

## Angolans Heading to Polls for First Vote in 16 Years

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JOHANNESBURG — More than eight million people — nearly half of the population — have registered to vote in war-ravaged Angola, a country with an abundance of oil, diamonds and grinding poverty that is holding its first election in 16 years on Friday. The last election, in 1992, degenerated into another decade of the civil war that uprooted millions of Angolans. In contrast, Friday's legislative vote follows six years of peace and is expected to go fairly smoothly.

Jardo Muekalia, representative for electoral issues in the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, or Unita, the rebel movement turned opposition party, said the campaign had been an imperfect but positive development in Angola's fratricidal history. "Democracy is a process, not a destination, and this is part of that process," Mr. Muekalia said.

Western diplomats and election observers are heralding Friday's vote as a potentially important step toward democracy. But civic and human rights groups, as well as opposition officials, contend that the governing party, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, known as the MPLA, has compromised the fairness of the election by abusing its control of state resources, especially with propaganda on the national radio and television networks.

The real test of the party's commitment to democracy is likely to come next year, when Angola is expected to elect a president, who is the dominant power center in the government. José Eduardo dos Santos, who has held the office for 29 years, is expected to run again.

Unlike the violent election season in nearby Zimbabwe, where President [Robert Mugabe](#) was fighting for his political survival after 28 years in power, Mr. dos Santos's public remarks during the campaign display his confidence that his party will increase its majority in Parliament this year.

With Angola's economy booming, its leadership's desire for greater international legitimacy probably influenced the decision to go ahead with the long-delayed balloting and to welcome Western election observers who were shunned in Zimbabwe, analysts said. The party is campaigning on a platform of restoring peace and rebuilding the

shattered country. “We have increased the creation of jobs and economic growth,” said Manuel Fragata de Moraes, information secretary for the party in Luanda, the capital. “And we are working very hard at a just partition of income.”

Angola is pumping almost two million barrels of oil a day, rivaling Nigeria as Africa’s largest producer. China and the United States are its biggest oil customers. It is the world’s fourth largest producer of diamonds. But its bad reputation is hard to shake. Angola’s elite has long been criticized for enriching itself at the expense of the country’s impoverished citizens, a perception reflected in Angola’s consistent ranking among the world’s most corrupt nations. And after four decades of conflict — first against the colonial power, Portugal, followed by civil war — malnutrition, poverty and illiteracy are still common.

“These elections are very important for Angola because they want international credibility,” said Francisco Ribeiro Telles, Portugal’s ambassador to Angola, who called Friday’s vote a turning point for the country. “They want to be legitimized by the popular vote. Angola is thinking that they can play in the region an important role in economic and political fields.”

And, indeed, Angola seems to be getting some recognition. The American ambassador to Angola, Dan Mozena, issued a statement last week thanking the government for inviting the United States to observe its election, which he said was expected to be “peaceful and credible.”

Luisa Morgantini, who leads the [European Union](#)’s mission of 120 election observers, offered a generally positive assessment. “There is room for many political parties to run for election,” she said. “They can make their own propaganda freely and their own campaigns.”

Researchers and economists are also giving the government some credit for reducing inflation in one of the world’s fastest-growing economies, and for rebuilding roads and removing land mines so that more than three million people displaced by war could go home. In recent years, China has provided billions of dollars in concessionary, oil-backed loans that have fueled a construction boom in schools, hospitals, roads, bridges and other infrastructure.

“They want to be treated as a stable, high-growth, emerging economy, not as a nasty, oil-rich place that steals large sums of money and represses its people,” said J. Stephen Morrison, director of the Africa program at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington.

Some critics of the government worry that it is getting too much credit. [Human Rights Watch](#) issued a report last month saying that the intimidation of opposition parties and journalists and sporadic assaults by MPLA supporters in rural areas against Unita members, among other factors, threatened prospects for a free and fair vote.

And Fernando Macedo, president of the Association for Justice, Peace and Democracy, an Angolan civic group, said he worried that Western countries cared more about whether Angola was stable enough to keep the oil flowing than whether it became a real democracy, which he said required much more than an uneventful day of voting.

The governing party has violated laws requiring equal access to the state media, which control what information people in rural areas receive, he said. He said he had seen bicycles, televisions and radios handed out at MPLA political rallies shown on television. The election observers must witness the problems as well as the progress, he said. "There are people here who want democracy, the rule of law and a government that is accountable to the people," he said.