

**AGOSTINHO NETO: THE MPLA'S ALCHEMIST,
BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE**

Nuno de Fragoso Vidal

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte)
Centro de Estudos Internacionais (CEI-Iscte)
Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal
nunofragosovidal@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-5921-6311

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Agostinho Neto: The MPLA's alchemist, between a rock and a hard place

In contrast with a long track record of historical-political analysis that has resisted accepting interpretations based on the ability of post-colonial political systems in Africa to follow their own historical “homegrown” experience, and according to its elites’ agency to pursue its own goals, this paper takes the Angolan case to expose how the administration of the first president, Agostinho Neto, was able to structure on its own terms, assimilating and accommodating domestic and external constraints. It is here analysed how Agostinho Neto’s administration ended up adhering to socialism and to a left-wing rhetoric, while breeding a right-wing praxis in terms of political economy, political management and foreign policy. As we will see, such an achievement is even more astonishing if we consider the extremely constraining domestic and international context.

Keywords: Angola, political economy, history, Agostinho Neto, MPLA, socialism

Agostinho Neto: O alquimista do MPLA, entre a rocha e o local duro

Em contraste com uma longa tradição de análise histórico-política que resiste em aceitar interpretações baseadas na capacidade dos sistemas políticos pós-coloniais em África de percorrerem o seu próprio caminho de acordo com a sua própria experiência histórica e de acordo com a capacidade das suas elites em perseguirem os seus próprios objetivos, este texto recorre ao caso angolano para expor como a administração do primeiro presidente, Agostinho Neto, foi capaz de se estruturar nos seus próprios termos, assimilando e acomodando os constrangimentos internos e externos. Analisa-se aqui como a administração de Agostinho Neto acabou por aderir ao socialismo e a uma retórica de esquerda, ao mesmo tempo que cultivava uma prática de direita em termos de economia política, gestão política e política externa. Como veremos, um tal feito é ainda mais surpreendente se considerarmos os constrangimentos extremos do contexto internacional e doméstico existente.

Palavras-chave: Angola, economia política, história, Agostinho Neto, MPLA, socialismo

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Transposing several of the international ideological discussions and disputes on different socialist perspectives (Soviets, Maoists, Trotskyists, Titoists, etc.) to the inner MPLA and putting them at the centre of political-historical analysis contributes to the dominant, though illusory, interpretation crediting MPLA as being ideologically committed in search of a socialist path at independence, which was certainly not the case.

This does not mean that there were no committed and sincere socialists of myriad tendencies in the MPLA, but to say that such discussion is illusive and distracts from the main and relevant issue at dispute: the struggle between two radically opposed projects of state and society inside the MPLA, that clearly emerge through the analysis of the political praxis of government in the independent state.

In these contexts, the analysis of politics in Africa should rather concentrate on the post-colonial praxis and dynamics, as proposed many years ago by Wallerstein: in broader, older, but much more analytically useful and objective concepts of “left” and “right”, according to specific strategic options for new states and governments around political economy, political management/ideology and foreign policy (Wallerstein, 1971).

This paper follows this line of analysis, which proves the most effective to expose the façade of Angolan socialism constructed during Agostinho Neto administration.

Besides the more general theoretical approach on neo-patrimonialism,¹ not much has been said on the façade nature of pre-transition (pre-1990s) African po-

¹ For a general characterisation of modern patrimonialism, see Bayart (1992, 1993), Chabal and Daloz (1999), Médard (1982, 1991).

litical systems, particularly the so-called socialist regimes of the first generation (independence).

This paper exposes the post-independence interactive relationship between the party, domestic and international contexts, and major players to explain why and how Agostinho Neto's administration managed to successfully conceal a right-wing praxis under a socialist façade.

The text unfolds in six parts. The first briefly presents the MPLA's complex historical-sociological background and dynamics with many political cleavages and how they were settled at the independence within the group of Agostinho Neto's loyalists – a left- and a right-wing – composing the presidentialist “faction”. The second deals with the emergence of new political criticism inside the MPLA, within a younger generation, that rose to become a serious political threat to Neto and his loyalists. The third part analyses the domestic and international strategy of such new threat, while the fourth focus on the domestic and international counter-strategy of a defensive alliance of left and right wings inside the presidential faction, implying the official adherence to socialism. The fifth part is centred on the reignition of left- and right-wing disputes over the new political-economic management model to be implemented, and the sixth explains how Neto ingeniously solved the dispute between the two groups and their opposed political projects, establishing the working principles of the New State: a right-wing praxis under a socialist façade.

Besides relevant secondary literature and primary document sources, this paper also resorts to testimonies gathered by the author during numerous interviews conducted with a few key players in this history, some already deceased. Gathered during field research for different works over the last 20 years, these are important historical testimonies and provide unrivalled insights to the theme analysed here.²

Neto and his loyalists at independence

Born out of a complex sociological-historical background and dynamics centuries in the making, the MPLA was always “a river of many currents and affluents”, determined by personalities and sociological-historical cleavages rather than effective institutional-ideological issues (L. Lara, personal interview, Luanda, May 1, 1998).

² A full description on the methodology used for such interviews, details on the interviews and the rules to publicly access and use it, can be found in Vidal (2002).

While it is not possible to discuss in detail the long and complex historical-sociological dynamics that later informed the Mbundu/Creole core of the MPLA, it can be located as far back as the end of the sixteenth century when Portugal began supporting the incursion in the northern-central area (Luanda and its hinterland) to the detriment of the north (S. Salvador of Congo). This favoured a process of Creolisation, encompassing heterogeneous elements such as the descendants of locally born Europeans (whites and *mestiços*) and Africans closely operating with them, which formed an intermediate group between the Europeans from the metropolis and the majority black rural population of the area (Birmingham, 2015, p. ix; Bittencourt, 1999, ch. V; Dias, 1984; Messiant, 1997, pp. 157-208, n. 6). They established alliances with the families of chiefdoms of the Mbundu-Kimbundu ethno-linguistic group through marriages, and commercial and financial alliances between chiefdoms and traders from the interior and from Luanda (Dias, 1984, p. 64; 1989, p. 245). The power and socio-economic prestige of these alliances among Mbundu/Creole elites became more entrenched in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, controlling the slave trade in the interior and agriculture. Together, these elites dominated the commercial, administrative, ecclesiastic and military structures (Dias, 1989, pp. 241-258; 1994, pp. 43-91).

This process suffered a major setback in mid-nineteenth century due to transformations in the colonial economy – the replacement of the slave trade and growing competition from the increased arrival of white Portuguese settlers (Dias, 1984; 1995, pp. 14-53). This led to these elites' first cultural and political reaction between 1870 and 1930, sometimes called proto-nationalism to distinguish it from so-called modern nationalism. Modern nationalism would develop in the late 1950s, encompassing the “old” and “new” Mbundu/Creole elites (the “new” comprising those from the 1940s onwards), and from which the MPLA emerged in early 1960s as their most clearly defined political project (Freudenthal, 2000, pp. 561-572; Messiant, 1989, 2006).

This process was much more than a simple combination of identity registers. It built up an enormous pride in its centuries-old fabrics of idiosyncrasy, pretentiously self-defined at the twentieth century as “Angolaness”.³ That is why it should never be confused with simple Creolisation, assimilation or even less skin colour, but a Mbundu/Creole sociological-historical matrix, despite its myriad socio-economic sub-divisions, internal rivalries and contradictions (Vidal, 2019, pp. 153-173). This process, among other factors, also helps explain why, despite whites and mestizos being numerically few in post-independence Angolan society, they came to occupy some important political positions in the MPLA.

³ As explored by Marissa Moorman as a cultural ethos with political import (Moorman, 2008, p. 3).

Within such a complex sociological-historical background, it is unsurprising that after assuming the presidency of the MPLA in 1962, Agostinho Neto faced several power disputes, internal criticism and division, long before independence. This began with Mário Pinto de Andrade, the former president, and Viriato da Cruz, one of the MPLA's founders and secretary-general up to 1962, who left the movement following deep disagreements with Neto. Later, Neto had to deal with more serious threats, with two party factions disputing his legitimacy as president on the eve of independency and calling for a congress for accountability, leading to the so-called Lusaka "congress" that was held between 12-26 August 1974.

Opposing Neto's so-called "presidential faction", on one side was the "Active Revolt", reflecting an elite faction representing the coastal Mbundu/Creole aristocracy of the "old Creoles", whose influence had been decreasing since Neto assumed the presidency. They accused Neto of:

Absolute presidentialism, authoritarianism imposing a presidential diktat, lack of accountability, opaque management of party administration and financial affairs and promoting the cult of personality, which rendered any internal criticism a matter of high treason with consequent persecution and punishment. (J. Pinto de Andrade, personal interview, Luanda, April 16 and April 20, 1998)

Linked to the origins of modern nationalism and the MPLA itself in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they formed a political faction in May 1974 based in Brazzaville and were led by members such as Mário and Joaquim Pinto de Andrade and Gentil Viana, fighting to regain the leadership of the movement.

On the other side was the "Eastern Revolt", which had emerged in 1972/73, led by Daniel Chipenda, a black commander from Lobito (South), based on the eastern military front near the border with Zambia and raising a regionalist and rural flag against the Mbundu/Creole urban elitism at the centre of Neto's presidentialism, leading the movement far from the country and lacking knowledge of MPLA's in-country struggle.

After insurmountable disagreements and fearing political defeat, the presidential faction led by Neto and Lúcio Lara contested the legitimacy of the conclave and abandoned the event, arranging for a new "congress" in September 1974 in Moxico, eastern Angola (*Conferência Inter-Regional de Militantes*; Inter Regional Militants Conference) where all the delegates and military commanders were pro-Neto, thus ensuring his re-election as President (Bittencourt, 2008, vol. II, pp. 238-250; Mabeko-Tali, 1996, ch. 6).⁴

⁴ Two editions based on Mabeko-Tali thesis, cited here, were later published in Portuguese, one in Angola and one in Portugal, but I will stick here to the original version in French.

In the face of Neto's larger political and social capital inside and outside of the country, the Active Revolt lost strength.

Once we saw the arrival of Neto to Luanda in February 1975, and the massive popular reception he had there, most of us [were] resigned to evidence and gave up on fighting Neto's presidency. (J. Pinto de Andrade, personal interview, Luanda, April 16 and April 20, 1998)

The Eastern Revolt allied itself to the rival FNLA nationalist movement and gradually disappeared along with FNLA's military defeat before the end of Neto's administration.

Therefore, at the start of Neto's administration of independent Angola, the MPLA's top leadership was largely free of these previous menaces. It was dominated by two major political groups of loyal supporters of Agostinho Neto, which smoothly assumed opposite political standings, that later crystallised into what will here be characterised as left and right wings inside the party.

These groups should not be confused with the previous party factions. They did not want to capture the presidency and replace Neto; they were made up of Neto's staunch supporters who wanted to achieve primacy around him to influence the political and economic path of the country. Their characterisation as left and right must be understood as with any other socio-political classifications in Angola – as useful to explain important divergences and post-independence political conflicts and dynamics, although non-exclusive and changeable over time (Messiant, 1997, pp. 812-813, 812n14).

On the one hand, there was a group mainly comprising mestizos, clearly related to the coastal non-protestant new Creoles, heirs of the colonial bourgeoisie of the beginning of the century (not to be confused with the old coastal aristocracy segment of "old Creoles" of the Active Revolt). Despite, or probably because of, their heritage, they assumed an ideological Marxist stance. Their most prominent members were Carlos Rocha Dilolwa, Minister of Economic Planning, Lúcio Lara, Member of the Political Bureau, Iko Carreira, Minister of Defence, António Jacinto, writer, and Paulo Teixeira Jorge, Foreign Minister from 1976 to 1984.

On the other hand, was a group mainly comprising darker-skinned protestants, "new Creoles" from the interior (mainly from Catete, Neto's birthplace), including some of the survivors of the nationalist insurrection of 1961 and the first generation of political prisoners and nationalists of the late 1950s. Their most prominent members were Agostinho Mendes de Carvalho ("Uanhenga Xitu"), Domingos Paiva da Silva, Imperial Santana, Bernardo de Souza, and Manuel Pedro Pacavira (all except Pacavira were from Catete; he was from Golungo Alto,

located between Catete and Malange). Their political stance had nothing to do with Marxism or any ideology, which they clearly rejected from the very beginning. They had a lower average education level than the leftists, whom they resented as “intellectuals”, standing instead for what can be considered tradition and ethnicity, defending a MBundu (black) base of power with a dominance of the MBundu from Catete (Mabeko-Tali, 1996, p. 411).

The main common denominator between these two groups was their loyalty to Agostinho Neto, as he had links with both and provided a useful balance within the leadership. He was black from Catete, but quite cultured, being a medical doctor who had trained in Portugal and even married a white Portuguese and had long and strong friendships with many mestizos such as Lúcio Lara, Iko Carreira and Carlos Dilolwa; he was protestant, but an intellectual and poet with knowledge of socialist-Marxist theories.

The struggle and internal balance between these groups inside the party went through different stages and became increasingly oppositional over time, with the right-wing initially having the advantage shortly after independence. Their influence over Neto was significant, and as stressed by Pepetela: “People within the leadership started to ironically refer to such ascendancy as *Catetização do Poder* [Catetisation of Power]”. (Pepetela, personal interview, Luanda, July 7, 1998)

By then the conflict between the groups was still in its early stages and was even suspended as soon as a new threat to Neto's leadership emerged, led by Nito Alves and his followers (*Nitistas*), in a movement called *Nitismo*.

Neto, the revolutionary youth committees and socialism

Although we cannot address *Nitismo* in all its sociological-political complexity within the complexity of the MPLA itself here, its importance is as part of a post-independence, pro-MPLA autonomous political activism which went out of control, involved a foreign dimension, and culminated in an attempted coup d'état on 27 May 1977 that pressured Neto to finally clarify the MPLA's political-ideological position, much against his will (as here argued).

Benefitting from the unexpected freedom of association and expression brought by the Portuguese revolution (25 April 1974) and resulting from the war between the competing nationalist movements (1975-1976), dozens of new autonomous political micro-groups (committees) proliferated, mainly in Luanda but soon spreading to other main cities (Mabeko-Tali, 2023).

Although supportive of Neto's MPLA, these committees were principally led by a young generation that had grown up during the last phase of colonialism

and were therefore unknown to the MPLA's leadership (composed of an older or nationalist generation). They were aged around 17-27 and generally had not taken part in the struggle for liberation; their activism mainly consisted of clandestine political discussions, pamphleteering propaganda within colonial society and minor boycotts. They had grown up in an Angola different to the one the nationalists had known and from which they had been kept away for 20 years, since the late 1950s.

It was a generation that had benefitted from the democratisation and development of the colonial educational system from the 1960s onwards (Heimer, 1979, p. 12; 1980, p. 37; Marques da Silva, 1991). This provided them with a relatively high level of education, making them potential competitors to most of the MPLA's political and administrative cadres.⁵ It was also a generation that experienced the accentuated economic growth of Angola (1961-1973) and became influenced by the passionate, "romantic", political-ideological discussions typical of that day and age (Bhagavan, 1986, p. 7; Hodges, 1987, pp. 29-30; Neto, 1991; Rela, 1992, esp. parts I and II).

They could not be simply classified within the "traditional" segments of the Creole/Mbundu elites referred above. They had heterogeneous socio-economic, racial and regional backgrounds, mixing, for instance, so-called progressive whites with educated blacks and mestizos; youngsters mainly from city centres, but also some from *musseques* (shanty towns); mainly from the coast but also from the interior. They had in common their relatively high education, their young age and their extreme political-ideological positions centred on Marxist theories, although varying within a wide (usually confused and shallow) range. "An eclectic confused ideological approach ranging from pro-Chinese, pro-Soviet, Guevarists, Trotskyists, Albania-ists, Titoists and so on" (F. Vieira Lopes, personal interview, Luanda, March 24, 1998).⁶

After a period of unconditional enthusiasm, most of these youth committees became progressively disillusioned and frustrated with the MPLA's leadership at the ideological, political and economic levels. Some of their members had their first contact with the movement's leadership during the Lusaka "congress" in August 1974. They went there as delegates from Luanda and talked with Neto, expounding their commitment and enthusiasm for Marxist theories and the socialist mode of production, but were struck by Neto's response that it was too

⁵ The term political cadres used as the most intellectually, ideologically and technically prepared members of the MPLA (Duverger, 1959).

⁶ See also in the same sense Carreira (1996, pp. 147-148).

soon to talk about such issues and that the MPLA intended to establish its own model of socialism.⁷

Their idealised image of a revolutionary movement of frontline fighters against capitalism, imperialism and racist South Africa (as internationally expounded by several “committed” academic authors) was also shattered by an undefined, dubious, inconsistent, politically, ideologically and materially opportunistic relationship with Angola’s foreign allies, especially the USSR and China.

Despite the international image, Neto had always had a pragmatic approach towards socialism, as his personal friend Basil Davidson recognised (Davidson, 1980, p. 284). He had always wanted to ensure autonomy vis-à-vis socialist foreign allies to whom he had no political romantic illusions, knowing the real-politik realities, as he experienced when the USSR stopped supporting him in 1973, favouring instead the Eastern Revolt faction (Shubin, 2008, p. 30). At the Lusaka “congress”, the USSR overtly backed Chipenda and only resumed its aid to Neto’s MPLA after Neto’s arrival in Luanda, witnessing the (politically legitimising) massive reception he had in February 1975, which left no doubt which Angolan nationalist, let alone MPLA leader, was the most popular in the country (Shubin, 2008, pp. 38-39).

As also stressed by John Marcum, the MPLA had always remained an eclectic front during the anti-colonial struggle (Marcum, 1978, p. 199).

Previous proposals for a clearer political-ideological position, such as that presented in February 1968 at the “I Regional Assembly of Cadres”, that the movement should convert into an ideologically well-defined revolutionary vanguard party, were deferred until such time as study groups could produce a solid nucleus of ideologically prepared cadres (Mabeko-Tali, 1996, pp. 80-82). Chipenda later characterised the movement as a synthesis:

As a whole, as a synthesis, the MPLA was not a communist movement. That does not mean that there were not within the movement several elements who were communist. (Chipenda, 1995, interview to *Rádio Nacional de Angola*, programme *Foi há vinte anos* – “It was twenty years ago”)

Likewise, as late as August 1975, Agostinho Neto stated that:

The MPLA is not a Marxist-Leninist organisation. Nor is our leadership Marxist-Leninist. [...] We are a large organisation with various shades of opinion and different types of groups. [...] As a heterogeneous organisation, it contains both Marxist and other points of view. (Cited in *Africa Contemporary Record* – ACR, 1976, vol. 8, B423)

⁷ Statements of Jaime Cohen (member of that delegation), cited in Mabeko-Tali (1996, p. 305).

Accordingly, the first constitution (11 November 1975) did not refer to the construction of socialism at all (Constitutional Law, 1975, 11 November).

All this led to the growing disillusionment of the younger generation inside Angola. Such disillusionment was put to the test as soon as November 1974 (a year before independence and a few months after the Lusaka “congress” and the Inter Regional Militants Conference), when a first major delegation of the MPLA arrived in Luanda led by Lúcio Lara to prepare Neto’s arrival, and proposed that these committees simply integrate into the existing structures of the movement. This proposal was strongly rejected by most committees, which opted to maintain their organisational autonomy in the face of the movement’s ideological vagueness (Mabeko-Tali, 1996, p. 282).

The political dynamics and strategy of *Nitistas*

The youth committees proceeded to develop their revolutionary political projects around the issue of *poder popular* (popular power), generally supporting a flexible interpretation of Marxist “democratic centralism” where power is effectively, actively and permanently exerted by the bottom layers of society, whose organisational structures these committees wanted to control with autonomy vis-à-vis the movement’s leadership. Fulfilling such projects, they became deeply involved with lower social-strata organisations, including neighbourhood paramilitary self-defence organisations, workers’ strike movements and independent unions, to whom they lent a political discourse, orientation and structure.

Within the youth committees, a group started to define itself around Nito Alves, who was a rising star ever since the Lusaka congress, where he used extremely aggressive discourse against the other two factions disputing the movement’s leadership – for which Neto was grateful, later supporting Nito’s promotion to the Central Committee at the Inter Regional Militants Conference and, after independence, to Minister of Internal Administration.

Nito led a motley alliance of a few groups and leaders of the young generation of activists who had not fought the war (José Van Dunem, Sita Valles and Rui Coelho) and older nationalists from the first military region in the Dembos forest (Eduardo Evaristo “Bakalov”, Jacob Caetano João “Monstro Imortal”, “Sianouk”, Bernardo Ventura “Ho Chi Minh” and Commander Bagé). The first military region was the oldest (since 1961) and most mythical, but also the one whose guerrillas always severely criticised the MPLA’s leadership, which they blamed for the lamentable conditions the region had endured.

We were the ones who always fought inside the country up to the end of the nationalist struggle, in almost complete isolation and enduring miserable conditions of survival and struggle, operating with some armaments captured from the Portuguese troops, with [a] lack of everything. We were the ones who supported the leadership discourses outside the country saying that the MPLA represented the people and had fighters inside the country besides the bordering regions, but nevertheless they forgot us and did not make any serious effort to support us through all those years. (Commander Bagé, personal interview, Luanda, May 26, 1998)

Nito represented both groups: he was a political commissar from the first military region, but his young age (born in 1945, at Piri, Dembos), his short but effective path as a high school student in Luanda⁸ and his aggressive and unorthodox – confused and shallow – ideological discourse made him close to the young activists.⁹

Nito and his followers first began a struggle for hegemony of *poder popular*, trying to integrate the competing committees, dissolve those that refused to be integrated, and arrest members of those that refused to dissolve (such as the Communist Organisation of Angola, itself evolved from the Amílcar Cabral committees to escape persecution, with several members arrested by Nito as Minister of the Interior); a process that occurred between mid-1975 and April 1976 (L. Araújo, personal interview, Lisbon, March 9, 2008).

Once the competition was eliminated, the *Nitistas* proceeded to institutionalise their *poder popular* through the approval of the Law of *Poder Popular* and subsequent elections to Neighbourhood Popular Commissions, held in May 1976. Sita Valles's autonomous secretariat at the DOM (Department of Organisation of Masses) exerted strict control over eligible names and the electoral process as a whole, allowing the *Nitistas* to control the most powerful (pro-MPLA) neighbourhoods in Luanda (Fauvet, 1978, pp. 88-104).

In parallel and also through Sita Valles's autonomous secretariat, the group managed to infiltrate several MPLA mass organisations: the JMPLA (MPLA's youth organisation), UNTA (MPLA's Union Federation) and OMA (MPLA's women organisation). The moves were so extensive and explicit that they provoked immediate criticism (Fauvet, 1978, p. 93). The DOM Director, Pedro Pacavira (a prominent right-wing member), went even further and immediately

⁸ For bibliographical data on Nito Alves, see Fauvet (1978, pp. 88-104); Mabeko-Tali (1996, p. 398; 2023).

⁹ According to several interviewees, Nito had only read the one and only book there was in the first military region on Marxism (J.-M. Mabeko-Tali, personal interview, Luanda, February 25 and April 27, 1998; Pepetela, personal interview, Luanda, July 7, 1998; J. Pinto de Andrade, personal interview, Luanda, April 16 and April 20, 1998; F. Vieira Lopes, personal interview, Luanda, March 24, 1998).

denounced the existence of a “*Nitista* plot to take over the MPLA’s leadership” (Mabeko-Tali, 1996, pp. 412-414). Although director, Pacavira was unable to exert control over Valles and her group inside DOM due to their political strength.

The *Nitistas* then started a campaign to enlarge their support as much as they could, not only domestically but also abroad. Domestically, in an attempt to accommodate all the discontented citizens and make the most of an increasingly difficult social and economic situation,

Nito and his followers developed an opportunistic argumentation, tailored to the various audiences. When addressing middle social strata [young middle cadres from the state administration and mid-ranking officers from the armed forces], they denounced the lower living standards compared with the colonial period and with the ostentatious wealth of the new rulers, who had access to restricted and luxuriously supplied stores, contrasting with miserably supplied “people’s stores” for general access. When addressing lower socio-economic strata, their discourse included racist arguments, confusing class with race, blaming the petite bourgeoisie (identified with the mestizos and whites at the top of the apparatus) for the scarcity, and denying the long-desired “power to the people”. (J. Pinto de Andrade, personal interview, Luanda, April 16 and April 20, 1998)¹⁰

Externally, the *Nitistas* deliberately looked for the USSR’s support, seen as a key partner. Although the USSR had no military forces in Angola, Cuban and Angolan troops were dependent on USSR’s regular deliveries of military supplies, and the USSR would ultimately influence the alignment of the Cuban forces in any internal conflict. Under the influence of Sita Valles’s groups, the *Nitistas* had already assumed a pro-Soviet stance (proving how shallow the other ideological tendencies were) and started a campaign portraying the MPLA’s top leadership (mainly the Political Bureau) as “dominated by anti-Soviets, Maoists and Social Democrats, led by Lúcio Lara, Carlos Dilolwa and Iko Carreira” (Fauvet, 1978, p. 97; L. Passos, personal interview, Luanda, May 13, 1998; Bagé, personal interview, Luanda, May 26, 1998). Leading the Angolan delegation at the xxv Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in March 1976, Nito Alves and José Van Dunem presented Nito as the representative of the purely Marxist-Leninist wing, supported by former members of the Portuguese Communist Party and Union of Communist Students such as Sita Valles. The move seemed to have had some impact and Nito was treated as an effective chief of state and paid serious political attention (Milhazes, 2013, pp. 74-75; Shubin, 2008, pp. 65-66). His impressive

¹⁰ Supporting the same view are several interviewees (J.-M. Mabeko-Tali, personal interview, Luanda, February 25 and April 27, 1998; Pepetela, personal interview, Luanda, July 7, 1998; F. Vieira Lopes, personal interview, Luanda, March 24, 1998).

speech referred the new law on *poder popular*, “opening the transitional period to the building of socialism”, while establishing a socialist economy with “maximum limitations of tendencies to develop a private sector”; with proper study of Marxism-Leninism, “in ten years’ time tribalism will disappear in Angola” (Shubin, 2008, p. 66).

When Nito returned from this trip, the *Nitistas* seemed to have everything in their favour. Externally, “we thought to have assured the Soviet support” (L. Passos, personal interview, Luanda, May 13, 1998). At the domestic level, their strategy gathered broad social support, ranging from a substantial part of the young activists, workers’ commissions, and micro-independent labour unions, through to the lower social strata, including the so-called lumpen proletariat.¹¹ In its aftermath, even party documents trying to make sense of the attempted coup had to admit that the *Nitistas* had significant social support, including in the civil service (especially the lower and middle levels), the armed forces (especially low to mid-ranking officers), and party mass organisations such as JMPLA, UNTA and OMA. The party tried to justify such support by accusing the *Nitistas* of using a false and deceiving discourse that “duped the masses and our militants [...] camouflaging their essentially reactionary, regionalist and racist ideology” (MPLA, 1977, 1977a).

The Neto leadership’s counterstrategy and reaction

However, the support the *Nitistas* had, or were thought to have, turned out to be insufficient or was made to be so by the strategic reaction of Agostinho Neto’s leadership and its staunch supporters (left and right) and from the *Nitistas* inability to attract either of those two main groups to the movement.

This was due not only to those groups’ strong loyalty to Neto, but also to the specific strategy followed by the *Nitistas*. By targeting the mestizos and whites at the centre of the MPLA’s top leadership, blaming them for the existing problems and frustrated expectations on the amelioration of the quality of life, the *Nitistas* immediately set that group against them. They also distanced themselves from the group around the “Catetes” due to several reasons: their pro-Soviet, supposedly “real” Marxist-Leninist crusade; their view that “the new should replace the old” (disrespecting the historical legitimacy of those who had survived the first anti-colonial insurrection and been victims of colonial prisons) (Mabeko-Tali, 1996, p. 412); the fact that Nito and some of his followers were from Dembos and

¹¹ Agostinho Neto also referred to the lumpen proletariat in a speech he made on 11 June 1977 (cited in MPLA, 1977, pp. 28-29), and David Birmingham also refers to the term (Birmingham, 1992, p. 79).

most of the right-wing tendency was from Catete (there had been an acute rivalry between Mbundu from Dembos and those from Catete since the anti-colonial struggle). Their aim to control the People's Defence Organisation (a paramilitary organisation in the neighbourhoods, that was also being disputed by the right-wing) also triggered another confrontation inside DOM between Sita Valles and Pedro Pacavira.

The attacks on these two major political groups from the *Nitistas* led them to again put their differences aside and unite around their leader and protector against what was perceived as an immediate and common threat; a product of an unknown generation that did not entirely understand the "order of play" to manage the system according to their "acquired" nationalist struggle historical legitimacy.

Their reaction to such threat was firm and planned to counter the *Nitistas*'s strategy both internally and externally. To this end, the Central Committee held one of its most important plenary sessions – the third (23-29 October 1976).

Externally, the leadership targeted the links between the USSR and the *Nitistas*, trying to ensure the support (or at least neutrality) of the USSR and Cuba in case of conflict. To this end, the MPLA finally declared its official allegiance to Marxism-Leninism. Conceding to the Soviet Union Communist Party's long-standing request, the first congress of the movement was planned for the end of 1977, with its main agenda item the formation of a vanguard party of the working class, aiming to construct socialism in Angola (ACR, 1978, vol. 9, B453).¹² After the plenary, Iko Carreira officially announced that "for the MPLA, the only socialism that exists is the socialism of Marx, Engels and Lenin, scientific socialism" (ACR, 1978, vol. 9, B453). It is noteworthy that in May 1976, Prime Minister Lopo do Nascimento had visited Moscow and signed several bilateral agreements, and a couple of weeks before the plenary, Neto visited Moscow (7-13 October 1976) and signed a 20-year "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" with the USSR (ACR, 1979, vol. 10, B509; Hodges, 1987, p. 20).

Domestically, the leadership targeted the *Nitistas*'s ties with lower social-strata organisations – neighbourhood commissions and labour strike movements. After studying several reports that had been previously prepared within a discussion on organisational party problems, it was stated that the main obstacle was the existence of two MPLAs, the official one and the one led by Nito Alves and José Van Dunem, leaving the idea of possible factions. It also suggested that these two Central Committee members, whilst exercising their official functions, had purposely caused food shortages to stir up discontent. It was then decided

¹² On Soviet demands for a congress, see Shubin (2008, p. 24).

that a commission of inquiry should be set up (led by José Eduardo dos Santos) to investigate dissident activity at the core of the MPLA and investigate the reports of food shortages (MPLA, 1977a, pp. 11-13; ACR, 1979, vol. 10, B499-B500; Mabeko-Tali, 1996, pp. 421-422). By then, Nito had been closely monitored by the political police (DISA) for months.

I warned Nito that DISA's men were monitoring our cabinet at the Ministry of the Interior from dawn to dusk, but he did not seem to care, so self-confident and absorbed he was. At the end he rarely appeared at the Ministry, going to those "secret" meetings that we all knew about. (R. Frende, personal interview, Luanda, March 25, 1998)

With the Central Committee's plenary in October 1976, the siege to the *Nitistas* was laid. Nito tried to deny the accusations, resorting to what his supporters had been working on and circulating for several months – *Treze teses em minha defesa* (Thirteen thesis in my defence) – a 156-page document analysing the nature of the MPLA and its turn right, accusing Lúcio Lara of being a "social democrat", a "Maoist" and the person leading this. He claimed that corruption, incompetence and nepotism were rife within the MPLA and that ministers were engaged in diamond smuggling or debauchery, citing Iko Carreira among others (L. Passos, personal interview, Luanda, May 13, 1998; Fauvet, 1978, p. 97).

In the meantime, *Nitistas* leaders started to receive contradictory messages from the USSR embassy (probably hesitating on whether to support the *Nitistas* or not). The group finally attempted a poorly organized and by then much expected (by the leadership) coup d'état on 27 May 1977, resulting in total failure (Mabeko-Tali, 1996, pp. 393-397, 421-427; Fauvet, 1978, pp. 96-97).¹³

As soon as Neto assured the Soviets of his official political-ideological alignment and guaranteed their economic interests for the next 20 years (the 20-year "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation"), the *Nitistas* were no longer useful and support was halted. Considering the contradictory messages sent to Nito and his partners by the USSR embassy, it seems that the MPLA's leadership achieved, if not the neutrality, at least the passiveness of the USSR in not opposing the Cuban intervention on Neto's behalf.

Although the extent of USSR involvement in the 27 May events and the contact that might have occurred between it and Cuba were never significantly disclosed (allowing a great amount of speculation), it seems unlikely that Havana could

¹³ Also confirming the contradictory signals from the USSR embassy, hesitation and confusion within the group are two interviewees belonging to Nito's group: Luís dos Passos (personal interview, Luanda, May 13, 1998) and Commander Bagé (personal interview, Luanda, May 26, 1998).

have intervened to save Neto if the USSR had clearly opposed this.¹⁴ Although Cuba was not an ordinary proxy of the USSR in Angola, pushing its own agenda in search for anti-imperialist internationalist status, and had always unequivocally supported Neto, its presence in Angola was always highly dependent on Soviet arms and logistics and it would hardly be politically independent on one of the main “hot Cold War” stages (Shubin, 2008, pp. 53-56, chs. 4-7).

At the MPLA’s Politburo, there was never any doubt about the relationship between the Soviets and the *Nitistas* until a very late stage. According to Iko Carreira, in the subsequent interrogation of the arrested *putschistes*, the most serious aspect was the Soviet’s direct involvement through two secretaries of the embassy’s military representative, Pavel Stariakov and Yuri Fedin (Carreira, 1996, p. 155). A few months later, in August 1977, Neto travelled to Moscow and had the audacity to confront Leonid Brezhnev:

I came here because such a thing – mutiny – happened, and I wanted to find out from you personally, has Moscow taken part in a conspiracy against me or not? Because as I have been informed, many of your people were involved. (Cited in Shubin, 2008, p. 70; Milhazes, 2013, pp. 78-79)

Brezhnev ignored the question (Shubin, 2008, pp. 70-71; Milhazes, 2013, pp. 78-79). The party’s official account on the attempted coup explicitly confirmed contact between the “factionalists” and the URSS embassy, stating that on the 26 May the factionalists:

have shielded themselves by means of a simulated devotion to this or that friendly country, not hesitating even to visit certain embassies where they engaged in slanders against the MPLA and certain of its leaders and militants. (MPLA, 1977, p. 5)

Likewise, the *Financial Times* reported that:

According to semi-official account, Sita Valles sent a plea for help to the Soviet embassy in Luanda after the coup attempt failed. The message was intercepted but demonstrated that, whatever the position of the Soviets, the coup leaders believed they had the Kremlin’s blessing. (*Financial Times*, 26 January 1978)¹⁵

A massive bloody purge followed the attempted coup, with innumerable deaths throughout the country, particularly of young activists, intellectuals and

¹⁴ Also supporting this argument is ACR (1979, vol. 10, B509).

¹⁵ Also referring the same Nitista hope towards the “soviet rescue” is Birmingham (1992, p. 81).

cadres (Mateus & Mateus, 2009).¹⁶ From then on, they stopped being a threat to the old nationalist generation. At the same time as the purge, on the 11 June 1977, Neto made explicit the directives for the construction of a new party in search of unity, cohesion and internal security: the MPLA would now be in total control and the Politburo would be in charge of everything within the MPLA; no opposition or centre of power parallel to the MPLA would be tolerated (cited in MPLA, 1977, p. 30).

Following the October 1976 Central Committee plenary, the movement held its congress in December 1977. The MPLA was consecrated as the instrument to lead the revolutionary classes towards popular democracy and socialism, a workers' vanguard party according to Marxist-Leninist principles, and added PT to its logo (*Partido do Trabalho*/Labour Party) (MPLA, 1977, p. 17). The new principles were later integrated within the revised constitution, approved in February 1978, which stated for the first time that:

The MPLA-PT constitutes the organised vanguard of the working class and, as a Marxist-Leninist party, it will provide the political, economic and social leadership of the state in its efforts towards the construction of a socialist society. (Constitutional Law, 1978, art. 2.^o, 7th February)

A vast party reorganisation was launched, aimed at institutionalizing and regulating a restructuring process that had started directly after the coup, in order to "correct mistakes, improve working methods, cleanse the organisation of harmful elements and unite all militants through party objectives" (MPLA, 1977, p. 19). The congress decided that there would be new membership rules for the new party and rigid processes were set up to select the members (MPLA, 1977, p. 19). Following three years of restructuring, the I Extraordinary Congress in December 1980 revealed that the new MPLA-PT had 31,098 members, down from 110,000 members at the time of the I Congress (MPLA, 1980, pp. 17-18).

Reignition of left and right disputes towards the MPLA's I Congress

The strategic alliance of left and right wings against the *Nitistas*, the official adherence to socialism, along with the selective reorganisation, reversed the initial advantage the right-wing had in its internal dispute with the left, which then

¹⁶ For a recent journalistic/literary emotional approach on the "27 May" process, vividly recovering the dramatic social impact of the whole process to the English-speaking public, see Pawson (2014).

assumed political ascendancy. However, to the frustration of the left and even of the USSR, this was not as effective as expected.

As soon as the *Nitista* threat vanished, differences between the groups re-emerged and became progressively acute in late 1977 during the preparations for the I Congress. The right-wing reacted to the advancement of the left in the previous months and attempted to place as many of its members as it could on the Central Committee and get at least one seat in the Politburo; a move that was so obvious that it was criticised by some at the congress and reported externally as the action of a “regional lobby known as the Catete group” (Wolfers & Bergerol, 1983, p. 167; Somerville, 1986, p. 86). Although the right-wing failed to get a long-desired Politburo seat, it nevertheless secured several places on the Central Committee, standing its ground in the internal power struggle.¹⁷

By the end of 1977 and during 1978, this power struggle became more politically defined in terms of opposing organisational principles held by each side, as outlined below, following the criteria established by Wallerstein to define left and right in Africa, in terms of economic policy, political management and ideology, and foreign policy (Wallerstein, 1971, pp. 5-10).

The left-wing socialist project, in terms of economic policy, stood for an all-out fight against the “anti-revolutionary” practices that had been evolving since independence, including the black market, absenteeism, diversion of produce and non-fulfilment of production targets.¹⁸ They also supported deeper economic cooperation with Eastern bloc countries, especially Cuba. This position was led by Carlos Dilolwa (Minister of Economy and Planning and Second Deputy Prime Minister).¹⁹

In terms of political management, the left argued for a system exclusively determined by revolutionary ideological criteria, whereby the top (strategic) positions of the party and the state should be occupied by a vanguard, versed in and deeply committed to Marxism-Leninism, “rejecting any criterion of ethno-regional demographic weight” (P. Teixeira Jorge, personal interview, Luanda, June 26, 1998), therefore rejecting right-wing pressure for a black Mbundu power base, which they saw as “backward and tribalistic” (P. Teixeira Jorge, personal interview, Luanda, June 26, 1998; C. Dilolwa, personal interview, Luanda, August 10 and September 7, 1994). Although respecting the possible ideological honesty

¹⁷ From the previously mentioned prominent members of the right-wing, Imperial Santana was the only one out of the Central Committee.

¹⁸ On such practices, see Law for the Disciplining of the Productive Process (Law 11/75, 1975, issue I, nº 29, 15th December).

¹⁹ Supporting this view of Carlos Dilolwa as the mastermind of left-wing policy are several interviews (N'Dunduma, 1998; Teixeira Jorge, 1998; Pepetela, 1998; Cardoso, 1998), and I also had the same sense interviewing Carlos Dilolwa thirty years ago (Dilolwa, 1994).

of such position, we cannot ignore that it also served the personal interests of its proponents within the party; despite the smaller size of this lighter-skinned (mainly coastal) segment of elite, their relatively higher educational level and ideological preparation would ensure their political primacy in a vanguard party, especially now that the revolutionary youth was no longer a threat.

In terms of foreign policy, the left-wing held an intransigent position alongside other socialist countries, reinforcing Cuba's presence at all levels of military and civil cooperation, rejecting any concessions on US/South African demands for Cuban troops to be withdrawn, and rejecting a relationship between the presence of Cuban troops in Angola and the implementation of UN Resolution 435 on independence in Namibia. Likewise, they rejected any negotiation with Mobutu's Zaire, "a long time and declared enemy of [Neto's] MPLA and of Angola", as then Foreign Minister Paulo Teixeira Jorge explained (P. Teixeira Jorge, personal interview, Luanda, June 26, 1998; A. Cardoso, personal interview, Luanda, July 10, 1998).

On the other side, the right-wing held a more pragmatic and "liberal" flexible position on economic policy, accepting socio-economic organisation as it now was – an officially proclaimed socialist model, which pragmatically accepted the economic schemes that had evolved, which straddled legal and illegal markets (private business) through an hierarchical and discriminatory distributive system of benefits and privileges managed by the party leadership (Vidal, 2011, pp. 9-66). They had little faith in the communist policies of collectivisation of the land and other economic assets and criticised the left-wing's radical stance towards private initiative. According to Agostinho Mendes de Carvalho,

I, and others who shared my views, had always rejected Marxism and we were never Marxist. I even warned several of my colleagues at the Central Committee, those who were always defending socialism and Marxism, of the dangers of such an option and that it was going to lead us nowhere. However, once the option was made, we had to adapt as we could. (A. Mendes de Carvalho, personal interview, Luanda, July 17, 1998)

In terms of political management, the right-wing supported a leadership system based on culture and tradition, respecting the demographic weight of each Creole/Mbundu elite segment within the MPLA, through which, though less ideologically and academically educated and from the interior of the country, they could achieve political primacy, dethroning the left-wing coastal ideologues or intellectuals (as they pejoratively called them). According to Mendes de Carvalho,

By then, as today, we must be realistic and cautious towards the regional and racial factors and to the majority in order to avoid negative comments like those usually heard among the people, pointing to the privileges of some whites and mestizos. This has nothing to do with racism, just diplomacy, wisdom and good sense. (A. Mendes de Carvalho, personal interview, Luanda, July 17, 1998)

Once assured of their primacy within the Creole/Mbundu core of the MPLA, they favoured a balanced (secondary) representation of other regional and ethnic sensibilities within the party ranks. Such a logic should be extended to groups outside the MPLA, attracting and co-opting their members within the middle ranks of the party, thus broadening the MPLA's support.

I always stressed the need to be more flexible and less radical and have a clemency approach towards those who fought the MPLA, and that is how you have Edouard Pinnock and others that joined the MPLA. There was no point to cultivate hate, we could reach an agreement if they repented and wanted to join us. (A. Mendes de Carvalho, personal interview, Luanda, July 17, 1998)

In terms of foreign policy, they “placed nationalism above internationalism, having serious reservations about Cuba and the USSR” (A. Mendes de Carvalho, personal interview, Luanda, July 17, 1998), sustaining a more flexible and pragmatic approach towards the West and especially the US and South Africa, as well as their major partner in the region – Mobutu's Zaire. They accepted the possibility of “making concessions” on the US/South African demands for Cuban troop withdrawal “in order to facilitate the implementation of UN Resolution 435” and US recognition of the Angolan government (A. Mendes de Carvalho, personal interview, Luanda, July 17, 1998).

Neto's clarification of governing principles, or the pyrrhic victory of socialism

The struggle for power and for opposing organisational principles between left and right wings reached its height at the Central Committee's plenary in December 1978. The two wings had a head-on collision, pressuring Neto to take sides, but the President's hybrid nature (representing features of both sides and grateful to both) and his already strong personal and institutional control of the whole political system allowed him to choose options close to those proposed by the right-wing (which he effectively shared), but without making it look like a public defeat for the left.

The normative principles of economic practices

Here, the left-wing suffered a major defeat. The pragmatism and “liberalism” of the right-wing won outright.

Internally, the Central Committee plenary gave the go-ahead to private Angolan businessmen to set up construction companies and trucking businesses to transport merchandise to the provinces. At a rally in Luanda the day after the plenary, Neto stressed that private Angolan capitalists would have a role to play in the country's economy (cited in ACR, 1980, vol. 11, B487). Trying to play down the previous statement, a few days later Neto explained that such a move did not mean that the aim of establishing a communist state was abandoned, adding that he looked forward to the day when every Angolan would stand up and say proudly “I am a communist” (Lewis, 1978). According to him, things would be different in 10, 20, or 30 years, but the immediate and urgent need was to get society working smoothly and to solve the people's problems (Lewis, 1978).

Proceeding in his realistic pragmatism, a week later, on 17 December, Neto declared “the need to offer more possibilities to private initiative in our country [...] which is not as counter-revolutionary as might seem at first” (cited in Meyns, 1984, p. 144).²⁰ He also announced that the ban on informal construction would be lifted (recognizing the state's incapacity in the housing sector) and suggested a more flexible attitude towards petit commerce as a way to help rural markets recover, recognizing that “men and women who live in the country suffer a lot, because they can hardly sell, buy or even produce” (Conchiglia, 1978, pp. 23-25).²¹

By then, even foreign observers usually sympathetic to left-wing positions, such as David Ottaway, admitted and justified the need for Neto's pragmatism: “The need for pragmatism is apparent to the visitor. Every Luanda grocery store seems to have a long queue outside, and fruit, vegetables and meat are in short supply” (Ottaway, 1978).

Apparent or not, such pragmatism was seen as a major setback to the left-wing, especially to Carlos Dilolwa, who expressed his disagreement with such concessions, and also with the “patrimonial way of managing the economic affairs”, immediately resigning his place in government (as Second Deputy Prime Minister for Economy) and his Politburo seat (C. Dilolwa, personal interview, Luanda, August 10 and September 7, 1994). Prime Minister Lopo do Nascimento, by then assuming a position close to Dilolwa (although it is arguable whether he

²⁰ Speech by Agostinho Neto made in Luanda on 17 December 1978, entitled “Nothing can stop our revolution” (cited in Meyns, 1984, p. 144).

²¹ Also reported in *Rádio Nacional de Angola* broadcast of 10 December 1978, cited in *Survey of World Broadcast - SWB*, 1978, 13 December; also *Le Monde*, 1978, 12 December.

assumed a left-wing stance in all matters), lost his place at the Politburo and as prime minister, a position that was simply abolished and its powers transferred to the Presidency in a process of power concentration that accelerated (Vidal, 2007).

A few months later, during his May Day speech, Neto specified the new areas open to private initiative – private commercial activities in food and consumer goods – in order to help to make up for shortages caused by inefficient production and distribution (cited in Associated Press, 1979, 2 May). While Neto publicly announced several concrete concessions towards the private sector, the only thing the left-wing achieved was a vacuous May Day Politburo statement denouncing the retrograde values of capitalism held by some sectors of the “*petite bourgeoisie*” (obviously referring to the right-wing).

Some sectors of the *petite bourgeoisie* want to step into the shoes of the colonial bourgeoisie and thus increasingly assume the ideological and moral values of capitalism – disdain for the working class, refusal to solve the concrete problems of the masses, the love of luxury and the easy life, the spirit of ostentation, negligence, political and economic corruption, opportunism, spreading of obscurantism and superstitious concepts – in a word, all the retrograde moral values of the enemy. (*The Guardian* – US, 1979, 9 May)

Externally, Neto had already shown some signs of pragmatism and liberalism even before the Central Committee plenary. In an attempt to normalize economic relationships with the West, he began to approach EEC countries and in July 1978, Claude Cheysson, the EEC’s Commissioner for Development, visited Angola. According to Cheysson,

Angola wanted to increase trade with the West and welcomed Western investment [...] I was struck by the desire of Neto and his ministers to immediately discuss certain development problems. Their traditional partners cannot offer them much in this field. (cited in ACR, 1980, vol. 11, B497)

Belgium Foreign Minister Henri Simonet was told by Neto that Angola was eager to establish cooperative economic relations with Western European countries in order to diversify its international relations and reduce its dependence on Cuba and the Soviet bloc (*The New York Times*, 1978, 18 September; ACR, 1980, vol. 11, B497). Beyond government-to-government agreements, Neto showed his interest in private Western investment on a large scale, mainly oil exploration (besides Gulf and Petrofina), but also development projects in other areas such as fisheries, the recovery of the port of Lobito, the Benguela Railway, and iron

and uranium mines (*The New York Times*, 1978, 18 September; *West Africa*, 1978, 23 October). In the meantime, Angola was granted observer status in the renegotiations of the Lomé Convention (ACR, 1980, vol. 11, B497).

In foreign economic policy, a few days before the plenary, Western reporters had already talked of a shift from ideology to pragmatism as the “economy founders” (Lamb, 1978, 1978a; Ottaway, 1978). By the time of the Central Committee plenary in December 1978, the economic approach towards the West had been reaffirmed and made concrete. Neto announced the preparation of a new and more attractive law for private foreign investment. This was passed in July 1979, covering all aspects of economic activity, allowing benefits such as the repatriation of profits, guarantees of compensation in the event of nationalisation, and exemptions from tax and customs duties (Peel, 1979; Hodges, 1987, pp. 32-33). For the oil sector, the new law was even more liberal than those already approved in 1978 (Bhagavan, 1980, p. 21).

The normative principles of political power management

After the plenary, Neto put in place a management system based upon the distribution of privileges and benefits through rotating nominations to top party and state positions: a carousel of posts which rotated according to the political needs of a system which took into account ethno-regional balances (ethnic, sub-ethnic, regional and racial). This balance was meant to be skewed in favour of the Creole/Mbundu core of the MPLA. Such supremacy was achieved not only through the party's all-powerful presidency, but also through the occupation of a greater number of top positions – mainly in the Politburo, Central Committee, General Staff, central and local government (ministers, vice-ministers, secretaries of state and provincial commissioners), top management of public companies and embassies abroad.

After the plenary, Neto remodelled the top organs of the party and of the state, starting with the Politburo, which was to comprise three black Mbundu/Creoles (Agostinho Neto, Eduardo dos Santos and João Luís Neto “Xietu”), three Mbundu/Creole mestizos (Lúcio Lara, Iko Carreira and António dos Santos França “N'Dalu”),²² three Bakongo (Pascoal Luvualo, Rodrigues João Lopes “Ludy Kissassunda” and Ambroise Lukoki) and two Cabindan (Evaristo

²² As previously mentioned, the other two *mestiços* in the Politburo – Dilolwa and Lopo do Nascimento – had resigned and been dismissed/relocated, respectively (although Lopo is not a *mulato* – son of a black and a white parent – like Dilolwa, he is still a *mestiço* – those with some degree of mixed race between black and white, coming from an old family of mixed race in Golungo Alto - Kwanza Norte province).

Domingos “Kimba” and Pedro Maria Tonha “Pedalé”).²³ The supremacy of the Creole/Mbundu was clear, given its six positions.

The Ovimbundu were the only major ethnic group that were not represented in the Politburo, because of the resentment provoked by renewed UNITA/South Africa offensives and growing linkages between the Ovimbundu and UNITA. Below the Politburo level, some longstanding Ovimbundu MPLA members managed to achieve top positions, such as Faustino Muteka, appointed as Minister of Transport in January 1979 (*Rádio Nacional de Angola* broadcast, 1978, 17 January, cited in *Survey of World Broadcast* - SWB, 1979, 19 January). The Central Committee and central and provincial governments were also reshuffled using the same management principles of rotation and balancing different identities; as a result, in 1979, all provincial commissioners were ex-officio members of the government.²⁴

At the intermediate level of the state hierarchy, a few months before the plenary Neto had already shown signs of wanting to manage the political system based on the strategic or selective integration (co-optation) of members of other movements and even of MPLA's dissident groups. Therefore, on September 16, 1978, he announced a policy of clemency and partial amnesty, followed by integration within the MPLA, towards members of the FNLA, the FLEC, the Active Revolt, the Eastern Revolt and Nito's sympathisers (still without mentioning UNITA) (MPLA, 1979, pp. 43-54). Later on, straight after the plenary, Neto stated that all those who once belonged to such organisations “must have the same opportunities and rights without any discrimination whatsoever” (*Rádio Nacional de Angola* broadcast, 1978, 17 December, cited in *Survey of World Broadcast* - SWB, 1978, 19 December).

As a result of this new policy of clemency, several top members of the FNLA deserted and surrendered to the MPLA during 1979, after which they were reintegrated within state structures, along with the freed members of MPLA's previous dissident groups (Active Revolt and Eastern Revolt). This reintegration or co-optation strategy was pursued in parallel to an also pragmatic or realistic foreign policy.

²³ The sabotage/military activities of the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), a secessionist movement of the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda (Angolan territory on the right bank of the Congo river), and the growing economic dependency of the Angolan economy on oil, demanded special attention for Cabindans, reserving them important places at the top organs of the Party.

²⁴ For a complete outline of such reshuffling, see DR (1978, series I, November-December, esp. n.º 266 to n.º 301; 1979, series I, January-December).

The guiding principles of foreign policy

In parallel to the attempted normalisation of economic relationships with the West during the summer of 1978, Neto also pursued a foreign policy designed to weaken the external support for the opposition movements still fighting the MPLA government – what was left of the FNLA, FLEC, and even UNITA.

At the regional level, and against the explicit opposition of the left-wing members of the Politburo, Neto approached the MPLA's long-time archenemy – Mobutu's Zaire – re-establishing diplomatic relations in July 1978 and officially visiting Kinshasa in the following month. The move was reciprocated by Mobutu, who visited Angola in October. After negotiations, Mobutu announced the expulsion of the FNLA and FLEC from Zaire. On 27 October 1979, Holden Roberto was expelled from Zaire, taking refuge in Paris with several other leaders of the movement, while others surrendered through the policy of clemency.

At the international level, as well as approaching the EEC countries, Neto also approached Portugal, where UNITA found support among Angolan refugees in Portugal and Portuguese returnees. In June 1978, there was an historic meeting in Guinea-Bissau between Neto and Portugal's President Ramalho Eanes, which resolved many of the issues that had kept Angolan-Portuguese relations very cool since independence, such as the activities of the FNLA, UNITA and FLEC in Portugal. Neto invited the estimated 7,000 refugees in Portugal to return home, and a contingent of Portuguese technicians was expected to go to Angola (*Herald Tribune*, 1978, 6 December; ACR, 1980, vol. 11, B496-B497).

Even more audacious was the approach to the US, whereby Neto expressed interest in discussing a possible reduction of dependency on Cuban and Soviet influence, as demanded by the US. The move was immediately reciprocated by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who announced in June 1978 that Washington "wished to improve its relations with Luanda" (ACR, 1980, vol. 11, B493-B494). Right after the Central Committee plenary, a US delegation visited Angola on 13 December and was told by Neto that Angola was "prepared and willing to establish diplomatic relations with the US, although it could do nothing about reducing the number of Cuban troops because of South Africa's daily attacks" (Ottaway, 1978a, 14 December; Lewis, 1978, 13 December; *The Sun* – US, 1978, 13 December).

During the Carter administration, Washington came very close to recognizing the Angolan government despite Cuba's military presence (Wright, 1997, chs. 5, 6; Patrício, 1997, pp. 50-51). The sudden and unexpected death of Agostinho Neto in Moscow during an operation on 10 September 1979, and the election of Ronald

Reagan's Republican administration, overtly supporting UNITA, reversed the diplomatic progress. The new foreign policy pragmatism of Neto and his sudden death fed a major conspiracy theory, with suspicion and resentment within MPLA's right-wing ranks, that the Soviets "helped" Neto to die.²⁵ According to Mendes de Carvalho,

That decision to look for treatment in the USSR was too sudden and unexpected. I was immediately afraid and asked for an explanation from Eduardo Macedo dos Santos [Neto's personal doctor] and he tried to explain the reasons, supporting the idea. I was not convinced and left him a warning [interviewee with finger raised, more like a threat]: "In no circumstance do you leave the President by himself. If anything happens to Neto, you will have to personally deal with me". After Neto's death I went to him for an explanation and he apologetically said he was preparing to enter the surgery room, but the Russians forbade him to enter despite all his insistence and left him waiting outside; that was the last time he saw Neto, they did not even allow him to inspect the body afterwards and he could not do anything about it. What can I say? (A. Mendes de Carvalho, personal interview, Luanda, July 17, 1998)

Although in practice the right-wing positions prevailed, the party's official discourse was more socialist than ever. In terms of specific individuals, the internal balance between the two groups was generally maintained. Except for Carlos Dilolwa, who "resigned from the Politburo and the government against Neto's will" (C. Dilolwa, personal interview, Luanda, August 10 and September 7, 1994), the left-wing members in general kept their seats within the Central Committee and the Politburo, as did the right-wing members on the Central Committee.²⁶

The prevailing practices of the majority of the population from then on

For most of the population, the pragmatic economic positions assumed at the top of the system were clearly seen as an "official" tolerance or unofficial acceptance of the private, informal or illegal procedures that had been rife in all sectors and throughout all social strata.

From then on, a self-legitimising process developed through which the increasing weakness of the official economy to provide goods and services, along with the party's nomination system ("elitist" and discriminatory), legitimised the

²⁵ On this conspiracy theory, see Shubin (2008, p. 71).

²⁶ Left-wingers such as Lúcio Lara and Iko Carreira remained in Politburo and Lopo do Nascimento lost his place at the Politburo but not at the Central Committee; right-wingers such as Mendes de Carvalho, Domingos Paiva da Silva, Bernardo de Souza and Manuel Pedro Pacavira remained at the Central Committee.

informal economy and pushed its ever-increasing development, further weakening the official economy and reinforcing the informal and illegal.

Despite Neto's public pronouncements on the provisional nature of the concessions made to private initiatives, the obvious truth to everybody was that these were just the first of a long list to come. As early as 1981 there were already many signs of the irreversible nature of this process. According to Zenha Rela,

[In early 1980] "despise the private", so characteristic of the first years of independence, was progressively transformed into "desire to be private" [...] Those in 1976 who attacked the saboteurs of the economy [the ones in the informal/private sector] were now beginning their path towards "entrepreneurship", having gone through the intermediate and uncomfortable phase of *candongueiro* [person acting in the black market]. In 1981/1982, signs that this course was already on the way were too many and allowed one to state its non-reversible character. (Rela, 1992, pp. 57-58)

The prevailing solidarities for the majority from then on

Likewise, the primary solidarity criteria used at the top of the party soon spread. The 1980 Congress documents (largely influenced by the left), which denounced all informal activities – generalized thefts, diversion of produce, corruption, organised networks, involvement of managers, cadres and security forces, and so on – also attacked the prevailing solidarities that made these possible, namely the "regionalism, racism and sectarianism [...] which contribute to the disorganisation and indiscipline in production and distribution, hampering the progress [...] towards socialism" (MPLA, 1980, p. 36).

The Central Committee report went even further, stating that:

The [...] elements who take advantage of still-existing prejudice, be it tribal, regional or racial, within Angolan society, just so they can pretend to be "defenders of the people" whilst striving for personal interests or those of their group, must be persecuted as enemies of the working class, of the Angolan nation and of socialism [...]. Regionalism, tribalism and racism are reflections of pre-capitalist production relationships and colonial domination. These concepts, as we have seen, bring about divisions that can be taken advantage of by opportunistic elements in order to divide the popular masses. (MPLA, 1980a, p. 37)

A third Congress document, on economic and social development between 1978-1980, added to these prevailing solidarities "nepotism" and *apadrinhamento* [godfather protection], thus "promoting incompetence" (MPLA, 1980b, pp. 11, 27).

What made ethnicity, regionalism or nepotism “a problem” in Angola, as elsewhere, were the inherent socio-economic distortions they generated.²⁷ These could be felt in daily life in Angola, as a national phenomenon spread throughout the whole country, as stressed by Neto in 1978:

We know that there is tribalism still. It exists and we can feel it here in Bié [central plateau], in Luanda [centre-north], in Zaire [north], and in the provinces of Cabinda [northern enclave] and Moxico [east and south-east]. It is there, despite the work we have been undertaking in order to accomplish national unity. We have achieved much through this effort. However, we have to recognise that tribalism exists. (*Rádio Luanda* broadcast, 1978, 12 February, cited in ACR, 1979, v. 10, B505)²⁸

In these terms one can understand the logic of the political management adopted by the President at the top of the system in favour of a more “balanced” ethnic and regional composition of key institutions: on the one hand, as an attempt to set an example from above in order to avoid radicalising such distortions throughout the whole society and country; on the other hand, as an “official” acknowledgement of the necessity to politically manage such a reality, thus integrating it instead of fighting it.

By the time of his death in September 1979, Neto had settled the dispute on the political-economic orientation of the MPLA, clearly setting out a pragmatic, right-wing, neo-patrimonial path, under the formal and official cover of a Marxist-Leninist workers’ party. Whatever effective socialist project that might have existed, was no longer.

²⁷ On these generic distortions caused by neo-patrimonialism, see Bayart (1993, ch. 1).

²⁸ Later, in December 1978, Neto referred again such problems of “racism, tribalism and regionalism” (*Rádio Luanda* broadcast, 1978, 17 December, cited in SWB - *Survey of World Broadcast*, 1978, 19 December).

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