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8 WE GOT A TASTE FOR PROTEST! LEADERSHIP TRANSITION AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROTEST IN ANGOLA'S RESILIENT AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

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Introduction

“Our stomachs are empty; we can’t take it anymore. This is not what the young people of Angola dreamed of. João Lourenço, you can leave, the nation doesn’t need you. Are we troublemakers?”¹ Protesters echoed this message during a public demonstration in the capital of Luanda on the 45th anniversary of Angola’s independence on 11 November 2020. The anti-government demonstrators demanded jobs, better living conditions, local elections, and the end of the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government, which had been in power since the country’s independence from Portugal in 1975. A university student, Inocência Matos was killed in the protest and others sustained severe injuries. The authorities’ violent response signalled the authoritarian nature of the MPLA regime and a reversal of president Lourenço’s initial pledges to embrace a more democratic state.

João Lourenço succeeded José Eduardo dos Santos as Angola’s third head of state in 2017. His election was initially met with optimism for more than just symbolic reasons: his reformist agenda, fight against corruption and proximity to the people distinguished him from the preceding president who had been in power since 1979 (Roque, 2017; Schubert, 2018). Lourenço was praised for his “new paradigm of governance”, and his desire to improve the country’s human rights performance and respect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. He would create a more favourable environment that welcomed civil society initiatives and voices of discontent. Remarkably, the number of popular protests² has increased significantly since Lourenço took office. In just four years of presidency, the new leadership has faced more episodes of protests than the 15 years of Dos Santos’ post-war presidency. What can explain the increased levels of protest during João Lourenço’s presidency? And how impactful have these protests been?

This chapter answers these questions by exploring the political opportunities arising from leadership change. Our analysis focuses on four variables of political

opportunity structures (POS) to assess how new opportunities brought by a new leadership can lead to an increase in protests in authoritarian states, namely: 1) the extent of the new leader's openness to protest (Meyer, 2004); 2) electoral pledges and policy implementation (Costain, 1992; Meyer et al., 2005); 3) the new government's use of repression (Meyer, 2004); and 4) protesters' perceptions of the political environment (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Kurzman, 1996). These variables will allow us to look simultaneously at the political context and the agency of protesters within it and perceive how protesters react to the regime's responses.

We argue that the election of a new President in 2017 changed political opportunities for protest. The initial openness to demonstrations and criticism by Lourenço's presidency set a cognitive mechanism in motion or, as Tilly (2001, p. 24) theorised, an alteration in individual and collective perception that encouraged individual and collective actors to protest and engage different people in these actions. The increased intensity of protests under Lourenço's presidency reveals a change in citizens' perception of their ability to engage in protest actions: less fear of protesting and a growing "taste for protest", to use the words of Luaty Beirão, a well-known Angolan activist.³ Regardless of the government's repressive response, this new cognitive frame, together with worsening socio-economic conditions and the government's inability to deliver on electoral pledges, influenced protesters' capacity to mobilise.

Our approach offers important contributions. First, it reveals the importance but also the shortcomings of political opportunities brought by leadership transition as triggers of change in autocratic regimes. The initial optimism about Lourenço's office gave way to widespread discontent because the regime's *status quo* remained as authoritarian and was incapable of improving good governance and living conditions. Second, it shows that it is worth exploring the impact of popular protests in authoritarian regimes from a different angle, i.e. cognitive. The literature tends to focus on more tangible changes such as political reforms but we can capture intangible, but quintessential, aspects of change by exploring alterations in the perception of protesters that encourage popular uprisings (Bratton and Walle, 1997; Branch and Mampilly, 2015).

The empirical analysis covers protests from the start of Lourenço's presidency (September 2017) until early February 2021. The quantitative data on protests was mainly collected from the ACLED dataset to depict the frequency, intensity, and type of protest.⁴ To explore the changes in political opportunities after Lourenço took office and to identify the cognitive mechanism, we build on evidence from semi-structured interviews conducted in Luanda, Cacuaco (Angola), and Lisbon (Portugal), between 2020 and 2021 with young Angolan protesters, activists, and experts. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese and translated to English by the authors.

This chapter comprises four sections. The first outlines the main characteristics of protests and the opportunities for protest in authoritarian regimes, specifically addressing the "third wave of protests" in Africa. The following section explains Angola's relevance in the context of protests in Africa's authoritarian regimes. Section three focuses on the changes brought by the new president to four POS variables. The concluding section looks at what the Angolan case tells us about

political opportunities that enable protest and their transformative power in Africa's resilient authoritarian regimes.

Opportunities for protest in African authoritarian regimes

Protest is a form of political participation that complements others such as voting or civic activism (Thyen and Gerschewski, 2018, pp. 39–40), and it is particularly important when more direct forms of influence are absent (Meyer, 2004, p. 128). This is the case of African autocracies where political life has been dominated by elites with ever-diminishing commitment to the democratic project, resulting in difficulties in implementing reforms after elections, state *dominium* over the economy and an “authoritarian political culture” (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015, pp. 101 and 107). Political elites failed to deliver the promises of social and political inclusion made at two fundamental moments of transition: from colonial rule to independence and from single-party or military dictatorships to multipartyism. The first was expected to bring colonial rule and its inequalities to an end, while the second paved the way for multipartyism. The ongoing third wave of popular protests across Africa represents a third moment of transition that spans all regime types and calls for better governance and living conditions (Branch and Mampilly, 2015).

Protesters demand improved socioeconomic conditions, access to public services, constitutional change, political freedom, and good governance (Branch and Mampilly, 2015; Mueller, 2018; Mateos and Erro, 2021). Although mobilising grievances might be context-dependent and address economic or political conditions of a certain state, the literature suggests that protesters express various grievances at the same protest event, which can be summarised as governance related issues. Therefore, the political context will determine the grievances that mobilise protesters. These include economic exclusion and political dissatisfaction, as was the case of popular protests in Mozambique in 2008–2012 (Brito, 2017). Following the inauguration of Niger's first oil refinery in 2011, protests mobilised civil society and political opponents who demonstrated against unemployment and economic instability (Schritt, 2019). Meanwhile, in 2016 Zimbabwe saw protests against corruption, bad governance, and the government's failure to tackle unemployment (Gukurume, 2017). Educated young people from Oromia not only protest against land grabbing by the government, unemployment, and other socioeconomic grievances but also demand democracy (Abebe, 2020). But this third wave encompasses other movements and protests in democracies and autocracies against changes to the constitution that allow for third terms, as in the case of Senegalese *Y'en a Marre* in 2011 (Dimé, 2022) and Burkinabé *Balai Citoyen* in 2014 (Touré, 2017; Bertrand, 2022), or call for regime change, as in the case of Sudan where protests in 2019 resulted in the ousting of Omar al-Bashir (Hassanain, 2020).

This brief snapshot of protests depicts different actors, grievances, outcomes and regime types. Protesting in authoritarian regimes carries higher costs and may even put the lives of protesters in danger; so what makes people take to the streets in these regimes? There are a number of explanations for collective action but, from the political opportunity perspective, the likelihood of protests taking place depends on the context (Meyer, 2004, p. 124; Dahlum and Wig, 2019; Sanches,

2022). Political opportunities for protest are scarcer in authoritarian regimes than in democracies (Almeida, 2003), which means the possibilities of different forms of political participation are more limited. Nevertheless, despite fewer political opportunities for protest in authoritarian regimes, empirical evidence, and anecdotal data show that they are recurrent phenomena (Barría, 2018).

Protests can be triggered by an enabling political environment resulting from turning point events within the political regime, such as leadership transition. Leadership change has been an important issue in contemporary African politics and a topic of concern in several authoritarian regimes (Brownlee, 2007) given that a long list of African presidents have managed to extend their time in office with the help of much international collusion (Cheeseman and Fisher, 2021). For example, the former Angolan president, Dos Santos, was among the five longest-serving presidents in Africa until September 2017, when power was transferred through elections to João Lourenço.

Leadership change in authoritarian regimes constitutes a moment of uncertainty and is therefore a time when political opportunities for protest can alter. POS in non-democratic states are more limited than in democracies due to a lack of independent institutions and fragile communication channels between citizens and the state. Theoretical contributions to the debate on POS in authoritarian regimes are also scarce as this theoretical framework is more focused on contentious episodes in democracies (Alimi, 2009). Hence, it is necessary to explore how the alteration in the political context impacts political actors' and activists' perceptions of the rules of the autocratic game and affects their agency to protest.

If a new leader shows he/she is more open to dialogue, activists can see this change in leadership as an opportunity. The leader's openness to protests is therefore a variable of POS (Meyer, 2004). A new leader is also expected to fulfil electoral promises of long-awaited changes in economic and political conditions. The fulfilment of promises and the government's response to demands also constitute a variable of POS (Costain, 1992; Meyer et al., 2005). However, competitive authoritarianism is the type of authoritarian regime that offers some space for popular protest and, where protests can change the policies of elites (Vladislavljević, 2014). This contrasts with the situation in more centralised and oil-rich authoritarian regimes (Girod, Stewart and Walters, 2018), which rely upon repression. Individuals and groups using peaceful means to contend with the government are often the target of this repression (Davenport, 2007), which raises the costs of collective action when power holders see it as a threat. Repression can come in many different shapes and forms, from controlling the media, banning associations, infiltrating movements, to physical violence and intimidation (Osa and Schock, 2007). For instance, state responses to recent popular protests in African authoritarian states such as Rwanda and Ethiopia were brutal and included jailing, different forms of harassment and the killing of demonstrators (Mueller, 2020, p. 65).

Due to this political culture, "contentious participation" has a higher cost in authoritarian regimes than in democracies, though both regime types usually respond with a "repressive backlash" (Albrecht and Koehler, 2020, pp. 138–139). Repression tends to reduce threats and is used along with other strategies of social and political control, such as co-optation, to allow the regime to negotiate with

protesters by accommodating some of their demands or distributing economic and political benefits (Geha, 2019). Repression and co-optation are key mechanisms of autocratic control and stability (Gerschewski, 2013; Sá and Sanches, 2021), lessening the chances of popular protest. Therefore, the reduction of state repression is a variable of political opportunity for protest in authoritarian regimes, making contentious politics less risky for protesters. However, people also take to streets when repression increases (Osa and Schock, 2007), due to the urgency of their grievances and to the perception that promises and long-awaited changes are not being addressed.

Lastly, the protesters' perceptions of the authoritarian status quo and the ability to demand better living conditions, democratic institutions, and political openness will be determinant to set a cognitive frame of individual and social mobilisation in motion (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Kurzman, 1996). Protesters' perception of how the authoritarian regime works and how to handle repression and other forms of social and political control is a relevant outcome arising from the political opportunities in authoritarian regimes.

POS raised in authoritarian settings by leadership changes are key to explaining contentious actions and the transformative impact that protests have in the mind-set of protesters, who feel they have gained voice in the streets and expressed their dissatisfaction.

Why Angola matters

If we look at the evolution of protest in Africa in the 21st century, we note that the number of popular protests has increased exponentially in most Sub-Saharan countries since 2011. This steady rise followed revolutions in the North of Africa where long-serving dictators were ousted, as well as general uprisings in other African countries with an anti-incumbency agenda have shaped the third wave of protests in the continent.

When the two decades of this century are compared, we observe a greater increase in protests in countries considered Not Free by the Freedom House index (Figure 8.1). This trend confirms Barría's (2018, p. 140) claim that protest in authoritarian contexts is not only possible but also recurrent. In fact, the five African countries that experienced the biggest increase in protests from the first to second decade of this century are Mali, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania. The first three of these are classified as Not Free, which raises important questions about windows of opportunities for protest and the transformative power of protests in autocratic regimes.

On closer examination, we find there is another important pattern in the number of protests in Not Free countries: on average, the increase in authoritarian regimes that went through a leadership transition in this last decade is higher than in regimes with no leadership change (Figure 8.2).

Angola belongs to a cluster of nine resilient authoritarian countries in Africa.⁵ It stands out in this group for three main reasons that shed light on the dynamics of protest brought by leadership change. First, it has been governed by the same

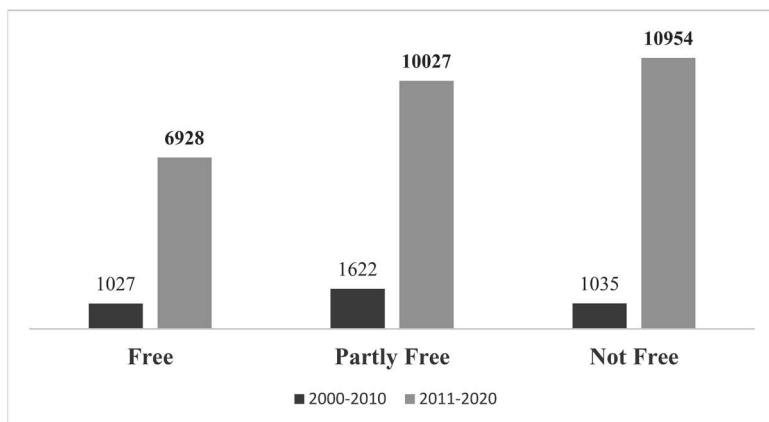


Figure 8.1 Total number of protests between 2000–2010 and 2011–2020

Source: ACLED dataset and Freedom in the World 2020 (Freedom House).

ruling party (MPLA) since independence, despite the transition to multipartyism in 1992. Angola has a dominant party system given that the ruling party has won every single post-war election (2008, 2012, and 2017) with more than 60% of the votes. Unlike their counterpart countries, and after a constitutional revision in 2010, the head of state is no longer directly elected; instead, it is the person heading the list of the party or coalition of parties receiving the most votes in the

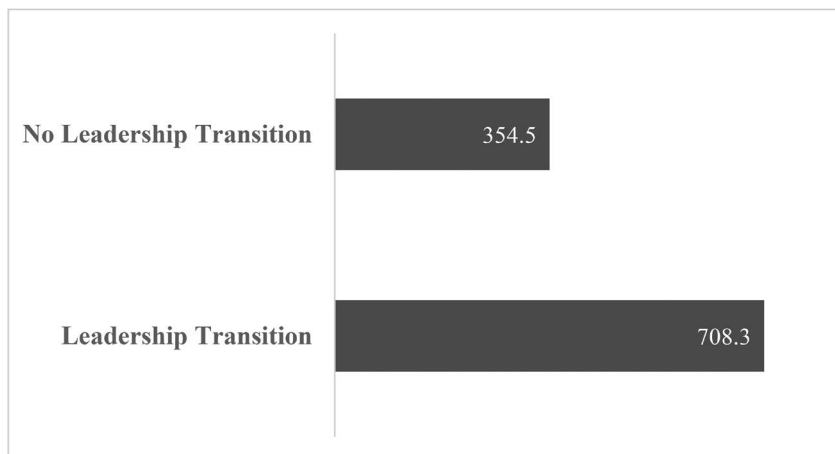


Figure 8.2 Mean increase in protests and leadership transition in not free states between 2000–2010 and 2011–2020

Source: ACLED dataset and African Leadership Transitions Tracker (ALTT).

general election that is elected. Second, this country experienced a protracted civil war (1975–1991; 1993–2002), which was brought to an end with the MPLA's military victory over The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The war outcome meant a new “democratic” hegemony of the MPLA and the party consolidation as a party-state (Oliveira, 2015; Mabeko-Tali, 2016). Finally, the rise in popular protest from 2015 became more marked in 2017 when Lourenço succeeded Dos Santos' 38-year rule as president.

The transition of Dos Santos' leadership to Lourenço occurred first at the state level (with the national elections of August 2017), and then at the party level. The MPLA's Extraordinary Congress in September 2018 elected Lourenço as the party's new chairman. As a result, the new leader gained full control of two main sources of political power: the presidency and the ruling party. This unprecedented leadership change represents a case of electoral succession, i.e. the new head of state comes from the same party (MPLA) as the outgoing president. However, this leadership change had a striking effect on the intensity of protest. Whereas, there were about 100 episodes of protest in the 15 years of Dos Santos' presidency after the war (2002–2017), Lourenço's presidency saw a total of 157 protests in just three years in office.⁶

The following section will analyse the selected POS variables – leader's openness to protest, the non-fulfilment of electoral pledges, the government's use of repression, and the protesters' perceptions of the political regime – that resulted from the transition of leadership. The findings are used to explain the increase in protest levels and the impact of protests, by focusing on the shift in the protesters' mind-set towards action.

New president, new opportunities for protest?

The new president's initial openness to protest

The 2008 global financial crisis and the wave of pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle-East and Africa in early 2011 challenged the view that stable authoritarian regimes could forever withstand and block any pressures for change. In countries such as Tunisia and Egypt “entrenched authoritarian rulers were jettisoned from office” by “popular protest” (Bellin, 2012, p. 127).

Angola witnessed an upsurge of popular protest against the Dos Santos' regime in 2011. Protesters demanded better living conditions, employment, and good governance (Morais, 2012). Additionally, protesters urged Dos Santos to resign because they thought that “32 years in power was too much”, like other cases in the third wave of protests in Africa. The first street protest demanding Dos Santos' departure, on 7 March 2011, was organised by the New Revolution of the Angolan People (MRPLA)⁷, but activists were harassed, arrested, and some even killed (Siegert, 2018, pp. 48–49).⁸ Dos Santos did not tolerate dissent and those who dared to protest often faced a repressive response from the regime (Pestana, 2003). Moreover, protests in Angola “signal an attempt to break away from exclusionary, corrupt and elite-dominated politics” (Faria, 2013, p. 305).

The deepening global crisis and the decline in oil revenues highlighted the perils of the country's economic dependency on a single commodity. Social vulnerability grew out of endemic corruption, nepotism, and youth unemployment. The Dos Santos regime was also the source of discontent within the MPLA due to his family's economic and political monopolies as well as the strategic alliances with top-rank military and party elites (Verde, 2021).

The transition to a new political leadership took place in this context of internal discontent in 2017. The new president was seen as a “reformer” and our interviewees had high hopes that he would fight the rotten system.⁹ President Lourenço heralded a new Angola. He was not shy to tell his party: “corruption is going to end, even though the first to fall were the ranked cadres and officials, who committed crimes and tarnished the good name of the party”¹⁰ This strategy was behind the MPLA's 2017 electoral motto “to improve what's good, correct what's bad”. Lourenço repeated this anti-corruption discourse in various interviews¹¹ and public speeches both at home and abroad.

Lourenço presented himself as someone that was aware of the “very corrupt system” and was ready to get rid of the Dos Santos regime. A handful of party officials linked to Dos Santos were either dismissed or brought to justice. However, the clean-up appeared to be more of a vendetta aimed at some rather than a balanced process to fix the rotten system. Lourenço used the word “marimbondos” (wasps),¹² a metaphor to describe those responsible for a nest of corruption and malpractices in both the state and the party. He distinguished between the “marimbondos”, the Dos Santos inner circle, and the supporters of his own anti-corruption fight. This strategy gave the impression of dislodging the *status quo* but, in fact, it was misleading because corruption, bad governance, and lack of transparency still overshadow the MPLA government today. Lourenço went to great pains to show off his reformist and tolerant attributes, receiving well-known activists and critics formerly persecuted by the Dos Santos regime, such as Luaty Beirão and Rafael Marques, at the presidential palace.¹³

According to Meyer, political openness is a core element of political opportunity for protest (Meyer, 2004, p. 137). Lourenço signalled a posture of dialogue with civil society and made out he was a *protester-in-chief* that was keen to take on board the critics' reasons for protesting against him. But despite the timid gains made under João Lourenço's presidency in fighting corruption and dialoguing with civil society (Sanches et al., 2020), Angola remains a resilient authoritarian state. The limited progress gave way to a collective consciousness among activists that the president was part of the system of unfulfilled promises they were ready to denounce. However, as the activist José Gomes Hata admitted, “nobody took to the streets to see how far João Lourenço would keep his electoral promises”.¹⁴

The president's unfulfilled promises

The MPLA went on campaigning in 2017, acknowledging the dissatisfaction felt while promoting a new leader, a promise of change (Pearce, Péclard and Soares de Oliveira, 2018, p. 155). Lourenço then projected himself as a reformer who

offered a new paradigm of governance to build a “different” Angola. The paradigm hinged on significant axes: separation of power between the executive and legislative branches; growing autonomy of the judiciary system; strengthening the role of civil society; greater independence of the media; combating impunity and corruption; inclusion and social well-being; and implementing local governance through local elections. One specific goal was to “create at least 500,000 new jobs” to tackle youth unemployment.

These pledges were constantly reiterated by Lourenço’s government and triggered a cautious optimism among the protesters we interviewed.¹⁵ However, the fight against corruption, the biggest electoral promise, has not yet translated into change in the regime, nor have people’s social and economic conditions improved. Moreover, corruption proved to be more structural and two types of corruption were the main sources of grievance, namely, elite corruption (abuses of power, embezzlement), and police corruption (kickbacks) (Lewis, 2020, p. 2). It soon became clear to the protesters that the president was unable to fulfil his electoral promises and deal with the “marimbondos”.

The perception of Lourenço as a reformer changed drastically as he failed to make good on his promises. Hata noted that “there was a moment of silence and peace. The street stayed quiet for a while, but the mass protests began as hopes were dashed”.¹⁶ Protesters broke the silence of the streets as the hopes of thousands of jobs for young Angolans, of local elections and institutional reforms faded away. The first massive demonstrations were held in Luanda and other cities on 21 July 2018.

The ACLED dataset and our compilation of protests show many different episodes in 2018 and 2019 addressing a variety of long-standing grievances. For instance, students protested against the increase in university admission fees and examination conditions. Employees demanded better wages. Women protested against domestic violence. Urban and rural communities demanded electricity and clean water. Protests addressing bad governance and nepotism of local authorities were organised in all the capital cities. Food price spikes and the worsening of living standards brought together different social strata of protesters. Our interviewees pointed out that the high cost of essential goods is a cross-cutting issue, affecting most of the population and ultimately leading to a comparison of food prices under the Dos Santos regime and now.¹⁷

In addition, restrictive measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic after March 2020, such as social distancing and the curfew, prompted protests by street traders and others affected by the state of emergency.¹⁸ Police used violent methods to contain protests and to force people to comply with the government decree. The death of the Angolan doctor, Silvio Dala, on 1 September 2020 at the hands of the police¹⁹ was a turning point in Angola’s recent protests marred by policy violence. The death was an emotional trigger, i.e. a strong emotional reaction that makes people protest (Bellin, 2012, p. 136). Driven by anger and injustice, civil society activists, health-care professionals and opposition politicians gathered all over the country on 12 September to demonstrate against police brutality and the government’s disregard of citizens’ lives.²⁰

Socio-economic grievances and demands for the long-awaited local elections, due in 2020, continued to bring people onto the streets. However, the local electoral process had been held up due to discussions about a gradual approach and constant delays caused by the ruling party (Orre and Pestana, 2014). On 13 August 2019 and again on 23 January 2020²¹ protesters gathered in front of the National Parliament to demand local elections across the whole country. The activist Tânia de Carvalho²² claimed that the “urgent need for *autarquias* (local governance)” was the most relevant issue for protesters in the demonstrations of 24 October, 11 November, and 10 December 2020. She believed that decentralisation would mitigate socio-economic problems and improve governance.

Our interviewees reported there was anger because the MPLA “had been in power too long”,²³ and they were sure João Lourenço would not be able to solve the problems of the Angolans.²⁴ The political openness experienced in the early years of Lourenço’s presidency and his new paradigm of governance became a deceitful distraction as the electoral promises remained unfulfilled and protesters saw Lourenço’s increasingly repressive response to protest.

Repression under Lourenço’s presidency

The reduction of state repression is a variable of political opportunity for protest (Meyer, 2004). Activists expected the new leader’s initial openness to protest and to listening to dissenting voices meant he would be less repressive than his predecessor. But the evolution of the type of protests during Lourenço’s presidency (Figure 8.3) reveals that there was an increasingly repressive response to popular demonstrations from 2018, i.e. after Lourenço was elected chairman of the ruling party. The activist Hitler Samussuku pointed out that when Lourenço first

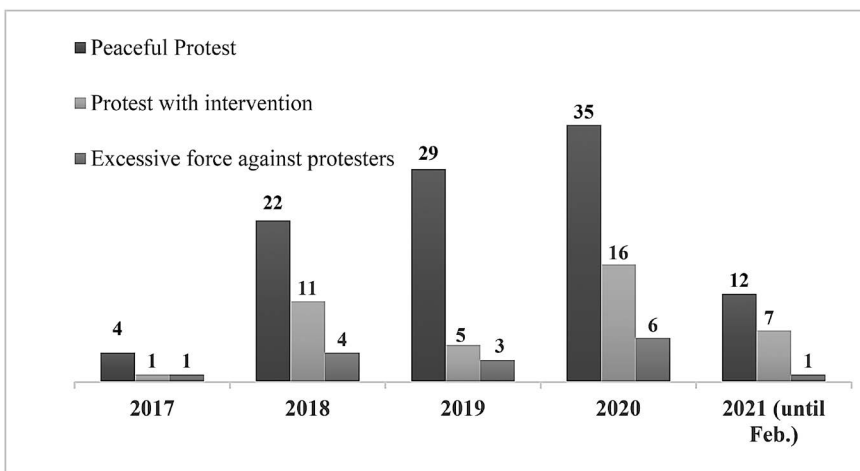


Figure 8.3 Type of protests per year during João Lourenço’s presidency

Source: ACLED dataset and authors’ compilation.

became President of the Republic, he only needed “to win the sympathy of civil society, the opposition and the international community through some openness. But, afterwards, the problems started”.²⁵

As protests escalated, the government response to widespread protest during the Lourenço presidency became more repressive. Indeed, the disaggregated data reveal a rising number of protests with intervention and excessive force by the authorities, especially in 2020 and 2021; the number of protests also increased during this period.

Episodes of excessive use of force by the Angolan authorities gave Lourenço’s presidency a more repressive tone. Police repression was more common in demonstrations near political institutions, such as the parliament or the presidential palace in Cidade Alta.²⁶ However, new patterns of youth resistance emerged in recent protests. We analyse three of these protests below, namely the protests of 24 October 2020, 11 November 2020, and 10 December 2020.

On 24 October 2020, different actors and activists took to the streets of Luanda to express a wide range of socioeconomic and political grievances; this was the first of a number of massive demonstrations towards the end of 2020 with a clearer pro-democracy demand and calling for the end of MPLA rule. Protesters voiced their anger at unreliable institutions and the MPLA’s kleptocratic system and they demanded local elections.²⁷ This protest is relevant due both to its size and the repressive response by authorities.²⁸ Well-known activists of the Revolutionary Movement of Angola (MRA) politicians of opposition parties and ordinary citizens took to the streets to voice their common grievances. There were episodes of violence with the burning of rubber tyres, and the police arrested 103 protesters and harassed the UNITA politicians attending the demonstration.

The anniversary of Angola’s independence, 11 November 2020, saw yet another demonstration²⁹ where protest posters could be seen denouncing “João Lourenço, you ungrateful one, where are the 500,000 jobs?”³⁰ Although the authorities had forbidden the demonstration,³¹ people went en masse and again police responded with brutality. Inocêncio Matos, a 23-year-old engineering student, was killed and became a symbol of Lourenço’s repression. This tragic event underscores the regime’s unease as it dealt with civic unrest amid the growing domestic crisis. Activist José Gomes Hata notes that the chances of repression are greater when the demonstration is political and indirectly affects people who belong to the state apparatus of the current regime.³²

According to Mwana Ngola, these protests had an impact because they brought large numbers of citizens onto the street for the first time despite the repression. They would no longer allow the government to put their grievances on hold: “The people had no alternative but to protest”.³³ The president was faced with two options to salvage his tarnishing image: he could either intensify the crack-down on peaceful demonstrations or resort to techniques of co-optation or signs of openness. He chose to calm critical voices and signal integration and dialogue when he set up a meeting with Angolan youths on 24 November 2020.³⁴

However, on 10 December,³⁵ the official anniversary of the MPLA’s foundation, another protest was organised against the same socioeconomic and political

grievances: unemployment, living conditions, corruption, and decentralisation. Protesters demanded the end of MPLA rule and, as a symbolic act, the picture of Inocêncio Matos was placed on the iconic statue of Angola's first president, Agostinho Neto, in Luanda. Unlike previous protests, there was no sign of police brutality or violence this time. Indeed, authoritarian regimes have various tools at their disposal to defuse the threat of protests (Sato and Wahman, 2019, p. 1422).

Despite the president's apparent commitment to drive the country on the path of the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, he showed a greater propensity to repression, thus demonstrating that repression is context-dependent and can decrease or increase dissent (Osa and Schock, 2007, p. 133). This is clearly the case in Angola where the use of repression did not reduce the levels of protest.

Protesters' perceptions and the emergence of a new cognitive frame

As Gamson and Meyer (1996) and Kurzman (1996) stated, the protesters' perceptions are influenced by opportunities arising from the political context. In Angola, Lourenço's presidency raised hopes of a new country that could better accommodate civil society's demands. Citizens perceived this as an opportunity for protest. According to international Human Rights organisations, there was "progress in respecting the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and several protests and marches were allowed across the country" (HWR 2020). As seen in the previous sections, citizens could now take to the streets or voice their demands. Despite Lourenço's repressive tone, a new protest dynamic had been created and there was no turning back. As the activist Luaty Beirão told us, with João Lourenço:

The omnipresence of the state-party started to diminish and with that the taste for being able to speak more freely and for more freedom of assembly in public spaces without police intervention, which was something new and once unthinkable. It will be difficult for the regime to close the door to that.³⁶

On the other hand, nobody believed that political change could be generated from a set of bold institutional reforms any longer. The unfulfilled promises of the new president along with repressive responses to protest consolidated the perception among protesters that the stakes were higher. The interviews we conducted with activists illustrate this. Dilson Branco Itchama stated, "we have discovered that he [João Lourenço] is so compromised that we realise that the problem was not Zé Dú [Dos Santos], but the system!"³⁷ For Dito Dali, "today society is demanding more because of dashed expectations".³⁸ Finally, Olívio Kilumbo noted that political parties offered no sustainable political and social answers to the protesters' demands.³⁹

The new political environment brought by Lourenço set a collective consciousness in motion despite the risks of repression and/or co-optation by the regime. As Dito Dali declares:

We do not necessarily conceive protest in authoritarian Angola in terms of what it can generate as policy changes, but as a progressive process where actively committed protagonists have the deep and personal conviction that it is the cause that is most important; because whereas a person can give in to co-optation, a cause never does so. (...) We must continue fighting, regardless of some people's decision to surrender to the MPLA.⁴⁰

Branco Itchama also points out that the president's fight against corruption was recognition of the fact that MPLA is failing as a ruling party and that protests are a necessary tool to express discontent and "to raise the level of awareness of the population".⁴¹ Samussuku highlights the more lasting effects of protests as a "process of constructing a collective consciousness";⁴² he added that Angolan activists had begun to create points of contact in provinces where other activists had been arrested, so the "process of building collective consciousness has begun".⁴³ Key to this consciousness is the notion that better living conditions are not only a right but can be achieved and, therefore, the appalling inequalities and exclusion should be publicly denounced, resisted, and dismantled; in the absence of real political transformation and other channels of communication between the state and the people, this could be done through protests.

This was evident during the emergency measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. When not protesting, "people stayed at home, they were confined, there was a marked increase in the use of the internet, and the exchange of ideas became commonplace".⁴⁴ There was no turning back for the new cognitive frame among protesters set in motion by the transition of leadership in Angola. Even though the incumbent party's responses to citizens' demands essentially remained unchanged, people now had the perception of the power of protest to express their discontent.

Concluding remarks

Opportunities for protest are particularly scarce in authoritarian regimes and contentious politics in these regimes is costly. Notwithstanding, there is an ongoing wave of protests spanning the African continent, raising questions about the explanation for people taking to the streets and the impact of protests in authoritarian settings.

The four POS variables analysed herein allowed us to perceive the dynamics between the regime's responses and the protesters' actions by looking at the political context of a leadership change and the related agency of protesters. The analysis of protest in Angola's authoritarian regime shows us that the leadership transition in 2017 changed political opportunities for protest, setting a new cognitive frame in motion that has led to relentless protests under the new president.

This finding is especially important since data shows that authoritarian regimes have faced more protest in this third wave of protests, and the increase was particularly marked where there had been a change in leadership.

Different actors in Angola saw this change in leadership as an opportunity to engage in collective action. The new president's initial openness to dialogue and reform raised expectations, particularly among the young, of a more democratic environment in the country with more inclusion and employment, and away from the quagmire of corruption and impunity. The president's initial less repressive response to discontent also had an impact on the protesters' perception.

When it became clear that Lourenço would not fulfil his electoral promises, dashed expectations led to more protests not only against socio-economic grievances but also pushing for political change. The new presidency's repressive response was unable to slow the protests, thus showing that the impact of repression depends on other variables of political opportunities, like those considered herein. Overall, the protesters believe their relentless resistance has helped foster a collective consciousness, which epitomises a "growing taste for protest", that made protest a prime channel of revindication for the Angolan activists in this new political environment. Whether collective consciousness alone can lead to a broad national protest movement against the regime is something that needs further critical appraisal.

The analysis of protest in Angola highlights the importance of tracing cognitive mechanisms to assess the transformative impact of protests in authoritarian regimes through more intangible signals of change; this is relevant given that so many protests in Africa have demanded the removal of political leaders and political change, and longstanding African rulers have actually been removed after street protests. This raises the following questions, which could certainly inspire further studies: how can the collective consciousness of protesters translate into collective action that enables the rise of a cross-national and continental network aimed at bringing authoritarian regimes to an end through pressure "from below", and how do these movements relate to formal actors of the political opposition?

Notes

1. Authors' translation.
2. We use ACLED's definition of protest, as "a public demonstration in which the participants do not engage in violence, though violence may be used against them" (ACLED 2019, p. 12).
3. Authors' interview, 17 February 2020.
4. According to this dataset, protest can be subdivided into: 1) Peaceful Protest, "when demonstrators are engaged in a protest while not engaging in violence or other forms of rioting behaviour and are not faced with any sort of force or engagement; 2) Protest with intervention, "when individuals are engaged in a peaceful protest during which there is an attempt to disperse or suppress the protest without serious/lethal injuries being reported or the targeting of protesters with lethal weapons; 3) Excessive force against protesters, "when individuals are engaged in a peaceful protest and are targeted with violence by an actor leading to (or if it could lead to) serious/lethal injuries." (ACLED 2019, p. 13).

5. Along with Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan.
6. Collected data from ACLED dataset and authors' compilation from April 2002 (end of the civil war) to February 2021.
7. This anonymous movement demanded a more democratic country and the end of corruption and socioeconomic inequality, using social media and rap music as means of communication (Yarwood, 2016, pp. 215–216).
8. The most blatant response was the imprisonment and trial in 2015 and 2016 of 15+2 activists who wanted Dos Santos to leave office. They were accused of plotting a coup by the provincial court of Luanda. In June 2016, they were put under house arrest and were granted amnesty in September. Today, these protesters contend they helped damage the external and internal image of Dos Santos.
9. This reformist profile of João Lourenço was raised by Mário de Carvalho and Dito Dali, among others. Authors' interview, 22 January and 5 February 2021.
10. Authors' translation from "MPLA prioriza combate à corrupção e bajulação", *ANGOP*, 9 September 2018.
11. See the interview with the German journalist Andrien Kriesch days before the official visit of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Luanda. Adrian Kriesch, "João Lourenço quebra o silêncio e fala à DW sobre Isabel dos Santos", *DW*, 3 February 2020.
12. *VOA Português*, "É preciso destruir o ninho do marimbondo", diz João Lourenço sobre o combate à corrupção", 22 November 2018.
13. *GCS, Agência Lusa, Borrinho Ndomba*, "Presidente angolano reúne-se com ativistas, Rafael Marques será recebido quarta-feira", *DW*, 4 December 2018.
14. Authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
15. Many of whom either were directly involved in the early protests – 10 years ago – or were part of the group of 15+2 who were prosecuted and imprisoned in 2015 for the alleged coup d'état attempt against the Dos Santos regime.
16. José Gomes Hata, Authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
17. Lisandro Benguela, a young man living in the outskirts of Luanda, made this point very tangible when he compared food prices in the two presidencies: "In JES' [José Eduardo dos Santos] days, pasta cost 700 [kwanzas], and with João Lourenço it is 3000." Authors' interview, 23 January 2021.
18. For example, on 17 April 2020, more than 500 vendors protesting against the closure of a local market in Caluquembe, Huila, were dispersed by police.
19. Amnesty International. "Doctor Sílvio Dala", 9 October 2020.
20. Manuel Luamba, "Eu sou Sílvio Dala: Sociedade civil angolana protesta contra a morte do médico", *DW*, 12 September 2020.
21. Data on the protest events retrieved from the ACLED dataset.
22. Authors' interview, 27 April 2021.
23. Mário de Carvalho, authors' interview, 22 January 2021.
24. Olívio Kilumbo, authors' interview, 21 January 2021.
25. Authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
26. José Gomes Hata, authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
27. On 3 October 2020, the Angolan Revolutionary Movement organised a demonstration in Luanda specifically demanding Costa's exoneration. In the interviews, activists stressed it was one of the most relevant demonstration during the Lourenço presidency. See Coque Mukuta, "'Revús' manifestam-se sábado em Luanda para pedir demissão de chefe de gabinete do PR", *Voa*, 1 October 2020.
28. Borrinho Ndomba, "Luanda: Manifestantes relatam brutalidade policial para conter protesto", *DW*, 24 October 2020.
29. Rafael Marques Morais, "Manifestações, Desgaste e Descrédito", *Maka Angola*, 12 November 2020; Pedro Bastos Reis, "Polícia reprime protestos em Angola: 'Vivemos um ambiente de terror'", *Público*, 11 November 2020.

30. Authors' translation from Simão Hossi, "Polícia angolana reprime manifestação no Dia da Independência", *Global Voices*, 17 November 2020.
31. João Manuel dos Santos "Mwana Ngola", Authors' interview, 3 February 2021.
32. Authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
33. João Manuel dos Santos "Mwana Ngola", Authors' interview, 3 February 2021.
34. Manuel Luamba, "Angola: 'Diálogo' de João Lourenço com jovens foi manobra dilatória?", *DW*, 26 November 2020.
35. Borrvalho Ndomba, "Luanda: Centenas de jovens em protesto contra corrupção e desemprego", *DW*, 10 December 2020.
36. Authors' interview, 17 February 2020.
37. Authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
38. Authors' interview, 5 February 2021.
39. Authors' interview, 21 January 2021.
40. Authors' interview, 5 February 2021.
41. Authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
42. Hitler Samussuku, Authors' interview, 1 February 2021.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*

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