

Angola 2017 Legislative Elections: Possible Scenarios

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, 1 month before)
3. **Forecast** (1 page, 10 days before)



On 23 August 2017, Angolans will be taking part in the legislative election, which will see the leader of the party with the highest number of seats in the National Assembly becoming the new president. The ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) party and country leader José Edouardo Dos Santos, in power since 1979, has announced his intention to retire after his current term. Dos Santos' deputy in the party and the country's Defense Minister João Lourenço was chosen to replace the veteran leader as the new MPLA strongman, and president of the country, should the ruling party secure a win in the August polls.

The 23 August election is less likely to produce any surprises as the better-resourced and experienced ruling MPLA party is expected to win, having overwhelmingly triumphed in the previous three elections since independence.

Yet perceptions by the opposition of an unfair electoral process, coupled with the ongoing economic hardships, may trigger civil unrest in Africa's second largest oil producer.

This document looks at some possible scenarios and their impact on the country's security and social framework.

The MPLA wins, the opposition refuses to recognize the results

The majority (175 out of 220) of Members of parliament (MPs) seeking re-election belong to the MPLA and enjoy incumbency advantages. Their official functions allow them to get visibility, which will in turn translate into name recognition during the polls. This factor, coupled with access to the party's financial resources — at times difficult to distinguish from those of the state — put them ahead of the lesser known, opposition candidates.

The Angolan ruling system maintains a tight lid on political dissent, and has not shown any willingness to address the opposition's grievances regarding reform of electoral laws, without which elections can be neither free nor fair. Against this background, it is almost certain that the opposition will dispute results in many of the country's constituencies.

Yet this is less likely to cause any serious issues, as the security forces, who remain loyal to the MPLA, will be on high alert and willing to suppress any form of protests.

The MPLA loses but refuses to hand over power

Having cemented its rule during the past four decades, the MPLA appears to be the only force capable of mobilizing the necessary resources to mount a formidable campaign. None of the other five contestants¹ look likely to pull a win in the upcoming election.

In the unlikely event of a potential MPLA defeat, the ruling party would do whatever it takes to retain power, and may exert pressure on the National Electoral Commission (CNE) not to announce the results, and nullify the election altogether.

This would emulate the 2016 scenario in Tanzania, where the Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC) annulled the elections last October, citing irregularities, while the main opposition party, the Civic United Front (CUF), had declared victory in the archipelago's elections.²

Risk of civil unrest during Lourenço's first term?

The ruling MPLA party has all it takes to win the upcoming elections and extend its dominance over the country's politics, even as veteran leader Dos Santos steps down.

Angola has projected an image of stability since the end of the civil war in 2002. Yet the lack of widespread civil unrest should not be mistaken for an approval of the leadership's performance by many within the population. Rather, such a semblance of stability may be the result of the government/ruling party's suppression of political dissent and other forms of free speech.

Unequal wealth distribution may breed feelings of dissatisfaction among Angola's poor, who may see themselves as victims of relative deprivation. This, coupled with the lack of faith in elections as a genuine avenue for leadership alternation, can lead to social unrest, especially by the urban, economically-deprived youth.

Such unrest may not necessarily be the direct result of the upcoming elections, but an accumulation of years of socioeconomic grievances, especially among the many who feel left out of the country's oil revenue distribution or those whose views have long been suppressed.

The arrest in 2015 of young activists who had gathered to discuss Gene Sharp's book, "From Dictatorship to Democracy", may be a sign of a gradual political awakening among Angolan youth, who may eventually resort to popular uprising as the only way to demand and obtain meaningful change.

João Lourenço's first term could thus potentially be marked by civil unrest. Yet, representing continuity rather than institutional change, the new MPLA leader is expected to follow the ruling party's hard line. Any potential popular protests will thus more likely be suppressed.



MPLA presidential candidate João Lourenço' (Credit: folha 8)

¹ The second largest political party, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA, currently holding 35 seats in the National Assembly), the Social Renewal Party (PRS, currently holding 8 seats) The National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA, currently holding 2 seats), the National Patriotic Alliance (APN) and the Broad Convergence for the Salvation of Angola-Electoral Coalition (CASA-CE) coalition.

² BBC, 'Tanzania election: Zanzibar vote annulled after fight' Available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-34656934> (Accessed 25 November 2015)