

Angola 2017 Elections Short Note:

The Ruling MPLA party's attempt to Guarantee Continuity

EDITOR'S NOTE: This document is part of our series "Elections in Africa 2017", which for each country comprises of:

1. **A short note** (2 pages, 3 months before the elections)
2. **Possible scenarios** (2 pages, 2 months)
3. **Forecast** (1 page, 10 days before)



Angolans will be heading to the general elections in August 2017, the third since the end of the country's 1975-2002 civil war, and the fourth, after independence. Long-time leader, José Eduardo dos Santos, surprised many when he announced, on 2 December 2016, that he would step down at the end of his current term. Dos Santos proposed — and the ruling MPLA¹ party designated — João Manuel Goncalves Lourenço, the Defense Minister and the party's Vice-President, as the ruling party's flag-bearer in the August election.

This report seeks to analyze the MPLA's chances of winning the upcoming election.



Electoral System

- The 2010 Constitution abolished the direct election of the president
- The leader of the party that receives the most votes in the National Assembly becomes president
- The 220 members of the National Assembly serve 4-year terms
 - 127 are elected from closed lists by proportional representation
 - 18 provinces elect 5 members each, for the remaining 90 seats
 - The remaining 3 are elected by Angolans living abroad

Key Elements

Population: 26,523,202

Turnout: 59%

Registered Voters: 9.3 million

2012 Elections: The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) won with a landslide. It garnered 71.85% of the votes, winning 175 seats — well above the 111 needed for a majority. Second-placed National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the main opposition party, got 18.67%, which translated to 32 seats in the National Assembly. As a result, José Eduardo dos Santos remained in office for another 5 years, in an election the opposition described as marred with irregularities and low turnout.

¹ The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola

1. An “uneven playing field”

With firm control of the political landscape, thanks to experience accumulated over more than four decades of leadership, the ruling MPLA party's prospects of winning this year's elections appear close to certain.

Through outgoing President Dos Santos, the MPLA has maintained a tight grip on Angola's main institutions, showing little to no tolerance for political dissent, thus creating an uneven field in the process.

Growing discontent is slowly translating into hunger for leadership change, especially among the educated, urban youth, the result of the MPLA's grim records on human rights and persisting poverty for many Angolans (36.6 %), as wealth from oil revenues has failed to trickle down to the population. Millions of disenfranchised Angolans are thus more likely to blame the current leadership for their poor economic conditions, making the economy an important issue during the upcoming election, to the ruling party's disadvantage.

Yet incumbency advantages will enable the ruling MPLA to extend its 42-year rule. Its access to the country's resources, including the state media broadcast, the security forces and finances, will provide an unfair advantage to its candidates, thus guaranteeing its victory.

Moreover, having become accustomed to power and the financial rewards that come with it, the MPLA's top brass may not be willing to relinquish such a privilege. They may thus seek to cling onto power by any means, including creating a climate that would make it impossible for a free and fair election.

Angola's current political framework, characterized by the closing of the political space, casts doubts on the ruling system's willingness to set a level playing field, without which there cannot be “free and fair” elections. In March 2016, 17 activists received sentences ranging from two to eight years for “conspiring to topple the government” after they were found reading a book on how to topple autocratic regimes by peaceful means², while seven opposition activists calling for transparency in the upcoming elections, received 45-day jail sentences each, last month³.

2. High stakes for foreign direct investment and domestic and regional stability

The upcoming election holds high stakes, not only for Angolans, but for multinational oil companies and the country's northern neighbour, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where refugees fleeing violence in the Kasai region continue to flee to Angola daily.

The enclave of Cabinda, which produces the bulk of the country's oil, is still prone to instability, but the MPLA system has so far been able to provide security for foreign oil companies. The meeting at the Pentagon on 17 May between Minister of Defence — and probably the next president — Joao Lourenco with his US counterpart, Jim Mattis, and other stake holders, on the DRC situation means that Angola is expected to play an important role for regional stability, mainly in the tumultuous DRC. Both the US and other main international actors would rather support continuity in Angola, which currently only an MPLA's victory can guarantee.

Although the MPLA appears to have cemented its dominance on the political scene, its win would hardly be the reflection of Angolans' approval of the current state of affairs.

Lingering poverty, despite the post-war domestic stability, contrasts with the country's vast oil wealth. And as the price of crude fails to recover on the global market, the government may not have answers to the current economic woes, due to overreliance on the commodity [crude oil].

Feelings of discontent will thus continue to grow among the youth, many of whom are reported to have previously voted for the opposition. Such opposition, especially the National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), whose former armed branch fought dos Santos during the civil war, may not have the resources to turn back to an armed struggle, but could engage in civil disobedience, thus creating a climate of social unrest.

² The GUARDIAN, 'Angola jails 17 activists for rebellion after public reading of political book' Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/28/angola-jails-17-activists-rebellion-public-book-reading> (Accessed on 4 May 2017)

³ Mail Online, 'Angolan activists jailed over election protest' Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4437636/Angolan-activists-jailed-election-protest.html> (Accessed on 4 May 2017)