

EU, African observers give thumbs-up to landmark Angola elections

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([dpa](#)) - European and African election observers gave a generally clean bill of health to last weekend's general elections in Angola - the first in 16 years, in which President Eduardo dos Santos' party was poised for a landslide win. European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said the elections, which the European Union's 108-member observer team described in a preliminary report as "tranquil and peaceful," showed Angola was consolidating its democracy. "After such a devastating war as the one Angola suffered, these elections are a step towards the consolidation of a multi-party democracy, a fundamental element for peace, stability, and socio-economic development," the head of the European Union's executive arm said in a statement.

Noting "only minor cases of electoral malpractice" the EU observers said that anomalies in the voting were due to a "lack of understanding" of voting procedures "rather than from any deliberate attempt to manipulate the polls." The report made no mention of the charges of intimidation and rigging in the oil-rich Cabinda enclave, made by Richard Howitt, Labour's foreign affairs spokesman in the European Parliament. Howitt told South African radio he had noted a heavy presence of soldiers at one polling station, which he said had appeared designed to pressure voters into choosing dos Santos' MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola).

Howitt also said he had seen people being bussed in from the neighbouring Republic of Congo to vote in the breakaway region. With three quarters of the vote counted the MPLA was poised for a sweeping win, with 81.62 per cent of votes against 10.47 per cent for UNITA. Counting was expected to be concluded by Monday evening but the results were not expected for a few days, until the national electoral commission had dealt with complaints - mainly from the opposition UNITA party, with which the MPLA fought a bloody 27-year civil war.

UNITA (Union for the Total Independence of Angola) has lodged a complaint with the electoral commission over irregularities, including the late opening of polling stations in the capital Launda. Meanwhile, three African observer teams - from the African Union, the Pan-African Parliament and the 15-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) - and a team from the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries also gave the vote the thumbs-up. The AU mission head Benjamin Bounkoulou also appealed to the leaders and members of rival parties to accept the result. Some 8.3 million Angolans were eligible to vote in the election, which had to be extended to a second day after logistical problems at hundreds of polling stations in Luanda, an MPLA stronghold. The polls were seen as a dry run for presidential elections, scheduled for next year. Dos Santos, who has ruled for 29 years, said previously he would not contest that vote but has made no signs of anointing a successor. Five years after the end of a devastating civil war, in which at least half a million people are thought to have died, Angola has begun the painstaking process of reconstruction, buoyed by strong prices for oil, of which it is Africa's second-largest oil producer