

ANGOLA: BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Political, Economic & Foreign Policy Developments: Historical Context Through 2025

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About This Document: *This paper is intended for Washington-based policymakers, Congressional staff, think tank analysts, and business leaders who may have limited recent familiarity with Angola. It provides the essential historical and contemporary context needed to understand Angola's transformation since independence and the strategic significance of UNITA as a political force in 2026.*

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: FROM COLONIAL RULE TO THE 1992 ELECTION

Portugal, Independence, and Three Movements

Portugal claimed Angola as a colonial possession from the fifteenth century, establishing one of the longest and most exploitative colonial relationships in African history. By the mid-twentieth century, Angola's colonial economy relied heavily on forced labor, and the Portuguese Estado Novo dictatorship under Salazar and his successor Caetano showed no willingness to grant independence voluntarily.

Three distinct nationalist movements emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, each with different ethnic bases, ideological orientations, and external sponsors — differences that would prove impossible to bridge and that structured the subsequent civil war:

- **MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola)** — Founded in 1956, Marxist in orientation, led by poet-physician Agostinho Neto. Its support base lay primarily among the Mbundu people of the Luanda hinterland and the mixed-race mestiço community. From the outset it had close ties to the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the Portuguese Communist Party.
- **FNLA (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola)** — Founded in 1962 by Holden Roberto, rooted among the Bakongo people of the north and backed by Mobutu's Zaire and, intermittently, by the United States and China. It never developed the organizational depth of the other two movements.
- **UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola)** — Founded in 1966 by Jonas Savimbi, a former FNLA foreign minister who broke with Roberto over strategy and vision. Savimbi was Ovimbundu — a member of Angola's largest ethnic group, concentrated in the central plateau — and UNITA drew its primary support from that community and from rural southern Angola. Initially Maoist in ideology, UNITA shifted toward a broadly anti-communist stance as it sought international backing, receiving covert US support beginning in 1975 and significant US military assistance from 1985 onward.

The Carnation Revolution and the Collapse of Portuguese Rule

The pivotal moment was not in Angola but in Lisbon. On April 25, 1974, young Portuguese army officers — exhausted by colonial wars in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau that had consumed nearly half the national budget — overthrew the Caetano government in a nearly bloodless coup that came to be known as the Carnation Revolution. The new government immediately committed to decolonization.

The three Angolan movements met with Portugal in January 1975 and signed the Alvor Accords, establishing a transitional government and a timetable for independence on November 11, 1975. The arrangement lasted only weeks. Trust between the movements collapsed almost immediately, and by mid-1975 the MPLA had expelled the FNLA from Luanda in a series of violent clashes.

Independence, Civil War, and the Cold War Proxy Conflict (1975–1991)

When Portugal formally departed on November 10, 1975 — deliberately declining to hand power to any of the three movements — the MPLA controlled the capital and declared independence the following day, proclaiming the People's Republic of Angola under Agostinho Neto. UNITA and the FNLA declared their own rival government in Huambo.

What followed was the immediate internationalization of a domestic power struggle into one of the Cold War's most destructive proxy conflicts. The alignment was stark:

- **For the MPLA:** Cuba dispatched combat troops — ultimately some 40,000 to 50,000 soldiers — along with Soviet arms, East German advisors, and support from sympathetic African states. Cuban intervention proved decisive in repelling a South African-backed UNITA advance on Luanda in late 1975.
- **For UNITA and the FNLA:** The United States provided covert assistance through the CIA (Operation IA Feature), South Africa intervened militarily from Namibia, and Zaire sent forces to support the FNLA. The US Congress, scarred by Vietnam, cut off CIA funding for Angola in early 1976 through the Clark Amendment, leaving South Africa exposed and forcing its withdrawal.

The MPLA consolidated control, the FNLA disintegrated, and UNITA regrouped in its Ovimbundu heartland and the bush of the southeast to wage a sustained guerrilla war. Neto died in 1979 and was succeeded by José Eduardo dos Santos, who would rule Angola for the next 38 years.

Through the 1980s the war intensified. Congress repealed the Clark Amendment in 1985 and US covert military aid to UNITA resumed, ultimately totaling approximately \$250 million between 1986 and 1991 — the second-largest US covert program after Afghanistan. Massive battles in the south of Angola — culminating in the siege of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987–88 — brought the war to a military stalemate that neither side could break.

The New York Accords, Cuban Withdrawal, and the Road to Bicesse (1988–1991)

The stalemate created the conditions for diplomacy. In December 1988, Angola, Cuba, and South Africa — with US and Soviet facilitation — signed the New York Accords (also known as the Tripartite Agreement), under which Cuba agreed to withdraw its forces from Angola in exchange for South African withdrawal from Namibia and a commitment to Namibian independence. Both withdrawals were to be monitored by the United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM I).

With their principal external patrons exhausted or disengaging, and with the Cold War itself ending, both the MPLA and UNITA were pushed toward a political settlement. Six rounds of talks, mediated by Portugal with the US and Soviet Union as observers, culminated in the Bicesse Accords, signed by dos Santos and Savimbi in Lisbon on May 31, 1991. The Accords called for a ceasefire, demobilization of both forces and their integration into a new national army, political multipartyism, and free elections to be held in September 1992 under UN supervision.

In retrospect, the Accords were structurally flawed in ways that made their failure nearly predictable. Demobilization was under-resourced and poorly monitored — the UN budget worked out to approximately \$1,100 per soldier demobilized, compared to \$7,400 in Namibia. Both sides cheated: they turned in old and unusable weapons while concealing newer ones. The proposed unified national army barely materialized. Critically, both Savimbi and dos Santos each believed he would win the election and used the Bicesse process primarily as a vehicle for consolidating power, not as a genuine commitment to democratic governance.

The 1992 Elections: A Flawed Process, a Disputed Result

Angola's first multiparty elections were held on September 29–30, 1992, under UNAVEM II supervision. Voter turnout was extraordinary — over 91% of registered voters — a testament to Angolans' desperate desire for a peaceful resolution of their conflict. In the presidential race, incumbent dos Santos received 49.6% of the vote against Savimbi's 40.1%, with neither reaching the absolute majority required to avoid a runoff. In the legislative elections, the MPLA won 129 of 220 National Assembly seats with 54% of the vote; UNITA won 70 seats with 34%.

The UN's Special Representative Margaret Anstee declared the elections "generally free and fair" — precise and careful language that papered over significant structural problems. The same qualification was endorsed by the US, EU, and other international observers. What the qualifier "generally" acknowledged, without stating explicitly:

- **Incomplete demobilization.** Both armies remained largely intact going into election day. UNITA in particular had not disarmed in any meaningful sense, retaining the military capacity it would shortly exercise.
- **Structural MPLA advantages.** The MPLA controlled the state apparatus, state media, and public resources — a playing field that was anything but level. As UNAVEM's own Margaret Anstee later acknowledged, the international community had "tried to buy peace on the cheap."
- **Documented irregularities.** UNITA's specific fraud allegations — centered on discrepancies between the official count and its own parallel tally — were not fabricated, even if their precise scale was contested.
- **Runoff never held.** Dos Santos's failure to reach 50% should have triggered a constitutionally mandated runoff. It never occurred — a structural failure of the process that left the presidential question genuinely unresolved in legal terms.

Whatever the legitimate grievances about the process, the international community overwhelmingly viewed Savimbi's response as disproportionate and indefensible. Within weeks of the results, UNITA remobilized its forces and returned to war. The so-called "Third War" — the deadliest phase of an already devastating conflict — had begun. In Luanda, MPLA security forces and armed

civilians massacred thousands of UNITA supporters and members in what became known as the Halloween Massacre of late October and early November 1992 — a pogrom that the MPLA government has never fully accounted for, and that adds essential moral complexity to any simple narrative of who bears responsibility for the post-election catastrophe.

NB: *The 1992 election was Angola's first experiment with democracy — imperfect in process, catastrophically mishandled by both sides in its aftermath, and ultimately a tragedy that set the country back a decade. Understanding this history is essential context for appreciating what UNITA represents today: a party that has fundamentally repudiated that legacy, and that in 2022 contested disputed election results through legal and political channels rather than military ones. That transformation is not incidental — it is the core of UNITA's contemporary identity.*

II. FROM WAR TO COMPETITIVE DEMOCRACY (1992–PRESENT)

The Lusaka Protocol, the GURN, and UNITA's Parliamentary Role (1994–1998)

The Third War, while catastrophic, also produced a new round of exhaustion on both sides. The 1994 Lusaka Protocol attempted once more to implement a ceasefire and power-sharing arrangement. Crucially, it required the 70 UNITA deputies elected in September 1992 to be reinstated in the National Assembly, and it reserved 17 central government positions for UNITA representatives.

These provisions were not fulfilled quickly. For nearly five years, the National Assembly functioned without UNITA's elected members. It was not until April 1997 — following the establishment of the Government of National Unity and Reconciliation (GURN) — that UNITA deputies finally took their seats in parliament. Simultaneously, UNITA received four cabinet ministries: Geology and Mines, Health, Trade, and Hotels and Tourism, along with seven deputy minister posts. Eleven of the top 32 government positions were formally allocated to UNITA.

The arrangement was fragile from the start. Savimbi refused to come to Luanda and participate personally in the GURN, demanding guarantees the government declined to provide. By late 1998 he had returned to full-scale war. UNITA parliamentarians who remained in Luanda did so by publicly breaking with Savimbi — they were no longer truly representing the movement but rather a compliant rump faction the MPLA recognized as the "legitimate" UNITA for purposes of the power-sharing framework. By 1999 the fiction had fully collapsed.

The End of the War and UNITA's Transformation (2002–2017)

The war ended not through negotiation but on the battlefield. In February 2002, Angolan Armed Forces tracked and killed Jonas Savimbi in Moxico Province. His death removed the one obstacle that had repeatedly prevented UNITA from accepting peace terms. Within weeks, a ceasefire was signed, and the Luena Memorandum of April 2002 formally ended the armed conflict.

UNITA's post-war transformation was painful and slow. Its cadres were demobilized, its external networks dismantled, and its political identity had to be rebuilt from scratch — without its founding leader, with the MPLA firmly controlling the state, the oil revenues, and the international narrative. Elections were held in 2008 and 2012 but under conditions so heavily skewed by MPLA control of state resources and media that UNITA won only 10% in 2008 and 19% in 2012.

Through this period, President José Eduardo dos Santos — who had ruled since 1979 — used Angola's extraordinary oil wealth, particularly after the mid-2000s boom, to consolidate MPLA power, rebuild Luanda, and co-opt potential opponents. The dos Santos family accumulated vast personal fortunes. His daughter Isabel dos Santos became, for a time, Africa's wealthiest woman and head of the state oil company Sonangol. Corruption was not incidental to the system — it was the system.

The Lourenço Reform Era and the 2022 Political Earthquake

In 2017, dos Santos — facing declining oil revenues and internal party pressure — stepped aside, anointing Defense Minister João Lourenço as his successor. What followed surprised many observers: Lourenço moved against the dos Santos family's business interests, prosecuted several prominent figures for corruption, and signaled openness to Western investment and institutional reform. He earned the nickname "JLo" and a reputation as Angola's unexpected reformer.

The transformation of the political landscape became dramatically apparent in the August 2022 general elections — the most competitive in Angolan history. The MPLA received 51% of the vote to UNITA's 44%, with UNITA winning 90 National Assembly seats compared to the MPLA's 124 — a surge from just 51 seats in 2017. UNITA won the capital Luanda by a wide margin, securing 63% of the city's vote. The MPLA's diminished majority, now below two-thirds, stripped it of the ability to amend the constitution unilaterally — a structural shift of lasting importance.

UNITA disputed the official results, citing discrepancies between the National Electoral Commission's count and its own parallel tally. Legal challenges were dismissed by the Constitutional Court, as in prior elections. But the political momentum belonged unmistakably to UNITA — and critically, the party pressed its challenge through legal channels and public advocacy, not military force. The contrast with 1992 could not be more stark, and is itself a central part of UNITA's contemporary identity.

UNITA's Current Position

In November 2025, Adalberto Costa Júnior (ACJ) was re-elected UNITA president with 91% of the vote at the party's 14th Ordinary Congress — defeating Jonas Savimbi's own son in the process, a result that both demonstrated ACJ's commanding internal authority and symbolically closed a chapter of dynastic succession politics within the party. UNITA has declared 2025 the "Year of National Unity for the Alternation of Power," with the 2027 elections firmly in its sights.

ACJ has been a consistent and credible voice for democratic accountability. He has publicly condemned the MPLA's pattern of awarding government contracts without public tender — what he has called the "new face of corruption" — and has pressed for genuine electoral reform ahead of 2027. His leadership style is substantive, internationally oriented, and deliberately moderate in tone. He is not a grievance politician but a credible would-be head of government.

III. THE ECONOMY: OIL, DEBT, AND DIVERSIFICATION

Angola remains one of sub-Saharan Africa's largest economies, but its structural vulnerabilities have deepened since the oil price collapse of 2014–2015 exposed the fragility of a single-

commodity state. Petroleum accounts for roughly 90% of export revenues and nearly half of government income.

Macroeconomic Conditions

The Lourenço government negotiated an IMF Extended Fund Facility arrangement in 2018 and pursued a program of macroeconomic stabilization. Progress has been uneven. Inflation fell from 21.4% in 2022 to 13.6% in 2023, then surged again in 2024, peaking at an estimated 31% mid-year — the highest in nearly a decade. The Angolan kwanza has depreciated substantially, and basic services remain severely inadequate: as of 2022, only 57.7% of the population had access to basic water, 52.2% to sanitation, and 48.5% to electricity.

Angola exited OPEC in 2024 — partly to maximize production outside quota constraints, and partly as a signal of its desire to diversify international partnerships. Major Western energy firms — Chevron, ExxonMobil, TotalEnergies, ENI, BP, and Equinor — have maintained and in some cases expanded their Angola operations.

The China Debt Problem

With approximately \$17 billion in debt to China, Angola stands as the most indebted African country to Beijing — a legacy of the infrastructure-for-oil arrangements that financed post-war reconstruction. Managing this debt overhang while diversifying partnerships is a central strategic challenge. Angola has sought to renegotiate terms with Chinese creditors and has been deliberately building Western alternatives, most visibly through the Lobito Corridor.

UNITA's Economic Platform

UNITA's economic vision centers on the premise that genuine governance reform is the prerequisite for sustainable development. Its platform argues — compellingly — that the MPLA's corruption and opacity have structurally depressed Angola's economic potential by deterring legitimate investment, enabling capital flight, and misallocating oil revenues. UNITA advocates for transparent public procurement, rule-of-law reforms that protect private property and contracts, diversification beyond hydrocarbons, and accountability in the management of natural resource revenues.

For US business audiences, this is a substantive and serious agenda. A UNITA-led or coalition government would represent not merely a change in political personnel but a qualitative change in the governance environment — one that would make Angola a more attractive and lower-risk destination for US investment across energy, mining, agriculture, and infrastructure.

IV. FOREIGN POLICY: ANGOLA BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

The Lobito Corridor: The New Geopolitical Axis

The single most consequential development in US-Angola relations in a generation is the Lobito Corridor — a railway and port infrastructure project linking Angola's Atlantic coast at Lobito through the Democratic Republic of Congo to Zambia's copper belt. The corridor is designed to move critical minerals — cobalt, copper, lithium — from some of the world's richest deposits to Western markets, reducing dependence on Chinese-controlled supply chains.

The concession for the railway's operation was awarded in November 2022 to the Lobito Atlantic Railway (LAR), a joint venture comprising Trafigura (49.5%, Singapore-headquartered commodities trader), Mota-Engil (49.5%, Portuguese construction multinational with deep historical roots in Angola), and Vecturis (1%, Belgian railway operations specialist). The consortium committed to invest \$455 million in Angola under a 30-year concession extendable by up to 50 years. Total projected investment over the concession lifetime exceeds \$800 million.

US government financing has been substantial and bipartisan — over \$4 billion in aggregate from the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), culminating in a December 2025 loan signing of \$753 million concluded under the Trump administration. President Biden made a historic visit to Angola in December 2024 — the first ever by a sitting US president. The Trump administration has maintained the project while reframing it from climate language toward critical minerals supply chain security and great-power competition with China.

The China and Russia Dimensions

Angola's decision in 2022 to reject a Chinese bid for the Benguela Railway concession in favor of the Western LAR consortium was a consequential geopolitical signal. China's state media responded by accelerating investment in a competing project — the TAZARA railway upgrade linking the same mineral-rich hinterland to Tanzania's Indian Ocean ports — making explicit that a genuine geopolitical competition is underway.

On the Russian side, Angola's military and security establishment was built on Soviet hardware, doctrine, and relationships stretching back to 1975. Those institutional loyalties do not dissolve quickly. Despite Lourenço's personal inclination toward Western engagement, Angola's tentative commitment to purchase US defense equipment has faced documented resistance from pro-Moscow elements within the security apparatus. In November 2024 — just weeks before Biden's visit — an Angolan delegation traveled to Moscow and signed security agreements and acquired Russian telecommunications equipment.

US Security Assistance: A Growing Portfolio

The US-Angola security relationship has expanded substantially since 2020 across multiple programs:

- **IMET (International Military Education and Training):** The foundational program, financing professional military education for Angolan defense personnel at US institutions, deploying training teams to Angola for maritime security, medical readiness, and English language training.
- **Military Assistance:** Over \$18 million provided from 2020–2023 — a significant increase over prior years, covering training, professionalization, and equipment.
- **Maritime Equipment:** Eight rigid-hull inflatable boats delivered to the Angolan marines through 2025, with operational training.
- **Cybersecurity:** A \$1.4 million initiative supporting Angola's national cybersecurity strategy.
- **Joint Defense Cooperation Committee:** Established in 2024, producing Angola's first defense acquisition and cross-servicing agreement with the US.
- **Military Intelligence:** Angola co-hosted the 2023 Directors of Military Intelligence Conference in Luanda with 29 countries attending.

- **State Partnership Program:** In 2025, Angola was matched with the Ohio National Guard — the DoD's flagship program for institutionalizing military-to-military and whole-of-society partnerships. Notably, the program was originally created in the 1990s to assist former Soviet-bloc nations emerging from Soviet influence — an irony not lost on those who know Angola's history.

V. UNITA'S RELEVANCE TO US INTERESTS IN 2026

UNITA in 2026 is a fundamentally different entity from the Cold War-era insurgency many may remember — or from the movement that catastrophically returned to war in 1992. It is the largest opposition party in Angola's National Assembly, has demonstrated it can win a majority in the country's capital, and is led by a credible, internationally sophisticated president in Adalberto Costa Júnior. **The party's decision in 2022 to contest disputed results through courts and public advocacy rather than arms is not a detail — it is the single most important fact about modern UNITA.**

The case for Washington's engagement to help ensure a truly free and fair election in August 2027 rests on three mutually reinforcing arguments:

The Democracy Argument:

A credible opposition is the essential ingredient of any genuinely democratic partner. The US has invested billions in Angola on the premise of a rules-based, governance-reformed relationship. UNITA's electoral strength — and the integrity of the 2027 process — will determine whether that premise is honored or hollow.

The Governance Argument:

Sustainable US investment in Angola — in the Lobito Corridor, in energy, in mining, in agriculture — requires rule of law, contract enforcement, and transparent procurement that MPLA one-party dominance has historically undermined. UNITA's platform explicitly addresses these conditions. A more competitive political environment, regardless of who wins, produces better governance outcomes for all investors.

The Geopolitical Argument:

A more genuinely democratic Angola is a more reliable Western partner — less susceptible to Russian and Chinese pressure on its political elite, less encumbered by institutional loyalties that pull against Western defense integration, and more capable of anchoring the kind of rules-based economic environment that makes the Lobito Corridor and similar investments durable. UNITA's leadership does not carry the Soviet-era obligations that constrain the MPLA's room for maneuver.

The 2027 elections are the horizon.

UNITA believes it can win outright or force a coalition outcome that ends 52 years of unbroken MPLA rule. Whether or not that result materializes, the trajectory of Angola's democratic development — and the durability of its Western alignment — will be substantially shaped by what happens between now and that vote. Washington's engagement with UNITA now is an investment in that outcome.