

"Thieves or Murderers"

Background to the Angolan Elections



Eduardo dos Santos campaigning in Huambo

BY SAR'S ANGOLAN CORRESPONDENT

This story was filed by our Luanda-based correspondent prior to the election. The comments that follow are meant to help situate some of the strengths and weaknesses of MPLA and Unita. Our regular Angolan correspondent, Victoria Brittain will provide analysis of the results in a subsequent issue of SAR.

When an Angolan delegation visited Algeria not long after independence,

they were a little surprised to be told by the President: "Like us, you have the misfortune to be an oil producing country." Since oil played a vital part in sustaining the arms imports from the then USSR to prevent the combined South African and Unita forces from winning the war against the MPLA government, they did not readily understand the message. Some years later, at least one former member of that delegation appreciated the point. The oil had generated a grandiose approach to certain issues, a neglect of problems facing ordinary people in their daily lives, an invitation to

waste money on "prestige" projects, and corruption.

Perhaps the most notorious prestige project was the mausoleum for the late President Neto, which remains unfinished and looks like a space rocket. It has given rise to innumerable jokes. Pope Paul's visit to Luanda, when he addressed a crowd while standing next to it, has led to one of its many names being "The *Pausoleum*." This popular response to an obvious error in wasting money on an over-ambitious and uncompleted project seems to have had no impact on government and party practices.

Clearly the biggest problem that the MPLA faces in terms of retaining its legitimacy has been its inability to deal with corruption and its effects on the daily lives of Angolan citizens, especially in Luanda which now has a population of two million, about a fifth of the total for the country. With many aspects of life formerly controlled by the army (FAPLA), the police have little experience of dealing with crime, and in the situation since the 1991 Estoril peace settlement, crime has become a serious problem. Organised crime syndicates now operate in Luanda and elsewhere, with occasional fighting at night with AK47s which have been sold by unpaid soldiers. The latter have not been demobilised, but are in assembly camps (*acantonamentos*), where they and their families have received insufficient food and shelter. Some of them have left their camps and either roam around living on their wits or have joined the diamond rush which resulted from deregulation of diamond mining operations. The latter has had various effects, including stimulating further crime in Luanda.

The two main election contenders

Despite all these problems, the MPLA retains a surprising degree of political support. This is partly because most of the population of Luanda has had to flee there since independence to escape the war. If they had forgotten what Unita was like, they may have been reminded by the criticisms of Unita members who have left to form their own parties with vocal criticisms of atrocities and a dictatorial approach by Unita leadership.

The rivalry between the MPLA and Unita has remained the focus in the campaign leading up to Angola's September 29-30 election, the first since Angolan independence in 1975. A diplomat has privately described the two main election contenders as "a bunch of thieves against a bunch of murderers." Such a judgement is harsh to the MPLA, although there are widespread rumours as to who might be corrupt in the senior leadership. However, the willingness to resort to force is evidently only just below the surface in the case of Unita, and has increasingly broken the surface in the last few weeks.

Unita's credibility unravelled

The central role of force becomes apparent with the sobering experience of attending a Unita rally. One is searched on entry. There are a lot of heavily armed soldiers who are the personal guard that Savimbi has managed to retain. They carry machine guns and grenade launchers, one in each hand, and have 16 grenades in their vests. They are transported in big new US financed GMC cross country vehicles, since the funds allocated in 1991 by Congress are still being spent. The crowd at the rally which I attended in Luanda was bussed in, displaying a formidable logistical capacity for a country which has hardly any transport facilities.

It was thus an exclusively pro-Unita crowd, something that is not to be had in the Luandan

population. Savimbi's support has always come mostly from some provinces in the fertile central plateau. The crowd was extremely well rehearsed, with cheer leaders to remind them of when to chant which

Unita only has about a dozen US and Portuguese Ph.D.s to lead any administration, and lacks the crucial middle management that the MPLA education system has created since independence.



Jonas Savimbi campaigning in Uige

slogan. Savimbi's rhetorical style was (deliberately?) reminiscent of that of Samora Machel, but the content was anti-Cuban and crudely nationalistic, with strong chauvinist overtones. There was not the slightest evidence of a political programme to address the serious problems facing the country.

However, there was an attempt to reassure existing state employees that their jobs were safe, since continuity was needed. This was little more than common sense, since Unita has no capacity to run a civilian administration in the absence of US financial support. As with Renamo in Mozambique,

What did Unita think it was doing holding such meetings? These were one way among many that Unita was bending the election rules. Officially, election meetings were not to be held until the registration process had been completed. This was circumvented by calling them "commissios," as if they were public meetings to discuss and resolve policy issues. There can be no doubt that their intent was electoral, but preaching to your own converted hardly wins new supporters, and the non-Unita press was not giving such meetings much coverage. Presumably the hope was that press announcements that

such meetings were being held would boost public awareness of Unita, but if so it was an underestimation of the sophistication of the Angolan population. Well informed sources estimated that the turnout for the election would be around 90%, and doubted whether Unita would win.

It may be that Unita also doubts it will win. In one of the more widely publicised breaches of the cease fire, in Malange during July, it was plain that Unita had not handed in all its weapons. Those on display at the Unita *acantonamento* in Malange were too old to have been used in serious fighting and did not match up to the weapons being used by Unita elsewhere. A series of incidents instigated by Unita has been reported in the international press, most notably by Victoria Brittain in the British paper The Guardian.

In addition, Unita has been reported as publicly stating that if it loses the election it will not accept it. This readiness to resort to violence may not just be trigger happy troops, especially since there has been some evidence to support the claims that weapons supplies have been hidden. This contradicts its agreement with the MPLA to enter into a post-election coalition whichever party wins, to ensure the peace is kept.

External interference

Such inconsistency may be the result of US or South African pressure on Unita. Certainly at times Unita behaviour has not made it popular with the US officials attached to the unofficial embassy, who nevertheless continue to support it. The US is mainly concerned with the oil issue; the Republican Party for the first time sent an observer to an African election. For that reason, if no other, Unita, like most parties, opposes the secession of the geographically separate oil rich Cabinda province, where almost the only effective FAPLA troops are currently fighting various secessionist groups.

For its part, South African support for Unita is probably part of the three phase plan to secure the most favourable regional outcome possible. This started with the Namibian elections, where various dirty tricks were tested, with an outcome close to that considered most desirable. The second phase, as was revealed in the South African press in July, is the Angolan election, while the third phase is to retain power in South Africa itself.

The South African air force arrived at the request of the Angolan government, which for some reason did not wish to use its own aircraft to register voters for the election. The UN is officially lending logistical support, unlike in Namibia where it had full responsibility for running the election, but the South Africans turned up with "UN Angola" stickers on their planes, which would have given them a great deal of freedom of manoeuvre in Angola. They were instructed to remove them immediately, and did so. They then asked to be posted to Cuando Cubango, Savimbi's stronghold, to help with the electoral registration process in an area where the number of Unita supporters has been hotly contested. They were sent to Malange instead, to cover the north where Unita has much less support.

Nothing daunted, at least one member of their central logistical team at Luanda airport was promptly caught spying, taking photographs of the military aircraft of the new integrated Angolan armed forces, the FAA. Presumably this was either in case of post election fighting so they could support Unita, or to support the apparent plans of the US to establish military hegemony in southern Africa after a settlement in South Africa itself.

Electoral support

Where does Unita's continued reliance on armed force and exter-

nal support leave the MPLA? The MPLA does face significant obstacles in its own right. It is not what it was, in that many of its most intelligent and dedicated leaders have already left government. Its difficulty in tackling theft in the port of Luanda is widely believed to be due to corruption at a high level. Even if this is not the case, the other parties may benefit from this belief at election time. The issue is how much support this belief will cost the MPLA. It has appeared, at least before the election campaign, to be incapable of addressing serious issues facing it, such as the pay and supply of its own troops in the *acantonamentos*, and the political claims of small Cabinda independence parties, who deny unconvincingly that they are supported by The Congo and Zaire. Attempts to get such parties to the conference table failed, and they also threatened to kill any electoral registration teams who left the city of Cabinda. Hence the continued fighting there.

It is extremely difficult to estimate support for the various parties for the reason that it has not been easy to determine just how many people are actually in Angola. Many people are refugees, others are fleeing the drought, while others still seem to be returning at Unita's instigation. This population movement has made it harder to track supporters of either main party. Nor has it been easy to even register voters.

Despite the population movement, it is probably the case that the MPLA has a good idea of where its supporters are and has been able to mobilise them for the election. That Unita may recognize this reality may explain the recent violence. In fact, the cease fire that had held quite well up until July has looked increasingly fragile. The best hope for peace is that the main parties will respect the electoral outcome. In the aftermath of an MPLA victory, however honestly earned, this modest hope may yet prove to be bleak.