ANGOLA, 1990–2000: OIL, DEMOCRACY, AND A “SUCCESSFUL FAILED STATE”

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ABSTRACT

Four decades after independence from Portugal, Angola remains a country with significant barriers to good governance and social development. Although the state's constitution established a multiparty democracy in the early 1990s, measures of high poverty and low state provision of public goods, in addition to high levels of corruption from the Angolan executive government headed by President José Eduardo dos Santos, do not equate with the proclaimed status of a democracy. Through an analysis of Angola's attempts at and challenges in democratization, particularly in the decade of the constitutional change (1990–2000), I attempt to explain why the government has remained largely authoritarian. What specific factors are most significant in the discrepancy between legal framework on paper and politics in practice? Why, in the terms of Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, has Angola become a “successful failed state”? By tracing a history of the parastatal Sonangol, the complex system of petrodollar patronage, and the attempts of the executive government to constrain civil society, I explain how the growth of the Angolan oil industry is most responsible for the failure of democratization. With special attention to the rise of Angola's oil dependence, measured by total oil rents as a share of gross domestic product, I hypothesize that the country's GDP growth during the 1990s (my independent variable) will produce opposite trends in its level of democracy (my dependent variable, using Polity scores).

INTRODUCTION

Four decades after independence from Portugal, and over two since the “Constitutional Revision Law no. 23/92,” described in the preamble to the Angolan

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Constitution as “ensuring multi-party democracy” and guaranteeing “the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens and a market economy,”² Angola remains a country with significant barriers to good governance and social development. Ranked 149th in the UNDP’s 2015 Human Development Index, Angolans have an average life expectancy of 52 years, one of the world’s lowest. The combination of high poverty, low state provision of public goods, and high levels of corruption from the Angolan executive government headed by President José Eduardo dos Santos, call into question the state’s democratic status. Through an analysis of Angola’s attempts at and challenges in democratization, particularly the decade during the constitutional change (1990–2000), I attempt to explain why the government has remained largely authoritarian. What specific factors account for the significant discrepancy between Angola’s constitutional framework—which promotes democratic norms—and its non-democratic political practices? Borrowing the language of de Oliveira, Why has Angola achieved the status of a “successful failed state?”³

In order to trace levels of democracy in Angola during the 1990s, I use the Polity score. Selected for its focus on the actions of central governments and the political groups that function within their authority, Polity monitors yearly changes in regime leadership. It measures countries on a 21-point scale from -10 (a “hereditary monarchy”) to 10 (a “consolidated democracy”).⁴ During my chosen range of study, Angola’s Polity score fluctuates from a -7 in 1990, -3 in 1991, and a 0 in 1992, leveling down to -3 towards the end of the decade. Comparing Angola’s 1990s average of -2.5 to sub-Saharan Africa’s of -1.35, Angola displays a lower level of democracy than the rest of the region, yet follows the same general trend of a significant increase during the decade, associated in part with the region’s large-scale movement of establishing multi-party democracies.

In this paper, I argue that international and economic conditions are most important in the study of Angolan political development. By tracing a history of the parastatal Sonangol, the complex system of “petrodollar patronage,”

² “Angola 2010,” Constitute, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Angola_2010?lang=en.

³ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, “Business Success, Angola-style: Postcolonial Politics and the Rise and Rise of Sonangol,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 4 (2007): 595-619.

⁴ “About Polity,” The Polity Project. Center for Systemic Peace, 2014, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>.

and the attempts of the executive government to constrain civil society, I explain how the growth of the Angolan oil industry is most responsible for the failure of democratization. With special attention to the rise of Angola's oil-dependence, measured by total oil rents as a share of gross domestic product, I hypothesize that the country's GDP growth during the 1990s will produce opposite trends in its Polity scores: increases in economic growth have led to a persistence in authoritarian leadership by President dos Santos and his ruling party, MPLA, and a decline in levels of democracy.

EXISTING EXPLANATIONS

In "Approaches to Democratization," Bratton and van de Walle raise distinctions across competing literature on African regime transitions. They identify multiple systemic forces at play in democratization processes, dismissing the notion of supposed "preconditions"⁵ of democracy that often characterize a Western approach based on the illogical task of objectively ordering subjective human processes. I, however, distance myself from the authors' central claim that "macroeconomic and international factors are too blunt to discriminate among the particular political histories of countries undergoing regime transition" and more, "Except that it is often overlooked the point is so obvious that it hardly seems necessary to make: A country's political prospects derive directly from its own inherited practices."⁶ I make the opposite claim, that instead of focusing on "*domestic political factors*" with attention to their "*structured contingency*"⁷ (authors' emphasis), one must study Angola's political challenges in light of its embedded position in an *international economic* system. The view that a postcolonial nation has "inherited practices" unchanged by the economic, political, social, and psychic devastations of colonialism is groundless. Further, Cold War politics had a massive effect on domestic politics in Angola. Specifically, Angola was the site of proxy conflicts between the superpowers of the Cold War. This, in combination with the growth of the international oil industry, the powerful impacts of global economic crises, and the transplanted Western blueprints of "liberal democracy" in the early 1990s, played a role in determining both the success and failure of African democratization.

⁵ Bratton, Michael, and Nicolas van de Walle. *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

In the subsequent chapter “Africa’s Divergent Transitions,” Bratton and van de Walle name Angola a “blocked transition” in which “incumbent elites avoided elections.”⁸ I again argue that the authors place too much power in the individual, in Angola’s case President dos Santos, who appears to have independently made the decision to delay an election until an indeterminable, opportune time. The image of the all-powerful African incumbent presented by Bratton and van de Walle’s characterization of Angola’s “liberalized autocracy” in which “new political freedoms coexisted uneasily alongside practices of governance inherited from the past.” This articulation employs the discursive strategy of alluding to a tribal imaginary that breeds authoritarian qualities. Aside from these normative concerns, Bratton and van de Walle’s theory does not explain how the 1992 elections, Angola’s first attempt at multipartyism, lead to intense disputes and “UNITA’s (MPLA’s rival party) return to a civil war that would kill hundreds of thousands in only two years and continue intermittently for another decade.”⁹ Instead, the realities of transition failure are better explained by a ravaging war caused by complex party politics — each, described later, with their connections to separate *international* partners and *economic* resources.

While Bratton and van de Walle dismiss the role of the economy (both integration into the global political economy as well as the role of national business arrangements) in regime developments, Arriola explains the causal linkage between financial liberalization and the growth of multiethnic coalitions. Such coalitions are necessary for a democracy as they function as an effective opposition and a constraint to an authoritarian regime. By achieving a degree of fiscal decentralization, liberalization reforms “erode the state’s role as a gatekeeper for capital” and “enable business to underwrite the electoral coalitions of their choice.”¹⁰ When multiethnic oppositions are funded, they are able to mimic incumbents’ strategy of patronage, they are able to purchase cross-ethnic support. Arriola’s claims can be applied to my later analysis of Sonangol, a state-owned-enterprise entrenched in networks of MPLA patronage that prohibit the formation of a threatening opposition.

⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁹ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, “Business Success, Angola-style...,” 603.

¹⁰ Leonardo R. Arriola, “Capital and Opposition in Africa: Coalition Building in Multiethnic Societies,” *World Politics* 65, no. 2 (2013): 233-72, 234.

THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS

Along with the selected text from Arriola, the unsustained rise and subsequent fall in Angolan levels of democracy during the 1990s, due in part to the country's expanding oil industry, is perhaps best complemented by the work of Ross and Watts. In "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" Ross questions the validity of whether a country's rising income from oil wealth has democratic or antidemocratic properties. He employs the concept of the "rentier state," useful for considering Angola (globally ranked sixth in Ross's report for oil reliance, and fifth for nonfuel mineral reliance — based on total exports divided by GDP), as "one where the rents are paid by foreign actors, where they accrue directly to the state, and where only a few are engaged in the generation of this rent (wealth), the majority being only involved in the distribution or utilization of it."¹¹ In other words, when a state uses its resources (e.g. land or shorelines, for oil drilling) to make a profit from others, without giving back to its people through wealth-creation or social development.

From "pooled time-series cross-national data from 113 states,"¹² Ross shows that the oil-impedes-democracy claim is both valid and statistically significant. He points to three important components of a pervasive "rentier effect," where "governments use their oil revenues to relieve social pressures that might otherwise lead to demands for greater accountability."¹³ Through the "taxation effect," governments limit the collection of taxes to prevent the demand for representation and transparency on government funding; the "spending effect" (the last two are most relevant for my case study) leads to greater spending on patronage in order to reduce dissent; and the "group formation effect" in which the government will use its power to prevent the formation of non-state organizations and civil society.

Watts's pieces are especially salient to my claim that international economic dynamics matter when studying the struggles of Angolan democracy. He characterizes the predatory search for new sources of oil beyond the "special relationship" with the Middle East as an imperial strategy, or a "new scramble for Africa in the making."¹⁴ Writing a decade ago, Watts notes that Big Oil's corporate profits and the billions of dollars of foreign direct investment in sub-Saharan Africa are

¹¹ Michael L. Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53 (2001): 325-61, 329.

¹² *Ibid.*, 325.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁴ Michael Watts, "Empire of Oil: Capitalist Dispossession and the Scramble for Africa," *Monthly Review*, 2006, 1-17, 2.

historically unprecedented. Primitive accumulation, African dispossession, and existing sociopolitical conflict combined with the militarization of the American “energy security” regime form the “perfect storm in which one can grasp the descent into violence and ungovernability.”¹⁵ This reading provides context of the West’s petroleum addiction playing out in the form of neocolonial, militaristic oversight of oil production and its implications for a ruling elite heavily invested in the rise and rise of their nation’s oil sector.

Watts also discusses the violent properties unique to the commodification of oil: “...the entire history of petroleum is replete with criminality, corruption, fabulous wealth, and the worst of rapacious frontier capitalism.”¹⁶ Oil also transforms those who direct its production—its finite quantity, instantaneous wealth, and “mysterious powers” come to define the state that exports more of it than anything else as an *oil nation*, sealed by OPEC membership, joined in a “sort of Faustian pact in which oil was traded for progress, wealth, and modernity.”¹⁷ The following euphoria of rising oil wealth then disregards “ecological catastrophe, social deprivation, political marginalization, and a rapacious company capitalism in which unaccountable foreign transnationals are granted a sort of immunity by the state,”¹⁸ a fitting description of how Angolan citizens’ rights of democratic representation were methodically displaced by the need for a close rapport between corporate oil and the dos Santos regime.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The growth of the de facto regime of the MPLA and President José Eduardo dos Santos began during the colonial era. After being fervently held by the Portuguese through a decade of violent insurgencies, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) declared independence and independently elected a president. Replacing the first President after his death, dos Santos came into office in 1979 and has remained ever since. In a struggle for political control, the MPLA and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Michael Watts, “Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity,” In *The Violent Environments: Social Bonds and Racial Hubris*, edited by Nancy Peluso, Cornell University Press, 2001, 190.

¹⁷ Ibid., 200.

¹⁸ Ibid., 196.

rebel group became engaged in a civil war lasting 26 years, only to end with the assassination of the UNITA leader, Joseph Savimbi, in 2002.¹⁹

Despite two substantial attempts at peace in the early 1990s, the fighting became largely unabated: “with each failed attempt the war became more intractable and more brutal.”²⁰ One of the mechanisms that prolonged the war was how each side controlled a monopoly of enclavic production—the MPLA with oil, and UNITA with diamonds. Revenues from their respective industries allowed each party to secure weapons and explosives. Also significant were international alliances, especially as Angola became the site of a Cold War proxy conflict. The United States and South Africa favored UNITA, while the USSR and Cuba favored the Marxist-Leninist MPLA. Political intervention also brought aid, sustained after the USSR’s collapse (not surprisingly occurring at the same time as Angola’s abandonment of Marxism) by support from new donors such as Brazil and China. Aid often comes from oil-backed loans and agencies that believe in Angola’s rhetoric of transition and development.

Unfortunately, although there exists a legal framework for political liberalization, Angola could easily be called an illiberal democracy. Until the beginning of the 1990’s, Angola’s situation would best have been described as a single-party regime. MPLA remained the party in control of national government, and the UNITA, while violently contesting MPLA’s authority, was legitimized as the political enemy.²¹ Since the ruling of Angola as a multi-party democracy, the country’s party politics have followed a dominant party-system. The MPLA has held a large majority of legislative seats, with UNITA, the largest opposition party, holding about 10% of the seats in the two most recent elections. Since the establishment of a multi-party system, the 1992, 2008, and 2012 elections have had 18, 14, and 9 parties running, respectively, and 12, 5, and 5 parties holding seats.²² Thus we see a dominant party and several smaller, fragmented opposition parties. Following the 1992 election, a violent stretch of the civil war occurred due to UNITA forces opposing the election results that again placed MPLA in power.²³ Elections were

¹⁹ Gretchen Bauer and Scott D. Taylor, *Politics in Southern Africa: Transition and Transformation*, 2nd ed. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011, 165.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

²² “Elections in Angola,” African Elections Database. October 10, 2012, <http://africanelections.tripod.com/ao.html>.

²³ Gretchen Bauer and Scott D. Taylor, *Politics in Southern Africa*, page 161.

stalled for sixteen years, and the two elections in the 21st century illustrate the highest levels of MPLA legislative representation.

Patterns in Angola's Polity score include a sharp rise from -7 in 1990 to 0 in 1992, followed by a gradual decrease to -3 for the last part of the decade. Not surprisingly, these trends closely mirror the changes in the country's executive government and electoral participation. After 1990, the MPLA began moving away from a centrally planned economy and their ties to the Soviet Union. Such a move should ideally have reduced the power of the executive and allowed new constituents to enter freely into the market. Also responsible for the large Polity increase is the 1992 election that marks the beginning of multiparty representation. Although several constitutional reforms were made during the early 1990s, they proved in many regards to solely be nominal in a state system that remained heavily centralized and resembled the one-party regime of the earlier decades (thus the Polity decrease soon after).

Having situated Angola in a political history in which its conflict, single-party dominance, and struggle for democratization is situated in an international context (including past allies, oil consumers, and potential suppliers of development aid) as well as an economic system (in which resource-dependen-

cy provides short-term booms that benefit the elite class of Angolans), I narrow the scope and identify three qualitative trends and two quantitative measures that link the rise of Angola's oil industry during with the perpetuation of authoritarian rule during the 1990s. Following Ross's notion of "rentier effects," I describe the "spending effect" and "group formation effect" in action, as the former relates to petrodollar patronage fueled through the parastatal Sonangol, and the latter connects to conscious efforts by the dos Santos administration in limiting Angolans' access to a civil society free from the influences of the state. Finally, I look at the growth of Angola's oil rents, and return to the Polity score alongside levels of GDP growth to compare my dependent variable (levels of democracy) with my independent variable (the rise in Angola's economy), expecting an inverse relationship.

As de Oliveira explains, the decision to spare the oil sector from postcolonial Angola's poor Marxist government is what first allowed the national oil company, Sonangol, to flourish.²⁴ During the 1970s and 1980s, the parastatal began contractual negotiations with oil firms, who would have a large degree of autonomy in the exploration and production of oil. While oil production remained largely in the hands of private international corporations (Sonangol's list of partners would grow as time went on and the country opened more and more land to the industry), the key figures in the business's leadership were MPLA members.

Even during the long period of enmity with the US (largely spurred by US-backing of UNITA rebels), American oil companies like Chevron and Gulf proved to be reliable allies. As early as 1979, de Oliveira states, "Gulf's impression of Angola's government as able 'to understand the difference between a multinational and its home government' was being publicly conveyed, and the hostility of the Reagan Administration did not change the thrust of its Angola engagement."²⁵ Thus, Sonangol was able to accomplish the hard task of transcending the instability and violence of its country and remaining a targeted recipient of foreign direct investment. Sentiments like Gulf's also add to Watts's contributions, illustrating that Western partners were more than willing to engage in less than optimal political conditions if it meant a new source of oil.

By the 1990s, when MPLA dropped its Marxist ideologies, Sonangol was the leading domestic entity in Angola's political economy. It attracted oil companies from all over the world, including British Petroleum, Royal Dutch/Shell,

²⁴ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, "Business Success, Angola-style...", 598.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 602.

and ExxonMobil.²⁶ Beyond the business arrangements, de Oliveira reveals the “other side of Sonangol,” as the “pivotal tool for the interests of the presidential clique.” It arrogated responsibilities normally held in the domains of presidential cabinets and the national bank, becoming responsible for millions of dollars in unaccounted-for revenue. Through the high levels of fiscal centralization, petrodollar patronage has been used to hush dissidents through corporate shares and rewards.

Beyond unethical and exclusionary practices of expanding the oil industry, and facilitating a large-scale system of political patronage through oil rents, in perhaps its most manipulative strategy to promote a veneer of democracy, the Angolan executive government follows Ross’s example of “group formation effect.” Efforts are made to restrict citizens from acting as members of a democracy, aware of their rights and engaged with political life through a nonbiased civil society. Bauer and Taylor affirm that throughout the 1990s, “civil society organizations were perceived as adversaries or enemies of the state,”²⁷ even well after the legal framework of multipartyism was put in place. In the mid-1990s, a key mechanism for political participation erasure was created as the “Eduardo dos Santos Foundation” (FESA), described by Messiant as “an attempt to take over civil society,”²⁸ engaged in developing executive-sponsored media programs, schools, and youth groups. Seen as a small yet institutionalized step towards extreme authoritarianism, FESA remains in existence today.

Not surprisingly, Sonangol has its own share of influence in public life and civil society. Today, The Sonangol Group has expanded to employ thousands of people, and has its own telecommunications group, insurance company, marketing and trading units, and air transport company, and various other joint ventures. The Group is involved with Luanda’s cultural and sports spheres, sponsoring two football teams and organizing a “well-endowed bi-yearly literary prize and hundreds of scholarships for the children of insiders.”²⁹

I conclude this study of the growth of Angola’s oil industry and its political force by analyzing the two following graphs created from World Bank data.

²⁶ Ibid., 603.

²⁷ Gretchen Bauer and Scott D. Taylor, *Politics in Southern Africa*, page 175.

²⁸ Christine Messiant, “The Eduardo Dos Santos Foundation: Or, How Angola’s Regime Is Taking over Civil Society,” *African Affairs* 100, no. 399 (2001): 287-309, 288.

²⁹ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, “Business Success, Angola-style...,” 604.

The first displays the total amount of oil rents in Angola (the difference between the value of crude oil production and total costs of production) expressed in the total share of the national GDP. I've chosen this measure to best display the country's growing reliance on oil. At the beginning of the 1990s, oil rents represented approximately 20% of total GDP, and at the start of the 21st century, close to 65%. It is clear that the oil industry went through unprecedented growth during the decade, in no doubt related to the strains on the national government headed by MPLA and dos Santos. Embroiled in an intense civil war, and under foreign and national expectations of promoting a multipartyism that would result in the weakening of the regime, oil growth remained an effective route for the MPLA to sustain its power. Angolan oil is limited geographically (virtually all of production takes place in the northwest region, close to the MPLA-controlled capital), ethnically, and socially, as only individuals valued or sought after by the MPLA are employed or coopted by Sonangol. The growth in oil rents therefore indicates increases in oil reliance, and might also be related to a rise in authoritarian governance. Lastly, I included a comparative measure for Nigeria. Nigeria, Africa's largest oil-producer, displays many similar fluctuations in its graph, likely due to global petroleum trends. However, since the mid-1990s, Angola has overtaken Nigeria in oil rents as a share of GDP. I draw the conclusion that Nigeria is less reliant on oil revenue than Angola and has a more diversified economy. It is also known that Nigeria has a higher level of democracy than Angola, perhaps in part due to this divergence starting in the 1990s on oil dependency. Nigeria would be less likely compared to Angola to display the characteristics of Ross's "resource trap," including long-term economic declines and authoritarian rule.

The second graph is a comparison between the Polity score as the dependent variable, and the percentage of annual GDP growth as the main independent variable. First, I connect the rise of Angola's oil industry to GDP growth, as oil is a significant sector of the nation's income (approximately 45% of national GDP, 80% of government revenues, and 95% of exports). As hypothesized, GDP growth and levels of democracy from an inverse relationship. The gradual decrease in Angola's income starting in 1990 coincides with the subsequent rise in Polity score. As GDP increased after 1993, the Polity score followed suit and decreased. Towards the end of the decade, as GDP growth stabilized, the level of democracy also stabilized at -3, reflective of Angola's position as an largely authoritative state a decade after unmet Constitutional changes.

CONCLUSION

In exposing the Angolan government's lack of transparency in oil revenues and its corrupt rent-seeking behavior, I hope to call attention to several situational factors responsible for the unfortunate reality that although Angola's GDP is that of a middle-income country, its indicators of social development (e.g., health, education, and persistent poverty) remain among the worlds lowest. Through an analysis of Angola's process of democratization, I have found that the economic

and international factors are particularly salient in explaining Angola's position as a peripheral, resource-rich country incorporated into the global capitalist economy through massive oil exports. Angola's position as both a major oil producer and yet one of the worst-governed states leads de Oliveria to call Angola a "successful failed state:" successful in sustaining a rich elite class who fails other citizens by not building a responsive, democratic state invested in the protection of freedoms and rights. As growth from oil is still on the rise and Angola's rewritten 2010 Constitution allows for more executive power, patronage politics—including the predation of national oil revenues for personal gain via the parastatal Sonangol—will continue to be employed to prevent opposition and safeguard the authoritarian regime of dos Santos and the MPLA.

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