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## Angola after dos Santos: Change and continuity

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This publication aims to identify and discuss several political, social, and economic dynamics during the first four years of the Lourenço presidency and assess the arguments suggesting continuity, and those for change, in the governance of Angola. It aims as well to identify its status in this regard now, one year before the next general elections to be held in August 2022.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Ever since its 1975 independence – through the civil war that ended in 2002, the long oil-boom of the 2000s, and up until today – Angola's state formation has been dominated by one hegemonic party, the MPLA. It has been portrayed as a particular form of petro-state (Karl, 1997) and as an archetypical case of the oil curse (Ross, 2012), a portrayal particularly visible during, and coinciding with, the oil boom in the years 2004–2014. During the long reign of José Eduardo dos Santos (1979–2017), and especially in the last twenty years of his presidency, the country was characterised by a parallel institutional system centred around the omnipotent President and his family and crony capitalist network (Soares de Oliveira 2015). Yet from 2017, at the outset of the presidency of João Lourenço, there were expectations, hope, and even cautious claims, of certain transformative reforms towards a more open and pluralistic state system – summed up in the yearning for *mudança*, that is, *real* change (Pearce et.al, 2018). The previous president and his family were quickly obliged to give up their unfettered power over party and state, as well as the economy. President Lourenço made a public commitment to root out corruption and set Angola on a course of broad-based development, comparing himself at one point to the Chinese economic reformer Deng Xiaoping.<sup>2</sup>

This article aims to identify and discuss several political, social, and economic dynamics during the first four years of the Lourenço presidency and assess the arguments suggesting continuity, and those for change, in the governance of Angola. It aims as well to identify its status in this regard now, one year before the next general elections to be held in August 2022.

In order to address this subject, we focus on the following specific questions:

- What are the political implications of socio-economic changes, most importantly the post-2014 crisis brought about by the decrease in oil prices and oil production, for the composition of power groups (that is, rent-seekers vs. non-oil entrepreneurs)? What other domestic political effects did the economic crisis have?
- Have social actors like civil society, academia, the media, advocacy groups, and opposition political parties managed to challenge MPLA's hegemonic power?
- What are the major developments within the ruling party, especially in view of Lourenço's dispute with his predecessor?
- Regarding what we now see from both Angolan government and society in general, what can we expect for the 2022 national election process and beyond?

This article is but an attempt to discuss these issues, which we will continue studying throughout the life of the Angolan-Norwegian research programme.

<sup>1</sup> This article is partly based on a series of webinars during March-May 2021, as part of a social research programme financed by the Norwegian Embassy in Luanda (<https://www.scanteam.no/angola-norway-research-webinar-series/>). Throughout the article, we have made frequent references to statements made during this webinar series, yet the overall interpretation is that of the authors.

<sup>2</sup> 'President João Lourenço sees himself as an Angolan Deng Xiaoping', The Economist, Dec 1, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/12/01/president-joao-lourenco-sees-himself-as-an-angolan-deng-xiaoping>

## 2. TRANSFORMATIVE OR TRANSACTIONAL CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP AT THE CRITICAL JUNCTURE?

When dos Santos appointed Lourenço as his successor, most observers expected that little would change, and that Lourenço would loyally carry on with business as usual, with the ex-president calling the shots in his role as leader of the ruling party. There were early signs that Lourenço had other intentions, which raised the question whether we were witnessing a *transformational* rather than a *transactional* change of leadership. According to MacGregor (2003), a *transactional* leader is not aiming at deep changes. He is more concerned with following existing rules than with changing the structure of the institution he is set to rule (being a company or a country). *Transformational leadership*, on the other hand, is creating a vision of something new, working with subordinates to identify the needed changes, and guiding the change through inspiration and motivation. Transformative changes may often occur when a country finds itself at a *critical juncture*, understood as ‘moments of relative structural indeterminism when wilful actors shape outcomes in a more voluntaristic fashion than normal circumstances permit ... these choices demonstrate the power of agency by revealing how long-term development patterns can hinge on distant actor decisions of the past.’ (Mahoney 2002:8).

One may argue that Angola stood at one such critical juncture in 2017, given the dramatic change from a decade of extraordinary economic growth to a deep macro-economic crisis, coinciding with the end of an almost four decades-long personalistic presidency. Would Lourenço be willing to act with determination and take strategic decisions independently of dos Santos’ personal power and the regime he had established, that is, to exercise *transformational leadership*? A critical juncture is often emerging when a country is going through an inter-generational transfer of power. Huntington (1968:14) claims that the inter-generational transfer of power from first- to second-generation leaders who have been living “a lifetime in the shadows”, offers a critical test of the reproductive capacity of an entrenched political order, as exemplified by the change from Stalin to Khrushchev, or from Mao to Deng Xiaoping. Applied to Angola, the shift from dos Santos to Lourenço can be seen as inter-generational, even though the age difference between the two is not so large given the longevity of the dos Santos regime. If it was ever on his agenda, would Lourenço *dare* or *manage* to make a similar paradigmatic change in post-dos Santos Angola?

This discussion depends on whether there were social forces at play that could challenge the absolute hegemony of the Angolan party-state construction in a post-dos Santos regime. Schubert (2017) offers a good point of departure for this discussion in his fascinating study of how hegemony has been reproduced in dos Santos’ Angola in a context of quite limited popular legitimacy, but still with relatively little physical coercion being applied. He shows how dominance and political legitimacy are negotiated in the Angolan authoritarian context,<sup>3</sup> and the characteristics and limits of hegemonic dominance.

Building on Schubert’s analysis, we ask if Lourenço could risk releasing a crisis of hegemony if he were to open up the system and reduce its authoritarian traits? Could that possibly provoke new social and political forces to start constructing a real political alternative? Gramsci called this ‘creating the new’, which in Angola could have the potential of resulting in a more pluralistic polity. According to Przeworski (1991) and building on Gramsci’s terms, a pro-democratic regime transformation requires something more than sporadic social protest. It will only enter the agenda when civil society and other political forces manage to organise a ‘counter-hegemonic bloc’ in a situation of failing regime legitimacy.

In Angola, this would probably only occur with the de-construction of the “culture of fear” that – as highlighted by Schubert – ‘impedes (people) from overly political engagement’. As he says: ‘The question why Angolans do not do more to contest the regime is one that baffles many observers of Angola.’ We will return to the question whether there has been any change in this regard.

<sup>3</sup> Schubert categorises the regime as neo-authoritarian.

Events beyond the control of the new president provided the impetus for the reform(ist) agenda proposed during the early Lourenço regime: the catastrophic macro-economic situation caused by low oil prices and falling petroleum production obliged Lourenço to take a less assertive position, particularly on the international stage, compared to dos Santos. Cautious steps, or perhaps carefully designed measures, were taken to highlight the problem of corruption and the opaque character of state institutions, although there are serious doubts about the depth of these measures. A USD3.7 billion credit facility was signed with the IMF, the biggest such credit ever obtained by an African state, obliging the government to allow some new elements of fiscal transparency and scrutiny over state finances and more independence of the Central Bank – but also here the effects of the changes remain uncertain. After revelations about the details of her financial dealings made international news, a judicial process against Isabel dos Santos, the former President's daughter, was initiated. Was this an expression of a strategic decision to combat the deeper corruption structures in the country, or simply an effort to improve the international image and re-entrench the country's elite by sidelining the dos Santos family?

### 3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS WITH POSSIBLE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The post-war period from 2002 to 2014 was Angola's "golden decade", a term most likely coined by Alves da Rocha, meaning rapid economic growth with the *pax dos Santos*, combining his brand of authoritarian political stability with the end of armed conflict.

Despite drastically falling oil prices since 2014 (from a 3-year average of nearly USD 100 per barrel before October 2014, to less than USD 50 after)<sup>4</sup> and falling production (from 1,8 bpd to 1,2 bpd), oil exports persistently represent around 95% of the country's export value and half of its GDP. The GDP evolution in Angola tends to follow oil price variations almost automatically (Fjeldstad, Orre & Paulo). GDP in 2020 stood at around two thirds of the 2014 value, if measured in current USD. It goes without saying that this has a tremendously negative impact on the macroeconomic and social situation in the country.<sup>5</sup> This dramatic worsening of the country's fiscal situation is also quite probably the main driving force behind any change in political terms that is highlighted throughout this article in the post-dos Santos Angola.

There is a significant change underway in the composition of petroleum companies in the country, away from the increasingly sceptical major US and UK corporations such as Chevron, Exxon Mobil and BP, and towards European companies who have also long been in Angola: French Total is presently the dominant actor, acquiring new blocs and now in control of 45% of the production. Italian ENI and the Norwegian Equinor also seem willing to stay, although only the former seems willing to invest. This change has consequences for Angola's increasing foreign policy priorities turning towards southern Europe and the EU (see chapter 6).

When it comes to the national petroleum regime, a potentially important change is that Angola since 2019 has a regulatory body, National Agency for Oil, Gas and Biofuels (*Agência Nacional de Petróleo, Gás e Biocombustíveis* – ANPG). Until its creation, Sonangol had both commercial and regulatory authority. This impingement on Sonangol's power is also confirmed by the fact that – according to observers familiar with the sector – Angola now has "a real minister of petroleum", a position that used to be quite marginal compared to "the Sonangol state" that existed under dos Santos.<sup>6</sup> Even though these changes in regulatory authority, it is important to stress it operates under the command of the ruling party and the president, instead of under an independent authority.

A related change that has been noted during recent years is that the Lourenço regime is more open to negotiate the degree of local content with foreign investors, particularly in the petroleum sector. Under dos Santos, the participation of regime-selected local partners was non-negotiable, often with quite shady arrangements being imposed on foreign investors. This change is partly driven by the weakening of the Angolan negotiating position since 2014: without the capital to invest in its oil industry maintenance and development, Angola sorely needs foreign capital to finance it. It can no longer impose the same conditions as during the heyday of the petroleum boom. This last observation highlights the caution we pointed to in the introduction about the possibility of transformative reforms toward a more open state.

Angola's petroleum sector is clearly in decline, and the national oil production will almost certainly never return to its previous production level. It peaked in 2010 with slightly over 2 million bpd of crude oil production, expected to stabilise on half that level in the coming years. Most observers claim that the de-carbonisation of the world economy will have serious consequences for a petroleum-dependent country like Angola. The latest IEA Report forecasts that the price of oil will fall to 30

4 <https://www.macrotrends.net/2516/wti-crude-oil-prices-10-year-daily-chart>

5 See CEIC's Relatório Económico 2020 for the most recent trends.

6 Reflections about the oil sector and the need to start planning for a "post-petroleum" era are based on two interventions at our 11 March 2021 webinar, by Benjamin Augé of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) and Rebecca Engebretsen (OECD official, speaking in her private capacity).

USD/barrel in 2030, and to 24 USD in 2050.<sup>7</sup> The forecast does not bode well for Angola, given the 2021 IMF estimate that Angola needs an oil price of 55 USD/barrel for fiscal breakeven.<sup>8</sup> Change is inevitable, but in practice Angolan decision-makers seem to ignore it.

The question is how to manage the structural decline of Angola's oil sector and move into a post-petroleum future without the fiscal space of the oil boom years. This accentuates the long overdue diversification and greening of the Angolan economy. In theory, this imperative is probably understood by the government, as illustrated by Angola's late ratification, in 2019, of the Paris climate agreement. But there are very few signs of any practical follow-up steps. The country's leading independent economist Alves da Rocha recalls that Angola's first president Agostinho Neto already proclaimed the need for diversification at independence in 1975. 'Forty-five years later, the economy does not even show faint signs of diversification,' he claims, in spite of this being part of the official discourse as the "panacea" for the response to the country's economic problems since the peak of the oil boom. Still, such considerations seem to be mere rhetoric.<sup>9</sup> In spite of having "a green deal", the transition to green energy, and a low-carbon society all be high on the agenda of the EU-Angola ministerial policy dialogue in 2020 (see ch. 6), EU officials in Angola recognise that they can hardly see this issue leading to any practical steps.<sup>10</sup> In his speech to the COP26 Summit in Glasgow in November, President Lourenço stipulated that "green" sources would increase from the present 62% to 70% of the energy mix by 2025, while he referred to a National Climate Change Strategy focusing on reaching the Paris Agreement goals by 2035.<sup>11</sup>

In our webinars in which both members of academia and of civil society participated in significant ways and with broader input, we had an interesting discussion about the reasons for this lack of practical steps towards a more diversified economy, in which many highlighted the strong inter-dependence between economic and political factors. 'Could it be that this (lack of diversification) has to do with a heavy resistance against the emergence of alternative capitalist groups – including foreign investors – that could lead to a limited political control by the MPLA elite?' asked Didier Péclard, political scientist from the University of Geneva, at the 11 March webinar. He added that the existing crisis could potentially be a force for change in this regard. Benjamin Augé (IFPRI) responded that this pattern is quite similar to the one seen in other African oil-producing countries, where the prominent power groups intend to make sure that the oil sector is capable of financing public administration, assuring political loyalty from public servants, and avoiding interference from other business sectors.

The consequences of the macro-economic changes described above in terms of the social situation in Angola, further aggravated by the Pandemic, are captured in the *Afrobarometer*. It shows that two thirds of the population live in poverty and one third in extreme poverty.

Rafael Marques, a harsh critic of dos Santos who has been relatively positively inclined to Lourenço's government (see ch. 4), has also been very critical of what he has termed 'the redundantly failed' macro-economic model adopted by economy minister Manuel Nunes Junior's team, accepting the conditions of the large IMF credit with the implication of recessive economic policies.

7 <https://www.iea.org/reports/net-zero-by-2050>

8 <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Energy-Transition-Could-Doom-Africas-Oil-Producers.html>

9 LUSA / Ver Angola, 23.07.2020. When we were looking for somebody to speak with about prospects for a greening of the economy in Angola during our webinars, we simply could not find anybody who had any considerations to offer in that regard.

10 This issue has been discussed as part of an evaluation of the EU's development cooperation with Angola, in which one of the authors has been involved.

11 *Jornal de Angola*, 3 November 2021. Angola has one of Africa's largest potentials for hydro power, potentially increasing the present production capacity of 1,200 MW to approximately 7,000 MW ([iea.org/countries/angola](http://iea.org/countries/angola)). Today it is hard to envision the investment sources for such a development.

## 4. RE-COMPOSITION OF POWER GROUPS UNDER LOURENÇO

Before José Eduardo dos Santos broke the news that he had handpicked him as his presidential successor for the 2017 elections after 38 years of an increasingly omnipotent presidency, João Lourenço had not been the most anticipated choice. Some observers had contended that Vice President and ex-Sonangol CEO Manuel Vicente was the most logical successor to the throne, while others expected dos Santos to attempt to manoeuvre his son into position to be his heir. Lourenço had, among other important posts in the country's party and state, been the ruling party's Secretary General. However, he was side-lined by dos Santos when talking openly about succession after the end of the civil war in 2003. In 2013, he was re-admitted to a key position, then as Minister of Defence, and thus allowed to build powerful alliances with key generals. He had his own military training at the Lenin Military-Political Academy in the Soviet Union, from the Marxist-Leninist era of the MPLA.

The general expectation, probably also from dos Santos himself, was that Lourenço would be a loyal successor, who would let his predecessor maintain much of his real power from behind the scenes. Inside party observers suggested that the choice of Lourenço would be a way at least to keep military loyalty to the regime, as military leaders have showed a thin dissatisfaction with the civilian drivers of the regime, probably due to the crisis. Dos Santos stayed on as leader of the MPLA party until one year after the elections, but then surprisingly lost effective control of the hierarchy in the country quite quickly: the party, the military and security apparatus, and not least the country's economic power centre, Sonangol, and with it the entire oil sector. Only a few months after his inauguration, João Lourenço fired dos Santos' daughter Isabel as Sonangol chair, and fired dos Santos' son José Filomeno ("Zenu") as the administrator of the Sovereign Wealth Fund (*Fundo Soberano de Angola*). The impression was that the new President might have wanted, if not a *tabula rasa*, at least to reconstruct the country's economic and political power system with his own trustees and with the dos Santos family safely out of the way.

It was the end of the oil boom, which occurred before dos Santos left the presidency, that also in effect removed the basis of the former President's unrestricted power. As pointed out by Mathias Alencastro: 'The collapse of the oil price offered an opportunity for the MPLA cadres to challenge the president's succession plans.' And once Lourenço had established himself in the Palace, he continues, he 'caught dos Santos off guard and turned the Angolan institutional apparatus upside down. In a matter of months, Luanda politics became unrecognizable.' Alencastro, in an article dated February 2018, claimed that the entry of Lourenço represented an evolution from a non-negotiated hegemony with presidential absolutism to what he then termed a 'negotiated hegemony', but without significantly changing state-society relations away from their authoritarian and militaristic characteristics.<sup>12</sup> After all, many features of Luanda politics were not so unrecognisable under Lourenço. It can be suggested that the last years of Dos Santos presidency were a bit more permeable for the opposition parties and civil society to appoint some critics to the regime than the last two years of Lourenço presidency. This seems due more to the weak position of the former than his willingness to open the system.<sup>13</sup>

Other observers noted a cautious optimism in the early phase of the Lourenço era but with increasing doubts about the prospects for change. There has been no improvement of ordinary people's lives, popular dissatisfaction has been met by increasing police repression (particularly of human rights defenders), and – perhaps most important – local elections that Lourenço had promised for 2020 were once again postponed without any fixed date. As we are moving towards the end of Lourenço's first presidential term, there seems to be a rather broad consensus that "hyper-presidentialism" is there to stay for the moment, with a change of the façade – or perhaps, the faces – but not of the system.

<sup>12</sup> Mathias Alencastro: "Angola under Lourenço. Towards a Negotiated Hegemony" *Notes de l'Ifri*, February 2018. When we are quoting Alencastro later in the article based on views he expressed in the 2021 Webinar, it may show that he, like other observers, perceive a significant difference between the 2018 and 2021 version of Lourenço.

<sup>13</sup> Paulo Inglês: "A Flawed legacy", *Africa in Fact*, Issue 42, July 2017, pp 93-98.



So, by and large, few observers have seen a deep political change. The political culture of the party is intact. The power position of the president was not touched.

However, Filomeno Vieira Lopes, President of *Bloco Democrático* and now part of the leading triumvirate of the united opposition front FPU, pointed out some elements in the political economy that may have changed from dos Santos to Lourenço:<sup>14</sup>

- Acceleration of the privatisation process, without giving up the control over the state apparatus – sharing of economic interests is limited by fears of losing political control
- Selective exclusion of a few large economic “predators”, and selective combat of corruption impunity. There has been no threat against the maintenance of power structures.
- Constitutional reform with a view toward eliminating political adversaries – marginalisation of those who lost the war (UNITA) continues
- Increasing political-social mobilisation – such as in favour of local elections and *autarquias* – is met by increasing repression
- Initially improved tolerance of criticism in media has gradually been reduced again

In contrast to Alencastro, Vieira Lopes claims that absolute presidentialism and MPLA control of state institutions has been maintained, and with that the missing separation of state powers continues. There are no signs of willingness even under the new regime to give up state capture of oil revenues to the extent required to redistribute wealth and income and improve social indicators. His prognosis is therefore that repression of social protest will continue and possibly increase.

One way to assess the changes pursued by Lourenço is to look at the composition of his senior government team.<sup>15</sup> Soon after taking power, he started a campaign to “fire and hire” people for key positions. He attempted to construct his own authority by appointing a number of loyal top executives, organised through two to three distinct nerve centres of power, each headed by one of his very closest advisors. There are very few new people in the top hierarchy: most are MPLA old-timers, several of which were people he rehabilitated or “recycled” after they were once – like himself – side-lined by dos Santos, while others were well-known allies and close relatives. Some examples are Generals Furtado and Miala, who were recalled to head the Military Staff and Security and Intelligence Services respectively; José de Lima Massano, who was picked to be Governor of the Bank of Angola; Carlos Saturnino, selected as Chair of Sonangol; and Francisco Mendes, head of the TPA, the state TV-station.

Significantly, there have been no openings for people from civil society or from the very limited private sector outside of the MPLA in Lourenço’s inner circle.

*The first nerve centre is the military and security apparatus*, one of the strongest in Africa and tremendously inflated compared to Angola’s real security challenges. This apparatus has never been downscaled after the war, and ex-general/ex-Minister of Defense Lourenço has made no attempt to do so, either. He maintains a personal close control of this power group.<sup>16</sup> Both the first Minister of Defense General Salviano de Jesus Sequeira and his closest collaborators in the Ministry, General Staff of the military and the heads of intelligence, were close collaborators with Lourenço when he himself was Minister of Defence, and all are veterans of the struggle for independence or the war against UNITA. When Lourenço went on to appoint Francisco Pereira Furtado, one of dos Santos’ closest military collaborators, as Sebastião’s successor, it showed how difficult it is for Lourenço to distance himself from the dos Santos era.

A feature of Lourenço’s presidency is the high turnover rate among his ministers and the top brass in the security services. One interpretation is that he tests their loyalty, and changes people as they prove or disprove their loyalty. But one key person remains: Edeltrudes da Costa, a man who more

14 Webinar 25 March 2021

15 The following presentation of main power groups under Lourenço is to a large degree based on Augé, 2019.

16 Paula Cristina Roque, in her new book (Roque 2021), characterizes Angola as a “securitized” rather than a “militarized” state.

than anyone else embodies the continuity with the dos Santos administration. As head of the Casa Civil, equivalent to the President's chief of staff, to both Lourenço and dos Santos, he certainly knows all the secrets. After much pressure on Edeltrudes da Costa following international claims about his involvement in a corruption scheme, he was removed as head of the Casa Civil, but currently holds the title of 'Minister and Director of the President's Office'.

*A second power group is headed by Vice President Bornito de Sousa, ex-Minister of Territorial Administration and in that capacity responsible for vetting and appointing all provincial and local leaders of party and state (very often with dual state and party functions) in Angola. The large majority of provincial governors have been replaced under Lourenço, thus consolidating a very important source of nation-wide control. When Bornito de Sousa became Vice President, this basic gatekeeper function was first left to Adão de Almeida, a close associate of Bornito de Sousa. Almeida was later appointed as Head of the Casa Civil, replacing Edeltrudes da Costa.*

*A third power centre, pulling the main strings in economic policy, is headed by the country's first lady, Ana Dias Lourenço. She is an economist with a background as Minister of Planning, and later as Executive Director at the World Bank (representing Angola, Nigeria and South Africa). Her circle includes the powerful Minister of State for Economic Coordination, Manuel José Nunes Júnior, the head of the sovereign fund (taking over after dos Santos' son), Carlos Alberto Lopes, and the Minister of State for Social Matters, Carolina Cerqueira.*

The MPLA party has undergone significant changes in membership within the Political Bureau and the Central Committee, starting with the 2018 Party Congress when dos Santos abandoned his presidency of the party and his closest confidants were removed from all key positions. The majority of the 72 member-strong Political Bureau are newcomers, and so are most members of the Party Secretariat. Political Bureau members often control key positions in the state administration as ministers or provincial governors.

*Sonangol, the state oil company, no longer exercises the same position as during the dos Santos regime, when it was operating under personal and almost unfettered control of the President. After Isabel dos Santos was forced to leave, the company was dominated by close associates of its head during the boom years until 2012, dos Santos' Vice President Manuel Vicente. Vicente himself was saved from corruption charges and now plays a rather unclear role as a key advisor to the President.*

The outcome of this process seems to be that Lourenço gained control of the party apparatus previously controlled by the dos Santos family, by means of a few strategic cadre replacements, without really distancing himself from the dos Santos power structures. The next MPLA Party Congress, scheduled for December 2021, will be Lourenço's opportunity to consummate this process. He seems concerned to unite the party elite and reduce the danger of any potential resistance prior to the Party Congress and the 2022 general elections. This implies some quite significant danger zones when it comes to implementing reforms and touching questionable party cadres, such as in the fight against corruption. As said by Paula Roque (15 April Webinar): 'João Lourenço cannot afford to de-stabilise the system by creating powerful enemies, if he wants to stay in power.' Filomeno Vieira Lopes concludes as follows regarding Lourenço's first three years: 'The ideology of the hegemonic party is that all transformation stays within its own model of dominance. The arrival of the new President created great hope, but it ended up with change of some persons only. There is a need for an ideological break with the past.' (25 March Webinar)

Similarly, Chatham House Angola expert Alex Vines observes: 'Targeting the dos Santos family and their friends was always going to be the low-hanging fruit of reform. Comprehensive and deep structural change is complicated, slower, and requires more serious compromises.'<sup>17</sup>

During his initial years in the presidency, Lourenço sought to approach some of the main critics of the dos Santos regime, most prominently the researcher, journalist, and civil society activist Rafael Marques. Marques, one of the most uncompromising critics of dos Santos, was actually decorated with the Angolan Presidential Medal for his work for human rights and against corruption. He

<sup>17</sup> World Politics Review, 16.10.20

perceived important improvements compared to the previous regime. He claimed that Lourenço represented 'the dismantling of the culture of fear that for four decades had stifled the freedom of expression of Angolans' (Maka Angola 26.09.20). Structurally, he saw 'an intent to return power to state institutions', where dos Santos had kept a close personal control on everything, often through Sonangol, side-lining entire ministries and other state bodies. Subsequently, he claimed that there has been a tendency to re-centralise power in the Presidency, and to maintain Party dominance over public institutions.

Recently Rafael Marques has further departed from his earlier positive assessment of the Lourenço regime. In a very thorough article published in May 2021,<sup>18</sup> he observes:

'The State in Angola continues to be confused with the MPLA, as an ideological consequence of early independence (...) Due to the nature of power in Angola, the logic of the Party-State, whose hegemony is based on privileged families and friends, continues to prevail. The subordination of the State and of all economic and social life to the leadership of the MPLA, reaffirmed at the Special Congress in 1980, still remains in force today in the actual exercise of political power.'

Marques' cautious optimism is based on a speculation that the deep crisis currently dominating the country may offer Lourenço a great opportunity to "put Angola on the right track", as well as, apparently, a belief that Lourenço may have the best of intentions but continues to be held back by the surviving power elite from the previous regime (apart from the dos Santos family itself). In our webinars, Didier Péclard also brought up a hypothesis that the crisis might offer an opportunity for change, but perhaps this opportunity is better understood as an imperative caused by the economic constraints than a product of willful leadership. Other speakers reinforced the view that such change away from state control, if it were to occur, would most probably move the country in a neo-liberal direction.

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18 Rafael Marques (2021): "Incompetência e Desorientação Política". MakaAngola, 10 and 12 May 2021 (two parts)

## 5. GROWING PLURALISM AND TRANSPARENCY?

### Autarquias/local elections

The absence of direct elections of local and provincial authorities, and the establishment of *autarquias*, has long been one of the main democratic deficits in Angola. So far in Angola, local and provincial authorities are appointed by the President – or indirectly through his minister of territorial administration – and they are an integral part of the Party-State power structure.

Since the end of the civil war, the establishment of autarquias, as part of political de-centralisation and de-concentration, has been something the people have demanded and politicians have promised repeatedly in the Angolan public debate. In 2012, the then minister of territorial administration, now Vice President Bornito de Sousa, announced that local elections would be held in 2015, after several previous postponements. The MPLA kept the holding of local elections in its 2017 electoral platform. In 2018, the new minister with the same function, Adão de Almeida, made clear that *autarquia* elections would be held in 2020, and that this would represent the most significant reform of public administration since independence. The Council of the Republic, a 21-member consultative body appointed by the President with the participation of all political parties represented in the National Assembly plus prominent representatives of the Judiciary and civil society, offered unanimous backing for this proposal. Law professor and MPLA cadre Carlos Teixeira was given the responsibility of preparing the necessary legal framework (“*pacote legal*”), to be submitted to and approved by the National Assembly. Several of these laws, but not all, had been approved before the end of 2019, but the most contentious issues – that of how elections were to be organised and that of whether elections should be held everywhere or just in a few trial *municípios* – had been left unresolved. Then in mid-2020, another delay was announced, allegedly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, although the President claimed that local elections ‘were not delayed, since they had never been promised’.<sup>19</sup>

Filomeno Lopes de Vieira argues that the MPLA is apparently worried that local elections could challenge its absolute power position, thus explaining the postponement. The opposition was very critical of this new delay, claiming that the real motive was MPLA’s worry over losing important municipalities and thereby a crucial element of their so-far-unlimited nationwide political power structure. Another opportunity to promote a more democratic polity in Angola seems to have been indefinitely postponed.

During the early post-peace days, the dos Santos regime introduced the Concelhos de Auscultação e Concertação Social (CACS) as a semblance of participation at the local level, in lieu of *autarquias* and local elections. These councils were to be established at the provincial, município and comuna levels, and its members were to be handpicked by the State representative (Governor or administrator) according to a vague formula outlined in the local governance legislation. In the areas where they were at all established, they rapidly fell out of systematic practice. One prominent civil society activist, Fernando Pacheco, himself a life-long member of MPLA and still a member of the advisory State Council established by the President, gives this description characteristic of their evolution:

‘I remember that the municipal or provincial councils that were institutionalised about 15 years ago abandoned the consultation component because it “did not work”, that is because there were uncomfortable voices that had to be eliminated. So, the MPLA either does not really want to have a dialogue, disguising itself in order to make believe the contrary, or it does not know how to have a dialogue. In any case, the party has to change its practises with major urgency.’<sup>20</sup>

19 <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/estado-da-na%C3%A7%C3%A3o-jo%C3%A3o-louren%C3%A7o-diz-que-aut%C3%A1rquias-nunca-foram-adiadas/a-55289633>

20 “Conversa na Mulemba”, Fernando Pacheco in *Novo Jornal* 23.03.21

Lúcia da Silveira, an activist of the human rights group AJPD, states quite categorically: ‘The *Conselhos de auscultação* are in reality a false council established to give a false idea that the President is listening (...) but this is simply a measure to maintain the power.’<sup>21</sup>

## Civil society

After the signing of the peace agreement in 2002, it was assumed that civil society could play a role in democracy and governance in Angola. The legal framework is set by the Angolan Constitutional Law, the Law of Associations and the Non-governmental Organisations Regulation. CSOs were called on to play an important role in that process, that is, through the above-mentioned CACS at the local level. However, when the CSOs intended to switch from humanitarian post-war work to more local mobilisation with a political lobbying role not least implying increased militancy of local youth groups, they were met by increasing restrictions in the political space. A surge in opposition youth activities and street manifestations, to a certain extent inspired by the ‘Arab Spring’, led to what was later referred to as ‘the revolutionary movement’ or ‘Revús’, the nickname by which they are usually known. According to Blanes (2021), these youth activists:

‘...engaged in self-sacrificial behaviour, exposing themselves to police brutality, imprisonment and social discrimination, in their struggle towards a brighter collective future. This optimistic and somewhat Gandhian stance marks a dramatic departure from the sense of fatalism and “culture of fear” that seems otherwise to prevail in Angola.’

In 2014, the government introduced a decree with new “NGO statutes” (Decree 2014/15), banning the financing of non-recognised organisations. This decree was appealed to the Constitutional Court with a claim that it was in violation of the Constitution. After two years, in July 2017 the Court actually found the Decree to be unconstitutional.

Presidential Decree 74/15 of March 2015 represented a further serious limitation of the freedoms of NGOs by monitoring their registration and financial support. Then, in June 2015, the so-called 15+2 group of peaceful human rights defenders and young activists were accused of the “crime of preparatory acts to the practice of rebellion (...) and attack against the [at the time] President of the Republic or other members of the Organs of State”. A year later, after a dramatic hunger-strike, followed by one of Angola’s most famous court-cases, they were sentenced to between 2 and 8 years in prison, before being pardoned by President dos Santos.<sup>22</sup>

So, when Lourenço took over the presidency, the CSO space in Angola had already been seriously limited. There were expectations that he would re-open part of this space. New confrontations with the police, however, soon signalled that the tolerance of security forces had not changed at all.

One of the country’s best-known political activists from the “15” detained in 2015, Hitler Samussuko, claimed in a presentation to the 29 April 2021 webinar that the ‘Revú’-movement is still active and now much more courageous, even having developed what he terms ‘collective consciousness’. Shortly afterwards, on 27 May 2021, the President offered an apology to the victims of the 27 May 1977 massacres, and thereby a historical acceptance of state responsibility for this dark spot in the country’s memory.<sup>23</sup> The question is whether this represented a qualitative change from the past. Until now, no MPLA authority has even hinted at an apology for this. Quite to the contrary: these historic massacres have been used instrumentally by the MPLA regime to prevent contestation and criticism. Ex-President dos Santos, who himself was the leader of a party commission established to investigate claims against some of those who later were accused of preparing a coup d’état – the main

21 Presentation at 25.03.21 webinar

22 The 15+2 refers to the 15 male activists who were jailed, plus 2 (women) who were accused but not jailed before the trial. For more on the 15+2 case, see <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-angola-15>

23 See Pawson, 2014, for a solid analysis of this remarkably unknown tragedy.

justification of the massacres that followed – used the memory of this date as a veiled threat against all opposition, including in the accusations against the “15+2” group of *reviús*.<sup>24</sup> ‘João Lourenço had the merit of opening the path that seemed closed’, according to one spokesperson of the families of the victims of the massacres, Edgar Valles, echoing the President’s appeal that this should be nothing less than a path towards national reconciliation<sup>25</sup>. There is still a considerable way left to go to find the full historical truth about this terrible national trauma and move from collective to personal responsibilities. It remains to be seen whether this presidential apology may eventually have a positive impact on tolerance for political pluralism in the country.

## Media / Press freedom

In previous research on the media situation in Angola,<sup>26</sup> almost all journalists interviewed highlighted the changing character of the media landscape over time, including different degrees of openness. There was a brief period of openness in the early 1990s, then more war-time closure. All agreed, as seems to be the case in Salgado (2014), that the best period was between 2003 and 2008. The onset of a series of electoral contests and the decline of dos Santos’ popularity resulted in less space for critical voices.

Most observers seem to agree that there was another moment of media openness in the early Lourenço years from late 2017 to 2019, not lasting very long before a return to the more “normal” situation of media control occurred.

Susana Mendes, deputy head of the Angolan Journalist Union, pointed out (in our 25 March webinar) that the Constitution and the international treaties ratified by Angola in principle offer a good basis for freedom of expression and the media. After this short-lived opening in 2017-19, however, public media again reverted to their previous practice of failing to offer transparent access to system-critical information. Journalists covering demonstrations have been detained. So, fundamental freedom of expression rights are not fulfilled in practice.<sup>27</sup> It is left to a network of social media to constitute “freedom strongholds”. So far at least, they have generally been allowed to operate.

The Portuguese analyst Rui Verde first claimed that Lourenço had taken a qualitative step by introducing freedom of expression as well as the right to publicly demonstrate in Angola. He concluded by identifying a paradox in October 2020:

‘By promoting more freedom, João Lourenço is promoting more criticism against himself. Basically, reformism is giving way to the formation of an unnatural alliance between retrograde forces of MPLA conservatism, which takes advantage of the natural discontent of youth in the face of a lack of jobs and prospects for the future. And this alliance, which will be dissolved as soon as it manages to remove João Lourenço, uses the newly acquired freedoms to defeat him.’ (Maka Angola, 10.10.20)

As discussed, Lourenço may have failed to uphold the initial opening of civic space over time. Nevertheless, this conflation of forces identified by Verde as retrograde MPLA conservatism and discontented youth – Verde may have gone too far in calling it an ‘alliance – has already worn on Lourenço’s political image and tested his regime.

24 According to information obtained from a reliable source involved in the documentation of the 27 May massacre, dos Santos told the MPLA Central Committee when he justified these detentions, that “we don’t want to repeat the 27th of May”.

25 Portugal Digital, 27.05.21

26 Research carried out by CEIC and CMI in 2013-14. Results forthcoming in Mano, Winston et.al (eds.), *Media ownership in Africa*, Routledge.

27 A very known and Popular radio broadcasting program came to an end as the Radio Station (MFM), was bought by an economic group close to the president.

## Corruption

The fight against corruption seemed to have been the political device that President Lourenço, when he took power in 2017, would use to reconstitute a sense of public morality and restore political confidence in state institutions and, above all, in presidential authority. The question was whether the President had sufficient political resources beyond apparent good intentions.

Some of the doubts about the President's determination to lead with corruption as his political priority arose when cases of mismanagement by some members of the President's cabinet emerged. Edeltrudes Gaspar da Costa, one of Lourenço's most trusted advisors, was never investigated but rather "recycled" in the President's team when highly trustworthy claims of his corruption involvement were published. Manuel Vicente, former Vice President and, before that, CEO of the oil company Sonangol, was at the heart of the 'Luanda Leaks', a scandal exposed by a consortium of journalists in which senior members of the state close to former President José Eduardo dos Santos went unpunished. The discourse on fighting corruption has not, in practice, induced the creation of concrete measures for its implementation. There were no substantive judicial reforms, civil society was not involved in access to information, the public media remained under state political control.

To Karina Carvalho, Angolan-born Executive Director of Transparency International Portugal, 'Luanda Leaks' represents a paradigmatic case of large-scale corruption, political corruption as well as state capture, where:

'governance has been turned into a criminal instrument of personal enrichment by modeling the crucial structures of the state power, captured for that purpose. Control over legislative and regulatory powers has been used to legalize corrupt activities and to weaken supervisory, inspection and punishment functions of the executive branch and the judiciary. At the same time, repressive mechanisms of state control have been used to suppress the engagement and empowerment of the civil society against corruption, as well as to undermine independence of the media to investigate and publicly expose the corrupted as well as the corruptors (corruptos e corruptores).'

This analysis, underscoring the impression of Angola as a pariah case of corruption in the world community, contrasts radically with how one of the country's most well-known judges interprets the phenomenon of white-collar crime in Angola. Luzia Sebastião, a prominent former judge of the Constitutional Court, questions the appropriateness of the penal system in Angola to handle such cases, and of prison facilities in the country to offer the conditions for the rehabilitation of white-collar criminals (supposedly one of the main aims of such punishment). Instead, she argues for mediation and conciliation with the purpose of obtaining a return of the assets to the state coffers: 'These people didn't assault banks and state coffers. They were allowed to make use of that (state) property. We need to find the mechanism for these values to be returned with as little cost as possible for the State.' And then she adds, with an argument that may be in line with the increasing leniency shown by President Lourenço in handling those accused of serious corruption who seem to benefit from continued impunity:

'We must not forget that due to the training they have, they are staff who have occupied very important positions in the state apparatus. They are an asset that in my opinion should not be missed. These are people who have initiative, who are creative, dynamic, so we need to take advantage of their professional capacity, under inspection by the State and on the basis of a properly structured program.'<sup>28</sup>

As this quote shows, there are still strong forces that prevent a full assault on the "marimbondo's nest" in Angola. By and large, impunity continues to reign for those who had access to public coffers

28 Quoted from Karina Carvalho's and Luzia Sebastião's respective presentations to the 29.04. webinar

and control over public contracting so that they could siphon off enormous sums of money through the golden years of the oil boom.

### Rule of Law/Separation of powers

In the discussion about separation of powers in Angola, and particularly the parliamentary control of the executive power, an interpretation has existed that the 2010 Constitution does not permit the National Assembly to exercise control over the President. This interpretation was strengthened by the infamous 2013 *Acórdão No. 319/13* by the Tribunal Court, which considered it to be unconstitutional for the National Assembly to make interpellations and inquiries to the Executive (President and ministers), and for ministers and other high representatives of the Executive to be questioned by parliamentary commissions or hearings without the explicit permission of the President. There was no external control of the Executive between elections. The legal analyst Rui Verde emphasises that with a new law from 2017 (Lei No. 13/17), which defines the functions of the National Assembly, some timid steps had been taken to recover some parliamentary oversight and control from the Executive.<sup>29</sup>

Based on this present interpretation, it is therefore up to the National Assembly, and particularly the political opposition represented there, to exercise a pro-active control of the Executive and thereby challenge the Party-State tradition that was so dominant in the dos Santos regime.

The principle of judicial independence and separation of powers was critically undermined when, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2021, João Lourenço appointed Laurinda Cardoso, then a member of the MPLA Political Bureau, to be the new President of the country's Constitutional Court. She succeeded Manuel Aragão who had resigned from his post protesting that the new proposals for constitutional reform represented 'the suicide of democracy in Angola'.<sup>30</sup> On October 5 2021, a mere six weeks after taking office, Cardoso chaired the Court when producing a legal statement (*Acórdão 700/2021*) that invalidates the entire UNITA Congress of 2019 that elected its leader Adalberto da Costa Júnior. By consequence, UNITA leadership then reverted to its previous President, Isaías Samakuva. When Samakuva re-took his place in the Council of the Republic on October 25, João Lourenço was quoted as saying that 'I hope this time you have come to stay'.<sup>31</sup> It was lost on no one that the President signalled that he had effectively engineered his choice of opponent in the largest opposition party.

The event immediately increased tensions in the political sphere of Angola, and soon after thousands of Adalberto da Costa Junior's supporters were demonstrating in the streets of Luanda, along with others worried that the *Acórdão* had signalled the total subjugation of the Constitutional Court to the party-political interests of the President of the Republic.<sup>32</sup> UNITA will hold an extraordinary Congress towards the end of 2021, where it is expected that da Costa Júnior will be confirmed as their presidential candidate.

Angola was included in the Rule of Law Index, elaborated annually by the World Justice Project (WJP), for the first time in 2019. In the 2020 Report,<sup>33</sup> Angola has an overall score of 0.43 (with 1 as full score) and has climbed four positions in the global rank (from 114 to 110), with an almost insignificant score improvement (0.01), which probably means that several countries have had a negative evolution. Among Sub-Saharan countries, Angola ranks as 23 out of 31, placing it among the bottom third. Looking at the more specific indicators, Angola has a top score (1.0) on absence of

29 MakaAngola 23.02.21: "O Mito do Não-Controlo Parlamentar do Executivo". Rui Verde argues in another MakaAngola article the previous day ("Umas voltas pela História Constitucional de Angola") that the interpretation that the Legislature is powerless vis-à-vis the Executive, far from being an African tradition as many have claimed, is a heritage from the Portuguese colonial system (Salazar's *Estado Novo*), uncritically taken over by the Angolan post-independence constitutionalism.

30 <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/demite-se-manuel-aragão-juiz-presidente-do-tribunal-constitucional-de-angola/a-58850027>

31 <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/jo%C3%A3o-louren%C3%A7o-espera-que-samakuva-tenha-vindo-para-ficar-na-unita/a-59618200>

32 For an understanding of the «Acórdão», see an opinion written by Benja Satula and Paulo Inglês: <https://www.istoenoticia.info/?s=No+fio+da+navalha>

33 [https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2020-Online\\_0.pdf](https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2020-Online_0.pdf)



civil conflict, in itself an undeniable success. There is a relatively good score (above 0.5) on indicators like impartial and effective alternative dispute resolution, non-discrimination in civil justice and in inter-race relations, open complaint mechanisms, freedom of religion, legislature constraint on government powers, absence of corruption in the judiciary (not so in other branches of government). The weakest scores (below 0.3) are on access to government data, right to privacy, delay in civil justice and regulatory enforcement, and having an effective correctional system.

The Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem) also has a Rule of Law index. It employs a methodology differing from that of the WJP and has a longer historical time series for diachronic comparison. On V-Dem's index Angola also improved its score markedly between 2017 and 2018, but has since stayed at the sub-Saharan African average.<sup>34</sup>

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34 See V-Dem scores at <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/VariableGraph/>

## 6. ANGOLA'S CHANGING INTERNATIONAL POSITION

Angola under dos Santos was a quite exceptionally self-confident player on the international arena, compared to its size and geopolitical position. The basis for this position was evidently the competition for access to its fast-growing petroleum resources, and the almost incomparable double-digit economic growth achieved during the first decade after the end of the war. The way the war ended, with a total military victory without any need for peace negotiations nor a post-conflict justice process, was also an important element in the self-confidence image building. The fact that the international community was unable to organise a post-war donor conference for national reconstruction, while the country enjoyed good relations to Russia in terms of military cooperation and to China when it came to trade and oil-for-infrastructure deals, led dos Santos to behave in a rather arrogant manner vis-à-vis the multilateral system and western countries. A President with full personal control of the country's foreign policy, who spoke fluent Russian, seemed to be more at ease with Putin than with western heads of state. The simultaneous prompt transformation from Marxism-Leninism to wild-west capitalism and state capture by a Party-based oligarchy in both countries in the early 1990s, is quite conspicuous. It is not by chance that Angola and Russia have been used as twin examples of what has been termed 'an oligarchic neo-patrimonial state' (see Bye, 2019:258).

Of particular relevance is the military relationship between Angola and Russia. Angola is one of the principal buyers of Russian weapons, and Lourenço actually signalled in a meeting with President Putin in 2019 that his country also wants to *produce* Russian weapons on license. Eight SU-30K fighter jets were delivered in 2019 – in spite of the deep economic crisis – and Angola made an expression of interest in buying costly Russian S-400 air-defence systems. This military cooperation is in reality a legacy from the cold war era when Russian arms and Cuban soldiers were the backbone of MPLA's struggle against enemy forces backed by the US, apartheid South Africa and Mobuto-era Zaire. As Defence Minister Sequeira said during the above-mentioned visit to Russia: 'Angolan armed forces are used to work with Russian weapons' and because of that, the military cooperation between the two countries 'will last forever'.<sup>35</sup> Another interpretation is that Angolan armament-buyers find the Russian market particularly attractive due to its equally non-transparent ways.

Angola has also signalled interest in closer military cooperation with China,<sup>36</sup> so there is no doubt that the two main non-western global powers are Angola's preferred partners in military and security aspects. Security cooperation is also probably maintained with two as unlikely bed-fellows as Cuba and Israel.<sup>37</sup>

One welcome traveller to Angola during these Angolan golden years was Brazil's former President Lula. He saw Angola as an obvious door-opener to Africa and to the South-South relationship that Lula was so eager to establish. Given Lula's leadership position among the emerging BRICS countries and the tremendously favourable perception he enjoyed among the leading western powers – President Obama called him 'the most popular president on earth' – dos Santos struck a strategic alliance with his fellow Lusophone leader. In this situation, Angola may even have challenged South Africa as the dominant sub-regional power in Southern Africa. In short, Angola exercised considerable international power in its own sub-region and beyond.

President dos Santos always gave priority to bilateral relations at the cost of multilateralism. This was particularly the case regarding relations with the two Congos after the fall of Mobutu, by some observers seen as Angolan "client states" of very special strategic importance. President dos Santos had a tremendous position of influence with President Joseph Kabila in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country with almost three times as many inhabitants and twice Angola's territory (Roque, 2021). There is still a potential destabilisation threat coming from the DRC, with refugee flows to

35 <https://www.africanews.com/2019/04/06/russia-angola-sign-cooperation-deals-in-moscow/>

36 [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-06/25/content\\_9538110.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-06/25/content_9538110.htm)

37 Angola's security cooperation is also discussed in Roque, 2021

the complicated Lundas provinces in Angola's north-east and a possible offshore territorial conflict emerging around oil-rich Cabinda.<sup>38</sup>

Angola's geographical position implies that it is part of no less than three different sub-regional alliances, in addition to the African Union: SADC (Southern African Development Coordination Conference), ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States) and ICGLR (International Conference of the Great Lakes Region). Under Lourenço, Angola is showing a considerably increased interest in playing an active role in these regional institutions and is presently holding the chairmanship in two of them: ECCAS and ICGLR. But, as stressed by the Portuguese scholar Paula Roque, one of the most prominent observers of regional politics: 'National security concerns will always define Angola's interventions in Africa', although, she adds, there may also be an interest to export its "model" of 'illiberalism, securitization and neo-patrimonial relations'.<sup>39</sup>

One interesting case is Angola's offer to mediate in the Central African Republic.<sup>40</sup> This is a new role that has the potential of becoming much more important, perhaps in the form of participation in peace-keeping operations. On the basis of Angola's still highly overinflated armed forces and security apparatus, never decommissioned after the civil war, and its own successful termination of armed conflict although without any negotiation process, there is reason to ask why Angola has stayed away from peace-keeping missions under the UN or AU umbrella. Under dos Santos, the lack of interest in multilateral initiatives may have been the reason. If our hypothesis that Lourenço is more open for this is correct, we might see Angolan soldiers in blue helmets in the time to come. When some observers question whether Angola has any foreign policy role to aspire for after the oil era, this might perhaps be one such opportunity.

Angola's geopolitical position in this period was clearly confirmed when the European Union in 2012, apparently following the proposal from the Portuguese Commission President at the time, José Manuel Barroso, signed a so-called 'Joint Way Forward' (JWF) agreement with Angola. Angola is the only African country other than South Africa with such agreement, aiming at the establishment of a "strategic partnership" similar to what the EU intended to have with the BRICS countries. The intention was, through annual consultations on the highest political level, 'to address jointly a number of global issues of common interest'.<sup>41</sup>

However, 'Angola is rapidly losing the position as an indispensable regional player', according to Mathias de Alencastro, who followed Lula's courting of the country closely.<sup>42</sup>

With dramatically falling oil prices, similarly growing debt burdens and a generally worsening macroeconomic situation, Angola's international position has been in free fall under Lourenço. Angola used to be one of those oil-rich countries where western countries have been willing to overlook "democratic shortcomings," in exchange for economic benefits. Playing this card in international relations, which dos Santos did so successfully, has become far more complicated for his successor. While oil continues to dominate the Angolan economy, the Angolan oil is – as we have seen – rapidly losing its strategic importance for most other countries. During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Angola was the seventh most important provider of crude oil to the US.<sup>43</sup> This export is today negligible. Two thirds of Angolan crude oil export in 2020 went to China, with India as a distant runner-up (less than 8%). Angola is China's fourth largest source of petroleum imports – providing less than 10% of the East Asian giant's oil imports – after Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Iraq.<sup>44</sup>

China is also Angola's dominant creditor – just as Angola is China's number one African debtor, perhaps owing as much as one third of total African debts to China – with a total of more than 20

38 <https://africanarguments.org/2019/10/angola-drc-oil/>

39 Paula Roque, 15 April webinar.

40 <https://www.theafricareport.com/63595/angola-car-president-lourenco-to-tackle-crisis-in-the-car/>

41 [https://ceas.europa.eu/archives/docs/angola/jwf\\_en.pdf](https://ceas.europa.eu/archives/docs/angola/jwf_en.pdf)

42 Presentation at Webinar 15 April 2021

43 US Government census 2010, Table 932: Crude Oil Imports Into the U.S. by Country of Origin: 1980 to 2009 (<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2010/compendia/statab/130ed/tables/11s0932.pdf>)

44 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1137636/main-destinations-of-oil-crude-exports-from-angola/>

billion USD (out of a total Angolan debt burden of almost USD 49 billion in 2020), of which \$14.5 billion to the China Development Bank and nearly \$5 billion to the Export-Import Bank of China. China has drastically reduced new credit requests from Angola. In the beginning of 2021, however, Angola secured three years of payment relief from Chinese creditors,<sup>45</sup> probably in recognition of a harsh reality where default would have been the only alternative. The IMF credit line to Angola formally stood at 3 billion USD in early 2021, also a record for Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>46</sup>

While there is no doubt about Angola's economic dependence on China, the advantage seen from Angola's perspective is that China also has developed a certain dependence on Angola both as oil provider and debtor. In that sense, we can speak about an inter-dependence, although there is little doubt about which side is calling the shots. It is a highly asymmetric relationship.

In this situation, Angola under Lourenço is showing increasing interest in strengthened relations to other countries and blocs, among which the EU now seems to have priority. Very different from dos Santos, Lourenço seems to be missing no opportunity to bring along large delegations to meetings with the EU and European countries in search of investments and economic relations. These efforts started with his first official visit to EU institutions already in 2018, less than one year after he took office, and continued with the Europe-Africa financial summit in Paris in May 2021. During such meetings, President Lourenço has learned the buzzwords he is supposed to repeat in order to be perceived as more of a "good guy" than his predecessor: human rights, democracy and transparency. While the 'Luanda Leaks' revelations initially damaged Angola's image in Europe and other western countries, the legal actions that followed against Isabel dos Santos were clearly intended to re-legitimise Angola among western partners. And it seems that they were at least partly successful at doing so, as the German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed during a February 2020 visit to Angola:

'I can only welcome the fact that there is strong commitment to investigating corruption (...) Should German companies or financial institutions also play a role through such disclosure, then Germany of course promises to help with clarification in a very transparent way.'<sup>47</sup>

EU officials involved in the JWF policy dialogue with Angola claim that there has been 'a striking change in attitude' on Angola's part from the dos Santos to the Lourenço regime, and that there is now a clearly perceived willingness to engage with the EU even on sensitive issues such as human rights violations and the speed with which they address issues of corruption.<sup>48</sup> The EU also wants to take part of the honour for Angola's ratification of the Paris Climate Accord. The EU has responded by initiating negotiations on a new investment facility agreement. Angola would be the first African country with such agreement. Angola has also submitted a formal request to accede to the EU-SADCC Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). All these steps are interpreted by the EU as signs that Angola under Lourenço has realized the urgent need for European support to economic diversification, although little so far is happening on the ground in that direction.

Angola may risk worsening relations with the US – or at least they become even less relevant – under the Biden administration, with its increased emphasis on human rights and anti-corruption, and in the context of reduced interest from the US oil giants, especially if Lourenço does not make a more concerted effort to improve these two policy areas.

<sup>45</sup> Reuters, 11.01.21

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/06/09/pr21168-angola-imf-exec-board-completes-5th-review-of-the-eff-arrangement-and-approves-disbursement>

<sup>47</sup> DPA, 7.02.2020

<sup>48</sup> Based on interviews with European Commission officials

## 7. CONCLUSIONS: WHAT LIES AHEAD?

It may be too optimistic to launch a hypothesis about the ability of a petro-state to democratise and become more transparent, as warned by Ross (2012) and many others, particularly against the backdrop of the general backlash against democracy in Africa (Rakner, 2019), and indeed worldwide: The V-Dem project argues in its latest report that the world is currently in the ‘third wave of autocratisation,’ with the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 being down to the levels around 1990 (V-dem 2020).<sup>49</sup>

Revisiting the characteristics used to describe the dos Santos regime in the introduction to this article, one interpretation is that *there has been a certain modification in the way state power is exercised during the three first years of the Lourenço regime*, perhaps more than anything caused by the end of the oil boom and the resulting reduction in discretionary powers. While the dominance of one hegemonic party and the Party-State structure continues, we cannot any longer talk about the same petro-state with a parallel institutional system centred around the state oil company Sonangol, which was the unfettered and opaque basis of the dos Santos family reign. In that sense, Lourenço’s power is hitherto less absolute than the one exercised by dos Santos. This has also led to the important modifications in Angola’s international position and behaviour.

The lack of political measures in favour of the absolutely inevitable diversification of the economy towards a post-carbon reality is the best illustration of the strategical impotence and incompetence of Angola’s state structure. The lack of action in this regard may be explained in two ways: either by a concern about impacting the vested interests of the traditional rent-seekers promoted and protected by dos Santos and the vulnerable stability of power relations, or, alternatively, by assuming that President Lourenço simply is allied with the same forces.

Careful, selective, and hesitant actions against corruption and police brutality, along with an initial attempt to permit more media openness and civic mobilization, all seem to have slowed down as the Lourenço regime approaches the end of its first term. The postponement of local elections, potentially leading to the emergence of counter-hegemonic forces in parts of the country – perhaps even in the capital – is an illustration of the precarious party-state dominance exercised by Lourenço. The delay of any measure to initiate the necessary economic diversification may have kept potential challengers to the political hegemony at bay for the moment. But this is in no way a sustainable response to the country’s fundamental governance crisis.

Lourenço may be playing with fire by starting to remove the lid on the culture of fear that has existed in the country. While his motivation for expressing a state apology to the victims of political conflict in the country, including the massacres after 27 May 1977, may have been to improve his image and enlarge his base of support prior to the 2022 general elections, this may backfire if he provokes sensitive feelings among MPLA power groups that are worried about their own historical responsibilities being exposed. As discussed, in contrast to the dos Santos regime, a challenge to his own may come not only from the traditional opposition parties and activist youth in civil society, but also from the “retrograde” sections of MPLA that feel threatened after the demise of dos Santos that Lourenço so poignantly termed ‘marimbondos’. These two sources of opposition provide obvious limits to Lourenço’s freedom to manoeuvre if he wants to maintain his position. If he really has deeper reform ambitions, as claimed by some observers, he has not had sufficient power of agency to perform a transformational change of leadership, although he has partially succeeded in convincing the international community that he is less of a bad boy than his predecessor.

49 <https://www.v-dem.net/en/publications/democracy-reports/> Swedish-based Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) produces the largest global dataset on democracy with almost 30 million data points for 202 countries from 1789 to 2020. Involving over 3,500 scholars and other country experts, V-Dem measures hundreds of different attributes of democracy. In its annual Democracy Report, the Institute ranks countries into four categories: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy and closed autocracy. This year’s report, “Autocratisation Turns Viral,” contains several important findings.

One important question is whether this vulnerable power structure can survive without deeper adjustments during another five-year presidential term. That will also depend on the capacity of opposition forces to present serious alternatives. It becomes constantly harder to delay the introduction of local elections and autonomy (*autarquias*), and a constitutional regime is now in place for the Legislature to make life harder for the Executive. A more self-confident and united political opposition is emerging through the formation of *the United Patriotic Front*, with the intention of presenting a united opposition candidate for President in 2022. Accompanied by a civil society that finally may get rid of the 44 years old historical trauma that has plagued the country, there may be signs of a more forceful challenge to the Party-State structure both locally and nationally after the 2022 elections. The nervousness of the MPLA is clearly demonstrated in the very questionable methods employed to reject the legality of the broad opposition's presidential candidate for the 2022 elections (Adalberto Costa Júnior), and also in the loudly criticised modifications to the electoral institutions.

What really is at stake for the new electoral period post 2022 is whether the Angolan political system can produce a new development model that permits a sustainable use of the vast natural resources in favour of the country's citizens, along with steps away from Angola's autocratic traditions.

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