

# Ethnicity and conflict in Angola: prospects for reconciliation

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After 25 years of civil war, the Angolan state exists in name only. Its ability to perform even the most basic functions of governance has crumbled under the strains of one of Africa's most protracted conflicts. Angolan society is increasingly acquiring all the characteristics of a Hobbesian existence: death has become banal whether by starvation in government controlled areas or by bullets, mines or bombs in rebel areas. Worse still, there is no short-term end in sight. Domestically, an enfeebled and coopted civil society lacks the capacity and space to present realistic alternatives for a peaceful solution while various international peace-making attempts have failed, reducing the appetite for further external intervention. What are the main causes of this complex situation?

Angola's conflict is being depicted as a 'resource war'. The elites of the two main warring parties – the governing *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) and the rebel *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA) – have used the country's vast oil and diamond resources to further their political and economic interests while the majority of the people lead a miserable existence. This view of the war in Angola, however accurate, does not take into account the important underlying causes of the conflict. Angola's ongoing tragedy is also the result of the dominant politico-military forces' reluctance to share power and wealth within an inclusive multi-ethnic and multi-racial political system. This has historical roots and is a direct consequence of the major divisions between the main nationalist groups that participated in the anti-colonial war of liberation, from 1961 to 1974. These cleavages, however, were only partly the result of deep animosities caused by class or racial differences reflecting colonial society or even ideological differences reflecting Cold War allegiances.<sup>1</sup> At a deeper level, the divisions between the nationalist groups were caused mainly by ethnic differences predating colonialism.

By forcibly binding different ethnic groups into one centrally administered territory, colonial rule inevitably led to the politicisation of ethnicity as different ethnic groups retreated into primordial constructs for cultural, if not political, self-preservation. Although other important dividing factors, including class and race, were superimposed by colonialism on Angolan society, the gulf dividing ethnic groups has proven to be both enduring and difficult to bridge. Not surprisingly, the anti-colonial struggle reflected these ethnic differences. The major liberation

movements – MPLA, UNITA and FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola*) – represented almost exclusively the Mbundu<sup>2</sup>, Ovimbundu<sup>3</sup>, and Bacongo<sup>4</sup> ethnic groups respectively. Even in the face of their common enemy, Portuguese colonialism, these three nationalist groups were unable to overcome their differences and form a united front. They remained deeply divided by issues of ethnicity. This is not to argue that other issues did not contribute to the disagreements among the liberation movements. In fact, besides ethnicity, issues of race and class featured prominently in the liberation movements' discourse to highlight both the oppressive and exploitative nature of Portuguese colonial rule in Angola and the differences among them. For example, since FNLA and UNITA drew most of their support from peasants in the northern and central areas of Angola, their programmes placed significant emphasis on the exploitation of Angola and its people by a relatively small number of Portuguese settlers. But both FNLA and UNITA also consistently highlighted the fact that many of MPLA's top leaders were descendants of Portuguese and/or originated from relatively privileged socio-economic classes. For MPLA, class – not race – constituted an important element of its discourse. Since a significant portion of MPLA leadership originated from the urban areas, especially the capital city of Luanda, it successfully used class issues within a Marxist-Leninist discourse to gain support from the embryonic proletariat, the emerging intelligentsia, and revolutionary mixed-race Angolans (*mulattos*). However, as will be discussed below, the end of settler rule decreased the significance of race and class as the main factors sustaining the conflict. Thus, ethnicity and ideology remained the main dividing factors. Later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, ideological differences became irrelevant as the MPLA abandoned Marxism-Leninism and embraced Western political and economic models. Today, the width of the ethnic gap and a lack of domestic and international mechanisms to bridge it remain as important factors hindering a resolution of the conflict.

This chapter has three objectives. First, it highlights the role of ethnicity in triggering and sustaining the civil war in Angola. It provides an analysis of how the major politico-military forces have used ethnic politics for different, yet equally destructive, purposes. For the MPLA, informal ethnic networks have been influential in maintaining its grip on power even during times of adversity caused by domestic and international pressures. UNITA, on the other hand, has successfully used ethnicity to rally and sustain popular support among the Ovimbundu, Angola's major ethnic group. Second, this chapter analyses how the civil war has paralysed the state and facilitated the usurping of power by unaccountable elites. The collapse of governance in Angola, this chapter argues, has been one of the major consequences of this ethnic-inspired civil war. Third, it focuses attention on the difficulties of reconciliation and peace in a context of ethnic conflict and governance breakdown. Reconciliation and peace will remain elusive for the foreseeable future especially in the absence of a vibrant civil society with the ability to bridge the ethnic divide separating the warring parties and provide alternative forms of governance. Given this situation, the chapter

concludes by suggesting that a new, more inclusive and transparent political system is needed if the Angolan conflict is to be permanently resolved.

## **Theoretical framework: ethnicity, nationalism and statehood**

The notion of ethnicity is both amorphous and imbued with extreme doses of subjectivity. James Kellas, for example, defines ethnicity as a “state of being ethnic, or belonging to an ethnic group.”<sup>5</sup> The literature on ethnicity is filled with such vague definitions of this concept. This points to the fact that ethnicity cannot be adequately defined in isolation. Ethnicity is an important social and political force that must be understood in conjunction with other equally essential and related notions like ethnic groups and nations. Richard Schermerhorn defines an ethnic group as “a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypical features, or any combination of these. A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the group.”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Schermerhorn, John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith de-emphasise the connection with the ‘larger society’. They prefer the term *ethnie* or ethnic community to define “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.”<sup>7</sup>

Whether one adopts Schermerhorn’s comprehensive definition or Hutchinson and Smith’s more elegant version, it is hard to deny the importance of ethnicity in the post-Cold War period when, around the world, various ethnic groups, many masquerading as nations, claim the right to govern themselves as independent, sovereign entities. Much of the present international confusion arises precisely because many ethnic groups claim the status of a nation.

The international community is hesitant to recognise such claims. This is understandable because a nation is much more than a group of people with a sense of community derived from common bonds of history, culture, and common ancestry. Nations, as Kellas reminds us, “have ‘objective’ characteristics which may include a territory, a language, a religion, or common descent (though not all these are always present), and ‘subjective’ characteristics, essentially a people’s awareness of its nationality and affection for it.”<sup>8</sup> However, in the current Westphalian system, nations matter little. People conduct their international affairs through states, not nations. Therefore, for a people or a nation to achieve international relevance, the attainment of statehood is a primary prerequisite. The problem for would-be states is that the current international system is inherently conservative and it abhors, and therefore discourages, territorial mutations of its constituent units – the states. Furthermore, most states still uphold traditional

notions of “hard power” that equate it primarily with landmass and population. Since power – acquisition, accumulation, and use – is at the very centre of a state's existence and survival, few states will voluntarily give up territory and population to facilitate the creation of another state.

This has not prevented political leaders – whether expressing the national will or pursuing their personal ambitions – from attempting to achieve domestic or international relevance for their ‘nations’. In most cases, this process involves politicising ethnicity. For Joseph Rothschild, the politicisation of ethnicity involves four elements, including:

- “to render people cognitively aware of the relevance of politics to the health of their ethnic cultural values and vice versa;
- to stimulate their concern about this nexus;
- to mobilise them into self-conscious ethnic groups; and
- to direct their behaviour toward activity in the political arena on the basis of this awareness, concern, and group consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

As numerous contemporary examples in Africa and elsewhere illustrate, once ethnicity is politicised, it becomes a powerful political force that may ultimately “enhance, retard, or nullify the political integration of states, may legitimate or delegitimize their political systems, and stabilise or undermine their regimes and governments.”<sup>10</sup> As the next section shows, the politicisation of ethnicity in Africa has retarded and – at least in the cases of Angola and Somalia – nullified the political integration of states; delegitimised post-colonial African political systems and undermined many African regimes and governments.

## Africa: ethnicity and colonialism

Attempts by European powers to graft the Westphalian system upon Africa have resulted in dismal failures. This is evident in the continuing struggle by many post-colonial African states for domestic survival and international relevance. This pathetic condition was not entirely unpredictable given the role of ethnicity in pre-colonial society.

Pre-colonial Africa included hundreds of societies ranging from small bands of hunters and gatherers to large, agricultural-based communities with highly sophisticated and centralised political structures dominated by chiefs and kings. Most of these societies were held together by a strong sense of kinship and common territory. As Richard Thompson notes, despite their diverse forms of social, political, and economic organisation, pre-colonial Africa had several features in common. These included the fact that “each society identified with a ‘homeland,’ a specific territory not defined in the legalistic sense of a modern state boundary, but in the equally forceful sense of a ‘common land’ occupied since the beginning of the ‘people’ themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Even more important, as far as the *problematique* of

ethnicity is concerned, Africans attached to each place “an emotional and cultural significance that could only be regarded as sacred.”<sup>12</sup> This realm – the subjective domain of emotion, culture, and spirituality – must have escaped colonial European perception. Or, what is worse, it fell victim to colonial expediency with devastating effects for post-colonial Africa.

The departing colonial powers bequeathed to the leaders of ‘independent’ Africa a virtual ethnic time bomb. The boundaries of the new African states reflected colonial, not cultural or national divisions. During the hastily arranged decolonisation process, and given the personal ambitions of the would-be leaders of the new states, little or no time was available for a sober assessment of the costs and benefits of building the post-colonial state according to an essentially unaltered colonial blueprint. Predictably, independence did not usher in a new era of freedom, peace, and prosperity. Instead, secessions and demands for regional self-determination dominated the agenda of nearly all newly independent African states. Ironically, nationalism took on a new meaning: it was no longer anti-colonial but anti-state. Its instrument of choice was no longer a liberation war but inter-ethnic strife and sometimes genocide. In reality, this could probably not have been prevented. The inherited boundaries are artificial lines on a map, not ethnic/national boundaries. From this perspective, the post-colonial states are in many respects just as artificial and illegitimate as the entities they replaced. In this situation, it is inevitable that political parties will develop along ethnic lines and ‘liberation armies’ will be formed to reconfigure the new states to take into account ethnic realities.

The latest evidence of an attempt to reconfigure an African state along ethnic lines comes from Namibia where a secessionist movement is demanding independence for the Caprivi Strip! Before Namibia’s current crisis several other African states – the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaïre), Chad, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and the Sudan – have experienced long civil wars involving separatists seeking to establish their own states.

The reason for these wars cannot simply be explained by the existence of numerous, often unfriendly, ethnic groups, tribes or nations. Civil wars in Africa, particularly of the secessionist type, reflect these new states’ inability to develop an inclusive political system that takes into account the fact that African citizens’ primary allegiances are not always to states. Often, the state must compete with the ethnic group, tribe or nation for the citizen’s allegiances because the latter’s sense of self is intrinsically attached to such factors as kinship ties, race, language, locality, religion, and tradition. This, as will be developed later, has significant implications for governance. Many African states still lack administrative and ideological capacity to govern, which means that they are unable to manage, let alone reconcile, ethnic conflicts. Specifically, governance in Africa is still essentially a zero-sum proposition. Most African states have come under the control of one ethnic group, usually numerically dominant. The resources of the state and economy are then used for the benefit of that group, to the detriment of others. This causes resentment, particularly when other groups see themselves as having

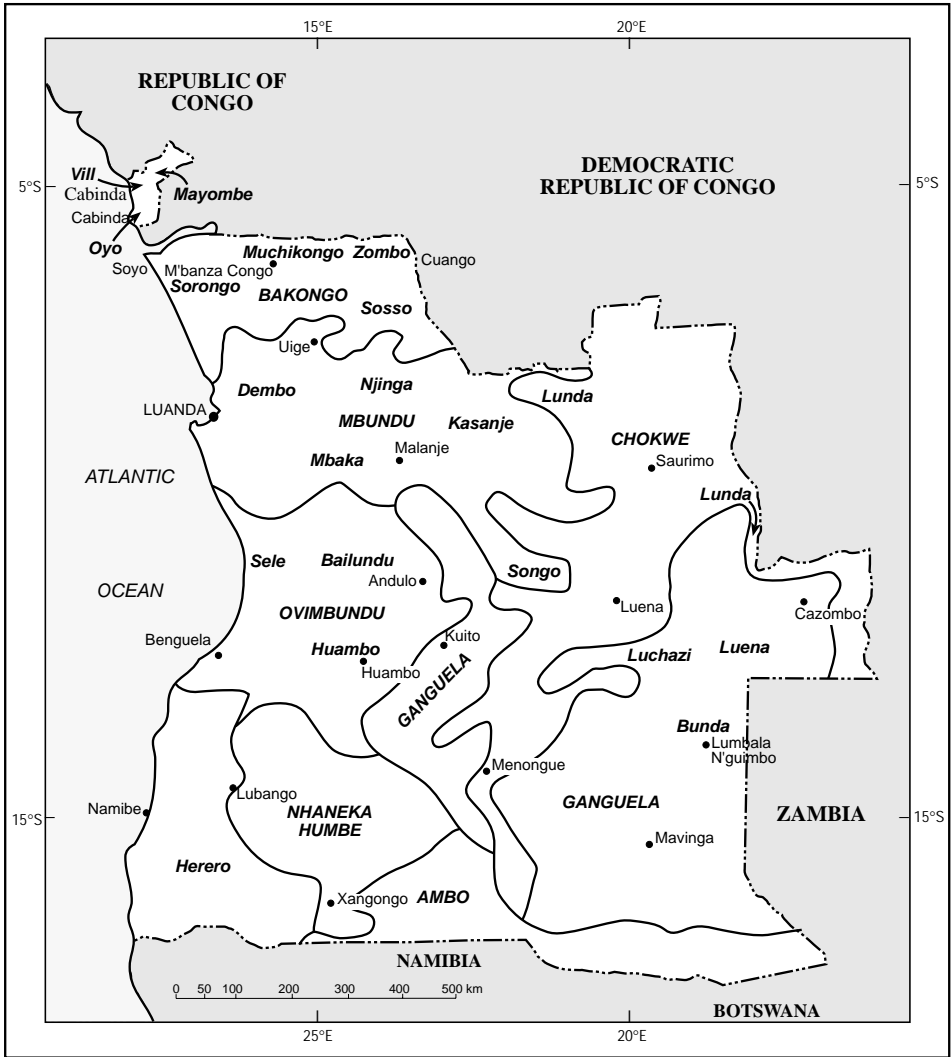
certain tangible attributes – like economic power, intellectual excellence, a tradition of military prowess – that could be translated into political power. In such cases, when access to political power is denied, civil wars often result.

This should not come as a surprise, especially in Africa where control of the state has become a vital political goal for ethnic groups because it provides unobstructed access to jobs, land, education, credit facilities and other highly coveted privileges and sources of wealth. For dominant groups, control of the state ensures political supremacy and economic dominance. Subordinate groups seek control of the state to ensure that their social, cultural, and economic interests are protected and their political aspirations fulfilled. When the political arena does not accommodate ethnic groups as interest groups they become conflict groups with a mandate to insert the group's grievances, claims, anxieties, and aspirations into the national agenda by all means necessary, including war. In extreme cases of real or perceived exclusionist politics, ethnic groups will opt for their own state – even if small and insignificant on the world stage – to ensure political, economic, cultural and demographic survival. This conforms to the Westphalian logic that places the state, not the nation, tribe or ethnic group, at the centre of world politics. In other words, in the current international system, the state is an indispensable vehicle for an ethnic group, particularly those who aspire to nation-state status, to realise their political aspirations both domestically and internationally. The case of Angola highlights some of these issues.

## **Ethnicity and the colonial state in Angola**

Ethnic divisions in Angola pre-date colonialism. As in many other parts of Africa, the pre-colonial process of state formation was carried out mainly along ethnic lines. When Portuguese explorer Diogo Cao first arrived at the Kingdom of Kongo in the early 15th century he found a complex process of state formation underway. Specifically, what Cao found in what would become Angola was not one homogenous state but a large number of distinct ethno-linguistic groups varying in size, level of economic development, and degree of political organisation. Some were small 'tribes', others constituted larger nations. The kingdom of Kongo, for example, dominated the political landscape in the region. Ruled by a monarch, the kingdom was divided into six provinces, five of which had their own subordinate rulers. The central province of Mpemba was governed by the king personally and contained the royal city of Mbanza Kongo. This city lay on a well-cultivated area surrounded by many small villages. Its population was once estimated to be as much as 100 000 people. The surrounding provinces were Nsundi to the north, Mpangu to the north-east, Mbata to the south-east, Mbamba in the south-west, and Sonyo on the coast west of the capital.<sup>13</sup> The 'scramble for Africa' split this kingdom into three modern-day African states: the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), and Angola.

Ethno-linguistic map of Angola



There were other smaller powers south of Kongo, in present-day Angola, like the kingdoms of Ndongo (or Ngola) and Kasanje that achieved some prominence in the 16th century before succumbing to the destructive effects of the slave trade. Other important political entities included the Lunda empire which "dominated the scene from afar during the 18th century,"<sup>14</sup> as well as the Bailundo and Benguela kingdoms.

The colonial presence halted this process of state building by forcibly including within the colonial domain different ethnolinguistic groups with different histories and political aspirations. This set the stage for a complicated process of post-colonial state building, both in Angola and elsewhere in Africa. Unsurprisingly, the main combatants in Angola have claimed to represent (or are seen to represent) the major ethno-linguistic groups in the country – Bacongo, Mbundu, and Ovimbundu – that once constituted distinct kingdoms: Kongo, Ndongo, and Bailundo respectively.

Currently, the Bacongo represent about 15% of Angola's population and live mainly in the northern provinces of Cabinda, Zaire, and Uige. They have traditionally regarded Kinshasa, not Luanda, as their cultural, economic, and political centre. The Mbundu, representing about 25% of the population, occupy the areas around the capital city, Luanda, and east as far as the Kasanje area of Malanje province. A distinct ethnic subgroup has developed within the larger Mbundu region. The impact of the colonial presence on the western part of the Mbundu domain, more specifically around Luanda, brought people from all Angolan ethnic groups to the region. Over time, they constituted a unique group – heavily influenced by the language and customs of the colonial power – which can accurately be described as *Luandas*.<sup>15</sup>

The Ovimbundu are, by far, the largest ethno-linguistic group. They represent 35% to 40% of Angola's population and dominate the areas with the highest population density in the country – the central plateau provinces of Benguela, Bie and Huambo. Their cultural, linguistic and economic domination in central part of Angola is such that they have been regarded as "a nation rather than an assembly of tribes."<sup>16</sup>

Awareness of this ethnic diversity is crucial to understanding the politics and society in Angola, both during colonial times and as a post-colonial state. For example, in the past, the Portuguese were able to impose colonial rule because the nature of anti-colonial resistance was so fractured. Although sporadic military resistance persisted during Portugal's presence in Angola, the various kingdoms and chiefdoms threatened by colonial domination were not able to create a united front. From this perspective, the disunity that characterised the anti-colonial movement after the Second World War and the inability to establish an inclusive political system after independence have long historical antecedents.

Unlike its colonial counterparts, Portugal did not participate in the European drive to de-colonise after the Second World War. Thus, an anti-colonial war was fought from 1961 until 1974. As mentioned earlier, three national liberation movements participated in this struggle. However, contrary to the experience of

other former Portuguese colonies, the liberation movements in Angola never succeeded in creating a united front because the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA were never able to overcome their ethnic differences.

The MPLA was founded in 1956 to lead the struggle against colonialism. However, its appeal never reached much beyond the Mbundu people living around the capital region from where most of MPLA leadership emerged. This movement also succeeded in attracting some *assimilados*,<sup>17</sup> *mullatos*,<sup>18</sup> and even some members of the settler community.

The FNLA was created through the merger of several groups whose main objective was the restoration of the ancient Kongo kingdom in northern Angola. Thus, FNLA's main constituency remained almost exclusively restricted to the Bacongo ethnic group. Attempts to expand this constituency to include elements from other ethnic groups consistently failed.

Similarly, the main rationale for creating UNITA was primarily ethnic. The Ovimbundu it represented believed that, as the major ethnic group in Angola, they should have their own 'liberation movement' to counterbalance the role and power of the movements representing the other two major ethnic groups. History has shown that the political project of these movements, especially FNLA and UNITA – was not national but sub-national. In other words, beyond the rhetoric, they were primarily concerned with the aspirations of particular ethnic groups – Bacongo, Mbundu, Ovimbundu – not the creation of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial Angolan state. For the liberation movements, the colonial state was an artificial and oppressive construct in need of dismantling to ensure the survival of their respective nations. To this end, both Holden Roberto's FNLA and Jonas Savimbi's UNITA used ethnicity as an important political tool at the domestic level. However, given the nature of the anti-colonial war – relatively small guerrilla groups facing an entrenched, NATO-backed colonial regime – and the broader international context framed by the Cold War, no liberation movement escaped capture by powerful foreign forces. The MPLA became a proxy of the former Soviet Union and Cuba while FNLA and UNITA were proxies of Western interests, particularly American and South African. The dynamic interplay of these forces – domestic/ethnic and international/ideological – affected Angolan post-colonial politics in important respects.

## **From liberation war to ethnic war**

The overthrow of the regime in Portugal by a group of disgruntled middle-level army officers in April 1974 placed Angola on the fast track to independence. Predictably, in the absence of a common colonial enemy and with their ethnic differences accentuated by mistrust and ideological animosity, the nationalist movements derailed the process of state building and set the new state on the slippery path to fratricidal self-destruction. In this context, Portugal's feeble efforts to set up a transition government that included FNLA, MPLA, and UNITA

did not stand a chance of success. Ultimately, all groups invited foreign forces to help them achieve supremacy in the initial phase of the civil war. Nevertheless, neither UNITA nor FNLA was able to take control of Luanda even with the assistance of invading armies from neighbouring South Africa and Zaïre. The MPLA emerged victorious in the sense that it was able to drive its two main rivals from Luanda, keep them out, install a one-party Marxist regime and win international diplomatic recognition from most states except apartheid South Africa and the United States.

Ethnicity played an important part in the MPLA's successful eviction of its adversaries from Luanda and the consolidation of its rule around the capital region, if not elsewhere in the vast rural expanses of Angola. Although the MPLA invited foreign troops from Cuba and received massive amounts of arms from the former Soviet Union to defeat its rivals – who, incidentally, also had invited their own external backers for similar reasons – the key to its success can also be attributed to the strategy of *poder popular*, or peoples' power. During the crucial stages of decolonisation, between April 1974 and November 1975, MPLA used *poder popular* to install and maintain itself in power with popular legitimacy, even if mostly confined to the capital region where the Mbundu ethnic group predominated.

*Poder popular* ostensibly brought the people closer to MPLA via 'mass organisations' like *União Nacional dos Trabalhadores Angolanos* (UNTA), for workers; *Juventude do Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (JMPLA), for youth; *Organizacao da Mulher Angolana* (OMA), for women; and *Organizacao dos Pioneiros Angolanos* (OPA), for children. In addition, *poder popular* involved the creation of local 'popular committees' that served as its basic organisational unit.<sup>19</sup> These committees were used to disseminate the MPLA's political programme during the decolonisation period. More importantly, the committees became the nuclei of the MPLA's militia comprising civilians of the predominantly Mbundu ethnic group in the capital city and surrounding regions. This made them an indispensable tool in consolidating MPLA's hold on the capital and its environs. These militia, who were supplied with weapons that now flowed freely into urban areas from guerrilla bases in the countryside, systematically harassed anyone who was not sympathetic to MPLA. In other words, since most non-Mbundus supported either FNLA or UNITA they were no longer welcome in the capital region. In this way armed Mbundu militia loyal to MPLA forced thousands of FNLA and UNITA sympathisers out of the capital region before independence and prior to the intervention of outside forces from Cuba, South Africa, and Zaïre (now DR Congo). The Cuban intervention notwithstanding, this forcible ethnic removal ensured that MPLA was in control of the capital city ahead of the transfer of power from Portugal on 11 November 1975.

The movement of light weapons into urban areas was a direct result of the haphazard manner in which the decolonisation process was carried out. The collapsing colonial administration did not supervise the resettlement of the former guerrilla armies from their bases either inside or outside Angola. This enabled

the FNLA, MPLA, and UNITA to move their armed guerrillas into the rural and urban areas where they commanded most popular support. The FNLA established itself in the northern provinces of Zaire, Uige, and Kwanza-Norte; the MPLA in Luanda, Malange and Kwanza-Sul while UNITA moved into the central plateau provinces of Benguela, Bie, and Huambo. In the remaining provinces, where no group had overwhelming ethnic support, political and military control was less definite.

The use of ethnicity to achieve political goals before independence affected the nature and character of the new Angolan state and influenced post-colonial politics in important respects. For example, after ensuring that the MPLA was in control of the capital city when power was transferred, the Mbundu ethnic group has maintained the MPLA in power for 25 years even in the face of inept governance. This is not surprising, as the Mbundu are the primary beneficiaries of the complex web of patron-client networks that have emerged to distribute the vast oil and diamond wealth. Other ethnic groups, including the majority Ovimbundu, have only token access to state power or the wealth derived from controlling the state.

Two major consequences have emerged from this failure to share power and wealth. First, the state is regarded as illegitimate by a significant portion of the population, which has no political voice within a highly restrictive political system and consequently does not receive tangible benefits from it. Second, it legitimises violence as a means to destroy this artificial, unfair, and undemocratic political construct. These two factors have conspired to abort all attempts to create a political consensus upon which a viable state can be built.

On the basis of the argument presented above, this chapter suggests that an additional level of analysis must be added to contemporary examinations of the Angolan conflict. Although class, racial, and ideological differences were important in the past – just like the current inability to find consensus on sharing wealth and power – the underlying cause has not changed. The fundamental cause of the civil war in Angola resides in the division of power and wealth along ethnic lines. One ethnic group in particular, the Mbundu, has benefited disproportionately from the *de facto* exclusion of all others from the centres of political and economic power. Thus, the civil war can be seen as an attempt by a powerful force, claiming to represent the largest ethnic group, the Ovimbundu, to redress the perceived unfairness of the system.

There is, however, another layer of complexity in the Angolan case that is often neglected. A closer look reveals that the major ethnic groups in Angola are not homogeneous. To speak of three major ethno-linguistic groups grossly oversimplifies a very complex picture of ethnicity in Angola. For example, the so-called 'big three' ethnic groups include several sub-groups.<sup>20</sup> This level of ethnic fragmentation also has important implications for governance. For instance, even if either the MPLA or UNITA were to win the civil war and attempt to impose ethnic hegemony, it would not necessarily guarantee peace because the Ovimbundu-controlled UNITA is in turn controlled by Savimbi's Bieno subgroup. The Bailundo and Uambo subgroups, although numerically superior and traditionally more

powerful politically, militarily and economically have been overshadowed by Savimbi's subgroup. Savimbi's hegemony has been tolerated, but not fully accepted by all Ovimbundu subgroups, because of the perceived external threats, essentially from the Mbundu who control the government. Constant purges within UNITA suggest that Savimbi's hegemony is based on coercion rather than consent.

Similarly, in the absence of the threat posed by UNITA, the major divisions within the Mbundu ethnic group that dominates the MPLA would come to the surface and might manifest themselves violently. The same could be said of all other major ethnic groups. In other words, the civil war in Angola is hiding potentially violent intra-group divisions.

Second, none of the nationalist movements represented the majority of the population. UNITA and FNLA in particular were used as instruments to legitimise the aspirations of a small group of ambitious individuals who did not even belong to these ethnic groups' elites. For example, as mentioned before, Savimbi belongs to the Bieno sub-group, not from larger, more influential subgroups like the Bailundo or Uambo. Therefore, allegiance from their respective larger ethnic groups was never spontaneous. In fact, all three major nationalist movements in Angola had to 'mobilise' the populations within their areas of operations. Moreover, during the anti-colonial war, both the MPLA and UNITA guerrillas were forced to operate outside of the regions inhabited by the ethnic groups they purportedly represented.

Initially, significant portions of the Ovimbundus and Bacongos responded to the ethnic appeals of UNITA and FNLA respectively because these ethnic groups regarded the liberation movements as instruments that would eventually restore their lost power, wealth, and honour. Later, as the transition to independence descended into civil war, mobilisation became increasingly more coercive. Within their respective ethnic zones of influence, the nationalist movements demanded complete, unquestioning allegiance from the populations. Support for a rival movement, even if only alleged, became the ultimate political crime, routinely punishable by death. Although UNITA claimed to represent the largest segment of the population and could, arguably, have won the planned pre-independence elections, the departing colonial administration handed over power to the MPLA in a desperate attempt to save the transition process that was being undermined by the civil war. Ethnicity was clearly a determining factor. The departing colonial administration could not hand over power to either UNITA or FNLA because these groups' claims of legitimacy were based on their purported representation of specific ethnic groups: the Ovimbundu and the Bacongo. The MPLA, on the other hand, was perceived to represent the urban segment of the population that had transcended – or was in the process of transcending – ethnicity.

Third, and finally, issues of class and race would have conspired against the new state even if the main ethnic groups had shared a common political goal. UNITA regards the Mbundu as the dominant group, even though they are numerically smaller than the Ovimbundu. To use Schermerhorn's definition, the dominant group

refers to “that collectivity within a society which has pre-eminent authority to function both as guardians and sustainers of the controlling value system, and as prime allocators of rewards in society.”<sup>21</sup> Conversely, UNITA sees itself as the legitimate representative of the majority of the population – the Ovimbundu – that has been relegated to a subordinate status. For UNITA, the Ovimbundu’s relegation to subordinate status was initially accomplished with the aid of the Russians and Cubans who helped place and keep the dominant group’s representatives in power. More recently, the dominant group has kept the Ovimbundu out of power by grossly manipulating the political process and by controlling the state’s economic resources.

UNITA’s view regarding who constitutes the dominant group in Angola is, to say the least, overly simplistic. The Mbundu cannot be considered the dominant group within Angolan society. In fact two other groups compete for dominance. First, as noted above, the descendants of Angolan indentured labourers who worked in Portuguese plantations in the island of Sao Tome control the innermost centre of political power in Angola. UNITA has insistently alleged that Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos was born in Sao Tome, not in Angola. Likewise, most of his inner-circle includes people who were born, or whose parents were born, in Sao Tome. Although the regime over which they preside includes a disproportionate number of Mbundus, the presidential entourage’s own ethnic ties with the Mbundu population are, at best, tenuous. Ironically, this means that even the people from which MPLA draws most of its support question their legitimacy. It has become clear that dos Santos’ rule is tolerated only because the alternative, Savimbi, is unthinkable for many Mbundu. Second, mixed-race Angolans (*mulattos*) control the economy. This group has filled the space left by the departing Portuguese settlers who owned most economic enterprises in the country. In sum, the war in Angola is further complicated by sub-ethnic and racial dynamics. In such circumstances, achieving good governance, let alone reconciliation and peace, is highly problematic.

## **Governance in an ethnically divided society**

The preoccupation with good governance in Africa is not new. As early as two decades ago, after the ‘lost decade’ of the 1970s, the International Financial Institutions diagnosed Africa’s affliction as a ‘crisis of governance’ reflected in the extensive personalisation of power, the denial of fundamental rights and freedoms, widespread corruption, and the prevalence of non-elected and unaccountable governments.<sup>22</sup> The recommended prescription emphasised ‘political renewal’ premised in “a systematic effort to build a pluralistic institutional structure, a determination to respect the rule of law, and a vigorous protection of the freedom of the press and human rights.”<sup>23</sup> Even critics of adjustment policies in Africa accepted this position. For example, in its ‘African Alternative Framework’, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) suggested that governance was the key to fundamental change in the continent. For ECA, governance

involved the “democratisation of the decision-making process at national, local and grassroots levels so as to generate the necessary consensus and people’s support.”<sup>24</sup> In this sense, governance serves two important purposes. First, it pushes African rulers to become more accountable to the populations over which they claim authority. Second, it can “facilitate a relationship of bargaining through which the interests of the state and those in society can be adjusted to each other so that the exercise of state power might be regarded as legitimate by those subject to it.”<sup>25</sup> This, for Goran Hyden, results in a situation “where politics is a positive-sum game; where reciprocal behaviour and legitimate relations of power between governors and governed prevail; and where everybody is a winner not only in the short run but also in the long run.”<sup>26</sup>

From a practical perspective, good governance involves political and bureaucratic accountability, freedom of association and participation, freedom of information and expression, and a sound autonomous judicial system. It goes without saying that the effectiveness of a system of governance depends largely on how it is perceived. Those governments that acquire authority or legitimate power to govern through a credible electoral process have a better chance of becoming real agents of change. Similarly, good governance requires arrangements to make bureaucrats more accountable through regular monitoring of performance of public agencies and officials. This is essential to achieve transparency in bureaucracies, particularly in terms of rigorous financial management, an area that has become particularly problematic in Angola. Even more important, political and bureaucratic accountability cannot become reality until citizens acquire the freedom to establish religious groups, professional associations, women’s groups, and other private voluntary organisations to pursue political, social, or economic objectives under the protection of an efficient, reliable and autonomous judicial system.

The realm of governance was one of the first casualties in Angola’s civil war. Currently, the decaying state is no longer able to carry out vital functions associated with governance including forms of domination, the nature of surplus extraction, and the patterns of resource allocation. Most of these functions are now formulated and carried out by powerful private agents who are not accountable to the public.

The inability to establish a regime of good governance in Angola can be understood by analysing the ways the new state was organised, particularly in terms of how power was exercised. Only then can the failure of its policies and the consequent loss of legitimacy and authority be explained. Although Angola achieved independence in extremely difficult conditions, the MPLA’s success in gaining control of the government enabled it to extend and consolidate its administration throughout the country with the help of Cuban troops and Russian advisers. In retrospect, Angolans expected that the winning side would introduce a system of good governance and impose measures to establish a viable political order that could promote national unity and ethnic harmony, social and regional equality, and economic development. Instead, an intolerant, inflexible political order based on Marxist-Leninist principles was erected to benefit a narrow segment of the population.

After inflicting severe political and military setbacks to UNITA and the FNLA in the initial stages of the civil war, the MPLA installed a one-party regime that attempted to either co-opt or destroy most elements of civil society. Political participation could only take place when mobilised and organised by the state to serve its own specific purposes. As discussed earlier, 'mass organisations' were created to mobilise workers, women, students, and even children.

The basic contractual relationship between state and citizen was lost in the Marxist-Leninist ideological fog. Instead, the people became a valuable element to be used in furthering the goals of an oppressive state. This resulted in ethnic favouritism and divisions, corruption and economic decline that combined to further devastate a state already ruined by civil war. With most avenues for political participation closed by the state, and in the presence of centralised, yet dysfunctional and decaying political and economic structures, Angolan citizens became almost exclusively consumed by concerns for their immediate survival; i.e., the search for food, shelter, and security. Meanwhile the growth of a powerful and usurping state elite contributed to the creation an ever-widening gap between state and citizen.

This gulf between the state and civil society manifests itself in various domestic conflicts involving ethnicity, class and race within an overall context of poor governance. Ironically, in the war against colonial domination and during its first years in power, the governing MPLA proclaimed itself as a "movement of the masses." Gradually, however, a political and economic elite – composed predominantly of *mulattos* and descendants from returning indentured labourers from Sao Tome – used their superior education, political skills, and economic power to take control of the party from the Mbundu elite. Instead of maintaining the existing strong ties with workers and peasants, the governing elite grew increasingly detached from the common citizen and used the repressive means of the state to preserve its privileged status.

From the ordinary citizen's point of view, the elite's grip on state power has assumed hegemonic proportions and represents a throwback to colonial times when power, prestige, and privilege were closely associated with class and race. Given their pivotal position, members of the Angolan ruling elite have enormous resources of patronage. As discussed before, these resources have been put to use to create extensive and intricate patron/client networks. It is within these networks that most political deals are made and significant economic transactions take place. Such networks are indispensable for holding political office or seeking public employment. Unsurprisingly, these networks of patron/client relationships have been used by the ruling elite for political control and financial aggrandisement. In the process, however, they engendered high levels of corruption and have eroded public trust in government. This widespread loss of confidence in the government has been exploited by UNITA for its own political purposes.

As the majority of Angolans found that survival meant operating in competition with a coercive and predatory state, they opted to inhabit the informal spheres outside the reaches of the state. This seriously hampered the development

of civil society. When the state saw its survival threatened by the weight of war and economic decline in the 1980s, it could not count on the resourcefulness – let alone understanding – of the civil society. Consequently, the conflict-resolutions mechanisms that have been attempted in Angola since the early 1990s have been unsuccessful.

Tragically for Angola, any hopes that the opposition would present alternative forms of governance have been dashed long ago. In fact, the situation facing citizens living within territories controlled by UNITA is also characterised by unaccountable and personalised rule. Throughout the years of insurgency, UNITA showed that it was no better equipped to facilitate the development of a healthy civil society. After losing its power struggle with the MPLA in 1976, UNITA returned to the countryside and has waged a devastating guerrilla war with the help of South Africa and the United States. By the time the Bicesse Peace Accord for Angola was signed in May 1991, UNITA controlled most of the south-eastern portion of Angola where it installed a rival administration.

Political participation in the areas controlled by UNITA was even more restricted than in government-held zones. There are several reasons for this. Although UNITA portrayed itself as a democratic organisation its political orientation and practice are clearly Maoist. As such, UNITA created very centralised structures both at the political as well as at the military levels. In fact, military structures dominated the organisation in the sense that no civilians were allowed to hold leadership positions. All members of UNITA's Politburo and its Political Commission (the decision-making body) have a military rank. The merging of military and political positions and functions gave UNITA a particularly rigid and disciplinarian character. Savimbi has successfully transformed UNITA into a powerful army under the cover of a political party.

The average citizen in Angola was unshackled – if only briefly – during the period of political and economic liberalisation leading to the signing of the Bicesse Peace Accords in 1991 and up to the resumption of the civil war after the elections of September 1992. However, Angola's version of *glasnost* and *perestroika* revealed important paradoxes in state-society relations. The would-be totalitarian regime had created both dissent and dependency. The dissent, which lay mostly dormant throughout the repressive years, served as the catalyst for the mushrooming of all types of organisations after the legal framework of the one-party state was abandoned. Paradoxically, most of these organisations continued to depend on the state or international organisations for resources. Thus, political parties, churches, cultural groups, women's organisations, and so on, have proliferated not so much as a counterweight to the state but mainly to benefit from it in terms of financial assistance and all the other benefits traditionally allotted to the state elites.

As mentioned before, the MPLA relied on the 'mass organisations' it created to ensure participation of officially sanctioned groups while making the formation of autonomous organisations illegal. Mass organisations were expected to provide unconditional support for MPLA's broad political, economic, and social

programmes. Although the economic reforms in the late 1980s and political liberalisation initiatives in the early 1990s allowed the emergence of autonomous organised groups, the MPLA has tried to influence key groups by binding them into organisations that have become dependent on patronage. An example is president José Eduardo dos Santos' own NGO – *Fundacao Eduardo dos Santos* (FESA) – whose considerable wealth and power rivals that of several ministries. By constantly redefining patron-client relationships, the regime continues to influence society – this time with the additional 'civil' label – as well as extend its organisation, coordination, and supervision over as much of the population as possible with the ultimate aim of staving off organised mass opposition.

It has now become clear that in Angola the emergence of organised groups commonly associated with civil society and their dependent relationship with the state constitutes an integral part of a well-designed strategy by the regime to keep itself in power. The MPLA had not planned to liberalise the regime and institute a genuine democratisation process that would eventually make the party-state genuinely accountable to common citizens. In fact, the reverse is closer to reality. The liberalisation measures introduced in the 1980s and 1990s were cleverly manipulated to create enough 'manoeuvring space' – especially in terms of providing sufficient economic/financial gains – to ensure that the party would remain in power.

The structures arising under this reordering resemble 'state corporatism' rather than civil society. Their continued existence, influence and well being depend on the whims and/or generosity of the state, particularly the party controlling it. By restricting the space of civil society the MPLA is preventing alternatives from emerging, further preventing genuine democratisation. In such circumstances, the party and the state – ruling over hybrid economic structures combined with centralised power – can remain unaccountable. The far-reaching impact of this form of state corporatism was evident during the 1992 electoral fiasco. The governing MPLA, having succeeded in collapsing the dividing line between party and state, was able to use state resources – particularly functionaries, revenues, the media and means of transportation – to ensure electoral victory. Although UNITA received the most votes in the provinces with the highest population density and where the Ovimbundu predominate – i.e., Benguela, Bie, and Huambo – this was not enough for a rebel victory at the polls. Incredibly, UNITA's claims of electoral fraud during the 1992 elections – triggering a return to war – missed a crucial point. Control of the corporatist state, not fraud, determined the MPLA's victory.

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show how the major politico-military forces in Angola have used ethnic politics for different, yet equally destructive, ends. For the MPLA, informal ethnic networks kept it in power even after suffering apparently crushing setbacks at the international and domestic levels. But these net-

works must be perpetually greased with the vast oil revenues controlled unaccountably by the regime. This has institutionalised a culture of corruption.

UNITA, on the other hand, has succeeded in using ethnicity to rally and sustain popular support among the Ovimbundu. By highlighting the fact that Mbundus dominate the governing MPLA, UNITA has consistently characterised the failure of governance in conspiratorial terms – as a conscious effort by the MPLA to deny other groups the fruits of oil and mineral wealth. Therefore, UNITA has been able to justify the use of military means as a way of redressing the inequitable distribution of power and wealth. This has fostered a culture of violence.

The twin cultures of corruption and violence have contributed to prolong the civil war. In fact, a new round of fighting is underway, triggered by the government's decision in December 1998 to mount a military assault on UNITA's two main strongholds. In October 1999, UNITA lost its main strongholds – Bailundo and Andulo – to the government. There are no indications that the current offensive will inflict a decisive and fatal blow against the rebels. Eventually, more peaceful ways must be found to reconcile the differences that separate the warring factions. This is an essential pre-condition to rebuild the state.

Since the state in Angola has historically been regarded as artificial and illegitimate, the project to rebuild it will necessarily rest on sub-national formations. The rules of the political game cannot be imposed from above by the state. They must be devised and implemented from below. Specifically, for Angola, this would entail a radical devolution of power to the local level where people can find innovative and peaceful ways to govern themselves.

Angola, like all other former colonies, cannot return to pre-colonial forms of governance. It must adapt and conform to the requirements of the modern state. However, this does not necessarily entail a rejection of ethnicity. Being a citizen and a member of any ethnic group must not be mutually exclusive. But this goal will only be realised when all ethnic groups perceive the state to be an expression of their multifaceted aspirations, including access to power and wealth. In the absence of an equitable division of power and wealth within a democratic system, Angola's future will remain grim.

In sum, given its central importance, the optic of ethnicity provides important insights for understanding Angola's current situation. Equally important, it opens possibilities to contemplate and anticipate possible solutions. Ethnicity is a formidable force. However, this force does not have to be necessarily destructive. Its power can be harnessed for more positive and constructive ends, including modern projects of state building. Unless such new and more positive forms for managing ethnicity are found, governance in Angola – as elsewhere in Africa – will remain highly problematic.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Marxist MPLA was supported by the former Soviet Union while *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (FNLA) and UNITA were supported by the United States.
- 2 The Mbundu ethnic group is sometimes referred to as the Kimbundu.
- 3 The Ovimbundu ethnic group is often referred to as the Umbundu.
- 4 The Bacongo ethnic group is sometimes referred to as Kicongo.
- 5 J Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1991, p 5.
- 6 R Schermerhorn, *Comparative Ethnic Relations*, Random House, New York, 1970, p 12.
- 7 J Hutchinson & AD Smith, Introduction, in Hutchinson & Smith, *Ethnicity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p 6.
- 8 Kellas, op cit, p 2.
- 9 J Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, p 6.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 R Thompson, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Critical Appraisal*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1989, pp 64–5.
- 12 Ibid, p 65.
- 13 D Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola: The Mbundu and Their Neighbours Under the Influence of the Portuguese 1483–1790*, Clarendon Press, London, 1966, p 2.
- 14 Ibid, p ix.
- 15 J Redinha, *Distribuicao Etnica da Provincia de Angola*, Centro de Informacao e Turismo de Angola, Luanda, 1965, p 7.
- 16 WS van der Waals, *Portugal's war in Angola 1961–1974*, Ashanti, Johannesburg, 1993, p 16.
- 17 Educated Angolans who had embraced the Portuguese way of life.
- 18 Angolans of mixed race.
- 19 MPLA political structure included several layers: local (commune), municipal, provincial, and national.
- 20 The Bacongo (Kicongo) ethnic group is composed of several major subgroups, including Cacongo, Coje, Congo, Guenze, Iaca, Iombe, Muchicongo, Oio, Paca, Pombo, Sorongo, Sosso, Suco, Vili, and Zombo. The Mbundu (Kimbundu) ethnic group includes Ambundo, Bambeiro, Bangala, Bondo, Cari, Chinje, Dembo, Haco, Holo, Hungo, Libolo, Luanda, Luango, Minungo, Ngola, Ntemo, Puna, Quibala, Quissama, Sende, and Songo. The Ovimbundu (Umbundu) include Bailundo, Bieno, Caconda, Chicuma, Dombe, Ganda, Hanha, Lumbo, Mbui, Quissanje, Sambo, Sele, Sumbe, and Uambo. See Redinha, op cit, pp 11–20.
- 21 Schermerhorn, op cit, p 12.
- 22 World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa: from Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1989, p 60.
- 23 Ibid, pp 60–61.
- 24 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation*, ECA, Addis Ababa, 1989, pp 60–61.
- 25 D Apter & C Rosberg, *Political Development and the New Realism in Sub-Saharan Africa*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1994, p 91.
- 26 G Hyden, Governance and the Study of Politics, in G Hyden & M Bratton, *Governance and Politics in Africa*, Westview, Boulder, 1992, p 10.