transitions of power between the two major political parties, the MpD and PAICV (Sanches et al., 2022; Moestrup & Sedelius, 2023). While there are still challenges, the country does well, especially in an African context. Indeed, scholars have proposed that Cabo Verde is the most democratic African country (Baker, 2006); is an "African exception" (Meyns, 2002); is a country with "consolidated democratic rule" (Canhanga, 2021, p. 12) and, as expressed by former US President Obama, "a real success story" (Obama, 2013). When discussing the state of democracy in Cabo Verde, or rather their view on *why* the country has managed to remain a stable bastion for democratic processes in stark contrast to some of its neighbours on the continent, the respondents' answers aligned with theoretical propositions advanced by previous scholarship (Herbst, 2014; Levitsky & Way, 2005; Teorell, 2010; Veenendaal, 2020). Many respondents stressed islandness as a protecting shield from violent conflicts and the fact that Cabo Verde has been able to maintain peace even during the transition from Portuguese rule, thereby managing to consolidate democratic processes and procedures in a peaceful context:

> Peace, and our freedom, is a very important aspect that explains it [democratic success]. Also, what happened during our political transition [from Portuguese rule] did not happen to our close-by neighbours. Here, peace prevailed.

Several respondents also emphasised how democracy has become part of the cultural fabric of the country, so rooted in the social and political fabric of Cabo Verde that any other governing system would be unimaginable. One of the MPs expressed it thus:

> When we see, for example, some of the countries on the African coast, when we see these situations there, for us it is unthinkable. We cannot believe how it is still possible to be experiencing some of these situations.

Stressing the importance of peace as a breathing room or space for a political culture to develop, in contrast to contexts plagued by violent conflicts and war, another MP said:

> If we compare Cabo Verde with the other PALOP [African nation-states with Portuguese as the official language] countries that have the same history in terms of the national liberation struggle, with more or less the same years of independence, we are far ahead with our democratic culture. Just go to Guinea-Bissau and you will see how many times the government has collapsed. If you go to São Tome, Mozambique, Angola, there is permanent instability, right? But here, we have peaceful political alternations. There is a democratic culture.

A specific strand of the democratization literature emphasises that having democratic neighbours is an important factor for strengthening democratic processes in one's own country (Levitsky & Way, 2005; Teorell, 2010). Cabo Verde illustrates that the inverse relation might also apply. Having authoritarian neighbours can work against the strengthening of democratic processes in one's own country. Having turbulence or even raging war close by can also have a detrimental effect on stability and democracy in one's own state.

Cross-party dialogue in Cabo Verde

During our interviews with Cabo Verdean MPs, we noticed that – regardless of political affiliation – they stressed that continuous cross-party dialogue, in formal as well as in informal settings, has served Cabo Verdean democracy well. One respondent expressed it as:

> We have a close relationship with our opponents and relate to each other with courtesy; with kindness. We are opponents, but we … have good relationships, even becoming friends in some cases. That too, I think is a good thing. We have very cordial relationships between opponents although we have different standpoints.

This particular MP reasoned that this cordial way of relating to political opponents is a consequence of smallness. MPs might know or be acquainted with each other even prior to entering political office and continue to build on amicable relations that have already been established. As this respondent expressed:

> The Cape Verdean knows everyone: he is a cousin of this one, he is a brother of that one, he is a friend of that one, he knows your father, he knows your mother. It works like this in Cape Verde.

Other MPs did not make a direct connection between smallness/islandness and constructive cross-party interactions, but rather emphasised aspects related to democratic maturity and democratic culture as explanatory factors to amicable relations. To further their argument, the current cohabitation (as of 2021) between the president (from PAICV) and the prime minister (from MpD) was brought to attention:

> I think that cohabitation represents our reality; I think that we are starting to realise this and that we have reached a point where we can have political argumentations without conflict since there is a common goal of democracy.

In fact, cohabitation within the executive was brought to our attention several times by the MPs as an example of cross-party dialogue that, in their opinion, works productively. One MP even said that this specific type of cross-party dialogue ought to be "a great democratic lesson for other countries". Another respondent stressed that cross-party dialogue at the highest political level – within the executive – is not an anomaly in Cabo Verde, pointing to the fact that cohabitation within the executive branch is now occurring for the second time since independence. Indeed, Cabo Verde has – at least according to our respondents – a previous experience of successful cohabitation. From 2011 to 2016, the country had a president from MpD and a prime minister from PAICV (Moestrup & Sedelius, 2023). This could lend support to Cheeseman's (2011) notion concerning "learning by doing" and that there might be an element of path dependency in creating good relationships between political opponents. We would, however, be cautious to draw any definite conclusions about constructive cross-party dialogue and a consensual political elite in Cabo Verde as stemming exclusively from good relations within the executive branch. Cohabitation has simply not occurred frequently enough for such a conclusion to be valid. Rather, other aspects in addition to smallness, and the consequential closeness between MPs (from different parties), may shed light on the matter.

During our conversations with Cabo Verdean MPs about the state of their democracy, we were struck by how nearly all respondents adamantly and repeatedly brought attention to the country's constitution. They did so from two slightly different, yet related, perspectives. One of the reasons for why the constitution was called on when discussing the state of democracy, and why they viewed the country as a well-functioning democracy, was a sense of pride in having founding laws that are very explicit in terms of specifying the separation of powers between all branches of government. They conveyed that this kind of precision leaves little or

no room for ambiguity and, more importantly, for the risk of political quarrels over matters of interpretation. Respondents also brought the constitution to attention to underscore how all MPs fully understand and respect the rules of the political game. Exemplifying with the balance of power between the president and the prime minister, whether being from the same political party or from different political parties, one respondent expressed it thus:

> We have clear guidelines in the constitution when it comes to what is the responsibility of the President and what is the responsibility of the PM. Therefore, neither one can go beyond what is stipulated in the constitution; it is within this framework that they have to act.

The same MP concluded that an amicable institutional relationship is likely to build on good personal terms that have been nurtured over time: that individuals who are now finding themselves in the office of the PM or as the president of the republic have developed good relations and a habit of working together in parliament for many years prior to entering the highest offices of the country. Another respondent echoed this sentiment:

> Cabo Verde politicians have had very good political training and experience. This makes them capable of cohabitation in the best possible way.

Another MP said that successful cohabitation – when the president and the prime minister are from different political parties – requires "extraordinary political experience" and that it also depends on *who* the cohabitating political actors are. They argued that familiarity and prior experiences of engaging with each other politically is essential. Another interviewee conveyed a similar response, also emphasising the constitution:

> Nothing is more natural for us than having a president from one political party and a PM from another. And why do I say that nothing is more natural? Because our constitutional arrangement is very good, it is very clear, it is very well defined. We have the constitution that dictates the rules of the game; each one has its own scope.

Another MP spoke of cross-party dialogue between politicians in a more general sense, expressing satisfaction with how Cabo Verdean MPs engage with each other. This MP further conveyed that even more such dialogue should occur since it would, in their view, "create more transparency in management". They argued that discussions, debates, bargains and agreement on political issues is a "win" for the country and the population. The MP argued that political decisions will always benefit from having been thoroughly discussed among MPs who hold different views, who can offer different angles on issues and who have different experiences: "Why put all your eggs in one basket when you can benefit from different perspectives?".

It appears that, overall, Cabo Verdean MPs have found constructive ways of living with cross-party dialogue. The interviews lend support to the theoretical postulates raised by Higley & Burton (2006) and Cheeseman (2011). For a consensually united political elite to emerge, political representatives from opposing political parties must understand the rules of the political game – that is, the constitution – not only as a legitimate document but also as a roadmap which everyone respects, even if it does not favour their own agenda at the moment. The answers conveyed through the quotes above suggest that fundamental respect for the constitution exists across the board. Cabo Verde has developed a political culture in which political opponents realise that there is a new day – a new election cycle – beyond the present one. All is not lost if the political party that one belongs to does not manage to win an election: the code of conduct is to respect the constitution, remain in opposition and try for an election win the next time around. To explain such states, Cheeseman (2011) draws our attention to the importance of path-dependency and the notion that frequent, repeated and successful

interactions between political opponents contribute to establishing a culture that builds on mutually respectful behaviour and respect for the constitution. Judging from the answers of the respondents in this study, it appears that such working relations have taken root among Cabo Verdean politicians in the National Assembly as well as within the executive; that is, between the prime minister and the president who – since 2021 – hail from two different political parties.

Conclusion

Much of what was conveyed during the interviews with Cabo Verdian MPs aligns with previous research concerning the political dynamics of small island states, concerning both positive and negative aspects (Saati, 2022; Veenendaal, 2013; Corbett, 2015). Like their counterparts in other small states, MPs in Cabo Verde believe that it is advantageous to be approachable to their voters. This makes them aware of the wants and needs of their constituents which, in turn, makes targeted legislation an easier task. On the other hand, being approachable also brings challenges in terms of pressure on MPs to deliver personal favours to voters, setting the stage for corrupt practices. This study, however, also provides new insights. To begin with, it substantiates the theoretical notion of islandness working as a protecting shield from authoritarian tendencies and violent conflict – at least from the viewpoint of Cabo Verdean MPs. When contrasting the country's democratic experience with that of other states on the African continent, especially PALOP states, the MPs acknowledged that their country is an exception. Free from violent conflict, even during the liberation from Portuguese rule, Cabo Verde has been able to foster and consolidate a democratic culture.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly – since islandness is not something that a country can change – this study brings new insights when it comes to the importance of continuous formal and informal cross-party dialogues, conducted in a cordial, respectful manner. Relating back to Dahl & Tufte's (1973) notion about how a "single code of conduct" tends to develop in small states, our results identify a deep respect for the constitution across the political spectrum in Cabo Verde. Indeed, this appears to be *the* single code of conduct in Cabo Verde: the political norm that everyone firmly agrees on, regardless of political stripe.

We are still curious to understand better why cross-party dialogue appears to be so extensive in this island state. A theoretically informed hypothesis could lead us to look for a critical juncture to explain this (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Independence from colonial rule could mark a new beginning, providing a foundation for amicable relations between political actors across party affiliations. However, Cabo Verde was ruled as a one-party state for the first 15 years after independence from Portuguese rule (1975-1990). In this case, independence seems unlikely as a critical juncture for the development and consolidation of a consensually united political elite. We find a more promising avenue for further inquiry in our respondents' recurring references to cohabitation between president and prime minister as an example of fruitful cross-party dialogue and cooperation. The first such cohabitation in 2011-2016 could be understood as such a critical juncture; and this is an interesting issue for further probing.

Based on our results, our main conclusion is that cross-party dialogue and cooperation between MPs from different political parties is worth institutionalizing. The issue of *how* and *where* this is done remains, however, a matter that must be determined by context. Different small island states will have to determine what is best considering their individual circumstance. In the case of Cabo Verde and based on our interviews, we believe that cross-party cooperation could – and should – be institutionalized specifically in institutions that have the responsibility to appoint individuals who head various anti-corruption agencies. MPs disclosed discontent and even mistrust vis-à-vis current appointment procedures but expressed strong approval of cross-

party dialogue in general and the current cohabitation between president from PAICV and prime minister from MpD in particular. Institutionalization of cross-party cooperation and negotiations within anti-corruption agencies and institutions could be a way to come to terms with discontent with, and mistrust towards, the appointment procedures within such agencies and institutions. This could include the installation of specific institutional bodies to appoint agency leaders, with representation from all political parties that have seats in the National Assembly on such bodies, and obliging them to reach consensus decisions on appointments. This would be a reform proposal that could travel to other small island states: after all, matters of corruption, patronage and nepotism in the appointment procedures of anti-corruption agencies may prevail in many small states and territories (Saati, 2022; Saati, 2023a; Veenendaal, 2013; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Farrugia, 1993).

Funding details

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in writing this paper.

References

Anckar, D. (2010). Small is democratic, but who is small? *Arts & Social Sciences Journal*, *2*(1), 1-10.

Anckar, D. (2002). Why are small island states democracies? *The Round Table*, *91*(365), 375-390.

Anckar, D. & Anckar, C. (1995). Size, islandness and democracy. *Scandinavian Political Studies, 18*(4), 211-230.

Baker, B. (2006). Cape Verde: the most democratic nation in Africa? *The Journal of Modern African Studies, 44*(4), 493-511.

Baldacchino, G. (2005). The contribution of 'social capital' to economic growth: lessons from island jurisdictions. *The Round Table, 94*(1), 31-46.

Baldacchino, G. (2012). Islands and despots. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *50*(1), 103–120.

Burton, M. & Higley, J. (2001). The study of political elite transformations. *International Review of Sociology, 11*(2), 181-199.

Canhanga, N. (2021). *Democratization and state-building in Lusophone African states: The cases of Cape Verde and Mozambique.* PhD thesis. South Africa: University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/items/61806b8d-0b4c-43cc-9864-9c15c24b1d21

Capoccia, G. & Keleman, D. R. (2007). The study of critical junctures: theory, narrative and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism. *World Politics, 59*(3), 341-369.

Cheeseman, N. (2011). The internal dynamics of power-sharing in Africa. *Democratization, 18*(2), 336-365.

Corbett, J. & Veenendaal, W. (2016). Westminster in small states: comparing the Caribbean and Pacific experience. *Contemporary Politics, 22*(4), 432-449.

Corbett, J. (2015). "Everybody knows everybody": practicing politics in the Pacific Islands. *Democratization, 22*(1), 51-72.

Dahl, R. A. & Tufte, E. R. (1973) *Size and democracy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Duncan, N. T. & Woods, D. (2007). What about us? The Anglo-Caribbean democratic experience. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *45*(2), 202-218.

Farrugia, C. J. (1993). The special working environment of senior administrators in small States. *World Development*, *21*(2), 221–226.

Herbst, J. (2014). *States and power in Africa: Comparative lessons in authority and control*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Higley, J. & Burton, M. (2006). *Elite foundations of liberal democracy.* Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Hinds, D. (2008). Beyond formal democracy: the discourse on democracy and governance in the Anglophone Caribbean. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *46*(3), 388-406.

Hirczy, W. (1995). Explaining near-universal turnout: The case of Malta. *European Journal of Political Research, 27*(2), 255-272.

Levitsky, S. & Way, L. (2005). International linkage and democratization. *Journal of Democracy, 16*(3), 20-34.

Meyns, P. (2002). Cape Verde: an African exception. *Journal of Democracy, 13*(3), 153-165.

Moestrup, S. & Sedelius, T. (2023). Presidential activism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Explaining variation among semi-presidential countries. *Political Studies Review, 50*(3), 1111–1136. https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299231204555

Obama, B. (2013) *President Obama welcomes African leaders.* https://web.archive.org/web/20200727092735/https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/03/28/president-obama-welcomes-african-leaders#transcript

Ott, D. (2000). *Small is democratic: An examination of state size and democratic development*. New York: Garland.

Reis, B. C., Borges da Silva, R. A., & Moreira Semedo, M. F. (2023). La actuación de los partidos políticos en Cabo Verde: Un análisis sobre las elecciones legislativas de 2016. *Estudios de Asia y Africa, 58*(1), 5–34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27194052

Saati, A. (2022). The political consequences of smallness: The case of Saint Lucia. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 60*(4), 339-356.

Saati, A. (2023a). Doing politics within the confines of restrictive norms: The case of St Lucia. *Small States & Territories, 6*(1), 3-14.

Saati, A. (2023b). The fourth estate? Experiences of Cape Verdean journalists. *Island Studies Journal, 19*(1). Early Access: https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.88131

Saati, A. & Bergman, T. (2022). Democracy, façade or somewhere in between? An exploration of Vanuatu, Kiribati and São Tomé and Príncipe. *Small States & Territories, 5*(1), 141-158.

Sanches, E., Cheeseman, N., Veenendaal, W. & Corbett, J. (2022). African exceptions: democratic development in small island states. *Journal of International Relations and Development, 25*(1), 210-234.

Srebrnik, H. (2004). Small island nations and democratic values. *World Development, 32*(3), 329-341.

Teorell, J. (2010). *Determinants of democratization.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

UN (2021). General Information: Cape Verde. https://data.un.org/en/iso/cv.html

Veenendaal, W. (2021). How instability creates stability: the survival of democracy in Vanuatu. *Third World Quarterly, 42*(6), 1330-1346.

Veenendaal, W. (2020). Islands of democracy. *Area, 52*(1), 30-37.

Veenendaal, W. (2015). Democracy in microstates: why smallness does not produce a democratic political system. *Democratization, 22*(1), 92-112.

Veenendaal, W. (2013). Size and institutional legitimacy: the case of St Kitts and Nevis. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *51*(3), 343-361.

Veenendaal, W. & Corbett, J. (2020). Clientelism in small states: how smallness influences patron-client networks in the Caribbean and the Pacific. *Democratization, 27*(1), 61-80.