

Who's to challenge the party-state in Angola?

Political space & opposition in parties and civil society

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Introduction

Was it not for the unsolved though low-scale conflict in the Cabinda enclave north of the Congo river, Angola has been “at peace” since February 2002 when government troops killed insurgent leader Jonas Savimbi. The remaining guerrillas of Unita demobilised and its leadership was integrated into Unita the political party. Although Unita then was formally part of a Government of National Unity and Reconciliation (GURN), there was never any doubt as to who were the ruling party: The MPLA, under the supreme leadership of President José Eduardo dos Santos. The MPLA has been the governing party Angola since independence in 1975 and dos Santos the party leader and President since 1979. He has overseen the end of the one-party state in 1991, the end of the long war and the coming of age of the oil-boom and spectacular economic growth of the 2000’s – and in early 2010 a new constitution was in place which essentially solidifies dos Santos’ rule.

This paper is a case study of one of the first-generation liberation movements which after independence converted itself into the ruling party. It makes the argument that despite two seemingly liberal constitutions and the many fundamental changes the country has undergone during the last two decades, the polity remains frozen as a party-state under the MPLA whereas the MPLA still remains subjugated to the personal power of the President. Furthermore, Unita and the other opposition parties are weaker than ever.

The paper starts by delving “directly” into Angolan politics by looking at a specific yet illustrative case of in the Huíla province. It then goes on to the explain the origins of the MPLA government in Angola, following it during three and a half decades in power and through two attempts at legitimising it through elections. The third chapter explains, partly through a discussion of the new constitution, the most salient formal and informal institutions and mechanisms through which the MPLA maintains itself in power. The last part of the paper will deal with the issues of possible alternative challengers to the party-state and the role of opposition parties in a democracy. It argues that that despite the bleak picture provided by the parties available in Angola – a dominant party seemingly bent on maintaining power without concern for further democratisation and ever weaker opposition parties – it is hard to conceive how democratisation could proceed in the future without attention to the development of functioning opposition parties.

The case of the Lubango demolitions

In order to set the stage and get a flavour of politics in Angola, a recent incident in Lubango, the capital city of the Huíla province in southern Angola, provides an illustration of some of the political dynamics of the country.¹ During the first two weeks of March 2010, a considerable number of people – perhaps as many as 3800 families – were evicted from their homes by the police (backed by armed riot police) before government bulldozers moved in and levelled 2188 houses (Angop '10). Some of the evictees may still receive compensation (Jornal de Angola '10b), but the process had certainly not been duly prepared before the demolitions. As so often happens, one injustice committed against the weak is followed by another (which is also the precedence set by the demolitions in Luanda).

One dynamic the event illustrates is the tension between, on the one hand, the building of large-scale infrastructure projects as the government's principal development strategy, and on the other, the interests – and very human rights – of many citizens who in different ways have “got in the way” of these projects on the other. The mass evictions and demolishing of poor people's houses in Huíla is only the latest of a series of evictions which has displaced thousands of people in Luanda during the last decade (HRW '07) as well as in the city of Benguela – usually with little or no notice or alternative housing provided.

The evictions in Huíla came as the government decided to clear the area around the railway track of the Moçamedes Railway. During colonial times the railway connected the interior provinces of the south to the coast of Namibe, but the railway has largely inoperative during the last thirty years due to the war. But recently the government decided to activate the plans to reconstruct the railway which implied the clearing of the tracks and its immediate surroundings upon which squatters have settled since the 1980s. The plans to clear the residence area were concretised apparently only as late as in mid-2009, according to provincial governor, Isaac dos Anjos (Angop '10) – who boasted to have personally led the eviction and demolition campaign. The governor took a publicly combative stance showing little sympathy for the many residents who had lost their homes (Angonotícias '10), emphasising merely the illegality of their land occupation – which in turn justified his refusal to prioritise alternative housing and even temporary shelter. Of course, he could have emphasised that most of the residents around the tracks were usually refugees and internally displaced. Many of the residents in the neighbourhoods adjacent to the railway track

¹ The following account is largely drawn from the reports in *Novo Jornal* ('10).

even claim that they have papers from the city administration proving that they were allowed to construct on the site.² The event thus illustrates the government's reconstruction strategy centred on the fast development of large-scale infrastructure in a process which seemingly shows little concern for the more immediate needs of the vast masses of the urban and rural poor. Such events also call the character of the government into question: Whereas it takes pride in showing itself as developmentalist and based on electoral legitimacy, it also regularly displays authoritarianism which is rare in competitive electoral democracies.

That brings us to a second dynamic concerning the role of opposition. Well-known opposition politicians from Unita appeared in Lubango, they protested against the proceedings but to no avail, and left after distributing blankets for the many people recently made homeless. The events in Lubango was little reported in the national and government controlled media, such as the *Angop* and the *Jornal de Angola* – and when it was reported, the government officials' viewpoints were dominant (Angop '10). The National Council of Media and Communication³ attacked the Huíla governor for having impeded television crews of filming the demolitions (Jornal de Angola '10a) – which the governor justified by saying that irresponsible people were trying to gain “political capital on the suffering of others” (Angop '10). The weekly Novo Jornal with only a few thousand copies in distribution, wrote extensively on the Lubango case, but also claimed it was only able to do so due to the sympathetic intervention of an Angolan NGO. A protest campaign was led by NGOs and church organisations. The above remarks are meant to illustrate that in Angola there exist media freedom to cover critical events as well as to express the very *claim* for media freedom, although the powerful forces of the government is able to control media at critical points. And finally, the largest opposition party seemed customarily unable to capitalise on the momentary unpopularity of a senior government official. Protesting voices were more effectively heard from “civil society” rather than the opposition party politicians.

A third interesting dynamic is therefore how opposition is channelled and expressed *within* the government and the ruling party. In this case the Governor's hard line was so pronounced and seemingly heartless that the MPLA in Luanda dispatched a parliamentary committee equipped with blankets, tents and foodstuffs to calm the tension in Lubango and some key voices within the MPLA started to call for the removal of the Governor (Voz da América '10) – a prerogative

² Incidentally, the provincial governor does not deny that the residents may hold such paperwork, but says that in that case it had been illegally issued by corrupt civil servants – in which case the residents would have to complain against named civil servants and bring them to judicial responsibility (Novo Jornal '10).

³ *Conselho Nacional de Comunicação Social (CNCS)*

of the President of the Republic. These recent events will be yet another test to gauge change in the politics of Angola. Will the Governor “survive” the unpopularity due to his hard-handed actions? Were the distribution of blankets (surely more than Unita’s) enough to “throw sand in the eyes” of angry citizens? Are the dissenting voices within MPLA genuinely transforming popular discontent into political pressure that eventually will reach dos Santos, or will dos Santos hold his protective hand over the governor so as to calm the critics? Will dos Santos eventually fire the Huíla governor only to “recycle” him to a powerful position at a later time? This technique of letting out steam has been used by dos Santos many a time, and in a sense it is now the privilege of dos Santos to sit out the drama to see how the Governor comes out of the situation. As before, the President is in a position to sit out such conflicts and see who comes out on top – and he can then throw in his support for the winning side be it his “strong hench-men” or the populist forces within the wider MPLA-party. Either way he and the MPLA win.

In short, the incident in Lubango illustrates how the Angolan regime balances between the wide reaching power and the large constituency of the ruling party, the current helplessness of the opposition, and the autocratic practices of senior government officials. The jury is out on the fate of the governor of Huíla, but the demolitions are a *fait accompli* and in the near future no one else of importance will be held responsible for the sorry fate of the many citizens who lost their homes.⁴ A review of the main parties and elections will serve to further acquaint the reader with the political situation in Angola.

Elections in Angola: 1992 and 2008

Due understanding of the particular political regime of Angola is impossible without looking into its origins before and during the independence process. On the 11th of November 1975 Agostinho Neto, President of the MPLA declared independence as the last Portuguese governor left the harbour of Luanda. It was far from an uncontested event. The MPLA hardly controlled Luanda as it was battling the Zaire-backed soldiers of the FNLA to the north. South of Luanda, MPLA’s forces, with essential backing from Cuban troops, defended Luanda against a South African invasion with Unita’s troops occupying the areas behind the South African advance (Kapuscinski '01; Birmingham '02:137). Later that year, Unita attempted to declare independence

⁴ It should be remarked with some irony that based on previous experience, for instance with the Benguela railway some hundreds of kilometres to the north, an operative railway can some places be a dynamising factor in the local rural economy, thus aiding also poor people. Yet “reconstruction” of the Benguela railway has been going on with little progress and under very non-transparent business methods since 2005, and still only a few hundred of its 1300 kilometres are operative.

from their “capital” Huambo in the central highlands. Put with a good dose of simplification, the three armies (or “armed groups”) who fought over state power represented three different social elites, each with their respective roots in different strata of colonial society. Whereas the independence of the Angolan state built on the colonial state was eventually accepted by the major movements,⁵ the MPLA’s rule was not. The soviet-styled “Marxist-Leninist” party had by 1977 established a very authoritarian one-party state. Its monopolistic hold on state power (and soon, enormous mineral resources) was contested from the outset by competing elites. In short, this “originary” split facilitated the war which was to last for decades.

After the end of the single party regime in 1990, there have been two national elections with universal suffrage in Angola. The first multiparty elections in Angola were held on September 29 and 30 in 1992, which ended with the unhappy result that Unita rejected the results and went back to war (Malaquias '07).

The 1992 electoral results do however provide an indication of the popular “support” to the main parties. Despite Unita’s claim of fraud, the election results reflect popular preferences – if not accurately then at least relatively well (Pereira '94:19). There were two ballots, one for the national assembly and one for the president of the republic. In the parliamentary elections MPLA won a mere 53.7 per cent of the votes, Unita took 34.1 per cent. The third “liberation movement” of the colonial times, Holden Roberto’s FNLA, only managed to get at 2.4 per cent and the remaining 9.8 per cent were split between fifteen other parties, of which nine actually gained some representation in the national assembly. However, the “small” parties eventually only shared 19 out of the 220 parliamentary seats. The main electoral battle was between the MPLA government and UNITA, who until recently had been at war. By consequence, the battle was also one between the two leaders of the warring parties, the battle for the presidency between incumbent President Eduardo dos Santos of MPLA and Jonas Savimbi of Unita.

⁵ The FNLA was originally a movement fighting only for the emancipation of the “people’s of the north of Angola”. In Cabinda, the FLEC has to date maintained the claim to independence.

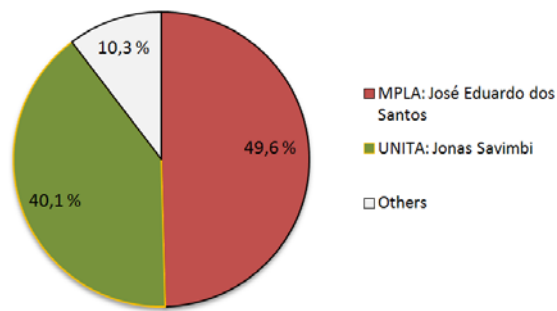


Figure 1: Results of presidential elections, 1992

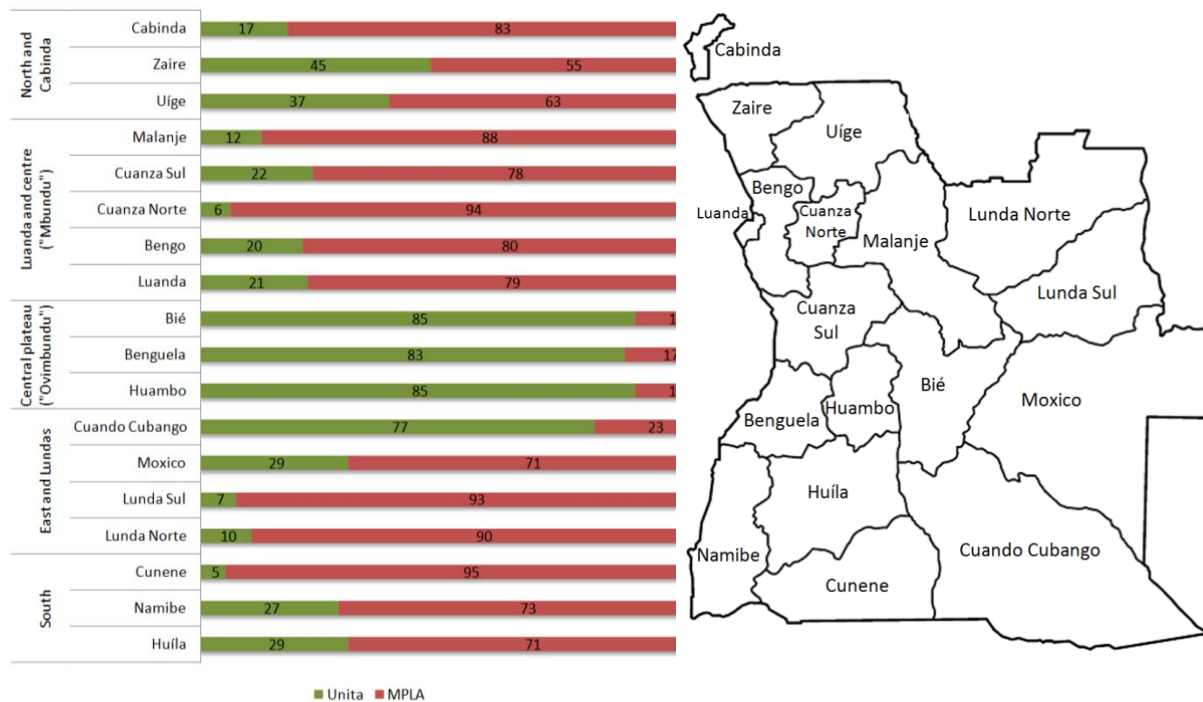
The official results stated that dos Santos had received 49.6 per cent and Savimbi 40.1 per cent. Indeed, it was a close call, so close that actually a second round should have been organised, since no candidate got more than 50 per cent. The second round was never held, as war had broken out.⁶

A look at the provincial breakdown of the electoral results is interesting as a background for understanding politics in Angola today, although several caveats should be made before making inferences about changes in voters' preferences.⁷ Most importantly, the objective conditions between '92 and '08 changed from one of an electoral battle between two belligerent and armed "party-states" (Unita also held large areas) to one between a defeated party and a victorious party state with all the resources of the country on its hands.⁸

⁶ Something which made many argue that dos Santos has never actually been elected as president.

⁷ The population size and the demographic structure changed a lot during the 16 years between 1992 and 2008, due to the massive movements of people during and after the war, as well as the addition of a whole new generation to Angola's very young population. This is not the place for the rather cumbersome discussion of the topic of "popular will" and what it might mean in Angola, other than stating that the above mentioned caveats admittedly weakens the precision of the interpretations of the electoral results.

⁸ Official results broken down to provincial level were not widely published in the aftermath of the elections. The best choice was to use the data provided by Pereira ('94:20-1), which compares the percentages going to MPLA and Unita out of a total (100 per cent) of votes going to these parties.



Source: (Pereira '94: 20-1)

Figure 2: 1992 parliamentary results – in per cent votes to MPLA and Unita (small parties omitted)

Both major parties won their “home” base provinces: Unita won the Ovimbundu-dominated populous central highlands; MPLA the Mbundu-dominated areas of Bengo, Cuanza Norte and Malanje in addition to Luanda. However, it was dos Santos ability to win large majorities in the ten remaining provinces that settled the result. This was captured in a neat summary and analysis of the 1992 election results’ provincial breakdown by Anthony Pereira ('94:21-2):

[Unita’s] belligerent ethno-nationalism was clearly rejected by a majority of voters in those areas where Ovimbundus are not numerous. In contrast, the MPLA emerged from the 1992 elections as a regionally and ethnically integrative party.

Compared to for instance Renamo in Mozambique, Unita was far less able to reach beyond their prime regional and ethnic base, which may have been a crucial factor in their dramatic loss of support in the 2008 elections. There were no elections during the years in between. The peace or cease-fire after the 1994 Lusaka-agreement was always fragile. Unita kept on holding its positions in the highlands and was reluctant to hand over civil administration to the government and Savimbi did never did fully recognise the GURN-government, something that ultimately provided the reason for the renewed fighting in 1998.

The 2008 parliamentary elections

Many had expected the elections to take place fairly quickly after 2002, as Unita leader Savimbi was dead and Unita finally seemed totally defeated militarily. The MPLA seemed in an advantageous position, the military victor with ever increasing income from the oil fields and accessing easy credits and reconstruction accords in Chinese banks. Its arch-enemy Unita was disorganised without any charismatic leadership, and in struggling to rid itself of the blame for the ills of the war. Yet it took six years, plenty of foot-dragging from the government and much rescheduling before eventually, on September 5 2008, parliamentary elections were finally held. Presidential elections were postponed without date. This did at least serve to provide ample time for the authorities to prepare the ground for holding elections. The international observers – who were not many – declared the elections to be generally free and fair, but far from problem free (EU '08). Unita and several other opposition parties complained loudly during the days that followed the elections (Unita '08), but after a short while settled to accept the results (Angonoticias '08). This decision seems to have been mostly a tactical move, with the self-awareness that the party had little clout with which to continue a campaign of non-acceptance of the election result with which to confront the government.

The electoral campaign preceding the elections was marked by the omnipresent propaganda apparatus of the ruling party – on roadside mega-billboards and in the national media. In addition, Unita was able to utilise its nation-wide network of local offices to campaign, but it could not match the incumbent party in media-coverage or resources spent on the campaign. The many other opposition parties had practically no visibility, except in the capital and a few towns (Vidal '07; Amundsen & Weimer '08).

The problem that the MPLA enjoys the incumbent advantage of controlling the state apparatus was commented on by independent Angola consultant and intellectual Fernando Pacheco in the following radiant terms:

The confusion [fusion] between party structures and State administration remains. It was shocking to observe the way in which the public media was manipulated by the MPLA during the electoral campaign of August 2008 [...] All over Angola, a significant number of civil servants did nothing in August 2008 except to work for the MPLA's campaign. The Public Treasury should demand payment from the MPLA for at least part of the expenses incurred. (Pacheco '09:133)

The unlevel “playing field” between the incumbent and the other parties, the mass of detailed criticism, and the extraordinary results mean that there will remain some doubt as to the extent that the results actually reflect popular will. The results produced by the 2008 elections may have

surprised many people even within MPLA: The extent of the victory was crushing! Figure 3 visualises the electoral gains by MPLA when compared to the results in 1992.

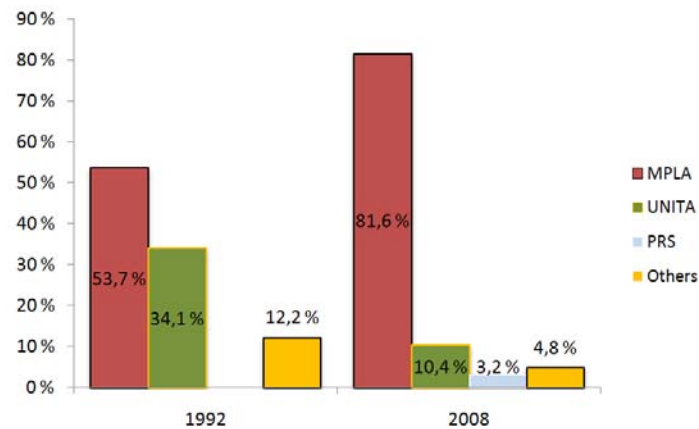


Figure 3: Parliamentary elections, results 1992 & 2008

The most dramatic loss was obviously for Unita. After the 1992 elections the party had seventy parliamentary deputies⁹ but after 2008 it was reduced to a mere sixteen. Neither were the other opposition parties successful. Together they collected far less votes than Unita alone.

When broken down to the provincial level, the results again reveal some of the same patterns of regional distribution of votes seen in 1992. In its core provinces, the MPLA swept the table. Unita maintained its strongest performance in the Ovimbundu areas of the central highlands (on average 15 per cent) – but also managed to get 31 per cent of the votes in the tiny and sparsely populated enclave province of Cabinda. The latter result was somehow surprising, but appears to be the result of a tacit decision by opposition minded inhabitants of the Cabinda to concentrate their vote for one opposition party more than any deep-seated support for Unita which has no history of operating in the province.¹⁰ The only province where MPLA’s majority was seriously threatened was in the Lunda Sul province where the party PRS took 46 per cent. This result was not so surprising as the PRS has managed to mobilise a following based on the Lunda-Chokwe ethnic group, which emanates from the Lunda kingdom. The two Lunda provinces are also marred by governance problems related to an abusive and chaotic extraction of diamonds (Marques & Campos '05), and PRS seems to have been able to tap into this disaffection. In Zaire,

⁹ Unita did not take up their places until 1997 due to the resumption of the war in 1992, and later due to subsequent splits in the party.

¹⁰ In 2008 the low-intensity “secessionist” conflict of the enclave was still going on between the armed forces of Angola and an “obscure” enemy going under the acronym of FLEC (*Frente de Libertação do Estado de Cabinda*) and was in 2008 still the most militarised province of the country. The FLEC is illegal and not an openly operating organisation, but it taps into a widely held conception of Cabindans that the province has been mistreated by the Angolan government.

the historical “cradle” of the FNLA (the party of the third guerrilla movement fighting the Portuguese which eradicated shortly after independence) this party took almost a fifth of the votes. Yet both PRS and the FNLA now appear as ethnically or regionally based parties which mobilise on the personal prestige of its leaders in their home bases. They have almost no following or party organisation in any other provinces.¹¹ Unita remains the only opposition party able to maintain organisational presence in all the country’s provinces – and in fact, in almost all municípios. Nevertheless, the electoral results of 2008 testify that also in the case of Unita, the party has close links to a core ethnicity or region. MPLA has now transcended the limitation inherent in the tendency of so many African parties to make a particular ethnic group or region its core base of support. Instead, its hold on the machinery of the state is its core political capital.

Despite the few relative successes of Unita and other opposition parties, MPLA took 87 percent of the seats in the national assembly. It remains to be seen what role is left for the opposition in the national assembly given that MPLA passed, by far, the threshold of absolute majority. With a winner-takes all constitutional system in place, there is little reason to believe there will be moves by MPLA to involve the other parties’ politicians in national governance. Tellingly, President dos Santos quickly dismantled the so-called Government of National Unity and Reconciliation (GURN) after 2008, and Unita has lost the ministers, provincial governors and local administrators it had held between 1997 up until 2008 – although these were merely token positions with next to no real influence. The previously multi-party negotiations in the constitutional committee broke down already in 2004. With the vast majority in the national assembly, the MPLA did eventually change the constitution by its own majority.

New constitution, old presidency, entrenched party-state

Before looking at the significance of the new Angolan constitution, a further layer is added to the analysis of the MPLA’s hold on power by starting with politics as seen “from below” – or rather, from the periphery. In an analysis of politics in Angola and Mozambique, I have elsewhere extensively described how a combination of informal practices and mechanisms and the formal institutional apparatus combines to reduce local political space for the opposition parties (Orre '10a). The argument can only be sketched here. To start with, the argument goes that by denying

¹¹ As an indicator, the FNLA’s office in Benguela, a couple of rooms only, remained closed for the entire duration of my successive stays there.

local political space for the opposition parties the dominant parties are able to maintain and entrench their party-state system.

Three dimensions of local political space were analysed. Firstly, *citizenship rights* (freedom of speech and organisation, media access) is formally upheld by constitutional rights, but members and activists of opposition parties are often prevented from organising party activities and express themselves in the public space locally. Secondly, opposition parties are denied *access to the local state*. Their members have hardly any access to positions of power and influence in the local state apparatus – and are therefore barred from the influence and prestige of public office and the resources of the state, making opposition politicians unable to gain experience from holding office. The ruling party monopolisation of the local state apparatus takes place due to the veritable *winner takes all* system in place: It is the president who directly or indirectly appoints all the officials of the local state apparatus – and party membership is a key qualifying merit for all hoping to be appointed to local offices. Consequently, also the civil services becomes imbued with the leaning towards the ruling party, even twenty years after the formal separation of the party and state took place in 1990. In Angola there are also no local elections through which opposition parties can compete for local office.

The third dimension of local political space for opposition parties is *community representation*. It was found that opposition parties – barred from holding formal offices – were also unable to systematically win influence through placing its members and activists in institutions through which local society is systematically represented before the state. In both Angola and Mozambique, field research focussed on two main *channels* of community representation before the state: The traditional authorities and new councils of local representatives. Through the reform of institutional mechanisms in local governance and informal practices, both ruling parties were in the post-war period to secure that community representation never have taken forms which threatened their local hegemony, thus aiding the party's entrenchment in the state apparatus. The result was that even though the large opposition parties – Unita in Angola – was weakened even in its “traditional” core areas of rural and regional support.

In Angola it can be highlighted how the MPLA party-state was able to reach out to the areas where it during decades after independence held none or only nominal control. Apart from the investing rapidly and heavily in the security apparatus of the state (the army and the police) in the periphery as well as basic administrative institutions (*município* and *comuna* administrations, with appointed *administrators* with no local electoral institutions), the MPLA also invested heavily in its relations with traditional authorities. By the early 2000s, the government had effectively recommenced the colonial state's practice of winning the local chiefs' loyalty by paying monthly

subsidies to at least forty thousand “traditional authorities” (in Angola, generically called *sobas*). In addition they were given preferential treatment in many other respects, including access to credit, as well as a massive government campaign of “wooing” the role of the chiefs in the national project. It was found that by and large, the strategy paid off as most *sobas* are today publicly displaying and expressing support to the MPLA government, and many were crucial campaigners for the MPLA during the 2008 election. Many were even involved in hampering the campaign of Unita (Orre '10a:ch.4).

The 2010 constitution

Quite suddenly, in early January 2010, the National Assembly sped up proceedings on the issue of the new constitution. On the 22nd of January 2010 the new constitution (Angola '10) was voted into existence by the MPLA majority in the National Assembly – as the principal opposition party Unita had abandoned the premises. The boycott seemed to be of little dismay to the ruling party with its comfortable two-thirds majority. Hence, the MPLA – in power since independence – unilaterally approved the new constitution. That the constitution would be moulded on other models of “liberal” constitutions, widely guaranteeing citizenship rights, no one doubted. The crucial question everyone was waiting for was that of presidential power: How was the president to be elected? How many terms can he sit? And which powers and prerogatives would be given to the President?

The obvious “elephant in the room” was the personal power of José Eduardo dos Santos. After three decades in power, he remains with a supreme hold on power, he is the “spider” in the web of the MPLA, and he and his children control large fortunes. Dos Santos appears in the public as soft-spoken and controlled, never visibly agitated – unlike many other African state leaders. Yet Angolans know that the personal power of the President is next to “unquestionable” – as his enemies and challengers in the party are sidelined when needed. What would the new constitution mean for the continued powers of President dos Santos, his possible re-candidature and his eventual successor?

The answer was clear by late 2009, yet nevertheless struck as somewhat of a “bomb” on followers of Angolan politics: Art. 109 states the President is now the list-head of the most voted party for the parliamentary elections. There will, therefore, be no more presidential elections! Since the “current presidents” sits until a president is chosen under the new constitutional rules, since there is nothing barring the current president to run for a maximum of two five year

periods, and since it is the current president who calls parliamentary elections, dos Santos may in theory stay in power until 2022 if he chooses to call elections next time say only in 2012.

Furthermore, the president is if anything given more constitutional powers than the previous constitution. Not only is the president to be the head of state, head of government, and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he is also given wider powers in appointing and exonerating all key positions in the state apparatus – including in the judiciary.¹² The president has wide powers to emit laws by decree. Though these can be overturned by the parliament, he can also veto the parliament's laws. The President can declare marshall law and a state of emergency (under certain conditions), and he can pardon or commute sentences by people convicted in the courts, and only he can ratify international treaties.

Notably the President *can* be removed by impeachment in the supreme or constitutional courts – although these are presumably hand-picked by the current president. But is only removed by impeachment if a two-thirds majority of the parliament has taken the initiative to remove the president *and* if either the constitutional court finds the president to be significantly disabled to serve as president or if the supreme court finds he has committed a serious crime or acted gravely against the constitutional principles.

Although the new constitution promises (as the previous) the holding of a kind of local elections, it is little concrete as to which kind of institutions are to be elected (articles 217-22) and no deadline for the holding of local elections are set. Hence, it seems that local elections will still be delayed until a moment the ruling party feels the holding of local elections is advantageous to it.

To summarise, the new constitution brought very little new to the table, and seems more than anything to cement the status quo in Angolan politics: the party-state remains entrenched under the supreme leadership in the person of President dos Santos. However hand-tailored the new constitution may seem to be to the interests of dos Santos' rule, one should not, however, be deceived to identify the Angola regime as another African personalistic presidency. The MPLA may be the current tool of dos Santos, but he is also the political expression of the elite which formed and grouped under the MPLA both before and after independence. Many commentators have written extensively on how the Angolan political and economic elite is *one* – and it

¹² To be more specific, the constitution gives the President of the Republic the right to *appoint and exonerate* the members of the government – including the vice-ministers, the commanders of the police and the armed forces, the intelligence agencies, the attorney general, the governor of the national bank, the provincial governors, and the ambassadors, and indirectly (through the minister of territorial administration) he still appoints and exonerates all officials of the local state apparatus. In addition he can *appoint*, although *not* exonerate, the judges of the supreme and constitutional courts, the auditor general and the military tribunal.

reproduces its grip on power both through formal mechanisms of constitutionally favourable institutions (such as the winner-takes-all system) but also through the informal ties that the “camaraderie” of the Party provides (Hodges '01; Messiant '07; Vidal '07; Andrade '09). The elite is probably conscious that it is the Party as much as the President is the guarantor of continued success – a success that is manifested in the tremendous ostentation of riches in Luanda which almost goes beyond belief when compared to the poverty of the vast majority. For these reasons, most academic writers of Angola continues to consider that the current regime in Luanda acts more in the interest of the ruling elite than in the interest of the poor majority.

Can “civil society” substitute opposition parties in a democratic party-state?

This far it has been emphasised that the MPLA, the movement which fought the colonial war to liberate the country from colonialism and which subsequently transformed itself into the ruling party of a one party state, also remains the expression of a tight economic and political elite which acts more in its own interests than that of the majority of the population. At the same time, the continued weakness of the opposition parties has encouraged the arrogance of power of the MPLA, which see virtually no match in the opposition. This puts into questions the claim to democracy in the country, and the very ability of future elections to produce results which really reflect the interests and desires of the population – even defined in the simplest sense. As a preliminary conclusion: it seems the MPLA struggles to “transcend” itself, and so use the almost unparalleled grip on power to develop the country’s political institutions beyond the status quo. The status quo now may appear as a success to the party-based elite, but as a failure to the millions of people who have seen little tangible benefit from the largest and most sustained economic boom in Africa.

A conundrum is raised by the observation of a trend within “civil society” in Angola. It seems that the disillusion with both the party-state system *and* the large opposition parties is so ingrained in the independent intellectuals of the associational life in the country, that they articulate democratisation as something that can only be brought about by pressure from *outside of* the party political system.¹³ Andrade, for instance, argue that ‘inefficiency and unproductiveness of political parties means that, in many situations, the onus of contesting burning issues and defending the poor and marginalised sectors (the majority) of the population falls on civil society organisations’ (Andrade '09:104-5). Furthermore, this line of thought is encouraged by the

¹³ For several examples, see Vidal (Vidal & Andrade '06; Vidal & Chabal '09) and (Viegas '07).

considerable recent ideological emphasis (or even ideological bias) on democratic *participation* over democratic *representation*. As some have pointed out, in the focus on *participation* of the poor, the neo-liberals of the World Bank and Washington Consensus developmentalism found a surface common ground with the left-leaning activists sceptical about any authoritarian state – be it left or right leaning (Ferguson '04; Harriss, Törnquist *et al.* '04). One might suspect that many Angolan activists of the “civil society” have drawn the tacit conclusion that as the state and government cannot be challenged directly through elections and the opposition parties, the civil society has to democratise the party-state through its direct local engagement through campaigns and alternative, non-parliamentary, forums.

The individuals fronting this kind of thoughts are largely church, academia or NGO-based activists who occasionally try to organise under different “civil society” umbrellas where they try to achieve a certain unity across their diverse political basis. Together they constitute what Törnquist calls ‘fragmented pro-democrats’ whose ‘efforts tend to suffer, on the one hand, from the lack of linkage between civil and political society activism at both central and local levels and, on the other hand, divisive politicisation of single issues, special interests and identities’ (Harriss, Törnquist *et al.* '04:10). It brings us back to the question of whether or not opposition parties are required in a democracy. Can a dynamic civil society take its place?

Without diminishing the potential role of pro-democracy civil society organisations – they have many inherent limitations theorised by Harris, Törnquist *et.al* which are played out in practice in Angola (as, for instance, in Mozambique) with their inherent divisions and parochialisms (Araújo & Chambote '09; Calundungo '09; Comerford '09; Figueiredo '09; Pacheco '09). More importantly, the civil society groups in Angola tend to refer to civil society in general, but in practice think of a limited number of “pure” civil society organisations, uninfected by the dominant parties’ attempts at cooptation. Furthermore, there is a tendency to conceive of opposition parties as something alien to civil society – perhaps due to parties’ inherent ambition to seize power. That leaves a lot of responsibility for a few small organisations, which “by definition”, do not seek power (in which case they would be “opposition parties”).

If the NGOs come with limitations, could civil society in rural areas (like, for instance, women associations, farmers’ cooperatives, CBOs, etc) take advantage of democratic openings under the liberal constitutional system – be it in public spaces such as councils of local representatives or in local radio stations – to forward various goals of democratisation? Certainly, to an extent it can – and Angola has made many advances in terms of local political openness during the last decades and it is even likely that political officials are now more accountable to local constituencies than it was before. But if the government can co-opt opposition politicians (an art which dos Santos and

MPLA seems to have perfected), it can all the more easily co-opt civil society representatives to their preference, while debarring others from influence and participation (Calundungo '09; Macedo '09). Curiously, the insistence that political parties should be defined as part of non-civil society somehow plays into the party-states' argument: That political parties be barred from participating in the new councils of local representatives (the CACS¹⁴) and other recent mechanisms of public dialogue and deliberation (such as the "poverty observatory").

There may be certain functions for which opposition parties are needed in a democracy. Randall & Svåsand ('02:4) summarise the major functions of parties in three bundles:

(Oriented towards the electorate)

1. Representation: expression of people's demands; simplifying and structuring electoral choice
2. Integration: integration of voters into the system, political education

(Linkage-related)

3. Aggregating (and channelling) interests
4. Recruitment and training of political leaders

(Government-related)

5. Making government accountable: implementing party policy, exercising control over government administration
6. Organizing opposition and dissent

Randall & Svåsand's model seems to assume the *de facto* existence of more than one party in the polity. In the absence of effective opposition parties, can (direct) citizen participation and non-partisan representative institutions at local government level somehow substitute for opposition parties? Or for that matter, can pressure-groups or NGOs operating in an open public sphere where freedom of expression and organisation is guaranteed challenge a dominant party and ensure accountability and that policies are made in the interest of the many?

With reference to the above schematisation it seems reasonable to assume that the 'substitutes' may well fulfil the roles of representation and integration of voters (1&2). There is no principled reason why individual 'candidates' may not represent voters, or why local activism or movements could not bring voters into the political system. With regard to the accountability functions towards the government (5) that is surely not the prerogative of parties, as alternative accountability mechanisms will always be available. But a special role appears to be reserved for parties with regard to functions 3, 4 & 6.

¹⁴ With the new law on local government of 2007 every local branch of the state (at the provincial, *município* and *comuna* tiers) required to set up a "consultative organ" of local representatives which are to be selected out of local interest groups and pre-defined categories – though political parties cannot be represented (Orre '10b).

Practical experiences have shown that movements- and issue-based politics struggle to aggregate interests (3) of complex political realities into operational ‘packages’ which can serve as the ideological foundation for citizens’ political choices – thereby creating clear alternatives to existing policies. If and when movements do the same, they take on the forms of proto-parties anyway (Budge '00). In theory, the recruitment and training of political leaders (4) may be done by movements or NGOs, but not at a local level only – political leaders of national relevance have to be propelled onto the national scene by some unifying movement or organisation (or party). But how such leaders, once they are many, will overcome a multitude of organisational issues if and when they are up against a central state power with a dominant incumbent party seems hard to visualise. It seems the historical role of parties is to unite such leaders so that they can really challenge a dominant political state power. But with regard to the organisation of opposition and dissent, that is where political parties seem to have its prime *raison d’être*. Opposition parties are, almost by definition, distinct from local activism, NGO campaigning and movement-based protests in that they are aimed at taking power to implement change with a base in the state. But what distinguishes them is opposition parties’ ability and ambition to organise opposition and dissent, direct it at the state at strategic moments, and sustain it over time and throughout the entire territory of a country. Of course, poorly organised opposition parties cannot really rise to these challenges, but the more successful ones can do so in ways that local activism and “participation”, or even the most virulent movements, are unable to do.

Summed up, with a twist to the Randall & Svåsand schematisation, opposition parties seem indispensable when it comes to the aggregation of interests and recruitment of political leaders (alternative to that conceived by the dominant party), as well as to organise and sustain dissent and opposition in time and space. This is, of course, the reason why it would be interesting to dominant parties in Africa to be lax about “civil society” or “grass-root” participation, while strictly barring the development of effective opposition parties.

I believe that it is very hard to conceptualise how the organisations of “civil society” can or would substitute the role of opposition parties in a state dominated by a ruling party entrenched in all sections of the state apparatus. Rather, the case of Angola suggests that democratisation will in similarly party-dominated states pass through the development of opposition parties – however long that trail appears when looking at the quality and weak position of current opposition parties.

The identified tendency of some African intellectuals and pro-democracy activists to give up on opposition parties altogether is a paradox to be followed and it may be a worrying trend for future democratic developments.

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