

# The Angolan Civil War: Conflict Economics or the Divine Right of Kings?

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BEN ROSIE, DEC 2 2020

In 1975, after a hurried exit by the Portuguese, Angola gained liberation and became one of a number of African countries to erupt into conflict in the wake of colonial independence. Like many of its continental peers, Angola lacked a unified independence movement. As a result the three main independence parties, in conjunction with a number of regional and international partners, began the struggle for Luanda and control of Angola. The war raged through a number of different political stages each altering the face of war, including the Cold War, the end of Apartheid and two failed peace attempts, only finding a bitter conclusion in 2002 with the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi.

When looking at the causes of conflict perpetuation it is important not to essentialise, civil wars are complex and can rarely, if ever, be reduced to a single perpetuating factor. Across the African continent it is easy to focus on the idea of 'conflict diamonds', popularised by films such as Blood Diamonds, as the driving force behind conflict. This remains a captivating narrative, simplifying a conflict to look good as a headline. However, this understanding trivialises and barbarises a conflict, distilling war down to nothing more than an exercise in economics through violent means. All conflicts are subject to an element of greed, conflict provides an opportunity and a cover for individuals to make vast sums of money and the Angolan Civil War was no different. The greed/grievance argument is a well-worn path in international relations, however, to reduce a conflict to these terms does it a disservice.

It is also important to understand that conflicts as complex as the Angolan Civil War have many different phases. This conflict has at various times been seen as a postcolonial independence struggle, an ideological conflict, a Cold War proxy and a resource war. It therefore becomes impossible to state the universal importance of natural resources or any perpetuating factor in sustaining violence across the history of the conflict. However, some generalisations can be made to further an understanding of why this conflict persisted for over a quarter of a century. Here we will seek to understand the various importance of three factors in perpetuating the conflict, beginning first with the importance of natural resources in the conflict. I will seek to understand how the economic benefits of these resources functioned differently for the MPLA, who maintained a grip on power, and UNITA, the perennial opposition, as well as how access to different resources altered each sides expression of violence. This essay will then look to other factors in conflict perpetuation and how they are connected to natural resources. Firstly, the Cold War provided the international backdrop to many of the political events of the late 20th century, the Angolan Civil War did not escape this, becoming in part a proxy war as both UNITA and the MPLA received vast amounts of financial and military assistance from the US and the Soviet Bloc respectively. Finally, we will investigate the importance of Jonas Savimbi himself. It is often argued that his single-minded conviction in his divine right to rule Angola was a significant driving force in sustaining the conflict and was a major factor in the breakdown of the peace accords in 1992 and 1994.

### Natural Resources and Their Expressions

Angola's resource endowment stands out amongst even the most resource rich countries. While the focus is understandably on oil and diamonds, as it will be here, Angola also has vast amounts of timber, precious metals and minerals (Malaquias 2001). This abundance of riches funded much of the civil war on both sides. Simplistically,

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Angola's resource reserves can be geographically divided. Much of the oil is found offshore, benefiting the MPLA, who controlled Luanda and the coastal region, while diamond reserves are located largely in the hinterlands controlled at the time by UNITA (Malaquias 2001). This resource wealth to some extent dictated the actions and expression of these two, defining their method of conducting war. For UNITA the diamond wealth afforded them the opportunity to sustain a rebellion against MPLA, often opting for guerilla warfare. Whereas the coastal oil reserves allowed the MPLA to rule through a system of patrimonialism, constructed in the ruins of the colonial governance structures (Stuvoy 2002). In the shadow of the colonial struggle and the rampant deprivation experienced by a significant portion of the population there were certainly grievances enough to explain the advent of rebellion. However, the nature of the colonial struggle and the complex political situation encourages us to look beyond greed/grievance explanations for conflict perpetuation.

It is difficult to estimate just how wealthy UNITA became through the sale of diamonds, due to the clandestine nature of the market. However, Angola is estimated to have the largest diamond wealth in Africa and is responsible for 5-8% of the world's diamond supply at any one time (Premoll 1992). The vast majority of these diamond reserves came to be under UNITA control – between 1981-86 the government's diamond revenue dropped from \$221 million to \$33 million (McCormick 1994). This reduced the government's capacity to gain a military foothold in the hinterlands. Between 1992-2000 UNITA produced diamonds estimated to be valued between \$3-4 billion (Le Billon 2001), which became essential as allies in Zaire and South Africa fell away through their own political upheaval.

UNITA was a relative latecomer in comparison to the MPLA and FNLA and as a result could not engender much support from the Cold War powers during the initial phases of the independence struggle. The resource wealth gained by UNITA as they took control of the hinterlands allowed them to effectively 'buy in' to the conflict and sustain a war effort, particularly early on (Leao 2007). With the resources they had at their disposal UNITA were afforded the opportunity to participate in the civil war, an opportunity Savimbi grasped with both hands (Collier & Hoeffler 2001). They were able to purchase arms and key military equipment essential for guerilla warfare, while amassing a rebel force estimated to be over 60,000 at one time (BBC News 1999). The funds from diamond sales also bought political power as UNITA established an autonomous region 1979 and implemented a quasi-state with education and medical services (Conciliation Resources 2004). Natural resources represented the mechanism through which the perpetuation of war was realised, they conferred UNITA strength and political legitimacy. This allowed UNITA to sustain a civil war from a stable political base. It is fair to say that without diamonds UNITA would not have been able to sustain conflict of any type for such an extended period of time. That is not to say they were the only reason this occurred.

For the MPLA natural resources played a different role. At the beginning of independence the MPLA controlled Luanda and were able to form a government (Leao 2007). Coastal resources, previously controlled by the Portuguese, allowed the MPLA to implement and maintain a system of patrimonial governance. This blended the economic with the political and the political with the personal, distorting the mode of wealth creation (Médard 1982). Authority in Luanda was based on a system of reciprocity in which each level of government was able to personally benefit from the oil wealth, thus securing loyalty. This ensured a certain 'social order' by creating stability based on beneficial reciprocity (Stuvoy 2002). This allowed the MPLA the strength to oppose UNITA and any foreign intervention, while maintaining a grip on Luanda and the levers of economic, and therefore, political power.

Coastal communities benefitted greatly from this oil wealth with these enclaves becoming rich and developed, providing the MPLA a stable region from which to govern. However, this wealth, and by extension governing, did not extend across the whole country, as wealth creation and governing were inextricably linked. Without the control of the resources inland the MPLA could not gain a foothold as the patrimonial system of governance broke down. As the war continued, oil increasingly became used to fund the military and the lifestyles of those in power, while public services and projects fell by the wayside (Le Billon 2001). This reinforced the division between coastal elites and inland communities that appeared during colonialism and deepened the distrust of the MPLA in the hinterland (Le Billon 2001). Oil revenue helped sustain conflict in Angola by stabilising and funding a government, but only in small enclaves. The lack of wealth distribution impeded the MPLA's attempts to control the whole country and allowed UNITA the space to conduct their own conflict. While the balance of natural resources between the MPLA and UNITA was uneven, it allowed both sides to sustain a conflict, while the geography and administration of resources

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also hindered the government's ability to gain an overwhelming victory. However, this understanding of resources essentialises a conflict as beholden to economic factors. This simplistic explanation of the Angolan conflict doesn't provide a broad and nuanced understanding and errs towards a condescending explanation of violence in a poor, postcolonial country.

## **The Cold War Context**

Strategically and economically Angola has always engendered regional and international interest. Foreign support began before independence as the struggle to control Luanda by the November independence date intensified. This section will focus on foreign support for UNITA, however, it is important to note that the MPLA received huge amounts of aid from the Soviet Bloc (Shubin & Tokarev 2001). Without the financial and military support from the USSR and the military intervention of Cuba, it is less likely the MPLA would have been able to control Luanda and form a government (Dunér 1981).

The US has a long standing and complex involvement in Angola, their initial support in the post-independence nation came alongside South Africa and Zaire for the FLNA, and in a lesser capacity, UNITA, in an attempt to stop the MPLA gaining control of Angola (Leao 2007). The ultimate failure of this operation and the involvement of the Cubans and Soviets undoubtedly played a role in future involvement by the US and its regional partners. The US was unwilling to accept a negotiated settlement to this conflict and strongly encouraged Savimbi to militarily oppose the MPLA, in an attempt to disrupt and impede the Soviets (Bender 1981). This early involvement by the US framed the struggle for Luanda as a military problem with a military solution, discounting diplomacy and the potential for a unity government, involving all the major political parties.

Increasingly through the Reagan administration, the right wing, anti-Cuban lobby became progressively more vocal in their support of Savimbi. With the Clark Amendment being repealed in 1985, Reagan could openly support UNITA (Minter 1991). Extensive involvement from the US through the 1980s encouraged South Africa to help rebuild UNITA's military capacity, allowing them to continue waging an increasingly destructive war (Minter 1991). Economic as well as military support from the US was backed up by technical and tactical support from the Apartheid government in South Africa. The support of these global and regional powerhouses emboldened UNITA on the world stage and provided this newly formed organisation the platform to wage war. This assistance wasn't economically motivated, in fact the strong anti-Cuban lobby suggests this was a deeply ideological support based not in the best interests of Angola but in the embarrassment and difficulty caused to the US by having Cuba on its doorstep and the increasingly radical anti-communist rabble in Washington. This allowed UNITA to sustain a war effort otherwise far beyond their means.

The US involvement in Angola was nuanced and complicated, changing over the course of their involvement. However, we can see, after the first attempted intervention to halt the communist MPLA that they did not pull out completely, nor did they seek to engage exclusively with the MPLA to extract oil, as would have been the economically prudent thing to do. The US continued to support UNITA and encourage the South Africans to do the same. Their support both financially and politically undoubtedly sustained the conflict, as without it Savimbi would not have been able to continue for as long as he did. This support was clearly not simply motivated by natural resources. If this were so, the US would have sided with the MPLA. The conservative right buoyed by an anti Cuban and anti communist agenda supported UNITA for ideological and power reasons. For the US, this was an opportunity to oppose and disrupt the communist influence in Africa at a time of heightened tensions between the world's two superpowers, a peaceful transition of power in a liberated Angola was not as important. While resources played a role in the second scramble for Africa and would certainly have motivated policy makers on both sides, the involvement of Cold War powers was as much about power, security and ideology as it was resources. So while natural resources were undoubtedly important in sustaining conflict and gaining international engagement, so too was ideology and the political necessities of the Cold War.

## **Jonas Savimbi's War**

One cannot explain why the Angola Civil War endured as it did without seeking to understand the importance of

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Jonas Savimbi. Few rebel leaders to emerge from the colonial struggle across Africa had such unwavering force of personality, perseverance and resolute self-belief. His own messianic sense of divine fate powered UNITA through over 25 years of conflict and two separate peace agreements. Savimbi was a complex figure supported by the US and South Africa, ostensibly a nationalist but a friend of Che Guevara and a pupil of Mao (Bridgland 1986). He was a man walking a tightrope between ideologies and political powers, consumed by personal ambition. He emerged through the ranks of the FLNA, having been a one time member of the MPLA Youth wing, but disillusionment with the tactics and ambition of his FLNA peers saw him launch UNITA to achieve his political goals and propel him into the leading role (Brittain 2002). While other stakeholders were key too, Savimbi was undoubtedly the single most important actor throughout the conflict.

It was this personality and pervasive charisma that made him an incredibly marketable and palatable potential leader for western audiences (Brittain 2002). He was a figure who could encapsulate the democratic spirit of the Cold War West and oppose the creeping Soviet influence across the continent, acting as ballast against western fears of communism. This image was strictly cultivated in Washington by the well-connected PR firm Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly, who lobbied on Savimbi's behalf (Minter 1991). This bolstered his political and financial leverage in the West, gaining him increasing support in the US Congress, which quickly translated into more than just political power. Western support allowed him to maintain a grip over the Angolan hinterlands, and grew his capacity to continue the destructive civil war with increasingly advanced military supplies and technical support.

Savimbi's charisma and intelligence was matched by a determination and self-belief, bordering on madness, that the presidency was rightfully his. It was this strength of will that forced the resumption of conflict after he failed to gain the presidency through a quasi-legitimate 1992 election, mandated by the Bicesse agreement (Brittain 2002). This peace accord came at an opportune time for Savimbi as the MPLA were militarily weakened and he had been given assurances by foreign powers that the election was his (Fortna 2003). After the failure of 1992 it became clear that a military victory would be the only route to power and Savimbi took to this with a renewed ferocity (Messiant 2004). The war waged after the Bicesse Accord was far more vicious than what had come before. The death toll and destruction caused was immeasurably higher with much of the population starving as supply planes were shot down and infrastructure razed to the ground (Brittain 2002). This was all done in an attempt to gain the presidency, with no regard for the people he would potentially be governing. This second phase of the conflict almost felt like an attempt to punish the population for not confirming Savimbi as their leader. This single mindedness sustained conflict through sheer force of will.

Savimbi's personality played an essential role in sustaining the conflict. Without his intelligence and charm he would not have become such a pivotal figure in the wider politics of the Cold War and would not have received the assistance he needed to perpetuate the conflict during this period. It was also through his specific character and ferocious determination that he forced the resumption of war when things did not go his way. It is difficult to make any definitive predictions, but it is fair to say without Savimbi leading the rebellion, the Angolan Civil War would probably not have gone on for as long as it did and it is telling how quickly the conflict was brought to an end following his death in 2002. UNITA would certainly not have been the power that it was for 25 years. However, it is important to point out that without the financial power of the diamond mines UNITA controlled, Savimbi would have been unable to hire such an expensive PR firm, and his influence, particularly during the Reagan administration, may not have been so great. However, this would also not have been possible without the context of the Cold War. He would not have had such a prominent role in the West's foreign policy if he had not been seen as a bastion of democracy fighting communism, which was, at the time, at the forefront of western political thought.

## Conclusion

It is clear there is no panacea to explain why the Angolan Civil War went on for so long. It must be understood as a series of interconnected factors that ebbed and flowed as the national and international context changed. However, what is also clear is that natural resources played a very significant role in the perpetuation of the Angolan Civil War, allowing both parties to fund a destructive war effort and buy favour with the world's leading powers. Through each 'stage' of the conflict they remained highly significant. Abundant natural resources initially allowed UNITA to become a major player in the post independence war and even after the Cold War engagement had waned, they allowed both

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parties to perpetuate the conflict. Diamonds provided a consistent funding stream for UNITA, allowing it to control much of the Angolan interior, while coastal oil reserves meant the MPLA could maintain control over the centres of power. The balance these resources provided also ensured neither side could score a definitive military victory. It is however important to understand how this fits in with other factors. Savimbi's personality drove UNITA forward through a number of hardships and led to UNITA resuming the conflict after the 1992 election loss. His charisma bought him many friends in the West and ensured political and financial clout through much of the conflict. His sense of divine right undoubtedly perpetuated the conflict and caused untold destruction. However, charisma and determination can only carry someone so far, and it is important to understand how it connects to other outside factors. UNITA would have initially been too weak to contest a civil war, which would most likely have led to the US and its partners dismissing them as a viable candidate. It is even less likely the international community would have become as involved had it not been for the strategic opportunity Angola represented within the political context of the Cold War. Ideologically, at least on the surface, international assistance was provided along Cold War lines, ensuring the conflict escalated and was sustained arguably artificially. While this provided both the USSR and the US the opportunity to bloody the others nose and disrupt their global spread. This Cold War context also provided a platform for Savimbi's personality to shine and become the keeper of western values in Southern Africa.

Natural resources remain such a significant explanatory factor because of their consistent importance throughout every stage of the conflict. Without Angola's natural riches the conflict would not have persisted as it did. They funded much of the hostilities but also made connections between, and provided the platform for, other factors, which allow for a more nuanced explanation of conflict perpetuation.

There are of course a number of factors in conflict perpetuation that could not be explored here. As with most conflicts there was an ethnic dynamic at play in Angola, but to what extent this was important in comparison, or in conjunction with ideological divisions, would be interesting to explore. Equally this essay only explored the ideology of this conflict through the international, within the context of the Cold War. It must also be understood at a local and national level. How important was this divide to ordinary Angolans? What role did ideology play in individuals taking up arms and continuing to fight through difficult conditions? Was poverty and an opportunity to gain a consistent wage a more important factor when considering enlisting rates? We have also not explored the importance of colonial context. Answering these questions represents the next stage in exploring the persistence of this and other conflicts.

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