

## Arguments for democratic decentralisation in Angola: If challenges remain the same, why delay the *autarquias*?



Photo: Aslak Orre

Is the Government once again going to delay local elections and democratic decentralisation? The 2010 Constitution renewed the Angolan state's commitment to such a process, and the President of the Republic recently recognised the "unquestionable importance of institutionalising the *autarquias* in the current situation".<sup>1</sup> Yet, the current Government discourse emphasises "gradualism" and that "the conditions have to be prepared". Details of this reform – calendar, responsibilities, scope - are still unknown to the public. With pressure in society growing for the implementation of the *autarquias*, is reform any less urgent than when the Constitution was written?

We argue below that the basic challenges of local governance in Angola remain the same and that the *autarquias* can be a path to their solution – given there is political will for it.

### DECENTRALISATION – A PROCESS BARELY STARTED IN ANGOLA

In practice, decentralisation did not prove to be the panacea of all good things, as proposed by its most ideologically committed proponents. Recent scholarship on decentralisation in developing countries has focussed on *real life* experiences, and analysed how well decentralisation fares as a means to other ends. Summarised in a recent study, such ends could be *democracy, development, and security*.<sup>2</sup>

On all three accounts, these studies conclude

with some good, but usually ambivalent results. This may ring well with proponents of a "gradual" and "cautious" approach to decentralisation in Angola. The most important conclusion of these studies is, however, that countering ages of centralised rule is not a one-shot affair likely to yield immediate success. It entails a long process of institutional and organisational change that usually meets resistance from within the networks of centralised political power. That process has barely started in Angola.

**Aslak Orre**

Senior Researcher, CMI

**Nelson Pestana**

Senior Researcher, CEIC

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The likelihood that decentralisation can lead to democratisation, development and increased security is higher if its proponents learn from similar experiences – here we look at the example of Mozambique - yet in order to tackle the *concrete challenges* of each country. Below we summarise the principal problems of local governance in Angola today: lack of accountability, resource concentration, limited popular participation and representation, and finally, one-party dominance. We then address how *autarquias* can lead to improvements for each respective challenge.

#### FROM CENTRALISED TO LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The Angolan local governance system is one of the most politically and administratively centralised in Africa. There have never been any free local elections with universal suffrage. For most of the time since independence, the central level has controlled appointment of the local government politicians and civil servants: The President of the Republic and the central government appoints the 18 provincial governors and the 165 or so *município* administrators. The governors in turn appoint the administrators of the lowest tier, the *comunas*. During the last ten years, “traditional authorities”, or the local leaders usually known as *sobas*, have increasingly become tied to the local state administration and its governing party. According to one centrally placed source, the government has spent up to USD 100 million a year in “subsidies” to around 40,000 *sobas* and their assistants.

The current system ensures that local officials in the *comunas* and *municípios* are accountable

principally towards their hierarchical superiors, upon whom they depend for their jobs. The introduction of local elections is the principal mechanism for changing local officials' accountability: from upwards only and increasingly toward the local citizenry. A sound local democratic system should combine the two.

#### REVERSING RESOURCE CENTRALISATION AND REGIONAL ASYMMETRIES

An oil state's politics revolves around the unfair and unbalanced distribution of centrally controlled wealth. This is part of the much talked about “oil curse”. In Angola, most of the annual budgetary resources, investment budgets and human resources are still concentrated in the central ministries and in national “institutes” or “programmes”, as well as in the provincial governments, and the elite controlling it is restricted.

The resilient bias in favour of Luanda and the coastal areas thus perpetuates regional asymmetries in wealth and welfare. Wages in Luanda are on average four times higher than in other regions, and around three quarters of the state budget is spent in Luanda alone.<sup>3</sup> Since 2009, the *municípios* have become budgetary units on national budgets, but they have limited autonomy. Central offices still manage the means for investments in the *municípios*, such as in the case of the most recent and much cited “municipal programme for rural development and poverty reduction”, with an annual budget of USD 75 million in 2014.<sup>4</sup> At some point, de facto decentralisation needs to break the concentration of development in Luanda and its immediate surroundings.

#### LOCAL REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

After the introduction of the National Strategy for Deconcentration and Administrative Decentralisation in 2001, there were attempts to open local governance to local participation in public planning, such as with the “forums”, or councils, of invited representatives to discuss with the local administration in pilot *municípios*. A significant institutional innovation came in the 2007 legislation on the “local state administration” (decree 2/07). It now called such councils *Conselhos de Auscultação e Concertação Social* (CACS), and the ambition was to roll them out to all *provincias*, *municípios* and even *comunas*. It has not been fully realised. Defined as advisory organs to the local Executive, the CACS have no decision-making powers. Their meetings appear to put important issues for local citizens in the sectors of health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure construction up for discussion. Yet as long as the central control over budgetary means remain absolute, participation in the CACS cannot at best do more than to provide opinions. The few studies that we do have on the *município* level CACS point out many institutional shortcomings in both quality and consistency:

#### THE AUTARQUIA, ACCORDING TO THE 2010 CONSTITUTION

The *autarquia* is a form of “local power” – that is, distinct from central state power – with legal personality and considerable autonomy. It potentially manages and regulates a long list of public affairs, ranging from public welfare to infrastructure and policing, of a given municipal area (art.216-19). While the *autarquia* reform is still in need of specific legislation, the 2010 constitution provides the institutional parameters. There will be three main institutions (art.220):

- The **assembly**, a deliberative organ constituted by members elected through universal, free and direct local elections. It can make by-laws and local regulations.
- The **president** of the *autarquia*, the head of the (party-)list receiving the most votes for the assembly elections.
- The president appoints his “secretaries” to form the *autarquia* **executive**, collectively accountable to the assembly.

Furthermore, a part of the *autarquia's* financial resources should come from local income and taxes (art.215). The *autarquias* are “organised in the *municípios*”, the territorial units below the level of the province (art.218). The provincial governor is the central state's representative in the provinces (art.201), and he/she manages the Local State Administration. Notably, the constitution does not mention the *município* administration, as it exists today as a tier below the provincial government. Finally, article 242 states that the “effective institutionalisation of the *autarquias* depends on the principle of gradualism.”



- CACS are little known in the *municípios*;
- irregular meetings, poor record-keeping and publication of the CACS activities;
- executive dominance of the councils and the selection of their membership;
- participation and representation in the CACS is limited to pre-defined groups;
- bias in favour of the *sobas* and men in general;
- limited amount of critical voices and participation due to a culture of fear of authorities.

Some civil society activists in Angola defend the CACS as “schools of participation” before the *autarquias* are introduced. If some CACS actually serve that purpose in an embryonic way, there is also evidence that they are failing to fulfil that role. One must also take into account the limitations of direct participation, and that social exclusion occurs even with “interest group” representation.<sup>5</sup> A system of representatives usually negotiates popular participation in institutionalised democracy, with democratic representation ultimately hinging on the quality of electoral processes. There is a potentially fruitful debate between the principles of interest group representation (a “corporatist” system) versus an electoral system based on proportional representation or single-mandate constituencies. Yet, the Government’s *de facto* choice of the former remains unexplained. Furthermore, in most democracies, interest group organisations are *additions*, not substitutes, to organs of elected representatives.

### DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALISATION IMPLIES POWER SHARING

The MPLA party moulded and ran the local state administration during the one-party period after independence. The MPLA executive still largely appoints people associated with the MPLA party structures to the local state administration offices. After the end of the Government of National Unity (GURN) in 2008, few, if any, persons associated with the opposition have been appointed to senior local offices in the state administration. The prospect of local elections may imply that the MPLA can lose control over local offices for the first time since independence.

There have been many examples of dominant party democracies, but we know of no real democracy where one party wins local elections all the time. Ultimately, real democratic decentralisation implies the possibility of power sharing between different parties and forces in societies. The example of Mozambique alerts us to the difficulties, which Angola should avoid. Gradual reform there came to be a cover for the perpetuation of one party’s power, which stuck to a “winner must take all” formula, to the detriment of the sound development of local government institutions.

### MOZAMBIQUE: HOW GRADUALISM CAME TO MEAN FRELIMO DOMINANCE

At the outset of decentralisation, Mozambique shared many institutional characteristics with Angola due to similarities in their common colonial and post-independence history. The country created the first *autarquias* in 1998 – notably *only* in the cities and some towns.

Hence, to this date, the majority of the country’s citizens, and the overwhelming part of its territory, fall directly under the command lines of the “local organs” of the central state – to which the Frelimo leadership appoints all officials. Even in the cities, the central state have superimposed its prefects to compete with the locally elected politicians for authority.

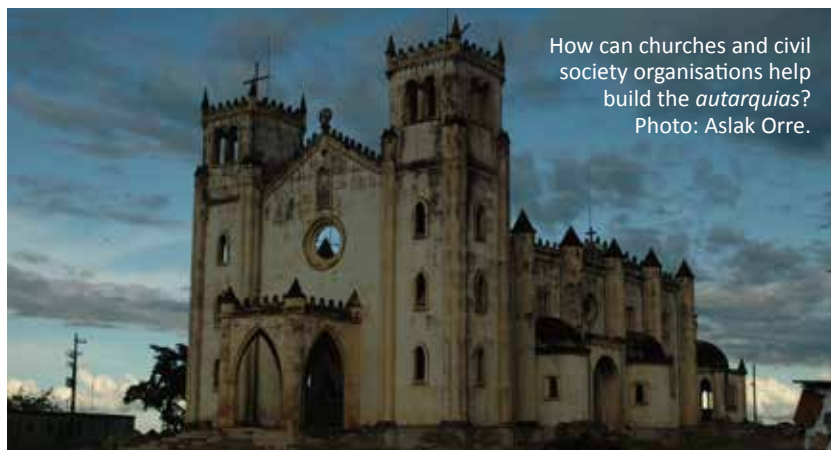
A system of “councils of local representatives” (*Conselhos Consultivos Locais*) was set up as an alternative to locally elected assemblies in the rural areas. In these, political parties are only represented along with other “interest groups”. Many studies show that in practice Frelimo controls these assemblies by handpicking the majority of the council members from local organisations close to the ruling party itself. Hence, also in the rural institutions of representation, opposition voice is difficult.

Renamo found that “gradual introduction” of *autarquias* meant that in the rural areas – where it has gained most votes in the general elections – local elections have been postponed into a distant future. With *autarquias* in urban areas only, Frelimo could concentrate its electoral efforts in the cities, where the general election results had revealed their strongest backing. Realising that “gradualism” implied that it could not easily convert its many rural votes into any executive power, Renamo increasingly lost interest in local elections and the *autarquias*.

The erratic process of decentralisation can partially explain the recent political impasse that has led to the resurgence of the Frelimo-Renamo war. Instead of creating openings for power sharing, Renamo found that the process actually meant the perpetuation of Frelimo’s power. It seems Renamo president Dhlakama became ever more convinced that the only way it could ever achieve something to show for was by winning central state power – either through the ballot box or by force. Meanwhile, another opposition party, the MDM, has successfully built an electoral following through running for office in the *autarquias*.<sup>6</sup>



Private residences in a Malanje *município*.  
Photo: Aslak Orre.



How can churches and civil society organisations help build the *autarquias*?  
Photo: Aslak Orre.

The Angola Brief series is an output of the CEIC-CMI Cooperation Programme for research in social and economic issues concerning Angola. The series aims to contribute research findings and policy recommendations to enhance public debate in and about Angola. This brief is based on data collected through an on-going research project on the Lobito Corridor jointly implemented by CEIC and CMI.

Editors: Alves da Rocha and Aslak Orre. Copy editor: Lisa Arnestad.

In the state budget for 2014, nearly USD 3 billion is set aside for the National Programme for the Construction of Administrative and *Autarquia* Infrastructures. It is unclear how much will actually be spent for the *autarquias* and how much aims to strengthen the *município* administrations. Coherence is now required as the Government continues to invest in the *município* administrations, even if the *autarquia* administrations will be the future.

**THE AUTARQUIA REFORM NEEDS PUBLIC DEBATE – AND IT NEEDS TO COMMENCE**

Ultimately, successful democratic decentralisation is not likely unless it is the desired outcome for a polity's most powerful parties and actors. As seen in Mozambique, there are many ways for the most powerful actors at central level to undercut or circumvent local autonomy. Such a game of "avoidance", instead of building responsible local government institutions, would be most unfortunate for Angola.

Perhaps the best antidote to such an outcome would be a widespread public debate – now – to ensure a serious and universally legitimate *autarquia* reform (such a debate has been somewhat botched recently). The debate would enable both the government and civil society actors to focus on and grab the opportunities associated with democratic decentralisation. They are:

- All citizens could test the institution of electing their local political leaders and holding them accountable.
- A motive for local resource mobilisation; a much-needed move away from the oil rent dependency.
- All citizens could run for office locally and aspire to represent her fellow municipal citizens in the *autarquia* assembly.
- The possibility of power sharing without necessitating central level regime-change.

Finally, gradualism and caution are sensible principles when introducing a large reform. Especially so since, in Angola, as everywhere, the municipalities are heterogeneous in their resource endowment and capacities. It makes good sense to allow for a gradual transfer

of responsibilities and rights depending on each municipality's preparedness. This will in no way preclude a *simultaneous* introduction of the *autarquias* all over the country. The important thing is to establish the basic institutional framework, thereby permitting the above listed changes to start taking root.<sup>7</sup>

**NOTES**

1. State of the Nation speech, October 15, 2013.
2. Connerley, E., K. Eaton, et al., Eds. (2010). Making decentralization work: Democracy, development, and security. Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers.
3. See Alves da Rocha, 2010. *Desigualdades e assimetrias regionais em Angola – os factores de competitividade territorial*. Universidade Católica de Angola, Luanda.
4. Official reference: Programa municipal integrado de desenvolvimento rural e combate à pobreza.
5. Cornwall, A. and V. S. Coelho, Eds., 2007. Spaces for change? The politics of citizen participation in new democratic arenas. Claiming citizenship. London & New York, Zed Books.
6. Weimer, B, (ed.), 2012. *Moçambique: Descentralizar o Centralismo - Economia política, recursos e resultados*. Maputo, IESE.
7. See Pestana & Orre, 'As autarquias em Angola: como evitar os erros dos outros', in Novo Jornal, February 10, 2014. [www.novojornal.co.ao/Artigo/Default/34156](http://www.novojornal.co.ao/Artigo/Default/34156)