

Article

‘If Angola were Libya’: protest and politics in Angola

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Abstract

The first two decades of the 2000s were characterised by what has been termed Africa’s ‘third wave’ of protest, which highlighted the shortcomings of multi-party democracy and neoliberal economic policies. Angola was no exception to this trend, with small protests, beginning in 2011 and continuing into the present. Angola’s protests generated public contestations between protestors and the incumbent regime over what constituted legitimate political engagement. This contestation raised the question of what exactly defined democratic representation. The ruling MPLA appealed to established political institutions and practice to claim it embodied a democratic mandate. In contrast, protestors argued that the ruling party had emptied out the very rituals and laws it claimed to represent, thereby rendering their actions more representative of popular sentiment. What became clear was that discourses of democracy could be used for both liberatory, as well as repressive, actions. These contestations in Angola, reveal how third wave protests called for a rethinking of democracy.

Introduction

On August 21, 2021, a variety of political parties, youth movements and student associations held protests across Luanda in support of the president of UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), Adalberto Costa Júnior, whose election as party leader was being challenged in the courts with the implicit support of the MPLA (People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola) (Ndomba 2021). Costa Júnior is seen as one of the few leaders whose popularity could threaten the MPLA in the 2022 national elections and supporters saw the bid to remove him as an attempt to undermine the opposition and with that hollow out the significance of the upcoming election.

An opposition party leading a protest against perceived incumbent tampering might seem banal for people used to the possibility of occupying the street as an act of democratic dissent. In Angola, however, the use of protest as a political tool is one that was only actively and consistently rejuvenated in the past decade, part of a continental-wide trend which scholars have referred to as Africa's 'third wave' of protest. These protests have focused on challenging the effects of neoliberal restructuring as well as critiqued the hollowing out of democratic institutions and processes. In doing this they have challenged citizens, governments and observers to think about the limits of democratic practice in Africa and opened a debate about what constitutes acceptable and desirable political practice on the continent.

Using debates that emerged in the wake of the resurgence of protest as a political tool in Angola during 2011 and 2012, this paper explores one aspect of the remaking of the political, the struggle over what constituted the normative limits of political action, and, with that, the claim to embody democratic politics. At the time the protests were not the primary focus of my research, which predominantly explored questions of housing and urban planning. Excellent work by Ruy Blanes (2021), Jon Schubert (2017), Justin Pearce (2015), Juliana Lima (2013) Paulo Faria (2013), and Mukuta and Fortuna (2011) among others, have addressed questions of personal motivations for protestors during this time, as well as detailed accounts of the movements' origins, transformations and make up. Building on the aforementioned work, this paper analyses some of the public statements and actions of both critics and supporters of the protests. It draws on media analyses, ethnographic observations of events and discussions that took place during the period of the initial protests (2011-2012). In doing this it sheds light on how the protests opened up debates about legality, rights, and political action that filtered into quotidian discussions of Angolan politics. In doing this, the paper tracks how debates over the legitimacy of protests became a catalyst for reimagining the nature of the law and, with that, democracy in post-conflict Angola, and more broadly in Africa's third wave of protest.

Protest Politics

In February 2011, as the 'Arab Spring' glued people across the world to their televisions, a letter written by a mysterious Agostinho Jonas Roberto dos Santos swept across Angolan social media. The online revolutionary,

whose pseudonym was an amalgamation of the names of the independence-era leaders of Angola's three liberation movements¹ and the then president, José Eduardo dos Santos, called for a protest to be held on March 7, 2011 to demand the creation of 'the conditions for the democratic election of a government of Angolan citizens whose hands are clean of blood and scams, that will govern Angola for all Angolans no matter their origin' (Nova Revolução do Povo Angolano 2011). Amongst other things, the statement called for the resignation of the president, a new public administration, and 'a social democracy that should have the interests of the Angolan people at its heart'.

Despite many people agreeing with the statement's aims, few Angolans initially rallied to the call. In a context in which open opposition to the ruling party carried with it significant personal risk, there was little interest in heeding an anonymous appeal to protest. The ruling MPLA, however, reacted strongly against the call, elevating its significance beyond people's initial estimation thereof. High ranking members of the party implied that the protests would be met with violent reaction and advised the population to be 'vigilant' and 'abstain from any type of activities that threaten the peaceful and democratic life of our country' (Mukuta and Fortuna 2012: 90). Others accused opposition parties and foreign interests of attempting to destabilise Angola, claiming that unknown protestors were planning attacks on police stations, MPLA offices, and the building where the national radio was housed.

The actual March 7 protest barely posed a threat. At around midnight 17 people arrived, four of whom were journalists. They were all detained and released the next day. The small size of the protest, however, did not mean that it was inconsequential. The willingness to go onto the street against the MPLA broke a taboo that stretched back to May 1977 when an uprising against the existing MPLA leadership was brutally crushed. Since March 2011, protests, although still generally reacted to with harsh police action, have become a regular part of the Angolan political landscape, ranging from single individuals holding up placards, to larger mobilisations such as protests by war veterans for their pensions to be paid and a 2017 march against the criminalisation of abortion in the country. While the protests and marches have never reached the size or consistency of those that occurred in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and most recently the Sudan, they nevertheless, as Schubert (2017: 177) has argued, 'modified the parameters of the political', opening up a space to question and critique the MPLA and its attempt to

control the meanings and practices of Angolan politics.

The 2011 protests and the multiple ones which followed were part of a continental wide trend that has been referred to as the ‘third wave’ of African protest.² These protests generally voiced disillusionment with the results of multi-party democracy and neoliberal economic restructuring, neither of which had delivered on their promises. In Angola, this turn to the streets as a political platform took many by surprise. Studies of Angola have tended to argue that the country is characterised by what Schubert (2017:18) describes as a ‘culture of fear’. This is a product of both subtle and at times explicit forms of intimidation directed at those who ask questions or express opinions viewed as politically threatening to the ruling party. The pressure of this culture of fear could be discreet, such as families asking relatives who are beginning to publicly criticise government policies to cease their activities; however, they often took more violent and explicit forms. During the post-conflict Dos Santos years these included the presidential guard’s 2003 murder of a car washer who was singing hip-hop lyrics critical of Dos Santos³ or the 2015 jailing and trial of seventeen youth activists for organising a reading group about peaceful revolution.

The origins of this culture of fear are often said to lie in the brutal repression of an uprising⁴ against the Agostinho Neto government on the May 27, 1977. Those associated with the uprising were hunted down with many being arrested, tortured or killed. These purges continued for years, creating a political atmosphere in which people feared being openly critical of the ruling party. This fear was intergenerationally transmitted by parents warning children of the consequences of protest and dissent that May 27 represented.

While the 2011 protest movement was certainly the first sustained return to street politics that Angola had witnessed since 1977, the emphasis on the ‘culture of fear’ has tended to obscure earlier instances of organisation building and resistance. During the one-party era, cultural and sporting groups provided a space for discussions that might not have been tolerated in more official political spaces (Pestana 2002). In the 1980s, student organisations began to press for greater autonomy from the MPLA (Pestana 2002). With the legalisation of private press and independent associations in the early 1990s, Angola saw a growth in non-governmental organisations, with some of them, such as ADRA (Acção para o Desenvolvimento Rural e o Ambiente) still existent in the present. These organisations contributed to broader civic education and development goals, laying the foundation

for the spread of ideas about democracy and rights. This was evident, for instance, in the various peace appeals released by civil society in the late 1990s demanding a cessation of fighting and criticising the government for its handling of the war (Comerford 2005:140-146). These appeals were paralleled by marches in support of peace, which suggested a precedent for the use of the streets for political purposes (Comerford 2005). Equally, starting in the 1990s, spontaneous protests in reaction to housing demolitions suggested that there was a growing willingness to openly defy the accepted norm that politics should not be taken to the street. Paralleling these developments, independent media was legalised in the early 1990s creating a space for dissenting voices and opinions to legally circulate through alternative media channels.

Unfortunately, while the rise of new organisations and media opened up new possibilities for the expression of political critique, these spaces of engagement were partially captured by the MPLA reducing their significance as potential sites for political change. Angola's recent history has largely been characterised by what Faria (2013:303) has referred to as a 'pseudo-public' as the MPLA's significant resources meant that it was able to largely manage civil society and private media. The 1990s into the 2000s were witness to the creation of multiple NGOs, foundations, and community organisations that were allied to the MPLA. Cesaltina Abreu (2008) refers to these MPLA-sponsored organisations as 'organized civil society', which she contrasts to the independent civil society that the state attempted to control through legislation and sometimes harassment. This 'organized civil society' reproduced the MPLA's interests rather than creating space for independent debate. Similarly, despite the appearance of a large private press, few private newspapers circulated outside of Luanda and most of them were owned by MPLA-aligned individuals. The result was that while there was 'the appearance of pluralism and choice' in Angola, in actual fact many of the seeming choices and the debates they generated had been manufactured by the regime (Faria 2013:303). One obvious historical exception to this 'pseudo-public' however, was the rise of an increasingly politicised hip-hop movement. Beginning in the 1990s, what was referred to as *rap de intervenção social* (social intervention rap) or 'revolutionary' rap actively began to criticise Angola's political status quo. The music was generally performed and engaged with outside of official state and media institutions, creating an openly critical public sphere where opinions and narratives that had long been sidelined could

be expressed (Lázaro and Santos 2016, Mendonça Júnior 2018). Musicians laid the seeds of imagining ways of expressing and enacting politics that did not follow established normative channels, something which would be central to the third wave of protests, not just in Angola, but across the African continent more generally.

It is precisely this refiguring of the boundaries of the political that characterised the third wave of protests. The first wave of protest is generally defined as having taken place between the 1940s and the 1960s and was largely led by nationalist movements pressing for independence. The second wave of protests began in the late 1980s, continuing into the early 1990s. These were generally organised by civil society organisations, unions and other recognisable political associations who pressed for an end to one-party rule and the introduction of multi-party democracy. In contrast, both the overall aims and the make-up of the third wave of protests have been harder for analysts to grasp. There is an agreement on the centrality of social media and other online platforms for organisation, and of the notable involvement of new associations such as collectives of musicians or consumer groupings that ‘provided alternatives to official politics’ (Mueller 2018:51). Scholars have noted that the protests sought to challenge not only existing socio-economic conditions, but importantly the hollowing out of multi-party democracy by elites who had undermined state institutions and democratic processes (Mateos and Erro 2021). The demand then was for the introduction of ‘real’ democracy as opposed to the calcified institutions and formulaic rubber-stamped elections that had come to stand in for politics. Protestors sought to reimagine the forms and institutions through which politics could be expressed and enacted (Branch and Mampilly 2015).

While individual movements may have had localised achievements, many analysts have battled to see a clear systemic outcome from the protests on the same scale as resulted from the first and second waves of protest. As Honwana (2019:17), among others, noted: ‘Young people have avoided the structures and political ideology that turn protest movements into political parties. They reject the established political order as corrupt and inadequate, but so far, have been unable to produce an alternative political model.’ While recognising the critique of scholars such as Honwana, it might be best to understand the third wave of protests, as the Angolan example suggests, as a struggle over the substance and practices of democracy. As Branch and Mampilly (2015:44) have argued, the significance of protest:

should not be judged according to whether it achieves its explicit demands, for those demands often change.... Instead, protest should be understood according to how it attempts to transform the national political questions that structure state power and how that protest answers, avoids, or is torn apart by the deep political dilemmas that may require resolution for democratic change to take hold.

It is precisely this question of the remaking of political imaginations and the perceived structures and boundaries of the political that the early Angolan third wave protests raised, and in which they were arguably very effective.

The Parameters of Politics: peace, war and the law

MPLA rule in Luanda has historically been characterised by strong control over political expression. During the socialist period,⁵ the MPLA used the war context and the state ideology of Marxist-Leninism to delegitimise critics. Quotidian forms of repression, such as academic censorship, were justified by the argument that the regime was under siege from internal and external enemies (Birmingham 1988:11). Political marches became confined to the MPLA's mass organisations such as the Organisation of Angolan Women (Malaquias 2007:181). The management of political expression became more complicated in the 1990s in the wake of political and economic reforms. Constitutional changes allowed for the establishment of private media and civil society organisations. They also ended the official unity of party and state, in theory laying the ground for greater political contestation and state independence. However, Angola's *nomenklatura* quickly learnt that 'it was possible to sublimate to its own objectives both the liberalisation of the economy and the multiparty system' (Messiant 2001:291). In addition to the use of security services to harass critics and the use of financial means to coopt them, the MPLA exercised political and social control through at least two other primary mechanisms: legislation and the appeal to war circumstances.

Since the 1990s, the MPLA has increasingly engaged in what has been referred to as 'the judicialisation of repression' (Pestana 2004:4). The party's power to create law became an active means of stifling dissent even within a putatively democratic system. In fact, the MPLA's electoral victory in 1992 provided it with a credibility in the international arena which weakened complaints about its actions. The MPLA's absolute majority in the parliament and continued influence over the public sector allowed it

to continue functioning as a *de facto* one-party regime even in the context of a multi-party system (Messiant 2001, Messiant 2007). This electorally based majority, in the absence of substantial checks on power from other branches of the state, meant that, the party could ‘continue to function as it had in the past, making and unmaking laws according to its own whims or, more prosaically, ignoring the law altogether’ (Messiant 2001:291-2). The workings of law to suppress criticism was evident in instances such as the March 2000 trial of journalist Rafael Marques de Morais, who was charged with defamation for writing an article critical of the president. Witnesses were unable to provide proof of the criticisms that the journalist had levelled against President José Edurado dos Santos because article 46 of the Media Law was used to prohibit the presentation of evidence against the president (Marques de Morais 2001).

The MPLA-state justified its use of the law and harsher security measures by reference to the war conditions under which it continued to operate. Thus, for instance, state representatives defended the harsh clampdowns on private media and independent reporting of the late 1990s, by framing them as legitimate security measures (Comerford 2005:74-5). In the buildup to the 1992 elections, however, Dos Santos astutely understood the general population’s fatigue with the conflict. He hired a Brazilian public relations firm to cast him and the MPLA as ‘champions of peace, reconciliation, and democracy’ (Hodges 2004:57). After the elections and subsequent return to war this image was used to juxtapose a supposedly peaceful and democratic Dos Santos against a bellicose Savimibi (Messiant 2001, Malaquias 2007), a dichotomous vision which the MPLA continued to cultivate after the end of war.

Post-Conflict Legitimacy: peace is war

The sudden end of Angola’s civil war, which followed the killing of rebel group UNITA’s long-term leader, Jonas Savimbi, in early 2002, proffered the possibility of significant political shifts after twenty-seven years of armed conflict. However, during the almost two decades following it, the MPLA actively sought to narrow political possibilities rather than open up political space (Messiant 2007, Soares de Oliveira 2015). This took place via the mobilisation of legislative mechanisms, the use of finances to coopt critics (Schubert 2009), the purchase of private media outlets, and the creation of government-sponsored civil society organisations and the heavy regulation of the NGO sector (Roque 2009). Key, however, was the

recasting of peace within the rhetoric of war, with the MPLA presented as the only organisation able to preserve 'the peace'.

In the post-conflict era, the rhetoric of war continued through discussions of peace. Politicians, newspapers, and ordinary citizens often described peace as something which had to be 'defended'. A prime example of this was a government advertisement in the state newspaper marking the anniversary of a decade of peace on April 4, 2012. The advertisement featured a white dove floating against a blue background with pictures of post-conflict housing and infrastructure below. Jarringly written below this bucolic image were the words 'We defend the peace, unity and development of Angola'. Within this 'militarization of peace' (Lima 2013:23-36), criticisms of the MPLA were framed as attacks on stability and therefore bordering on attempted warfare. An Angolan public commentator, Cláudio Silva (2013) wrote in a discussion of politics in the country: 'Perhaps the most distressing of all for our young democracy is the MPLA's mostly explicit but sometimes subtle reinforcement that questioning the powers that be, debating their policies, making use of their rights, courts and institutions and otherwise participating in the democratic process as concerned citizens (or political parties) is somehow a danger to the stability of the country and could plunge it back into war'. This framing of demands for inclusion as a disturbance to peace was evident in quotidian attempts to press for rights. A resident of Iraq, a neighbourhood where state-sanctioned housing demolitions had occurred, lamented that, 'whoever claims his rights, they don't treat him like a normal citizen, they treat him like an 'element' that is also sometimes considered partisan.... We are called UNITA men when we don't have anything to do with that party'.⁶ The accusation of being a 'UNITA man' in the shadow of the MPLA's mobilisation of fragile peace tended to define someone as stoking conflict and seeking to undermine the post-conflict settlement. The mere act of demanding civil and political rights was therefore framed as a threat to peace.

The 'peace as war' rhetoric became a means of setting the boundaries of acceptable speech and action, especially as regarded the MPLA's primary opposition and previous wartime armed opponent, UNITA. When Isaías Samakuva, the leader of UNITA, described Angola as a dictatorship during a radio interview in late 2011, the state newspaper, the *Jornal de Angola*, hit back. In an editorial entitled 'Samakuva's dictatorship', the editor, José Ribeiro, described President Dos Santos as 'the primary defender of the democratic regime'. Styling Angola's peace as a product of the president's

commitment to democratic ideals in the face of UNITA's devastation of the country, he argued that, 'In a time in which the authority of the state was put into crisis in the majority of national territory by an illegal and destructive army [a reference to UNITA], José Eduardo dos Santos placed his faith in democracy instead of the path that the circumstances suggested, which would have been the declaration of a state of emergency' (Ribeiro 2011a). Ribeiro further argued that during its membership of the government of national unity in the 1990s, UNITA had engaged in 'demagoguery' which raised questions about its commitment to democracy (Ribeiro 2011a). In casting the war as a story of a democratic and peace-seeking MPLA being forced into a conflict by an aggressive UNITA, Ribeiro presented the ruling party and Dos Santos as the only political forces that truly embodied democratic ideals. These democratic sensibilities, he implied, laid the foundation for and continued to ensure Angola's hard-won peace. It was precisely through positioning itself as the defender of peace that the MPLA was able to set the terms of imagining the normative bounds of political discourse and behavior. Appeals to peace and democracy when framed against a background of war, therefore became tools for discrediting opposition and shutting down criticism, rather than opening up debate.

Questioning Protests

The uprisings in North Africa elicited a fearful response from the MPLA, because of the ways in which they reverberated and appealed to a growing group of largely disaffected younger Angolans. With protestors using slogans such as 'First Gaddafi, then Zedú'⁷ it was very clear that they were drawing direct parallels between Angola and the troubled North African countries. Discussions of the Arab Spring quickly became proxies for reflecting on Angolan politics, and specifically the question of whether protests constituted legitimate forms of action or, instead, threatened to disturb 'the peace'. Protestors were often met with police and security branch violence, sent death threats, jailed, attacked, and kidnapped. The most shocking instance of state violence was possibly the 2012 kidnapping and murder by the State Intelligence and Security Services (SINSE) of Alves Kamuningue and Isaías Cassule, two former soldiers who were attempting to organise war veterans and former presidential guards to press for the payment of salaries and pensions (Human Rights Watch 2013). The regime generally either denied involvement in the abovementioned incidents, remained quiet about them with the state broadcaster not covering them, or argued that

these actions were necessary in order to defend the country's peace. Despite these harsh reactions from the state, protests quickly gained ground and were no longer confined to urban youth nor to demands for Dos Santos to step down. From 2011 to 2012, Angola witnessed protests about housing demolitions, concerns over potential electoral fraud, service delivery, and payments over war veterans' pensions. Although generally extremely small as regarding the number of participants, the protests nevertheless called into question many analysts' assumptions that the MPLA enjoyed hegemonic control over Angola's political narratives, especially given the diversity of backgrounds of protestors which suggested growing disaffection across socio-economic, professional, and geographic divides. Protest as a political form began to spread across various political interests and groupings.

As protests spread, so did the attempt to delegitimise them, notably through making reference to the events that had taken place in Libya. In a column entitled 'If Angola were Libya', José Ribeiro (2011b) once again mobilised peace and democracy to shut down debate, criticising those who were making comparisons between Angola and Libya. Arguing that, 'Angola experienced a long war and the country was left destroyed. Peace is here to stay, and no one wants a return to that time of unrest and uncertainty', he asked the reader to imagine 'if Angola were Libya' weaving a tale of neo-colonialism, destruction and war:

If Angola were Libya, there would not be political parties nor press freedom and less likely democratic elections. The beautiful Constitution of the Republic of Angola would be ripped apart in Independence Square where the statue of Agostinho Neto already would have been torn down to angry shouts so that the cameras of international television could interminably repeat [the image] hour upon hour... Because of this, we are certain that no dignified Angolan politician, no real patriot... would compare our country and leaders to Libya and Libyan leaders, so that the airplanes of the military alliance might arrive and hand over our liberated Angola to the previous masters or stain Angola with such disgrace.

In the above instance, Libya was held up as a threat, its unravelling an indication of what protests ultimately led to. While not all Angolans agreed with Ribeiro, there were, without doubt, many who felt that the protests were unnecessarily provocative and would lead to a cycle of violence. A retired primary school teacher and longtime MPLA supporter, explained to me that young people misunderstood the president and the party. In his eyes, it was precisely because Angola's rulers were such good ones, that

protests were growing,

If Angola improves other countries will imitate it and be less dependent. There is a fear of José Eduardo because he has good intentions. Look at what happened in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya. There is a danger that other countries will follow. This will create problems for the major powers, and they will create conflicts. It is not because he [Dos Santos] is bad or has been in power for years [that there are protests], it is because he has good ideas.⁸

He cited the refusal of Western powers to provide assistance for post-conflict reconstruction as proof of their animosity towards Dos Santos, and then linked what was happening in Angola to previous instances of foreign intervention in Iraq and now Libya. This had led him to believe that the protests were being supported and planned by foreign powers. After all, he asked, 'If there are elections, why do people need to protest?'

The former teacher's explanation drew not only on evidence of foreign interventions in other African countries, but spoke powerfully to Angola's history and the involvement of foreign powers in its long-running civil war. Nevertheless, what interested me most was his question about elections, which spoke directly to the ambivalence over protests' legitimacy. Protests, he suggested, were unnecessary political expressions if elections existed. Many of those critical of the protests voiced similar points, insisting that political concerns should be expressed through established channels such as elections and political parties. Appearing on the street, even if it was legal, was considered to be inappropriate. The discussion of protests thereby involved an implicit judgement about what constituted acceptable political action. Perhaps the most blatant example of this stance was a speech delivered by President Dos Santos in April 2011, just over a month after the March 7 protest.

During a televised address⁹ to the MPLA Central Committee on April 15, 2011, Dos Santos accused the protestors of attempting to bring the 'confusion' of the Arab Spring to Angola. What was striking was not simply the accusation, but the way in which it would be supported, namely through the argument that protestors failed to abide by the proper procedures of democracy and therefore lacked legitimacy. In the speech, Dos Santos constructed a narrative of MPLA history and political engagement as exemplifying democratic practice, which he contrasted with the protestors who he implied were anti-democratic in their actions and threatening the country's stability. The speech revealed how the appeal to a democratic

mandate could limit imaginations of politics and act as a justification of repression.

Dos Santos began with an account of Angola's history, framing it as a teleological path spearheaded by the MPLA, to the achievement of multi-party democracy and free-market enterprise. To do this, he began with the anti-colonial struggle:

When we were young, during the colonial period, we knew that the liberation struggle was led by unions, political parties, or national liberation movements that had, as their primary members, leaders and people of great prestige and capacity who were well known within society. These leaders had ideas, programmes and clear strategies that they shared for all to know, ones which clearly defined an enemy and determined who allies were.

To appreciate the opening statement, it is necessary to understand who the implied objects of criticism were – the youth protestors. Dos Santos was suggesting that the protestors fell far short of those who had led the liberation movements. For him they had failed to constitute themselves through recognised forms of political representation such as political parties and unions. As such, he implied, they could not be trusted. Protestors had been and would continue to be described as *arruaceiros* (thugs), 'frustrated', and 'unemployed' by ruling party stalwarts.

The president followed the description of the anti-colonial struggle with an account of how the country moved from a post-independence period of socialism, characterised by a planned economy and a 'democratic-revolutionary dictatorship', to multi-party democracy in the 1990s. He explained that the political and economic conditions that underpinned the socialist model had been unable to survive because, 'they were not able to provide for the exercise of the fundamental liberties and guarantees for the advent of economic and social prosperity.' Instead, he continued, Angola became part of the 'revolution for democracy and the market economy' that swept the African continent in the 1980s and 1990s. It was from this that the 'democratic processes that are underway today emerged; in almost all countries where the president, the government and parliamentarians are regularly elected by the people'. Angola then, was part of a larger global historical movement towards electoral democracy. Standing in the way of this then, was not only to be anti-democratic but to oppose the movement of history. Dos Santos then explained democratic change, confining it to the ballot box:

These democratic processes are based on, among other things, the principle of democratic alternation, which means that the leaders and the parliamentarians that are governing, contest for the electorate's vote with people chosen by opposition parties; whomever gets the majority of these votes wins the right to govern for the following period. When those who are in power win, there is continuity. When those who are in the opposition win, there is a democratic alternation of power, because those who were there leave.

Dos Santos clearly outlined his vision of the only democratic way in which those in power could be removed: elections. The insinuation was that those who sought political change through extra-electoral means were behaving in a non-democratic manner. It is to this issue that Dos Santos turned as the speech began to focus specifically on the question of protests.

Directly following his explanation of 'democratic alternation', Dos Santos stated that: 'Today there is a certain confusion in Africa and some people want to bring this confusion to Angola.' Everyone listening was well aware that the 'confusion' he was referring to was the North African protests and that the reference to people trying to bring 'confusion' was an allusion to the 'youth' protestors who had initiated the first protest. In stark contrast to the 'well-known' leaders of the anti-colonial struggle that Dos Santos had described in his opening statement, he characterised those involved in protests as 'opportunists' who were attempting to dupe the public, with potentially dangerous consequences. One of the primary consequences, he suggested, was the undermining of democracy. This was evident, he suggested, in the nature of the protestors' demands, pointing out that people calling for change on social media, 'talk of revolution, but do not talk about democratic alternation'. The protestors' 'revolution' was therefore not the same as the 'democratic revolution' that Dos Santos had ushered in, but an anti-democratic one.

The accusation of being anti-democratic was stressed in the speech by him arguing that those involved in protests were protesting precisely because they lacked the legitimacy and support to successfully compete in elections:

For these people, revolution means gathering people for protests, even when not authorized, to insult, denigrate, and provoke disturbances and confusion with the intention of obligating the police to respond, so that they can say that there is not freedom of expression and that there is not respect for rights. It is this path of provocation that they are choosing to try and overthrow elected governments that are fulfilling their mandates.

They also do not want to apply the principle of democratic alternation in our country because they are afraid of the next election in 2012, because they know that the majority of voters will not vote for them. What they are trying to do is not a revolution. It is called confusion, subversion of democracy or the democratic order established in the Constitution of the Republic.

The speech therefore embodied the multiple ways in which the ruling party's discourse of electoral democracy was mobilised to stifle dissent and justify repression. According to Dos Santos, it was the protestors who were anti-democratic for assuming that dissent could be legitimately expressed outside of the confines of an electoral apparatus. To him, protests were a transgression of the legitimate bounds of politics. But there remained a dangerous slip up in Dos Santos's speech where he had referred to the need to authorise protests. Article 47 of Angola's 2010 Constitution recognises the right to peaceful assembly and demonstrate without any necessary authorisation, the relevant authorities merely need to be notified of the intention to do so. This meant that, assuming authorities had been notified, protests were legal forms of political expression. Protestors and their sympathisers would incessantly cite this fact as they sought to recast the act of protest as legitimate in their attempt to wrestle the claim to democratic representation away from the ruling party.

Claiming the Law

The responses from MPLA and state representatives partially shifted discussions about protests away from the substantive issues being raised by the protestors and rather towards the question of whether or not the protests themselves were legitimate. The document which was most frequently cited as proof of the legitimacy of the protests was the 2010 Constitution, which soon became used across a variety of contexts as a means of performing and explaining the independence of citizens and the law from the state and the MPLA. The first obvious sign to me that protests were having this effect took place during a meeting of demolition victims that was held just a few months after the first protest. Bernardo,¹⁰ a member of the housing rights organisation SOS Habitat, was sitting at the head of the outdoor table that had been erected at their offices, explaining to a group of demolition victims who had been discussing the protests, why it was that they were legal. While acknowledging that many Angolans were fearful about the consequences of the protests for more general political stability, he emphasised that they were

not violent. Opening up a copy of the 2010 Constitution, he read out Article 47 for everyone gathered there and explained that as long as the gathering was peaceful and notification provided, it was legal.¹¹ These performative mobilisations of the constitution were taking place at a micro-scale in a variety of interactions and institutional settings. At a two-day conference organised by affiliates of some of the youth organisations linked to the protests, a young man recounted how he was criticised by his eight siblings for being disparaging about the current regime. However, he explained that when they put pressure on him because of his views, he would take out a copy of the 2010 Constitution, and show them that he had the right to protest.¹² These were simply public performances of conversations taking place within families in their homes, among friends across glasses of beer, and inside mini-bus taxis where commuters discussed the latest political developments.

As these discussions increased, so ‘the law’ was grappled away from the state and into the hands of the population. As people gradually treated the law as in itself a neutral object, the state’s behavior came under scrutiny. If the law did not belong to the state, then the state could be criticised for abusing it. During a visit to a tented settlement whose residents had been forcibly removed from the centrally located Ilha area to a zone hours from the city centre, Bernardo, and SOS Habitat associates, attempted to rally those who had been removed by picking apart the relationships between the law and political expression. Standing in the midst of the settlement with a loudspeaker, a demolition victim told the crowd, ‘When the government is not working, it has to go!’. Bernardo then spoke, encouraging everyone to support the ‘youth’, who, he explained, were protesting for everyone. A murmur of assent ran through the crowd. Immediately following this statement, however, he tried to encourage the crowd not to reject the law. The problem, was not the law, he stated, but that the government did not implement the law correctly. ‘Angola has good laws’, he insisted, however, he continued, just as an infant had to cry to get the attention of its mother, so they had to cry to get the attention of the state.¹³ The protests in this framing were the legitimate cries of the population asking for the state’s care and nourishment.

The capacity to claim the language of the law enabled a diagnosis of the problems of the state as a law-breaker. Luandans were increasingly able to argue about to what degree they felt the state had abused the law, and equally significantly, what they as ‘citizens’ should be able to do without fear of

reprisal. These rights, however, had to be grappled from the MPLA-state. In one of my visits with SOS Habitat, a housing and land rights organisation with residents in Bairro Two, a neighbourhood that had suffered multiple demolitions, a debate broke out regarding whether or not residents should protest to put pressure on the government for compensation. When one of those present stated that they shouldn't, one of his neighbours spoke back, 'No, we have the right to protest. We have the right'. The coordinator from SOS Habitat replied, 'Yes, it is in the Constitution'. To which one of the men enthusiastically responded, 'You have this right, now you have to demand it'.¹⁴ Even friends of mine who supported the MPLA said that although they did not agree with the protests, they were against the police beating up protesters as they had a 'right' (*direito*) to voice their grievances in that manner. In moving the framing of the protests away from a discourse of war to that of a legitimate right, these discussions contributed to the framing of the state as a law-breaker for suppressing the protests. At a press conference organised by members of the Bagdad neighbourhood which had undergone a violent demolition, one of the community leaders exclaimed, 'When we go to the road to protest, they put us in jail! Who is not following the Constitution?' The question of the state's constitutionality and protest would move centre stage the following year in the buildup to the 2012 elections.

Elections and protest politics

Angola's second post-conflict election was held on August 31, 2012. The build up to the election had already begun the year before with the completion and inauguration of new schools, clinics, roads and other infrastructures across the city. Now, as the day moved closer, huge neon signs of President Dos Santos bedecked traffic islands, political rallies were organised, and political parties' advertisements were aired at an allocated time on the television every evening. In neighbourhoods across the city, the MPLA funded what Angolans referred to as *maratonas* (marathons), block parties where free food, alcohol, and goods such as t-shirts and caps were handed out. Election time was turning into a party.

During this period, the legitimacy of protests came under scrutiny as opposition parties tried to hold protests and rallies. These activities sought not only to mobilise support, but also to raise concerns about the electoral process. Many studies of elections in African countries have characterised them as simulacra (Apter 1999, Fermé 1999). Suspensions of behind-doors

deal making, ballot stuffing, and other forms of fraud create disquiet that elections, while legitimating power, are merely an empty procedural act rather than a means of bringing into being a substantive democracy. It is precisely the perceived hollowing out of democracy which had driven the despair of many protestors involved in the third wave of protests. This concern was evident in Luanda, with many believing that political parties had already agreed on the electoral outcomes behind the scenes. Despite these ambivalent sentiments, elections continued to be recognised as a legitimate means through which political grievances could be aired. Government critics therefore worked hard to both acknowledge the legitimacy of elections, while simultaneously warning the general public of how processes could be manipulated and rendered fraudulent.

The election became the object through which struggles took place over who represented popular sentiment in Angola and through which channels this could be legitimately expressed. *Central Angola 7311*, a website associated with some of the youth groups linked to anti Dos Santos protests, published an article entitled 'A Chronology of Fraud: The Constitutional Coup and the Electoral Truth' (Central Angola 7311, 2012). It listed the laws passed and decisions taken since 2010 which had rendered the procedural nature of the coming election suspect. This included the elimination of presidential elections in 2010, the attempt to grant oversight of voter registration and election processes to the executive rather than an independent body, and the appointment of Suzana Inglês, a member of the MPLA women's movement, as chairperson of the National Electoral Commission (she was eventually removed due to widespread public opposition). The article was insistent that elections could produce legitimate results, but that in Angola they had been corrupted by the president and the ruling party. The outcome was that they created an illusion of democracy to rubber stamp anti-democratic practices, with the article describing the president, the MPLA and the CNE (Comissão Nacional Eleitoral) as 'subverting the truth of the electoral process'. In this framing, the claim to electoral legitimacy as necessarily embodying an appropriate form of political representation was brought into question.

This struggle over the legitimacy of both elections and protests was evident in the efforts of competing interests to question to what extent these acts constituted credible sites of democratic representation. After UNITA declared that it would hold a protest against electoral fraud and its featuring of some youth activists in its television campaign, the *Jornal de Angola*

printed an opinion piece in which the author mobilised references to peace and democracy to suggest that UNITA was not interested in either,

UNITA has clearly revealed that it has not disassociated itself from the species of violence that always characterized it – made evident to Angolans in a dramatic fashion in the 1992 election – because it did not refrain in its airtime from celebrating the March protests promoted in Angola as ‘inspired by the Arab Spring’, forgetting that as a party its obligation is to obtain power via the voting booth, as dictated by the rules of democracy. (Manças 2012)

Although UNITA desperately tried to call attention to the corruption of the electoral process, and therefore to the fact that the very institutions to which the MPLA appealed as the basis of its legitimacy were potentially undermining democracy, the MPLA constantly cast any attempt to move outside those institutions as ‘anti-democratic’, especially as regarding protests which indexed an identification between masses and any political body other than the MPLA. In light of this, UNITA embraced what the MPLA had attempted to criticise. It moved forward with its protest, much to the shock of many.

On August 26, 2012, approximately 5,000 supporters turned out for UNITA’s protest against electoral fraud, contrasting the protest against the electoral apparatus as a legitimate sight for democratic expression. For a brief few hours, UNITA’s red and green, an unusual sight in a historically MPLA-aligned Luanda, displaced the red and black of the ruling party. Some members of the youth movement marched in solidarity, wearing t-shirts emblazoned with one of the slogans of anti-Dos Santos protests, ‘*32 é muito*’ (32 is a lot/too much), a reference to the number of years that Dos Santos had been in power in 2011, when the protestors began. Echoing the reference to the constitution that had spread throughout Luanda when rights and politics were discussed, protestors carried copies of the 2010 Constitution symbolising their right to protest, and held up signs demanding ‘*alternancia do poder*’ (the alternation of power). These and other placards reiterated the legalistic language of rights that had come to be that upon which they constructed their critique, but shifted it to the site of the protest rather than the election.

The protest then was not only about electoral fraud, but about the very right to protest. The reference to the constitution was not only about the running of the election, but about the public performance of freedom of speech and of constitutional rights. By physically occupying Luanda,

long conceived of as an MPLA space, but also by explicitly referencing the right to protest, UNITA supporters transformed the protest over the election into a protest about the boundaries of legitimate political action and the basis of democracy.

Conclusion: a tenuous victory

The MPLA swept the 2012 election, winning 71.82 per cent of the national vote, and 59.47 per cent of the vote in Luanda Province. Concerns about electoral fraud went ignored and the MPLA politicians took their seats once again in the national assembly. In 2017, the MPLA again won a majority although this time with a new presidential candidate, João Lourenço, following José Eduardo Dos Santos's exit from the presidency after 38 years in power. The protests did not overthrow the government, nor did they lead to a drastic reformation of Angola's political institutions. This does not mean, however, that they did not have profound implications for Angolan politics. As Branch and Mampilly (2015:34-35) have argued, drawing on the work of Claude Ake, the value of protest does not always lie in its bringing about immediate concrete change, but rather 'the real value of protest movements was in their effects on the political consciousness and imagination of African societies'. Discussions of protests created a space where the existing parameters of what constituted acceptable political expression were challenged. In doing this, they opened up discussion about the power of the law and what underlay democratic legitimacy.

This questioning of the limits of electoral democracy has endured in the ongoing presence of protests as a form of political engagement. In recent years, this has been reflected in the rise of grassroots movements, such as Movimento Jovens pelas Autarquias (Youth Movement for Local Elections) to put pressure on the government to hold the long-delayed local elections or *autarquias*. This has involved public protests and civic education actions. While arguing that local elections are important as a check on power and means of representation, they have insistently highlighted the potential danger of these elections to be captured by the ruling party. The use of protest to highlight the instability of democratic process and make demands for assurances that institutions and actions will ensure substantive democratic outcomes has been a long-lasting legacy of Angola's early protests.

As the protest against the removal of Adalberto Costa Júnior, with which this paper opened suggests, the turn to protest has continued to be justified

by the need to ensure the proper workings of democracy. Protestors suggest that it is not them, but rather the very institutions that are meant to safeguard it, that are undermining democracy. By opening public discussion about the limits of electoral democracy and the possibility of realising democratic action in other spaces and forums, the protests that occurred in 2011 and 2012 shifted the parameters of politics and with those, understandings of democracy in Angola. This is their lasting legacy in the country and, perhaps more broadly, the legacy of the third wave of protests in Africa more generally.

Notes

1. The three leaders were: Agostinho Neto (MPLA), Holden Roberto (FNLA), Jonas Savimbi (UNITA). The identity of "Agostinho Jonas Roberto dos Santos" was never publicly revealed.
2. There is not clear agreement regarding the beginning of the waves. Branch and Mampilly (2015) date them back to 2005 while Mueller (2018) dates the third wave as starting in 2011 and argues it petered out in approximately 2016.
3. For more details see Marques de Moraes (2003).
4. The MPLA argues that the events constituted an attempted coup while others suggest that it was a popular uprising. It is extremely difficult to research the events of the May 27 due to the active suppression of information about the day and its consequences. See Pawson (2014) and Saul (2014) for a broader discussion of May 27, 1977 and the politics surrounding it.
5. Due to the ineffectiveness of many socialist policies in Angola, there is debate as to whether or not it makes sense to periodise the years from 1975 until c.1992 as a "socialist period". I choose to do so partially because I believe such arguments rest on normative imaginations of what socialism is that take their models from other geographies, rather than examining socialisms' possibilities in the African context. I also choose to identify the period as socialist, because socialism was an official state ideology at the time and as a result significantly shaped policy, international alliances, and political-economic trends in Angola at the time including, for example the nationalisation of property, organisation of purchasing systems, the curriculum and design of Angola's educational system, and the structures of Angola's particular one-party state. Even if socialism was "patchy" in its application, the impact of it as a justificatory political discourse and organising principle seems difficult to ignore.
6. Group discussion with residents of Iraque. Luanda, July 1, 2012.
7. Zedú was a nickname used for José Eduardo dos Santos.
8. Author interview with retired primary school teacher. Cazenga, September 26, 2011.

9. A transcription of the speech was previously available at www.angola-resistente.net. Unfortunately the website is no longer active, but the speech can be watched on *YouTube*. See Dos Santos (2011).
10. Pseudonym.
11. Participant observation at SOS Habitat meeting. Benfica, Luanda Province, May 27, 2011.
12. Participant observation at Primeiro Encontro Provincial da Juventude de Luanda. Prenda, Luanda Province, January 28, 2012.
13. Participant observation at SOS event. Zango, Luanda Province, October 15, 2011.
14. Group discussion in Bairro 1. Kilamba Kiaxi, Luanda Province, July 1, 2011.

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