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UNITA - TWENTY YEARS ON

This update on the rôle of UNITA will concentrate on evaluating its position in Angola, although inevitably some reference must be made to external factors. We will examine the position under two main headings: (a) UNITA's historical legitimacy as an Angolan nationalist movement and (b) UNITA's present-day capabilities, both military and civil. Brief comment will also be made on the movement's rôle as an actor in this long-running drama.

Legitimacy

It is only proper that one commences with a brief outline of Jonas Savimbi's early days, as without his impetus and charisma it is doubtful that UNITA would have survived until now.

Johas Savimbi was born in 1934, the son of a maverick Angolan station-master employed by the Benguela railway. An early convert to Protestant Christianity, Savimbi senior spent a lifetime establishing Protestant missions up and down the line, to the chagrin of the Portuguese authorities, who were not over sympathetic to the North American brand of ruggedly independent churches. The United Church of Canada was to sponsor young Savimbi as a pre-medical student in Portugal, but reacting badly to PIDE (the Portuguese Security Police) pressure to act as an informer, Savimbi transferred to Fribourg University in Switzerland and shortly afterwards to political studies at Lausanne, where he eventually graduated as a licencié. The prefix Dr is purely a courtesy one.

Returning from Europe before completing his studies, it was natural that as a young black nationalist, he should gravitate towards Holden Roberto's FNLA, rather than to the urban sophisticates and budding Marxist intellectuals of the largely mestizo and assimilado based MPLA, already well established in Luanda. That Savimbi's involvement with the FNLA, despite his rapid rise to prominence as Party Secretary to UPA (the FNLA's political arm) and subsequently as Foreign Secretary in GRAE (an abortive 'government in exile' concept copied from other models), lasted only until 1964, was due to Roberto's obsessions: ethnocentric in its Bakongo dominance on the one hand and an inability to delegate effective power to subordinates on the other.

Savimbi's travels after leaving the FNLA in 1964 are often cited by his detractors as evidence of political inconsistency and opportunism. Flexibility of doctrine is only seen as a virtue in politicians when crowned by success. In little more than one year he travelled to Egypt, to Algeria, whence, through the good offices of Premier Ben Bella, a visit to China (PRC),

North Korea and North Vietnam was arranged, with a lasting influence on his military and political strategy but less on his ideology, which remained highly empirical. He returned to Lausanne to complete his studies, consulting with Che Guevara in North Africa on the way. Later he went to Brazzaville, where he held unsuccessful talks with Neto and Chipenda of the MPLA. They reputedly invited him to join MPLA but Savimbi refused. It seems likely that the concept of 'coalition' rather than 'merger' was already in his mind, with the framework of his own brand of African socialism taking form. His evolving philosophy is well illustrated in John Marcum's The Angolan Revolution, Vol. II, p. 165, from which the following quotation is taken:

The liberation of Angola would not come from outside. Only Angolans within Angola could free the country from foreign domination. And it was vital that Angolans of all "tribes, clans and classes" participate in the liberation struggle. Moreover the participation of different groups ought to be in proportion to their numbers within Angolan society. The MPLA was essentially Mbundu, the GRAE essentially Bakongo. This left "outside the political struggle more than half the population." The MPLA was "pro-Communist" and under Moscow's influence, and GRAE was "supported by western forces." What was needed, then, was a new political movement to represent the interests of the majority inside (Ovimbundu, Chokwe, Ovambo, Ganguela, and so forth) and to work for the total independence of all Angolans vis-à-vis political forces outside.

Savimbi argued prophetically for the need to avoid "a direct or indirect confrontation of the great powers" in Angola. He warned against an "ideological struggle" and advocated a purposefully inclusive approach to political mobilization. The choice before Angolan nationalists abroad, he said, was between a "return to the Father-Mother Land or an exile which is bitter, dishonorable and prolonged." George Washington could not have freed the British colonies of America by fighting "from a base of exile against an army superior in numbers and equipment." Revolutionary effectiveness depended upon transcending exile, upon returning home to fight.

It is also worth quoting Savimbi's own words in a September 1965 letter to former United Church missionaries in Canada. Considering that they are written at the age of 31, when political fanaticism has usually already devoured its acolytes, his words are refreshingly direct.

... It is necessary that a new formula which includes all Angolan forces should be realized. The struggle for the liberation of Angola is not an ideological struggle. It is a democratic national struggle of a popular nature. This struggle has to incorporate everyone from the sincere chief to the most enlightened revolutionary; from the worker in the plantations to the popular catechist who brings with him the masses in the villages; from the workman who lives on a starvation salary to the Catholic Priest who has nothing to do with the feudal and colonial regime; from the primary or secondary student to the Government or the private teacher who only receives colonial regime scorn and humiliation; from the isolated peasant in the valleys and the mountains who only gets from his work poverty to the contract laborer who does not even know the warmth of home. This irresistible and invincible force can only be directed by people who have

come out from African masses which suffer most from colonial domination. Those who are directly or indirectly linked to the feudal and colonialist regime cannot inspire confidence in the Angolan masses. This struggle is not ideological because it cannot exclude anybody. It has to unite all. Political and economic theories which are supported in atheistic attitudes do not fall in line with the feelings of African belief. The African believes in a higher Being whatever his name may be, or whatever the place where he is worshipped. There is an ancestral force which transcends man. All alienation from this feeling which is profoundly popular will tend to divide the forces which could openly show themselves against colonial domination.

Savimbi then, in late 1965, set about consolidating the rudimentary power base established when he was still nominally an FNLA supporter based in Lusaka - and made clear his intention of moving into Eastern Angola. Before doing so however, he persuaded President Kaunda to invite both Roberto and Neto to Lusaka in an endeavour to find common ground - to form a united front. Both declined the invitation, assuming incorrectly that Savimbi's power base was insufficiently strong to constitute a major factor in the coming struggle. In March 1966 at Mwangai in Moxico province, UNITA was born.

1966 and 1967 saw increasing numbers of minor skirmishes against the Portuguese in the Moxico district, but Kaunda's tacit support of Savimbi ended first in hostility and then with his arrest, followed by deportation to Egypt, as a result of a succession of attacks on the Benguela railway - Zambia's lifeline for copper shipments to Lobito. This loss of a powerful supporter close to home - with all its logistical implications - was well-nigh fatal to the infant UNITA which probably did not number more than 200/300 in the field at that stage. Savimbi himself was only able to re-enter Angola with SWAPO assistance in mid-1968. The Ovambo minority in southern Angola regularly assisted Savimbi in resisting MPLA encroachment on what was regarded as a UNITA preserve. The MPLA was anxious to eliminate non-Marxist competition before it could establish a firm base and there were frequent clashes as UNITA gained adherents. (A classic Marxist manoeuvre this - to take time off to remove competing liberation groups - as witness: France, Yugoslavia and Greece during and in the case of the latter, after the 1939-45 war). The MPLA was subsequently to claim that UNITA had actually fought with the Portuguese against them - this is unproven, although all parties had at one time or another entered into a truce with the Portuguese, especially in the later stages.

The symbiotic relationship with SWAPO lasted until 1975, when as a result of UNITA's precarious position following the South African advance into and subsequent retreat from Angola, Savimbi was forced to rely entirely on South Africa for logistical support, rendering the SWAPO relationship untenable and forcing the latter in turn to dependence on the MPLA.

Up to the time of, and even during, the 1974/75 collapse and subsequent withdrawal of the Portuguese from Angola, one sees UNITA as initially the only nationalist movement led in action by a leadership based itself inside Angola. Although not well-equipped and without sophisticated propaganda mechanisms available outside the country, Savimbi had established a certain credibility among the more conservative, non-Marxist members of the OAU, which had in fact accorded UNITA recognition as a legitimate resistance movement, as the following paragraph illustrates.

The Portuguese included UNITA in the Alvor Agreement, which was hammered out and signed in the Portuguese Algarve over a period of five days ending on 15 January 1975. It followed a trilateral accord signed earlier that month by Neto, Roberto and Savimbi in Mombasa, under pressure from the OAU. The signatories to that accord had pledged themselves to the principle of Angolan territorial integrity, to work in cooperation and to join in peaceful reconstruction.

The actual Alvor Agreement named the three major nationalist movements as the legitimate heirs to Angola and apportioned responsibilities in a coalition government, with a mandate to produce a provisional constitution and to hold elections prior to independence itself, set for 11 November 1975. Provision was also made for a national army, to be formed of 8 000 men from each movement, to be matched by 24 000 men from the Portuguese army. The framework of the Agreement was designed to promote better inter-tribal relations, with the laudable object of reducing tribal tensions by quite simple devices, for example: each ministry was to be run by a triumvirate of a minister and two secretaries - one from each movement.

With the ink barely dry on the Agreement, the squabbling began in earnest, marked by clashes between the FNLA and its affiliates on the one hand, and the MPLA on the other. Savage skirmishes occurred in Luanda for the allegiance of the mosseque (township) inhabitants. The MPLA's superior organisation and the increasing supplies of Soviet arms gradually triumphed over the FNLA's numbers and fighting on the same pattern spread to other towns. By May 1975, to most observers the situation seemed out of hand and the Alvor Agreement a figment of the imagination. The Portuguese military force was naturally reluctant to involve itself in an apparent 'no-win' campaign - with the exception of some units which were reported to be actively supporting the MPLA. At this stage, there seemed little interest among the Western powers in assisting the Portuguese to resolve matters peacefully and only Savimbi's voice was heard inside (and outside) Angola, preaching reconciliation between the contenders and wooing the Portuguese elements, military and civilian, in Southern Angola, with this theme.

At this stage UNITA was estimated to have about 3 000 'effectives' under arms, as against a nominal 21 000 in the FNLA and some 5 000 or so with the MPLA, although the latter had recently won the support of the approx. 5 000 well trained men of the Katangese gendarmerie taken over by the Portuguese authorities in the post-Tshombe era of Zaire.

On June 16th 1975, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, with the OAU's blessing, managed to bring the three groups together at Nakuru. The fragile truce collapsed within three weeks, after which time the FNLA was expelled from its tenuously held position in Luanda, leaving the MPLA in undisputed control of that city.

The rapid progress being made by the MPLA in the ports and towns of the south inspired panic amongst the white settlers of the region, decimating UNITA's hoped-for support among them.

From Savimbi's point of view, matters only went downhill from then on: the superior administrative and military capabilities of the MPLA, the numerical superiority and bombast of the FNLA left him very much the junior partner. There was little support to be derived even from the well intentioned moves of the OAU. Arising out of the OAU annual meeting in Kampala in July 1975, a commission had been dispatched to Angola, with a mandate to recommend an OAU peacekeeping force. However, no effective peg could be found on which

to hang the proposal, in the face of MPLA hostility and the Portuguese governing junta's own left-leaning predilection (under Admiral Rosa de Coutinho) for the MPLA. Towards the end of August, the Portuguese government threw in the towel, in effect, by annulling the Alvor Agreement and dissolving the transitional government. It was too late to save the situation and the Portuguese presence in Angola was no longer adequate to control events.

Savimbi found the temptation to seek South African support overwhelming, in the absence of substantial Chinese aid which, though promised, was barely forthcoming. The calculated risk of dealing with the established regional superpower, South Africa, turned almost overnight into Hobson's Choice. Whilst collectively and individually the OAU members had hitherto dithered over Angolan options - disliking the prospects of recognizing the Marxist MPLA as sole rulers, the members were now disturbed by the tactical alliance of UNITA with South Africa and the frightening speed of the South African advance towards Luanda in October 1975. This, coupled with the massive Soviet/Cuban response to threatened MPLA collapse, inspired a complete reversal in attitudes.

The awakening of American concern belatedly over the likelihood of a pro-Soviet government take-over in Angola (a dilatoriness excusable only by the anguish and trauma for the USA of the VietNam debacle then drawing to a close), coincided, whether deliberately or otherwise, with mounting South African concern over events in the territory. With some aid now coming through to UNITA from US sources, a creeping advance by the South Africans into southern Angola in the preceding months became in effect the precursor to a full-scale assault from Namibia in October, in conjunction with UNITA forces. The attack finally ground to a halt before Port Amboim in mid-November, although to the east, South African forces were still actively pushing forward until December. Savimbi (and South Africa in the wings, so to speak) had hoped for support from the OAU at the impending January 1976 Summit, but with a deadlocked vote of 22 for recognition of the MPLA and 22 against, there was cold comfort to be derived and South Africa's withdrawal began.

In the meantime, 11 November 1975 had dawned to the MPLA's coup de main of an 'independent' Angola under an MPLA government, pre-empting possible recognition from leading Communist states. Neto and the MPLA sat tight - as they could well afford to do - with the tremendous influx of Eastern bloc material and human aid in response to the cry for help from a 'threatened independent Angola'. By 27 November, Nigeria had decided to recognize its 'sister African country' and many other OAU members rapidly followed suit.

So, in a few short months, the modest structure of militant moderation painstakingly built up by Savimbi's UNITA over the years, was to be razed almost to the ground, not by a shift in principles but by a disastrous error in tactics through the South African connection. (With the advantage of hindsight it seems a pity that Savimbi's early Protestant mentors had not included in his education the old Scots adage: 'he who sups wi' the Deil maun hae a lang spoon'.) Whether in fact Savimbi would have achieved more for his people and his own career by reaching an accommodation with the MPLA, only history will show. Although it is interesting to pursue the parallel of Nkomo in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, the much greater numerical strength of Savimbi's tribal connections (the Ovimbundu group of tribes comprises some 40% of the Angolan population - if one includes the Chokwe, Nganguela and other southern groups, the total would be 65-70%) would possibly have inhibited his emasculation by the MPLA government.

Present Capabilities

There seems little doubt that UNITA would still be able to maintain a presence in Angola, even if deprived of South African logistical support. However, as the improving military competence of FAPLA (the military wing of the MPLA government) - and also of the more conventional SWAPO units - seems to demonstrate, the odds are that withdrawal of both Cubans and South Africans from Angolan soil would leave the indigenous combatants in relatively unchanged positions. It is doubtful that UNITA could undertake a sustained conventional military offensive and maintain a more substantial regional administration that it does at present. Tribal support and the application of Maoist guerrilla tactics alone would not carry UNITA to Luanda. The realisation of these bleak truths probably inspires the periodic UNITA utterances on the need for reconciliation - and no doubt the predictably negative responses from Luanda. Moscow has not yet awarded the ultimate accolade to the aspiring MPLA 'vanguard' movement (the highest term of approbation applied to lesser deities in the Marxist Pantheon). Negotiations with UNITA, therefore, except on terms wholly favourable to the Luanda government, would only be construed as weakness and as a denial of absolute Marxist truths. Whether other factors could lead to a modification of this attitude will be discussed later.

To comment authoritatively on UNITA's actual military deployment is difficult. Surprisingly, verifiable statistics on the position are in short supply, considering the extremely well-marketed visits arranged from time to time for journalists and visiting VIPs. Even a recently published article in a specialist journal relies almost entirely on UNITA's own statements and the South African press for references. No doubt good tactical reasons for the paucity of facts can be offered but the more cynical observer may be forgiven for wondering if other factors may not be involved, such as: shortages of material, the need to obtain US support and substantial loss of terrain under even nominal UNITA control following the late 1985 FAPLA offensive. Savimbi himself has boasted of UNITA's ability to fight on from the bush if need be, but this inevitably would invite comparison with the FNLA in the north, which is no longer seen as much more than an irritant.

The actual structures of command seem orthodox and on paper, effective. An HQ structure coordinates 5 geographical fronts, in turn broken down into 22 regions under field officers, these are further broken down into 3 sectors for each region and finally, at the grass roots level, each sector is divided into 3 zones. The theoretical manning for each zone (some 200 in all) seems to be between 50 and 100 men. We thus have a picture of between 10 000 and 20 000 men on paper ranging from the intelligence-gathering low profile guerrillas through various degrees of specialist units up to semi-regular and entirely regular forces grouped in battalion strength. Military Balance 1985/86, an international strategic review, gives figures of 18 000 regulars and 23 000 militia and also lists equipment, but again without attempting to quantify. Presumably this assessment also relies heavily on UNITA's statistics.

Similarly, it is difficult to assess the true nature of support enjoyed among the non-Ovimbundu - or to what extent loss of terrain during the recent campaign has been recovered. Reports of attacks and sabotage are credible enough even in distant areas but do no more than testify to UNITA's continuing existence in strategic terms.

The rôle of UNITA as an actor in 1986

It is a tempting but perhaps facile view to see the current negotiations conducted by Dr. Crocker on the Lusaka, Luanda and Pretoria shuttle service and the strong indications of official US moral support for UNITA - which may or may not be translated more tangibly into overt or covert material assistance - as a failure of 'constructive engagement' - of peace by negotiation in the region as a whole.

It does seem, however, that a reluctant consensus is being achieved between the 'hawks' and 'doves' of the US administration over UNITA's potential as a body with political as well as some military capability. The repeal in mid-1985 of the Clark Amendment has given the Reagan administration more freedom of action to support movements such as UNITA. However, as with all major decisions, there has to be an element of calculated risk. In this instance, it takes the form of the Soviet-Angolan Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation of 11 October 1976. Article 7 of the Treaty reads, in relation to threatened external military action or internal subversion:

... the Parties will immediately enter into contact with each other with the aim of coordinating their positions in the interests of eliminating the threat that has originated or for restoring peace.

This does give the USSR a legal foothold for once that might well find the US in an embarrassing position vis-à-vis the African bloc in particular, unless its contemplated intervention, even though only indirect, is very carefully considered.

It is possible that we shall not know for some years the facts behind the failure of the FAPLA/Cuban offensive of August/October 1985 and in particular the extent to which UNITA was obliged to rely on South African help. In a lengthy article published in the conservative US Policy Review (no. 35, Winter 1986), Savimbi gives a convincing account of the offensive and UNITA's ultimately successful resistance. In spite of the air of confrontation, the Savimbi philosophy appears to remain one of negotiation and reconciliation. It does appear that if Angola is not to continue indefinitely to be the cockpit of Southern Africa, firm commitments to UNITA are required by the Western powers and also by the moderate members of the OAU, so numerous ten years ago. In any negotiating process, such support would emphasize the contrast between protracted civil war and a reconciliation backed by Western capital and expertise in a country well-endowed by nature to benefit therefrom. The recent statement, attributed to President dos Santos himself, disclosing a one-third (\$600 million) loss in oil revenues may well encourage a more receptive attitude to positive proposals in Luanda. Whatever South Africa's own long-term objectives, the immediate solution seems to lie in South Africa being prepared to distance itself from UNITA. That in turn requires an accelerated effort to achieve an acceptable settlement in SWA/Namibia, which realistically would include elements of SWAPO. Perhaps something of the sort may be heralded by the proclaimed new impetus towards domestic change within South Africa itself.