

Angola Party Politics: Into the African Trend



Angolan politics is usually explained with reference to the country's long and devastating civil war. The postponed elections, the domination of the presidency and the ruling party, and the election results are typically seen as consequences of this war. Looking at Angola from the perspective of political developments in Africa gives another picture. Angola is quite similar to most Sub-Saharan African countries, where the ruling party gains ground; the opposition is marginalised; and elections are controlled and held basically to render legitimacy to the incumbent regime.

'ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM' IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

With its first elections in 1992, Angola moved from a long and brutal civil war into an era of multiparty politics. This new era of 'multipartyism' in Angola paralleled the global 'third wave' of the early 1990s, in which more than 60 countries went through a period of political opening and democratic transition. Communism fell in the East Block, African regimes with similar ideology crumbled and other authoritarian governments on the continent opened up for multiparty elections. By 2011, all but two sub-Saharan African countries (Somalia and Swaziland) held multiparty elections.

Yet, multiparty elections have not deepened and consolidated democratic practices in Africa. Incumbent parties win more than 80 per cent of elections in sub-Saharan Africa. The electoral

turnover is very low. An institutional façade of democracy now conceals and reproduces the abusive reality of non-democratic rule in what has been called 'electoral authoritarianism'.

In some African countries the single party was 'reformed' and 'democratised', but is still ruling. These were the 'national liberation movements' that later became single ruling parties during the authoritarian period. After democratisation, they won the first multiparty elections and have ruled ever since. In Southern Africa, these include Tanzania, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola. In other countries, the pro-democracy movement formed a new party (or alliance) that managed to oust the authoritarian government in the first multiparty elections, and established itself as ruling parties. These parties are now firmly in

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power, and they have managed to rule since multipartyism was introduced. This is the case in Kenya, Zambia and Malawi, among others.

Both 'reformed' ruling parties and new 'pro-democracy' ruling parties have consolidated their first multiparty victory and strengthened their position of power to the extent that they no longer have any real opposition. Multiparty elections appear democratic, but instead of presenting alternatives, elections are held to bring legitimacy to the rulers. Electoral authoritarianism has two elements to it; authoritarianism, which in Africa translates to presidentialism, plus electoral manipulation.

PRESIDENTIALISM IN ANGOLA

The political system in Angola is presidential. Angola's president José Eduardo dos Santos is Africa's longest serving president, after Libya's Gaddafi. He has been the party leader and President since 1979. He has survived the introduction of multiparty politics and a civil war, and his rule has been bolstered by an oil-boom and spectacular economic growth.

The President of the Republic is the Head of State and Head of Government, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and President of the ruling party MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola). The President appoints (and can remove) the government and a large number of government officials (including the Attorney General, the Governor of the Central Bank, the Generals and other commanders of the Armed Forces and the police, Chief Justices and all province Governors). The president can, in practice, dissolve the parliament, but not vice versa.

Institutional checks and balances are weak, and the president is bypassing parliamentary and judiciary decisions. The former Constitution (1992) did for instance establish several power control institutions, such as the Tribunal de Contas (2001), the Tribunal Constitucional (2008) and the Provedoria de Justiça (2006), but none of these were institutionalised for a long time and serve no counterbalancing power on the presidency.

The 1996 law where Parliament established an anti-corruption commission (Alta Autoridade contra a Corrupção), has been completely ignored.

The new 2010 constitution solidified presidential rule in Angola. With the ruling party MPLA's more than 2/3 majority in Parliament, the regime changed the constitution from direct presidential elections to indirect election. This move was not indicated to the voters before the elections.

The benefits are substantial for those who prove loyal to the party.

ELECTIONS IN ANGOLA

In the 1992 elections, the 'reformed' ruling party won with a clear majority. Yet, the victory did not bring stability and peace. The defeated candidate Jonas Savimbi and most of his opposition party and guerrilla army UNITA returned to the bush and the armed struggle. Another ten years of civil war followed, until government forces killed Savimbi in 2002 and his army disintegrated.

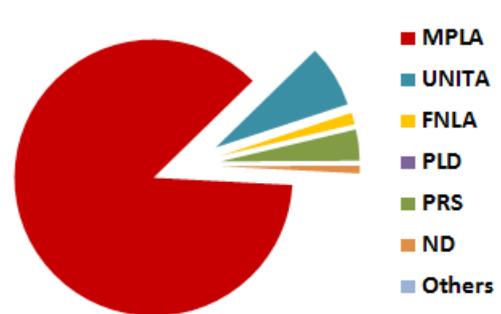
It took another six years for the government to re-establish control over most of the country and felt sufficiently secure to open up for elections. Thus, the second elections were held in September 2008. In these elections, the ruling party MPLA secured an even larger majority, and almost wiped out the opposition. MPLA won nearly 82 per cent of the votes and well above two-thirds majority in parliament. Thus, Angola moved into the trend of much of sub-Saharan Africa: the ruling party is consolidating its grip on power through multiparty elections.

The parliamentary elections in 2008 were rated 'credible and transparent' but not 'free and fair'. The main issues were the incumbency advantages: the absence of an independent election commission and the systematic use of state resources for the benefit of the ruling party. Like in many

Seats 1992



Seats 2008



The "PACMAN": The ruling party MPLA has gone from strong to dominating, and parliamentary opposition is almost eradicated

other elections in Africa over the latest two decades, the advantages of incumbency created an uneven playing field.

In Angola, the majority of the eleven member National Electoral Commission (Comissão Nacional Eleitoral, CNE) is effectively appointed by the government. Furthermore, massive public resources benefit the MPLA, including military resources and the state bureaucracy at all levels. The MPLA receives officially about US\$ 50 million annually in state subsidies to cover running costs. In addition, it receives subventions for central and provincial offices. Also, the separation between the party, the government and the state is blurred. The national flag and the ruling party banner are, for instance, deliberately kept similar. Public funds and services are at the disposal of the ruling party, and are also used for election campaigning. The ruling party also owns and runs some private businesses, and receives various donations from public and private companies and individuals. These are privileges that rarely accrue to any opposition party.

Another frequently used method to secure election victory in sub-Saharan Africa is to change the 'rules of the game' in favour of the ruling party. The Angolan government was, for instance, 'unable' to register Angolans living abroad to allow them to vote due to 'costs and logistics', despite the law. The opposition claimed this was because the government feared that the majority of Angolans abroad would support the opposition.

Furthermore, MPLA seemed to be ignoring the law on election campaigning. The official election campaign period for the 2008 elections was from 5 August, and the opposition parties were not allowed to hold rallies before this date. The ruling party MPLA, however, held several rallies before this date, for instance, the very visible 'free concerts' with overt political campaign messages held by the MPLA in Luanda and in other cities in May.

MPLA shares a historical legacy of communism with some other ruling parties in Africa. The MPLA once tried to become a Moscow-style communist party, with its Central Committee and other organs situated above elected and nominated state institutions, including 'cells' for 'guidance' and control within state institutions as well as within social segments and communities. Although its constitutional privileges are gone, the MPLA has reformed comparably little in terms of its internal structures, and the party is still able to pervade most aspects of political life in the country.

Besides, no local elections have ever been held, and consequently there is no process of democracy learning 'from below' in Angola.



With the constitutional revisions of 2010, no more direct presidential elections will be held.

The Angola flag and the MPLA banner
Photo: Inge Amundsen

CLIENTELIST OPPOSITION

Angola shares two other significant sub-Saharan African trends. The first is the tendency towards moderate, pragmatic and clientelist opposition parties. These consist of mainly status-quo oriented parties that focus on 'bringing the beef' to their constituencies through negotiations with the ruling elite (rather than challenging the rules of the game or the ruling elite). They are able to operate, negotiate and deliver with some success, and thus to win some representation. The second tendency is towards 'regionalisation' and 'ethno-politics'. Parties tend to develop a regional or ethnic/religious base.

The third biggest party in Angola, PRS (Partido de Renovação Social), illustrates the first tendency. The PRS is based in the northeast and in the Lunda provinces, and it has had quite some success in negotiating advantages to its constituencies. It does not challenge the rule of the MPLA, and it does not promote any strong political differences to MPLA's policies. Instead, it seeks a space within the orbit of the ruling party in order to 'bring home the beef' for its constituencies.

The second tendency is illustrated in the case of the second biggest party, UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola). The last elections brought UNITA back to its ethno-regional core, the Ovimbundu-dominated central highlands and Cuando Cubango province. The party is politically moderate, but as the civil war rival of the MPLA government, it is not (yet) accepted as a negotiation partner for government benefits.

Parties with a clear ideological and less ethno-regional platform lost out entirely in the last elections, including the liberal PLD and the radical FpD.

THE ANGOLAN PARTICULARITIES

What is special about Angola is the fact that the country is the second biggest oil-producer in Africa. Extensive oil and gas resources and diamonds give the Angolan regime a particular boost to the general trend of

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political monopolisation. Monopolistic politics and monopolistic economics reinforce each other at the top. This increases incentives for holding on to power at the same time the means to hold on to power are strengthened.

Thus, the pull factor in Angola is particularly strong. The benefits are substantial for those who adhere to and prove loyal to the party, but unavailable to those who are in opposition and quickly withdrawn from those who are deemed treacherous. The oil revenues make it easy to buy support, and the benefits can be considerable for those who adhere to and prove loyal to the party. Co-optations, for instance of intellectuals and NGO activists into special party committees or government positions, are frequent.

This favouritism also encompasses the business sector. The most profitable business opportunities — import licences, government contracts and government protection (privileges and monopolies), — accrue mainly to family members and loyal adherents of the president and the party. Positions of political and economic influence are intertwined; top military and civil service cadres have converted themselves into entrepreneurs, and successful entrepreneurs protect their investments through MPLA membership and donations to the party.

The economic disadvantages of opposition are also particularly effective in a high-cost country like Angola. In addition to some overt threats of violence against outspoken opposition figures, the economic punishments can be ruinous: bank credits are not granted, power or water supplies are cut off, and salaries and benefits are not paid. There is 'Berufsferbot' in Angola: people risk their jobs, promotions and salaries when engaging in opposition activities, and they risk the status and benefits associated with government positions like insurance schemes, pensions, stipends and hospital treatment.

The MPLA has also created a culture of fear, including the fear that voting for the opposition will entail the drying out of development projects and government

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funds to your region, and that persecution and purges will follow. Besides these regionally-based concerns, the nationally-based fear of renewed violence and yet another round of civil war after the elections was played upon as a particularly important election campaign point by the MPLA in 2008: "vote for us, or chaos and anarchy will follow".

THE FUTURE

The result of the next election, scheduled for 2012, seems to be a foregone conclusion. As in other 'electoral authoritarian' regimes, the well-known mechanisms of power preservation will be called upon, and the playing field will be uneven. With the remarkable economic growth and oil-backed Chinese credit lines, money will be available for co-optations and favouritism, and the threats of disintegration and civil war will be revived, if necessary, as political capital for the MPLA.

The advantage is that the money flow available to build support through co-optations, favouritism and cronyism will lessen the need for violent power protection. The hope is that this secure position can make the regime somewhat liberal, tolerable of human and political rights and dissent and debate, but the behaviour of other 'electoral authoritarian' sub-Saharan regimes suggests it will not.

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