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An unshaken alliance: Angola's stance in the Côte d'Ivoire

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Angolan capacity and ability to gain the support of several important countries and organizations has always managed to surprise the ever-watchful world. During Angola's long lasting civil war, both the MPLA and UNITA maintained their struggle by relying heavily on foreign countries' assistance, which either ideologically or economically always found common ground to politically support each of these parties. However, besides the well-known MPLA-Soviet Union-Cuba and UNITA-South Africa-United States axis, other layers of power made efforts to sustain these factions, thus largely prolonging the Angolan conflict.

UNITA was the champion of diversified foreign assistance. Although able to secure South African support relatively soon, only in Ronald Reagan's administration and with the 'Reagan doctrine' was UNITA able to garner substantial support from the United States. Yet, UNITA enjoyed a much broader support base – changing with time and in interests –, consisting of Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Morocco, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo and Zambia to name a few. Nevertheless, regardless of such abundant support, none of these actors – perhaps with the exception of South Africa during a brief period – provided military and economic aid with the same intensity and duration as the Soviet Union and Cuba did for the MPLA.

With the 1991 electoral results intensely contested but accepted by UNITA's leader Jonas Savimbi, UNITA's support base began decaying because of the end of the Cold War – and the gradual withdrawal of US support –, the tearing of relations between South Africa and UNITA – a relationship highly criticized abroad due to the former's Apartheid policy – and finally, United Nations sanctions, which brought UNITA's foreign apparatus to its knees. Without surprise, José Eduardo dos Santos' MPLA played UNITA's clouded reputation in the international community remarkably, by practicing a coercive foreign policy with regard to UNITA's supporters and by supporting rebel groups in countries where governments were known to assist UNITA's struggle, while frequently finding ways to divert this assistance from the government itself.

With the death of UNITA's legendary leader Jonas Savimbi in February 2002, the war ended and the world's attention was diverted from Angola to other parts of the globe, namely the Balkans. Yet the Angolan government's foreign relations, celebrated during the period of civil war, were neither forgotten nor terminated. They muted into a policy underpinned by the principle of not letting allied leaders down. Indeed, the Angolan government did not hesitate to reciprocate the



support given to its struggle when its allies needed it the most. This explains Angola's involvement in the Second Congo War, in favor of Laurent Désiré-Kabila. Laurent Kabila received support from the Angolan government in the First Congo War, since President Mobutu Sese-Seko was an important ally of UNITA. During the Second Congo War, now with President Laurent Kabila and later his son current President Joseph Kabila in power in the DRC, Angola remained active in supporting their faction, which faced a Ugandan and Rwandan-led invasion. Because a power vacuum in the DRC or the triumph of the invading forces would destabilize the country and potentially create favorable conditions for the new incumbent to resume support to UNITA, Angola saw it crucial to yet again support Joseph Kabila's struggle, thus remaining faithful to its First Congo War ally while cracking down on any possibility UNITA had of regaining a line of support from the DRC. A similar situation occurred in Congo Brazzaville, when Pascal Lissouba, another long term supporter of UNITA, faced an armed insurrection led by former President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, which ended with the ousting of the former with direct assistance from Angola's Armed Forces (FAA).

It is in this context that President José Eduardo dos Santos' diplomatic intervention to mediate the current crisis in the Côte d'Ivoire, opposing President Laurent Gbagbo to President-elect Alassane Ouattara, is manifested. Although President José Eduardo dos Santos justified his country's recognition of Laurent Gbagbo as the official President of Côte d'Ivoire by stating that the results of the second round of elections were announced after the established date by law and by those who did not have the competences to do so,¹ this position is also firmly based in the fact that Alassane Ouattara was one of the many African leaders to have supported UNITA's struggle against his party and government.

UNITA enjoyed broad political support in the Côte d'Ivoire. Former President Félix Houphouët-Boigny himself, an ardent anti-communist, was an avid supporter of the struggle of UNITA in Angola. In his illness Houphouët-Boigny named Alassane Ouattara Prime Minister – a post unoccupied since 1960 – who ruled the country on the former's behalf from November 1990 until December 1993. The policy of countering communism by supporting its enemies was maintained throughout Ouattara's period as Prime Minister, until after a phase of uncertainty and conflict Laurent Gbagbo assumed office in 2000 as President of the Côte d'Ivoire. However,

it was during Laurent Gbagbo's presidency that UNITA began to take the most painful blows to its structure. Laurent Gbagbo was an ally of President José Eduardo dos Santos, a relationship which proved most profitable for his government. Not only did Laurent Gbagbo stop accepting UNITA's presence in the Côte d'Ivoire and prevent a large quantity of arms from reaching Angola, but he is also said – albeit unofficially – to have allowed the Angolan secret police to kidnap leaders, sympathizers and even members of Jonas Savimbi's family residing in the country. This course of action was a major victory for the Angolan government, which managed to disrupt one of UNITA's decade-long important economic, political, diplomatic and military bases. This alone characterizes the profound political ties both leaders have enjoyed ever since, and explains the culture of commitment Angola has towards Laurent Gbagbo and his current situation in the Côte d'Ivoire.

There are other countries in Africa that enjoy such a relationship with the Angolan President, although Laurent Gbagbo proved to be a true ally and a trustworthy leader in the eyes of Angolan foreign policy. This is the reason why Angola was the only country to send an ambassador to his swearing in ceremony and one of the first countries in Africa to assume a position of mediation – thus avoiding confrontation –, logically inclined towards Laurent Gbagbo's leadership.

Above all, there is a greater underlying sense to be withdrawn from these events. That is the prominent role of Angola in sub-Saharan African politics. Indeed, Angola's numerous allies and political connections reveal a truth many ignore in the international community and within its security bodies: any attempt at conflict resolution in sub-Saharan Africa not involving Angola as a central pillar in the negotiations will hardly achieve the best results. Although it is hard to understand a country's influence in regional and world affairs, Angola's weight in its broader region has been immensely unaccounted for, which often leaves the international community perplexed and even confused when Angola opts in and takes a position. British ambassador to Angola Richard Wildash stated in an interview that the world does not yet grasp the importance of Angola in today's international relations – not only in its region but also globally – while pointing out the country's capacity for conflict resolution, as currently witnessed in the Côte d'Ivoire.² Nothing could be closer to the truth. President José Eduardo dos Santos has stated several times that he wishes for a peaceful resolution to the Ivorian

1 Agostinho Gayeta, "Eduardo dos Santos criticado por apoio a Gbagbo" (*Voice of America*, 14 January 2011).

2 "International community should understand the country's importance" (*allAfrica*, 17 January 2011).



conundrum. Yet, a peaceful resolution does not simply entail a straightforward negotiation between all parties involved. In fact, although Angola was the only state to support Laurent Gbagbo, several other countries are now taking its side – particularly South Africa, which has been accused by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) of supporting Laurent Gbagbo by sending a naval frigate that would assure his protection³ – thus shifting attention from the former's refusal to leave office to the fact that the elections might have been influenced by Alassane Ouattara in the first place.

Angola's reach appears to go beyond its regional scope. Its government was able to extract dividends from UNITA's loss of international influence, by either conserving ties or simply by sponsoring regime change in those countries which supported the latter. Having successfully broadened its contacts, today, almost a decade after the demise of Jonas Savimbi, Angolan foreign policy has grown out of its civil war shell, to become not only a well connected player faithful to its past allies, but also an actor capable of influencing regional powers and even the international community itself.

³ Scott Stearns, "ECOWAS: S. Africa undermining Ivory Coast mediation" (*Voice of America*, 9 February 2011).

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