

Angola: the Longest War

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On 31 May 1991, the ruling MPLA and UNITA, the guerrilla movement led by Jonas Savimbi, signed the Bicesse agreement. The agreement contained a framework for peace and the completion of a process of political liberalisation designed to bring about multi-party democracy in Angola. In early October 1992, Mr. Savimbi alleged widespread fraud had taken place in the elections, and by November Angola was back in the throes of an even more devastating civil war. The renewal of civil war in Angola following a failed political transition is not an isolated case, rather it offers the UN a good illustration of the kind politics of intra-state conflict in which it is increasingly called upon to act. At stake is not simply the already difficult objective of peace, but also the establishment of solid processes of national reconciliation and, in this case as in many others, the emergence of representative democracy.

The origins of the conflict

The Angolan civil war has along the years been linked to the interlocking on all sorts of internal, regional, and international forces. As a consequence, the private process of peace, national reconciliation, and democratisation has been entrepreneurial conditioned by the altering relationship between these three factors.

In 1961, the Movimento para a Libertação de Angola and the União dos Povos de Angola initiated a war of liberation against the yoke of Portuguese colonialism. In 1962, the UPA merged with the smaller Angolan Democratic Party to form the Frente Nacional para a libertação de Angola. It quickly became apparent that parallel to the war against the colonial power there was a bitter feud between the MPLA and the FNLA.

The animosity between the two movements stemmed from the poignant differences which separated the two. The MPLA had its power-base in Luanda and the surrounding areas. In ethnic terms this meant that the movement rested to a large degree on the support of the Kimbundu tribe natural to that region of Angola. Yet, the MPLA's support-base also included urban intellectuals, especially those in Luanda, along with Luanda's creole (detrified Angolans) and mestiço (mixed race) population who harboured nationalistic aspirations and who were "well integrated into Portuguese culture and

espoused middle-class values". The creoles and the mestiços were very much associated with the administrative bureaucracy of the colonial system. Ideologically, the MPLA, which included the small Angolan Communist Party, was from an early phase associated with Socialist: ideals and principles. These characteristics not only formed the basis of the movement's origins but they have continued to define the MPLA right down to the present day. While this has had the positive effect of providing the MPLA with a continuing and guaranteed power-base, it has aggravated the gap between the MPLA and other ethno-social groups. However, for all of its own ethnic support base, the MPLA's Marxist principles, together with its creole and mestiço following, made the movement despise ethnic and tribal politics; in favour of the construction of an independent non-racial modern Angolan state.

The FNLA had its roots in the Bakongo, people whose natural homeland criss-crosses the Angolan border with Zaire. Its leader, Holden Roberto, related to the aristocracy of the old Bakongo kingdom, is the brother-in-law of president Mobutu of Zaire. In contrast to the more administrative-linked support-base of the MPLA, the Bakongo had and have a strong tradition of private enterprise and initiative. Taking advantage of contacts in Zaire, the Bakongo had for a long time migrated to what is now Kinshasa and taken on all sorts of jobs in the private sector. Their natural flair and taste for private enterprise quickly led to the emergence of a class of black entrepreneurial farmers in northern Angola as the colonial authorities relaxed a number of laws in the last few years of Portuguese rule. Thus, the FNLA was by nature "sharply antagonistic to state enterprise, government interference, and the meddling of the bureaucracy."

The two movements dearly espoused diametrically opposed philosophies. In, 1962, the rivalry between the two manifested itself sharply when the FNLA created a government in exile and purposefully excluded the MPLA. At the same time, the FNLA was under orders from its leader Holden Roberto to kill MPLA guerrilla infiltrating northern Angola. A number of African initiatives designed to bring about reconciliation between the two never produced any significant results.

Meanwhile, while both movements spent nearly as much time fighting each other as they did fighting the war of liberation, another movement appeared on the Angolan landscape. On the 15th March 1966, in the province of Moxico, UNITA came into being. The movement was established by a group of disgruntled FNLA followers led by Jonas Savimbi. Many of these, like Savimbi himself, were members of Angola's largest ethnic group, the Ovimbundu, dissatisfied with the FNLA's Bakongo-centered philosophy. The limited nature of the movement at the moment of its inception does question whether it

could be seen as representing the whole or even a section of the Ovimbundu. However, Savimbi was quick to exploit the opportunities provided by his own ethnic background and that of many of his men. In military terms UNITA was also weak. The movement did not field a force of more than 500 men by the time of Angolan independence in 1975. Hence it was never a significant force in the fight to topple Portuguese colonialism. Many have even accused and brought forward what they believe to be conclusive proof of UNITA's collaboration with the Portuguese colonial authorities to facilitate the liquidation of the other two movements, especially the MPLA.

In contrast to the MPLA and the FNLA, UNITA was not recognised by the Organisation of African Unity as a liberation movement until early 1975.

All three, as the MPLA and UNITA would do until the present day, sought to explore international support as a means of bolstering not just their fight against the Portuguese but also their position vis-a-vis each other.

The FNLA was initially more successful on the international scene. To a large extent this was due to the diplomatic, financial and military assistance provided by president Mobutu of Zaire. The MPLA suffered a real setback when it was forced to leave Congo-Leopoldville and relocate in Congo-Brazzaville when the pro-FNLA leadership of the former recognised the FNLA government in exile and banned activity on its territory. Moreover, unlike the FNLA, the MPLA was wrought by personality, social and ideological feuds which reduced its political and military cohesiveness and hampered its development as a force to be reckoned with.

The Marxist sympathies within the MPLA initially allowed the movement to benefit from Soviet support. This lasted from the mid-sixties until 1972 when the USSR promptly terminated this because of the recurrent feuds and splits within the MPLA. To Lisbon's great displeasure, this cut in Soviet aid was however offset to a large degree by support from the Scandinavian countries. Aid from these four countries continued only during what was considered a war of liberation against colonialism, and ceased on independence. UNITA seems to have relied on small amounts of support from China and allegedly its tacit alliance with the Portuguese for survival.

Thus, from the very onset, the conflict in Angola was characterised by a dual struggle: a liberation war against the Portuguese and a bitter feud between two and then three movements, each one representing, in varying degrees, a different political stand and a particular ethno-social reality within Angola's borders.

From colonial rule to independence

The 25 April 1974 coup d'etat in Portugal had a dramatic impact on events in Angola and profoundly altered the nature of the conflict. Although the Angolan conflict was to be continuously marked by an internal power struggle, albeit with a change in one of the main actors, it quickly became firmly locked into regional and international patterns of hostility, respectively destabilisation and superpower rivalry.

After a series of cease-fires between the three movements and the colonial authorities, an agreement was signed by all three in Portugal on 15 January 1975 establishing a date for Angolan independence and a government of national unity which took office on 31 January 1975.

However, the impending reality of independence and the availability of political power only served to increase the degree of hostility and rivalry between the movements and their respective foreign backers. As a result, both the MPLA and the FNLA began preparing for war in mid-1974. In June of that year, the FNLA received more Chinese instructors and light weapons, and in July it began to receive the first wave of US financing. In August of the same year, the MPLA having surmounted its difficulties with Moscow, a first consignment of Soviet arms reached the movement, although the first big consignment of eastern bloc weapons arrived only in March 1975. The MPLA's Cuban advisors began arriving in growing numbers from the spring of 1974 onwards. At this stage, the militarily weaker UNITA was busy playing the role of mediator between the big two, although small amounts of US financial assistance had begun to reach the organisation.

Boistered by more injections of US financial assistance and Zairean troops, the FNLA launched a series of small attacks on the MPLA from March 1975 onwards. A major offensive against the MPLA in Luanda on 9 July aimed at seizing power, resulted in the victory of the former and the expulsion of the FNLA from the capital. The FNLA never recovered from this defeat. Overcome by disarray and seen as incompetent by its foreign backers, the FNLA gradually faded away and by 1976 it had totally disappeared. In the meantime, UNITA left Luanda for Huambo. The MPLA was now in complete control of the capital.

Worried by the good fortunes of the Communist bloc-supported MPLA the West chose a military response. On 14 October 1975, the South African Defence Forces (SADF) launched their invasion of southern Angola in conjunction with UNITA and a number of FNLA troops. Their objective was the MPLA-held capital. The main aim of this was to prevent the MPLA from declaring unilateral independence on 11 November 1975. The South African forces failed in their objective. Firstly because the MPLA, increasingly

strengthened by Cuban troops and firepower, stopped the invaders on the southern bank of the river Keve; and secondly, because the United States made it known in Pretoria that it would not support an open South African invasion of Angola that included a take-over of the capital. Such a situation might have only hampered the US and western position throughout the third world and facilitated gains by the Soviet Union. Aware of this danger and with the wounds of Vietnam still fresh, in December 1975 the US Congress passed the Clark amendment prohibiting all covert aid to Angola.

In early 1976 the MPLA government had been recognised by most of the international community. And by the spring South Africa had withdrawn its troops from Angola. The FNLA's remnants had disappeared into Zaire. But civil war was to continue as Jonas Savimbi exhorted his scattered forces to hide in the bush and begin a guerrilla war against the MPLA.

In Luanda, the MPLA concentrated on building Socialism in what soon became the People's Republic of Angola. In the western world the MPLA was viewed as little more than another Soviet third world puppet-regime. In the end this became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Facing hostility in the West, the MPLA did indeed find friendlier allies in the Communist bloc. Its eastern allies grew in importance as the Luanda regime was growingly confronted by apartheid's regional war.

The presence of a Soviet and Cuban-backed Marxist-Leninist regime in Luanda at what was a time of international superpower rivalry, the existence of apartheid in the regional hegemon and the availability of a guerrilla force committed to fighting the MPLA, contained the seeds of further conflict. UNITA was not only to become the MPLA's main enemy but it was also to prove a far more formidable adversary than the FNLA.

A never-ending conflict

Although militarily weaker than the MPLA and the FNLA, UNITA was politically the most popular of the three liberation movements. According to polls carried out by an OAU delegation shortly before independence, UNITA commanded 45 percent of the potential electorate, while the MPLA and the FNLA could expect around 20 percent each. Keeping out of the MPLA-FNLA conflict at the earlier pre-independence stages, while attempting to reconcile the two, had greatly strengthened UNITA's standing with the population. Moreover, the Portuguese had hoped to use UNITA as an MPLA ally to prevent a perceived take-over by Zaire and the FNLA.

UNITA quickly began to exploit a number of potential advantages that not only ensured its survival, but transformed it from a small band of ill-prepared bushmen into one of the

contemporary world's most potent guerrilla forces. One of the first avenues exploited by UNITA was the ethnic card. Upon signing a cease-fire with the Portuguese on 14 June 1974, UNITA began to establish itself in the central regions of Huambo and Bié where it started to recruit members of Savimbi's tribe, the Ovimbundu. "They received a welcome all along the railway line and signed up thousands of party members in a very short time." Many UNITA "leaders had been educated in the local schools or had been lay preachers in the Congregationalist chapels. Party meetings turned into festive occasions which combined hymn-singing and dancing with political education and leadership training." Moreover, as David Birmingham also points out, "the South knew little of Luanda." Having found its natural power-base, it was not difficult to go one step further with independence and mobilise the South against what was seen as the Kimbundu-Luanda-based MPLA. As the Ovimbundu substituted the Bakongo in providing an anti-MPLA movement with a major power-base, the war retained an important ethnic dimension. From 1976 to the early eighties UNITA carried out only small-scale guerrilla warfare, consisting chiefly of attacking easy targets such as social and economic installations in central and southern Angola.

Threatened by the appearance of black Communist and Soviet-friendly regimes which would undoubtedly have repercussions for the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa itself, Pretoria initiated total strategy in 1980-81. Having already associated itself with the South African invasion of late 1975, UNITA now quickly seized on renewed support from Pretoria and became its main tool for the destabilisation of Angola. In turn, UNITA saw its position vis-a-vis the MPLA bolstered by training, money, logistic support and even the odd South African invasion. Pretoria had offered the MPLA an olive branch on the condition that it sever its support for SWAPO and the ANC. An offer which the MPLA rejected outright.

Already strengthened, by the support of the regional hegemon, UNITA was to see its position further reinforced by the simplistic geostrategic interpretation of events in Angola and southern Africa as a whole, by the West and mainly the United States. The rise of Reaganism and its staunch anti-communist platform dedicated to fighting the "evil empire" ruled over by Moscow proved crucial in strengthening UNITA. Blind to the liberation struggle still underway in the region against apartheid, the United States and many western governments viewed UNITA as an important bulwark against the spread of Soviet influence in the region. Savimbi was even described at one point as the key to democracy in Africa. The United States gave its stamp of approval to the movement with Mr. Savimbi's visit to the White House in 1985. The support which UNITA received in western circles, especially in the United States, meant that it could by the mid-eighties

field a force of somewhere between 50-60,000 guerrillas and had access to sophisticated military hardware.

The MPLA's own liking for arbitrary violence and Stalinist methods strengthened UNITA's claims to represent the fight for democracy in Angola. Many former MPLA supporters disgruntled at the MPLA's political bankruptness and its economic incompetence began to give increased credence to UNITA as a legitimate opponent.

By mid-eighties the conflict tearing Angola apart was far more complex than it had been in the early days of MPLA-FNLA rivalry and the anti-colonial struggle. It was still characterised by a civil war, but it now also involved the clashing rivalry of the two Cold War blocs. It was still a war of liberation, but it was now a regional war of liberation against the powerful regional hegemon, linked to the end of apartheid and the independence of Namibia. At the stake was not just the winner of another internal power struggle but a whole series of international and regional power relationships. Naturally, the path to peace, national reconciliation, and a new form of representative government in Angola would be linked to changes in the regional and international dimensions to the conflict and to the altering relationship between these.

The Road to Peace

The first important landmark in this country's quest for a new political landscape in December of 1988, when Angola, Cuba and South Africa culminated a series of negotiations with the signing of the New York agreements. The accords rested on the acceptance of Chester Crocker's policy of linkage. This policy elaborated by the then US assistant secretary of state for African affairs firmly linked the independence of Namibia to the withdrawal of the Cuban troops from Angola. Unlike Angola and Cuba, South Africa had always accepted linkage as the basis for a regional peace-settlement. Pretoria realised that the Angolans would be very reluctant to allow the Cubans to leave while UNITA existed, and this meant it could blame Luanda for its procrastination over Namibian independence.

The 1988 regional settlement was made possible by two similar parallel and interacting processes: a weakening in the capacities of the Soviet Union and the Republic of South Africa, and a subsequent waning of their will, to engage in military conflict in Southern Africa. In essence, the 1988 New York agreements reflected wider regional and international trends - the beginning of the end of apartheid and the demise of the Soviet Union. In, early 1988 South Africa effectively had to admit defeat at the hands of the Angolan-Cuban forces in the battle for Cuíto-Canavale. The SADF in conjunction with UNITA guerrillas were prevented from taking Cuíto-Canavale. This defeat coupled with

the increasing frequency of SWAPO attacks in Namibia at around the same time, demonstrated a growing weakness on the part of the South Africa military machine. It also meant that Pretoria could not use military force as a credible long-term policy to impose its will on the region. It was evidently time for a sober analysis of Pretoria's relationship with the region it had crippled for nearly ten years. The changes underway in the old Soviet Union were to have a decisive influence on South Africa's reassessment of its relations with neighbouring countries.

By late 1987, Moscow had lost its lust for third world revolutionary adventures. Supporting liberation movements was not only expensive, but unaffordable at a time when Gorbachev was intent on restructuring the Soviet system. It was also clear that the international Communist revolution was not going to take place. Furthermore, perestroika itself dictated the need for a new accommodation with the West. Restructuring the Soviet economic apparatus required significant cuts in the capacities of the all-powerful Soviet military machine. Yet, this could only be made acceptable and palatable to the people and the Red Army generals, and even then with great difficulty, if relations with the West were seen to have improved so as to significantly reduce the risk of a military confrontation. Equally, Gorbachev and his reform-minded supporters undoubtedly realised that transforming the Soviet economic system required the kind of economic assistance only available in the capitalist West. In Southern Africa Moscow's changed perception of the West translated, as in other Cold War regional hot points, into the appearance of a new spirit of compromise. By early 1988 South Africans and Soviets began to forge a new relationship and by late 1988 the New York accords were signed.

One of the most immediate results of the changes operated in the Kremlin was increased pressure on the MPLA to demonstrate flexibility in finding an end to the war. The MPLA had already begun a period of liberalisation in 1985 with the expulsion of a number of hardliners from the central committee and the implementation of a series of economic reforms. It had also increasingly sought closer relations with EC states such as France and Spain. But the arrival of Gorbachev brought a whole new dynamics to the need for a rapprochement with the West and greater political and integration into economic liberalisation. From 1987 onwards, Luanda growingly turned to Portugal as a means of forging closer relations with both the European and aware of Community and the United States. The regional dimension to the Angolan conflict began to subside significantly with the end of official South African military support for UNITA as a result of the New York agreements. And it was further attenuated by the internal process of political change in South Africa aimed at achieving a negotiated end to apartheid.

However, the regional dimension to the conflict did not disappear completely. Pretoria continued to grant its old ally UNITA international diplomatic support at least until late 1992 and has willingly turned a blind eye to flights from South African territory with medical supplies and foodstuffs for UNITA. For many South African companies supplying UNITA is a highly lucrative business which they will not easily terminate. Whether or not these supply flights have also contained armaments is unknown. Military supplies tend to be routed to UNITA's northern front via Zaire, again in many cases by using South African companies. Zaire's president Mobutu and his inner circle earn a fortune that helps sustain them in power by acting as middlemen in UNITA's illicit diamond smuggling and arms buys.

The changing nature of superpower relations, which had already proved crucial in facilitating the New York accords, was to severely condition the process of national reconciliation in Angola. In January 1989 the United States re-affirmed its continuing commitment to supporting UNITA. From late 1988 onwards the United States launched a massive supply operation via Zaire to strengthen UNITA's position. The exact reasons for the US position, apart from loyalty to an ally, appear unclear. It seems that Washington was intent on weaning UNITA away from South African control and to redress the defeat it had suffered at the hands of the Soviet and Cuban backed MPLA in 1975. Whatever the main thrust of American rationale it was highly evident that the United States was committed to providing UNITA an honourable discharge from its Cold War duties. According to the Swedish International Development Agency, US financial support jumped from 15 million dollars a year in the period up to 1987 to 70 million in 1989 and to 90 million in 1990. For its part, Zaire was only too happy to increase its strategic and diplomatic leverage in Washington. In January 1989, the MPLA responded to an increasingly difficult internal and external position by offering UNITA guerrillas a general amnesty and integration into government. It was still not prepared to offer the rebels any form of direct negotiations. UNITA, bolstered by continuing American support and aware of the MPLA's increasingly tenuous position rebuffed the MPLA's offer and sought greater gains through military force. UNITA was not prepared to take crumbs when, at least so it thought, it could have the whole pie. Luanda's position became increasingly precarious. Not only was the Soviet Union reforming itself out of existence, but in its desire to court the West Moscow was putting greater pressure on Luanda to demonstrate flexibility in the search for a negotiated solution to the conflict. Even former staunch allies such as Mozambique (only too aware of possible effects on its internal situation) began to urge Luanda into negotiations with UNITA.

Aware of its precarious internal and external position the MPLA finally ceded to direct negotiations. Delegations from the MPLA and UNITA met at Gbadolite in June 1989. United States and South African diplomacy had played an important role in organising the event and in ensuring the presence of 18 heads of state designed to imprint on this settlement the hallmark of an African initiative. Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos and UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi shook hands on a peace agreement. However the whole Gbadolite edifice proved a clear a couple of days later with both sides confused as to what they had actually agreed to. Following the Gbadolite failure there was a clear intensification in the fighting with both sides looking for military advantages which would transfer into a strengthened position at the negotiating table. In December 1989, government forces launched a major military onslaught on UNITA positions in southeastern Angola. The battle of Mavinga was to be an important watershed in the search for peace. After what initially looked like a success for government forces, UNITA's position improved significantly. South African logistic support had enabled UNITA to resist until more effective and decisive American support reached the rebels . The result was a deadlock between the two belligerents.

In the aftermath of Mavinga it was clear to the MPLA that its medium to long term options were more than limited. The United States, by then was clearly the only superpower, was committed to supporting UNITA, Moscow increased its pressure on the MPLA for a negotiated settlement following what it saw as a defeat at the hands of the rebels , and the all-important Cuban forces were set to withdraw in 1991. Faced with this scenario, the MPLA finally conceded to direct talks with the rebels. In early April 1990, the Portuguese secretary of state for cooperation and foreign affairs, Durão Barroso, received the go-ahead for direct talks with UNITA from president José Eduardo dos Santos . The talks soon got bogged down with both sides seeking to gain the advantage. UNITA refused to discuss a cease-fire until it was assured of certain political guarantees while the MPLA, reflecting its fragile military situation, wanted to discuss a cease-fire before negotiating political compromises.