

Côte d'Ivoire: A test tube for Angola's regional policy?

PAULO GORJÃO

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)

On November 28th, Côte d'Ivoire held its presidential run-off elections. The Election Commission announced that Alassane Ouattara had won with 54.1% of the votes, against the 45.9% achieved by Laurent Gbagbo, but the Constitutional Council declared that the incumbent President Gbagbo was the winner with 51.4% against Ouattara's 48.5%. Later on, in different ceremonies, Gbagbo and Ouattara were both sworn in as the new President of Côte d'Ivoire.

In order to overcome this standoff, the AU sent former South African President Thabo Mbeki to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. After several high-level meetings, Mbeki was unable to defuse the problem and left Abidjan with no results to show. Mbeki's mission – with South African support – was carefully monitored in Luanda, for several reasons. One of them is because Mbeki is *persona non grata* in Angola. Another is due to the fact that an increasing South African influence in West Africa – and in Côte d'Ivoire in particular – is not the kind of political development that is welcomed by Angola. Last but not the least, Gbagbo has been a longtime ally of Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos, and therefore the future of his regime matters to him.

Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that José Eduardo dos Santos received Gbagbo's envoy to Luanda Kadet Bertin, or that the Angolan ambassador Gilberto Buta Lutucuta was one of the few ambassadors in Abidjan who did not boycott Gbagbo's swearing-in ceremony.¹ Indeed, as far as Côte d'Ivoire is concerned, Angola is an indisputable political player, and consequently has a word

to say regarding the stalemate and the future of the country. As a result, the United Nations' (UN) Secretary-General's Special Representative for Côte d'Ivoire Young-jin Choi has already held talks in Abidjan with Gilberto Buta Lutucuta on the electoral dispute.²

Gbagbo's international isolation could not be greater, something that in turn increases the value of Angola's discreet support. At this stage, the ECOWAS suspended Côte d'Ivoire from all its decision-making bodies and the AU also suspended its membership.³ Moreover, the AU, ECOWAS, the EU, the IMF, the UN, as well as France and the US, recognize Ouattara as the winner of the November 28th presidential run-off elections. In other words, Gbagbo's chances of success seem rather slim.

Unsurprisingly, Gbagbo wants a power-sharing deal, but the AU and ECOWAS have already rejected the idea.⁴ The little success of the power-sharing formula in Zimbabwe and Kenya certainly did contribute to its outright refusal. Even though Gbagbo is still in charge, the truth is that he has a lousy hand to play. Under mounting international and regional political pressure and growing isolation, it is likely – although not guaranteed – that Gbagbo will have to step down. But will he do so peacefully?

Angola may come to play a relevant backstage role here,

² "Le chef de l'ONU rencontre l'ambassadeur d'Angola en Côte d'Ivoire" (ONU-CI, 10 December 2010).

³ See "Communiqué final de la session extraordinaire de la conférence des chefs d'État et de gouvernement sur la Côte d'Ivoire" (ECOWAS, Press Release 188/2010, 7 December 2010); and, "Communiqué of the 252nd Meeting of the Peace and Security Council" (African Union, PSC/PR/COMM.1(CCLII), 9 December 2010).

⁴ "West African bloc takes tough stance on Ivory Coast" (CNN, 11 December 2010).

¹ Tim Cocks, "Thabo Mbeki to mediate Ivory Coast poll row" (Reuters, 4 December 2010).



where Mbeki failed under the limelight. The million-dollar question is how to devise a successful exit strategy. By chance, the current crisis in Côte d'Ivoire might become a test of Angola's capacity to safeguard and promote its regional interests.

While in Luanda, the British Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Henry Bellingham, emphasized the role that Angola can play in the future within the framework of the AU and the SADC. Bearing in mind that in 2011 Luanda will chair the SADC, Bellingham believes that Angola's regional responsibilities will increase.⁵ In fact, Angola knows in advance that it will have to deal with at least one hot potato. If everything goes according to the plan, Zimbabwe will hold elections next year. Therefore Angola – which is “increasingly becoming more suited to contribute to SADC”⁶ – is expected to play a relevant role.

However, Angola needs to deepen its diplomatic ties with South Africa, and José Eduardo dos Santos' first state visit to South Africa could not be timelier. In the last 35 years, Pretoria's bilateral relation with Luanda has not been brilliant, particularly during the Cold War. The end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela as the new President of South Africa in 1994 led to the improvement of bilateral relations. However, when Thabo Mbeki became President in 1999, diplomatic relations began to deteriorate once again, a trend that would last until 2008.

The election of Jacob Zuma was a new turning point. Almost immediately after he became President of South Africa, it became clear that he wished to improve bilateral relations. Indeed, in order to show it, his first state visit in August 2009 was to Luanda.⁷

Zuma's desire to improve bilateral relations is shared by José Eduardo dos Santos. Therefore, his state visit should be perceived as a response of political goodwill. Under normal circumstances, bilateral relations will improve significantly in the next few years, and both countries will be a little more cooperative and less competitive.

Yet, despite the good relationship between Jacob Zuma and José Eduardo dos Santos, there are structural limits blocking the scope of possible progress. At this point, Angola has strategic relationships with Brazil, Portugal, the US, and soon with China. However, despite improving bilateral relations, it is unlikely that in the short and medium term a similar relationship will exist between Luanda and Pretoria. In the past, Angola and South Africa have been unable to agree on how to handle the crisis in Zimbabwe and the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At this stage, it seems that the two countries do not see eye-to-eye regarding how to solve the current standoff in Côte d'Ivoire. Moreover, it is likely that in the next year they will disagree once again about Zimbabwe.

One should not forget that “the two countries are natural rivals for influence in Southern Africa”.⁸ Indeed, it seems that “Angola is keen to establish itself as a competing pole of interest in Africa between Nigeria and South Africa”, as it was pointed out by Edward George.⁹ As a consequence, one should expect increasing cooperation with South Africa, but at the same time competition will continue to exist. How Angola will handle the current crisis in Côte d'Ivoire will provide useful and relevant clues regarding its regional strategy.

5 “Angola's role in African diplomacy might get stronger – British minister” (*Angop*, 9 December 2010).

6 Vasco Martins, “Keeping business in and politics out: Angola's multi-vector foreign policy” (*IPRIS Viewpoints*, No. 22, October 2010): 2.

7 See Vasco Martins, “Reaching out for new beginnings: South Africa rethinks Angola” (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 11, September 2010): 1-2.

8 “South Africa, Angola: The Politics of Dominance” (*Stratfor*, 20 August 2009).

9 Edward George is an Africa analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Sibongile Khumalo, “Angolan President to make state visit to South Africa” (*AFP*, 12 December 2010).

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão

ASSISTANT EDITORS | Laura Tereno • Vasco Martins

DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua Vitorino Nemésio, 5 - 1750-306 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

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