

Angola's ruling MPLA set for victory, eyes reforms

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By Paul Simao

LUANDA, Sept 9 (Reuters) - Angola's ruling MPLA is heading for a landslide victory in the parliamentary election, a result which will give it the power to make sweeping changes to the oil-rich African nation's institutions. With about 84 percent of votes counted, the MPLA, which has ruled since independence from Portugal in 1975, had nearly 82 percent of the vote against just over 10 percent for the biggest opposition party, UNITA. UNITA has already conceded defeat, a decision which will ensure that Angola emerges from the election without the turmoil that marked recent polls in Kenya and Zimbabwe. The opposition party initially vowed to contest the poll over what it described as a flawed poll. A U.S. election monitoring team said on Tuesday the election, which took place on Friday and Saturday, was peaceful and no intimidation of voters was witnessed. "On election day the country was peaceful. The embassy observation team observed no acts of voter intimidation," the mission said in a statement read by U.S. ambassador Dan Mozena. But the team noted some procedural problems with polling stations not opening on time and officials failing to use registration lists to identify voters. It added that the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) had enjoyed an advantage over the opposition through its access to resources and state control of big media outlets.

DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY

The U.S. statement followed a **European Union observer team's verdict that Angolans had voted freely and that the election represented an important step in the development of a multi-party democracy. African observer missions have also described the poll as legitimate.**

The MPLA currently holds a simple majority in the 220-seat parliament but it wants to obtain a two-thirds majority that will allow it to change some parts of the constitution. President Jose Eduardo dos Santos said before the elections the country needed a modern constitution to reinforce democracy and the rule of law. He gave no details of how it would be changed. Investors are likely to welcome UNITA's decision to concede defeat, 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. The international community had watched the election closely, hoping Angola would defy its own history and emerge from the poll with political consensus. Its last election in 1992 led to a resumption of a 27-year civil 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.