

Mail&Guardian

Angolan ruling party claims election victory

CANDIDO MENDES | LUANDA, ANGOLA - Sep 07 2008 07:36

Angola's ruling party has claimed victory in the oil-rich nation's chaotic landmark election despite opposition attempts to have the result cancelled.

The ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, in power for more than 30 years, predicted a sweeping victory after polls closed late on Saturday.

Voting in the first election since the end of a three-decade-long civil war was extended because of delays and a lack of election registers at many polling stations. An African observer mission said the vote had been credible but a European Union mission delayed giving a verdict.

"We are going to win big time," MPLA spokesperson Rui Falcao said. "The victory is not in question, only whether we get the numbers required."

The opposition Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Unita) -- the MPLA's main foe during the civil war, which left 500 000 dead -- called on Angola's Constitutional Court to annul the vote.

It said the delays and lack of ballot material had rendered the vote "illegal". Unita has also accused the ruling party of misusing state funds and monopolising the media during the campaign.

Alceides Sakala, head of Unita's parliamentary group, said: "As far as Luanda is concerned, it was a scandal, the way it was organised."

Despite the confusion, Angolans turned out in force to vote for the first time since fighting ended in 2002. The electoral commission reported a high turnout but did not give a figure.

In Luanda's impoverished Samba neighbourhood, Arlindo Dangeroux (30) managed to vote on Saturday afternoon after being turned away a day earlier.

"It was a very difficult day yesterday [Friday]. I was in the queue but it was very crowded and then the ballot papers ran out and I didn't vote," he said. "I'm very happy, it is the first time I have voted. I never had the opportunity before."

Despite the opposition challenge to the vote, international observers gave cautious approval.

Monitors from the 15-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) group said the vote was "peaceful, free, transparent and credible" and reflected "the will of the people". But it said delays and procedural glitches could have put off many voters.

The head of the EU observer mission, who on Friday morning called the voting process a "disaster", was more circumspect. "There have been problems and they're trying to change them," Luisa Morgantini said. "We'll see what will happen."

The EU mission said it would delay its official report on the elections until Monday.

The MPLA said it hoped to get the two-thirds majority needed to change the Constitution.

Do Santos, in a rare public speech just ahead of the vote, said he was ready to overhaul his government in the cause of greater unity, amend the Constitution and work towards a more equitable distribution of the national wealth.

According to Unita, the fact that the problems with polling stations mainly affected Luanda's sprawling townships -- where 90% of the city's five to seven million residents live -- was a ploy to discourage voting in areas where the MPLA was not expected to get a majority.

Angola has a booming economy that stems from vast oil and diamond riches, which has fuelled double-digit growth, but more than two-thirds of its people remain mired in poverty, living on less than \$2 a day.

The state media have spoken of a massive turn-out with millions of voters but no official figures have been given yet. About half of Angola's 17-million inhabitants had registered to vote.

Angola attempted to hold an election in 1992 -- but Unita claimed it was fixed and withdrew from the second round, and new hostilities started. -- Sapa-AFP