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Angola's Parliamentary Elections in 2008

A COUNTRY ON ITS WAY TO ONE-PARTY DEMOCRACY

On September 5, 2008, Angola's citizens went to the polls for the first time in 16 years to elect a new parliament, attentively observed by the international community. Both local and foreign observers were highly sceptical, for there is hardly any tradition of democracy in this country which is still profoundly marked by the civil war that ended in 2002, having lasted all of 27 years. One of the crucial questions asked in the context was about how the UNITA would react to the result; after all, it had refused to acknowledge defeat in the elections of 1992. At the time, the victory of the MPLA, which came as a surprise to many, ushered in the bloody final phase of the civil war which, all in all, claimed the lives of one million people.

From 2005 onwards, the government had been taking legislative and administrative steps to ensure that the elections, which had been deferred repeatedly after they had been called, could be carried out correctly. A bundle of laws adopted in 2005 included a new citizenship act, a party act, a law regulating voter registration, another regulating the observation of elections, an electoral act, and a code of behaviour for elections.

The party act was intended to stem the flood of new parties that were founded after the 1991 peace agreement of Bicesse and the end of the official one-party state. In short order, 125 parties were founded at the time, of which only six remained after the others had been de-registered in the run-up to the elections of 2008. A great

deal of technological equipment was deployed to create a register of Angola's more than eight million voters, the most up-to-date system in all Africa, in order to secure the transparency of the elections and prevent multiple registrations.

Of the 8.2 million persons who are legally entitled to vote, 75% or 6.14 million went to the polls in 2008, which shows how fervently the people wish that the peaceful reconstruction of their country might continue after the devastation of the civil war. Appeals to go to the polls were made not only by the government but also by the political parties, civil-society representatives, and the extremely influential Catholic Church.

Having gathered 81.64 percent of the vote, the MPLA emerged the undisputed winner. Next in line came the UNITA at no more than 10.39 percent. The PRS received 3.17 percent of the vote, the ND 1.2, and the FNLA 1.11 percent. Consequently, the MPLA now holds 191 seats in parliament, the UNITA 16, the PRS eight, the FNLA three, and the ND two.

Both the origin and the present configuration of Angola's party landscape can only be properly understood against the background of the armed struggle for liberation and the cold war. At the time, there were three groups, the MPLA, the UNITA, and the FNLA, which violently strove to achieve independence for their country and hegemony for themselves.

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Founded in 1965 as a Marxist-Leninist workers' party, the MPLA constituted itself a socialist unity party and took over the government after 1975, when the country became independent. However, even after multi-party democracy had been introduced, the MPLA continued to perceive itself as Angola's sole political representative, although it did form a government of reconciliation and reconstruction with the UNITA and the PRS in 1997. Having seen several thousands of dissidents within its ranks murdered in 1977 and failed to take advantage of every opportunity to relax and renew its ideology, the party with its sound nationwide infrastructure is even today perceived as almost identical with the government and its machine.

Founded in 1966, the UNITA, properly speaking, is the only force opposing the MPLA, which it violently fought against from 1975 to 1991 in conformance with its self-perception as a movement for the total liberation of Angola. After it had refused to acknowledge the result of the 1992 election, the UNITA's struggle grew more and more violent, ending only when its leader, Mr Savimbi, was murdered. Elected in 2003, his successor, Mr Samakuva, has been endeavouring to reconcile the party's three wings, the foreign faction, the military activists, and the moderates who have been supporting the government of national reconciliation since 1997.

The Party of Social Renewal, the PRS, is mainly concerned with social justice, besides favouring a federative structure for the state. Having gone through many ups and downs in its history, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola, the FNLA, is now left with a mere three representatives in parliament. Formed by a merger of five minor parties, the ND (New Democracy) holds two seats.

The election in Angola and the events that preceded it aroused a great deal of interest at the national, regional, and international level. After the elections, numerous observers praised the quality of the technical preparations, including the modern electronic voter registration system, as well as

the high turnout and the lack of violence. Several were heard to say that the elections had been free and fair and/or transparent and credible. Mr Barroso, the president of the EU Commission, went so far as to say that an important step forward had been taken on the country's way to a multi-party democracy. However, criticism could be heard as well: some observers, though only a few, stated that the MPLA had been abusing and/or manipulating the state-owned media, and that compliance with international standards had been decidedly spotty. The fact that MPLA representatives had been conspicuously present in the immediate vicinity of the polling booths almost everywhere in the country was interpreted as an attempt at intimidation.

Actually there is no way in which the Angolan elections of 2008 can be regarded as free by international standards, nor were they fair in view of the unequal conditions applying to the individual parties. Moreover, the fact that, in these very circumstances, a party was able to win 80 percent of the vote and marginalize the opposition necessarily raises some concern about whether the country really deserves to be called a multi-party democracy. And yet, 5 September 2008 marks a positive trend in view of what the country has been through since 1975. Everyone took notice when elections were called after 16 years, and when the opposition admitted defeat and acknowledged the victory of its opponent. It is also remarkable that no more than three weeks elapsed between the elections and the constituent meeting of parliament. After the elections of 1992, five years went by before the UNITA's MPs were willing to take their seats.

It is only to be expected that Angola's President and his closest advisers will go on deciding all essential political matters in the future. Accordingly, it would be naive to think that Angola's new one-party system is more than mere democratic window-dressing.

Today, more than 4.5 million Angolans who were displaced within the country have returned home, and more than 300,000 have been repatriated from neighbouring coun-

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tries. On the other hand, the country's infrastructure still is in a desolate state, and landmines are thick on the ground, especially in the interior. However, the national economy began to move again after the war ended in 2002. Commercializing its natural resources, i.e. oil and diamonds, brought a modest boom to Angola which, among other things, boosts the reconstruction of the infrastructure, helping to build roads, bridges, and a new airport.

Nevertheless, those who actually benefit from this new trend in the economy are very few in number. Now as before, two thirds of the population are living below the absolute poverty line, all the more so because the country's leaders and their cronies keep most of the oil revenues for themselves, and because, as the IMF says, there is a lack of internal control and transparency in both the government and the central bank. Reinforced by the fatal consequences of inadequate economic policies and rampant corruption, all this has so far nullified the positive effects of low inflation and constant economic growth.

The global community's interest in Angola has been growing because of the country's economic development and its 2008 elections. This, in turn, motivated the Angolan government to increase its endeavours to alleviate poverty and promote reconstruction and reconciliation. Nevertheless, this is not the breakthrough which a country needs that has been sorely shaken by political instability and civil war. Moreover, given the result of the recent parliamentary elections, it is a safe bet what the outcome of the presidential elections promised for 2009 will be. And it is more than doubtful whether all this is reason for us to cherish hopes for Angola's democracy.