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The Politics of Cape Verde

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Introduction

Cape Verde stands out in West Africa as a beacon of political stability, democratic governance, and respect for the rule of law. Since gaining independence from Portugal in 1975, the country has fostered a unique political environment rooted in its constitution and enriched by its journey from one-party rule to a robust multi-party democracy. Despite its small size and scattered geography, Cape Verde has managed to create a political system admired for its functionality and transparency.

This book, “The Politics of Cape Verde: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Cape Verde,” aims to offer a comprehensive and accessible exploration of the island nation’s political evolution, institutions, and contemporary challenges. By providing context and depth, the book is intended as a resource for students, researchers, policy-makers, and anyone interested in understanding how Cape Verde has charted its political course over the decades. It seeks to demystify the workings of government, the role of political parties, the legislative process, and the interaction between citizens and their leaders.

Central to Cape Verde’s success has been its constitution, first adopted in 1980 and periodically revised, most notably in 1992, to reflect the nation’s commitment to pluralism, human rights, and good governance. These legal and political frameworks have helped safeguard fundamental freedoms, encourage peaceful competition between parties, and ensure regular and transparent elections. As a result, Cape Verde has experienced frequent and peaceful transfers of power—a rarity in its regional context.

The resilience of Cape Verde’s civil society, the independence of its judiciary, and the vitality of its media landscape have each contributed to the strengthening of democracy. The country’s ability to address corruption, encourage civic participation, and protect human rights owes much to the active involvement of both formal and informal organizations, as well as a culture that values dialogue and consensus.

However, like any democracy, Cape Verde faces ongoing and emerging challenges. These include social and economic disparities, pressure on public institutions, security and crime concerns, and the constant need for political and constitutional reforms. The nation’s foreign policy, especially its relationship within the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) and with the European Union, also continues to shape its political identity and aspirations.

By mapping the evolution, complexities, and ongoing developments of Cape Verde’s political system, this book invites readers to appreciate not just the mechanics of

governance but also the deeper social forces and historical currents that have shaped one of Africa's most stable democracies.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Geography and Demographics of Cape Verde

Cape Verde, or Cabo Verde as it is officially known, is an archipelago nation situated in the central Atlantic Ocean. This collection of volcanic islands lies approximately 570 kilometers (about 350 miles) off the coast of West Africa, near Senegal, The Gambia, and Mauritania. The islands are part of the Macaronesia ecoregion, a collection of four archipelagos in the North Atlantic Ocean that also includes the Azores, Madeira, and the Canary Islands.

The archipelago encompasses a combined land area of slightly over 4,033 square kilometers (1,557 square miles), making it slightly larger than the state of Rhode Island in the United States. It is a horseshoe-shaped cluster consisting of ten islands and eight smaller islets. Of these, nine of the islands are inhabited.

For ease of reference, the islands are typically divided into two groups based on their position relative to the prevailing trade winds. To the north are the Barlavento Islands, also known as the Windward Islands. This group includes Santo Antão, São Vicente, Santa Luzia, São Nicolau, Sal, and Boa Vista. Santa Luzia is the only one of the larger islands in this group that remains uninhabited. The islets of Raso and Branco are also part of the Barlavento group.

To the south lie the Sotavento Islands, or Leeward Islands. This group comprises Maio, Santiago, Fogo, and Brava. The Sotavento islands also include the three islets collectively known as the Rombos: Grande, Luís Carneiro, and Cima.

Geologically, the islands are primarily composed of igneous rocks, a result of their volcanic origins. The terrain varies significantly across the archipelago. The eastern islands, such as Sal, Boa Vista, and Maio, are generally flatter, more arid, and characterized by sandy landscapes due to extensive wind erosion over time. In contrast, the western islands are typically more mountainous and rugged, with dramatic cliffs rising steeply from the sea.

Mount Fogo, located on Fogo Island, is an active volcano and the highest point in the archipelago, reaching an elevation of 2,829 meters (9,281 feet). The historical volcanism within the period of human settlement has been confined to Fogo. On the northern island of Santo Antão, Tope de Coroa is another prominent peak, reaching 1,979 meters (6,493 feet). The volcanic soils are generally shallow, rocky, and coarse, with only a small fraction of the land suitable for significant irrigated agriculture. Soil erosion, caused by both wind and water, presents a considerable challenge.

The climate of Cape Verde is typically milder than that of the African mainland due to the moderating influence of the surrounding Atlantic Ocean and cool ocean currents. It falls within the Sahelian semi-arid belt and receives significantly less rainfall than nearby West Africa. The islands generally experience a tropical climate with distinct dry and rainy seasons.

Average annual temperatures hover around 25°C (77°F) in coastal areas, dropping to about 19°C (66°F) in higher elevations. The coolest months, from January to April, see minimum temperatures between 20°C and 21°C (68-70°F), while the warmest months, August and September, have maximum temperatures ranging from 26°C to 28°C (79-82°F). The dry season typically runs from November to June, offering consistently hot and bright days with minimal rainfall. The rainy season occurs between July and October, characterized by short, sporadic showers rather than prolonged periods of rain. September usually receives the highest amount of rainfall. However, rainfall is irregular, and the archipelago is susceptible to periodic droughts, which have historically led to food shortages.

The population of Cape Verde is relatively small. As of 2022, the estimated population was around 596,000. The population is primarily of mixed Sub-Saharan African and European heritage, often referred to as Creole. This reflects the legacy of Portuguese colonization and the historical transatlantic slave trade, which played a significant role in the islands' development. While Portuguese is the official language, the widely spoken national language is Cape Verdean Creole, or Kriolu, which is based on archaic Portuguese but has influences from various African and European languages.

A substantial Cape Verdean diaspora exists across the globe, particularly in the United States and Portugal, with the number of people of Cape Verdean ancestry living abroad considerably outnumbering the inhabitants on the islands themselves. The difficulty of life in a country with limited natural resources and susceptibility to drought has historically been a driving force behind emigration.

The population density of Cape Verde is approximately 131 people per square kilometer. The distribution of the population across the islands is uneven. The largest island, Santiago, is the most populous and home to the capital city, Praia. Nearly half of the country's population resides on Santiago. Praia is the largest urban center, followed by Mindelo on the island of São Vicente. While a significant portion of the population still lives in rural areas, urbanization is a continuing trend.

The economy of Cape Verde is largely service-oriented, with significant contributions from commerce, transport, and public services. Tourism has become increasingly important in recent decades, leveraging the islands' attractive natural geography. However, the country has limited natural resources and arable land, making agriculture challenging and requiring the import of a significant amount of food.

Remittances from the large diaspora also play a crucial role in the economy.

Despite the geographical and environmental challenges, Cape Verde has achieved a notable level of development and stability. Its location at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Americas has influenced its history, culture, and continues to shape its interactions with the wider world. The diverse landscapes, from the arid plains and sandy beaches of the eastern islands to the dramatic volcanic peaks and green valleys of the west, contribute to the unique character of this island nation.

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