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José kidding?

Angola's president of four decades may be stepping down, but his cronies will ensure power and wealth stay in the family

Counting close to 38 years in power, Angola's president José Eduardo dos Santos is Africa's second-longest-serving head of state. His face appears on the country's bank notes and on every citizen's ID card. But when some nine million Angolans head to the polls on 23 August to elect their parliament and president, dos Santos won't be on the ballot sheet. His reasons for quitting the post are unclear, though rumours of cancer and frequent trips to a Spanish private clinic abound.

This time around, six parties will compete for control of Angola's parliament. The leader of the winning party will automatically become president. Campaigning began in late July and has continued full-pelt. But while the major opposition parties are putting up a fight, there is little doubt who will win.

In 2012 dos Santos' MPLA, the ruling party since the country's independence from the Portuguese in 1975, won a 72 percent share of the vote. His hand-picked successor, João Lourenço, is expected to pull off an equally impressive feat, given the party's supremacy.

Nicknamed "JLo", the 63-year-old former defence minister is a party veteran with strong ties to the military. His promises to fight corruption, increase transparency and invite foreign investment have been welcomed, albeit with some scepticism, by international observers.

But how much change Lourenço can really bring about remains in doubt. Seen as the candidate of continuity, he joined the MPLA as a teenager when Angola was still a Portuguese colony, going on to study in the Soviet Union and occupy a range of posts in the military and in public office.

Keeping it in the family

Dos Santos, meanwhile, has made sure to stuff his country's institutions and enterprises with cronies, ensuring his legacy continues after he has stepped down. Last year the president appointed his daughter Isabel chief executive of the state oil company Sonangol – the largest source of state revenue and central to an extensive system of patronage. His eldest son is head of Angola's sovereign wealth fund. All the highest posts in the army, police and secret services have gone to close allies. The family has amassed great wealth from Angola's oil production, and will not want a change in the presidency to put that at risk.

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Furthermore, it is doubtful that elections on 23 August will be free and fair. Following an argument over access to polling stations, the government announced it would allow only four experts from the European Union to monitor its elections. In a standard mission, the EU would expect to send around 200 observers. Opposition parties also predict that elections will be skewed. According to a Human Rights Watch Report, "security forces frequently crack down on pro-democracy and human rights activists, raising doubts about whether the elections will be free and fair".

The African Union and the southern African bloc SADC will, however, be allowed to send full observer missions.

Money equals power

Despite Angola's pretence at multi-party democracy, it is essentially a one-party state. UNITA, the second-largest party, has attracted thousands to its rallies with promises of economic regeneration and popular pledges such as a €400 minimum wage. Yet in 2012, UNITA won just 32 of 220 seats. CASA–CE, the other major opposition party, won only eight.

For smaller parties, the cost of running a campaign, funding billboards, organising rallies and paying candidates' travel expenses is simply too high. As long as the ruling party's system of patronage and control over oil revenues endures, rivals will be excluded from power.

Yet the dos Santos star may be fading. Following a devastating civil war that ended in 2002, the president oversaw an oil-backed economic boom.

But the collapse in global crude prices is turning that boom into bust in Angola – Africa's largest oil producer – reducing its foreign exchange revenues. A 2017 report from the International Monetary Fund shows that the oil price shock that started in mid-2014 has substantially reduced fiscal revenue and exports, with halting growth and an aggressive acceleration in inflation. This has highlighted the need to address forcefully the country's dependence on oil and to diversify its economy. In July, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed concern at the state's regressive austerity measures, including an insufficient allocation of resources to the health sector.

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Though Angola still enjoys a higher GDP per capita than many African countries at around $3,800, most of its economic gains end up in the hands of a privileged few. Isabel dos Santos, for example, is estimated to be worth around $3 billion, making her the richest woman on the entire continent.

There is still some room for optimism. Over the last three years, the government has taken steps to mitigate the impact of declining oil revenues. Spending cuts, including the removal of fuel subsidies, are credited with helping create an 18 percent rise in GDP in the non-oil primary fiscal balance over 2015-16. Furthermore the *kwanza,* local currency, has been devalued against the US dollar by over 40 percent since September 2014, with international reserves being used to smooth the depreciation.

However, the exchange rate has been re-pegged since April 2016 leading to an appreciation of the *kwanza* in real terms, and further policy actions are needed to continue adjusting the economy to the new reality in the oil market and to return growth to a level consistent with poverty reduction.

José Eduardo dos Santos' decision to step down from the presidency represents Angola's biggest chance for a fresh start in almost four decades. But will a new face at the top be enough to make a real difference in the lives of ordinary Angolans? A history of cronyism, imitated throughout Africa, says no.



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