

Angola

The people have their say

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Despite its shortcomings, Angola's election marked a hopeful step forward

IT WAS far from perfect. But despite chaotic voting in Luanda, the capital, Angola's general election on September 5th seemed to reflect the will of the 8m-plus registered voters. The ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), in power since independence in 1975, won by a landslide, with more than 80% of the vote. The main opposition party, the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), came a sad second, with only 10%.

The head of the observer mission from the European Union refused to endorse the poll outright as "free and fair" but said it was "an advance for democracy". More important, UNITA's leader, Isaias Samakuva, accepted defeat, despite the party's demands for a rerun of the poll in Luanda, which was turned down. "Our country has taken an important step for the consolidation of our fragile democracy," he said. "From now on, each government is going to last only four years, not 33-plus."

It was a big test for a country that has held only one multi-party election since independence. The mood this week was quite different from that of 1992, the last time Angolans had a choice of parties. Then, after the results came out, UNITA took up arms again until the death in 2002 of its leader, Jonas Savimbi, finally paved the way for peace.

This time several thousand candidates from ten parties and four coalitions competed for 220 seats. Voters cast ballots at about 12,400 polling stations. Despite a few ugly incidents, the campaign and the vote were peaceful. Most observers apparently thought the count was fair. American, European and African ones, as well as locals, scrutinised the poll.

The opposition claimed fraud, but most observers blamed the problems in Luanda, where close to 29% of the voters are concentrated, on disorganisation rather than foul play. Some of Luanda's polling stations ran out of ballots or got them late. In some cases they opened late or not at all, and the vote was extended to a second day. Voters lists were not always available, making it impossible to check who had voted. Rules were applied unevenly; some polling officers were not aware of last-minute changes. Local observers had problems being accredited, so their presence in Luanda was scaled down. A member of the EU's team reported hanky-panky in the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda.

With the advantage of incumbency, deep pockets and the bias of the state media and institutions, the MPLA had a big advantage. But the size of its victory, presuming the count was accurate, suggests it would have won comfortably anyway.

After election fiascos in Kenya and Zimbabwe, this was a relief. Angola is sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest oil producer and may even have ousted Nigeria

from the top spot. Its economy is said to be the fastest-growing on the continent. Yet the opposition's poor showing is a worry, as it means the MPLA may be able to do what it likes, with too few checks and balances. It can shape a promised new constitution to its liking. Its grip on state institutions and patronage is unlikely to be challenged. Next year's planned presidential election is likely to be a walkover. So the MPLA may be tempted to act as if Angola were still a one-party state, 33 years on.