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Guinea-Bissau: bringing Angola into the fold

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“Will Guinea-Bissau ever move on from this current and cyclical status quo?”¹ Indeed, questions such as these often come up whenever Guinea-Bissau’s internal unrest takes a turn for the worst. The unlawful events of April 1st 2010 were a case in point and in that order, calls for some kind of proactive and enforced international engagement were, yet again, made. However, after a back-and-forth process lasting all year, new developments began to surface thanks to the timely and singular contribution of one Lusophone peer in particular - Angola.

In truth, public pledges of support had already been made by Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos during the 2010 July Summit of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP). Moreover, the following Technical and Military Assistance Protocol, jointly signed on September 10th, also clearly demonstrated official interest in becoming an active part of any decisive and final resolution to the problems in Guinea-Bissau’s own security sector.

But from words to deeds, there is usually a long way. Expectations thus remained relatively low, specially if one takes into account several other possible venues for international/regional assistance – either under a CPLP,

ECOWAS or African Union framework – with the exact same objective, that were also being explored at the time.² Be that as it may, Angola clearly identified an opportunity to boost its foreign policy clout and it made sure not to waste it. On March 21st Angolan Defense Minister Cândido Pereira Van-Dúnem – as head of a wide delegation comprising, among others, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Manuel Domingos Augusto and Angolan ambassador to the CPLP Hélder Lucas – together with Bissau-Guinean President Malam Bacai Sanhá, officially launched MISSANG/GB – the Angolan Security Mission in Guinea-Bissau. Comprised of almost 200 Angolan military personnel and led by Lieutenant-General Gildo dos Santos, it is supposed to take on more of a “technical advisory” role, instead of becoming a traditional “defense mission”.³ Furthermore, with an unconfirmed total cost of US\$30 million, it will work in an initial one-year timeframe and focus on restructuring the Military Instruction Centre of Cumeré, while continuing to support the training of Bissau-Guinean military under the premises of the long-sought Security Sector Reform (SSR).

1 David Zounmenou, “Guinea-Bissau in 2010: still in the eye of the storm” (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin: 2010 Review*, 2011), p. 24.

2 See Pedro Seabra, “A stabilization mission in Guinea-Bissau: the illusive panacea?” (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 15, January 2010), pp. 5-9.

3 Fonseca Bengui, “Missão militar angolana apresentada em Bissau” (*Jornal de Angola*, 22 March 2011).



But if doubts remained as to the international backing of this endeavor, the audience in attendance for this occasion proved otherwise. CPLP Secretary-General Domingos Simões Pereira, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative to Guinea-Bissau Joseph Mutaboba, ECOWAS Representative on Guinea-Bissau Hamet Sidibe, Portuguese ambassador António Ricoca Freire and Nigerian ambassador Godwin Agamah, all made sure to appear, and in some way endorse this 'laudable and selfless' Angolan effort. But amid all the grateful rhetoric, some questions are bound to arise. First, how accurate would it be to assume that, given the presence of an Angolan mission on the ground with a clear political mandate to pursue a comprehensive SSR agenda, the remaining international organizations will chose to take a back seat, thus reducing their direct involvement in Guinea-Bissau? According to the local leadership's intentions, apparently not so much. Indeed, President Sanhá was very clear when stating that "Guinea-Bissau is fully aware of the extent of work to be done in this process which is not exhausted by bilateral cooperation alone, hence the importance of having to associate with other bilateral, regional and international partners, such as CEDEAO, the African Union, the EU and the UN".⁴ For his part, Minister Van-Dúnem was also very straightforward when pointing out that these organization's efforts – including the CPLP, which was curiously absent from the foreign actors mentioned by Sanhá – will be nothing short of complementary to the Angolan mission.

But if that is indeed the case, it is also worth asking if Angola is taking point here, i.e. if all of the other embryonic forms of international-regional support are going to be contingent to Angola's leadership of this process from

now on. Moreover, is it equally legitimate to infer that the joint AU-ECOWAS-CPLP stabilization mission announced by the AU's Special Representative Sebastião Isata on January 6th, is no longer a variable in this equation?⁵ Or

was Isata counting on Angola's military detachment – which began to be deployed to Bissau in February, precisely the month that he had brought forward for the beginning of the hastily proclaimed 'trilateral' mission – all along? Unfortunately, as one would expect, satisfying answers for either of these queries are difficult to reach and the situation is not likely to change in the near future. As with everything else regarding Guinea-Bissau's internal order, these multiple foreign endeavors are to remain clouded in enigmatic stances and cryptic public messages, showcasing the difficult tight rope that the local political leadership must walk to appease the wary international community, while in the end managing only to engage with one significant bilateral partner.

Be that as it may, Angola is being granted a chance to prove its worth in this drawn out geopolitical quagmire. As the driving forces behind this latest

political-military surge abroad, one could easily mention the significant Angolan economic interests in the country – the exploration of lucrative mineral bauxite easily comes to mind – but regional considerations must also be taken into account. Clearly, Angola is no longer too coy to display the full extent of its increasing economic power, and thus seeks to firmly entrench its status within the wider African context with this timely intervention. However, Angola also appears extremely keen to complement these poorly concealed ambitions

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4 Assana Sambú, "Lançada missão angolana de apoio à Reforma do Sector de Segurança" [*Gazeta de Notícias*, 27 March 2011].

5 "Guiné-Bissau: Missão de estabilização chega ao país em fevereiro - União Africana" [*Lusa*, 6 January 2011].



with a notorious political effort, betting its own external credibility on an enduring commitment to tackling the structural flaws behind Guinea-Bissau's instability. That much can be deduced from the attendance of Angolan Secretary of State Manuel Domingos Augusto to the latest EU consultations meeting on the situation in Guinea-Bissau, on March 29th in Brussels.⁶ All in all, the level of Angolan interest in Guinea-Bissau is undeniable, that's for sure. But one needs only to recall the EU's own experience with the Bissau-Guinean SSR to inevitably lower any expectations that this new development might bring. Hence, despite Angola's certainty of the success of this initiative, given Guinea-Bissau's track record, words of caution are necessarily in order.

⁶ "Angola acompanha consultas entre Guiné-Bissau e União Europeia" (*Angop*, 29 March 2011).

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