

## FACTIONAL REVOLT SUPPRESSED

by Mike Shuster

The May 27 attempted coup in Angola that sought to overthrow the government of Agostinho Neto is known to have claimed the lives of at least a half dozen of MPLA's top leaders before it was suppressed. It was the result of a division within MPLA that had widened since the end of the Angolan war in early 1976, and had involved conflict between Nito Alves, leader of the group involved in the coup attempt and other MPLA leaders.

During my stay in Angola from April to September 1976, the politics of Nito Alves, then Minister for Internal Administration was a constant topic of discussion and debate within many Luanda homes and workplaces as well as throughout the countryside. Even then, divisions were beginning to appear between the "Netoistas" and the "Nitoistas." The struggle that eventually brought the MPLA government dangerously close to chaos is one of the most complex and important in Angola today.

A guerrilla commander who is only 28 or 29 years old, Alves had fought in MPLA's First Military Region during the war against the Portuguese. That was the dense, swampy Dembos Forest area, northeast of Luanda, which had been totally cut off from other MPLA units for several years in the 1960s. Many legends of the heroic struggles of the guerrillas who continued fighting there grew throughout the country.

After the Portuguese coup of April 25, 1974, Alves emerged as one of the more legendary guerrilla fighters. When the movement in support of Poder Popular—People's Power—developed in the shantytowns of Luanda, Alves was one of its earliest backers, eventually becoming identified with the movement for the formation of "Comissoes Populares de Bairros," the local Neighborhood Committees that are designed to become the backbone of

MPLA's Poder Popular government. He was made Minister of Internal Administration, with special charge of overseeing the formation of these CPBs.

It appears now that Alves was using his position as Minister to create a base for the expansion of his own personal power. Throughout last summer, as he felt his power base grow, he was openly critical of the policies of Neto and Lucio Lara, the secretary of the Political Bureau of MPLA and a man generally credited with its organization.

The first move to diminish Alves' growing strength came at the end of October when MPLA's Central Committee abolished his Ministry. A week before the coup attempt, MPLA removed Alves from its ranks altogether, the move that led directly to the coup. Sources in Luanda told me that Alves did have support within the military. Although Luanda is reported calm, there have been unconfirmed reports of fighting in other areas of the country.

For an outsider, Alves' brand of criticism was hard to untangle. His rhetoric in support of "class struggle" had gained favor with Lisbon leftists who, uneasy with the presence of Cuban troops, saw him representing the "left-wing of MPLA."

Yet within the concrete Angolan context—a country badly divided by war, and an economy paralyzed and virtually abandoned by its skilled labor force—I came to feel that his views represented a real threat to MPLA's still precarious power. His advocacy of "class struggle" against the "petit bourgeois element" translated into the elimination of skilled whites and mulattos from prominent and responsible positions. It challenged the position of Neto and Lara who have continued to argue for national unity—a politics of anti-racism, anti-tribalism, and anti-regionalism. When Alves' supporters took over the national radio station on May 27 they appealed to "you who have always felt humiliated because of the simple color of your skin" to demonstrate against the government.

Privately, sources in Luanda who spoke frankly with me about the Neto-Nito split, expressed anxiety about Alves' personal ambitions. They felt he wanted to overthrow Neto and establish

an all-black government, not necessarily progressive, with himself at the top. These same sources, who were close to several Cuban commanders who had fought during the war, told me the Cubans were aware of the impending split and opposed Alves.

Press dispatches about the recent coup attempt have speculated on whether it was supported by external forces. Several reports say that Alves accused the MPLA government of being "anti-Soviet." When Alves supporters took over the Angolan radio station they were also said to have exhorted people to demonstrate in downtown Luanda to "bar the road to the alliance of right-wing and Maoist forces conspiring against the revolution's victories." After the attempt had been crushed, Neto reiterated on national radio that Angola remained committed to non-alignment and its own independence. No one, including the Soviet Union and Cuba, would dictate the country's policies, he said.

MPLA communiques have hinted at the possibility of Western support for the coup, but so far have not revealed any specifics. I do know for certain that the US State Department was interested in Alves as early as last spring. Other journalists who traveled to Angola while I was there and who had visited the State Department reported that information on Alves was one of its primary interests. Some reports stated that supporters of Alves who had attacked Luanda's Sao Paulo prison to free him and another coup leader, Jose van Dunen, also sought to free British and American mercenaries held there since their trial last summer. If true, this could mean that those who organized the attempt may have agreed to free the mercenaries in exchange for support for their efforts.

What has happened to Alves is uncertain. Some reports say he has fled the country, others that he was killed, still others that his fate is unknown. It is known that at least six high ranking members of MPLA including Saydi Mingas, the Finance Minister, several commanders of the army, and other government members, were killed. Several dozen more are missing. □

*Mike Shuster, an Editor of Seven Days and member of the Southern Africa collective, was in Angola from April to September, 1976.*