

Angola from past to present

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On 11 November 1975, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) declared Angola's independence and installed Agostinho Neto as its first President in the former Portuguese colony's capital at Luanda. This outcome had long seemed uncertain and indeed even unlikely; the MPLA had not only had to deal with its own serious internal troubles and disaffections, but had also had to take on the Portuguese colonial army and the two rival armed movements, each backed by powerful allies. Holden Roberto's National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) had initially been the most powerful of the three competing national liberation movements and in the autumn of 1975 it came close to capturing Luanda from the north, backed by a heavily armed force supplied by President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). In the south, two armoured columns of a South African invasion force, acting in military coordination with the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), led by Jonas Savimbi, almost reached Luanda before they were stopped by Cuban troops which had been rushed to the assistance of the MPLA. The independent Angolan state was thus born out of turmoil and violence and amid serious national, regional and global rivalries. This heritage with its deep historical roots was to influence the unfolding of events for a long time.

Angola, like most African countries, grew out of a conglomerate of peoples and groups each with its own distinct history and traditions. Gradually small local nations and states came into contact with each other and historical developments drove them to share a common destiny under increasing Portuguese influence. Long before the arrival of the Portuguese, Bantu-speaking communities had established a farming economy over most of the territory. They had absorbed many of the scattered Khoisan-speaking populations and developed a successful pastoral dimension to their agriculture as well as building up trading economies.



One of the most successfully diverse market centres became the town of M'banza Kongo around which the Kongo kingdom evolved. Further east the concept of state formation related to the political ideology of the Lunda peoples while in the south later kingdoms took shape in the highlands of the Ovimbundu people.

Angola under Portuguese rule

Although the first Portuguese traders, explorers and soldiers set foot on this part of the African coast from 1483, modern colonization of the whole territory was only formalized four centuries later after the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Wide stretches of Angola experienced colonial rule for less than a century, and even after 1900 armed revolts broke out and resistance movements sprang up as among the Ovimbundu and the Bakongo from 1913, until the last northern resistance was put down in 1917. During its century of overrule the colonial regime left crucial marks on Angolan society. Its discriminatory legislation, particularly the *Statute of the Portuguese Natives of the Provinces of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea*, separated the indigenous population from a tiny elite of 'civilized'

individuals (or *assimilados*) who enjoyed some of the rights of Portuguese citizens. In 1961, after the start of an armed liberation struggle, the statute was revoked but the changes were only cosmetic. The Portuguese policy of racial and cultural discrimination had a profound and lasting impact on the later social and political development of Angola as an independent country. Social divisions created by colonialism continued to exercise a strong influence on the relationships between groups and on the attitudes of individuals. Racial mistrust manifested itself in the conflicts between as well as the tensions within the liberation movements. Deeply entrenched suspicion played a decisive role in Angola's recent political history. The conflicting interests of rural dwellers and people living in urban centres are in part another source of tension which independent Angola inherited from the colonial state.

Portugal, like the other colonial powers, was primarily interested in extracting riches from its colonies, through taxation, forced labour and the compulsory cultivation of marketable crops such as cotton. Under the guise of a 'civilizing mission', the colonial state was

heavily influenced by its own distinctive variety of Catholic fundamentalism, invented by the semi-fascist dictator António Salazar. An ideology developed under the banner of *luso-tropicalism*, a supposedly specific Portuguese way of harmonizing Portuguese manners with the customs of peoples in the tropics. In Angola economic extraction was later supplemented by migrant influences when Portugal needed to dispose of excess population. In the 1950s and 1960s Angola received many thousands of poor white peasants and entrepreneurial settlers from Portugal. They created a colony of European descent which, although smaller than the Portuguese communities in France or Brazil, was larger than the rival colonial one in Mozambique.

During the colonial period, and particularly under the corporatist 'New State' and its colonial charters perfected by Salazar when he graduated from finance minister to Prime Minister in 1932, Angola's political and economic developments were crucially linked to the motherland. In 1969 Marcelo Caetano succeeded Salazar as Prime Minister and continued to insulate Portugal's colonies, and especially the crown jewel that was Angola, from the winds of change that blew concepts of independence over Africa in the 1960s. Instead of preparing for independence, as the other colonial powers had reluctantly done after the Second World War, Portugal tried to strengthen its imperial grip. As a weak state, politically isolated and economically backward, Portugal resorted to special measures to hold on to its colonies and in 1954 it euphemistically renamed them 'overseas provinces' in an attempt to avoid the attentions of United Nations inspectors. Economically, both Portugal and Angola were always at the mercy of trends and developments in the wider global economy, determined by powers beyond their control. It had been the world economic crisis of the 1930s which had led to the impoverishment of Portugal and to the crystallization of Salazar's authoritarian regime. In the 1950s, when Portugal aspired to become a member of the United Nations and yet keep its colonies, it was agricultural crises and opportunities that caused impending upheavals. The relative poverty of the southern highlands and the boom in coffee prices in the north drove thousands of Ovimbundu peasants to become migrant workers on the coffee estates. There they were subjected to humiliation by white colonists and to resentment by the Bakongo who lived there.

Continuous rivalries between various elites have played an important role in Angola's recent history. The FNLA embodied the aspirations of the northern elite focused on Kinshasa but with some cultural links with the old Kongo kingdom. The MPLA had its heartland in the territory of the Mbundu people of

the Luanda hinterland but included many groups in the urban centres including some who descended from the old assimilated families of black Angolans and others who were the mixed-race children of modern colonization. UNITA became the expression of a third political tradition and embodied the economic aspirations of the Ovimbundu and their merchant leaders on the southern *planalto*. To a large extent the ethnic identification of these movements has come about as a result of conscious political manoeuvring by each leadership rather than as a genuine expression of popular sentiment and aspiration. Over time the social and political factors of identity and cohesion have become real.

Angola's historical society can be characterized by a tiny semi-urbanized elite of Portuguese-speaking 'creole' families - many black, some of mixed race, some Catholic and others Protestant, some old-established and others cosmopolitan - who are distinguished from the broad population of black African peasants and farm workers. Until the nineteenth century the great creole merchants and the rural princes dealt in captive slaves, most of whom were exported to Brazil or to the African islands. The black aristocracy and the creole bourgeoisie thrived on the profits of overseas trade and lived in style, consuming large quantities of imported alcoholic beverages and wearing fashionable European costumes. In the early twentieth century, however, their social and economic position was eroded by an influx of petty merchants and bureaucrats from Portugal, who wished to grasp the commercial and employment opportunities created by a new colonial order.

Although effective occupation only had a relatively short duration and elements of pre-colonial continuity persisted, colonialism nevertheless brought major social changes in urbanization, in formal education, in religious practice, in farming techniques and in commercial linkages. These changes affected all sections of society and all parts of the country, albeit to an uneven and variable degree. There is a tendency noted above to view Angolan society, and indeed other African societies, as fundamentally split between a 'modern' sector, influenced by 'Western' (or European) values, and a 'traditional' one governed by pre-modern systems of unchanging norms and historic ritual practices. Such views, expressed in political and public discourse, tend to over-simplify the socio-cultural base of both the MPLA and UNITA when in fact each had to manage its relations with appropriate 'traditional authorities'. Angola presents a rich variety of influences and mixtures all deeply marked by the colonial experience as well as by the so-called Afro-Stalinism of the post-independence years. 'Traditional' concepts are now being transformed to adapt to the challenges

of life in the present and the future. There is no part of Angola, however remote, and no sector of Angolan society, however 'traditional', which is not in some way linked to the 'modern' world of a globalized economy and its culture and communication systems.

The struggle for national liberation

While colonial rule never went unresisted, a more focused armed struggle for independence only started in 1961, after the Portuguese had bloodily repressed a mass protest against colonial conditions in the north. Hundreds of white planters and traders (estimates vary between 250 and 1,000) and thousands of black farm workers were killed, and many more fled the country, forming a fertile recruiting ground for an emerging anti-colonial cause.

Nationalist political activity and resistance occurred initially under the banner of the Union of the Peoples of Angola (UPA), a predecessor of the FNLA. In Luanda and the coastal cities much older associations had long expressed the nationalist sentiment of Angola's African population. This urban-based nationalism also incorporated *assimilados* and *mestiços* of Luanda and Benguela who had organized the Angolan League in the 1910s and the Let's Discover Angola (*Vamos Descobrir Angola*) movement in the 1940s under leaders such as Viriato da Cruz who later became founders of the MPLA.

The 1960s saw a major military and political confrontation between the Portuguese colonial regime and Angolan nationalism. The country also experienced the early manifestation of divisions within the nationalist movement that were to mark political life in Angola for many years. The protagonists were the FNLA, the MPLA, which subsequently tried to claim responsibility for an attack on a Luanda prison on 4 February 1961, and UNITA which emerged in the mid 1960s. The date of the prison attack was later officially celebrated as the beginning of the armed struggle.

The anti-colonial struggle launched in 1961 was fought with guerrilla tactics, gradually increasing in scope to reach from the north to the east of the country. On the diplomatic front nationalists worked from bases in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), Conakry and Brazzaville, as well as from Lisbon and Paris. The FNLA received political and military backing from African countries and from China and the US. In 1962 it formed a Revolutionary Government of Angola in Exile (GRAE) which the Organization of African Unity (OAU) initially recognized as the legitimate successor to colonial rule. Some African countries later transferred their allegiance to the MPLA which, though its military record was poor

and its leadership continuously suffered from internal conflict, gradually outmanoeuvred its rivals politically and diplomatically to gain pre-eminence in 1975.

The FNLA was no freer from internal dissent than the MPLA and in 1964 Jonas Savimbi left the 'government in exile' in which he had served as Minister for Foreign Affairs. He accused the FNLA leaders of being militarily ineffective and heavily dependent on the US. He also denounced nepotism and the authoritarian leadership of Holden Roberto. After visiting a number of mainly communist countries Savimbi founded UNITA in 1966. By exploiting the feelings of exclusion in Angola's largest ethnic group, the Ovimbundu, Savimbi built up his own constituency in the centre and south of the country. Initially he conducted small guerrilla operations inside Angola before establishing a network of supporters abroad.

None of the armed movements succeeded in effectively threatening the colonial state in Angola. The end of this 'first Angolan war' was brought about indirectly through domestic pressure in Portugal and the growing dissatisfaction of the Portuguese military fighting the colonial wars in Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. In April 1974, junior officers belonging to the Movement of the Armed Forces (MFA) toppled the Salazar-Caetano regime in Portugal and began the process of decolonization. In 1974, however, a frenzy of diplomatic and political activity at home and abroad mitigated against a negotiated independence. In 1975, as the will to retain imperial control over Angola dwindled, fighting broke out in many provinces of Angola and also in the capital, Luanda, where the armies of the MPLA, the FNLA and UNITA were intended to maintain the peace with joint patrols. In January 1975, under heavy international pressure, the colonial power and the three movements had signed an agreement in Alvor, Portugal, providing for a transitional government, a constitution, elections and independence. This *Alvor Accord* soon collapsed, however, and the transitional government scarcely functioned. In the subsequent confrontations the FNLA received military support from Zaire with the backing of China and the US, while under Agostinho Neto the MPLA gained ground in particular in Luanda with support from the Soviet Union and from Cuban troops. On 11 November 1975 Angola became independent. The FNLA and UNITA were excluded from the city and from government and a socialist one-party regime was established which eventually gained international recognition, though not from the United States.



Angola under one-party rule

From 1975 until the late 1980s Angolan society was moulded along 'classical' Marxist-Leninist lines. A dominant, but increasingly corrupt state sector was controlled by the ruling party. Private business, with the exception of the activities of foreign oil companies, was restricted and organized religion, including the Catholic Church, which had held an official place under the colonial regime, was suppressed. No freely organized 'civil society' emerged and the state controlled the media and mass organizations for youth, for women, for workers and for some of the professions.

One event had a crucial impact on the political climate during Angola's socialist era: the failed coup attempt by Nito Alves and his followers on 27 May 1977. Alves was a minister in President Agostinho Neto's government but also had his own constituency of supporters in Luanda's *musseques* (slums). The *nitista* crisis was fuelled by personal ambitions but also by ideological battles

within the ruling socialist camp. Some leaders were loyal to the 'bureaucratic' line practised in the USSR while others preferred a more 'revolutionary' Chinese approach. The coup itself was bloodily repressed and it is alleged that thousands of supposed sympathizers were jailed or killed in the following days, weeks and months. The episode had a profound effect on the President, and his regime became ever more authoritarian and repressive. Angola's population lost its innocence and henceforth lived in fear.

Subsequent wars

By the end of the 1970s, UNITA took over from the FNLA as the main civil war opponent of the MPLA government. A *rapprochement* had been achieved between the MPLA and President Mobutu of Zaire. The FNLA's cadres, led by Mobutu's protégé Holden Roberto, were gradually integrated into Angolan society as the free-market acolytes of the one-party state.

Displaced families living in a warehouse in Kaala, Huambo, 2000

Source: Didier Ruef/Pixsil.com

The FNLA army, once a foreign-armed force with thousands of recruits, disintegrated without being formally disarmed or demobilized.

Agostinho Neto died of cancer in 1979 and was succeeded as President by José Eduardo dos Santos, a young petroleum engineer trained in the Soviet Union. By this time the superpower conflict in Vietnam had ended and Angola became the seat of a new war by proxy between the United States and the Soviet Union. Each side was not so much defending a specific interest in Angola as playing out geo-political rivalry. The regional allies of the US continued to be Zaire and South Africa, while Congo-Brazzaville aligned itself with the Soviet Union. Cuba stepped up both military and civilian support to the MPLA government and contributed significantly to the rehabilitation of social sectors such as health and education.

Diamonds, and more especially oil, provided the MPLA with the necessary revenue to function as a government. Foreign income also funded the lifestyle of the ruling elite and financed the ongoing war against UNITA. During the war years economic links between the coastal cities and the agrarian hinterland weakened almost to the point of extinction. Sometimes backed by South African forces, UNITA spasmodically occupied parts of the country, which became inaccessible to both government and merchants. The cities, especially Luanda, survived on imported food rather than home produce. Consumer goods were paid for by oil royalties. The neglected countryside was left to its own subsistence strategies. Over the years many people fleeing the war migrated to the towns. The lack of opportunities in the rural areas made prospects in the urban centres seem more attractive despite the poverty of the great slums. The city of Luanda grew to an estimated population of four million.

The 'second Angolan war' reached its peak in the mid-1980s. One of its enduring ironies concerned the dollar income generated by American oil companies, which paid for Cuban troops to protect the Angolan government and its oil installations from attacks by South African forces working for UNITA and partly financed by the US. In this phase of the war the battle for the small but strategic town of Cuito Cuanavale was a turning point. In 1987-88, South African and UNITA forces were pushed back by MPLA and Cuban troops after a long siege. The South Africans conceded that no military solution to the security of their northern border was possible and they started to explore political alternatives. The ensuing peace initiatives, orchestrated by a troika of Portugal, America and Russia, finally resulted in the *Bicesse Accords* of May 1991 between the MPLA and UNITA. The peace was followed by the

holding under UN auspices of Angola's first and only general election. Savimbi expected to gain power through the ballot box in September 1992. When he failed to do so he rejected the voting results and returned to war.

The 'third Angolan war' was even more brutal than its predecessors. Whole cities were reduced to ruins, hundreds of thousands of people were killed or died from war-related deprivation and disease, and millions were displaced, some for the second or even the third time. Extended talks in Lusaka finally resulted in another peace agreement, the *Lusaka Protocol*, signed in October 1994, but even then the war was not over. Despite international sanctions against UNITA's supply networks, Savimbi was reluctant to surrender the military option. After four years of neither peace nor war, the war erupted again with full ferocity in December 1998. The Angolan government, on paper a 'government of national unity and reconciliation' in which some UNITA dissident politicians participated under MPLA domination, pursued an offensive that culminated in the assassination of Jonas Savimbi in February 2002. On 4 April 2002, the *Luena Memorandum* marked the end of four decades of war and the ultimate defeat of UNITA. In October 2002, UNITA declared itself a fully disarmed and democratic political party and UN sanctions against it were lifted.

Peace has characterized mainland Angola since April 2002, but in Cabinda, the enclave between the two Congo republics which accounts for sixty per cent of Angola's oil production, a war has continued unabated. The government has tried to replicate the strategy of scorched earth and starvation that had proved successful against UNITA. Many Cabindans nevertheless still support the rival movements demanding independence. The Angolan government, determined to preserve major economic assets, could never offer more than some form of provincial autonomy for the enclave. In October 2002, a major offensive against the Liberation Front of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) led to serious accusations of human rights abuses. Towards the end of 2003, after some FLEC defeats and defections, the Luanda government signalled that it was prepared to talk peace or even consider a referendum. So far, however, the silencing of the guns in mainland Angola has not reached Cabinda and the conflict remains unresolved. Peace in Angola remains incomplete. The physical and psychological scars of war are still evident. The democratic deficit has not been remedied. The regime is still marked by its predatory history.