The historical-sociological matrix and ethos at the heart and strength of MPLA's modern Angola

Nuno Carlos de Fragoso Vidal [*]

[*] Centro de Estudos Internacionais — ISCTE — Instituto Universitário de Lisboa — Portugal.
E-mail: nunofragosovidal@gmail.com

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5921-6311

Abstract: Proximate to a Weberian perspective, this article argues that the resilience of the Angolan regime is mainly owed to an ethos structured on top of a specific socio-cultural historical matrix (minority at start), evolving since the 16th century. Such matrix was structured on a prevailing *Weltanschauung* (world and national vision), that has been progressively self-presented, self-assumed, imposed/assimilated as national and modern within a project of identity and power hegemony, even though still and constantly ridden by several internal contradictions and tensions. Dynamics of this process is central to understand the intricacies of the relationship between rulers and ruled, evolving identities as well as the still significant social support to the party in power after more than four decades in the government. The regime's resilience lays on such ethos in support of hegemonic power and identity project, above and beyond the president and all his political management abilities, beyond the central instrumentality of the national oil company (SONANGOL), beyond the media spotlight on influential names surrounding the presidency, including the president's men, generals, and beyond authoritarianism.

Keywords: Angola; History; Political power; Identities, Ethos.

A matriz socio-histórica e o ethos no coração e na força do MPLA na Angola moderna

Resumo: Próximo a uma perspectiva Weberiana, o presente artigo propõe que a resiliência do regime angolano se deve sobretudo a um *ethos* estruturado no topo de uma histórica matriz sociocultural (minoritária, de início), evoluindo desde o século XVI. Esta matriz foi estruturada em uma prevalente *weltanschauung* (visão nacional e mundial), que tem sido progressivamente autoapresentada, autoassumida, imposta/assimilada como nacional e moderna dentro de um projeto de identidade e de um poder hegemônico, ainda que constantemente marcada por diversas tensões e contradições internas. A dinâmica desse processo é central para que se possa entender as complexidades da relação entre governantes e governados, identidades em evolução, bem como a ainda significativa base social de apoio ao partido político no poder, mesmo depois de mais de quatro décadas no governo. A resiliência do regime se encontra nesse *ethos* em suporte ao poder hegemônico e ao projeto de identidade, acima e além da figura do presidente e de todas as suas habilidades políticas, além da instrumentalidade central da companhia nacional de petróleo (SONANGOL), além do autoritarismo, e além do foco midiático nos nomes de influência que circundam a presidência, incluindo os homens do presidente, generais e o autoritarismo.

Palavras-chave: Angola; História; Poder político; Identidades, *Ethos*.

Introduction

This paper explores the crucial importance of the ethos at the core of the Angolan ruling party since 1975, the MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), explaining its resilience since independence. Dynamics of this process is central to understand the intricacies of the relationship between rulers and ruled, evolving identities as well as the still significant social support (surprising for most analysts) to the party in power after more than four decades in power, surviving a turbulent and complex political-economic transition in the 1990s and with four consecutive electoral wins with majority vote since then.

The Angolan regime's resilience has been usually explained by the clever oligarchic and clientelistic management of an abundant oil rent, mastered by the president and his clique through the competent national oil company, compounded with some dose of authoritarianism and efficient adaptability to ever evolving domestic and international contexts.

This paper argues, in part within a Weberian perspective, that the Angolan regime's resilience owes much more to an ethos structured on top of a specific socio-cultural historical matrix (minority at start, Mbundu/Creole), evolving since the 16th century. Such matrix, structuring a prevailing *Weltanschauung* (world and national vision, values, culture, identity and ways of doing and being) and ethos[1], has been progressively self-presented, self-assumed, imposed/assimilated as national and modern within a project of identity and power hegemony, even though still and constantly ridden by several internal contradictions and tensions.

Like every neo-patrimonial system, power in Angola is extremely centralized, concentrated and personalized, with the president at the top, but — contrary to other African cases — his power and support relies much more on his ability to represent and incorporate a historical-sociological matrix, dynamics, symbolic capital and long-term power and identity project, which is at the core of the MPLA, that comes first whenever it is perceived to be at risk.

The regime's resilience lays on such ethos, which supports its project of hegemonic power and "national" identity, above and beyond the president and all his political management abilities, beyond the central instrumentality of the national oil company (SONANGOL), beyond the media spotlight on influential names surrounding the president, including generals and the president's family, and beyond authoritarianism.

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[1] (Weber, 1964; 1965). I will not use terms such as "Ethics" or "Ethic" because that presupposes a much more systematized sedimentation and specification (sometimes with a moral character) of an ethos, which does not seem to be the case here addressed. Nevertheless, we argue for the existence of an ethos, as a set of defining common historical-sociological and cultural traits, values and beliefs, which have been structural to the world vision at the core of the Angolan socio-political project sustained by the MPLA and its sociological basis.

This is what distinguishes the Angolan regime from other rough modern patrimonial African regimes characterized by simple elites' assault to riches under the classic predatory principle that "the goat grazes wherever it is tied" according to primary solidarity (usually family/regional/ethnic bounds). The Angolan regime would differ from such regimes and practices that usually lead to recurrent instability, lost in immediate sectarian unrestrained predatory interests, which end up self-destructive, losing sight of the long-term perspective, broader interest and power project (e.g. Mobutu's Zaire).[2]

This paper evolves in four sections. The first characterises the historical-sociological/cultural process, breeding an identity matrix and ethos, which will sustain the dominant project for hegemonic power and its perspective of national identity discussed in subsequent sections. The second deals with the tripartite division of Angolan nationalism, differences between movements and the ensuing dynamics in search for domestic and international legitimacy, reflecting the historical process explained at the first section. The third section focus on the construction of the new State through a modern patrimonial logic under the cover of a Socialist template, but still subject to the same strategy for power and identity hegemony. The fourth analyses the need for regime re-legitimization through a process of political transition in the 1990s without changing its essentials (constantly recycling an electoral appeal to an historical ethos and identity matrix and to its political/national project), and the new challenges facing such quest for an hegemonic project to the 2020s.

MPLA's socio-cultural matrix

Although we cannot provide here an in-depth historical discussion, the genesis of the historical-sociological matrix at the core of the MPLA can be located at the end of the 16th century when Portugal began favouring the North-central area (Luanda and its hinterland) to the detriment of the North (S. Salvador of Congo), following a new commercial and military strategy of incursion into the interior along the rivers Kwanza, Dande, Bengo and Lukala, mainly supported by the *presídios* (fortresses), *feiras* (fairs) and the *guerra preta* ("black army") that favoured a process of Creolisation, by which emerged a socio-cultural category — the Creoles[3] —; encompassing a broad scope of heterogeneous elements such as the descendants of locally born Europeans (whites and *mestiços*), "detribalized" Africans more or less adapted to the European culture (so-called "civilised" or "assimilated" in the Portuguese colonial terminology), all of which formed an intermediate group between the Europeans from the metropolis and the majority of black rural non-acculturated population

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[2] (Bayart, 1999, p. 8; 1989, p. ix).
[3] Using the term "Creoles" for lack of a better term, as explained by Birmingham (2015, p. ix), and following the long and still open discussion on the use of such term, using it more as an operative analytical category than a close concept.

of that area (Dias, 1984, p. 61, footnote 1; Messiant, 1997, p. 163, footnote 6; Bittencourt, 1996, chapter V ; Havik & Newitt, 2007, p. 17-20; Birmingham, 2015, p. ix).

They established alliances with families of the chiefdoms of the MBundu-Kimbundu ethno-linguistic area through marriages, thus creating a network of commercial and financial credit between chiefdoms and traders from the interior and traders from Luanda. Here were located the main white-owned trading houses, many of which already had ties of kinship through relationships with black women. The wealthiest of these families extended these commercial and political ties to Brazil and Portugal, marrying their daughters off to high-ranking army and navy officers of those countries, thus reinforcing their commercial and political ties and allowing them to accumulate a significant patrimony in terms of land and slaves. A network of commerce, credit, protection and services grew, based on extended preferential solidarity with a kinship support (Dias, 1989, p. 245; 1984, p. 64; Henriques, 1997, p. 115-23).

The power and socio-economic prestige of these alliances amongst elites became more entrenched between the 17th and 18th centuries, based mainly on the almost total control of the slave trade in the interior and to a much lesser extent on agriculture. The adoption of Portuguese inheritance law enabled several families to amass great wealth over several generations (Dias, 1989; 1994; Henriques, 1997).

Despite the important socio-economic sub-divisions, internal rivalries and diversity characterizing these networks, the ties that linked them soon overcame the purely commercial, kinship and clientelist type. They developed specific common socio-cultural traits combining (not without internal contradictions) a double inherited register, African and European, characterizing the Mbundu/Creole area, the Luanda-Catete-Malange corridor and the territories between the Dande and Kwanza-rivers (Birmingham, 1966, p. 17).

Although short (1641-1648), the Dutch occupation of Luanda had a significant symbolic impact on the political and identity utopia that later emerged in that area, having enmeshed in the existing political trade and even family alliances — e.g. the Van Dunem family, extended in myriad branches since 1600, but with its core still influential in current politics — (Birmingham, 2015, p. 23-24). Having occupied the North-East of Brazil since 1630, the Dutch presented new opportunities for the slave trade in face of a weakening Portuguese empire since the Spanish domain of the crown in 1580 (Heywood & Thornton, 2007). The alliance of Queen NZinga with the Dutch against the Portuguese is today part of the narrative of a much-praised historical diplomatic ability and tradition at the service of political autonomy and of a specific "Angolaness" (Mbundu/Creole at origin).

This process was much more than a simple clever combination of registers or dialogic appropriation/negotiation of a place and a role within registers, as partially argued by Péclard to the central plateaux Ovimbundu societies in relation to the protestant missions at the end of the 19th century (2015, p. 29-31). The MBundu/Creole matrix raised over the

centuries as an ambitious identity project. It nurtures an enormous pride of its idiosyncrasy, convinced that it managed to understand, manipulate and efficiently surmount those two founding registers to breed its own specific identity matrix — pretentiously self-defined as "Angolaness" at the 20th century, as brilliantly explored by Marissa Moorman as a cultural ethos with political import — (2008, p. 3) and political project (leadership of Angola in mid 1950s and throughout the 1960s).

Here lies the essence of the Mbundu/Creole matrix as an historical and socio-cultural phenomenon, which should never be confused with the question of skin colour. Their boundaries as a socio-cultural group are very imprecise given its hybrid and sometimes contradictory character at start, propelled by hegemonic ambition, trying to expand socially and geographically to the whole territory.

Altogether, these elites dominated the commercial, administrative, ecclesiastic and military structures. This process suffered a major setback in mid-19th century due to the transformations that occurred in the colonial economy — replacement of the slave-trade by "legitimate trade" and the growing competition at all levels from the increased arrival of white Portuguese (Dias, 1989; 1995; 1994). Such setback led to a progressive economic and political downgrading of the Mbundu/Creole elites, generating their first cultural/political reaction between 1870 and 1930, sometimes called proto-nationalism to distinguish it from a subsequent so-called modern nationalism. The modern nationalism would develop in the late 1950s within the Mbundu/Creole elites (old and new) and from which the MPLA will emerge as their most clearly defined political project (Messiant, 1983, 1989; Freudenthal, 2000).

Emerging politically in urban centres of Angola and Europe, because of their privileged status as educated elites — and having in mind that they were the first to acquire a sense of Angola as an administrative-territorial unity due to the positions occupied in the colonial administration —, these militants of modern nationalism denounced the racial domination of colonisation and the failure of assimilation; they adopted nationalism supported by values that were creole, universalistic, national, multiracial, multi-ethnic, Christian humanistic, but also Socialist. It is from this group that emerged those who were to form the MPLA, who were to give it shape, its discourse and ideology (Messiant, 1983; 1989; 1994; 1995).

Moorman has adequately used the concept of Cosmopolitanism to explain a set of practices, no less African for incorporating modes of articulation and ideas considered to be European, as a dynamic mode of African self-articulation rather than a European imposition. In this way, we avoid the pitfalls of Portuguese exceptionalism as proposed in lusotropicalism, as well as the too-narrow sense of cultural nationalism offered in calls for African authenticity. With cosmopolitanism Angolans moved towards nation and not away from it; they claimed national sovereignty through worldliness, instead of opposing

one to the other (2008, p. 18). However, the Angolans referred by Moorman are effectively those carrying the historical matrix here characterized and aiming to extend it to the nation.

The MPLA's traditional elites have nurtured the sense (useful to their power ambition) that their centuries-old idiosyncrasy with a strong western trait, embodies modern nationalism, progressivism, universalism and humanism through cosmopolitanism. Therefore, such characteristics would sustain and added legitimacy to their ambitions to lead nationalism and political utopian project — independent Angola — into the modern world that prizes such values; be it through the so-called progressivism of the Socialist period, or through the late 1980s and 1990s transition to multiparty politics, but without losing its identity (a so-called "Angolaness", *Angolanidade*), pride and need to preserve its autonomy and dominance, once lost to the colonial power and recovered at high cost (leadership of Angola).

The original matrix then went through a process of self-reformulation within a modern discourse, standing not only for an independent country but also and foremost for an independent identity (Angolaness). This identity aimed to encompass and somehow incorporate the diversity of cultures in the territory and become a legitimate nation in a supposedly world of modern nations.

The MPLA's notion of Angola is not "first and foremost [...] the historical product of Portuguese imperialism" (Oliveira, 2015, p. 18), but of its own national imperialism based on two main factors. First, on its pride of an autonomous identity, governing and diplomatic abilities, that went beyond its founding registers and rose above other socio-cultural groups, thus conquering the "right" to lead and expand "its" national project, conceptualized as the modern materialization of a centuries-old *Weltanschauung* and identity. Second, on the consciousness of the vital need for such hegemony when considering the reaction of competing groups (eventually more "genuinely" African), particularly evident and revived in crucial moments of the country's political history, be it the nationalist struggle, the civil war at independence and the electoral processes of the long multiparty transition process (Cf. infra).

However, as shown in the following sections, it would be wrong to consider the referred historical-social-cultural dynamics as an exclusive of elites or to consider the "rest" of "the people" as passive ahistorical extras for the elites' protagonist role. The sociological-historical post-independence dynamics allowed the MPLA to acquire a national footprint — strongly backed by its manipulative but effective use of a modern developmental international discourse over the years. The MPLA became much more than the original political project of the Mbundu/Creole elites and much more than the alliance (co-option) of other elites. Resorting to a Weberian terminology, we would say that through a long history of dispute, struggle (*Kampf*) and social relationships (*soziale Beziehungen*)[4] analyzed in the following

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[4] (Weber, 1971; 1964).

sections, the MPLA's "Angolaness" national project became dominant — although, obviously, not exclusive and not free from several internal contradictions and tensions even within its original core (Tali, 1996, p. 172-197). It gathered an undeniable significant social support until today that would not be explainable otherwise.

Angolan "national" liberation in struggle for hegemony and nationhood

The unequal historical and geographic impact of the European presence in Angola altogether with the pre-European dynamics of identities in the territory, will politically and most visibly express itself on the tripartite nature of Angolan nationalism. We had the MPLA and FNLA (National Liberation Front of Angola) created in late 1950s/early 1960s and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) founded in 1966.

The competition between rival elites for power, a rivalry firstly exercised during the anti-colonial struggle, was founded on several socio-cultural cleavages — elite fractions, race, religion, region, ethno-linguistic (Messiant, 1983), some of them prior to the Portuguese (Carvalho, 1997). However, the most politically influential cleavage with an impact to the nationalist period arose between the elites that had been significantly marked by the Portuguese colonization and those that had not, emerging from the numerous Bakongo emigrants to the Belgian Congo. Following the example of the Congolese elites, they challenged colonialism exalting the black race and the Kongo people's pride. They were the founders of UPNA (Union of Peoples of Northern Angola), then transformed into UPA (Union of Peoples of Angola), and finally into the FNLA. The FNLA was thus, first of all, a regional-nationalist movement, whose leaders belonged to protestant families and the aristocracy of the old Kongo kingdom. Their ideology was liberal-nationalistic, but radically African, much opposed not only to colonialism but also to any Portuguese cultural influence.

Towards the end of the 1950s and early 1960s, there was an extreme contrast between these two elites, mutually and strongly rejecting each other. Confronted with the polarization between the FNLA and the MPLA, most of the new educated nationalists, outside the historical areas of Portuguese influence, chose the FNLA in the early 1960s, in spite of its ethnic nationalism. The same happened to the educated nationalists of the central plateaux, such as Savimbi, who later abandoned the FNLA because of ethnic bias in favor of the Bakongo, but who still found the MPLA too Creole, assimilated and mestizo, forming instead their own movement (UNITA), which after independence would be increasingly related to, and identified with, the ethno-linguistic group of the Ovimbundu (Heywood, 2000; Péclard, 2015).

These tripartite dynamics would from then on greatly influence the country's historical-political path: first, with the emergence of centripetal forces generating a stronger and greatly

enlarged alliance at the MPLA, much beyond its initial core constituencies, in contrast to the other two movements which remained relatively more regionally, ethno-linguistically and culturally circumscribed; second, a ferocious competition for power in the newly independent State, with increasing ethnic overtones and international involvement in the 1970s and 1980s; third, a "vital" commitment by the MPLA's regime to the safeguarding of its national (hegemonic) project, proactively adapting to changing domestic and international contexts and legitimacy criteria.

The 15 March 1961 FNLA uprising, killing not only whites but all those who were not Bakongo (Wheeler & Pélissier, 1970, p. 178), expanded and reinforced the MPLA's alliance much beyond its core constituencies and openly started the contest for power and identity hegemony in the future independent State. The two, and then three movements, fought amongst themselves for the hegemonic leadership of Angolan nationalism, to such an extent that the anti-colonial struggle often took second place, evidencing that much more was at stake than independence (Guimarães, 1998, p. 57-58/64).

Overt military aggression between the three movements progressed unabated until independence, degenerating into civil war with increasing ethnic overtones (Birmingham, 1992, p. 88; Messiant, 1995, p. 44, 1995a) and increasing international involvement that went back to the anti-colonial struggle (Guimarães, 1998). However, despite such increasing ethnic overtone and internationalisation, the struggle between nationalist movements cannot be said to have been transformed either into a mere stage of the Cold War or into an ethnic conflict.

Although this theme cannot be explored here, it should be stressed that despite the fact that the MPLA was clearly dominated by the Mbundu/Creole elites, it made an unparalleled effort, throughout the anti-colonial struggle and towards independence, of integrating members (selective cooption) from other ethno-linguistic groups and regions: North (Bakongo), East (Lunda-Tchokwe; Mbunda; Luchaze), South (Herero; Cuvale). The integration of members from the central plateaux (Ovimbundu) was harder and remained that way after independence and until the death of UNITA's leader — Savimbi (Vidal, 2002; Mabeko-Tali, 1996).

Such a singular feature was certainly related to the practice of internal compromise within the Creole/Mbundu elites in evidence since the 16th century and buttressed by an initially strong universalist discourse (itself needed to surmount the Creole/Mbundu fragilities in demographic and cultural terms, being less "genuinely" African given its hybrid genesis). Thus the scope of the Mbundu/Creole alliance broadened in a way not paralleled at all by the other two movements.

Nevertheless, the bi-partition and then three-partition of the nationalist movement brought about the hegemonic power struggle for control of the State — the State being seen

in the colonial period as the mechanism assuring hegemony for the sake of cultural (identity), political and economic domination. In these terms, the struggle for power in the future State (especially acute during the 1975-1976 open warfare between the movements) had taken on a vital importance — "bloody and brutal […] like a war of religion" (Soremekun, 1983, p. 212), and had become a "zero-sum struggle" (Hodges, 1987, p. 8) where the winner would secure hegemony for dominance, while the losers would have to count on subordinated co-optation.

Accordingly, the conflict surrounding independence (1975-1976) is officially described by the MPLA as a "struggle for the hegemony and exclusivity of power" (MPLA, 1996, p. 51). The FNLA saw it in the same way, "convinced that its military strength would in the end permit it to 'grab the whole cake'" (Heimer, 1979, p. 65). And for UNITA, the expected electoral victory — due to the Ovimbundu demographic weight — or a possible federalist arrangement were seen as the most efficient ways "to get the biggest share" and the leading role in the new political system (Heimer, 1979, p. 65), while also considering its relative military weakness.

Beyond the intricacies of that process, after the open military confrontation between the three movements and direct and indirect foreign involvement, the MPLA won that struggle for the State's hegemonic control. However, contrary to recent interpretations, this was not by then — and it is still not today — merely related to material fruition of power by an oligarchy (Oliveira, 2015, p. 212-218). It was and is first and foremost about a victory of a centuries-old quest for cultural and political domination of a socio-cultural matrix that started as a minority within the Angolan context through its most successful political project, the MPLA, sustained by the control of the State and its resources and the dominance of "its" concept of Angolaness and Angola as a modern nation (*Weltanschauung*).

Although the modern nationalist discourse, as known through the nationalist struggle and early independence, became structured and shaped through the leading elites of the three movements, processes of conflict territorialisation and identity in Angola have roots beyond elites' political projects and are centuries older than the nationalist struggle and the period surrounding the independence, contradicting some recent interpretations, such as Pearce (2015). The dynamics of conflict and identity in Angola owes a lot to culture and a rich/complex history as explained at length by Messiant (1983) and Carvalho (1997, 2011).

As stressed by Jill Dias, the socio-historical dynamics leading to the Mbundu/Creole identity had a strong impact on all the peoples inhabiting the centre-North region, much beyond the elites (1989, p. 241). Thus, when the open and total warfare between the nationalist movements broke out massively involving the great majority of the population, much of the rural masses of this region "naturally" felt closer to the Mbundu/Creole elites and "their" most significant political project: the MPLA.

The same happened with much of the rural populations of the former Kongo kingdom region in relation to the UPNA/UPA/FNLA, with a clear traumatic memory of the historical destruction of the kingdom when Portugal began favouring the Centre-North penetration, leading to the Mbundu/Creole alliance and ascendancy. And the same could also be said to much of the central plateaux rural masses in relation to UNITA, as independence approached and open conflict between movements emerged, in a region with a centuries-old history of territoriality and identity dynamics along with trade competition and conflict with other regions (Henriques, 1997; Heywood, 2000; Carvalho 1997, 2011, p. 19-40).

Likewise, as clearly argued by Morman, there are cultural and nationalist tendencies that also developed independently and beyond the three political movements and elites usually associated with Angolan nationalism (2008). In the same terms, the civil war erupting at independence also created sociological dynamics through massive migration movements, compulsory conscription in the armed forces and life experiences that also propelled forms of national consciousness and internationalization, beyond the political/ideological manipulative discourses of the main contenders (Carvalho, 2011, p. 20-21).

Moreover, as also explained by Carvalho, constantly reformulated and recreated sub-national identities co-exist and articulate with the also constantly evolving national identity, these are in no way self-excluding dimensions of identity up to nowadays (Carvalho, 2011, p. 19-40).

Despite such complex historical dynamics of identity/identities through a long history of *Kampf* and *soziale Beziehungen*, in the end, it seems that such processes ended up favoring the MPLA's politically created and manipulated discourse of "its Angolaness" (urban, modern developmental, westernized, hybrid and cosmopolitan) rather than UNITA's, as studied by Pearce (2015). Being the most "fragile" group in demographic and "cultural" terms — being the most recent in Angola's history and not genuinely "African" as sequentially accused by the FNLA and UNITA —, the need to nurture a bond beyond simple ethnic-regional-linguistic and sociological terms gained a stronger character when compared to the contenders. The MPLA thus supported the construction of a political project based on a *Weltanschauung* and an ethos, including values and a social-political utopia in search for universalism/imperialism inside Angola — identity/power hegemony.[5]

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[5] Although it could also be explored that both the FNLA and UNITA also had their own specific world vision associated to some specific political project (oppositely identified in relation to the MPLA's or not), such projects never materialized in a State organization as the one of the MPLA, not even UNITA's in the so-called Free Lands of Jamba during the 1980s or even less the FNLA's Government in Exile in the 1960s (GRAE; *Governo Revolucionário Angolano no Exílio*) or the so-called and born-death Angolan Democratic Republic, which for a month after independence was announced by UNITA and FNLA at the central plateaux to supposedly oppose the MPLA's Popular Republic of Angola in Luanda. Moreover, this paper is centred on the MPLA and not the other movements, which are beyond the scope and limits of this article.

Post-independence construction of political and identity hegemony

The new (independent) political system then followed a "modern patrimonial" dynamics disguised behind the façade of a modern State template that was Socialist, with the corresponding revolutionary modern developmental legitimacy.

Post-independence Angolan patrimonialism started off, during Neto's administration, by being partisan in nature, soon to become presidential and increasingly authoritarian, especially after the party-political purge so-called "rectification movement" (Vidal, 2007) that followed the bloody purge of the post-27th May 1977 attempted coup (Pawson, 2014). It also became increasingly elitist, especially during the Dos Santos administration in the mid-1980s (Vidal, 2002; 2007). Nevertheless, that does not mean that the party lost or forgot the importance of preserving its symbolic capital as an articulation mechanism for the broader alliance beyond the elites and the vehicle for the construction of "its" promoted "Angolan" identity; it simply became less instrumental in day-to-day management of the neo-patrimonial system, especially with the ascendancy of SONANGOL to that role, promoted by Neto and then greatly developed by the new president. This phenomenon was facilitated by the enclave and rentière nature of the main source of revenue, oil, as well as the civil war, which intensified in the 1980s with stronger international involvement. The threats and challenges brought by the civil war with strong international involvement also propelled the ever-increasing power concentration and centralization in the Presidency for purposes of flexible management and quick decision-making.

The loss of party instrumentality in day-to-day management, authoritarianism and the increasing elitism in the access to resources did not mean the loss of legitimacy within the party constituencies either. The increasing intensity of the war in the 1980s also served, on the one hand, as an excuse for the decline of poor State delivery of services and, on the other, the stronger the guerrilla activity of UNITA, the stronger was its identification with the Ovimbundu — also politically manipulated by the MPLA — and the stronger was the threat to the MPLA's alliance and project/identity — increasingly self-portrayed as urban, cosmopolitan and modern developmental in contrast to UNITA's characterization as backward, traditional, rural, tribal (Pearce, 2015), and therefore sub-national. These phenomena provided the MPLA with far more support than would otherwise have been the case.

These are the main factors allowing an ambiguous process whereby it was possible for the government to progressively alienate (economically and politically) the majority of the population but without losing the political support of those identified with the "great alliance", its urban/modern identity and "political project" and/or simply fearing UNITA. Thereby, the alliance proceeded strengthening much beyond its core constituencies.

Just like Neto, the new president also had to assert his personal and institutional power over the old party barons, who entered a conflict within the MPLA ranks for prominence and influence as soon as Neto died. Once again, an internal political purge followed — although restricted and less bloody than in 1977 —, essentially targeting the central party organs. Dos Santos downgraded the old party barons and surrounded himself with an entourage of carefully selected, competent, young and loyal cadres, while refining the complex game of patronage politics, dividing and ruling over party groups and personalities, including the military. From then on, Dos Santos carefully prevented the prominence of other personalities and autonomous constituencies, constantly circulating such members through myriad positions in State administration and military structures all over the country and even abroad in embassies (Vidal, 2007).

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that most of the top-members of those structures (civil and military), maintained a strong sense of identification with what the MPLA represents in socio-cultural-historical and political terms, with a strong consciousness that personal sacrifices — unfair and tough as they might be — have to be accepted silently for the sake of the bigger interest at stake — MPLA's rule, identity and power project. Such dimension is much stronger than any sectorial solidarity such as the military, impeding the military to become an autonomous political actor as such, as happened in other African cases (e.g. Nigeria).

By the late 1980s, the international context started to change, and Cold War came to an end, representing a major challenge to the MPLA's regime. Once again, the socio-historical matrix and experience of flexible articulation of domestic and international contexts resurfaced and proved crucial. Even though UNITA "happened" to be on the "right" side of the Cold War as it came to an end, it was the MPLA who better understood the changing context since the late 1980s and adapted quicker.

First, economic reforms were adopted through the Economic and Financial Clean-up Program (SEF), which, as soon as 1987, paved the way for economic liberalization. Second, diplomatic negotiations were entailed with South Africa, the US and Cuba in late 1980s, leading to the withdrawal of Cuban troops, Namibia's independence and to the 1991 Bicesse peace agreement between the MPLA and UNITA, conceding to the 1992 multiparty elections. Third, the party was swiftly and effectively restructured to face the new challenge. The Socialist model officially ended at the third MPLA congress of December 1990, and the third MPLA extraordinary congress of May 1992 set the electoral strategy to secure hegemony within a new modern legitimacy (liberal multiparty setting).

The electoral process and campaign were carefully prepared to once again adapt and assume the "right" national and international dominant discourse — peaceful, humanist, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, modern (now liberal) developmental —, tempting the Western governments and companies with new opportunities under a new so-called liberal social-democratic party orientation.

Most important though, it was now time to recall the expanded identity matrix and ethos, appealing to the re-union of the party's "Great Family" (*Unir a Grande Família do MPLA*)[6], which became the official slogan to the electoral campaign, appealing to all those identified with/allied to the MPLA, though distanced from party militancy for no matter what reason and/or simply fearing UNITA, constantly demonized in MPLA's massive propaganda. It was now a gathering call of an ethos, remembering what the priority was: the survival of a centuries-old national power project. The strategy proved right, unexpectedly helped by UNITA's revanchist identity electoral discourse against the MPLA's culture, explicitly characterized and despised as creole and urban-assimilated (Messiant, 1995a).

The strategy proceeded through a major and effective rehabilitation of party base structures, including traditional authorities. Several former leaders from the nationalist period were re-called to prominent positions and the party recovered its long-gone mass-party character; membership rose from 65,362 members in 1990 to 544,639 by the end of 1992 (Vidal, 2007). Lastly, the State structure (legislative, executive and judicial), logistics and resources, as well as the media — all maintained under MPLA's control —, were extensively used in favour of the party's campaign, including extensive distribution of benefits and a professionally managed electoral campaign, altogether with the maintenance of some dose of authoritarianism and control of political and civil liberties (Messiant, 1995a). This electoral recipe will be intensively repeated in each election from then on.

Within such context, in Angola's first nationwide multiparty elections ever, a turn-out of 91% of 4.4 million registered voters gave the MPLA 53.74% of the legislative vote against 34.10% to UNITA, while President Dos Santos got 49.57% against Savimbi's 40.07%. There should have been a presidential election run-off, but UNITA contested the results and war resumed, extending for another decade with several hiccups in terms of military intensity and diplomatic activity (Birmingham, 2015, p. 109-124; Weigert, 2011).

In order to finally conclude the legitimacy process halted in 1992, new elections had to occur. Nonetheless, elections were strategically postponed until the MPLA felt confident enough to assure a resounding victory, a qualified majority of the votes for parliament, enabling the party to govern with total autonomy from the opposition and maintain its power hegemony within the new multiparty context.

The MPLA's fifth congress in 2003 set the electoral strategy, partially returning to the major lines defined at the third extraordinary congress of 1992. This meant: first, proceed with mass party membership, now especially targeting the central plateaux (UNITA's traditional stronghold), co-opting UNITA ex-combatants who massively started to join the MPLA since 2004 in order to access the support promised to help them integrate back

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[6] We have translated the Portuguese word *grande* as "big" and *Grande* as Great, as these are the two meanings of that same word in Portuguese, depending on the way it is originally written, capitalized or not.

into civil life (Roque, 2008); second, a self-recycled modern identity, now social-democrat, pacifist, integrative (humanitarian Western-civilized), gender balanced, environmentally concerned, gay-friendly, in contrast to the once again emphatically characterized bellicose, revanchist, regionalist, rural-tribal-traditional, backward UNITA; third, the expansion of public spending and investment; fourth, the manipulative control of the State apparatus; fifth, a flexible political and economic diplomacy.

Taking advantage of record-high oil revenues and more favorable oil-backed loans from China — a new partner found by the flexible diplomacy when the IMF and the World Bank became imposing political conditions on their loans —, the MPLA heavily invested on infrastructure to support its argument that the country's progress had been stalled for 27 years by UNITA.

National broadcasting for television and radio remained State monopoly and were intensively used for propaganda. Severe constraints were imposed on the private media, including the blocking of the only relatively independent radio station — the Catholic Church radio *Ecclesia* — from broadcasting outside Luanda.

As it did prior to the 1992 elections and taking full political advantage of the control over the legislature, the party legislated according to its interests, especially at the level of the electoral process and structures (Vidal, 2016).

Political control over the judiciary remained as strong as ever, including the Presidential power to appoint Supreme Court judges without confirmation by the National Assembly.

Directly or indirectly, the president and the party kept a tight grip over each and every significant business activity in the country, public or private, resulting in oligopolies in the politically crucial private sectors like banks, communications, cement, diamonds, insurance and transport (Oliveira, 2015).

Opposition parties remained politically and financially fragile, living on funds coming out of the State budget which were paid irregularly, and sometimes even suspended, disrupting their activities and exerting political pressure (Vidal, 2016).

In such context, when the 2008 elections came, the domestic and international context was objectively favorable to the MPLA as never before. However, above anything else, it was able to convincingly portray itself (domestically and internationally) as the best (exclusive) assurance for the maintenance of peace, security and modern liberal development, in contrast with UNITA's proven inability to govern the cities. During the time it controlled the city of Huambo and partially the city of Kuito, UNITA was unable to provide civil services, health, food, education and employment in modern economy sectors (Pearce, 2015, p. 125-142).

Unsurprisingly, the MPLA managed to achieve its carefully prepared resounding victory with 81.64% of the vote against 10.39% of UNITA in a turnout of 87.36% of 8,256,584 registered

voters. International observers, such as the EU and the AU Pan-African Parliament, recognized several procedural electoral shortcomings, but generally approved the electoral results.

By then, the party and its regime had finally managed to close the 1992 process of legitimacy renewal. More than that, the MPLA's core elites assumed the smashing electoral victory — after the no less smashing military and diplomatic victory at the regional and international level —, as the victory of the party's old self-attributed status as the embodiment (creator) of "Angolaness" (national, modern, hybrid, cosmopolitan) and the embodiment of the "Angolan" people (not its political representative for a legislature). Recalling the old political slogan at the independence — which was then more than a slogan but a centuries-old cultural, sociological and political utopia —, the MPLA assumed its victories as the confirmation that it was, in fact, the people and the people was the MPLA (*o MPLA é o Povo e o Povo é o MPLA*). It was now the apex of MPLA's national imperialism, which was actually the reflection of a centuries-old *Weltanschauung* on the making — MPLA's Angola and "Angolaness".

MPLA's Angola to the 2020s: the struggle for power and identity hegemony continues

With more than 2/3 of votes at the 2008 elections and in face of a new international context, which combined the oil prices' boom and Western financial crisis, the regime saw the opportunity to expand its legitimacy and strength.

At the domestic level, the approval of a new constitution consecrated the decades-old presidential supremacy over the legislative, the executive and the judicial, but now within a multiparty setting, characterized by some as superlative-presidentialism (Moreira, 2010). Ignoring the domestic and international criticism, the president was to be elected as the first name of the candidates' list produced by the majority party.

At the international level, a strategy was set for the expansion (legitimization) of the regime abroad, through massive investments (internationalization) of patrimonial accumulated capital. Once again, as in 1987 with SEF, the move was mainly proactive.

Taking advantage of the European financial crisis (mainly Portugal) and of the massive influx of capital as oil prices soared from 2009 onwards, the regime heavily, arrogantly and aggressively invested in Portuguese strategic sectors such as banks, communications, energy, media, and insurances. This investment strategy was led by SONANGOL, the president's daughter, Isabel dos Santos, and several of the president's closest advisors, including the military (Oliveira, 2015; Costa et al., 2014; Fernandes, 2015; Filipe, 2013).

The strategy served not only to the laundering of public capital appropriated by the elites in power, but also and mainly to increase the regime's international leverage and

legitimization, extending clientele networks abroad, gathering allies and accomplices (Vidal, 2011).

The "superlative-presidentialism" (Moreira, 2010), over the State organs, once again favored the party in power and its candidate for the 2012 electoral race reflected in the electoral process structures, logistics, legislation, and campaign. New suspicions on the supposed influence over the judicial were raised through the much-contested decisions of the Constitutional Court to reject the application of a few well-known opposition parties while accepting other newcomers created by the MPLA to support its campaign (Vidal, 2016). A wealthy-funded campaign was carefully managed by the party and the presidency — mainly the military cabinet of the presidency (*Casa Militar da Presidência da República*) —, along with its foreign consultants and state-of–the-art political marketing (Roque, 2013).

The state media reached the level of outrageous propaganda for the party in government. The only relatively independent radio broadcast — Catholic Church's radio *Ecclesia* — progressively lowered its quest for national broadcasts up to the point when, in December 2012 (three months after elections), surprisingly dropped its petition and long-time struggle to national broadcast. The influence over the private media was also extended with the rise of new and well-funded pro-regime media corporations owned by the regime elites (Filipe, 2013), attracting several of the best journalists and suffocating smaller and relatively independent newspapers that went bankrupt for lack of advertising — largely controlled by the regime itself.

In the end, the MPLA again reached its main goal, being able to retain its qualified 2/3 majority of the votes at the 2012 elections with 71.84% of the votes, although smaller than the 81% obtained in 2008. This time EU observers were not invited and the invited international organisations (African Union and SADC) basically praised the peaceful and mature way in which the elections took place, generally considering them transparent, "free and fair" within an extremely government-friendly tone (SADC, 2012, p. 14).

Alleged proofs of electoral fraud were filed and presented by UNITA and other opposition parties (PRS and CASA-CE) to the National Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Court but were again dismissed by both.

Considering the usual characterizations of the regime as an oligarchic and neo-patrimonial clever management of an abundant oil rent with authoritarianism, and considering that oil still represents 95% of export earnings and more than half of government revenues,[7] it would be expectable to see a major strain on the regime in face of the steady decrease in oil prices since the second semester of 2014. Government negotiations with the IMF in 2016 seemed to support such analyses, some of them considering that the regime's survival was

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[7] Reuters Africa, "IMF says Angola needs fiscal prudence in run-up to 2017 elections".Available at <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN0ZO28Q>. Accessed on June 14, 2016.

at stake. However, as soon as the IMF "suggested" budget restrictive measures in view of the 2017 elections, the government "clarified" that it was merely interested in technical consultations, not loans, again demonstrating its self-confidence that it is much more than simple clientelism, patrimonial distribution and authoritarianism.

Likewise, the (presidential) option for a new electoral model without direct presidential elections — where the party rises above the president — is itself revealing of the president's consciousness that the party represents much more than himself. More revealing, though, was "his" decision to leave politics, announced at the Central Committee meeting of 11 March 2016. His successor, João Lourenço, was the minister of Defense, and the selection seems to have been a party decision, much more than the president's choice. Lourenço would be the party's candidate for the presidency at the 2017 legislative/presidential elections, and therefore his immediate successor. Most analysts expected Dos Santos to be able to choose a successor within his family to avoid international legal liability when leaving office. The decision, however, proved the party's strength, capable to overcome the dangers of a political succession after 36 years, announced only 6 months prior to elections and to someone whose major credentials are a sound, although discreet, party *parcours*, outside the presidential family and outside the closest presidential circle of political and/or business advisers/partners. Moreover, Lourenço was known to hold serious hard feelings towards Dos Santos, after being downgraded inside the government for more than ten years, since 1998.[8]

Following the same old electoral strategies and mechanisms since 1992, the MPLA machinery carefully prepared for new elections in August 2017. This time, however, the context was much more unfavorable when compared to all the previous elections, characterized by a deep financial and economic crisis out of a steep and extended downturn in oil prices.

There was a distributive expansion typical of electoral periods, but this time much more contained and with significantly less funds due to the crisis. Still, the control over the State administration machinery, State resources, control of the legislative and the judicial, as well as the electoral management body and the State media, all proved crucial. Despite an increase at the level of sophistication on those old electoral strategies, their use was evident and important to assure the 61% MPLA electoral win at the 23rd August election. The party lost circa 10% of the vote since 2012, but still managed to obtain a smashing victory amidst an unfavorable context, proving that it is much more than a usual authoritarian neo-patrimonial machine.

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[8] By then, Dos Santos publicly assumed his intention to leave power and, in face of that, Lourenço assumed in an interview the intention to become president. From then on, Dos Santos submitted him to a decade-long "cross of the desert" with regards to government top positions, being later progressively recovered (as usual within Dos Santos' political management). During that time, Lourenço always managed to keep important positions at the party level and his party credibility was not affected by that episode.

Although international observers praised the electoral process as free and transparent, once again several opposition parties presented alleged proofs of electoral fraud to the National Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Court but were again dismissed by both. Within a precipitated move, only a few hours after the close of the pools, UNITA publicly announced that it had in its possession the copies of 95% of the polling tables counting registers — a document that is signed by all the parties' delegates to the polling tables at the end of the vote counting —, and according to its own parallel counting the MPLA should prepare itself to leave power.[9] CASA-CE, on its turn, had started a parallel counting system on the web, also based in the information sent by its delegates to the polling tables, but soon suspended it only a few hours after the close of the polling tables. The MPLA soon rejected such claims of victory form the opposition.[10] The dispute could be sorted out with the presentation of the mentioned copies of the polling stations' register that allegedly showed a different result from the provisional results announced by the National Electoral Commission on August 24th. However, neither UNITA nor CASA-CE ever presented such copies, which represented a major blow to the opposition credibility on massive fraud allegations.

Despite the previously referred tight control over several important structures and variables conditioning the electoral outcome, and even though the allegations of the opposition on electoral malpractices should be taking seriously (requiring further investigation), one cannot in any way explain the victories of the MPLA in 1992, 2008, 2012, and 2017 with electoral fraud. The economic growth — although unbalanced and oil-dependent —, the investment in social and poverty-reduction policies — although limited and far from sufficient while considering the amount of available funds —, the distributive expansion of the post-2008 period — although asymmetric and slowing down since 2014 —, the rise of a middle-class — although still weak and a minority —, and, most of all, the MPLA's ability to socially embody and represent a significant constituency and acquire a national footprint since independence (expanding its own concept of Angola and "Angolaness", much beyond urban areas, beyond the president and his clique), should explain the MPLA's victories.

Above all, it is worth mentioning the regime's resilience supported by the same old ability to constantly innovate and proactively adapt and re-legitimize in face of new and challenging domestic and international contexts for the sake of a bigger goal prevailing over generations: power and identity hegemony.

The presidential transition intricacies through the 2020's will shed some light on the directions to be followed by the historical quest of a socio-cultural matrix for the political

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[9] Declaration of José Pedro Cachiungo, coordinator of UNITAs electoral campaign, broadcasted by *Radio National de Angola* on the 23rd of August at the 21:00h news bulletin.
[10] Declaration of Ju Martins, MPLA's secretary for political and electoral affairs, broadcasted by *Radio National de Angola* on the 23rd of August at the 22:00h news bulletin.

leadership of their "Angolan" utopian project and *Weltanschauung*. However, more than anything else, the future of such quest will continue to depend upon a constantly revived consciousness of itself, the nurture of its ethos, based on socio-historical identity and on the need for hegemony for its survival — "The Great Angolan Family", pretentiously embodied by the MPLA.

> This VII Congress of the Party is an important moment to strength our union, reinforce the ideals that have always guided the MPLA, and to show that the MPLA is the Party of the Great Angolan Family. […] Through these years we had our internal issues […]. Our differences, instead of weakening us, make us stronger […]. For that reason, more than one Party, the MPLA is […] a big Family! (Dos Santos opening speech at the seventh MPLA congress, Luanda 17 Aug. 2016).

In the same terms, the new president João Lourenço — while still a candidate — stressed the importance of the party and felt the need to base his credentials at that level:

> I am no stranger. I have been a party cadre for several years filling several positions. I was secretary-general of the party […]. My main objective is to win the elections […], but it is not the citizen or the party militant João Lourenço that is going to make it, but the MPLA itself, which is a real machine. I feel sufficiently backed to face such challenge. (João Lourenço in *Jornal de Angola*, 4 Feb. 2017)

Finally, the communique of the Central Committee stressed the idea of the old slogan/political ambition of a unified Angolan identity, from Cabinda, in the extreme North, to Cunene, in the extreme South (*De Cabinda ao Cunene*), under the MPLA's leadership: "the MPLA has the conditions to continue the mobilization of the Angolan people, from Cabinda to Cunene, and to assure a convincing electoral victory" (Press Release, MPLA's Central Committee, 10 Feb. 2017).

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