

ANGOLA UPDATE

Cabinda separatism



Cabinda: a province sandwiched between Congo Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of Congo
Maps: Wikimedia Commons

**By Inge Amundsen, CMI
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Various separatist movements have been active in the Cabinda enclave in northern Angola since independence. During the 1970s and 80s, the FLEC guerrilla operated a low-intensity guerrilla war, at the same time as government suppression was heavy, due to the importance of Cabinda as an oil-producing province. Although never successful in gaining territory or any significant concessions, the guerrillas gained international attention with an attack on the Togo national football team in 2010, leaving two Togolese and the Angolan bus driver killed. Today, armed resistance seems to be replaced by an upsurge in non-violent protests, at the same time as violent government suppression continues. This indicates that the new president Lourenco and his administration will continue with human rights abuses to keep oil-producing Cabinda under control, despite some reported progress in the right to protest and in freedom of expression at the national level.

Background

With an area of approximately 7,290 square kilometres, the northern Angolan province of Cabinda is separated from the rest of the country by a 60 kilometres wide strip of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the lower Congo River. Communications with the mainland is therefore difficult, in particular over land. The town of Cabinda is the chief population centre, and the total population is 825,000, according to the latest estimate.

Most of the population is Bakongo, and their kin also live in the two other northern regions, Zaire and Uíge, and in the DRC and in the Republic of Congo. At one point an estimated one third of Cabindans were refugees living in the DRC, as the number have been fluctuating due to the political

situation in Angola, the seesawing civil war and oppression in the DRC, and by opportunities in the artisanal (informal) diamond mines in northern Angola.

Consisting largely of tropical forest, Cabinda produces hardwoods, coffee, cocoa, crude rubber, and palm oil. Phosphates extraction is planned. The product for which Cabinda is best known, however, is its oil, which has given it the nickname “the Kuwait of Africa”. Cabinda's petroleum production accounts for more than half of Angola’s output, and stems from considerable offshore reserves that were discovered under Portuguese rule by the *Cabinda Gulf Oil Company* (CABGOC) from 1968 onwards. Today there are also some new onshore oil wells in the southern parts of the province, starting production in 2013 and 2014 (Wood Macenzie 2020). Investments in the new onshore oil fields in Cabinda are seen as being insecure, however, due to falling oil prices and because Cabindan separatists have made it clear that they will not accept oil installations onshore without resistance.

Soon after Portugal handed over sovereignty of its former overseas province of Angola to the local independence groups, the MPLA party (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) took control of the new Republic and the MPLA’s armed wing FAA (*Forças Armadas Angolanas*) also took control over Cabinda. Cabinda was *formally* a separate Portuguese protectorate, however, that was never *explicitly* handed over to the new Republic of Angola. Cabindan independence movements therefore consider the occupation of the territory by Angola illegal.

Ever since Angolan independence in 1974, the territory of Cabinda has seen separatist guerrilla actions opposing the Government of Angola and its armed forces, the FAA. Already in 1963 was the first liberation movement formed, the *Frente para a Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda* (Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda, FLEC) with its armed wing (*Forças Armadas de Cabinda*, FAC). For much of the 1970s and 80s, FLEC operated a low-intensity guerrilla war, attacking Angolan government troops and economic targets, and creating havoc by kidnapping foreign employees working in the province’s oil and construction businesses. The hostilities were always ‘low intensity’, at the same time as the government suppression of it was heavy, due to the importance of Cabinda as an oil-producing enclave. The province has for years been under direct military administration, and the suppression of the separatists have also included the suppression of local voices like civil society organisations and traditional leaders.

Cabinda is one of the many very resource rich provinces that have sought independence from the main country is what is described as an important element of the ‘resource curse’. Rich provinces would be much better off without sharing the riches with a larger ‘mother country’, and we have seen secession attempts in several similar cases like Biafra/Nigeria, Zanzibar/Tanzania and the successful independence of South Sudan. Traditionally, Cabinda has provided for at least half of Angola’s oil revenues and is supposed to receive a bonus payment from the central government in recognition of its contribution to the national economy, but the Cabindans have always complained that they see few tangible benefits of the oil production.

The economic grievances are therefore at the core of the secession drive, even when history and geography is at the forefront of the ‘official’ dialogue. The petroleum industry offers few employment opportunities, and no significant attempts have been made to develop secondary industry in Cabinda on the basis of oil extraction. Besides, fuel for vehicles has to be brought in from Luanda and the cost of living in Cabinda is among the highest in Angola. Although the poverty rate in Cabinda is well below most other provinces in Angola (with 12.1%, only Luanda has a lower rate, both explained by the high level of urbanisation), Cabinda has a labour force participation below the national average and a higher unemployment rate. Furthermore, rural children in Cabinda (and Lunda Norte) are most likely to be out-of-school (WB 2020: 8, 56, 62, 82)

Ethno-religious-linguistic cleavages are also overlapping with and reinforcing the historical and economic cleavages in Cabinda, making the conflict deep and enduring. Historically, the FNLA was one of three ‘liberation movements’ fighting for independence from Portugal, and the FNLA was primarily based in the north, composed primarily of members from the Bakongo ethnic group.

However, much of the FNLA's traditional Bakongo constituency fled into Zaire during the war. Upon return, the FNLA 'elite' and many other Bakongo brought back with them language, religion, and organisations from the Congo, and ethnic, social, commercial, and organisational links remain strong (Martíns 2015: 121-122). Today, the 'old guard' of the FNLA party is still using French (which is the official language of both Congos) along with Portuguese.

Besides, the Bakongo are traditionally Baptist, mostly because the Belgians established Baptist missions in neighbouring Congo (Brinkman 2003: 197). A current offshoot of the Baptist church is the *Église de Jésus Christ sur la Terre par son envoyé spécial Simon Kimbangu* (Church of Jesus Christ on Earth, also called *Kimbanguism*). This is a large, independent African church with an estimated 22.5 million followers, headquarters in Nkamba in DR Congo, and strong support in northern Angola and in particular among the Bakongo (Sarró et al. 2008: 84). Although this church is officially recognised in Angola (Marques de Morais 2014), its transnational scope and large Bakongo membership add to the widespread Angolan perceptions of Bakongo 'foreignness'.

There is also an international element to the conflict. When the DRC (ex-Zaire) was ruled by President Mobutu, he had ambitions of wresting control of Cabinda from Angola, and FLEC did for years use territory in the DRC as rear bases from which to launch attacks into Cabinda (Global Security n.d.). Thus, French-speaking Angolans, Bakongo, Cabindans, and activists from the DRC has for years been seen as possible enemies of the state and therefore been subject to suppression.

Recent Action ...

The Cabinda separatist movement and the armed guerrillas has never had any noteworthy success in terms of military advances, territory, or in diplomacy. In addition to heavy suppression by an illiberal central government that has considered the separatist movement an existential threat and acted accordingly, the lack of success also stems from the fact that the Cabindan independence movement has been weakened by repeated, irregular fragmentation. Currently, there are at least four factions (DW 2013).

The most active faction on the international scene is *the Frente de Libertação do Estado de Cabinda* (same name as the original FLEC, but "state" has now substituted "enclave"). This faction was formed in the Netherlands in 1996 and is a "radical" faction, claiming full independence. It is a small group of activists, consisting mainly of students and exiles from Cabinda spread over Europe (Folha8 2017, IRBC 2013). They have an 'official website', which is just a blog, and a Facebook site.¹ They claim to have a government in exile (*Governo Provisório*),² led by President António Luís Lopes, "a Vice-President, a Secretary General, a Spokesperson, and Representatives in a number of European countries"), but this 'government' is not recognised by any other government or international organisation. It is more a dream than a reality.

Another faction, FLEC-Renovada, made a peace agreement with the Angolan government in 2006, and is now defunct. The FLEC faction called *FLEC/PM (Posição Militar, Military Position, FLEC-Mingas)* is one of the two factions that seems to have some protracted military presence on the ground in Cabinda. The FLEC-PM was probably responsible for the deadliest and most widely noticed recent attack (as they claimed responsibility): the attack on the Togo national football team in 2010. The team's bus was attacked on 8 January as the team travelled through Cabinda on its way to the 2010 Africa Cup of Nations tournament, two days before it began. Two Togolese and the Angolan bus driver were killed by machineguns (BBC 2010). Strategically, for a separatist movement in desperate need of international sympathy and internal coherence, this was a failure as the outcome was the opposite: international and national condemnation.

¹ See <http://cabinda.skyrock.com/>, and <https://www.facebook.com/CabindaFleccom-504102986444544/>.

² See <http://www.cabinda.org/english.htm> and www.cabinda.org/francais.htm.

Two new small groups were formed in 2018, the *Movimento Independista de Cabinda* (MIC) and the *União dos Cabindenses para a Independência* (UCI). These are but two of the handful of independence groups that has called for independence by peaceful means, like manifestations, agitation, and a referendum on the question (The East African 2019, DW 2020a, NaM 2021). There are also several blogs and a large number of Facebook pages on the issue of Cabinda separatism, history, and dialogue.

Over many years, controversies over armed attacks, turnout in manifestations, the number of arrests made, and the number of people killed due to the conflict has made it difficult to assess the level of conflict. For instance, according to a FLEC statement in late 2019, FLEC wanted to “intensify” the armed struggle in order to “force negotiations with Luanda”.³ In June 2020, FLEC-FAC claimed that it had killed 13 FAA soldiers on the border with the DRC, a fact not confirmed by the Angolan government (VoA 2020). In July 2020 they claimed that another five people died in between separatists and government forces, including two soldiers of the Angolan Armed Forces (DW 2020b). In September 2020, FLEC-FAC claimed that another attack by the FAA had left six people dead: three FAA soldiers, two on their side, and one civilian (Ver Angola 2020).

In contrast, in April 2019, the Angolan Minister of Defence claimed that the situation in Cabinda was calm and serene, and that “nothing happened” (DW 2019). In July 2020, the Angolan Minister for State Security admitted that the province of Cabinda did have some guerrilla action “from time to time”, but there was “no instability” but “effective peace” in the territory (Novo Jornal 2020).

One observer said one cannot trust the FLEC-FAC press releases on the number of dead and hurt. At the same time, it is obvious that the armed conflict is not over, as seen for instance in the reinforcement of military contingents in Cabinda, especially in the inland areas, and the constant patrols on the roads of well-armed FAA personnel (Raúl Tati, opposition MP, in DW 2020c).

... and Reaction

Despite the claims of the FLEC-FAC and FLEC/PM of military attacks from both sides, there has been far less armed activity in Cabinda over the last few years, but a significant upsurge in non-violent protests. Even FLEC-FAC, the oldest separatist movement, which still claims to maintain an “armed resistance” against the central government and to have killed several FAA soldiers over the last few years, seems (also) to have embraced additional, peaceful means. In June 2020, the FLEC leader for instance called for the creation of a “roundtable” between representatives of Cabinda and Angola, for direct negotiations, and for international mediation (Plataforma 2020, DW 2020b), and in early February 2021 the FLEC-FAC “political-military leadership” called on President Joe Biden and the UN to organise a referendum on “the free and just self-determination of Cabinda”, according to a statement (Angola24Horas 2021).

This seems to signify that the action has moved from an armed struggle to civilian protests. There are also, however, strong indications that the government suppression of the civilian, peaceful protests is heavy. For instance, in January 2019, there was a large protest march in Cabinda, and dozens of protesters and their leaders were arrested as well as the use of “violent and excessive use of force by state security forces” to break up the march, according to *Amnesty International* (Amnesty International 2019a, 2019b).

According to HRW,

Between January 28 and February 1, 2019, police arrested 63 Cabinda pro-independence activists ahead of an announced protest to celebrate the anniversary of the signing of the 1885 treaty that gave Cabinda the status of a protectorate of former colonial power Portugal. Many of the activists were members of the *Movimento Independista de Cabinda*

³ RFI (Radio France International), 28 February 2019: *Cabinda: FLEC anuncia "intensificação da luta armada"* (www.rfi.fr/pt/angola/20190228-cabinda-flec-fac-anuncia-intensificacao-da-luta-armada).

(Independence Movement of Cabinda), a peaceful separatist group that wants independence or autonomy from Angola.

In March, police arrested 10 more activists who had gathered in a square in Cabinda city, to demand the release of fellow activists. Also in March, after visiting the province, members of the main opposition party, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), accused Cabinda authorities of intimidating and repressing residents of the province (HRW 2020a).

According to Amnesty,

The heavy deployment of security personnel armed with batons and guns – and the subsequent excessive use of force against peaceful protesters in order to prevent this planned protest - is yet another indication that authorities are not prepared to tolerate dissent (Amnesty International 2019b).

In January 2020, according to Human Rights Watch, state security forces rounded up activists from their homes in Cabinda after they attempted to hold a protest in December 2019.

In violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Angola is a state party, authorities refused all the requests by Cabinda pro-independence activists to peacefully assemble. Where protests and marches took place, police violently interrupted them, and illegally detained the participants (HRW 2021a).

In June 2020, three more political activists were arrested. According to their lawyer, they had tried to affix posters with the words “Down with the guns, down the war, Cabinda is not Angola, live the dialogue”, whereas the police charged them with rebellion, subversion, and criminal association and has held them in custody since their arrest (NaM 2021). According to Human Rights Watch, plainclothes police officers arbitrarily arrested the president of the separatist group *Union for the Independence of Cabinda* and his vice president after they displayed leaflets of the organization in the streets of the city of Cabinda. As of early December, the two men were still detained at Cabinda Province Civil Prison under concerningly inhumane conditions, despite calls for their release (HRW 2020b).

On 1 February 2021, on the 136th anniversary of the Simbulambuco agreement (between Portugal and the kings of Cabinda, which the separatists regard as proof that the enclave is separate), the Angolan police arrested a group of young people who intended to make a manifestation outside of the Embassy of Portugal in Luanda (they were released a few hours later) (Novo Jornal 2021, DW 2021).

The violent crack-down of protests in 2019 and 2020 and the arrests made in Luanda in February 2021, indicates that in contrast to other parts of Angola, where there has been some progress in the right to protest and in freedom of expression, the situation in Cabinda remains tense, with protests and arrests on an irregular basis.⁴ According to Human Rights Watch’ summary of the human rights situation in Angola for 2020,

Some progress has been made in terms of respecting the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in the country. However, this progress did not extend to the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda, where the crackdown on peaceful protesters and activists has continued (HWR 2021).

According to Jeovanny Ventura, a long-time Cabinda independence activist,

⁴ TRT World, 20 May 2019: *Cabinda- a little known oil-rich region- seeks independence from Angola* (<https://www.trtworld.com/africa/cabinda-a-little-known-oil-rich-region-seeks-independence-from-angola-26799>).

What the Angolan state is doing to us is persecution. The authorities treat us as terrorists. [...] And it has not improved under João Lourenço; everything we organise always ends up with supporters being taken into detention (Africa News 2019).

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