

Lessons from Angola

Publicação: [Cadernos do Lumiar Nº 3](#)

Data de Publicação: 1994

In the aftermath of events in Angola, are there any lessons which can be learnt to facilitate similar transitions? There are undoubtedly a number of issues that contributed to the Angolan debacle and which suggest they might be avoided or modified elsewhere.

However, any attempt to draw precise and exact lessons from the Angolan experience should be coupled with a sense of caution. Events and conditions in Angola are specific to that country. What worked or did not work in Angola might not function in the same manner in countries experiencing similar problems such as Bosnia, Zaire, Somalia, or even Mozambique. Each process has its own dynamics, its own specific problems and its own inherent characteristics. Notwithstanding similarities with other processes, the lessons available from Angola may not amount to more than rough guidelines whose successful application elsewhere depends on a clear understanding of the context in question.

Forging a peace agreement

Firstly, the goodwill of the parties after years of bitter and prolonged civil war proved an insufficient basis on which to forge the successful implementation of a peace agreement. Angola demonstrates that the distrust and animosity accumulated during years of war and bloodshed are not wiped out overnight by a peace agreement. In the absence of a third party capable of enforcing the process, both the MPLA and UNITA proved incapable of overcoming their mutual hostility and mistrust that ultimately undermined the Angolan transition. Furthermore, the need for the MPLA's and UNITA's assent to any decision taken in the CCPM deprived the main body responsible for implementing the peace accord of a sense of direction and leadership, a situation which only further aggravated non-compliance with the provisions of Bicesse.

Secondly, the prospect of winner-takes-all elections did not foster the emergence of a solid spirit of national reconciliation. In Angola the prospect of disputing winner-takes-all elections only increased the already deep felt rivalry and hostility existent between the MPLA and UNITA. Elections do not encourage cooperation and harmony, rather they presuppose competition. In societies torn apart by years of violent conflict this type of

political competition only tends to accentuate old wounds while exacerbating tempers and violent passions.

This is not to say that elections should not occur. But that when they do occur, a previously agreed power-sharing formula based on electoral support might better mitigate the rivalry and hostility associated with the competition for political power.

In comparison to winner-take-all victories, power-sharing has the advantage of being a politically inclusive and not exclusive arrangement. While winner-take-all elections encourage divisions within society by creating a gap between political winners and losers, power-sharing institutionalises a level of cooperation between former adversaries. Cooperation at the top will go a long way to fostering increased social harmony at a lower level between previously opposed sectors of the population. Under power-sharing greater numbers of the population are also likely to feel represented in the post-conflict political structure, increasing the likelihood of long-term peace and stability.

The inclusive nature of power-sharing makes the concept more likely to encourage the appearance of a true spirit of national reconciliation in societies at times bitterly divided and fragmented by years of lengthy conflict. Thus, power-sharing may prove a far more successful mechanism in managing transitions from armed conflict and non-democratic rule to peace and increased representative government.

Thirdly, in Angola one party's discontent with its electoral performance and its failure to disarm and demobilise allowed it to undermine the country's entire transition. In transitions which provide for a process of demobilising and disarming rival forces, the creation of a single army and the holding of elections, events in Angola suggest that all rival forces should be totally and fully demobilised before the elections are allowed to proceed. An even wiser strategy might be to insist on the disarmament and demobilisation of rival forces before an election campaign begins and gathers momentum.

However, the process of disarmament, demobilisation and creation of single army, as well as the important process of registration, were hampered not only by political factors but also by technical and logistical difficulties. The lamentable state of Angola's infrastructure and the poor level of resources available to all those involved in implementing the various provisions of Bicesse were serious barriers to the timely fulfilment of many of the steps envisaged in the peace agreement. In essence, deadlines agreed by belligerents around the negotiating table have to prove flexible in light of real world handicaps if the overall transition is to prove successful.

As witnessed in Angola, uncontrolled, aggressive and vitriolic propaganda raises the political temperature and can negatively affect the general state of an on-going transition. The use by the MPLA and UNITA of their respective means of communication also dwarfed attempts by smaller political forces to project themselves on the electorate. In future a code of conduct should be accepted by belligerents to prevent what were clearly the pejorative levels of antagonistic propaganda seen in Angola. The blatant use of the state-owned media by the MPLA regime for its own propaganda purposes, suggest that the state-run media could be placed under the control of an impartial committee during the run-up to elections. Any such committee would have to be made up of representatives from various political forces.

The international dimension

The whole international dimension to the Angolan peace agreement proved unsatisfactory. The three-country troika which provided the transition in Angola with both international guarantees and legitimacy failed to act decisively. In the face of blatant non-compliance by the parties, the troika countries accepted silence as Bicesse fell apart. But then, could the troika have done anything?

Another fundamental aspect of the renewed Angolan conflict to which little attention had been given is the issue of external intervention. Two countries traditionally associated with destabilisation in Angola are known to be assisting UNITA: Zaire with official aid (although with no official protestations noticeable). Greater diplomatic pressure should be brought to bear on countries involved in fuelling the military capabilities of belligerents, especially when a particular party has already been called upon by the Security Council to lay down its weapons. The use of peacekeeping missions equipped with sophisticated technology to monitor incoming foreign assistance and to prevent it from reaching its objective, would go a long way towards curbing the ability of outside parties to fan conflict in other states.

This brings us back to the all-important role of the United Nations. If there is one clear lesson to come out of Angola, it is the fact that severely restricting the UN in what are delicate and sensitive transitions undermines the potential role which the organisation can play as an impartial confidence-building mechanism. A strengthened UN presence will enhance its capacities to prevent a peace process from derailment due to the fears, misgiving, and suspicious of the main actors.

This means that the UN cannot hover on the sidelines as did it in Angola. Instead, the UN must occupy centre stage and control the various stages mapped out in peace agreements and transition processes. It cannot merely assist and monitor elections,

especially when the incumbent government is heavily distrusted as was the case in Angola, it must organise and control all the electorate process beginning with registration, assisting in the preparation of relevant laws and culminating in the vote itself. The UN cannot simply observe crucial steps such as demobilisation, disarmament, the establishment of a single army, and the creation of a representative police force, it must assume a central role in carrying them out.

Even a limited UN mandate can not be fully undertaken with a clear lack of resources, as was the case in Angola. Deploying 350 military and 400 electoral observers to operate in a territory the size and nature of Angola where lack of mobility and distance were great handicaps, was totally inappropriate. The problem of scarce resources also strained the position of the UN secretary-general's special representative. While the UN was given a small mandate and few resources, the special representative was then called upon to verify the elections! This naturally opened the way for challenges not only to the UN's authority, but also to the entire peace process by those unhappy with events or electoral results. As Margaret Anstee stated, even if a larger UN role had not prevented a resumption of hostilities, it would have reduced its likelihood.

A case in point: Mozambique

After two long years of direct peace talks, Mozambique's guerrilla movement, Resistência Nacional de Moçambique and the ruling Marxist (at least it was, until in similar vein to many of those regimes it accepted multi-party democracy in 1990) Frente Revolucionária de Libertação de Moçambique signed the General Peace Accord (GPA) in Rome, on 4 October 1992, outlining this country's transition from war and single-party rule, to peace and representative government.

The process of national reconciliation mapped out by Renamo and Frelimo enshrines a number of steps similar to those contained in Angola's Bicesse agreement, namely: the establishment of a cease-fire followed by a process of demobilisation and disarmament of the two rival armies, the creation of a new Mozambican defence force made up of elements from both sides, and the holding of multi-party elections under international supervision.

However, Mozambique's Rome peace agreement also contains a number of features which distinguish it from its Angolan counterpart. The GPA allows for the continuation of two separate administrations, one lorded over by Renamo and the other by Frelimo, until an unspecified date in the future. The agreement also contemplates the withdrawal of foreign troops, namely Zimbabwean and Malawian, from respectively the Beira and the of Nacala corridors. In contrast to Angola, both the police and the secret services were

placed under the auspices of an impartial commission. The government committed itself not to pass any measures contrary to the protocols agreed upon in Rome and to incorporate these into national legislation. Building on the Angolan experience, the Rome accord also envisages the availability of funds for political parties which register to contest the elections and the holding of a donor conference to assist financially with primarily the reintegration of refugees, internally displaced people and demobilised personnel. Above all, it outlines the establishment of a model UN operation as the centrepiece of the Mozambican transition.

The principles stated in the GPA, such as freedom of speech, association, religion, and impartial access to the media, although already part of the democratic reforms enacted by Frelimo since 1990, were included on the insistence of the guerrillas. Through the inclusion of these basic democratic principles in the GPA, Renamo wanted to project the idea that it had been instrumental in forcing Frelimo to accept democratic rule.

With the haunting spectre of Angola as a backcloth, three lessons have been taken from this country's debacle and applied to Mozambique, in a clear effort to avert another tragedy and to develop a better formula for managing the political transition inherent in similar processes of national reconciliation.

The first of these lessons, enshrined in the very GPA, is the role assigned to the United Nations. In startling contrast to the peripheral position of the UN in Angola, the organisation has been made centre-stage of the transition process underway in Mozambique. Angola stressed that only a large role and presence could allow the UN to function effectively as a valuable and neutral confidence-building agent. The express aim of ONUMOZ is to prevent mistrust on either side from derailing Mozambique's peace process.

Politically, the UN has the task of impartially coordinating the implementation of the peace process. In practice, this is done through the UN secretary general's special representative's chairmanship of the body with chief responsibility for the transition process, the Control and Supervision Commission. In military terms, the UN with just over 7,000 peacekeepers on the ground, is responsible, in dear contrast to its Angolan mandate, for monitoring and verifying the withdrawal of foreign forces, the ceasefire, and for the supervision of the disarmament and demobilisation of both belligerents. Under its ONUMOZ mandate, the UN is also to provide both technical assistance and observers for the country's first ever free elections. ONUMOZ'S fourth area of action is in the humanitarian area; the UN is to assist with the voluntary repatriation of around 1.5 million refugees, resettling 4 million internally displaced people, reintegrating demobilised

personnel, plus distributing emergency food and medical aid. As the secretary-general of the United Nations highlighted, all four areas of action are closely inter-related.

The next two lessons taken from the Angolan experience are closely linked. Distrust, suspicion, and reluctance to demobilise on the part of both belligerents, plus Renamo's particular delaying tactics in order to obtain promised international finance for its transformation into a political party, including its withdrawal from GPA-created peace commissions in March 1993, and the regime's late presentation of a draft electoral law, all led to significant delays in the peace process by the spring of 1993. The paralysis which Mozambique's transition had succumbed to was only overcome by a visit of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in October. After this Renamo and Frelimo approved a new politico-military calendar, with demobilisation beginning in November and terminating in May of 1994, and with the elections re-scheduled for October 1994.

The new calendar reflected a desire to avoid the mistake made in Angola of allowing multi-party elections to go ahead as planned without the process of demobilising and disarming belligerents being anywhere near completion. Re-scheduling these important components in the transition, revealed a changed approach to that witnessed by all concerned in Angola; no longer were agreements reached at the negotiating table carved in stone. Instead, in the face of stark reality, they must prove flexible if the ultimate objective, in this case the attainment of peace and representative government, is to be successfully concluded.

Another lesson that many informed observers began to propagate in the aftermath of renewed civil war in Angola, was the need to avoid simple multi-party winner-takes-all elections as the cornerstone of national reconciliation processes. It has been simultaneously advocated that in these processes, elections be preceded by power-sharing arrangements such as is already the case in South Africa. Interestingly, and even though the GPA goes some way in this direction by granting the continued existence of two separate administrations, this all-important lesson has not yet been applied to the state apparatus, a point that may bear close watching.

As was pointed out earlier, each transition is a different case, a different bundle of conditions and challenges. Underscoring this in Mozambique is the fact that, despite an attempt to better manage the transition, the process has not overcome the distrust that is leading both sides to stall. None of the problems afflicting this decimated and fractured state have gone away.

Renamo's lack of a political dimension, its scarce resources, the movement's awareness of its political frailties, and what appears to be the unfulfilled expectations created

amongst the guerrillas that these problems would vanish once they put their name to a peace agreement, have been the main factors hampering Mozambique's transition. Yet, Frelimo appears to be more reluctant to meet the demobilisation deadlines. The regime has also purposefully stalled the process in an attempt to delay the elections until the population has felt the positive effects of promised international aid. It has also done little to appease Renamo's financial constraints, throwing the ball into the international community's court.

Bearing in mind the reluctance of the Mozambican belligerents to promptly comply with the peace agreement and the growing commitments faced by the UN elsewhere, and even though it has so far appeared adamant on avoiding a repetition of the mistakes committed in Angola, the question arises - how long is the international community prepared to finance an indefinite UN mandate?