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Angola: reinventing pasts and futures

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What's in a name? For the ruling party of Angola, it seems, quite a lot. In December 2009, that party formally abandoned its original name from 1956, *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. Henceforth it would be known merely by the old initials: MPLA. Evidently the party thought it best to bury and forget terms like 'movement' and 'liberation'. Besides, it had long ago dropped the word *Popular* from new nation's first name, the *People's Republic of Angola*.

Such fiery terms from a burnt-out era no doubt left a lot of people cold. But deleting those tokens of past ideals came at an odd time. For never in its 53-year history had the MPLA's claims to a popular mandate looked stronger. In high-turnout parliamentary elections in September 2008, it got more than four out of every five votes. Six years earlier, its triumph over warlord-led Unita, and the non-punitive peace deal that followed, met with overwhelming relief, even among people on the losing side. Since the war, popular expectations have risen, and many, at least in urban wage-earning strata, are optimistic about the future. Urbanised and Portuguese-speaking, most people see themselves no longer chiefly as members of ethnic blocs, but as citizens of one Angolan nation (Farinha *et al.* 2004, IRI 2004).¹ The MPLA, more than any other political force, contributed to those outcomes.

No such scenario seemed feasible in the early 1970s. At that time the party was on the ropes, reeling from Portuguese counter-insurgency and from its own self-inflicted wounds. Like its two rival nationalist parties, the MPLA had never developed internal coherence or means to engage broadly with Angolan citizens at large. Reviewing the parties' histories, an Angolan political analyst put it as follows:

Although [national parties'] programmes proclaimed democratic liberties as objectives of the struggle, none of them conducted themselves in ways that would guarantee pluralism ... Within each organization, conditions of tolerance and openness to political debate [were] non-existent. (Gonçalves 2004, p. 17)

Angolan anti-colonial politics thus foreshadowed the autocratic political order of the post-colony. The nationalist leadership could draw on few traditions or norms on which to build a responsive, non-patrimonial bond between citizens and the state (Birmingham 1992).

Yet from the near-death experience of internal fratricide and international isolation (both Washington and Moscow had written it off by 1973), the MPLA made an astonishing comeback as a thrusting new African power. With military help from Cuban communists and

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plenty of petrodollars from Western capitalists, it gained time, space and know-how to recover and get the upper hand. Revolutionary rhetoric may have filled the airwaves in 1975–76, but in the suites where the party chieftains cut deals with the oil companies, the byword was continuity (Soares de Oliveira 2007, pp. 189–194). Neither side wished to put at risk, let alone abandon, mutually lucrative arrangements merely because they originated under colonial rule. The new leadership went on, however, to modify the *status quo* by building three key institutions: a disciplined army and security apparatus; a professionally-run state holding company, Sonangol; and a well-oiled system of patronage. Shrewd management of all three led to advances on the fronts of coercive power, state revenues and domestic politics. In short, the MPLA built what Cold-War Washington least wanted to see: a black African state with muscle and ‘attitude’.

For its impudence, Angola paid in blood. Unlike Afghanistan, where American support to Islamic fundamentalists to ‘roll back’ communism brought nasty blowback for the United States itself, American support to African anti-communists brought death and wretchedness only for Angolans. From 1975 to 2002 about one-and-a-half million of them perished, a staggering number for a country of only six million people in 1975. Of these, about 160,000 died in combat – the heaviest battle casualties, in absolute numbers, of any African conflict in the twentieth century (Ormhaug 2009, p. 8).

War utterly transfigured Angola. It did so by sheer destruction, but also by obscuring processes of dispossession, private accumulation and the consolidation of political power in Luanda. As the country’s sophisticated agro-industrial system collapsed, it took with it a sizable class of small producers and a rural semi-proletariat – social categories never trusted by the MPLA, whose adherents were mainly urban and better schooled. The violence that drove nearly half the population into urban shack settlements radically reduced the rural constituencies from which the MPLA’s enemies had drawn their support. As the belligerents swept up tens of thousands of young people into their war machines, years of apprenticeship began in trade schools for violence. Many of these veterans are today on payrolls of the army, police and private security companies.

Today, as in the war years, most of the war’s uprooted and dispossessed scrape by in netherworlds of informal work and commerce, the onshore economy’s new centre of gravity. But as elsewhere in global capitalism, that free market is only for losers. The economic winners, being politically well connected, get rich pickings such as control over lucrative import monopolies. Import streams they control supply most of the markets where the *povo*, the common people, do the work, take the risks and pay off the Economic Police and other shakedown artists to leave them in peace. Such is life under *capitalismo selvagen*: jungle capitalism.

In contrast to the rest of Africa, Angola’s elites never allowed the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to supervise economic policy directly. Yet by 1990 they had nonetheless embraced key tenets of the Washington Consensus: liberalisation of external flows, austerity for public services and privatisation of public assets. In so doing, they quashed any remaining hopes of a social contract – ‘satisfaction of the people’s needs’, in the discourse of the MPLA *anno* 1975. In that initial period, the party’s socio-economic pledges sounded vaguely social-democratic, mentioning commitments to basic schooling and literacy, which expanded rapidly up to 1980, then shrank. Primary and preventive health care, promoted by sympathetic donors like Sweden and Italy, never gained traction; government put priority instead on centralised care in city hospitals, and eventually on private clinics. For the most part, fulfilment of Central Committee pledges for public services took second place to elite preferences, politico-military imperatives and to aspirations for a Soviet command-and-control system. But within 10 years, this haphazardly built state

socialist project had been engulfed by bureaucratic disorganisation, volatile revenues, elite self-interest, a flourishing parallel market and above all, war. By 1990 most of the half-hearted gestures toward downward distribution had come to an end and elite battles for power, and especially wealth, had been joined.

The new 'market-friendly' policies ushered in a bonanza for the political class and their corporate allies abroad. Capital flight took wing. A recent study indicates that in the 1990s illicit outflows averaged US\$542 million a year, roughly 6% of gross domestic product (GDP); in the period 2000–2008 they averaged US\$2.7 billion a year, roughly 14% of GDP (GFI 2010).² Angola's 'peace dividend' has meant, literally, big dividends for interests abroad.

Judicial activists like the French magistrate Eva Joly and policy-activist organisations like Global Witness have revealed much about these shadowy systems. But just where Angola's siphoned-off wealth is stashed, and who owns it, are largely guesswork. All outflows are murky and circuitous, coursing through multiple secrecy jurisdictions from London and Lichtenstein to Delaware to end up mainly on Wall Street. That is the most likely destination identified by a team of economists of the US Federal Reserve, after sifting a lot of data in the opaque world of petrodollars (Higgins *et al.* 2006). 'Market-friendly' policies have meant exactly that: friendly to The Markets.

In addition, legally earned monies get special handling in Angola itself. Foreign corporations face low taxes and streamlined repatriation of profits – a fact attentively noted in a US government review of Angola's investment climate and in scorecards of 'economic freedom' by influential think-tanks in Washington DC (US Department of State 2010, Cato Institute 2010, Heritage Foundation 2010).

Domestic businesses, on the other hand, face different rules. They cannot accumulate at will; indeed any Angolan seeking to make serious profits has first to cut a deal with an appropriate politician. For the MPLA, any effort to accumulate beyond its purview is a matter of zero tolerance, for that could lead to autonomous bases of power. Hence there are no Angolans making money on a *substantial scale* outside the purview and participation of the political class.

MPLA statecraft includes control over media and the flow of ideas. But its main levers work through the distribution of money, status and official positions. The MPLA has used these levers, backed by brute coercion, to forge informal pacts among elites, to co-opt and neutralise adversaries and to keep the wayward on board. Despite rumours of mutual distrust – stories of VIPs at dinner parties who refuse to drink from bottles not opened before their own eyes or to eat anything not tasted first by their flunkies – the political class is holding together rather well. Pacts and patronage have been stabilising in Angola's case.

Indeed the party's centralised patronage system has thus far proven reliable for managing politics where centrifugal forces are strong and a lot of lootable wealth is at stake. That system enabled recruitment of former 'outsider' ethnicities into the military's top brass. Part of it operates through revenue sharing, particularly in sensitive oil and diamond zones, and through the allocation of official positions from which rents can be extracted. The domesticating effects of patronage are now apparent; with the exception of renegade militias in Cabinda, Angola is at peace. The argument that resources breed political chaos does not hold for Angola; mere plunder and oppression to the neglect statecraft has never been the MPLA approach.

Yet domestic acceptance of MPLA rule and developmental preferences is far from iron-clad. Indeed Angolans show hearty contempt for their politicians and for the big corporations on which they depend. Most Angolans express much greater confidence in their churches (BBC World Service Trust 2008). Public opinion polls indicate tepid satisfaction

with living standards, but at levels higher than in comparable countries (UNDP 2010).³ Such mixed popular sentiments appear to back efforts by activists in the emancipatory camp of civil society, in Angola and abroad, to keep probing the connections, embarrassing the rulers and stimulating public debate. Certainly in the blogosphere, and occasionally on the ground (such when the authorities forcibly remove peri-urban shackdwellers), activism continues.

But the authorities seem increasingly adept in using coercive methods, a modicum of public services and especially engagement in a constrained civil arena to keep the lid on popular discontent. They have begun working shrewdly to contain independent ideas and associational life. In the early post-independence years it tried to colonise civil spaces with Soviet-type monopoly organisations for women, workers, peasants and youth. But with the exception of the women's organisation these never achieved any real legitimacy.

Toward the activist non-profits the MPLA employs both sticks and carrots. Repressive measures include containment (for example, independent media confined mainly to Luanda if not terrorised by hired thugs or bought out by party associates), secret police infiltration and strong-arm action such as against low-income residents of prime urban land in Luanda and Lubango. Positive incentives include favours from the party's own non-government organisations, notably the Eduardo dos Santos Foundation (Messiant 1999). Patronage and perks offered through the party's *Specialty Committees* have kept many urban professionals away from political activism. Progressive parties and vibrant periodicals (digital and printed) are alive and kicking in Luanda, but faced with MPLA cunning they have yet to form a critical mass in political life.

Citizens might mount stronger counter-pressures if there were effective court systems and other channels for public complaint and transparent regulation. And indeed cases sometimes get hearings in real courts of law, with occasional advances in real justice. These episodes may help explain why a small majority of Angolans polled by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2008 claimed to trust the country's legal system (BBC World Service Trust 2008, slide 57, 'Trust in Different Institutions'). In March 2010, a provincial court convicted seven policemen of the unlawful killing of eight youth in a Luanda neighbourhood, although the court was at pains to exclude higher-ups from any culpability. Indeed, it appears that most of those at upper levels enjoy effective immunity from justice. In the same month, the government promulgated a Public Probity Law that would penalise corruption and oblige top public officials to declare their personal wealth at home and abroad. Anyone can denounce abuses by public figures, but the penalties for making false accusations are severe.

Will this and other impressive laws actually promote transparency, honesty and respect for human rights? The leadership has in any case shown no haste in beefing up the Prosecutor's Office (responsible for enforcing the new Public Probity Law) or in expanding a responsive judiciary. It prefers instead law-enforcement-lite. The Judicial Ombudsman's office, provincial human rights commissions and mediation centres may provide occasions for citizens to ventilate complaints. But none have mandates to enforce laws or impose legally binding outcomes. They help alert the authorities to problems without requiring them to find solutions. Yet because they reflect, however dimly, the principle that citizens may express grievances, those bodies cannot be dismissed out of hand. They might someday provide sites for the powerless to gain a little leverage over, or at least embarrass, the powerful.

But how much of the public realm will survive? Privatisation of public services is advancing, and that largely precludes the making of claims. Private providers, for-profit or not-for-profit, face almost no obligations publically to account for what they do or fail to do. In any case public services are never portrayed as citizen entitlements, but rather

as commodities you have to pay for, or beneficence you have to show gratitude for. Neoliberal norms blanket the land, crowding out anything smacking of an equitable social contract. Indeed, Angolans are captive to a curious fusion of neoliberal formulas and a coercive state. Under capitalism in many countries, corporate and state actors develop virtual ‘condominiums’ to govern the economy, mainly in pursuit of private gain and fiscal survival. In today’s Angola, this intimacy is extremely close, state authorities and large-scale business actors being effectively ‘joined at birth’. Because accumulation takes place chiefly offshore, the arrangement is outwardly oriented and driven by strong external incentives and logics of negotiated alliances with outside corporate, military and diplomatic actors. Subordinated to it are internal mechanisms that co-opt, absorb and control business and other private actors through suave coercion but especially neo-patrimonial (and familial/dynastic) relations.

Despite this political fortification, a few groups in the emancipatory wing of civil society keep probing for progressive openings. They can point to occasional modest domestic advances, such as agreements by public service providers and local-level governments to allow for public consultation and innovation in government services, such as schooling for children and range management for livestock. An experimental programme to shift more planning and spending powers to local governments raised hopes of decentralisation, but that initiative has recently been scaled back; fundamental decisions, and powers over public and private patronage, remain prerogatives of the President’s office. Meanwhile modest expansion of public education and health services suggests that the authorities might hold the line against elite and foreign donor preferences for fee-for-service approaches. But in successive national budgets, the allocations for health, education and other public services have consistently fallen below southern African averages, and much of that spending goes to foreign scholarships and medical treatment abroad. Private service providers, for-profit and non-profit, loom ever larger as commodification triumphs over entitlement-based services.

Angola’s elites call most of the shots domestically, and work smoothly and with real leverage abroad. They do so with increasing self-assurance – some domestic critics call it arrogance – thanks to the state’s huge spending powers. With oil output now surpassing that of Nigeria and oil prices still buoyant, the pressures to consume conspicuously have been intense and subsidies royal. That has left its mark in traffic gridlock, port congestion, tiny apartments renting for US\$15,000 per month. Demand has provoked supply through conspicuous investment: superhighways, shopping malls and gated housing estates. Meanwhile even the modest amounts earmarked for peripheral zones and for basic services remain routinely underspent, reinforcing spatial and social ‘asymmetries’, in the cautious word of an Angolan policy watchdog group (OPSA 2010).

Shopping abroad, an Angolan practice of long standing, is now common for Angolan state firms. The state holding company Sonangol has recently become a major if not dominant shareholder of Portuguese energy, banking and media firms. Maximising financial returns is not necessarily the point here; some observers see instead Angolan elites gaining satisfaction in lording it over the former coloniser in Lisbon. Portuguese officials in their turn never fail to express gratitude for the Angolan patronage and custom. Angola has become, after Spain, Germany and France, the fourth most important customer for Portuguese exports. Meanwhile Angolan corporate interests are also spreading their wings in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and elsewhere in the Gulf of Guinea.

Banks have worked overtime in Angola to sell loans and commodity credits. The Chinese have been hugely successful in this. Pressures to borrow are intense, yet do not always get

satisfied. Government hopes to raise US\$4 billion on the European bond market – billed as the largest-ever bond issue by a sub-Saharan African state – have been shelved for want of an international credit rating. Perhaps for this reason in 2009 the IMF finally got its foot in the door with a US\$1.4 billion loan to shore up government reserves and cushion a fiscal shortfall. Public borrowing undergoes no automatic translation into public investments; plausibly, significant portions of foreign loans depart Angola via ‘revolving doors’ to rich jurisdictions, though they remain on the debt ledger to be repaid, with interest, in the future.

Foreign borrowings and services are destined to keep building a classically high modernist, outwardly oriented model of development. The government’s *Anti-Poverty Strategy* may be studded with terms like social equity and even redistribution; but today that earnest policy paper, stillborn in 2005, has been quietly forgotten. Recently several leading Angolan development specialists – Fernando Pacheco, Cesaltina Abreu and Carlos Figueiredo – dismissed notions that Angola might achieve by 2015 even one of its eight millennium development goals – despite their all being achievable, as Figueiredo observed, given Angola’s financial capacities. The outlook is even more pessimistic, he concluded, considering the (political) weight of the forces and policies that prioritise those anti-poverty goals.⁴

In sum, today’s political economy resembles the colonial order of yesterday in a number of ways. A narrow state-based elite manages the economy in collaboration with foreign corporations to promote a development model that redistributes wealth upward and outward. Yet it looks different in two fundamental ways: first, governing elites are African and hold territorial powers legitimised by elections; second, national economic life is now far more dependent on consumers and producers in richer countries. Hence today’s paradox: Angolans have formal standing as citizens with votes as well as informal claims on their rulers, but they do not count for much as consumers and producers; indeed the development model has no place for most of them. Elites’ confusion of economic growth with development is, in the words of Fernando Pacheco, ‘painful and extremely penalizing for Angolans’.⁵

But what of the future? Some foresee a developmental state comparable to the Asian tigers. Today’s Angolan political class, and its subordinate business strata, clearly lack the modernising vision, drive and discipline found in such ‘developmental states’. Nevertheless, optimism persists. For the economist Paul Collier, ‘Angola, with its oil and its Atlantic coastline, could well prove to be another Malaysia’ (Collier 2008, p. 206). Others in the mainstream merely continue expressing breathless enthusiasm – ‘leaping from strength to strength’, ‘on the cusp of a real economic take-off’ – without conjuring up specific scenarios.

Hence the persistence of giddy anticipation among diplomats, aid managers and the business press, spurred by up-ticks in oil markets. In contemporary capitalism, after all, only the short term really matters. Yet specialists focused on the long term have begun telling a different story, one about falling oil revenues. ‘As its main oil fields reach maturity,’ a London business newsletter wrote recently, ‘production is likely to peak sometime around 2015, at which point its current and fiscal account surpluses are all but certain to disappear.’⁶ In short, Angola’s glittering coach may soon to turn into a pumpkin.

When a fiscal and debt crisis hits Angola, a political crisis will not be far behind. Among the urban salaried strata, especially those on civilian and military state payrolls, lifestyle and career expectations have kept on rising. So too have expectations among more peripheral members of the political class and their hangers-on at the receiving ends of patronage flows. Cutbacks to these flows would bring on an unpleasant downshift in expectations. Some would take harder hits than others. The basis of elite pacts could then become quite fragile.

Should those pacts come unglued and discontent gel into organised pressure, some politicians might think of revisiting the progressive political project the MPLA once talked about. The wish of the new Angolan bourgeoisie to prettify their biographies has already been satirised in the 2004 novel *The seller of pasts*.⁷ Today, members of Angola's bruised but resilient progressive camp, and its allies abroad, face the challenge of reinventing that political project.

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Note on contributor

Formally educated at Harvard, Princeton and the Institute of Social Studies, David Sogge first began visiting Angola in 1985. Among his published works is the book *Sustainable peace: Angola's recovery* (1992) and the FRIDE report *Angola: 'failed' yet 'successful'* (2009).

Notes

1. Regarding Portuguese language use, see 'Geografia da língua portuguesa', *Wikipédia*. Available from: http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geografia_da_l%C3%ADngua_portuguesa [Accessed 30 January 2011].
2. GDP data from <http://unstats.un.org>.
3. The data appear in the report's tables on 'Perceptions of individual well-being and happiness'; and on 'Civic and community well-being', both of which draw on the Gallup World Poll database. 'Comparable countries' here refers to the *Human development report's* category 'Low human development'.
4. 'Angola fica a meio do caminho', *Correio do Patriota*, 15 October 2009. Available from: <http://www.correiodopatriota.com> [Accessed 30 January 2011].
5. 'Ligações perigosas', *Correio do Patriota*, 25 January 2009. Available from: <http://www.correiodopatriota.com> [Accessed 30 January 2011].
6. Business Monitor International (2009). This prediction is consistent with that provided by oil experts, as reflected in Mitchell and Stevens (2008).
7. By the Angolan novelist José Eduardo Agualusa. Original title: *O Vendedor de Passados*.

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