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UNITA accepts MPLA victory in Angola election

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LUANDA (Reuters) - Angola's opposition UNITA party reversed course on Monday and said it accepted the results of the country's parliamentary election, which showed the ruling MPLA winning a landslide victory and extending its 33-year rule.

The decision, coming a few days after UNITA vowed to contest what it described as a flawed poll, ensured the oil-rich African nation would emerge from its first election in 16 years without the turmoil that marked recent polls in Kenya and Zimbabwe.

The MPLA had taken an insurmountable lead over UNITA, the former rebel group and largest opposition party. With nearly 80 of the vote counted from the two-day poll, the MPLA had about 82 percent of the vote versus just over 10 percent for UNITA.

"The leadership of UNITA accepts the results of the election," UNITA leader Isaias Samakuva said in a news conference at his party's headquarters in Luanda. He added that he hoped the MPLA would govern in the interests of all Angolans.

UNITA had contested the election due to what it described as voting irregularities on September 5 and demanded it be redone, a move that threatened to shatter the fragile political stability that has existed since the end of a 27-year civil war in 2002.

The end of the electoral wrangling is likely to be welcomed by investors, particularly oil firms, who are generally comfortable with the MPLA's pro-business policies. Angola rivals Nigeria as sub-Saharan Africa's largest oil producer and its economy grew by 24 percent in 2007.

"It is not going to change the political landscape. The same government will carry on as before and it is very favourable to investors," said Indira Campos, a researcher with London-based think-tank Chatham House.

OBSERVERS SATISFIED

The international community had watched the unfolding election saga closely, hoping Angola would defy its own history and emerge from the poll with political consensus. The country's last election in 1992 led to a resumption of the war.

That hope began to unravel on Friday in a chaotic first day of voting, when hundreds of polling stations opened late or not at all and officials failed to provide the voter registration lists needed to identify those casting ballots.

UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) complained that the problems could have allowed some to vote more than once, possibly inflating the MPLA vote.

Authorities denied the opposition's allegations of foul play but admitted that there were administrative glitches in some areas, particularly in Luanda province, home to 21 percent of the nation's 8.3 million voters.

An extra day of voting was organised on Saturday.

While admitting the vote had been marred by organisational problems, European Union monitors said they had not endangered the electoral process and that no cases of violence were observed during the campaign or voting.

"The election marks a critical step for democracy despite the organisation difficulties. The Angolan people participated actively and voted freely," the EU mission said in a statement following a news conference in Luanda.

Luisa Morgantini, head of the mission, stopped short of declaring the election legitimate and said observers would continue to monitor vote counting and investigate complaints. The EU observer team will issue a full report in two months.

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso called the election a step toward consolidating multi-party democracy.

The African Union's observer team said on Monday the election had been free and fair, echoing the view of the Southern African Development Community, which last weekend declared the poll credible, transparent and free.

Samakuva, who faces dissent within his party, had ruled out any prospect the former rebel group would again take up arms against the government. The long war between the two sides killed half a million people.

In the last parliamentary election in 1992 the MPLA won 54 percent to UNITA's 34 percent. UNITA rejected the results of a parallel presidential race and fighting resumed. The conflict ended in 2002 when rebel leader Jonas Savimbi was killed.

(Additional reporting by Michael Georgy in Johannesburg and Ingrid Melander in Brussels; editing by Richard Williams)