

# LEFT AND RIGHT IN MPLA'S ANGOLAN SOCIALISM

## *Esquerda e direita no socialismo angolano do MPLA*

*Nuno Fragoso Vidal<sup>1</sup>*

### ABSTRACT

Although the epithet of Socialist attributed to Agostinho Neto's presidency at the MPLA, dates to the anti-colonial struggle, the official adherence was delayed until October 1976, a year after independence. Far from a voluntary option by the leadership, least of its president, it is here argued that it was the result of a specific context combining unbearable domestic and international pressures on Neto and his loyalists - left and right wings. A stronger-than-ever threat to Neto's leadership, through Nito Alves's attempted coup in May 1977, articulated with the USSR's decisive push for a clear standing and the desperate need for Cuba military support, did not leave much option. Nonetheless, as demonstrated here, Neto and the right-wing ingeniously found a way-out, cocooning a right-wing praxis with a left-wing discourse, founding the MPLA's façade Socialism. This paper analysis such dynamics through Agostinho Neto's administration, articulating the domestic and international contexts.

*Keywords: Angola, MPLA, Socialism, Agostinho Neto administration, Politics*

### RESUMO

Apesar do epíteto Socialista atribuído à presidência de Agostinho Neto no MPLA datar dos tempos da luta anti-colonial, a adesão oficial foi postergada até Outubro de 1976, um ano depois da independência. Longe de ser uma opção voluntária da liderança, muito menos ainda do seu presidente, é aqui defendido que tal opção foi o resultado de um contexto específico combinando fortes pressões domésticas e internacionais sobre Neto e os seus lealistas – alas esquerda e direita do partido. Uma ameaça mais forte que nunca à liderança de Agostinho Neto, por via da tentativa de golpe em Maio de 1977, articulada com a

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<sup>1</sup> É Professor de História da África da UFRJ/PPGHIS; PhD King's College London. Publications centered on democratization and development processes in Southern Africa, focus on Angola and Mozambique. E-mail: nunofragosovidal@gmail.com  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5921-6311>

pressão decisiva da URSS por uma clara definição político-ideológica e com a necessidade desesperada do apoio militar Cubano, não deixou espaço para alternativas. Não obstante, conforme demonstrado aqui, Neto e a ala direita do partido encontraram uma engenhosa solução, camuflando uma praxis política de direita sob um discurso de esquerda, fundando um Socialismo de fachada do MPLA. Este texto analisa tal dinâmica ao longo da administração de Agostinho Neto, articulando os contextos doméstico e internacional.

*Palavras chave: Angola, MPLA, Socialismo, presidência de Agostinho Neto, política.*

## *Introduction*

Following a three-partite national liberation struggle, with already direct military fighting between movements (MPLA – Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola; FNLA – National Front for the Liberation of Angola; UNITA – National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), when the Angolan independence came on 11 November 1975, two declarations were made: one in Luanda, where the MPLA announced the formation of the People's Republic of Angola with Agostinho Neto as president; the other, proclaimed by Holden Roberto (president of the FNLA) and Savimbi (president of UNITA), announcing the formation of the Democratic Republic of Angola, which was to be governed by a UNITA–FNLA coalition with its headquarters in Huambo. The coalition soon disintegrated for unsurmountable disagreements between the two. Benefiting from ever-growing Soviet and Cuban assistance, the MPLA defeated in February 1976 the forces of the FNLA to the North and the forces of UNITA to the South. Left isolated by the US and having to face an increasing number of well-armed Cuban troops, the South Africans withdrew back to Namibia in March 1976. By then the struggle for the hegemonic control of the new Angolan State had been won by the MPLA.

Such parcourse and the historical, political-ideological, academic analysis of Angolan nationalist movements, ended up contributing to the characterization of the MPLA as a Socialist movement/party in

contraposition to some sort of 'rightists'/nationalists' FNLA and UNITA. However, as here argued, the post-independence Angolan political system became a façade Socialism since its very foundation, hiding a right-wing nationalist orientation that gained strength through Agostinho Neto's administration.

The MPLA epithet of Socialist during the nationalist struggle and through the independence, was much more the result of foreign attributed classifications (political and academic), influenced by the political-ideological struggles of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the Cold War, and the diplomatic-political instrumentalization made by the nationalist leaders themselves, rather than a fact based on political praxis.

That does not mean that there were no committed and sincere Socialists of myriad tendencies inside the MPLA, but to say that such discussion is illusive and distractive from the main and relevant stake at dispute: the struggle between two radically opposed projects of State and society inside the MPLA, that will clearly emerge with the political praxis of government at the independent State.

Transposing several of the international ideological discussions and disputes on different Socialist perspectives (Soviets, Maoists, Trotskyites, Titoists, etc.) to the inner MPLA and bringing them to the centre of political-historical analysis, contributes to the dominant though illusory interpretation somehow generally crediting an MPLA ideologically committed in search of a Socialist path at independence, which was certainly not the case.

Likewise, the transposition of theoretical literature discussions on institutionalised party organisations' machineries and models is also distortive of the analysis, insofar as most of post-colonial political systems with a neo-patrimonial root are extremely personalized, infra or supra-institutionalised (effectively operating outside or in parallel to the existing institutions and much dependent on the personalities occupying the positions). The MPLA is a clear example of such personalization. It started off as a partisan neo-patrimonial regime, soon to become presidential, with an extreme concentration of powers in the hands of the President of the Republic/President of the Party and Commander-In-Chief.

In these cases and contexts, the analysis should rather concentrate in the post-colonial praxis and dynamics, as proposed by Wallerstein in broader, older, but much more analytically useful and objective concepts of 'left' and 'right', according to specific strategic options of the new States and governments in terms of political economy, political management/ideology, and foreign policy (WALLERSTEIN, 1971).

This paper follows this line of analysis, that proves the most effective to historically-politically expose the façade nature of Angolan Socialism.

Within the political-science literature, our paper is inscribed in the long discussion on the characterization of African transition/post-transition political systems. The most recent discussions over this theme still battle around some sort of hybridism, whereby such systems would combine liberal and illiberal features, resorting to concepts such as illiberal democracies (ZAKARIA, 1997), façade democracies (JOSEPH, 2003), semi-authoritarian states (OTTAWAY, 2003), electoral autocracies (SCHEDLER, 2006), competitive authoritarian regimes (LEVITSKY & WAY, 2010), post-neo-liberal States (PITCHER, 2017), or new competitive authoritarian regimes (LEVITSKY & WAY, 2020). However, besides the more general theoretical approach on neo-patrimonialism (MÉDARD, 1982; 1991; BAYART, 1989; 1998; CHABAL & DALOZ 1999), not much has been said on the façade nature of pre-transition African political systems, and most of all on so-called Socialist regimes of the first generation (independence). How exactly that Socialist institutional outfit and discourse were consciously and efficiently manipulated and instrumentalized to camouflage a different endogenous operational logic?

In fact, a long-track record of historical and political analysis has been resisting to accept interpretations based on the ability of post-colonial political systems in Africa to follow their own logic, according to its own historical 'home-grown' parcourse and experience, and according to its elites' agency, ability and political competence, to coherently pursue its own goals and objectives within its own political dynamics, as evolved since independence. That posture objectively results in the refusal to accept that these political systems can be anything more than allies, followers, victims,

secondary participants, or faulty/poor versions of major foreign international dominant dynamics and political models.

However, as argued and demonstrated in this paper, that was not the case of Angola and its very first administration, which was certainly the most internationally credited as officially committed to the construction of a Socialist model. The Angolan political system proved the ability to structure on its own terms, assimilating and accommodating external influences through increased (though quiet and disguised) agency. Such achievement is even more astonishing if we consider an extremely constraining domestic and international context, as exposed in this paper.

After a brief presentation of the main lines of academic historical and political/ideological characterization of Angolan nationalist movements that set the analytical pace until today (first chapter of our structure), our argument exposes the post-independence interactive relationship between the party, domestic and international contexts, and major players, to explain why and how the administration of Neto ended up adhering to Socialism and to a left-wing rhetoric (chapters two to six), while cocooning and breeding a right-wing praxis in terms of political economy, political management/ideology, and foreign policy (final chapter).

Methodologically, our presentation will resort to relevant secondary literature of some of the authors within the referred three lines of interpretation but will also bring several testimonies gathered by the author during numerous interviews conducted with a few key players in this history, some of them already deceased. Gathered within a field research for different works over the last twenty-years, some of these audio-recorded testimonies were left in great part unused for being out of the scope of the original works but are important historical testimonies and therefore recovered to this article, providing unrivalled insights to the theme here analysed and a significant contribution to historical literature and analysis.<sup>2</sup>

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A full description on the methodology used for such interviews, details on the interviews and the rules to publicly access and use it, can be found at the original work, which is public and registered at... in compliance with the existing ethical principles and norms for social science research and data treatment of the harbouring institution and country.

## *The historical political-ideological characterization of a Socialist Neto's MPLA*

The historical, political-ideological, academic analysis of Angolan nationalist movements/parties, evolved through three major lines of interpretation, that sequentially set the analytical pace until today.

The first and also the earliest of these interpretations, stresses the weight of an ethno-linguistic-regional explanation above and beyond the ideological discourses of a 'leftist' MPLA (relatively more urban and assimilated) and the 'rightists' FNLA and UNITA (relatively more rural and less assimilated by the Portuguese colonial society), identifying the sociological support of the three movements within the three major ethno-linguistic groups as defined during colonialism: the Ovimbundu from the central plateaux, gathered around UNITA; the M'Bundu from the Luanda-Catete-Malange corridor, gathered around the MPLA; the Bakongo from the North, in the provinces of Zaire, Uíge and Cabinda, gathered around the UPA/FNLA. Such cleavages found direct expression in the three-partite nationalist struggle that emerged in the 1950s and 1960's – thus impinging on the kind of conflict that arose between them in 1975–1976, namely the civil war.

Authors such as John Marcum (MARCUM, 1978; 1978a), René Pélissier and Douglas Wheeler (PÉLISSIER, 1978; WHEELER & PELISSIER, 1970), Lawrence Henderson (HENDERSON, 1979; MOHANTY, 1992) could be included in this category. Their interpretation had significant influence, and because it was the 'first' it can be considered 'classical' in tracing the historical-sociological origins of each movement and its first political-ideological characterization.

The second major line of interpretation reacts against the importance given to the ethno-linguistic factor as a crucial, resorting to class analysis instead. Its authors are the most ideologically influenced and they are the ones who academically credited and politically supported Neto's MPLA as the progressist, leftist and Socialist movement. This second line was pretty much marked by the stigma of 'redfeet', a term which was made known by Patrick Chabal (CHABAL, 1983) and used by Tom Young (YOUNG, 1989)

to expose some deficiencies in the literature on Angola and Mozambique, produced for many years before and after independence. Authors such as Basil Davidson (DAVIDSON, 1972), Fola Soremekun (SOREMEKUN, 1983), Claude Gabriel (GABRIEL, 1978), Michael Wolfers and Jane Bergerol (WOLFERS & BERGEROL, 1983), and Keith Somerville (SOMERVILLE, 1986) can be included in this category. In generic terms, this line of analysis considers the ethno-linguistic identification as a creation/imposition of colonialism on the population, which would be destroyed by a 'real' revolution to be led by a progressive MPLA against the counter-revolutionary forces of FNLA and UNITA supported by foreign Western imperialism.

The third line will attempt to escape the simple division between ethnic and simple class/political-ideological interpretations of those two previous lines. They will resort to a more broadly encompassing approach, including socio-cultural specificities due to colonialism, class analysis, dependency and world-system schools of thought, international influences like the 'Cold war' and apartheid, and ideological disputes.

This category includes authors such as Franz Heimer (HEIMER 1979; 1980), Gervase Clarence-Smith (CLARENCE-SMITH, 1980), David Birmingham (BIRMINGHAM, 1988; 1988a; 1992; 2015) and Christine Messiant (MESSIANT, 1989; 1995; 2006). Of these authors, Messiant is certainly the one with the most developed and structured socio-historical-political analysis.

However, none of these authors nor the generations that later followed them in different degrees and shades, effectively confronted the Socialist generic characterization of the post-independence Neto's MPLA as a deceiving manoeuvre, and effectively ended up contributing in different degrees to such characterization, that our paper will historically-politically deconstruct.

## *Neto and his loyalists at independence within the MPLA's many currents and affluents*

Born out of a complex sociological-historical background and dynamics with centuries on the making, the MPLA was always 'a river of many currents and affluents', much more determined by personalities and sociological-historical cleavages rather than effective institutional-ideological issues.<sup>3</sup>

Although impossible to discuss here the long and complex historical-sociological parcourse that will later inform the Mbundu/Creole core of the MPLA, we can summarily say that it can be located as far as the end of the sixteenth century when Portugal began favouring the incursion in the North-central area (Luanda and its hinterland) to the detriment of the North (S. Salvador of Congo), that favoured a process of Creolisation, encompassing heterogeneous elements such as the descendants of locally born Europeans (whites and *mestiços*), and Africans closely operating with them, all of which formed an intermediate group between the Europeans from the metropolis and the majority of black rural population of that area (DIAS, 1984, footnote 1; MESSIANT, 1987, footnote 6; BITTENCOURT, 1999, ch. V ; BIRMINGHAM, 2015, p. ix). They established alliances with families of the chiefdoms of the MBundu-Kimbundu ethno-linguistic area through marriages and commercial and financial alliances, between chiefdoms and traders from the interior and traders from Luanda (DIAS, 1989, p. 245). The power and socio-economic prestige of these alliances amongst Mbundu/Creole elites became more entrenched between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, controlling the slave trade in the interior and agriculture. Altogether, these elites dominated the commercial, administrative, ecclesiastic, and military structures (DIAS, 1994).

This process suffered a major setback in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century due to the transformations that occurred in the colonial economy — replacement of the slave-trade and the growing competition from the increased arrival of white Portuguese (DIAS 1995; 1994). This generated these elites' first

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3 Terms used by Lúcio Lara, in private interview (LARA, Lúcio, private interview, Luanda: 1 May 1998).



cultural/political reaction between 1870 and 1930, sometimes called proto-nationalism to distinguish it from a so-called modern nationalism. The modern nationalism would develop in the late 1950s gathering the 'old' and the 'new' Mbundu/Creole elites (the 'new', comprising the generations of 1940s onwards), and from which the MPLA will emerge in early 1960s as their most clearly defined political project (MESSIANT, 2000).

This process was much more than a simple clever or dialogic combination of registers. It built up an enormous pride of its centuries-old fabrics of idiosyncrasy, pretentiously self-defined at the twentieth century as "Angolaness", as explored by Marissa Moorman as a cultural ethos with political import. (MOORMAN, 2008, p.3). That is why it should never be confused with simple Creolisation, assimilation or even less skin colour, but a Mbundu/Creole sociological-historical matrix, despite its myriad socio-economic sub-divisions, internal rivalries, fractions and inner-contradictions (VIDAL, 2019). It is also this process, among other factors, that helps explain that despite the fact that whites and mestizos are numerically little expressive in post-independence Angolan society, they came to occupy some important political positions in the MPLA.

Within such complex sociological-historical background here briefly presented, it is therefore unsurprising that since assuming the presidency of the MPLA in 1962, Agostinho Neto faced several power disputes, internal criticism, and division, long before the independence, starting with Mário Pinto de Andrade, the former president, and Viriato da Cruz, one of the MPLA's founder and secretary-general up to 1962, who left the movement in deeper disagreement with Agostinho Neto. Later, Neto had to deal with more serious threats, two party factions disputing the presidency on the eve of independency, contesting the legitimacy of Agostinho Neto as president and pressuring for a congress for accountability and re-legitimization, leading to the so-called Lusaka 'congress', 12-26<sup>th</sup> August 1974.

Contesting the so-called 'Presidential faction' of Neto, there was on the one side the so-called 'Active revolt', reflecting an old fraction of elite, essentially representing the coastal M'Bundu/Creole aristocracy within the 'old creoles' category, whose influence had been decreasing since Neto assumed the presidency. They accused Neto of,

Absolute presidentialism, authoritarianism imposing a Presidential diktat, lack of accountability, opaque management of party administration and financial affairs and promoting the cult of personality, which rendered any internal criticism a matter of high treason with consequent persecution and punishment (ANDRADE, Joaquim Pinto de, 1998, Interview).

Linked to the origins of modern nationalism and the MPLA itself in the late fifties/early sixties, they formed a political faction in May 1974, essentially based in Brazzaville and were led by members such as Mário and Joaquim Pinto de Andrade and Gentil Viana, fighting to regain the leadership of the movement.

On the other side, there was the 'Eastern Revolt', which had emerged in 1972/73, led by Daniel Chipenda, a black commander from Lobito (South), essentially based on the Eastern military front near the frontier with Zambia and raising a regionalist/rural flag against the Mbundu/Creole urban elitism at the centre of the leadership, Neto's presidentialism, leading the movement far from the country and lacking knowledge of the in-country MPLA's struggle.

After insurmountable disagreements and fearing a political defeat, the presidential faction led by Neto and Lúcio Lara contested the legitimacy of the conclave and abandoned the 'congress', arranging for a new 'congress' in September 1974, in Moxico, Eastern Angola (*Conferência Inter-Regional de Militantes*; Inter Regional Militants Conference) where the totality of delegates and military commanders were pro-Neto, thus ensuring his re-election as President (BITTENCOURT 2008, vol. II, p. 238-250; MABEKO-TALI, 1996, ch. VI).<sup>4</sup>

In face of the unquestionable larger political and social capital of Agostinho Neto inside and outside of the country, the 'Active revolt' lost strength.

Once we saw the arrival of Neto to Luanda in February 1975, and the massive popular reception he had there, most of us resigned to evidence and gave up on fighting Neto's presidency (ANDRADE, Joaquim Pinto de, 1998, Interview).

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Two editions based on this thesis were published in Portuguese, one in Angola and one in Portugal, but I will stick here to the original version in French.

As for the 'Eastern Revolt', it allied itself to the rival nationalist movement FNLA (Front for National Liberation of Angola) and progressively disappeared along with that movement's military defeat before the end of Neto's administration.

Therefore, at the start of Agostinho Neto's administration of independent Angola, the MPLA's top leadership was more or less extirpated of those previous menaces. By then it was mainly dominated by two major political groups of unconditional supporters of Agostinho Neto, which smoothly assumed opposite political standings, that will latter accentuate and crystalize into what will be here characterized as left and right wings inside the party.

These groups at the top of the MPLA cannot be confused with the previous party factions. They did not want to capture the presidency and replace Neto, they were made up of Neto's staunch and loyal supporters who wanted to achieve primacy around him to influence the political and economic path of the country. Their characterization as left and right according to specific criteria must be understood as any other socio-political classifications in Angola – particularly useful to explain important divergences and post-independence political conflicts and dynamics, although non-exclusive and changeable over time (MESSIANT 1997, p. 812-13, 812 footnote 14).

On the one hand, there was a group mainly comprising mestizos, clearly related to the coastal non-protestant new *creoles*, heirs of the colonial bourgeoisie of the beginning of the century (not to be confused with the old coastal aristocracy segment of the 'old creoles' of the 'active revolt'). Despite, or probably because, their heritage, as we will see, they assumed an ideological Marxist stance. Their most prominent members were Carlos Rocha Dilolwa, minister of economic planning, Lúcio Lara, Secretary of the Political Bureau, Iko Carreira, minister of defence, António Jacinto, writer, and Paulo Teixeira Jorge, foreign minister from 1976 to 1984.

On the other hand, there was a group mainly comprising the darker skinned, protestants, 'new creoles' from the interior (mainly from Catete, the birthplace of Agostinho Neto), including some of the survivors of the nationalist insurrection of 1961 and/or the first generation of political prisoners and nationalists of the late fifties. Their most prominent members

were Agostinho Mendes de Carvalho - 'Uanhenga Xitu', Domingos Paiva da Silva, Imperial Santana, Bernardo de Souza, and Manuel Pedro Pacavira (only Pacavira was not exactly from Catete, but from Golungo Alto, located between Catete and Malange). Their political stance had nothing to do with Marxism or any ideology, which they clearly rejected from the very beginning. Their education level was in average lower than the leftists, whom they saw with resentment as 'intellectuals', standing instead for what can be considered tradition and ethnicity, defending a M'Bundu (black) base of power with a dominance of the M'Bundu from Catete (MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 411).

The main common denominator between these two groups was their loyalty to Agostinho Neto, because he had links with both and provided a useful balance within the leadership. He was black from Catete, but quite acculturated, being a medical doctor who had trained in Portugal and even married a white Portuguese and had a long and strong friendship with many mestizos such as Lúcio Lara, Iko Carreira and Carlos Dilolwa; he was protestant, but an intellectual and poet with knowledge of Socialist-Marxist theories.

The struggle and internal balance of forces between these groups inside the party (sometimes called tendencies), went through different stages and increased in opposition throughout time, with an initial advantage to the right-wing soon after the independence. Their influence over Neto was significant and as stressed by Pepetela,

People within the leadership started to ironically refer to such ascendancy as Catetização do Poder [Catetization of Power] (PEPETELA, 1998, Interview).

By then the conflict between them was still in its early stages and was even suspended and postponed as soon as a new threat to Neto's leadership emerged, led by Nito Alves and his followers (*Nitistas*), in a movement usually called *Nitismo*.

## *Neto, the revolutionary youth committees, and Socialism*

Although we cannot address here *Nitismo* in all its sociological-political complexity and extension within the sociological complexity of the MPLA itself, for the sake of this paper's main argument we will simply stress its character as part of a post-independence pro-MPLA autonomous political activism, which went out of control, became articulated with a foreign dimension, and climaxed with an attempted *coup d'état* on 27 May 1977, that pressured Neto to finally clarify the MPLA's political-ideological standing.

Benefitting from the unexpected freedom of association and expression brought by the Portuguese revolution (25 April 1974) and from the agitated period derived from the war between the competing nationalist movements (1975-1976), dozens of new autonomous political micro-groups (committees) proliferated, mainly in Luanda but soon spreading to other main cities.

Although supportive of Neto's MPLA, these committees were principally led by a young generation that had grown up during the last phase of colonialism and therefore unknown to the MPLA's leadership (itself composed of an older generation or nationalist generation). They were aged circa 17–27 and as a general rule had not taken part in the struggle for liberation; their activism mainly consisted of clandestine political group discussions, pamphleteering propaganda within colonial society and minor boycotting activities. They had grown up during the last phase of colonialism, in an Angola different to the one the nationalists had known and from which they had been kept away for twenty years, since the late fifties.

It was a generation that had benefited from the democratisation and development of the colonial educational system from the 1960s onwards (HEIMER, 1979, p.12; 1980, p.37; Marques da Silva, 1991). In general, such educational change, provided them with a relatively high level of scholar/academic preparation, making them potential competitors to most of the MPLA's political and administrative cadres (DUVERGER, 1969).<sup>5</sup> It was

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5 The term political cadres used as the most intellectually, ideologically and technically prepared members of the MPLA.

also a generation that experienced the accentuated economic growth of Angola (1961-1973) and became dominated by the passionate, 'romantic', political-ideological discussions typical of that day and age – the sixties (BHAGAVAN, 1986, p. 7; HODGES, 1987, p. 29-30; NETO, 1991); ZENHA RELA, 1992, esp. Parts I and II).

They could not be simply classified within the 'traditional' segments of the Creole/M'Bundu elites referred above. They had heterogeneous socio-economic, racial, and regional background, cutting across those segments, mixing for instance, so-called progressive whites with educated blacks and mestizos; youngsters mainly from the cities' centres, but also some from the *musseques* (shanty towns); mainly from the coast but also from the interior. They had in common their relatively high education, their young age and their extreme political-ideological positions centred on Marxist theories, although varying within a wide (usually confused and shallow) range, ranging from pro-Chinese, pro-Soviet, Guevarists, Trotskyites, Albania-ists, Tito-ists and so on (LOPES, 1998, Interview; CARREIRA, 1996, p. 147-8).

After a first period of unconditional enthusiasm, most of these youth committees became progressively disillusioned and frustrated with the MPLA's leadership at the ideological, political, and economic levels. Some of their members had their first contact with the movement's leadership during the referred MPLA's Lusaka 'congress' in August 1974. They went there as delegates from Luanda and talked with Agostinho Neto, expounding their commitment and enthusiasm on Marxist theories and the Socialist mode of production, but were struck by Neto's answer that it was too soon to talk about such issues and that the MPLA had the intention to establish its own model of Socialism (MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 305).

Their idealized image of a revolutionary movement of frontline fighters against capitalism, imperialism and racist South Africa (as most internationally vehiculated by several 'committed' academic authors), was also shattered by an undefined, dubious, inconsistent, politically, ideologically and materially opportunistic relationship with its foreign allies, especially the USSR and China.

Despite that internationally vehiculated image, Neto had always had a pragmatic approach towards Socialism as recognized, though minimized, by his personal friend Basil Davidson (DAVIDSON, 1980, p. 284). He had always wanted to ensure autonomy vis a vis Socialist foreign allies to whom he had no political romantic illusions, knowing the interstices of the *Realpolitik*, as he himself experienced, having in mind that the USSR stopped supporting him since 1973, favouring instead the 'Eastern Revolt' faction (SHUBIN, 2008, p. 30). At that precise Lusaka 'congress', the USSR was overtly backing Chipenda and only resumed its aid to Neto's MPLA after Neto's arrival in Luanda, witnessing the magnificent (politically legitimising) massive reception he had there in February 1975, which left no doubt on which Angolan nationalist, let alone MPLA leader, was the most popular inside the country (SHUBIN, 2008, p. 38-9).

As also stressed by John Marcum, the MPLA had always remained an eclectic front during the anti-colonial struggle (MARCUM, 1978a, p. 199). Previous proposals for a clearer political-ideological standing, such as the one presented in February 1968 at the 'I Regional Assembly of Cadres', sustaining that the movement should convert itself into an ideologically well-defined revolutionary vanguard party, was deferred until such time as study groups could produce a solid nucleus of ideologically prepared cadres (MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 80-2).

Chipenda himself, later characterized the movement as a synthesis,

As a whole, as a synthesis, the MPLA [nationalist movement] was not a communist movement. That does not mean that there were not within the movement several elements who were communist (CHIPENDA, 1995, Interview).

Likewise, as late as August 1975, Agostinho Neto was stating that,

The MPLA is not a Marxist-Leninist organisation. Nor is our leadership Marxist-Leninist. [...] We are a large organisation with various shades of opinion and different types of groups. [...] As a heterogeneous organisation, it contains both Marxist and other points of view (cit. in *Afriscopie*, August 1975).

Accordingly, the first constitution (11 November 1975) does not have any reference to the construction of Socialism whatsoever (Constitutional Law, 1975).

From all this, we can easily understand the growing disillusionment of the younger generation inside Angola. Such disillusionment was put to the test as soon as November 1974 (a year before independence and a few months after the Lusaka ‘congress’ and the Inter Regional Militants Conference, of August and September 1974, respectively), when a first major delegation of the MPLA arrived in Luanda led by Lúcio Lara (to prepare Neto’s arrival) and proposed these committees to simply integrate them into the existing structures of the movement. The proposal was strongly refused by the bulk of them, opting to maintain their organisational autonomy in the face of the movement’s ideological vagueness (MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 282).

### *The political dynamics and strategy of Nitistas*

The youth committees proceeded developing their revolutionary political projects around the issue of *poder popular* (popular power), generally supporting a flexible interpretation of Marxist ‘democratic centralism’ in favour of an organic where the power is effectively, actively, and permanently exerted by the bottom layers of society, whose organisational structures these committees wanted to control with exclusivity and autonomy *vis à vis* the movement’s leadership. Fulfilling such projects, they became deeply involved with the lower social strata organisations, be it neighbourhood para-military self-defence organisations, workers’ strike movements, and independent unions, to whom they lent a political discourse, orientation and structure.

Within the youth committees, a group started to define itself around Nito Alves, who was a rising star ever since the ‘congress’ of Lusaka, where he made use of an extremely aggressive discourse against the other two factions disputing the movement’s leadership – for which Neto was grateful, later supporting Nito’s promotion to the Central Committee at the



Inter Regional Militants Conference and later, after the independence, to minister of Internal Administration.

Nito led a motley alliance between a few groups and leaders of the young generation of activists who had not fought the war (José Van Dunem, Sita Valles, and Rui Coelho), and older nationalists from the first military region in the Dembos forest (Eduardo Evaristo 'Bakalov', Jacob Caetano João 'Monstro Imortal', 'Sianouk', Bernardo Ventura 'Ho-Chi-Minh' and Commander Bagé). The first military region was the oldest (since 1961), the most mythical, but also the one whose guerrilla always expressed severe criticism towards the MPLA's leadership, which they blamed for the lamentable conditions the region had endured.

We were the ones who always fought inside the country up to the end of the nationalist struggle, in almost complete isolation and enduring miserable conditions of survival and struggle, operating with some armament captured to the Portuguese troops with lack of everything. We were the ones who supported the leadership discourses outside the country saying that the MPLA represented the people and had fighters inside the country besides the bordering regions, but nevertheless they forgot us and did not make any serious effort to support us through all those years (BAGÉ, 1998, Interview).

Nito represented both groups: he was a political commissar from the first military region, but his young age (born in 1945, at Piri, Dembos), his short but effective path as a high school student in Luanda and his aggressive and unorthodox – confused and shallow – ideological discourse, made him close to the young activists.<sup>6</sup>

In a first moment, Nito and his followers began a struggle for hegemony of *poder popular*, trying to integrate the competing committees, dissolve those that refused to be integrated and even arrest members of those that refused to dissolve, such as the Communist Organization of Angola, itself evolved from the Amílcar Cabral committees to escape persecution,

6 For bibliographical data on Nito Alves see MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 398, also FAUVET, 1978. Nito had only read the one and only book there was in the 1st Military Region on Marxism; from interview with MABEKO-TALI 1998; in the same sense interviews with PEPETELA, 1998; LOPES, 1998; ANDRADE, 1998.

which according to one of its members, had several members arrested by Nito as minister of the interior, a process occurring between mid 1975 and March/April 1976 (ARAÚJO, 20008, Interview).

Once eliminated the competition, the *Nitistas* proceeded with the institutionalisation of their *poder popular* through the approval of the Law of *Poder Popular* and subsequent elections to Neighbourhood Popular Commissions, being held in May 1976. Sita Valles's autonomous secretariat at the DOM (Department of Organization of Masses) exerted strict control over the eligible names and the electoral process as a whole, allowing the *Nitistas* to control the most powerful (pro-MPLA) neighbourhoods in Luanda, such as Sambizanga, Patrice Lumumba, Nelito Soares, Operário, Rangel, Neves Bendinha and Prenda (FAUVET, 1978, p. 96-7). In parallel and also through Sita Valles's autonomous secretariat, the group managed to infiltrate several MPLA mass organisations, namely the JMPLA (MPLA's youth organization), UNTA (MPLA's Union Federation) and OMA (MPLA's Women organization). The moves were so ostensive and explicit that provoked immediate criticism (FAUVET, 1978, p. 93). The Director of DOM, Pedro Pacavira (prominent member of the right-wing), went even further and immediately denounced the existence of a '*Nitista* plot to take over the MPLA's leadership.' (MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 412-14). Although director, Pacavira was unable to exert power or control over Sita and her group inside DOM due to their political strength.

Accomplished the first stage, at the base structures, the *Nitistas* then started a campaign to enlarge their support as much as they could, not only domestically, but also externally.

Domestically, in an attempt to accommodate all the discontented and make the most of an increasingly difficult social and economic situation,

Nito and his followers developed an opportunistic argumentation, tailored to the various audiences. When addressing middle social strata [young middle cadres from the State administration and middle ranking officers from the armed forces] they denounced the lower living standards compared with the colonial period and with the ostentatious wealth of the new rulers, who had access to restricted and luxuriously supplied stores, contrasting with miserably supplied 'people's stores' for general access.

When addressing lower socio-economic strata, their discourse included racist arguments, confusing class with race, blaming the *petite bourgeoisie* (identified with the mestizos and whites at the top of the apparatus) for the scarcity, and denying the long desired 'power to the people' (PINTO DE ANDRADE, 1998. Interview).<sup>7</sup>

Externally, the *Nitistas* deliberately looked for the USSR's support, seen as a key partner. Although the USSR had no military forces in Angola, Cuban and Angolan troops were dependent on USSR regular deliveries of war material, and the USSR would ultimately influence the alignment of the Cuban forces in any possible internal conflict. Under the influence of Sita Valles's groups, the *Nitistas* had already assumed a pro-Soviet stance (proving how shallow were the other ideological tendencies) and started a campaign portraying the MPLA's top leadership (mainly the Political Bureau) as 'dominated by anti-Soviets, Maoists and Social Democrats, led by Lúcio Lara, Carlos Dilolwa and Iko Carreira' (PASSOS, 1998, Interview; BAGÉ, 1998, Interview; FAUVET, 1978, p. 97). Leading the Angolan delegation at the XXV Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in March 1976, Nito Alves and José Van Dunem presented Nito as the representative of the purely Marxist-Leninist wing, supported by former members of the Portuguese Communist Party and of the Union of Communist Students such as Sita Valles; the move seems to have had some impact and Nito was treated as an effective Chief of State and paid serious political attention (MILHAZES, 2013, p. 74-5; SHUBIN, 2008, p. 65-6). His impressive speech at that congress referred the new law on *poder popular*, 'opening the transitional period to the building of socialism', while establishing a socialist economy with 'maximum limitations of tendencies to develop a private sector'; with proper study of Marxism-Leninism, 'in ten years' time tribalism will disappear in Angola' (SHUBIN, 2008, p. 66).

When Nito returned from this trip, the *Nitistas* seemed to have all in their favour. On the external front, 'we thought to have assured the Soviet support' (PASSOS, 1998, Interview). At the domestic level, their strategy

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Supporting the same view is PEPETELA, 1998, Interview; LOPES, 1998, Interview; MABE-KO-TALI, 1998, Interview.

effectively gathered broad social support, that ranged from a substantial part of the generation of young activists, workers' commissions, and micro independent labour unions, through to the general population of the lower social strata, including the so-called lumpen proletariat (BIRMINGHAM, 1992, p. 79; Agostinho Neto cit. in BOLETIM DO MILITANTE - BM, 3, 1977, p. 28-29). In the coup aftermath, even party documents trying to make sense of the attempted coup, had to admit a significant social support to the *Nitistas*, including the civil service (especially the lower and middle levels), the armed forces (especially the low to middle-ranking officers), and party mass organisations such as JMPLA, UNTA and OMA. The party tried to justify such support by accusing the *Nitistas* of using a false and deceiving discourse, who 'duped the masses and our militants (...) camouflaging their essentially reactionary, regionalist and racist ideology' (BOLETIM DO MILITANTE - BM, 1977, p. 5; BM, 1977a).

### *Neto's leadership counterstrategy and reaction*

However, the support the *Nitistas* had, or thought to have, turned out to be insufficient or was made insufficient by the strategic reaction of Agostinho Neto's leadership and its staunch supporters (left and right) and from the *Nitistas* inability to attract any of those two main groups at the top of the movement.

Such inability was due not only to those groups' strong loyalty to Neto, but also to the specific strategy followed by the *Nitistas* themselves.

On the one hand, while targeting the mestizos and whites at the centre of the MPLA's top leadership, blaming them for the existing problems and frustrated expectations in the amelioration of the quality of life, the *Nitistas* immediately and naturally set that group against them.

On the other hand, they also distanced themselves from the group around the 'Catetes' due to several reasons: their pro-Soviet supposedly 'real' Marxist-Leninist crusade; their view that 'the new should replace the old', disrespecting the historical legitimacy gained by those who had survived the first anti-colonial insurrection and had been victims of colonial

prisons (MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 412); the fact that Nito and some of his followers were from Dembos and the majority of the right-wing tendency was from Catete (there was an acute rivalry between those M'Bundu from Dembos and those from Catete since the anti-colonial struggle); the *Nitistas*'s aim to rule over the People's Defence Organisation (a para-military organization in the neighbourhoods, that was also being disputed by the right-wing, which triggered another confrontation inside DOM between Sita Valles and Pedro Pacavira).

The *Nitistas*'s attacks towards these two major political groups led them to once again leave their divergences aside for a while and unite around their leader and protector against what was perceived as an immediate and common threat; a product of an unknown generation that did not entirely understand the 'order of play' to manage the system according to their 'acquired' nationalist struggle historical legitimacy.

Their reaction to such threat was firm, planned to counter the *Nitistas*'s strategy at the internal and external levels. To this purpose, the Central Committee (CC) held one of its most important plenary sessions – the third (23-29 October 1976).

Externally, the leadership targeted the links between the USSR and the Nitistas, trying to ensure the support (or at least the neutrality) of the USSR and Cuba in case of conflict. To this end, the MPLA finally declared its official allegiance to Marxism-Leninism. Conceding to a long request of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, a date was made for the end of 1977 for the first congress of the movement, which would have as a main item on its agenda the formation of a vanguard party of the working class, with the aim to construct Socialism in Angola (AFRICA CONTEMPORARY RECORD - ACR, 1978, p. B453).<sup>8</sup> After the plenary, Iko Carreira officially announced that 'for the MPLA, the only Socialism that exists is the Socialism of Marx, Engels and Lenin, scientific socialism' (CARREIRA, 1977). Noteworthy is also the fact that in May 1976, prime minister Lopo do Nascimento had visited Moscow and signed several bi-lateral agreements and, a couple of weeks before the CC plenary, Neto visited Moscow (7-13 October 1976), having

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On Soviet demands for a Congress see SHUBIN, 2008, p. 24.

signed on 8 October, a twenty-year 'Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation' with the USSR (ACR, 1978, p. B453; HODGES, 1987, p.20).

Domestically, the leadership targeted the *Nitistas*' ties with the lower social strata organisations – neighbourhood commissions and labour strike movement. To this end, and after studying several reports that had been previously requested and prepared within a discussion on organisational party problems, it was stated that the main obstacle in the organisation of the movement was the existence of two MPLAs, the official one and the one led by Nito Alves and José Van Dunem, leaving the idea of possible fractionism. It also suggested that these two CC members, whilst exercising their official functions, had purposely caused food shortages to stir up discontent. It was then decided that a commission of enquiry should be set up (led by José Eduardo dos Santos) to investigate dissident activity at the core of the MPLA and look into the reports on food shortages (BM, 1977a, p. 11-13; ACR, 1979, p. B499-B500; MABEKO-TALI, 1996, p. 421-22). By then, Nito was being closely monitored by the political police (DISA) for months, as referred by his own Chief of Ministerial Cabinet, Rui Frende.

I warned Nito that DISA's men were monitoring our cabinet at the Ministry of the Interior from dawn to dusk, but he did not seem to care, so self-confident and absorbed he was. At the end he rarely appeared at the Ministry, going to those 'secret' meetings that we all knew about (FRENDE, 1998, Interview).

With the October 1976 CC's plenary, the siege to the *Nitistas* was laid. Nito still tried to deny the accusations resorting to what his supporters had been working on and circulating for several months – *Treze teses em minha defesa* (Thirteen thesis in my defence), a 156 pages document, analysing the nature of the MPLA and its right-turn, accusing Lúcio Lara of being a 'social democrat', a 'Maoist' and the person leading this path. He claimed that corruption, incompetence, and nepotism were rife within the MPLA, that ministers were engaged in diamond smuggling or debauchery, citing the name of Iko Carreira among others (FAUVET, 1978, p. 97; PASSOS, 1998, Interview).

In the meantime, the core leaders of the *Nitistas* started to receive contradictory messages from the USSR embassy (probably hesitating whether to support the *Nitistas* or not). The group became confused, hesitant, and finally attempted a poorly organised and by then much expected (by the leadership) *coup d'état* on 27th May 1977, resulting in total failure (MABE-KO-TALI, 1996, p. 393-7, 421-7; FAUVET, 1978, p. 96-7).<sup>9</sup>

As soon as Neto assured the Soviets on his official political-ideological alignment and guaranteed their economic interests for the next twenty years, the *Nitistas* were no longer that useful. Support was halted and Cuba might not have been denied of its intention to help Neto. Considering the contradictory messages sent to Neto and his partners by the USSR embassy, it seems that the MPLA's leadership achieved, if not the neutrality, at least the passiveness of the USSR, not opposing the Cuban intervention for Neto.

Despite the fact that the extent of the USSR involvement in the 27 May events and the contacts that might have occurred between this country and Cuba were never significantly disclosed (allowing a great amount of speculation) it seems most unlikely that Havana could have intervened to save Neto if the USSR had clearly opposed (ACR, 1979, p. B509). Although Cuba was not an ordinary proxy of the USSR in Angola, pushing its own agenda in search for anti-imperialist internationalist status, and had always unequivocally stood for Neto, its presence in Angola was always highly dependent on Soviet arms regular delivery and logistics and would hardly be politically independent in one of the main "hot-Cold War" stages (SHUBIN, 2008, p. 53-6, ch. 4-7).

At the MPLA's Politburo, there was never a shadow of a doubt on the relationship between the Soviets and the *Nitistas* until a very late stage. According to Iko Carreira, in the subsequent interrogation of the arrested *putschistes*, the most serious balance was the Soviet direct involvement through two secretaries of the embassy's military representative, namely Pavel Stariakov and Yuri Fedin (CARREIRA, 1996, p. 155). A few months later, in August 1977, Agostinho Neto travelled to Moscow and had the audacity to confront Leonid Brejnev,

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Also confirming the contradictory signals from the USSR embassy, hesitation and confusion within the group are PASSOS, 1998, Interview; BAGÉ, 1998, Interview.

Here I came, because such a thing – mutiny – happened, and I wanted to find from you personally, has Moscow taken part in a conspiracy against me or not? Because as I have been informed, many of your people were involved (cit. in SHUBIN, 2008, p. 70; also MILHAZES, 2013, p. 78-9).

Brejev ostensibly ignored the question and left him unanswered (SHUBIN, 2008, p. 70-1; also MILHAZES, 2013, p. 78-9). The party's official account on the attempted coup, explicitly confirmed contacts between the 'factionalists' and the URSS embassy, stating that on the 26 May the factionalists,

[...] have shielded themselves by means of a simulated devotion to this or that friendly country, not hesitating even to visit certain embassies where they engaged in slanders against the MPLA and certain of its leaders and militants (BM, 1977, p.5).

Likewise, the Financial Times, reported that,

According to semi-official account, Sita Valles sent a plea for help to the Soviet embassy in Luanda after the coup attempt failed. The message was intercepted but demonstrated that, whatever the position of the Soviets, the coup leaders believed they had the Kremlin's blessing (FINANCIAL TIMES, 1978; BIRMINGHAM, 1992, p. 81).

A massive bloody purge followed the attempted coup with innumerable deaths throughout the country, with particular and obvious incidence on young activists, intellectuals, and cadres.<sup>10</sup> From then on, they stopped being a threat or a nuisance to the old nationalist generation.

At the same time as the purge, Neto made explicit the directives for the construction of a new party in search of unity, cohesion, and internal

<sup>10</sup> For a recent journalistic/literary emotional approach on the "27<sup>th</sup> May" process, having the merit to vividly recover the dramatic social impact of the whole process to the English-speaking public, see PAWSON, 2014; MATEUS & MATEUS, 2009.



security: the MPLA would now be in total control and the Politburo would be in charge of everything within the MPLA; no opposition or centre of power parallel to the MPLA would be tolerated (cit. in Boletim do Militante - BM, 3, 1977, p. 30).

In accordance with the decisions made at the October 1976 CC third plenary, the movement held its I congress in December 1977. The MPLA was consecrated as the instrument to lead the revolutionary classes towards popular democracy and Socialism, a workers' vanguard party according to Marxist-Leninist principles, adding PT to its logo – Partido do Trabalho/Labour Party (MPLA, 1977, p. 17). The new principles were later integrated within the revised constitution, approved in February 1978, and stating for the first time that,

The MPLA-PT constitutes the organised vanguard of the working class and, as a Marxist-Leninist party, it will provide the political, economic and social leadership of the State in its efforts towards the construction of a Socialist Society (Constitutional Law, 1978, art.º 2).

A vast movement of party rectification was launched. It was aimed at institutionalising and regulating a process of restructuring that had started straight after the coup, in order to 'correct mistakes, improve working methods, cleanse the organisation of harmful elements and unite all militants through party objectives.' (MPLA, 1977, p. 19). The congress decided that there would be new rules for membership of the new party and rigid processes were set up to select the members. The balance of the first three years of rectification was presented at the I Extraordinary Congress, in December 1980: the new MPLA-PT came down to 31,098 members from 110,000 members at the time of the I Congress (MPLA, 1980, p. 17-18).

## *Left and Right disputes re-igniting towards the MPLA's I Congress*

The strategic alliance of both left and right wings against the *Nitistas*, the official adherence to Socialism along with the selective rectification campaign, reverted the referred initial advantage the right-wing had on its inner dispute with the left, which then assumed political preponderance. However, to the frustration of the left and even of the USSR, such preponderance was not as effective as expected.

As soon as the *Nitista* threat vanished (with the purge and rectification), divergences between both groups re-emerged and became progressively acute in late 1977 during the preparations for the I congress. The right-wing reacted against the advancement of the left in the previous months and attempted to place as many of its members as it could in the CC and to get at least one seat in the Politburo; a move that was so obvious that it was criticised by some at the congress and reported externally as the action of a 'regional lobby known as the Catete group' (WOLFERS & BERGEROL, 1983, p. 167; SOMERVILLE, 1986, p. 86). Although the right-wing failed to get the long-desired Politburo seat, it nevertheless secured several places at the CC, standing its ground in the internal power struggle.<sup>11</sup>

Progressively (by the end of 1977 and during 1978), such power struggle became more politically defined in terms of opposing organisational principles sustained by each side, as expounded below and close to the main criteria established by Wallerstein to define left and right in Africa, in terms of economic policy, political management/ideology, and foreign policy (WALLERSTEIN, 1971, p. 5-10).

On the one side, the left-wing Socialist project in terms of economic policy stood for an all-out fight against the 'anti-revolutionary' practices as had been evolving since independence, which included the black market, absenteeism, diversion of produce, and non-fulfilment of production targets (Law 11/75). They also supported a deeper economic co-operation with countries of the Eastern bloc, especially Cuba. This left-wing position on

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From the previously mentioned prominent members of the rightwing, Imperial Santana was the only one out of the CC.

economic principles was led by Carlos Dilolwa (minister of planning and second deputy prime minister).<sup>12</sup>

In terms of political management, the left argued for a system exclusively determined by revolutionary-ideological criteria, whereby the top (strategic) positions of the party and the State should be occupied by a vanguard, properly versed in and deeply committed to Marxism–Leninism; ‘rejecting any criterion of ethno-regional demographic weight’ (JORGE, 1998, Interview), therefore rejecting the right-wing pressures for a black M’Bundu base of power, which they saw as ‘backward and tribalistic’ (JORGE, 1998, Interview; DILOLWA, 1998, Interview). Although respecting the possible ideological honesty of such position, we cannot ignore that it served well the personal interests of its proponents within the party; despite the smaller demographic weight of this lighter skinned (mainly coastal) segment of elite, their relatively higher educational level and ideological preparation would ensure their political primacy in a vanguard party, especially now that the revolutionary youth was no longer a threat.

In terms of foreign policy, they sustained an intransigent path alongside other Socialist countries, reinforcing the Cuban presence at all levels of co-operation (military and civil), rejecting any concession towards the US/South Africa demands for Cuban troops withdrawal and rejecting a relationship between the presence of Cuban troops in Angola and the implementation of UN 435 resolution (independence of Namibia). Likewise, they rejected any negotiation with Mobutu’s Zaire, ‘a long time and declared enemy of the [ Neto’s ] MPLA and of Angola’, as explained by Paulo Teixeira Jorge, foreign minister by then (JORGE, 1998, Interview; CARDOSO, 1998, Interview).

On the other side, the right-wing positions on economic policy sustained a more pragmatic and ‘liberal’-flexible position, accepting socio-economic organisation as it now was – an officially proclaimed Socialist model, which pragmatically accepted the economic schemes that had meanwhile evolved, which in fact represented a generalised straddling between legal

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12 Supporting this view of Carlos Dilolwa as the master mind of a left-wing policy are: NDUNDUMA, 1998, Interview; JORGE, 1998, Interview; PEPETELA, 1998, Interview; CARDOSO, 1998, Interview; and I also had the same sense interviewing Carlos Dilolwa himself, DILOLWA, 1994, Interview.

and illegal markets (private business) through an hierarchical/discriminatory distributive system of benefits and privileges managed by the top leadership of the Party (VIDAL, 2011). They had little faith in the communist policies of collectivisation of the land and of other economic assets and criticised the left-wing radical stance towards the private initiative. According to Mendes de Carvalho,

I, and others who shared my views, had always rejected Marxism and we were never Marxist. I even warned several of my colleagues at the CC, those who were always defending Socialism and Marxism, of the dangers of such an option and that it was going to lead us nowhere. However, once the option was made, we had to adapt as we could (CARVALHO, 1998, Interview).

In terms of political management, the right-wing supported a leadership system based on culture and tradition, respecting the demographic weight of each Creole/M'Bundu elite segment within the MPLA, through which, though less ideologically and academically educated and from the interior of the country, they could achieve political primacy, dethroning the left-wing lighter skinned, coastal ideologues or intellectuals (as they pejoratively called them). According to Mendes de Carvalho,

By then, as today, we must be realistic and cautious towards the regional and racial factors and to the majority in order to avoid negative comments like those usually heard among the people, pointing to the privileges of some whites and mestizos. This has nothing to do with racism, just diplomacy, wisdom and good sense (CARVALHO, 1998, Interview).

Once assured of their primacy within the Creole/M'Bundu core of the MPLA and following the same logic, they favoured a balanced (secondary) representation of other regional and ethnic sensibilities within the party ranks. Such logic should be extended to those groups outside the MPLA, attracting their members (cooptation) within the middle rank hierarchy of the party, thus broadening the socio-political support of the MPLA.

I always stressed the need to be more flexible and less radical and have a clemency approach towards those who fought the MPLA, and that is how you have the Edouard Pinnock and others that joined the MPLA. There was no point to cultivate hate, we could reach an agreement if they repent and wanted to join us (CARVALHO, 1998, Interview).

In terms of foreign policy, they ‘placed nationalism above internationalism, having serious reservations about the Cuban and the USSR’, sustaining a more flexible and pragmatic approach towards the West and especially the US and South Africa, as well as their major partner in the region – Mobutu’s Zaire (CARVALHO, 1998, Interview). They accepted the possibility of ‘making concessions’ towards the US/South Africa demands for Cuban troops withdrawal ‘in order to facilitate the implementation of UN resolution’ 435 and the US recognition of the Angolan government.

### *Neto's clarification of governing principles or the Pyrrhic victory of Socialism*

The struggle for power and for opposing organisational principles between left and right wings reached its height at the CC's plenary in December 1978 (6 to 9 December). There the two wings had a head-on collision, pressuring Neto to take sides, but the president's hybrid nature (representing features of both sides and grateful to both) and his already strong personal/institutional control over the whole political system, allowed him options close to the ones sustained by the right-wing (which he effectively shared), but without making it look like a public defeat for the left, as we will now see.

#### *- The normative principles of economic practice*

At this level, the left-wing suffered a major defeat. The pragmatism and ‘liberalism’ sustained by the right-wing won right out.

Internally, the Central Committee plenary gave the go-ahead to private Angolan businessmen to set up construction companies and trucking businesses (merchandise transport to provinces). At a rally in Luanda

on 10 December 1978, the day after the meeting, Neto stressed that private Angolan capitalists would have a role to play in the country's economy (Cit. in *Africa Contemporary Record - ACR*, 11, 1980, p. B487).

Somehow trying to smooth down the previous statement, a few days later Neto explained that such a move did not mean that the aim of establishing a communist State was abandoned, adding that he looked forward to the day when every Angolan would stand up and say proudly 'I am a communist' (LEWIS, 1978). According to him, things would be different in ten, or twenty, or thirty years, but the immediate and urgent need was just to get the society working smoothly and to solve the people's problems (LEWIS, 1978).

Proceeding in his realistic pragmatism, a week later, on 17 December, 1978, in Luanda, in a speech entitled 'Nothing can stop our revolution', Neto declared 'the need to offer more possibilities to private initiative in our country [...] which is not as counter-revolutionary as might seem at first.' (Cit. in MEYNS, 1984, p. 144). He also announced the lift of the prohibition towards informal construction (recognising the State's incapacity in the housing sector) and suggested a more flexible attitude towards the *petit commerce* as a possible way to help the recovery of rural markets, recognising that 'men and women who live in the country suffer a lot, because they can hardly sell, buy or even produce' (Cit. in CONCHIGLIA, 1978, p.23-25; cit. in *LE MONDE*, 12 December 1978; cit. in *SURVEY OF WORLD BROADCAST - SWB*, London: 13 December 1978).

By then, even foreign observers usually sympathetic to left-wing positions such as David Ottaway, admitted and justified the need for Neto's pragmatism,

The need for pragmatism is apparent to the visitor. Every Luanda grocery store seems to have a long queue outside, and fruit, vegetables and meat are in short supply (OTTAWAY, 1978).

Apparent or not, such pragmatism was seen as a major setback to the left-wing, especially to Carlos Dilolwa who expressed his disagreement not only towards such concessions, but also towards the 'patrimonial way

of managing the economic affairs', having immediately resigned his place in government (as second deputy-prime minister for economy) and his politburo seat (DILOLWA, 1994). The prime minister Lopo do Nascimento, by then assuming a position close to Dilolwa (although it is arguable if he in fact assumed a left-wing stand in all matters), lost his place at the Politburo and also his place as prime minister, a position that was quite simply abolished and powers transferred to the Presidency in a process of power concentration that accelerated (VIDAL, 2007, p. 124-174).

A few months later, during his May Day speech, Neto specified the new areas open to private initiative, comprising private commercial activities of food and consumer goods in order to help to make up for shortages caused by inefficient production and distribution (Cit. in ASSOCIATED PRESS, 2 May 1979). While Neto was publicly announcing several concrete concessions towards the private sector, the only thing the left-wing achieved was a vague and vacuous May Day politburo statement denouncing the retrograde values of capitalism sustained by some sectors of the 'petite bourgeoisie' (obviously referring to the right-wing),

Some sectors of the petite bourgeoisie want to step into the shoes of the colonial bourgeoisie and thus increasingly assume the ideological and moral values of capitalism — disdain for the working class, refusal to solve the concrete problems of the masses, the love of luxury and the easy life, the spirit of ostentation, negligence, political and economic corruption, opportunism, spreading of obscurantism and superstitious concepts — in a word all the retrograde moral values of the enemy (Cit. in ASSOCIATED PRESS, 2 May 1979).

Externally, Neto had already shown some signs of pragmatism and liberalism even before the CC plenary. In an attempt to normalise economic relationships with the West, the president began to approach the EEC countries in general and in July 1978, Claude Cheysson, the EEC's Commissioner for Development, visited Angola, and according to his own words,

Angola wanted to increase trade with the West and welcomed Western investment [...] I was struck by the desire of Neto and his Ministers to immediately discuss certain development problems. Their traditional partners cannot offer them much in this field (cit. in AFRICA CONTEMPORARY RECORD - ACR, 11, 1980, p. B497).

Belgium foreign minister, Henri Simonet, was told by Neto that Angola was eager to establish co-operative economic relations with West European countries in order to diversify its international relations and reduce its dependence on Cuba and the Soviet bloc (cit. in THE NEW YORK TIMES, 18 September 1978; cit. in AFRICA CONTEMPORARY RECORD - ACR, 11, 1980, p. B497). Beyond government-to-government agreements, Neto showed his interest in private Western investment on a large scale, mainly directed to oil exploration (besides Gulf and Petrofina), but also including development projects in other areas such as fisheries, the recovery of the port of Lobito, the Benguela Railway, iron, and uranium mines (cit. in THE NEW YORK TIMES, 18 September 1978; cit. in WEST AFRICA MAGAZINE, 23 October 1978). In the meantime, Angola was granted the status of observer in the renegotiations of the Lomé Convention (cit. in AFRICA CONTEMPORARY RECORD, 11, 1980, p. B497).

At the level of foreign economic policy, a few days before the plenary, Western reporters already talked of a shift from ideology to pragmatism as the 'economy founders' (LAMB, 1978; 1978a; OTTAWAY, 1978). By the time of the CC plenary (6-9 December 1978) the economic approach towards the West was re-affirmed and made concrete. Neto thus announced the preparation of a new and more attractive law for private foreign investment, which was effectively passed in July 1979, covering all aspects of economic activity, allowing several benefits such as the repatriation of profits, guarantees of compensation in the event of nationalisation, exemption from tax and from customs duties (PEEL, 1979; HODGES, 1987, p. 32-3). In the specific case of the oil sector, the new law was even more 'liberal' than the ones already approved in 1978 (BHAGAVAN, 1980, p. 21).



- *The normative principles in terms of political power management*

After the plenary Neto definitely put in place a management system based upon the distribution of privileges and benefits through rotating nominations to party and State top positions; making for a kind of a carousel of posts on which the key elements of the party rotated according to the political needs of a system which took into account ethno-regional balances (ethnic, sub-ethnic, regional and racial). This balance was in fact meant to be skewed in favour of the Creole/M'Bundu core of the MPLA. Such supremacy was achieved not only through the party's all-powerful presidency, but also through the occupation of a higher number of top positions – mainly in the politburo, the Central Committee, the General Staff, central and local government (ministers, vice-ministers, secretaries of State and provincial commissioners), top management of public companies and embassies abroad.

In these terms, after the plenary the president remodelled the top organs of the party and of the State, starting with the politburo, which was to comprise three black Mbundu/Creoles (Agostinho Neto, Eduardo dos Santos and João Luís Neto 'Xietu'), three Mbundu/Creole mestizos (Lúcio Lara, Iko Carreira and António dos Santos França 'N'Dalu')<sup>13</sup>, three Bakongo (Pascoal Luvualo, Rodrigues João Lopes 'Ludy Kissassunda' and Ambroise Lukoki) and two Cabindan (Evaristo Domingos 'Kimba' and Pedro Maria Tonha 'Pedalé').<sup>14</sup> The supremacy of the Creole/M'Bundu was clear with six elements.

The Ovimbundu were the only major ethnic group that were not represented in the politburo because of the resentment provoked by renewed UNITA/South Africa offensives and growing linkages between the Ovimbundu and UNITA. Below the politburo level, some MPLA Ovimbundu old time members managed to achieve top positions, such as Faustino

13 As previously mentioned, the other two mestiços in the politburo — Dilolwa and Lopo do Nascimento — had resigned and dismissed/relocated, respectively (although Lopo is not a *mulato* - son of a black and a white parent - like Dilolwa, he is still a *mestiço* - those with some degree of mixed race between black and white, coming from an old family of mixed race in Golungo Alto - Kwanza Norte province).

14 The sabotage/military activities of the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda – FLEC, a secessionist movement of the oil rich enclave of Cabinda (Angolan territory at the right bank of the Congo river), and the growing economic dependency of the Angolan economy on oil, demanded special attention to Cabindans, reserving them important places at the top organs of the Party.

Muteka, appointed minister of transport in January 1979 (cit. in SURVEY OF WORLD BROADCAST – SWB, 19 January 1979). Following the same management principles of rotation and micro-identity balance, there was reshuffling in the CC and also in the central and provincial governments; in consequence of such rotation, in 1979, all provincial commissioners were ex-officio members of the government.

Beyond those very top organs, at an intermediate level of the State hierarchy, a few months before the plenary Neto had already shown signs of wanting to manage the political system based on the strategic or selective integration (cooptation) of members of other movements and even of MPLA's dissident groups. Therefore, in 16<sup>th</sup> September 1978, he announced in Cabinda, his policy of clemency and partial amnesty followed by integration within the MPLA, towards members of the FNLA, the FLEC, the 'Active Revolt', the 'Eastern Revolt' and Nito's sympathisers, but still without mentioning UNITA (NETO, 1979, p.43-54). Later on, right after the plenary, in 17<sup>th</sup> September, Neto stated that all those who once belonged to such organisations 'must have the same opportunities and rights without any discrimination whatsoever' (cit. in SURVEY OF WORLD BROADCAST, 19 December 1978).

As a result of this new policy of clemency, several top members of the FNLA deserted and surrendered to the MPLA during 1979, after which they were reintegrated within State structures, along with the freed members of MPLA's previous dissident groups ('active revolt' and 'Eastern revolt'). This re-integration/cooptation strategy was pursued in parallel and articulation to an also pragmatic/realistic foreign policy as follows.

*- The guiding principles in terms of foreign policy*

In parallel to the attempted normalisation of economic relationships with the West (during the summer of 1978), Neto also pursued a foreign policy designed to weaken the external support for the opposing movements still fighting the MPLA government – what was left of FNLA, and FLEC, and even UNITA.

At the regional level, and against the explicit opposition of the left-wing members at the Politburo, Neto approached the long-time MPLA's archenemy – Mobutu's Zaire –, re-establishing diplomatic relations in July

1978 and officially visiting Kinshasa in the following month. The move was reciprocated by Mobutu who visited Angola in October. After negotiations, Neto got Mobutu to announce the expulsion of the FNLA and the FLEC from Zaire. On 27 October 1979, Holden Roberto was expelled from Zaire, taking refuge in Paris with several other leaders of the movement, while others surrendered through the referred policy of clemency.

At the international level (West), Neto approached diplomatically not only the EEC countries as mentioned, but also Portugal, where UNITA found support among the Angolan refugees in Portugal and Portuguese returnees. In June 1978, there was an historic meeting between Neto and Portugal's President Ramalho Eanes in Guinea-Bissau, which resolved many of the issues that had kept Angolan-Portuguese relations very cool since independence such as the activities of the FNLA, UNITA and FLEC in Portugal. By then, Neto invited the estimated 7000 refugees in Portugal to return home and a contingent of Portuguese technicians was expected to go to Angola (cit. in HERALD TRIBUNE, 6 December 1978; cit. in AFRICA CONTEMPORARY RECORD - ACR, II, 1980, P. B496-B497).

Even more audacious was the approach to the US, whereby Neto expressed availability to discuss a possible reduction of dependency on Cuban and Soviet influence, as demanded by the US. On the US side the move was immediately reciprocated by the Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, announcing in June 1978 that Washington 'wished to improve its relations with Luanda' (AFRICA CONTEMPORARY RECORD, II, 1980, p. B493-B494). Right after the CC plenary, a US delegation visited Angola on 13 December and was told by Neto that Angola was 'prepared and willing to establish diplomatic relations with the US, although it could do nothing about reducing the number of Cuban troops because of South Africa's daily attacks' (OTTAWAY, 1978; LEWIS, 1978; also cit. in THE SUN – US, 13 December 1978).

By then, during the 'Carter administration', Washington came very close to recognise the Angolan government despite the Cuban military presence (WRIGHT, 1997, chapters 5-6; PATRÍCIO, 1997, p. 50-1). The sudden and unexpected death of Agostinho Neto in Moscow during a cancer operation on 10 September 1979 and the election of Ronald Reagan's

republican administration, overtly supporting UNITA, somehow reversed the diplomatic progresses. The new foreign policy pragmatism of Neto and his sudden death fed a major conspiracy theory, suspicion and resentment within MPLA's right-wing ranks, that the Soviets 'helped' Neto to die (SHUBIN, 2008, p.71). According to Mendes de Carvalho,

That decision to look for treatment in the USSR was too sudden and unexpected. I was immediately afraid and asked for explanations to Eduardo Macedo dos Santos [Neto's personal medical Doctor] and he tried to explain the reasons, supporting the idea, I was not convinced and left him a warn [interviewee with finger raised, more like a threat], "in any circumstance you leave the president by himself. If anything happens to Neto you will have to personally deal with me." After Neto's death I went to him for explanations and he apologetically said he was preparing to enter the surgery room, but the Russians forbade him to enter despite all his insistence and left him waiting outside; that was the last time he saw Neto, they did not even allow him to inspect the body afterwards and he could not do anything about it. What can I say? (MENDES DE CARVALHO, Private Interview, 1998)

Although in practice the right-wing positions prevailed, the party's official discourse was more Socialist than ever. In terms of specific individuals, the internal balance between the two groups was in general maintained. With the exception of Carlos Dilolwa, who in fact 'resigned from the politburo and the government against Neto's will' (DILOLWA, Private Interview, 1994), the left-wing members in general kept their seats within the CC and the Politburo, as the right-wingers kept theirs at the CC.<sup>15</sup>

*- The prevailing practices of the majority of the population from then on.*

For the majority of the population, the pragmatic economic positions assumed at the top of the system were clearly seen as an 'official' tolerance or unofficial acceptance to the private/informal/illegal procedures based on straddling that had been rife in all sectors of activity and throughout all social strata.

<sup>15</sup> Left-wingers as Lúcio Lara and Iko Carreira remained in Politburo and Lopo do Nascimento lost his place at the politburo but not at the CC; right-wingers as Mendes de Carvalho, Domingos Paiva da Silva, Bernardo de Souza and Manuel Pedro Pacavira remained at the CC.

From then on, a self-legitimising cumulative process was unleashed through which the increasing weakness of the official economy to provide goods and services along with the party's nomination system ('elitist' and discriminatory), legitimised the informal economy and pushed for its ever-increasing development, further weakening the official economy and further reinforcing the informal/illegal.

Contrary to Neto's announced provisional character for the concessions made to private initiative, the obvious truth to everybody was that those concessions were just the first of a long list to come. In fact, as soon as 1981/1982 there were already many signs of the irreversible character of this self-fulfilling process. According to Zenha Rela,

[In early 1980] 'Despise the private' so characteristic of the first years of independence, was progressively transformed in 'desire to be private' [...] Those in 1976 who attacked the saboteurs of the economy [the ones in the informal/private sector] were now beginning their path towards 'entrepreneurship', having gone through the intermediate and uncomfortable phase of *candongueiro* [person acting in the black market]. In 1981/1982, signs that this course was already on the way were too many and allowed one to state its non-reversible character (ZENHA RELA, 1992, p. 57-8).

*- The prevailing solidarities for the majority from then on.*

Likewise, the primary solidarities criteria used at the top organs, soon spread. The 1980 congress documents (majorly influenced by the left), which denounced all the previously referred informal activities – generalised thefts, diversion of produce, corruption, organised networks, involvement of managers, cadres and security forces, and so on –, also attacked the prevailing solidarities making it possible, namely the 'regionalism, racism and sectarianism [...] which contributes to the disorganisation and indiscipline in production and distribution, hampering the progress [...] towards Socialism' (MPLA, 1980a, p. 36).

The CC report went even further, stating that,

The divisionist elements who take advantage of still-existing prejudice, be it tribal, regional or racial, within Angolan society, just so they can pretend to be 'defenders of the people' whilst striving for personal interests or those of their group, must be persecuted as enemies of the working class, of the Angolan nation and of Socialism [...] Regionalism, tribalism and racism are reflections of pre-capitalist production relationships and colonial domination. These concepts, as we have been seeing, bring about divisions that can be taken advantage of by opportunistic elements in order to divide the popular masse (MPLA, 1980, p. 37).

A third congress document, drawing an economic and social balance of the 1978-1980 period added to those prevailing solidarities the 'nepotism' and *apadrinhamento* [Godfather protection], thus 'promoting incompetence' (MPLA, 1980b, p. II, 27).

What made ethnicity, regionalism or nepotism 'a problem' in Angola as elsewhere, were the inherent socio-economic distortions it generated (BAYART, 1989, chapter I). Such distortions could be effectively felt in Angola's daily life, as a national phenomenon spread throughout the whole country, as stressed by Neto in February 1978,

We know that there is tribalism still. It exists and we can feel it here in Bié [central plateau], in Luanda [centre-North], in Zaire [North], and in the provinces of Cabinda [North enclave] and Moxico [East and South-East]. It is there, despite the work we have been undertaking in order to accomplish national unity. We have achieved much through this effort. However, we have to recognise that tribalism exists (cit. in AFRICA CONTEMPORARY RECORD, 10, 1979, P. B505).

Later, in December 1978, Neto referred again such problems of 'racism, tribalism and regionalism' (cit. in SURVEY OF WORLD BROADCAST, 19 December 1978). In these terms one can understand the logics of political management adopted by the president at the top of the system in favour of a more 'balanced' ethnic and regional composition of top organs: on the one hand, as an attempt to set the example from above in order to

avoid a radicalisation of such type of distortions throughout the whole society and country; on the other hand, as an 'official' acknowledgement of the necessity to politically manage such reality, thus integrating it instead of straightforward fighting it.

By the time of his death in September 1979, Neto had set the dispute on political-economic orientation, which clearly consecrated a pragmatic right-wing path, which according to the description above was neo-patri-monial, under the formal and official cover of a Marxist-Leninist Workers' Party. Whatever effective Socialist project that might have existed, was no longer.

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