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Angola

The Long Road Traveled and the Way Forward

AUTHOR

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele

A Report of the CSIS Africa Program

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
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Center for Strategic & International Studies
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-887-0200 | www.csis.org

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Introduction

Angola has come a long way since independence in 1975 and the end of its civil war in 2002. Yet despite the promise of reform under President João Lourenço, the country continues to be held back by well-connected and wealthy elites who oppose a range of changes that would threaten their interests, from anti-corruption measures to facilitating international private investment to opening up the political space. Angola faces three major challenges: strengthening the democratic process, liberalizing its economic model, and consolidating steps toward national reconciliation, none of which can be achieved without strengthening rule of law and factoring in the interests of all Angolans.

When Peace Fails to Deliver Economic Development

A peace process that does not address the root causes of war can only lead to uneasy peace. Such failure weakens the social contract, undermines the legitimacy of the state, and delays economic development. This has been the case in Angola for the past two decades.

Two failed peace accords, in Alvor in 1975 and Bicesse in 1991, prolonged the post-independence struggle for unity into a 27-year civil war that pitted nationalist forces against each other, including the communist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the U.S.-backed National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) and National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).¹ Another group, the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), was excluded from the Alvor and Bicesse negotiations; its forces have continued to carry out low-intensity attacks against government forces to this day.

The war in Angola proper only ended in 2002, when government forces killed UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi and MPLA and UNITA signed the Luena Memorandum of Understanding.² MPLA, emboldened by a winner-takes-all attitude, did not fully implement the letter and spirit of the agreement, seeking to impose its vision on the other factions. Today, the country is paying a steep price through bad economic policies and mismanagement of natural resources. Angola is endowed with critical resources, including oil and diamonds, and has an extensive network of waterways. It produces 1.16 million barrels of oil a day and is sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest oil producer.³ However, it has yet to fully capitalize on its natural wealth. The country has accrued \$66 billion (about 70.3 percent of its GDP) in debt and owes China, its largest creditor, \$17 billion.⁴



A general view of the refinery at the state oil company, Sonangol, in Luanda, Angola, on June 7, 2022.

Photo Source: -/AFP/Getty Images

Angola is endowed with critical resources, including oil and diamonds, and has an extensive network of waterways. It produces 1.16 million barrels of oil a day and is sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest oil producer.

Thus, two decades after the war ended, Angola faces three major challenges: strengthening the democratic process, liberalizing its economic model, and consolidating steps toward national reconciliation.

In particular, the lack of a true and serious reconciliation process means the war's causes have yet to be addressed. The current political settlement, which was brokered between combatants at

the expense of civilian populations, spawned a regime of intolerance that is unable and unwilling to accept different political perspectives and criticism.⁵ The regime brooks no dissent, seeks to either co-opt or weaken critics, and fights those who resist. Civic and human rights abuses have come to define Angolan politics, wherein the parliamentary majority passes laws that exclude, penalize, and ostracize those who do not agree with MPLA. These restrictive and repressive policies have been used to curtail funding for political parties, the press, civil society groups, and other nongovernmental organizations. Public transcripts of the war for independence and ensuing civil war seek to rewrite history to favor MPLA and minimize the contributions of the other nationalist forces—or simply erase them from national memory. For instance, veterans of ELNA, the armed wing of FNLA, which was the largest of the three main forces in 1975, are neither celebrated nor granted a pension.⁶

Since the end of the civil war in 2002, however, the country has accelerated two key transitions to reshape governance. First, Angola has striven to move away from its communist economic model by embracing a wide and diverse range of new investors aligned with world market dynamics.⁷ It has done so even while relying on massive Chinese financing to rebuild its public infrastructure system, which was destroyed during the war. Second, since he assumed the presidency in 2017, João Lourenço has launched an anti-corruption campaign that seeks to recover public funds stolen during the rule of his predecessor, Eduardo dos Santos.⁸ The fight against corruption has also paved the way for greater cooperation with the United States. However, it has been a long and arduous road, filled with successes and failures.

The Changing of the Guard

When Lourenço won the 2017 election, his victory raised great hope for Angolans. For a time, it seemed like the beginning of the end of an era. His predecessor, Eduardo dos Santos, was in power for 38 years and exerted enormous influence in the public and private sectors.⁹ Senior MPLA cadres—including the dos Santos family and their associates—controlled substantial stakes in important business ventures, including telecommunications, oil, mining, and banking concerns.

A former army general, political commissar, provincial governor, and minister of defense who trained in the Soviet Union, Lourenço had risen through the ranks of MPLA, serving as its secretary-general from 1998 to 2003.¹⁰ As such, he had a keen understanding of the workings of the party. In 2017, dos Santos endorsed Lourenço, who faced no serious opposition within MPLA and won the election.

Early in his presidency, Lourenço signaled that he would be his own man and lead differently. He underscored his independence with the anti-corruption campaign—which ultimately pursued only a few MPLA heavyweights close to the former president, to the latter's chagrin.¹¹ The campaign briefly bolstered Lourenço's standing among Angolans, around 41.1 percent of whom live in extreme poverty despite the vast wealth accrued by oil and mining companies.¹²

The Lourenço administration also initially relaxed the crackdown on civil society that characterized his predecessor's government and opened part of the political space to engage with activists and

advocacy groups on democracy and good governance.¹³ This overture particularly highlighted the credibility of civil society groups and other critics of the dos Santos administration regarding mismanagement of resources and abuses over the years.

The honeymoon did not last long. President Lourenço had to compromise between MPLA's long-standing interests and his agenda, which lacked the support of dos Santos's senior party allies. Lourenço backed off, as the dos Santos camp effectively controls key sectors of the economy such as oil, mining, housing, and banking; in particular, this camp controls the management of the state-owned oil company, Sonangol, the mainstay of the petroleum sector, which accounts for around 70 percent of Angolan government revenue and 95 percent of GDP.¹⁴ Instead, Lourenço moved to consolidate his position, project his power, and bring his own people into the government and party structures. His administration became more hostile and his relationship with the political opposition and civil society deteriorated.

Old Habits Die Hard

As Angolans prepared for general elections on August 24, 2023, Lourenço's leadership and record were scrutinized. Although he won a second term, the country remains divided.¹⁵ Many youth feel the political opposition, which has been seeking to avoid more repression, should have campaigned more aggressively.¹⁶ Angola's population is relatively young—the median age is 16—and the majority of Angolans did not participate in the civil war and are increasingly impatient with the regime.¹⁷ Even though MPLA won the election, the party did worse than expected—UNITA carried Luanda, for example. This rattled MPLA leaders, who will likely face even more difficulty in the next presidential election.

Lourenço's popularity has fallen within the party, with many believing that MPLA did poorly because of his inability to connect with the population. Unemployment, the rising cost of living, insecurity, poor health infrastructure, and nepotism have further weakened his standing with the people.

Critics charge that Lourenço's anti-corruption initiative only targeted a few old regime leaders, including his predecessor's family, but did not extend widely and deeply enough to prompt the impactful change Angola needs.¹⁸ Many see the initiative as an effective way for the president to silence and neutralize his enemies and potential challengers.¹⁹ Some see it as an elaborate scheme to create, reward and strengthen the new camp of Lourenço's loyalists and expand his power base. Others view it simply as a transfer of economic interests from one group to another, which naturally leads to conflict.²⁰ It is also an extension of identity politics, which has long fueled the scramble for political and economic power among Angolan elites.²¹ While this power struggle plays out between different factions of the ruling party, the high risk of growing instability affects the entire country.

The détente with civil society organizations ended rather quickly. Activists and good-governance advocacy groups that denounce the mismanagement of resources and call for transparency in state affairs found themselves facing the same old restrictive and repressive system.²² Still, UNITA, FNLA, and the Broad Convergence for the Salvation of Angola - Electoral Coalition (CASA-CE),

the three major political-opposition formations, have continued to assert themselves and voice their discontent despite an intense state campaign against them and violence against protesters.²³ The rest of the political opposition has been confined to the periphery of national politics, often operating in fear of reprisal. Even now, a year after the election, the harassment and violence against political parties has not stopped.

Government institutions remain politicized at all levels, with leadership appointed based on party loyalty, not meritocracy. This means that despite the state's control of all key sectors of the economy, the regime does not harness the pool of talent the country needs for its economic development. This politicization of institutions has had an adverse effect on the rule of law, impeding good governance and frustrating those seeking change and investment opportunities.²⁴

On another front, the political wing of FLEC has continued to wage its campaign for the independence of Cabinda, an Angolan exclave separated from the rest of the country by the Democratic Republic of the Congo. FLEC partisans stage protests and sit-ins, calling for dialogue with the government on a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the province.²⁵

While Angola has formally embraced a market economy, state intervention remains as a dominant feature. Significantly, government ministers and high-level officials also tend to be businessmen, ensuring state capture benefits their own mercantile interests at the expense of the public. This has been one of the big obstacles to privatization and international investment.²⁶

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State intervention not only rewards senior party leaders, it also scares foreign investors. This situation has contributed to major foreign exchange problems.²⁷ For instance, private banks under the control of shareholding politicians are used by the same politicians to transfer their ill-gained money outside the country at the expense of small and medium-sized enterprises and private citizens. Most importantly, the state's heavy meddling in the economy prevents Angola from tapping into and benefiting from world market dynamics and opportunities. Certainly, Angola has received substantial debt financing from China and other countries, but this has not been accompanied by foreign direct investment. The credit agreements that Angola has signed with United States, which heavily emphasize infrastructure projects, debt management, and food aid, do not align with the country's long-term sustainable economic development—which instead requires massive direct investment, capital and technology transfers, and leadership and management know-how.²⁸

Policy Approaches

Rapprochement with the United States and the Search for Investors

The rapprochement between Angola and the United States has been a long time coming. Having been in two opposing camps during the Cold War, the two countries only normalized their relations in 1993. Angolan leaders, many of whom trained in the old Soviet bloc or in Cuba, have held closely to their communist ideology while seeking to reap the reward of free-market economic dynamics.

Lourenço was a member of the senior cadre of MPLA when President dos Santos initiated the rapprochement. From this position, and later as the minister of defense, he played an important role in bridging the gap between Angola and the United States, visiting the Pentagon in 2017 in a highly publicized event.²⁹ As president, Lourenço has invested in strengthening bilateral relations, which range from defense and security to infrastructure investment. On November 11, 2023, U.S. president Joseph Biden hosted Lourenço at the White House to “address opportunities to deepen our relationship, identify areas of future cooperation, and discuss regional and global challenges,” discussing “significant U.S. economic investment in Angola, including through the president’s flagship Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) in the Lobito Corridor.”³⁰ It was a short visit, but one that can only be described as a success, considering the long and turbulent road traveled.

Angola’s Lobito Corridor project, to which the United States committed over a billion dollars in 2023 alone, includes “support for over 180 rural bridges, upgrading 4G and 5G digital connectivity across

the nation, introducing the first ever mobile money application, and bringing 500 megawatts of solar power to the grid.” Such investment, in addition to support for food security, seems to signal that U.S. policymakers are now ready to “walk the talk” in what promises to be a strong U.S.-Africa partnership, with Angola at the center.



U.S. president Joe Biden shakes hands with Angolan president João Lourenço during a meeting in the Oval Office of the White House on November 30, 2023, in Washington, D.C.

Photo Source: Alex Wong/Getty Images

Unlike his predecessor, who was reluctant to play a prominent role in regional affairs that did not serve Angola’s immediate interests, Lourenço has expanded Angola’s involvement and influence in sub-Saharan Africa. The president has been a key negotiator in the conflict between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as in the Central African Republic.³¹ (This engagement, however, contrasts with the lack of government initiative for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Cabinda, as discussed later).

At home in Angola, the rapprochement and partnership with the United States are also under scrutiny, with many people feeling they have not reaped any substantial benefits. There are also tensions between MPLA’s pro-Russia camp and those, like Lourenço, who are more U.S.-minded, with each threatening to field their own candidate in the next election. This is more palpable in the defense and security sector, where the president is implementing U.S. training and capacity-building programs; he also plans to purchase U.S. equipment to upgrade the military and diversify away from Russian sources.³²

It is difficult to overstate Russian influence in Angola. Russian companies operate important businesses in the extractive industry, particularly diamond mining.³³ Furthermore, most generals

and many civilian elites were educated in the Soviet Union and speak Russian. Overall, Lourenço has had to manage competing expectations and demands from several quarters, domestic and foreign—including China, which he visited four months after his White House meeting with Biden.³⁴

The shift toward the United States has additional obstacles to overcome. For instance, in 2010 the U.S. Financial Action Task Force (FATF) blacklisted Angola, suspending direct dollar deposits into the country as part of an international campaign against money laundering and terrorist financing.³⁵ Even though Angola was removed from the blacklist in February 2016, Deutsche Bank stopped offering dollar clearing there as of December 2016—the last bank to do so.³⁶ Since then, all international financial operations must be denominated in other currencies such as the euro. In response to the banks' pullout, the Central Bank of Angola has adopted restrictive monetary policies that compound operational challenges in a high-risk and difficult business environment already suffering from high capital costs and a volatile exchange rate due to powerful and well-connected politicians-turned-businessmen who do not pay back their loans.³⁷ This situation frustrates both investors and the government, as it is taking too long to reestablish international banking relationships, thus dampening the investment climate and business environment. Critics see the FATF intervention as a heavy-handed attempt to squeeze concessions in other areas of U.S. interests. They argue that other countries with similar challenges with the dollar have not been penalized.³⁸

To help alleviate the burden on local businesses, the government created Angola Invest, a special initiative that subsidized up to 70 percent of collateral in non-oil and gas industries between 2012 and 2018.³⁹ This program, which had mixed success, aimed to remove bureaucratic barriers to doing business, increase access to credit for small and medium-sized enterprises (especially in food production), and promote the creation of special economic zones to facilitate further international investment.⁴⁰

To Lourenço's credit, his administration has also amended the 2015 requirement that foreign investors find a local partner with at least 51 percent ownership of their company to operate in the country, lowering the foreign ownership cap for some sectors and allowing investors to set up a fully foreign company in others.⁴¹ But despite the legal change, financing is not rushing into Angola. Major economic decisions or plans are designed to protect the established system, in which outside investors or businesses are better off partnering with an Angolan company (in most cases as a minority shareholder) if they want to operate in the country.

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While international financial institutions welcomed the new Private Investment Law, MPLA leaders who had benefited from the old system by acting as partners and patrons to foreign investors have denounced the new code as undermining Angolan interests.⁴² Owners of small and medium-sized

enterprises have also denounced the change, as it subjects them to more competition from multinational corporations in Angola.⁴³ In the Angolan state-controlled economy, businesses of all sizes need to work harder to succeed if they are not owned by or associated with powerful figures in the government, and investors know this.

Uneven, Inequitable, and Punitive Development Policy

Together with Angola's closed political space and dearth of international investment, the country also needs to confront the systemic issues with its own approach to development. Following the end of the civil war in 2002, Angola borrowed billions of dollars from China to finance infrastructure projects to rebuild the country. Roads, airports, and other projects materialized.⁴⁴ However, a closer look at these infrastructure projects reveals an inequitable distribution of resources that favored the southern regions and ignored the north. Southern provinces—such as Namibe, Benguela, Huíla, and Huambo—as well as the capital city of Luanda, boast new transportation infrastructure, housing, and other goods and services.⁴⁵ Such infrastructure is lacking in the northern provinces of Cabinda, Zaire, and Uíge. One reason for this attention is that nearly 40 percent of the population lives in the south, and central Luanda Province alone accounts for another 24 percent of the population.⁴⁶ For MPLA, this means votes.

This imbalance, however, is more patent because the wealth of the country mostly comes from the northern provinces of Zaire and Cabinda, which produce 55 and 35 percent of Angola's oil revenues, respectively.⁴⁷ Yet the infrastructure in the two provinces does not reflect their important contributions to the economy. For instance, the southern city of Catumbela, in Benguela Province, is home to a new, state-of-the-art international airport with the capacity to accommodate 2.2 million passengers per year—but has no air traffic volume to justify it.⁴⁸ Cabinda, on the other hand, which has a large expatriate community of oil professionals traveling back and forth to their home countries, has a busy, small airport that was built in 1951 and has none of the same amenities despite a 2016 expansion.⁴⁹ There is no practical reason for the MPLA government to deny northern populations the resources that they produce but do not enjoy like their fellow Angolans. This approach is counterproductive, fuels public discontent, and undermines the legitimacy of the government.

Angola has also grappled with the exclave of Cabinda's unique set of demands since the day the country became independent. Various political and armed movements in Cabinda have either wanted to secede or advocated for greater autonomy for the region. Since Angola cannot afford to lose Cabinda's oil revenue, the government should be inclined to provide incentives to the province through a win-win political settlement. Instead, Luanda has invested disproportionately in quelling dissent by deploying the military to fight these armed movements and setting up a substantial security police and intelligence apparatus, effectively putting the province under surveillance.

Over the years, MPLA has adopted a colonizer mindset about Cabinda: the state extracts from but does not invest in the province. The three biggest buildings in Cabinda City are the office of the governor, the provincial hospital, and the local MPLA headquarters.⁵⁰ The construction of the only deep-sea port in Cabinda has dragged on for nearly 10 years.⁵¹ And although the government did open a modern hospital in Cabinda City in 2022, the rest of the province, particularly rural areas, lacks adequate health infrastructure.⁵²

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In perhaps the most striking case study, analysts and leaders of civil society organizations in Luanda and Cabinda City said that Cabinda Gulf Oil Company, a joint venture between Chevron, Sonangol, TotalEnergies, and Eni, which had its largest presence at Malongo Field in Cabinda, was ordered by the government to relocate its leadership and key services, including finance, human resources, and logistics to Luanda.⁵³ Cabinda Gulf Oil Company is the largest employer in Cabinda. Only operations remained in the province. Following the gradual relocation from 2010 to 2015, the withdrawal of services from Cabinda weakened the local economy and blunted the rise of the province's middle class.⁵⁴



A poor neighborhood overlooking Cabinda, a heavily guarded territory that accounts for half the oil output from Africa's top petroleum producer.

Photo Source: Nichole Sobecki/The Washington Post/Getty Images

Like the rest of Angola, Cabinda faces great political, social, and economic challenges. According to the World Bank, urban and youth unemployment increased to 42 and 58 percent at the end of 2023, respectively, from 39 and 53 percent a year prior.⁵⁵ Urban areas have the country's highest unemployment rates, according to the Angolan National Institute of Statistics.⁵⁶ These official data, however, do not account for the large number of high school and college graduates who have never held a job. Yet rather than address them, MPLA is choosing to control and suppress dissident voices and forces that dare to challenge the Angolan regime—the most ineffective way to promote national unity and build national cohesion. Angola's unity will depend on how effectively Luanda can navigate these tensions and reach a workable political settlement with the various political and armed factions in Cabinda. This would affect the entire country's economic outlook and performance.

The Way Forward

Angola has tremendous potential for economic development and regional leadership. Anchored in a winner-takes-all attitude, the current model has led to bad economic policies, mismanagement of natural resources, and a closed political space, killing Angolans' dreams of peace and prosperity. The country and its future are captive to a political system that refuses to recognize the shared sacrifices of Angolans during the civil war. For real peace to happen, it is important to create the conditions whereby the interests of all Angolans are considered and valued.

Such an environment cannot happen in the absence of the rule of law. This will entail reforming judicial institutions to make them independent of undue political influence. Only an independent judiciary can lay the ground for ensuring civic and human rights, upholding contracts, and protecting property and citizens. Such a judiciary would be able to limit state involvement to a regulatory role, drawing a clear line between politics and business, and authorize appropriate agencies to enforce the separation. Together with the new law lifting the requirement for foreign investors to partner with local operators to open a business in Angola, this separation of roles and functions would encourage more businesses to invest in the country.

In addition, since Angola has declared itself a market economy, it should act like one. In particular, the banking system is a victim of a dollar crisis and broader shortage of foreign currency due to unconventional financial decisions—which deliberately made it a system that only serves elites and those associated with them. The economic architecture and infrastructure, including the financial system, should instead be reconfigured (supported by the law) to align with world market dynamics.

The public bidding process should also be more rigorous and transparent to ensure that competition is fair, corrupt practices are reduced to a minimum, and the best proposals get the contracts—not just companies belonging to or associated with prominent regime figures.

Given the importance of the oil sector to Angola's economy and the influence that the government exerts over it, international oil companies should be prepared to exert their weight and push for better engagement with local companies, embrace the government's vision of using locally sourced goods and services in their operations, and build strong relations with the communities where they work.

Consequential decisions that may destabilize communities, as happened when the government ordered Cabinda Gulf Oil Company to relocate its headquarters and key services to Luanda, should be taken in consultation with representatives from the affected communities. With 39.2 and 41 percent of shares respectively, Chevron and Sonangol (Angolan State) are nearly equal partners in Cabinda Gulf Oil Company. In the case of Cabinda, where the government has an adversarial stance toward the community, economic partners of the government in Cabinda Gulf Oil Company, such as Chevron, TotalEnergies and Eni, considering the company's prominent role in the local economy, should step in to moderate and, if necessary, defend local interests—else, given the balance of power, be complicit in the government's bad policies. This aligns with corporate social responsibility best practices that call for better and sustained investment in the communities in Cabinda.

Such changes—first and foremost ensuring the rule of law—would reassure foreign and domestic investors in Angola. Together, the changes will help create a stable financial environment, attract investment, create jobs, reduce corruption, provide transparency and predictability in legal systems, promote prosperity, fight poverty and disease, and ensure all Angolans' interests factor into decisionmaking.

About the Author

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele is a senior fellow and director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He is also a lecturer in African studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Prior to CSIS, he was the Africa senior adviser at the International Republican Institute. Previously, he served as the course coordinator for central and southern Africa at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute. He was also a Peter J. Duignan distinguished visiting fellow and a national fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. Dizolele has testified for both chambers of the U.S. Congress, as well as at the UN Security Council. He has served as an international election monitor and delegate in several countries, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he was also embedded with UN peacekeepers in Ituri and South Kivu as a reporter. Dizolele's analyses have been published in the *Journal of Democracy*, *New York Times*, *Newsweek International*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, *New Republic*, *Forbes*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and other outlets. A frequent commentator on African affairs, he has been a guest analyst on PBS's NewsHour and Foreign Exchange; NPR's Tell Me More, On Point, and the Diane Rehm Show; BBC's World News Update; and Al Jazeera's The Stream, NewsHour, and Inside Story. Dizolele holds an international MBA and an MPP from the University of Chicago. He is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and is fluent in French, Norwegian, Spanish, Swahili, Kikongo, and Lingala and proficient in Danish and Swedish. He is the author of the forthcoming biography, *Mobutu: The Rise and Fall of the Leopard King* (Random House).

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