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Déjà Vu in Angola: Burkina Faso and the Myth of Contagion Effect

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Following two days of intense popular protests in Burkina Faso, President Blaise Compaoré was forced to resign his office and seek refuge in Côte d'Ivoire. Compaoré was in power for 27 years and it was precisely the attempt to perpetuate himself in the presidential office that caused his fall.

As happened during the 2011 Arab Spring,¹ with the ousting of Tunisia's Ben Ali, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Compaoré's removal from power has raised hopes for some and fear for others in Angola. In some way, the events in Burkina Faso reminded many that José Eduardo dos Santos is one of sub-Saharan Africa's longest-serving leaders. Does that mean that Compaoré's fall must be a reason for hope or fear in Angola? What has changed in Angola between 2011 and 2014? Is a contagion effect a real possibility?

The immediate answer is that there is no reason to hope, or fear, that the events in Burkina Faso will cause any sort of replica or contagion effect in Angola.² Firstly,

there is no geographical contiguity, or even a common past, between Angola and Burkina Faso. Geography and history do not operate as a political and social stimulus. Secondly, Angola's 27 years of civil war ended only in 2002, making it very much alive in that nation's collective memory. While not everyone has equally benefited from the peace dividends, it is, however, not possible to counter argue and deny the fact that living conditions have improved considerably over the past 12 years. In fact, economic growth has never been the engine of political instability in Angola, far from it. Thirdly, there is no concrete alternative to MPLA's hegemony, or even a charismatic figure to lead the opposition. Thus, contrary to what happened during the Arab Spring, or recently in Burkina Faso, and as far as it is possible to anticipate, it is hard to recognize a catalyst, or discontentment in significant proportions, that may serve to mobilize Angolans. From this point view, nothing has changed in Angola between 2011 and 2014.

Naturally, there are Angolans that do not identify themselves with José Eduardo dos Santos' long lasting leadership. Many have abstained, or did not vote, for the MPLA in the August 2012 general elections. Regardless, the MPLA got 71,8% of the votes in an electoral process deemed free and fair by the CPLP, SADC and African Union observers, despite some relevant and substantive punctual remarks.

Today there is no institutional blockage in Luanda, nor a problem with political legitimacy, in a scale that justifies popular protests similar to those that took

1 See Vasco Martins, "Empty words of revolution in Angola" (*IPRIS Viewpoints*, No. 43, March 2011).

2 See Carina Branco, "Sismo político no Burkina Faso pode ter réplicas em Angola?" (RFI, 8 November 2014), e, Nádia Issufo, "Burkina Faso: Angola e outros regimes temem efeito de contágio" (Deutsche Welle, 3 November 2014).



place in Ouagadougou. This does not mean that it is illegitimate and unreasonable to discuss, in Angola and abroad, José Eduardo dos Santos's political succession. As a matter of fact, the President's age—72 years old—is more than a sufficient reason for, sooner or later, making the matter of political succession an unavoidable issue. Hence, the apparent relevance of Manuel Domingos Vicente's choice to take the Vice-Presidency.

Having said this, and as far as what is possible to understand from the course of events in Angola, waiting for Compaoré's fall to resonate in the ousting of José Eduardo dos Santos is likely to be useless. It may be better to put the champagne bottles back in the fridge.

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