



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Angola 1975–2002

Executive Summary

The Angola conflict began shortly before Angola's independence from Portugal in 1975. Two former anti-colonial guerilla movements fought for control of the country, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). The MPLA seized control of the capital of Luanda and most major cities and functioned as the de facto government of Angola, with UNITA controlling the southeast part of the country. UNITA and the MPLA drew support from different tribal groups. The MPLA was primarily made up of Ambundu people based around Luanda and other northern cities. UNITA represented Angola's largest ethnic group, the Ovimbundu, about 35–40 percent of the population, that resided in the central highlands.¹

The conflict emerged as a major battleground of the Cold War, with both sides receiving support in weapons and training as well as foreign forces on the ground. UNITA was backed by apartheid South Africa and the United States while the Marxist MPLA was backed primarily by the Soviet Union and Cuba.² South African Defense Forces (SADF) and the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces engaged in combat alongside their local allies, utilizing heavy weapons and their air forces. Soviet advisers were also active in support of MPLA.³ South Africa sought to create a buffer state while Field Castro's Cuba sought to aid international socialism.

In 1975–76, MPLA/Cuban forces defeated UNITA/SADF forces advancing from the south as well as another armed group in the northwest of the country, the FNLA. UNITA was forced to the remote areas of the south and east of Angola, and the FNLA ceased to be a significant group.⁴ The new MPLA government of Angola faced the challenge of conducting a counterinsurgency campaign while also engaging in periodic conventional warfare. Their Cuban and Soviet advisers favored large formations, which were easily avoided or encircled by more flexible UNITA forces. UNITA guerillas were able to infiltrate much of the country and conduct sabotage operations, sometimes operating with South African commandos. UNITA was also able to launch successful conventional offensives but struggled to hold territory outside their usual stronghold in the southeast.⁵

The 1987–88 battle of Cuito Cuanavale, the largest ever in Sub-Saharan Africa, saw Cuban/MPLA and SADF/UNITA forces fight each other to an indecisive conclusion. Shortly afterward, accords were signed by Cuba and South Africa to withdraw their troops from Angola. A government offensive to defeat UNITA when it was deprived of South African firepower failed, and a UNITA counteroffensive was able to take some territory, showing the MPLA the need for a negotiated settlement.⁶ The MPLA renounced Marxism and one-party rule, and in 1991, a ceasefire was signed, with elections in 1992.

The first round of elections called for a runoff, but UNITA disputed the results, MPLA supporters massacred UNITA members across the country, and UNITA launched an offensive that captured 70 percent of the country before an MPLA counteroffensive took back most of it by 1994. The 1994–98 period saw peace negotiations that ultimately failed due to UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi's unwillingness to compromise.⁷

World opinion turned against UNITA with the United States recognizing the MPLA government in 1993 and sanctioning UNITA together with the rest of the UN Security Council.⁸ Only through the illegal trade in diamonds was UNITA able to continue funding itself, while the MPLA funded itself through its large oil fields. UNITA was internally fracturing as Savimbi alienated his supporters with increasingly paranoid behavior and sacked or executed his officers. Several high-ranking commanders defected to the government. The final phase of the war in 1998 saw UNITA make a final conventional push on the capital, but MPLA forces drove them back. In 2002, Savimbi was killed by government troops, and the new UNITA leadership signed a peace deal in the government's favor, ending the 27-year conflict.⁹

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Angola was divided among several different ethnic groups and had significant regional divisions and exclusionary identity politics that Portuguese colonial rule had created or exacerbated.¹⁰ Angola was a colonial creation, and nothing unified the people living there other than Portuguese rule and language.¹¹ Both movements were associated with different regional elites who advocated a national identity, but this was not held by the majority of the population.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. The conflict began as soon as Portugal left, with the MPLA becoming the de facto government only by seizing the capital.¹² There was no election or other indication of legitimacy until the disputed 1992 elections. During the conflict, both sides portrayed themselves as legitimate while painting the other side as neo-colonizers in league with foreign powers but focused primarily on militarily defeating each other rather than winning over the population.¹³

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No. UNITA controlled large parts of the southeast of the country throughout the conflict and at different times controlled parts of the southeast and northeast and controlled insurgent forces near the capital in the northwest.¹⁴

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. At different times during the conflict UNITA was able to enter and set up bases in every country bordering Angola: Zambia, Congo-Brazzaville, Zaire, and South-African ruled Namibia.¹⁵ However, as UNITA was able to control the southern border (where they were allied with South Africa) and large areas of the country, external sanctuary was not a major factor in the conflict.

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The MPLA had an armed force that had fought the Portuguese and was competent enough to defeat other rebel groups in conventional battles for control of the capital and surrounding areas at the start of the conflict in 1975.¹⁶ Soon after, the MPLA formed a national military with the help of Soviet and Cuban advisers. Both sides in the conflict had large, self-sustaining, and reasonably competent armies.

Outcome

Essentially a tie. There has been considerable discussion within the Study of Internal Conflict research program about whether Angola meets the criteria for inclusion, as the conflict started even before the Portuguese colonial authorities left the country, and there was no standing government per se. It was more like a free-for-all with the MPLA and UNITA both scrambling to fill the vacuum and take power. The MPLA reached Luanda first, and the two forces fought each other to control the capital. The MPLA became the de facto government in 1975 and remains in power, but there is a power-sharing agreement with UNITA, which remains the second-largest political party in the country. Because of the ambiguity of the lack of a government at the time the Portuguese left, this case is not included in the overall SOIC statistics.

Endnotes

1. Christopher Paul et al., “Angola (UNITA), 1975–2002: Case Outcome: COIN Win,” in *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 363–73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk>.
2. Paul et al., “COIN Win.”
3. Stephen L. Weigert, *Angola: A Modern Military History, 1961–2002* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
4. Weigert, *Modern Military History*.
5. Weigert, *Modern Military History*.
6. Weigert, *Modern Military History*.
7. Christopher Paul et al., *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013).
8. Paul et al., *Paths to Victory*.
9. Paul et al., *Paths to Victory*.
10. Iracema Dulley and Luísa Tui Sampaio, “Accusation and Legitimacy in the Civil War in Angola,” version 17, *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* (website), 2020, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.scielo.br/j/vb/a/qBLBGQV3NwfWtpTFtTxvtHL/?lang=en#>; and Shana Melnysyn, “Mbailundu Remembered: Colonial Traces in Post-Civil War Angola,” *Kronos* 45, no. 1 (November 2019): 140–53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26916221>.
11. Jeremy Ball and Claudia Gastrow, “Angola: Nationalist Narratives and Alternative Histories,” *Kronos* 45, no. 1 (November 2019): 10–16, DOI:10.17159/2309-9585/2019/v45a1.
12. Ball and Gastrow, “Nationalist Narratives.”
13. Dulley and Sampaio, “Accusation and Legitimacy”; and Weigert, *Modern Military History*.
14. Weigert, *Modern Military History*; and Paul et al., *Paths to Victory*.
15. Paul et al., *Paths to Victory*; and Weigert, *Modern Military History*.
16. Weigert, *Modern Military History*.



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