Angolan election: MPLA party consolidates control and eyes role as regional power

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The ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) won a landslide victory in early September polls with 81.64 percent of the vote. It now has a reinforced majority of 191 of the 220 seats in the assembly.

The main opposition party, the National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), polled 10.39 percent, winning just 16 seats--down from 70 seats going into the election, when it held positions in the Government of Unity and National Reconciliation.

UNITA complained of election irregularities, but did not receive the backing of the United States and European governments or the National Electoral Commission (CNE). Consequently UNITA backed down, with its leader Isaías Samakuva saying that he accepted the outcome of the poll and praising the MPLA with the hope that it "governs in the interest of all Angolans."

The result pushes UNITA into the group of minor parties, which includes the Party of Social Renewal with eight seats, New Democracy with three seats, and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola with two seats. The turnout was 74 percent of around 8 million registered voters, from a population of 17 million.

This was the country's first election since 1992, when UNITA's leader at the time, Jonas Savimbi, refused to accept the result of the first round of the presidential poll and accused President Jose Eduardo dos Santos of cheating. UNITA then resumed fighting in a long-running civil war against the MPLA.

The MPLA has ruled Angola since the country gained independence from Portugal in 1975, operating a virtual one-party state aligned to the Soviet Union and Cuba. UNITA, which also has its roots in the fight for independence, was previously backed by the US, via South Africa, in a 27-year guerrilla war which killed half a million people and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure and only ended with the death of Savimbi in 2002.

With its increased majority, the MPLA is no longer compelled to include UNITA in the new government and it has signalled that some senior UNITA members of the government will be removed. Having over a two-thirds majority, the MPLA will have the power to change the country's constitution as it sees fit and has signalled that there will be changes.

Irregularities identified by Human Rights Watch (HRW) include media bias in favour of the ruling party, and severe delays by the Angolan government in providing funds to opposition parties.

Polling stations in Luanda experienced massive problems with the late delivery of ballot papers, which forced the CNE to extend the vote an extra day, though only 22 of the 320 polling stations that failed to open on September 5 due to lack of ballot papers reopened the next day.

HRW noted that state television news regularly showed MPLA events where motorcycles, televisions and refrigerators were presented as gifts to village chiefs, agricultural implements and bags of grain were given to villagers, and water was distributed from trucks that were flying the MPLA flag. HRW also logged reports of the provincial government distributing cars to trade union leaders known to be MPLA supporters.

All political parties eligible to run candidates, according to Angola's Electoral Law, should receive state funds for their campaigns up to three months before the poll. Parties received their funding only after the official campaign had started on August 5, one month before the election. The MPLA has almost limitless funds at its disposal.

An African Union team of election observers claimed that the poll was free and fair, but that the MPLA had benefited from unfair access to the state-dominated media. The European Union registered problems, but declared the vote was an “advance for democracy” and that people clearly voted massively for the MPLA. The US embassy also noted procedural problems, but congratulated Angolans “on their participation in this important step in strengthening their democracy.”

The EU and the US are prepared to turn a blind eye to election irregularities in Angola because they are now dealing with this former pariah state, which abandoned any pretence of Marxism following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Angola’s economy grew 24 percent last year, with $18.8 billion of oil sales completely controlled by the state monopoly Sonangol. Angola is now Africa’s largest, and the world’s eighth largest, oil producer--having overtaken Nigeria in August--and the MPLA government is keen to woo investors into its booming oil and diamond sectors.

In the first quarter of 2008 Angola became the main supplier of oil to China, with a 55 percent increase of its exports, overtaking Saudi Arabia. The US also imports 5 percent of its petroleum from the Southwest African state.

The Angolan oil minister, Desiderio Costa, has just been elected to chair the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) from January 1, 2009, with Angola having only become a full OPEC member in December 2006.

The MPLA government intends to integrate Angola more fully into the world economic system, and to consolidate its dominant position in South-Central Africa and the Gulf of Guinea. Angola has already increased its influence in Lusophone Africa and in the two Congos to the north, but is looking for a higher profile across Africa.

Foreign Minister João Bernardo Miranda recently attended the signing of the power-sharing agreement between Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, as chairman of the Southern African Development Community’s security committee--the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security (OPDS). The long drawn-out Zimbabwe negotiations gave the OPDS ‘troika’ of Angola, Tanzania and Swaziland a leading role, alongside South Africa, in the mediation talks.

Angola has been a long-time ally of the Mugabe regime, and both dos Santos and Thabo Mbeki are suspicious of Tsvangirai and concerned about the loss of regional influence and control that a Movement for Democratic Change administration would involve.

Angolan newspaper *Semanario Angolense* reports that Angolan and South African diplomats came to an agreement to reject Tsvangirai’s demand that Mbeki be replaced, forcing the MDC to change its position and to call for the mediation team to be expanded. The two mediators also jointly called for the lifting of EU-imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe, so removing Tsvangirai’s key negotiating weapon and obliging him to accede to Mugabe’s demands.

The negotiations have led to a warming of relations between Angola and South Africa, which had been chilly for some years following Pretoria’s support for the rebel movement UNITA in the civil war. Angola has also resisted the economic and political influence of South Africa in the region, and edged out companies like De Beers from its diamond sector once it was able to do so.

Massive Chinese investment has given Angola a degree of independence from the constraints of World Bank and IMF control, with promises of further infrastructure investment including development of the power grid.

Angola’s influence has also risen steadily in the West, in line with its growing oil exports, particularly in the US. Reuben Jeffery, the US State Department’s top economic adviser, recently had talks in Luanda about expanding investment in biofuel agriculture. The MPLA government also aims for self-sufficiency in vegetables, milk and grain production.

Despite election promises for greater distribution of Angola’s newfound wealth, the situation will remain largely the same for the two-thirds of the country who live on less than $2 a day, whilst billions of petrodollars remain unaccounted for and a narrow section of Angolan society becomes enormously wealthy.