



# CASE STUDY

*October 2024*



**The transition in Angola,**  
*An example of African  
spring*

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## KEY POINTS

After September 2017, Angola seems to have experienced a "Putin-style" scenario that deviated from its original goal of allowing José Eduardo Dos Santos to remain politically and economically influential after handing over power.

His successor, João Lourenço, quickly launched an anti-corruption campaign and political liberalization in the country, to the surprise of both Angolan actors and external observers.

This dual movement followed an economic crisis primarily due to the drop in oil prices in an economy that depends 90% on it, as well as a series of demonstrations organized by activists centered around Luaty Beirão.

Beyond these two explanatory elements, the political liberalization in Angola owes much to Lourenço's personality and was carried out in exceptional ways that would be risky to try to replicate.

Civil society has since taken on the role of an attentive observer, without directly involving itself in the country's governance or the renewal of the opposition.

The true test for the regime's evolution will be in the management of what follows, i.e., the consolidation of the country's democratization by João Lourenço's successor.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Yoweri Museveni, Omar al-Bashir, and Denis Sassou Nguesso are 75 years old, Paul Biya is 86, Nigeria's Muhammadu Buhari is 76, and Mugabe just left power at the age of 94. The average age on the continent is 19: even without being a demographer or political scientist, the disparity and its consequences are striking. It is a source of instability, and the changes in leadership in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, the DRC, as well as the ongoing protests in Sudan, serve as a reminder to the autocrats leading the "democratorships" of the continent.

Angola also experienced a significant change in leadership in 2017, with Eduardo Dos Santos finally stepping down after 38 years in power. The transition was peaceful, sudden, and unexpected, particularly surprising in its scope. This study will briefly examine the underlying factors behind this transition.

### *Recap of the sequence of events*

Angola has been independent from Portugal since 1975; the regime is presidential and unicameral, with the MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), which has been in power since independence, holding 150 of the 220 seats in the Assembly. In August 2017, President José Eduardo Dos Santos, weakened by health issues on one hand and the drop in oil prices since 2014 on the other, preferred to organize his succession rather than risk being ousted from power.

In September 2017, he named his Minister of Defense, João Lourenço, hoping that he would protect his interests and those of his family (his daughter Isabel Dos Santos had been appointed to head the state oil company Sonangol, a cash cow for the regime, and his son José Filomeno Dos Santos had been appointed to head the sovereign wealth fund).

In the first months in power, João Lourenço dismissed key figures from the previous regime (including his predecessor's children and the generals who controlled the country's economic reins) and regained control over the MPLA, which operates as a state within a state. With the support of public opinion in his country and the international community, he orchestrated an anti-corruption campaign, imprisoning former pillars of the regime, and launched a political liberalization movement, freeing opposition figures, initiating dialogue with unions, opening the media to the opposition, and so on.



*Joao Lourenço*

## II. LOW INFLUENCE OF USUAL EXPLANATORY FACTORS

### A - EXTERNAL FACTORS

#### *The international community limited role*

As the collective 'Tournons la page' writes, 'to pretend to democratize authoritarian regimes through friendly foreign pressures is, at best, an illusion'; the current situations in Iraq and Libya have reminded us that democracy, imposed from the outside at a pace that does not align with any internal logic, can destabilize a society. This is especially true in a country like Angola, which had never experienced democracy either during colonization or after independence: in fact, the first pluralistic elections in the country's history in 1992, and *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola's* (UNITA) refusal to recognize the results, plunged Angola back into civil war.

Meanwhile, the foreign powers' interference during the Angolan wars (the United States and South Africa supporting UNITA vs. the USSR and Cuba backing the MPLA) ceased at the end of the Cold War.

Modern Angola, emerging from a liberation struggle, has a national culture steeped in pride and a desire for independence. Moreover, having been forged in conflict and remaining a military power, Angola possesses the necessary strength to support its independent ambitions. Finally, its oil reserves and production provide the financial means for its autonomy, which, for example, allowed Eduardo Dos Santos to reject aid (and oversight) from the International Monetary Found (IMF).

- ① In this regard, 'this is not Africa, in the sense of Francafrique or daddy's Africa': interference is limited, especially since the former colonial power (Portugal) is no longer a power.

On the contrary, during the years of opulence before the oil shock of 2014, many Portuguese companies and a portion of the real estate in Lisbon were being bought by Angola, while young Portuguese affected by the crisis sought work in Angola, resulting in reversed migration flows.

#### *The tenuous role of the diaspora*



Unlike Central Africa, where the intellectual diaspora plays a role in organizing civil society from Paris and Brussels, the Angolan diaspora seems to be relatively unpoliticized.

- ① According to General Manuel Vieira Dias, alias Kopelipa.

Some reserve their energy for conducting business: this is true for young Angolans who continue to leave the country not out of desperation, but as members of the middle class who view a long stay abroad as a necessary step in their careers, much like young Europeans. In this respect, the recent Angolan diaspora differs from other African diasporas: young Angolans believe in the country's growth.

Angola is a wealthy nation, and its citizens are aware of this. The young people who leave—especially to Portugal or Brazil—do so with the intention of returning: salaries for young Angolan graduates are more attractive in Angola than in Portugal.

This part of the diaspora has still managed to have an impact on democratization by becoming 'repats': they sometimes hold significant positions in Angolan society without originally coming from elite backgrounds, and they largely have a liberal political sensitivity.

These young people went to Portugal on scholarships and returned with a liberal European model in mind. As for the older Angolan diaspora, those who fled the war, they indeed left for survival reasons, and today their families are settled in Europe, without any real intention of returning.

They are also both less educated and less politically aware, not sufficiently so to participate in changes in their country of origin. It should be noted that many Angolans hold dual Angolan and Portuguese nationality. This slightly skews the comparison with other African diasporas.

<sup>2</sup> Members of the diaspora who have repatriated.

<sup>3</sup> Including here the cross-border migration of populations living along the Angola/DRC border

## B - INTERNAL FACTORS

### *Low community issues*

During the civil war, Jonas Savimbi portrayed UNITA as the party of the Ovimbundus and, more generally, of all black Angolans and/or those from the southern part of the country, in opposition to the MPLA, which was dominated by a Creole elite from Luanda.

However, while in other newly independent African countries, parties resorted to ethnicism for legitimacy, this communal and regionalist logic quickly weakened in Angola.

Having an ultra-majoritarian party-state, the MPLA, prevented the organization of multiple minority political parties based on ethnic logics, where each would compete to seize state resources. Similarly, the recent leadership renewal in Angola was not tainted by an ethnic reading, allowing Angolan civil society to act in a unified manner.

Finally, the trauma of a long and violent conflict helped suppress residual ethnic divisions, or at least prevented political divisions from aligning with them.



Mosaic, Armed Forces Museum, Luanda

### *Limited role of the opposition*

Because of the MPLA supremacy in Angolan political life, opposition parties such as the UNITA, did not play a role in the recent political transition, as they did not have the ability to do so.

UNITA's leaders didn't realize the opportunity for the party to go with a promising civil society; finally, the youth movement behind the contestation turned down any attempt seen as political solicitation (they did not ask for support, blaming the suspicion on the political class as a whole, and not on the MPLA alone).

The change then came from an MPLA internal contestation, because Dos Santos loss of political capital raised the fear for the state party of being weakened for the

next elections (as seen in the case of the African National Congress (ANC) in neighboring South Africa).

Moreover, the drop in the oil price limited the needed resources to finance the political patronage, that means to purchase internally the support of "big guys" or the MPLA "dinosaurs": paradoxically, change therefore came via the apparatchik, i.e. from the moment they stopped supporting the ruling power because they were no longer in their interest.

Finally, the renewal within the MPLA's political bureau can also be understood according to a classical logic of generational renewal of the elites, with young Turks replacing the old guard.



"Tribute to Heroes", National Museum of Military History, Luanda

### III. CIVIL SOCIETY INFLUENCE

#### A - THE MOVEMENT WAS PART OF A CONTINENTAL TREND

The Burkinabé collective Balai citizen reminds us that 'our number is our strength,' while the pan-African collective Tournons la page emphasizes that 'democracy is a matter of conquest'; otherwise, it would not take root.

In Angola, the similarities with the conditions that led to the Arab Springs were striking: the longevity of the head of state in power, with a political sphere locked down by a single-party system, and the existence of an oligarchy that had enriched itself through oil resources, along with a countercultural urban movement driven by tech-savvy youth (culturally and literally, thanks to the internet).

There are also similarities in the protest process that initiated the movement in two stages (the departure of Dos Santos followed by liberalization under Lourenço) starting in 2011: the absence of political affiliation among the protesters; demonstrations; and the denunciation of the repression of demonstrators by state security forces.

However, beyond the similarities, there was fundamental differences, as the streets of Luanda have never been overwhelmed like Egypt's Tahrir Square: the protests in Angola were led by a small vanguard, with the apparent failure to mobilize the masses behind them.

#### B - DELUSION GENERATION

Why were Angolan activists unable to mobilize the masses, remaining limited to a few hundred demonstrators?

This inability is likely due, in part, to the memory of the suffering endured during the long civil war (and thus the fear of experiencing a similar ordeal again), and, on the other hand, to a specificity of sub-Saharan African countries: the quantitative weakness of urban and educated middle classes.

The observation made by Doris Lessing, who grew up in Zimbabwe, about a 'too patient' population (in the face of the abuses of the ruling power) is, however, becoming obsolete: times have changed, particularly because the young urban populations of Southern Africa are connected to the Internet, which offers them a window to the world and makes inequalities tangible, fueling strong resentment.

The economic conditions forcing young Angolans to find alternative paths, such as informal economies or emigration (only 5% of jobs are in the formal private sector), have created an explosive, if not pre-revolutionary, situation.

④ "the middle class represents the segment of the population that is sufficiently well-off to engage in public life, to 'do politics' in a broad sense, but not rich and powerful enough to be tempted to undermine the transparency of the political system—its control by elected officials and an independent press—(...)" according to Stephen Smith in *The Rush to Europe*.



## 5 C - THE “TIPPING POINT”

A regime that derived its only legitimacy from having won the war and maintained peace since 2002 could no longer contain the impatience of a generation that had not experienced war: for the youth, the MPLA had become more a party of clientelism than one of the struggle for independence.

This impatience, coupled with the use of social media (led by WhatsApp and Facebook) for mobilization, was well understood by the regime: 'Now Angola must control its own population. They have learned the lessons from the Arab Springs.'

The Arab Spring of 2011 demonstrated that change was possible and sparked a hope that quickly gained momentum. This phenomenon of a young, connected urban middle class challenging an old autocrat is not unique to Angola and the Arab world; it has also recently been seen in Angola's neighbors, such as Zimbabwe (the departure of Robert Mugabe) and South Africa (the departure of Jacob Zuma).

## D - METHODS OF ACTION

Although the economic crisis and the political blockage preceding João Lourenço's rise to power did not lead to massive street protests, they clearly galvanized an embryonic yet active and media-savvy civil society.

A group of young activists gathered around the charismatic figure of Luaty Beirão, a famous rapper, and organized

protests, with the goal of ousting President Dos Santos. They were confident that a change at the higher level would lead to political reforms, which ultimately proved to be correct.

The apolitical aspect of the movement was emphasized by the demonstrators; little institutionalized, mainly for security reasons, the organization was also not very hierarchized.

This movement of Angolan youth did not find an echo in trade unions neither was it backed immediately or openly by opposition parties. Such parties did not contribute to the movement through their institutions or militant networks (even though their mobilization capacity on the entire national territory had significant results during the previous electoral campaign).

The mobilization tools were common: use of SMS, social networks, blogosphere and peaceful discourse. In addition, they use to communicate the date, time and place of the rallies beforehand, as well as the routes of the marches to the various local authorities. Finally, they would disseminate the information on the conduct of the demonstrations in real time on the Internet and post videos of the rallies on YouTube and various blogs, etc.

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5 Expression by Gérard Prunier to characterize the turning point of popular movements."

## E - REPRESSION

The protest was violently repressed by the police. Leaders were sent in jail, while others were martyred and the situation became known internationally.

The disproportion of the repression in front of peaceful protests and gatherings proved the authoritarian aspect of the regime, and legitimized consequently an intensification of the young revolutionaries' action, as a domino effect.

The Angolan government's response to the wave of demonstrations has given greater visibility to youth causes, prompted human rights NGOs to take a stand and encouraged activist groups to continue their mobilization.

- The renewed calls to protest after 7 March 2011 openly criticised the violent repression, denounced the disappearances and kidnappings of young demonstrators, the threats they faced with their families, and summary imprisonments.

Yet the government still managed to keep the control over the situation. The repression and spread of fear prevented the mobilization from growing: a few hundred young people involved, just over a dozen gatherings in 2011-2012, and almost no demonstrations in rural Angola where the effects of the war were still being felt. The result of the August 2012 elections and the support of the international community, (which continued to act as if nothing had happened) proved that MPLA were still controlling the situation: the very fact that these protests took place legitimized the democratic nature of the government,

with attacks being attributed to third parties or justified by the fights provoked by the demonstrators themselves during the protests.

However, behind an apparent failure in terms of mobilization from a strictly quantitative point of view, a breach had been opened in the apparent solidity of the regime, whose days were numbered.

## F - CONSEQUENCES

According to leader Luaty Beirao himself, the young activists were taken aback by the speed with which power changed and the country was liberalized; they then wanted to "give Joao Lourenço the benefit of the doubt" and maintain a certain pressure, but without going further than playing the role of the stimulus, because "it is not our job to run the country".

Going against the certainties voiced by Luanda's provincial secretary, Bento Bento, stating that "Angola is not Egypt, Angola is not Libya, Angola is not Tunisia", Dos Santos was forced to pass (intelligently) power at the right time, in order to save what could be saved. He seemed to have been aware of the impatience of the urban youth who had not known war and could no longer wait for their moment.

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<sup>6</sup> First non-partisan protest in Angola since 1977 when an attempt overthrow the government turned into a bloodbath.

## IV. THE TIMING OF THE CHANGE: A REVOLUTION THROUGH BETRAYAL

### A - ANTICIPATE A SPILLOVER

If Dos Santos passed on the power in order to save the future, preserve his family's interests, and pressured by the apparatchiks of MPLA, Lourenço liberalized the country at high speed, even at forced-run for two reasons.

First, because he realized that if he could not liberalize the regime and gave an economic hope, a revolution could happen. Indeed, the masses of unemployed everywhere, cohorts of young idlers had a significant revolutionary potential: a spark would have been enough to mobilize them, and the power feared a social explosion. Therefore, first-class properties were (and still are) statesponsored (bread, flour, sugar and beer) so that the mosek (slums) do not arrive in the city, to avoid hunger riots like recently witnessed in Sudan.

Then Joao Lourenço, discreet and not very charismatic needed additional legitimacy. A credible commensurate with its state leader stature, in order to emancipate and fight against the foreseeable accusations of being the puppet of Dos Santos in a "Putin" scenario. To sum up, Lourenço needed to reinforce his power and show who was in charge: he shook the Angolan institutional apparatus by eliminating a number of corrupt executives, starting with those he did not control and by the head, to play the surprise game and to show that nothing would stop him.

(for example the cases of Kopelipa and Dino, the two main business generals who were so feared that their names were only pronounced by lowering his voice).

Once Lourenço had taken over the state apparatus, ensuring that he was not countered, and that these actions were approved by public opinion, he definitively broke the Dos Santos monopoly on economic capture by getting rid of Isabel and Zenu Dos Santos. He thus deprived them of any ability to react, as their capacity to maintain a network of allies/affiliates became almost non-existent without unding.

Joao Lourenço has above all appointed his brother as deputy director of the President Intelligence Bureau, which oversees the armed forces, the national police and the intelligence services. He also appointed six new provincial governors and 400 senior officials (after firing 230).

At the same time, Lourenço appointed the young people who were "waiting in the third row seats", with the dual effect of creating new people dedicated to him and illustrating his desire for renewal while giving pledges to civil society.

<sup>7</sup> « Desesuardização »

<sup>8</sup> Faisant même incarcérer ce dernier

It should be stressed that putting Dos Santos' son in prison was anything but free. It is indeed breaking a taboo to attack the chief's son in this way (even humiliating him), he was claiming his authority and at the same time showing that no one is untouchable. The characters in the first circle who had initially thought that there would be "a gentlemen's agreement between the two gorillas", but were denied by the facts: "it was a bold move and a strong signal".

Thus, the entire political and economic elites are now silent, because no one is clean in the country: "they are on tenterhooks and do not know what lies in the store for them". Following this rapid takeover of the regime, Joao Lourenço was described as a chess player, but "who takes charge"; the limit of the exercise is that since everyone has been involved in corruption for the past decades, Joao Lourenço cannot renew the entire elite, otherwise he no longer has anyone to govern. He therefore chose a few "big cats" for the example, so that abusive practices would stop, and to prevent young people who were waiting in line from thinking in terms of "it's our time to eat", or stomach politics.

## **B - CATALYST ROLE OF THE LEADER**

While Joao Lourenço's a posteriori orientations seem logical in view of the situation he had to contain, they first surprised all observers, both inside and outside the country. They were pleasantly surprised, as there are not many examples of African heads of state taking strategic decisions in the general interest. There have been few (i.e. Mandela, Khama, etc.) and there are those who have been muzzled before they can act (i.e. Lumumba, Sankara, etc.).

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In this case, the role of the leader in ending the crisis has therefore been crucial, an honest (until proven otherwise) and inspired leader, who has a global intention and knows how to silence ethnic or partisan allegiances. However, Joao Lourenço is a 60-year-old general trained in Russia: not really the typical profile of the young leader ready to make a change in governance, change habits and democratize a country.

"Behind every great man there is a great lady": it is worth mentioning here the positive role that the wife of the Angolan President would play. Very intelligent, well-connected, former World Bank executive in Washington, former minister, she is the anti-Simon Gbagbo or Agathe Habyarimana: Ana Dias Lourenço has a lot of influence, with the difference that when she speaks in the ear of the Head of State, it is not to breathe on the embers.

Besides the influence of his wife, what can explain the exception Joao Lourenço? Just as there are several levers for an officer to make a source speak (pride, ambition, pride, money, etc.), so can there be various motivations behind the actions of a man in power. A man of Lourenço's age may not be aiming for money, but for a place in history as a reformer, for the common good. The worst is never certain, and "JLo", as the people nicknamed him, may also simply want to get his country back on its feet. Especially if this leads to being awarded the Mo Ibrahim Prize for African leadership (of 1 million dollars), while on the other hand crime does not necessarily pay (cf. the end of life of Mobutu, Idi Amin, Khadafi, etc.). It is not forbidden for a leader to learn lessons from history.

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## V. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

What lessons can be learned from Angola's apparent forced democratization since 2017? First, that, as it is often the case, the economic factor has been decisive (falling oil prices that have blocked the relative redistribution and weakened the power in place); second, that the concrete modalities of change have not taken place according to a known pattern:

First, what is surprising is that the elections in August 2017, immediately preceding Joao Lourenço's accession to power, i.e. the first stage of the conquest, did not suggest a short-term change but rather a business as usual, because as they had not been more democratic than the previous ones. What is surprising then is that the government felt defensive even though the balance of power in the street did not seem to be to its disadvantage.

Therefore there have been two different anticipations that made the change happened: Dos Santos' anticipation of the wear of power, and then that of his designated, farsighted successor, that turned the situation around, but as a consequence of the first two factors mentioned (a half- mast economy (13) and an active civil society).

It is thus a mix movement, a change initiated by an economic crash, but followed by the abandonment of the old autocrat by the single party (the MPLA) which saw a potential Angolan spring behind the (still tenuous) pressure of the street.

Paradoxically, the Dos Santos clan's awareness of the imminence of their fall precipitated it because at the end of the reign they wanted to build a financial cushion for their retirement, and they drew too much from the fund, even according to Angolan standards. Too much corruption is like too much tax, there is a threshold beyond which even people who are considered patient begin to get agitated, and the intermediate bodies, feeling it, cut off the head to save the body.

However, an unsustainable level of corruption, which had become an established and normal practice (14), had undermined any foundation in Angola. Thus, over the past 18 months, the political situation in Angola has improved and the transition has been an apparent success. But when will we really be able to judge that the afterlife has also been well managed?

Indeed, a regime that has lasted for 38 years does not deconstruct itself in a few months, it also takes time to change culture and mentalities. Institutionally, the Angolan President is not accountable to Parliament, he appoints 4 of the 7 judges of the Constitutional Court (including its President) as well as the judges of the Supreme Court, the Attorney General, provincial governors, the Governor of the Central Bank, etc. Finally, two bodies attached to the Presidency, the Military Casa and the Civil Casa, appoint ministers, judges, senior officials and directors of public companies.

In short, power is very concentrated and its orientation thus depends largely on the state of mind of the Head of State. The problem of the enlightened despot is his successor. It is therefore not only the evolution of Lourenço's administration but also the next change of power that will tell us whether Angolan democracy has indeed evolved.

The problem with the enlightened despot is his successor. Therefore, it's not only the evolution of Lourenço's administration but also the next change of power that will reveal whether Angolan democracy has truly evolved.

Angolan editorialists have used a number of interesting expressions to describe the ongoing process: "the Angolan perestroika," "the Luandan spring," "uma revolução tranquila," while European political analysts saw a "political tornado" or even a "Copernican revolution." In any case, it is certainly a textbook example that other African leaders will keep in mind, starting with neighboring Kabila: a "Putin-like" scenario can turn against its strategist. Times are changing, and old recipes can become obsolete.

Ultimately, yes, the MPLA will remain in power, João Lourenço too, and he will probably choose his successor. But, in a strategy of small steps, we should nonetheless be pleased and acknowledge the role of the street while waiting for genuine reforms to democratize institutional mechanisms. One has to start somewhere, regardless of the short-term back and forth of history, the rises and falls, ebbs and flows: time will tell.

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