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Ruling party set for Angola victory

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Angola's ruling party looked set yesterday to win an overwhelming victory in the country's first peacetime elections, with partial results suggesting it is close to the two-thirds parliamentary majority necessary to change the constitution.

The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), which has governed the country since independence from Portugal in 1975, had nearly 82 per cent of the vote after three-quarters of ballots had been counted. Unita, the former guerrilla movement and largest opposition party, trailed with only 10.5 per cent of the vote, according to Angola's electoral commission.

The parliamentary polls - held last Friday and extended into Saturday due to delays in distributing voting materials in the capital, Luanda - were the first since 1992 when alleged irregularities reignited a long-running civil war. The elections were touted as an opportunity for Angola to cement its status as a regional power, and consolidate a return to peace.

A two-thirds majority in parliament would give the MPLA the power to usher in sweeping constitutional changes before presidential elections next year.

European Union election observers noted organisational problems and said state control of the media, and an "unlevel playing field" meant polls fell short of international standards.

However, in a preliminary statement yesterday, an EU mission said Angolans had turned out in large numbers, marking an important step for democracy. Regional and pan-African observers gave the polls a relatively clean bill of health.

Unita and three smaller rivals called for the election to be annulled in Luanda province, home to nearly a quarter of the country's 8.3m registered voters, saying many were denied the opportunity to vote.

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