

RESEARCH ARTICLES

"Somos Todos Primos" (We're All Cousins) in São Tomé & Príncipe: Islandness, Closeness, and Democracy in a Small Island State

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This article explores how members of parliament (MPs) in the small island state of São Tomé & Príncipe (STP) understand the effects of islandness and smallness on their country's democracy. Drawing on interviews with MPs from all political parties in the National Assembly in 2024, we find broad agreement that smallness and islandness offer certain democratic advantages, particularly by fostering close contact between representatives and voters, which helps MPs respond more directly to constituents' needs. Yet, this same proximity also brings profound challenges. MPs describe how closeness facilitates corruption, patronage, and vote-buying, while friendship and kinship ties shape appointments to key institutions, undermining the rule of law. Across interviews, MPs repeatedly invoked the expression "Somos Todos Primos" ("We're all cousins"), a local expression that doubles as a playful rephrasing of the country's acronym, STP. This phrase captures both the intimacy and the entanglement of political and personal relations that characterize life and democratic governance in São Tomé & Príncipe. Within such a tightly knit society, political decision-making often occurs outside or between formal democratic institutions. Building on these findings, the article advances a theoretical refinement by integrating Putnam's (1994) work on social capital with Corbett and Veenendaal's (2018) analysis of small states. We argue that social capital in small island societies may be both particularly potent and unusually fragile. When political leaders use personal ties responsibly, hyper-personalisation can reinforce social trust and contribute to a virtuous cycle of democratic strengthening. When used irresponsibly, however, these same ties undermine social capital and weaken democratic practice.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on islandness is dispersed across many different disciplines (see Foley et al., 2023 for a recent overview). This makes the notion of islandness—what it is, how it is perceived by islanders and outsiders, and how its effects play out socially, economically, culturally, and politically—contested and, largely, dependent on who is doing the explaining. Though the concept

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of islandness is a source of dispute, the cross-disciplinary interest has led to “islandness” being thoroughly probed from different perspectives. This is valuable for island studies in general. The focus of this article, however, is limited to a context-specific understanding of islandness. We explore how members of parliament (MPs) in São Tomé & Príncipe—a small island jurisdiction located in the Gulf of Guinea, inhabited by 225,000 individuals (World Food Programme, 2025)—perceive it, and more specifically, how they understand it to affect their country’s state of democracy.

As Foley et al. (2023) accurately bring attention to, it is not always the case that islandness also implies smallness. For one, islands can encompass massive land areas and provide a home for large populations. Secondly, smallness can involve many different aspects beyond the territorial. For example, smallness may include a country’s GDP/capita, its military strength, its population size, and more (Foley et al., 2023; Ott, 2000; Srebrnik, 2004). In the case of São Tomé & Príncipe, however, as the interviews with the MPs on the coming pages will show, “islandness” and “smallness” appear to go hand in hand, used interchangeably when they speak about the challenges and advantages of being an insular state with a small population.

The findings of this article align, to some extent, with our previous work on small island jurisdictions and the challenges such states face when it comes to securing democratic processes and procedures (Saati, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Saati & Bergman, 2022; Saati & Souza, 2024). However, in the case of São Tomé & Príncipe, the disadvantages are rather amplified. In the empirical section of this article, we show that MPs recognize the benefits of being a small island state, such as increasing accessibility and communication with constituents to fully understand their wants and needs. At the same time, easy access and closeness—physically, emotionally, and mentally—has also led to widespread corruption and patronage not only entailing monetary handouts and vote-buying, but also more disturbing occurrences such as paedophilia not being reported (due to friendship ties) in exchange for material goods. This is serious for the victims of such crimes, but also at a societal level. For one, it has implications for the rule of law, an essential aspect of democracy. Secondly, it bears consequences for the social fabric of a country in the sense that it negatively affects social trust, which we, in alignment with Putnam’s (1994) seminal work, argue is central for supporting and developing democratic practices. In this article, we set out to explore how MPs from all political parties in São Tomé & Príncipe understand, and explain, various occurrences that are related to the strengthening, and likewise weakening, of democratic processes in their country, and what they perceive can and should be done to address the weaknesses that they identify.

This article is organized into four parts. In the next section, we situate our study into a broader theoretical context that specifically addresses islandness, smallness, and democracy. In this section, we synthesise the existing literature and, based on our empirical findings of São Tomé & Príncipe, articulate a conceptual extension and contribution of our own, which we hope will

advance the frontiers of small island studies. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of our method and materials, coding procedures, including thematic development, i.e., aspects of our method that have made it possible for us to analyse the interviews in a systematic and comprehensive way. In this section, we also pay particular attention to the delicate matter of interviewing MPs in a state with a small population size and a small legislature. We will also discuss how the answers from the interviews will be presented so as to ensure that the MPs cannot be identified. Securing their anonymity was a prerequisite for them agreeing to be interviewed. Honouring this trust has been essential for us. This is followed by the empirical section, in which we present and analyse the findings from the case of São Tomé & Príncipe. Throughout this analysis, we consistently relate the empirical evidence to the theoretical assumptions regarding islandness, smallness, and democracy outlined earlier, thereby ensuring analytical coherence and theoretical stringency. The article concludes with a final section that synthesises the key insights and discusses the broader implications of the research findings.

SMALLNESS, ISLANDNESS, AND DEMOCRACY

Before delving into theoretical discussions about smallness, islandness, and democracy, we must first establish what we mean by "small". As we mentioned in the introductory section, small can involve various aspects of a country's characteristics, ranging from its territory to its population size. In this article, "small" relates to the population size of a country. Having established that, small is still a relative concept. We lean on previous scholarship in this vein of research. Thus, we draw the cut-off point for what constitutes small at states that have a population size of around 500,000 individuals (Ott, 2000; Srebrnik, 2004; Veenendaal, 2015).

The idea that democracy has a stronger chance to thrive in small polities has a long pedigree, dating back to ancient Greece. We will not recite this literature here, but suffice to say that many contemporary scholars who, like the ancient Greek philosophers, are interested in understanding the potential effects of smallness and islandness on democracy, continue to theorize that the two former are beneficial for the latter. In this context, before proceeding with this section of the article, it is crucial to recognise that scholars differ in their conceptualisation of the defining features of democracy. These conceptualisations range from minimalist or "thin" approaches where the regular conduct of free and fair elections is sufficient to classify a regime as democratic, to maximalist or "thick" approaches, which incorporate additional criteria relating to what democratic systems are expected to deliver, such as the protection of political and civil rights and the cultivation of democratic competencies among citizens (in essence, the "learning" of democracy) (Arnstein, 1969; Coppedge & Gerring, 2011; Norris, 2008; Pateman, 1970, 2012; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). As we interpret the literature on small island states and the theoretical postulates raised therein, we understand that these scholars lean on a maximalist

definition of how smallness and islandness affect democracy. This, as well as the findings in our previous work (Saati, 2023a, 2023b; Saati & Souza, 2024), aligns with how respondents in São Tomé & Príncipe speak of democracy as a regime that extends beyond merely holding regular free and fair elections.

In their seminal work *Size and Democracy*, Dahl and Tufte (1973) capture a broader/thicker understanding of democracy in an illustrative way. In their work, they suggest that a small population size can impact democracy in a positive way for several reasons. The authors theorize that a small population size brings voters and their representatives closer to each other, physically, but equally important, emotionally and mentally. If constituents encounter their political representatives in the supermarket, at church, and when picking up their children at soccer games, the MP is likely to be viewed as an ordinary person, much like him/herself, making it less intimidating to approach the MP and convey grievances one experiences in one's everyday life (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Such repeated encounters might foster political interest among the constituents, which is beneficial for a vibrant democracy. Closeness, due to smallness, may also lead constituents to act as (informal) watchdogs, overseeing their MPs, making sure that they act within the confines of their role as elected politicians (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Following Dahl and Tufte's theorizing, influential empirical studies by, for example, Hadenius (1992), Ott (2000), and Anckar (2002) have found a positive association between smallness and democracy. Hadenius (1992) and Ott (2000) have, furthermore, found that small island states are more democratic compared to other small states. Why small island states are more democratic compared to larger states is, however, not probed further in their respective studies.

Addressing this issue, Anckar and Anckar (1995), and Anckar (2008; 2002) have made important theoretical contributions. They argue that islandness entails a degree of remoteness imposed by the surrounding sea. This remoteness is hypothesised to foster stronger social cohesion among island populations, as well as a sense of self-reliance borne from being "left to their own devices." Taken together, these factors may, at least theoretically, predispose islanders to resolve conflicts more amicably, thereby nurturing a democratic ethos and ultimately reinforcing democratic practice. In a more recent contribution, Sanches et al. (2022) confirm these results. Studying five island states in Africa, the authors propose and empirically confirm that smallness leads to closer links between citizens and politicians, and this leads to more efficient service delivery, while islandness cultivates heightened social cohesion and functions as a stabilising buffer against political volatility and conflict in proximate states.

To conclude, the propositions accounted for above capture a maximalist/thick approach to democracy. Democracy, in this case in small island states, is understood as a regime that is envisioned to deliver more than merely regular free and fair elections; to foster a vibrant society; to educate citizens

in democratic behaviour; to bring constituents and MPs closer to each other making it easier for the latter to propose targeted legislation; to educate the citizenry to become a watch-dog institution, and more.

More recent theoretical and empirical scholarship on small island states has, however, begun to question several of the previously assumed democratic advantages associated with smallness and islandness. This shift has prompted a re-orientation in the literature, with newer work seeking to more fully grasp the distinctive political dynamics that characterise small island state politics (Baldacchino, 2012; Corbett, 2015; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Saati, 2023a, 2023b; Saati & Bergman, 2022; Saati & Souza, 2024; Veenendaal, 2013, 2020). Veenendaal (2020), as the scholars referred to above, has noted that even though island jurisdictions appear to have "exceptionally democratic regimes" (2020, p. 30), the interconnectedness of individuals who reside in these societies including MPs with voters, MPs with government officials, MPs with civil servants, and voters with civil servants has made much of the actual political decision-making an activity that takes place outside of formal democratic institutions. Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) show that small states—defined as those with populations under one million and not limited to island jurisdiction—are characterised by a pronounced personalization of politics. This is a pattern that persists irrespective of region, historical trajectory, institutional configuration, or level of economic development, and which exerts a decisive influence on political practice within these polities. Their study also illustrates that, in addition to personalization of politics, informal avenues for political decision-making are frequently used compared to formal institutions through which such decisions are expected to be taken.

Other studies have shown that while political representatives value easy access to their constituents, they also tell of the drawbacks. Although acknowledging the value of frequent contact with the voters for purposes of being able to propose targeted legislation, regular interaction often makes the individual MP feel overwhelmed as voters tend to demand to be heard on any given day and time of the week (Saati, 2023a; Saati & Souza, 2024; Veenendaal, 2013). The expectation to have immediate access to the MP is likely even more present if the MP and the voter have a bond that extends beyond a mere representative-constituent relationship, i.e., if they are also friends, family, or somehow acquainted. The probability of such being the case is obviously higher in a small polity compared to a larger one. Furthermore, Baldacchino (2005, 2012) has pointed to another theoretical possibility that islandness and smallness bring, namely that the pressure to conform to social, cultural, and political norms can become overwhelming, almost serving as a straitjacket. The pressure to conform might lead to MPs (and ordinary citizens alike) refraining from voicing opinions that run counter to established norms in the given society, even if doing so would bring attention to political misconduct that is harmful to democratic processes. These propositions of conformism have been empirically validated

(Saati, 2023a, 2023b; Saati & Souza, 2024). When combining smallness and closeness, the remoteness that islandness implies and the heightened risk of conformism, the political landscape of the small island jurisdiction will also be characterized by personalization (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018) and personal relationships, phenomenon that provide fertile soil for patronage and corruption (Corbett, 2015; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Farrugia, 1993; Girvan, 2015; Hinds, 2008; Saati & Souza, 2024; Veenendaal, 2013; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020). Based on our previous work on small island states including Cabo Verde, Vanuatu, Saint Lucia, and Kiribati (Saati, 2023a, 2023b; Saati & Bergman, 2022; Saati & Souza, 2024) as well as Veenendaal's work on St. Kitts and Nevis (2013) and Corbett's (2015) and Connell and Corbet's (2016) contributions with an empirical focus on the islands in the south pacific, we further theorize that acts of corruption are more prevalent in small island states that are economically underdeveloped.

In the empirical section of this article, we demonstrate that many of the propositions advanced in earlier scholarship, summarised above, carry explanatory value in the case of São Tomé & Príncipe. At the same time, our empirical findings also motivate a further refinement of existing theory, which may be of value for future studies of small island states. We pursue this theoretical development by bringing together Putnam's (1994) classical work on social capital with Corbett and Veenendaal's (2018) recent and comprehensive analysis of small states. Corbett and Veenendaal show that democracy in small states often persists against the odds, largely due to the hyper-personalisation of politics, an observation that might initially seem to contradict conventional assumptions about what underpins robust democratic systems.

We argue that the core proposition of Putnam's (1994) work—that social capital enhances the capacity of individuals within a society to act collectively and pursue shared goals—may have heightened significance in small island states precisely because of their small size and remoteness. At the same time, we contend that social capital in such settings may also be more vulnerable or fragile for these very reasons. This implies that when hyper-personalised politics negatively (rather than positively) affect democratic practice, social capital is likely to come under strain.

Put differently, when political leaders use their personal ties to the electorate responsibly, in ways that support and reinforce democratic norms, social capital is strengthened, thereby contributing to a virtuous cycle of democratic consolidation (Putnam, 1994). Conversely, the reverse dynamic may also be theoretically plausible. When politicians or other authority figures employ these ties irresponsibly, it erodes social trust, which weakens social capital and generates a downward spiral, adversely affecting democratic practices.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS IN A SMALL ISLAND STATE

As stated in the introductory note, this study takes an interest in exploring how members of parliament (MPs) in São Tomé & Príncipe perceive islandness, and more specifically, how they understand it to affect their country’s state of democracy. Thus, the experiences of MPs are our sole focus of empirical attention since these are influential political actors who, we argue, have unique insights into how being a small island jurisdiction affects democracy in their country. During a research trip to São Tomé and Príncipe in May 2024, we conducted 12 interviews with MPs representing all political parties with seats in the National Assembly. Following the 2022 elections, the 55 parliamentary seats were distributed among the country’s main political forces (Assembleia Nacional de São Tomé & Príncipe, 2025). The Independent Democratic Action (ADI) secured 30 seats, forming a parliamentary majority and appointing the Prime Minister. The Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP-PSD) obtained 18 seats, the Movement of Independent Citizens of São Tomé and Príncipe (MCI-PUN) won 5 seats, and the Basta Movement gained 3 (Assembleia Nacional de São Tomé & Príncipe, 2025). A caveat is that, despite receiving information about the project and an invitation to interviews, we did not manage to conduct interviews with representatives elected in the Príncipe autonomous region. Our interview sample roughly mirrored the seat distribution in the National Assembly: 4 MPs from ADI, 5 from MLSTP-PSD, 2 from Basta, and 1 from MCI-PUN were interviewed in their professional capacity. In terms of gender, 9 men and 3 women participated, reflecting the broader gender imbalance within the National Assembly. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the country’s official language, by one of the authors, who is a native Portuguese speaker. This facilitated a nuanced understanding of key expressions such as “Somos Todos Primos” (the phrase used in our title) and common political terms like “banho,” a colloquial reference to bribery in the country. Interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated into English, yet culturally specific expressions unique to São Tomé and Príncipe were retained in their original form.

Challenges in studying small island states have long been documented (see, for instance, Baldacchino, 2008). During our fieldwork, three main challenges emerged in the sampling and interview processes. First, it proved difficult to reach potential interviewees from abroad, particularly when initial contact attempts were made in English. Interviews were successfully arranged only after one of the authors arrived in São Tomé and Príncipe and personally visited the National Assembly. With the assistance of a Secretary of the Assembly, we were advised to submit a formal invitation letter, which was subsequently circulated among MPs during a meeting of the Network of Women Parliamentarians. This process enabled us to schedule the first interviews and continue recruitment through snowball sampling. The second challenge concerned preserving the anonymity of participating MPs, a particularly complex issue in a small society where personal and professional

networks are closely intertwined (Baldacchino, 2008). To safeguard anonymity, we refrained from identifying MPs by political affiliation or gender when presenting quotations in the sections below. This approach was necessary to ensure anonymity and to avoid potential asymmetrical consequences, in particular to women MPs or members from smaller parties. Finally, as Baldacchino (2008) highlights, researchers studying small islands must navigate the balance between insider and outsider perspectives. The author argues that "[b]oth external and internal understandings are necessary for a fuller, deeper understanding of island life" (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 49). We acknowledge our outsider standpoint through pre-defined notions of democracy and democratic governance in small island states. We were transparent about our positionality during interviews, explaining our interest in São Tomé and Príncipe and our experience studying other contexts under the same research project. At the same time, we designed the interview guide to encourage, rather than constrain, insider reflections. In particular, the interview guide invited participants to reflect on the advantages and challenges of democratic governance in São Tomé & Príncipe, the results of which are presented in the following sections.

Although the interview guide encouraged MPs to speak freely and without constraints, it was nevertheless strongly informed by existing theory. This approach was essential for ensuring that the full range of potential democratic advantages and disadvantages associated with smallness and islandness could be systematically captured. Accordingly, we formulated questions that directly engaged with the propositions advanced by Dahl and Tufte (1973), Baldacchino (2005, 2012), Anckar and Anckar (1995), Anckar (2008; 2002), Veenendaal (2013), Saati and Souza (2024), Saati (2023a, 2023b), Farrugia (1993), Duncan and Woods (2007), Hinds (2008), Corbett (2015), Girvan (2015), Veenendaal and Corbett (2020), among others discussed in the theoretical section above. The empirical material was subsequently analysed according to theoretically derived themes and categories, each directly linked to the propositions advanced by the authors referenced above. This analytical process proved relatively straightforward, as many respondents articulated their experiences in ways that resonated strongly with existing theoretical concepts. They frequently employed terms such as "closeness," "smallness," "access," "proximity," "kinship," "friendship," "ties," "democracy," "islandness," "patronage," "corruption," and "social norms." This alignment is clearly reflected in the numerous quotations presented in the empirical section that follows.

Below, we provide an example that illustrates our coding technique. One MP stated: "Here, everybody knows everybody. If someone complains about corruption, they might face repercussions because people are afraid of breaking social ties.". Based on this account, we broke the excerpt into meaningful parts and assigned them descriptive labels. These labels were: Closeness of community; social pressure; fear of reporting corruption; maintenance of social ties; informal sanctions, and reluctance to challenge

Table 1. Thematic coding table

Interview excerpt	Initial code	Theme
“Everybody knows everybody here”	Closeness of community	Social cohesion and conformity
“If you report corruption, people will not talk to you anymore”	Social sanctions	Social cohesion and conformity
“People fear losing favour if they speak up”	Fear of reprisals	Democratic challenges
“Corruption continues because nobody wants to be the one to expose it”	Reluctance to report wrongdoing	Democratic challenges

authority. These codes (which were close to the respondents’ own language) were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes. For example, one theme was “Social cohesion and conformity” (into which we fit closeness of community, maintenance of social ties, informal sanctions, and social pressure), another was “Democratic challenges” (into which we fit fear of reporting corruption, reluctance to challenge authority, and perceived consequences for whistleblowing. The table summarizes this example (and our general approach to developing themes and coding the material).

In the following section, we present and analyse the findings from our interviews with MPs in São Tomé & Príncipe. We begin by outlining the advantages and disadvantages of smallness and islandness as described by the respondents. We then devote particular attention to the ways in which smallness and islandness, according to the interviewees, significantly affect the functioning of anti-corruption agencies and the media, which were frequently highlighted as especially problematic areas.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF SMALLNESS AND ISLANDNESS ON DEMOCRACY

In our interviews with the MPs, we came to understand that many of the propositions that previous literature has suggested about the advantages and disadvantages of being a small island state are borne out in practice in São Tomé & Príncipe. As we indicated at the outset of this article, the respondents also referred to their country, almost always, as a “small island state.” For example, before explicating their answers further, they would often preface by stating “look, we are a small island state,” “seeing that we are a small island state,” “so, we’re an island and we’re small,” “we are an island and we also have a small population, so.” One respondent even said, “I am not sure if you are aware, but São Tomé is not a country, it is an island.” Thus, MPs in São Tomé & Príncipe perceive of smallness and islandness as two interrelated concepts. From this understanding follows other insights about what smallness and islandness imply for the state of democracy in their own country, as they perceive it.

Regardless of political affiliation, the MPs who were interviewed agreed that there are benefits of being a small island state as far as democracy is concerned. On numerous occasions, the phrase “somos todos primos” was voiced, Portuguese for “we are all cousins.” The MPs would say that the

combination of a small population size and a small territory has worked to strengthen democratic processes and procedures. They argued that the sense of interconnectedness of individuals has made ordinary citizens feel at ease in terms of approaching their MPs, suggesting that it is quite comparable to approaching "your cousin." One MP expressed it as:

Regardless of our insularity, we are still small. The fact that we are an island probably also increases the level of familiarity, of people knowing each other. But this has a good advantage as we strive to understand them. Another advantage is that this island is small so we can quickly be in the north or south of the country, come in contact with the population's difficulties and what improvements they need during a period of governance.

Echoing this sentiment, another respondent phrased it:

The advantageous aspect is that we are all known to each other. If we want to contact someone, there will be someone who knows them. Going to an area, to a district, even in the Autonomous region of Príncipe, if we get there and mention someone, someone will know them and make our contact easy and possible.

These types of experiences were expressed in almost all the interviews. The MPs we talked to were thus unanimous in their understanding of how smallness and islandness have the advantage of bringing voters and representatives closer to each other, making it easier for the latter to understand the wants and needs of the former. For example, the term "access" was mentioned in nearly all interviews when MPs stressed the great value of getting access and being accessible to the voters. These results firmly align with Dahl and Tufte's (1973) ideas that we discussed earlier and also align with previous empirical findings in the small island states of Cabo Verde (Saati & Souza, 2024), Saint Lucia (Saati, 2023a), and St. Kitts and Nevis (Veenendaal, 2013).

As to Dahl and Tufte's (1973) other proposition concerning voters in small states acting as an informal watchdog institution, it is challenging to know, as our interviews were conducted with MPs solely and not ordinary citizens. However, based on the information that they provided about the education level of the population in general and on matters concerning how democracy works in particular, it is difficult to imagine that people are engaging in such oversight activities. For example, respondents told of "poor lack of understanding of what politicians can and cannot do," "we often have to contextualise our work so that people understand what exactly we can help them with," and "because a low level of education, people rely more on kinship and traditional practices" compared to democratic practices. This also makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the extent to which citizens are "learning democracy" through practice, such as by participating in

elections, as some theoretical propositions would suggest (Pateman, 2012). At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the country's democratic system is relatively young, with the first multiparty elections held only in 1991. Therefore, one respondent argued that the small population size could and should be viewed as advantageous, because it allows for:

Each citizen to contribute with their knowledge, time, capacity and competence to the development of the country, and at the same time, help overcome the limitations that insularity imposes on us.

They continued:

You know that we are a small, very small country, with weak economic and financial resources, living largely on development aid. And all citizens must understand that to change this, we must reverse the situation, we must stop being a country that lives on development aid and instead produce and distribute wealth to our citizens.

However, the same advantage, smallness as an asset that could allow each citizen to actively contribute to their country (performing oversight being only one of many possible activities), works to disadvantage São Tomé & Príncipe, the MP argued. The small size of the country, the "family proximity" as they phrased it, and friendship ties, prevent democratic institutions from working as they ought to, since these institutions are inhabited by politicians and civil servants who have these ties to each other. Below, we explore the disadvantages as conveyed by the respondents in greater detail.

Being accessible, however valuable it may be for purposes of acquiring a good understanding of constituent needs, can become "too much," as expressed by some MPs. As the literature on small island states also hypothesises (Saati, 2023a; Saati & Souza, 2024; Veenendaal, 2013), it turns out that MPs in São Tomé & Príncipe, at times, feel overwhelmed by voters who turn up at their front door early in the morning or late at night, demanding to be heard. Among the MPs, there was also a sense that—since they are interconnected in ways that stretch beyond a mere voter-representative relationship—expectations to "deliver" are high. One MP expressed that "voters expect something from us whenever we approach them." Here again, the term "somos todos primos" was voiced on numerous occasions, but this time to underscore the disadvantage of being a small island state.

MPs elaborated on these disadvantages from two different perspectives, one with consequences for the individual MP and the other with consequences for democratic processes. Beginning with the former, to be close "as cousins" with the voters is viewed as good and necessary for purposes of being able to craft appropriate legislation in clear alignment with Dahl

and Tufte's (1973) proposition, but the MP must at the same time manage the voters' expectations so that disappointment does not end up in a lost vote in the upcoming elections. As to the latter, being close "as cousins" with the voters can become detrimental to democratic processes when the voter expects that the MP delivers various types of favours, and the other way around, when the MP expects that by extending favours, he/she has secured the constituents' vote on election day. One respondent frankly stated that "the ugly truth is that corruption is properly institutionalised in this country" pointing to instances in which political representatives are aware of various types of misconduct that run directly counter to democratic processes, but refrain from reporting such occurrences due to friendship ties (either to each other, to the constituent, to a civil servant or a contractor). The tendency to allow nepotism and/or friendship to be prioritized over democratic processes also works its way into the judicial system, with consequences for the rule of law. One MP stated that:

There are cases in which the judge asks to be excused when a case involves someone they know or a relative. But when he asks to be excused, he passes it on to another colleague. But the colleague knows that this case came from the other colleague who asked to be excused because the person on trial is his cousin. Even if he doesn't ask his colleague, there is always the temptation to try to facilitate it because he knows that this is the judge's – his colleague's – cousin, right?

Another respondent echoed this sentiment saying that it is simply, due to the interrelatedness of people on the island, "not easy to be a judge, a magistrate, a police officer here in São Tomé and Príncipe" because the person in question might have to face an acquaintance or even a relative in court or at the police station, complicating the matter of staying impartial and enforcing the rule of law.

Of course, as far as democratic processes are concerned, the rule of law must always be upheld regardless of the type of misconduct one is referring to and regardless of who is carrying it out. However, certain offenses are arguably more serious than others. MPs told of instances where young people are the victims of sexual assault, or that they are being sexually victimized, without this being reported due to friendship ties. For example, one MP expressed that asking for favours has become part of the culture of the country, "we have almost a subworld here where anyone who looks closely can perceive, and at some point, we have started to think that it's normal, that this is normal." The same MP went on to illustrate this "subworld" by exemplifying teacher-student relationships:

We have students who approach teachers saying "I'm struggling, I'm going to fail, help me out teacher, I'll date you or do something else in return". We see this happening. In this case of paedophilia, and abuse of minors, happens and families overlook it in exchange of material goods.

Thus, there are situations in which, as in this case, the MP is aware that such things are occurring, the family with the child who is being abused are aware, it is likely that other teachers and other students are likewise aware, yet no one reports it to the police. These examples corroborate Baldacchino's (2005, 2012) arguments regarding the particularly strong pressures toward conformism in small island states. They also reinforce our claim that Putnam's (1994) notion of social capital is analytically useful when discussing democratic dynamics in such contexts. At first glance, it may seem far-fetched—or even inappropriate—to suggest that these circumstances are damaging to democracy. However, if democracy is understood as inherently tied to the protection of political and civil rights and as closely connected to social capital, then situations such as the one described above, when widespread, can erode the social fabric of the state, diminish social capital, and thereby undermine democratic practices. In São Tomé & Príncipe, there appears to be significant hesitation—and in some cases outright reluctance—to report misdemeanours that have substantial implications for democratic processes. The "subworld" described by the MP above both enables such behaviour and allows it to persist. We argue that remoteness, and by extension the vulnerability that remoteness implies, makes it particularly pertinent for individuals (MPs and constituents alike) to conform, even if this implies looking the other way. The fear of being "ex-isled" if speaking up, to borrow Baldacchino's (2012, p. 109) term, is simply too strong. However, it is not inconceivable that, over the long term, a tendency to remain silent out of fear of repercussions may erode social trust and, in turn, negatively affect democracy.

Another factor that was mentioned many times when MPs discussed challenges was the interrelatedness of smallness, islandness, and an underdeveloped economy. Like many other small island states, São Tomé & Príncipe has faced, and continues to face, economic difficulties that are directly related to being a small island. The economy is not diversified, the domestic market is small, and remoteness makes trade expensive. Adding to this, economic inequality is soaring, poverty is high, and employment is hard to come by (World Bank, 2025). The matter of poverty has made, as one MP expressed it "everything for sale, almost everyone is for sale." Continuing to describe situations in which child abuse of various sorts occurred, and when "these acts are discovered, the family submits to the economic power of the offender if there is a possibility," even at times facilitating it by saying that "look, I have a beautiful daughter." The MPs also told of another tendency, namely that older men get involved with younger people, offering to pay their bills, buy them gifts, and more. This type of behaviour, extending and

receiving favours, as expressed by one MP, has become so embedded in the culture of the country and "culminates in our elections," captured by the term "banho."

"Banho" is the colloquial term for vote-buying in São Tomé & Príncipe, and next to "somos todos primos," was perhaps the most frequently encountered phrase during the interviews with the MPs. Several of them readily admitted that vote-buying is "visible" and "notable" and that it is rooted in the political fabric of the country. The European Election Observer Mission (n.d.) has also noted the practice of "banho" as widespread, very problematic, and not addressed by the relevant authorities. The respondents said that it is usual that constituents approach them and simply state, "If you don't give us money, we won't vote." One MP said, "I can tell you, very honestly and very frankly, whoever has money wins the elections in São Tomé & Príncipe; all of them." Another MP acknowledged that due to poverty and smallness, "we, the politicians, have the people as hostages," implying that the people's vote, since many are poor, can be bought. In this context it is not always a matter of the MP giving monetary handouts, it can rather be all sorts of favours in exchange for a vote ranging from offering to pay someone's medical bills, to helping someone's child with tuition fees, buying cement so that someone can fix the roof of their house, making sure that someone/a specific company receives a government contract for an upcoming road construction, etc. Thus, when a voter says, as stated by one respondent, "if you don't give us banho, we won't vote," all types of exchanges for a vote are included.

The statements of the MPs as to the disadvantages of being a small island state on democratic processes are concerned, correspond firmly with the propositions of many of the scholars we referred to earlier (Baldacchino, 2012; Corbett, 2015; Duncan & Woods, 2007; Farrugia, 1993; Girvan, 2015; Hinds, 2008; Saati, 2023a; Saati & Souza, 2024; Veenendaal, 2013, 2020; Veenendaal & Corbett, 2020). The interconnectedness of people in small island jurisdictions undeniably poses challenges for democratic processes. These challenges are also reflected in the anti-corruption agencies of the country and the media sector, which we devote attention to below.

ANTI-CORRUPTION AGENCIES AND THE MEDIA

During one of the interviews, an MP said:

Democracy in São Tomé and Príncipe is a fact. It exists, constitutionally speaking, it is enshrined. But from my point of view, we need to improve certain pillars that can help consolidate the democratic process.

Many of the MPs discussed the state of democracy in São Tomé and Príncipe in a similar fashion, i.e., acknowledging that although democratic institutions exist on paper, much of the actual political decision-making takes place outside of, and in between, formal democratic institutions. This is

something that closely aligns with Corbett and Veenendaal's (2018) findings on small states, i.e., that much of the actual political decision-making takes place through informal channels. When asked about how they perceive various branches of government and other sectors' function, nearly all MPs acknowledged that the media and many anti-corruption agencies have been struggling with serious issues for a long time, though, not surprisingly, MPs from the opposition were harsher in their statements. MPs were also unanimous in their assessment about how the public media operates, particularly emphasising the near absence of media coverage on issues that would reflect poorly on the party currently holding government office. Many respondents were doubtful as to the extent to which public media is doing their job in terms of reporting on politically sensitive (for the government) issues, and on political misconduct in general, since government ministers "get themselves involved in the appointment of the highest directors" to public media outlets. Here, it is worthwhile to note that the European Union Election Observation Mission (n.d.) also reported that it is not advisable that the senior management of public media is appointed by the government, as it has consequences for the impartiality of what is being reported and how.

Several of the MPs discussed media reporting, in general, not only public media, as affected by the small population size of the country. They argued that in the same way that MPs and voters might know each other as friends or family, the small population size of the country also makes it possible that people who work within the media sector are somehow related, as friends or family, with the MPs or government ministers whom they are supposed to conduct investigative journalism on. As stated by one of the respondents, this can lead to self-censorship:

The person who is in charge of the media, a journalist, perhaps limits themselves not to investigate, not to disclose, not to play their role because it is someone with whom they might have connections.

Though acknowledging that the media does not work in an unbiased manner and does not quite fulfil its role as the fourth pillar of democracy alongside the legislative, executive and judicial branches, the respondents were more disturbed by the appointment procedures to various anti-corruption agencies and also to judges in the courts. One MP said, "there is the issue of the politization of justice because the ease with which politicians and government can influence appointments, for example the election of some judges and so on." Another MP, when asked about whether various anti-corruption institutions operate impartially and free from political interference, stated:

It is rather difficult to separate politics from corruption because, as they say, politics and corruption go hand in hand. It is easier for a politician to be corrupt or to engage in corruption than for an ordinary citizen. Why? Because the access that politicians have is not available to the ordinary citizen.

Several of the respondents returned to the interrelatedness of people in a small island nation when explicating their answers. When there is a possibility to "pack the [anti-corruption] agencies" with people you know, friends, family, or acquaintances, the temptation to resist might be too great. Thus, the overall viewpoint was that due to appointment procedures handled by the government, anti-corruption agencies, media, and sometimes also the justice sector do not function as they should, which has consequences for democracy. The issue, however, is that though the respondents, both in the ruling party and in the opposition, acknowledged that this is problematic and that "certain pillars ought to be improved" to strengthen democracy, no sharp legislation proposals to address the matters were voiced. This finding resonates with recent research on Saint Lucia (Saati, 2023a). Here, too, MPs and senators from across the political board agreed that appointment procedures really should not be handled by the government. However, though they recognized that their party might suffer from it while in opposition, they are aware that the tables will turn once in government. Hence, there is reluctance to make alterations to how appointment procedures are carried out. The same type of reasoning was found among the respondents in São Tomé & Príncipe.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study illustrates that MPs in São Tomé & Príncipe recognise several benefits that stem directly from the country's small-island context. The closeness of social relations, often described as being "like cousins," places constituents and politicians in direct and frequent contact, enabling levels of responsiveness that would be difficult to achieve in larger polities. According to one interviewee, the small population size also gives citizens unique opportunities to contribute their specific competencies to national development. Although the current low levels of education among citizens limit the realisation of this potential, this may well change as the country develops economically and a greater proportion of the population completes basic schooling.

At the same time, MPs also describe how the very same closeness that can benefit democracy may also undermine it, most notably through corruption, nepotism, and informal practices that compromise democratic procedures. The use of "banho" remains customary, and political will to halt the practice appears limited. The European Election Observation Mission (n.d.) has documented the use of vote-buying repeatedly and further noted that the appointment procedures for senior positions in state-owned media are influenced by government ministers. Although the Mission recommended

that the government address these issues, and despite broad agreement among MPs regarding the democratic challenges they face, there appears to be little political will to undertake meaningful reform.

What does this imply in a broader perspective? Does it suggest that São Tomé & Príncipe cannot achieve democracy as conceptualised in the scholarship on small island states – that is, a thick understanding of democracy that entails not only regular free and fair elections but also the protection of political and civil rights and the cultivation of democratic competencies among citizens? We do not think so. Rather, we argue that São Tomé & Príncipe, like other small island nations we have studied, places considerable value on kinship, friendship, and close interpersonal bonds as essential features of everyday life.

Building on Putnam's (1994) influential work and Corbett and Veenendaal's (2018) recent analysis, we suggest that hyper-personalisation in small island states may, under the right conditions, enable a virtuous cycle of democratic practice – particularly when political leaders model responsible, ethical, and accountable decision-making. Such leadership can strengthen social capital, which in turn supports democratic norms and institutions. Democratic norms that encourage individuals to voice concerns about political or other forms of misconduct, even when doing so risks straining social relationships. Democratic norms that ensure individuals are not socially ostracised for demonstrating moral courage. There is nothing inherently incompatible between close social relationships and effective democratic governance. These can co-exist. In fact, for small island states, this may be not only a viable path forward but perhaps the most advisable one: not to diminish proximity, familiarity, and trust between rulers and ruled, but to build upon these relationships through strong, honest, and upright political leadership. São Tomé & Príncipe is still a fairly young democracy, and the establishment of a political culture in which leaders consistently uphold democratic principles while maintaining close ties to citizens may simply require more time.

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