



An Angolan collecting recyclable material in Luanda. Victorious in recent elections, the governing party has done little to alleviate the deep poverty in this oil-rich country. (Gianluigi Guercia/Agence France-Presse)

## One party, still poor: Angola as democracy

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**JOHANNESBURG:** The governing party in oil-rich Angola won a landslide victory in the country's first elections in 16 years, official results show, prompting a remarkable concession of defeat by the leading opposition party, which just six years ago was the government's enemy in a brutal 27-year-long civil war.

The decisive win for the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, known as the MPLA, in last week's legislative elections will give it the two-thirds majority in Parliament needed to change the constitution and further entrench its dominance of Angolan politics, senior officials in both parties said Tuesday.

It will also confer a measure of legitimacy on a government that has been in power since Angola gained its independence from Portugal in 1975. While U.S. and European election observers concluded the political playing field was hardly level given the MPLA's control of state media, they also said the election itself was evidence of democratic progress.

"Again, we congratulate the people of Angola on their participation in this important step in strengthening their democracy," the U.S. Embassy's election observation team said Tuesday.

The tranquillity that prevailed as millions of Angolans went to the polls last week and, even more so, the acceptance of the outcome by the opposition party, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, or Unita, set this election apart from Angola's calamitous last vote in 1992.

At that time, Unita's guerrilla leader, Jonas Savimbi, refused to accept his second-place finish and the civil war that had already killed hundreds of thousands of people resumed for another decade, ending only when Savimbi was killed in a gun battle in 2002.

Shadowed by that woeful history, Unita accepted its defeat this time despite what observers said were flaws in the voting process in Luanda, the capital.

"We don't want to create a situation where this drags on for weeks and weeks," Jardo Muekalia, Unita's representative for electoral issues, said in an interview on Tuesday. "We want to make sure for peace and stability's sake we end this on a high note."

The official tally, posted Tuesday on the election commission's Web site, showed the MPLA with about 82 percent of the vote to Unita's 10 percent, with more than 80 percent of the vote counted. The rest of the votes were divided among a dozen other parties and coalitions. Officials in both the main parties agreed the MPLA would have a two-thirds legislative majority.

The European Union's election observer mission found that Angola's elections fell short of international standards because the state-controlled radio, television and daily newspaper were biased in favor of the government and because of flaws in some election procedures.

Voter lists were distributed too late to be posted in most areas, making it impossible to check who had voted, though the use of indelible ink on voters' fingers helped guard against double voting, the European Union mission found. There were also widespread delays in the opening of many polling stations in Luanda and a failure to deliver sufficient ballots to them. Election authorities also did not accredit hundreds of trained election observers in Luanda.

Still, the European Union's report said, the elections had been peaceful and showed the Angolan people's "clear commitment to the country's democratic process and desire to leave behind a past marked by decades of war and civil conflict."

The MPLA's margin of victory leaves Unita even more marginalized - a situation that some analysts worried could weaken the much-needed development of an effective political opposition. The public money each party receives is based on its number of seats in Parliament, and Unita will have fewer now. It could regain a foothold if the government follows through on plans to hold local elections in two years.

The country faces huge challenges. While it is one of the world's fastest-growing economies, now pumping almost two million barrels of oil a day, its people are among the poorest on earth. Even with this election victory, its governing elite will still be stuck with a reputation for self-dealing and corruption that shows up in studies by Transparency International and the World Bank Institute.

"There's a risk they will become more arrogant," said Indira Campos, a researcher for Chatham House, London policy research organization.

Or as Isabel Emerson, Angola country director for the National Democratic Institute, a Washington-based nonprofit group, said, "The fact that they won such a vast majority will translate into a one-party state practically. I hope they see it as a wake up call."

Manuel Fragata de Morais, the MPLA's information secretary in Luanda, said Tuesday that the party feels the weight on its shoulders.

"If Angola's a one-party state, it would be for the first time by popular vote," he exclaimed. "So we're not worried by that. But seriously, we have to be very humble, serene and serious or otherwise we could pay seriously in public support."