



## Elections in Angola: Understanding the Result behind the Result

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Having hundreds of thousands of supporters marching on the streets, inaugurating colossal projects, organizing a multi-million electoral campaign run by foreign advisors, gaining international recognition and receiving 71.84 per cent of the votes may not signify an overwhelming victory.<sup>1</sup> For the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA henceforth), Angola's 2012 legislative election was not about convincing the convinced, but about confirming the MPLA's domination of Angola's political arena. As the results behind the result indicate, the party, in power since the country's independence, failed on that score.

As an estimated ten million voters went to the polls in early September, the debate was not whether the MPLA would win, but whether the MPLA would confirm the exceptional score of 81.76 per cent in 2008, ten years into an oil-fuelled post-war reconstruction. On the eve of the elections, the circumstances appeared to be most favourable: the former rebel group *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA henceforth), converted into an opposition party with the same name, faced internal quarrels and seemed unable to mobilise the population around its post-conflict political project. At the same time, a party that emerged as a potential contender at the regional level, the *Partido para a Renovação Social* (PRS henceforth), imploded after a successful 2008 election, joining the many smaller parties of the opposition with little leverage in the population, making an overwhelming victory of the MPLA inevitable.

Ten years ago, when the MPLA and UNITA signed the peace deal, the stars were aligned for Angola to enter its most prosperous decades. With an economy booming at an average of 14 per cent growth, a victorious party with a clear mandate, and a queue of foreign investors at the door, conditions were created to transform the face of the country, and pave the way for a long lasting domination of the MPLA. However, despite a decade of myriad investment projects announced with pomp and ceremony, the economy has seen little diversification, and the rural areas have

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<sup>1</sup> All results for the 2012 election used in this article are available at the National Electoral Commission's website: Abstention results were not communicated, and are an estimation of the author, based on official results.

seldom emerged from their misery. Meanwhile, in the capital Luanda, a minor strand of the population has evolved into a consumption-driven class whose priorities moved from securing basic needs to acquire the latest electronic gadgets in a matter of years. In a context where being a party member is a *sine qua non* condition for professional success, politicians as well as civil society leaders have been jumping off the opposition ships to benefit from state and private sector positions that remain conditioned to political affiliation. Countless are those who have joined the MPLA after years criticizing its policies. As the subtitle of Windeck, Angola's most popular soap opera goes, "rising in life has a price".

Outside the country, the MPLA's crafty multilateral diplomacy has secured close relationships with former enemies in Washington and Pretoria, and long-time friends in Lisbon and Brasilia. Systematically partial towards the MPLA since the end of the conflict, Western institutions and countries dismissed the importance of the election. Neither bothered sending election observers, seeing the election merely as a referendum on the MPLA's post-war project, and not a defining moment such as the 1992 election. Little attention was paid to signs of social tension and malpractice in the months preceding the elections. In October 2011, a protest was brutally repressed in Luanda, showing that the Angolan police have yet to learn how to behave in democracy. Violence broke out again at other times over the year, leading to an increasing mobilization of the suburban youth of Luanda in social networks ahead of the elections. In May 2012, a close ally to President dos Santos was named head of the Electoral Commission, raising questions about the impartiality of the electoral process. Late decisions made on the distribution of electoral lists and the registration of voters added to a general sense of disorganization. As a result, even if the government cannot be pointed to as being solely responsible for flaws in the electoral process, it evidently failed to create the best possible environment for the elections to be held.

On Election Day, there were few accounts of protests and cases of misconduct, though widespread according to local sources, went unnoticed in the western press. From Fidel Castro to Barack Obama, messages of congratulation flowed into Angola's Presidential Palace, seeing in the "free and fair" elections a sign that Angola was becoming a mature democracy. Nonetheless, despite the overwhelming success, neither the population nor the political observers consider the MPLA's electoral sweep a proper triumph.

There is no doubt that the MPLA still a major force compared to its rivals. The party won the majority of the votes in every province and never came close to being tailed by another party. The province where the second party came the closest to the MPLA was Cabinda, where the latter won 59.40 per cent of the votes and UNITA scored 24.46 per cent. As one MPLA politician put it to me: "we know the elections were far from perfect, but had they been perfect, we would have won them largely" (personal communication). Nevertheless, the party is constantly haunted by Eduardo dos Santos' fading age and the ruthless will of the new generation to take over. It is worth noting that the MPLA has already largely demonstrated its capacity to rip itself apart during the horrific repression following the Nito Alves coup in 1977.

The main protagonist of the elections, however, one to which the Angolan press did not devote much attention, was the abstention. The "second party in Angola", achieved exceptional results

even in the MPLA's historical strongholds. In Malange and Cunene, two historical pro-MPLA provinces, 44 per cent and 45 per cent of the population did not show up to vote. In Luanda, the province where the MPLA has the most pervasive influence in social neighbourhoods and where the population is arguably the most informed, abstention reached as high as 47 per cent. In Moxico, a heavily controlled area where the government's grip is comparable to the authoritarian one-party system of the 1980s, only 68 per cent of the population went to vote. In stark contrast, 87 per cent of the registered voters participated in the 2008 election.

The percentage of abstention in each province, ranging from 47 per cent in Luanda to 29 per cent in Cuanza-Norte, does not fit into any analytical framework. The numbers were as high in pro-MPLA provinces as they were in pro-UNITA provinces, so there is no way to connect abstention with community rejection. Abstention is therefore the object of different interpretations in Angola. While government officials dismissed the abstention as secondary, opposition members celebrated abstention as a defeat for the MPLA. A prominent Luanda pundit came up with the distinction between "technical" and "political" abstention, the latter being voluntary and the former being "occasional". João Melo labels as "technical abstention" those who did not renew their voting registration, excepting for those who did so for political reasons, and therefore fall in the "political abstention" category. He points myriad reasons for explaining the rise in "technical abstention", ranging from opposition pressures to Angola's typical *laissez-aller*. Although he acknowledges that "political abstention" may be seen as a protest against the MPLA, he fails to provide any explanation as to why voters protested by absconding their vote (Melo 2012).

The argument that the rise in abstention is a result of the population's growing scepticism against the system as whole also does not stand on its feet. UNITA, the second largest party, almost double its score, from 10.36 per cent to 18.66 per cent, proving that its political base is larger than the Ovimbundu ethnic group, a stereotype promoted to the collective imagination of Angolans through the MPLA's campaigns. More importantly, CASA, created only six months ago, reached 6 per cent. Other minor parties did not made out of their irrelevancy, limiting themselves to less than 2 per cent of the votes. How does a seemingly stalling UNITA and a newly arrived CASA amass almost a quarter of the total votes? And, perhaps more importantly, why did abstention claim almost as many votes as the MPLA, whose political capacity for mobilization seemed endless?

If the results tells us one thing, is that despite the MPLA's efforts to mobilise the population around the election, the commitment of those who joined meetings and marched on the streets did not follow through to the ballot box. The MPLA's project of post-war reconstruction, so highly praised by foreigners, may be effective in guaranteeing peace and a transforming society, but it fails in establishing a mature political arena.

In a trend that can be traced back to the early formation of party politics in post-independence Angola, the lines between political and instrumental affiliation to the MPLA have become increasingly blurred. In some hostile or remote regions, joining the party is an economic rather than political choice, leading to a vicious relation between parties and the society. The regions of Lunda Norte and Lunda Sul, that voted massively for the PRS in 2008, were deprived of state investments and had their traditional authorities replaced, while neighbouring regions supporting

the MPLA were rewarded with roads, and access to electricity and water. Everybody is aware of the political nature of state-led development in eastern Angola. As a community leader in Lunda Sul told me: “if you are not part of the MPLA’s activities, you will not have access to state services” (personal communication).

This has led many Angolan citizens, those who were not members of the MPLA – to adopt an instrumental relation with a party that tries to instrumentalise them. Many have not hesitated in joining the party meetings, becoming a member of party committees or even campaigning for the party, but only for the purposes of their public life. In private, they carry their own opinions and criticisms. The words of a schoolteacher in Malange echo those of the community leader in Lunda-Sul: “people are MPLA during the day and from the opposition at night” (personal communication).

Abstention and the rise of the opposition parties are therefore the result of the confusion between state building and party politics, which fails to generate a genuine political ground reflecting the aspirations of the post-war generation of Angolans. President dos Santos, whose authority has been strengthened in the 2008 constitutional revision, may go a long way saying that Angola has achieved peace only ten years ago and much has been done since then. He can say that the “state is here” in the hinterland provinces. He can put forward the slogan brought up by a Brazilian marketing advisor, “Angola: growing more and distributing better”. But, as the results behind the result indicate, for Angolans, it is more important to take part in the hierarchies and norms of the MPLA than to effectively place a vote for the party in the ballot box.

The great spectacle of elections must not obscure the fact that the political arena of post-war Angola remains significantly underdeveloped. If nothing is done against this, elections in Angola may become a ritual of legitimation for the MPLA, where the opposition plays the role of figurants, the masses trade their political passion for subventions, the international community cheerleads, and abstention sits as the elephant in the room.

## **Reference**

Melo, J. (2012) ‘A Abstenção “Técnica” e a Abstenção “Política” nas Eleições Gerais’, *Jornal de Angola*, 11 September.

## **Biographical Note**

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