



Street art, 2017, Fabien Blanc

EXTERNAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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**Perestroika in
Botswana and Angola**
By Fabien Blanc

CONTEXT

ANGOLA

- Angola has been independent from Portugal since 1975. It has a presidential system and a unicameral parliament, with the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola), the party in power since independence, holding 150 of the 220 seats.
- In August 2017, President José Eduardo Dos Santos, weakened by health problems and the fall in oil prices that began in 2014, preferred to organise his succession rather than risk being ousted from power.
- In September 2017, he appointed his Defence Minister Joao Lourenço, hoping that he would protect his interests and those of his family (his daughter Isabel Dos Santos had been appointed head of the state oil company Sonagol, the regime's cash cow, and his son Jose Filomeno Dos Santos had been appointed head of the sovereign wealth fund).
- In his first months in power, Joao Lourenço dismissed the key men of the previous regime, including the children of his predecessor and the generals who held the country's economic reins, and took control of the MPLA, the state within the state.
- With the support of public opinion in his country and in the international community, he launched an anti-corruption campaign, imprisoning several former pillars of the regime, and launched a movement of politi-

-cal liberalisation, freeing opponents, engaging in dialogue with the unions, opening up the media, etc.

BOTSWANA

- Botswana's politics have always been dominated by the Khama family, who are also of royal lineage: Sereste Khama since independence, then his son Ian, head of the armed forces, vice-president and president.
- In April 2018, however, a period of transition began for constitutional reasons: Ian Khama chose his successor Mokgweetsi Masisi (having failed to impose his brother Tshekedi Khama), who was elected president and will probably be re-elected at the end of the year.
- Even though Masisi was placed in power by Ian Khama, he quickly showed clear signs of independence and then defiance, notably by replacing key figures in the previous administration. He embarked on a process of political liberalisation, but now has to contend with the open hostility of Khama and his clan.

'HOWEVER SELF-EVIDENT THEIR TRUTH MAY BE TO US, (...) THE OPPOSITE OF A FACTUAL THING IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE'.

In Angola, Eduardo Dos Santos took power four years after the country's independence, only to relinquish it last year.

In Botswana, Seretse Khama took power at independence, and held it until his death; his son Sereste Ian Khama became de facto head of the army in 1977, then Vice-President from 1998 to 2008, and finally President from 2008 to this year.

So there is a certain stability of family power in these two countries, and until last year, we were in the strict pattern of a Humian *'de facto thing'*: for their people, the Dos Santos and the Khamas had always held their country, so there was no reason for that to change. For as long as she can remember, for anyone under the age of 40 in these countries (i.e. 90% of the population), there has never been a leader other than the current one.

And yet. And yet *'however self-evident their truth may be to us, (...) the opposite of a factual thing does not allow itself to be possible'*.

And so the reign of the Dos Santos came to an end in Angola, dismantled piece by piece, politically and economically, by a Joao Lourenço whose appetite came with eating.

And so it was that the reign of the Khamas came to an end in Botswana, to the astonishment not only of the main parties concerned, but also of Botswana's civil society (which wasn't

asking for much), the neighbouring SADC states and the (rare) international observers.

AMBUSH IN ANGOLA

Under Eduardo Dos Santos, the regime was based on an excessive personification of power. This is a strength as long as the legitimacy of the leader (a hero of the liberation struggle, their very own De Gaulle) is strong, but it is also a weakness to uncouple the stability of a regime from its institutions, which are supposed to sustain it. As a corollary, as soon as the leader shows signs of physical weakness, the lieutenants get restless and ambitions grow; everyone wants to be Caliph instead of Caliph.

Dos Santos, so shrewd, had anticipated and announced his retirement a few years ago, in order to look for a successor: it was a decoy to spot the (naive) ambitious people who were going to step out of line. Unfortunately, they were ostracised at best, and jailed at worst.

In this way, Dos Santos managed to gain a little time, to slightly postpone the deadline; but when the illness really announced itself, when the old lion showed a second sign of weakness, when the old liberation fighter approached 80 years of age, then the court became agitated.

The potential successors, scalded, experienced the prisoner's dilemma: who is going to decide first [1], and what if it

was another trap? All those who were waiting their turn in the MPLA were staring at each other in the face.

Dos Santos himself chose Joao Lourenço, who seemed the most controllable. At the same time, he took steps to protect his own interests by giving the purse strings to his children: Sonangol [2] to his daughter Isabel, the sovereign wealth fund to his son Zenu.

In this way, he controlled the sinews of war, and thought he was safe. He was therefore surprised, like everyone else, Angolan citizens and foreign observers alike, when Lourenço used the institutions in blitzkrieg mode to take everyone by surprise and turn the tables. Admittedly, Dos Santos had been intelligent enough to anticipate the situation, hoping in this way to save his legacy, but in the new conditions of austerity that were difficult to manage (falling oil prices), it was becoming difficult for his bluff to hold up: public opinion was no longer behind him, and the MPLA caciques were going to be loyal to the new hand that was feeding them, in a spirit of self-interested 'loyalty'. A system of prebends and patronage works like a Ponzi pyramid: the minute there is no more money flowing into the system, it collapses like a house of cards.

In an oil-rich society, a society that was only able to survive thanks to the (admittedly limited) trickle-down effect of oil wealth, the fall in the price of oil [3] sounded the death knell, and Lourenço had no choice but to change his system of governance.

When he takes over, or rather when Dos Santos throws him the hot potato, he knows he has to inject cash into the system.

But the economy is sluggish, 90% dependent on oil for exports at a time when the price of a barrel of oil has fallen from \$100 to \$40. As a result, it needs foreign currency, i.e. from the IMF, the World Bank, bilateral donors (led by China), and FDI; and all these saviours need a strong gesture to be convinced that corruption, which has reached such levels that it is killing the egg, the chicken and the wheat, is going to be eradicated. The Angolan Attorney General, Hélder Fernando Pitta Grós, has set up a unit specifically dedicated to the fight against corruption.

Secondly, JLo had to build a reputation for good governance that would compensate for his lack of historical stature and personal charisma (paradoxically one of the main reasons why he was chosen).



João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço (président de l'Angola) au Parlement européen à Strasbourg, 2018.

JLo knew that civil society would only be patient for a short time: for them too (especially for the young urbanites on Facebook), it was necessary to let go of some ballast. In short, it was a question of political survival, as in South Africa. Eighteen months on, Joao Lourenço seems to have made a success of his gamble, remaining popular even among young people, who affectionately and ironically nickname him JLo (finding '*an old general trained in Moscow*' sympathetic never ceases to amaze local star and committed rapper Luati Beirao).

Last but not least, JLo was happy to settle his accounts. He was still reeling from the desert experience following the decision of the man he is now replacing. Luanda is also buzzing with an old story about Dos Santos seducing JLo's wife in the maquis during the war against UNITA. Revenge is a dish best served cold, and small deceptions sometimes end up in the big story.

In the end, JLo knew he had to strike hard and fast, use the element of surprise, and mobilise both symbols and institutions. He took over the MPLA (at the congress on 9 September 2018), removed his predecessor's daughter from Sonangol... and, in the ultimate crime of *lèse-majesté*, put his son Zenu in prison.

A UNITED KINGDOM

Ilan Khama was not in an easy position in his kingdom of Botswana. On the one hand, he is the son, grandson and great-grandson of a king and the founder of the nation, destined for power from his earliest childhood. On the other hand, he has to respect and honour his father's other legacy: from a legal-rational point of view, his father is THE African star pupil, held up as an example, if not by his (jealous) peers, then at least by Westerners and their institutions. He is in fact one of the rare African counter-examples of good governance that gives hope to the continent: who would want to be the one to trample on this heritage?

So Ian Khama had no choice but to respect the Constitution and step down after his statutory two terms in office. The expected consequence was that he put a loyalist in his place, presumed to be loyal, to keep it warm (after having tried to place his brother Tshekedi).

Except that. Except that Masisi, his successor, committed a crime of *lèse-majesté*: presumed to be a mere lieutenant, he quickly realised how fed up the BDF (the ruling party) and the people were. But above all, he had no desire to be Khama's Medvedev, supervised by his henchman Isaac Kgosi, at the head of the secret services [4]. So first he placed his allies in key positions, while remaining publicly respectful of Khama. He gave precedence to expertise over political loyalty in the appointments, and then chose to strike very early and very hard, using his country's institutional resources: the arrest, in handcuffs of the all-powerful former head of the

secret services on his return from Dubai. The same man who had declared in April 2018, before a parliamentary committee, that he was accountable to no one.

Atfu, Masisi had the weapons of war withdrawn from the Ministry of the Environment (which it nevertheless needs against the heavily armed poachers), headed by Khama's brother, Tshekedi): this shows the level of mistrust that had arisen between the two clans.

And after these initial measures, which were surprising in their scale and speed, it was now too late for Khama not to counter-attack.

To drive the symbolic point home, Masisi refused to allow Khama to hire Kgosi as his private secretary: it was the little extra (free?) humiliation [5] that broke the masks and marked the beginning of the open confrontation. Khama called a press conference to announce that he would be taking legal action against the state through the lawyer Duma Boko, who also happens to be the leader of the opposition (as a reminder, Khama is still a member of the BDP).

Masisi himself recognises this feud, and is now sufficiently confident to afford himself the luxury of frankness: in his address to the nation on 5 November 2018, he admits that his fellow citizens are *'aware that the transition with the previous administration was not as smooth as expected'* [6].

This *'phase of confrontation thus reshuffles the cards within the ruling party'* [7], and while there are certainly personal reasons [8] that explain Masisi's



Mokgweetsi Masisi, President of Botswana, during an official visit by a Botswana delegation to the WIPO headquarters in Geneva, 2023

actions, there is also a political calculation, in a country of 2 million inhabitants where there are 800,000 15-34 year olds, and where the ruling BDP is experiencing a structural erosion of its electorate. Masisi knows 'that you don't run a country like you run a regiment', and this formulation is not just a criticism, not even a veiled one, of his predecessor, but also an indication of the strategy at work behind the change and liberalisation. Indeed, the strategy of transparency and openness responded to the criticisms of the press (which he now has on his side) and the opposition, and cut the latter's ground from under its feet. He presents himself as a president who listens and plays a team game, with the result that he has a high approval rating and consolidated power, which was not a foregone conclusion a year earlier.

So yes, Masisi is manoeuvring intelligently and in a calculated manner,

but we can only be delighted if this ultimately contributes to a strengthening of good governance. A fortiori if the example is to be imitated by the SADC neighbours, or even beyond.

**EVERY FLATTERER LIVES AT THE
EXPENSE OF THE ONE WHO
LISTENS TO HIM**

In Angola, as in Botswana, we have just witnessed the opportunism of young wolves, tired of waiting, certainly, but also the advent of a generation of politicians aware of the urgency of putting their country back on track in order to anticipate and prevent a social explosion of youth along the lines of the Arab springs. This renewal has brought in leaders who are aware that for every young person who arrives in Lampedusa with the energy of despair, there are nine who remain there, at the end of their tether.

So even if these accelerated changes were partially caused by external events (oil prices, the age of the leader, etc.), pressure from civil society was necessary. And as a result, the new strongman has realised the value of relying on civil society to make up for a lack of historical charismatic legitimacy and to strengthen himself in anticipation of a counter-attack from old leaders who have been ousted but are not without influence (because they still have patronage networks and significant financial resources).

Democratic legitimacy as a crutch, ultimately, and international society as a support, the two going hand in hand since it is also necessary to give guaran-

tees in terms of good governance (except with China or Russia).

Finally, the fight against corruption was no longer even a moral and/or marketing choice, but a condition for the survival of the regimes, so much had the phenomenon become a cancer. Without making any pledges to fight corruption, it would have been impossible to bring in investment, and therefore foreign currency, to get the economic machine going again and keep the people off the streets (after having fed them with hope), because *'ballots are not for eating'*.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

- [1] 'Who's going to make a move ?'
- [2] State oil company, the regime's cash cow, source of 90% of foreign currency.
- [3] 115 USD in July 2014, less than 30USD eighteen months later.
- [4] Directorate of Intelligence and Security.
- [5] *'Khama is a proud man. You denigrate him, and his ego explodes. What broke the relationship are statements that denigrated Khama's legacy as well as not fulfilling the promises the two men entered into. Khama had legitimate expectations that the incumbent will protect his interests. That abrogation which amounted to sheer betrayal triggered a chain of events. Statements from the Office of the President attacking personal Khama and his associates prompted Khama to retaliate.'*
- [6] *"Mister Speaker, Batswana are all aware that the transition from the previous administration has not been as smooth as expected. However, it ought to be noted, I have in my attempt to smoothen the process engaged senior citizens namely; His Excellency Dr. Festus Mogae, His Honour Dr. Ponatshego Kedikilwe, Honourable Ray Molomo, Honourable Patrick Balopi and Honourable David Magang to assist and lead in smoothening the transition. I regret to announce that their efforts have not borne fruit up to this point. In the true tradition of Botswana, such mediation should be managed, for the benefit of everyone. Worth noting, however, is that there is in place legislation that governs the benefits and entitlements of Former Presidents. I have no intention whatsoever of breaking the law. I intend to apply the law to the letter."*
- [7] Thibaud Kurtz
- [8] Masisi publicly accused Khama of 'not respecting him' after the latter arrived late for a public meeting with his successor.