

Angola's first nationwide poll in 16 years to elect a new parliament has been troubled by confusion and delays.

An EU observer told the BBC that in parts of the capital, Luanda, voting was poorly organised and many stations opened late. But the electoral commission says the polls will stay open until all those queuing have voted. The oil-rich nation has been rebuilding since 2002, when 27 years of civil war came to an end.

Although 14 parties are taking part, the contest is primarily between long-term rivals, the ruling MPLA party and opposition Unita party.

'Patience'

Many voters said they were frustrated by being made to wait for hours at polling stations, but that they were prepared to wait to cast their vote. "It's good to participate in the future of my country," said one voter. "We have to be patient." In the eastern city of Huambo, the scene of some of the fiercest fighting when war resumed after the last elections - in 1992 - voting appeared to have gone smoothly. Correspondents say people queued early to cast their ballot, and by mid-afternoon polling stations were empty save for polling officials.

Among those to vote in the capital early on Friday was President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, who said after casting his ballot that the election marked a new period in Angolan politics.

"I think we have begun a new way of conducting politics and achieving certain aims in which competition, on the basis of respect and freedom, will be the focal point." But the head of the EU observer mission, Luisa Morgantini, said voting in parts of Luanda had been disorganised.

"The way in which on the ground things work in Luanda or at least in parts of Luanda is quite problematic," she told the BBC's Network Africa programme. Some eight million voters are registered in the country - more than a quarter of whom live in the capital's very overcrowded conditions.

The MPLA, which is the dominant political force in the country, is widely expected to win the election and consolidate its hold on power. The party is using the poll as a dress rehearsal for next year's planned presidential election, the BBC's Peter Biles in Luanda says. The president has already been in power for nearly 30 years - longer than Zimbabwe's leader Robert Mugabe.

Luis Samakundi, a child soldier in the war told the BBC the election was very important to him. "For the very first time the political parties are not inciting people, especially young people, to fight against each other," he said.

"Let's hope that the result will be accepted and peace will prevail."