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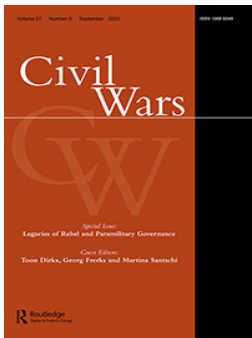
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The Legacies of Defeat: UNITA and the Changing Fortunes of Legitimacy in (Post-)War Angola

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ABSTRACT

What are the legacies of defeat? This article examines the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), a rebel movement which fought a 27-year long civil war against the Angolan state until its military defeat in 2002, and traces its strategies of legitimisation during and after the war. Focusing on the alternative imaginary of the Nation upon which UNITA constructed its social base, I argue that the legacies of defeat depend on the ability of armed groups to keep alive the narratives that supported their struggle and articulate them with shifting local realities in the post-war environment.

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Introduction

Research on rebel governance has shown that armed groups cannot rule by violence alone (Mampilly 2011, Arjona *et al.* 2015, Arjona 2017, Kasfir *et al.* 2017). Their legitimacy during civil wars and their capacity to ensure ‘civilian participation’ in the war effort (Kasfir 2005), as well as their ability to transform into political actors after the end of a violent conflict (Manning 2007, Zeeuw 2008) depend on their ability to rule and be granted recognition as rulers by the population under their control (Terpstra and Frerks 2017). Building coherent narratives about the origins of the conflict and the necessity to take up arms, as well as providing services to the civilian populations living in zones under the control of armed groups are important elements of this strategy (Péclard and Mechoulan 2015). Indeed, violence has potentially contradictory consequences for armed groups. It serves as a means to address grievances and thus legitimises their very existence, but at the same time, it can also have delegitimising effects, since it casts a ‘shadow’ of suffering and destruction upon the very population whose interests they claim to defend (Schlichte 2009). To mitigate these potentially delegitimising effects, armed

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groups need to make this violence socially acceptable and to 'turn it into authority' (Schlichte 2012, p. 723), that is a socially accepted form of domination (Hibou 2011).

The rebel governance paradigm thus rests on the central idea that civil wars do not only destroy existing polities but that they contribute to shaping and producing new, alternative social and political orders (Kalyvas 2006, Arjona 2017), thereby suggesting that civil wars are an integral part of processes of state formation (Tilly 1985, Hassner and Marchal 2003, Clapham 2017, Grajales and Le Cour Grandmaison 2019). Indeed, while violent conflicts and civil wars are often seen as external and in opposition to the state, violence is deeply entrenched in the history of state formation (Grajales 2016). In particular, it has been at the core of the exercise of power in colonial Africa, shaping symbolic representations as well as day-to-day practices of rule in the (post)colony (Mbembe 2001, Bayart 2008).

In other words, studying representations of power developed during wartime, and in particular, the use of violence as a repertoire of rule (Lombard 2016), the symbolic (Förster 2012, Hoffmann and Verweijen 2019) and practical dimensions of the political institutions developed by armed groups, as well as armed groups' legitimisation narratives, and analysing how these play out beyond the end of military hostilities, is key to understanding the role of civil wars in state formation (Popineau 2023). Thus far, however, 'the rebel governance literature has been primarily focused on the drivers of rebel governance rather than its outcomes' (Loyle *et al.* 2023, p. 271), and the emerging literature on 'Legacies of Rebel Rule', to take up the title of the special issue to which this article contributes (see also Dirx 2020) has focused mainly, if not exclusively, on the ways in which 'victorious rebels' (Lyons 2016c) influence processes of state formation and politics in the post-war context (Müller 2012, Martin *et al.* 2021). Questions revolve around the possible links between (former) rebels and authoritarian rule (Lyons 2016a, 2016b, Slater 2020), based on the realisation that variations in the type and form of post-war regimes have war time origins (Huang 2016) and that ideologies developed within rebel movements also contribute to explaining their post-war politics (Thaler 2012).

This article contributes to these ongoing reflections by concentrating on the legacies of rebel defeat. How do armed groups shape post-civil war state formation processes after they have lost the war? What remains of the narratives and symbolic repertoires upon which they built their legitimisation strategies? And what remains of the institutions through which they governed the territories that came under their control during the war? I argue that defeated rebel movements provide a valuable, if counter-intuitive, entry point into the study of the legacies of governance by armed groups. In order to do so, I propose to focus on the symbolic and imaginary foundations of the power armed groups exercise during and after the war, since, in most

instances, defeated armed groups have lost the material capacity to directly rule over specific spaces and have few possibilities of influencing politics at the national level. I therefore contend that their legacy depends on their ability to articulate the narratives upon which they built their claim to legitimacy during the war with shifting local realities in the post-war environment.

The article draws on the history of the civil war in Angola and on the role of the National Union for the total independence of Angola (UNITA¹), an armed group founded in 1966 as one of the three competing nationalist movements which fought for Angola's independence – and against one another (Péclard 2021). Angola's independence was achieved in 1975 in the midst of what was to become one of the longest civil wars in Africa. At independence, UNITA went from 'liberation' to 'rebel' movement, and, with the support of the USA and apartheid South Africa, it fought against the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a Marxist-Leninist party that had taken power in the capital Luanda at independence with support from Cuban troops and the Soviet bloc (Wright 1997, Guimarães 1998, Gleijeses 2002). The end of the Cold War permitted a first peace agreement in 1991, and in September 1992 Angola held its first democratic elections. The process, hastily organised in a context where neither of the parties was willing to accept electoral defeat, failed and the war went on for another decade, causing up to 500,000 civilian casualties and forcing approximately one quarter of the population to flee their home. Eventually, UNITA's founder and historical leader Jonas Savimbi was killed in February 2002 and the movement surrendered on 4 April of the same year. Having lost the war, UNITA was forced to transform itself and survive as a 'standard' non-armed political party in a context where the MPLA's hegemony was stronger than ever, reinstating a form of one-party state in a seemingly pluralist democratic regime (Schubert 2015, Soares de Oliveira 2015).

With its particular trajectory, UNITA offers interesting insights for the study of the legacies of armed rule. At the height of its power in the mid-1980s, it controlled vast swathes of the Angolan territory, where it established 'state-like' structures based on a solid security apparatus, but including a vast network of schools, hospitals and medical outposts, support to agricultural production and an administration (Pearce 2015). Savimbi was received in Washington as a Head of State by the Reagan administration, since the USA only officially recognised the state of Angola in 1993, after the end of the Cold War. In the second half of the 1990s, however, Savimbi became the epitome of a blood- and money-thirsty warlord, and by the time it was militarily defeated in 2002, the party was under international sanctions in the wake of the conflict diamond campaign (Global Witness 1998). Angola's post-war politics proved particularly challenging for UNITA, since both the civil war and the war to peace transition contributed to the concentration of power in the

hands of the ruling elite, in a country where elections have so far only taken place at the national level, and where the party in power designates all power holders from the top to the bottom of the administrative and political ladder, thereby strongly limiting the possibility for opposition parties to articulate an alternative local political agenda. However, 20 years after the end of the civil war, UNITA is the second political force in the country, and it managed to seriously challenge the MPLA's hegemonic rule, especially in the national elections held in 2017 and 2022 (Pearce *et al.* 2018, Pearce 2022).²

In order to analyse the changing fortunes of UNITA's claim to legitimacy and its post-war legacies, I take up Bazcko and Dorronsoro's definition of civil wars as 'the coexistence within the same national territory of different social orders related to each other by violence' (Baczko and Dorronsoro 2017, p. 322). I concentrate on the social order that UNITA created, on its relations to the competing social order of the ruling MPLA, and on the consequences that the advent of peace had on the survival of UNITA's social order in the post-war period. In doing so, I focus on the imaginary foundations (Castoriadis 1987) of UNITA's power and rule, and, wherever necessary, on the institutions into which this translated. I trace the historical roots of the 'nation view' (Duara 1995) upon which UNITA's claim to legitimacy rested, how this relates to the general issue of the quest for legitimacy by armed groups, and how a military defeat impacts on these dynamics.

Legitimacy is not a static quality, with which institutions or people are simply imbued, but a constantly negotiated power relationship. And this process of negotiation depends on the ability of people, political leaders, movements and institutions to instil a belief in their justification to rule. Following Schlichte and Schneckener, I therefore refer to the term here 'in a purely empirical understanding, ignoring all normative or legal usages' and consider legitimacy as 'the belief in the justification or the moral validity of a political organization and its activities', a belief that can 'exist both within that organization and outside its boundaries' (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015, p. 413). I focus on the ideational foundations of this belief, looking at UNITA's strategy to legitimise itself and its actions through narratives and institutions.

The article proceeds as follows: I start by looking back at UNITA's main strategies of legitimisation during the civil war and how they played out at different stages of the conflict. The next section concentrates on the end of the war in Angola, the MPLA's strategy to achieve peace and its consequences for UNITA in the post-war period. I argue that, by winning the war, the MPLA won the right to not only control all levers of the political and economic transition, but also to impose its own version of the history of the war, and beyond that of the formation of the Angolan nation. This strongly constrained UNITA's room for manoeuvre in its post-war legitimisation strategies. The third section turns to youth politics in urban Angola, and how this

led to an interesting shift in UNITA's strategy. Indeed, the party, under its new leader Adalberto da Costa Júnior, is increasingly addressing a disenfranchised urban youth. While this strategy has proven rather successful in electoral terms, it also highlights the ambiguities and tensions that a defeated armed group has to confront in its claim to legitimacy.³

UNITA and the Politics of (De-)Marginalisation

UNITA's strategy to stay out of the 'shadow of violence' (Schlichte 2009) throughout the civil war was a complex and changing mix of three elements. A rhetoric of marginalisation that was crucial to create and later maintain its support base; Savimbi's own charisma and his growing authoritarianism; and international support. In this section, I look at how these elements played out from the mid-1970s until Savimbi's death and UNITA's crushing military defeat in 2002.

Championing the (Post)Colonial Margins

At the time of independence in 1975, UNITA was by far the smallest of the three Angolan nationalist movements, and it was still mostly a 'party of cadres' without a real social base (Messiant 2008, p. 47). After failing to take control of the capital Luanda, it retreated to the city of Huambo, in the centre of the country. In 1976, the MPLA, supported by Cuban troops, took over the Central Highlands,⁴ and UNITA was forced to retreat into the *matas* (bush) of South-Central Angola and to start what the movement's own mythology would later on refer to as its 'Long March'.⁵ The march was in reality a long flight from the MPLA and its Cuban allies that eventually brought UNITA's troops and thousands of accompanying civilians to settle in the far South-Eastern corner of the country, an area known by the Portuguese as the *Terras do Fim do Mundo*. This is where, in close vicinity of the Zambian and Namibian (then still under South African control) borders, UNITA eventually established its bush 'capital', Jamba.

Paradoxically, UNITA's 1976 military defeat became a political 'success' because it provided the narrative that allowed it to become a military-cum-political movement with a proper social base (Péclard 2012). This narrative was as straightforward as it proved effective. It presented UNITA as the champion and defender of those individuals and social groups whose history of articulation with the Portuguese colonial world *and* whose experience through the process of decolonisation could be summarised as a long trajectory of progressive social, economic, political and even racial marginalisation. In particular, the takeover of power by the MPLA, a party with strong roots within the – mainly urban – creolised elites of Angola, became, in UNITA's

rhetoric, the symbol of the postcolonial extension of colonial policies of estrangement and oppression.

UNITA's rhetoric of marginalisation was also meant to address profound differences between the social worlds that it and its rival MPLA represented. At the time of independence in 1975, this rhetoric focused on two main dividing factors which were the product of Angola's long history of interaction with Portugal. The first was of a social and cultural nature, and UNITA insisted that the MPLA exclusively represented what Christine Messiant (2006, 2008) called 'old *assimilados*', that is the small urban bourgeoisie which was part of the socially creole and racially mixed society nurtured by the long presence of Portuguese and other European merchants, traders and settlers in Angola, an elite which developed its own urban creole culture, expressed mainly through literature and music (Leite 1996, Moorman 2008), and whose mother tongue became Portuguese in the course of the 20th Century, while most of them lost their active knowledge and practice of Angolan indigenous languages. The second was racial, and UNITA presented itself as the defender of the rights of Black Angolans against what it argued was the postcolonial extension of racially based exploitation on the part of White and *mestiço* Angolans. This vision was rooted in what I have called a 'culturalist modernisation' project. Mostly developed within Christian missions, this perspective promoted the modernisation of Angolan societies through the reinvention of traditional African cultural values within a Christian mould, and it became one of the ideational pillars of UNITA's discourse (Péclard 2012, 2015).

UNITA's rhetoric and strategy of legitimisation evolved after independence. While the historical marginalisation of the people and social groups that UNITA claimed to represent remained a central trope in its discourse, in the course of the 1980s, the movement went through three parallel processes: 'an ethnicisation of its power structures (globally in favour of the Ovimbundu)⁶, a tribalisation (in favour of Bié, where Jonas Savimbi came from), as well as a personalisation and nepotisation of power within the party' (Messiant 2008, p. 49). In the process, UNITA appropriated the meaning of Ovimbundu ethnicity, attempting to present the party and 'its' ethnic people as one and the same reality (Pearce 2008, Martins 2021a).

Violence, Rebel Governance and International Support

The broad narrative of marginalisation and UNITA's role in supporting the victims of this centuries-long process was at the heart of the movement's quest for legitimacy at the local, national and international levels. Trying to respond to civilians' quest for a 'normal life' (Hibou 2006, 2011) in spite of the disruptions caused by the war proved to be equally important in UNITA's strategy, both locally and internationally.

After its initial defeat in 1976, UNITA gradually developed a vast network of military outposts and bases, as well as an important apparatus of civilian governance in the so-called *Terras livres* that came under its control. The symbolic and political centre of this network was Jamba, UNITA's 'bush capital' which was established in 1978 as a detention centre for UNITA convicts (Chiwale 2008, p. 254) but had become by the mid-1980s the centre of its power. Jamba was important metaphorically as it 'represented the symbol of [UNITA's] force and the expression of [its] organisational capacity' through the provision of 'electricity, running water [...] schools for primary and secondary education, a secretarial school, a Protestant and a Catholic church'.⁷

Many of the young Angolans who joined UNITA in the late 1970s and early 1980s were from families of 'new *assimilados*' (Messiant 2006). These were families who, thanks to their education within mostly Catholic and Protestant mission schools, had de facto acquired a social status close to assimilation, while being kept at the margins of the colonial world by a discriminative legal and political system. Families who, in the particular context of the Central Highlands, had had virtually no possibilities of social interaction with the 'old *assimilados*' culture and society out of which the backbone of the MPLA emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Neto 2012). For the young new *assimilados* of the Central Highlands, UNITA therefore represented an alternative path towards a modern, independent Angola, a different and competitive 'nation view' (Duara 1995) to that offered by the MPLA.⁸ Jamba and UNITA's world seemed to offer this young generation a world where a renewed sense of 'honour' (Iliffe 2005) could be found in the 'culturalist modernisation' (Péclard 2015) that its nationalist project rested upon.

In the course of the 1980s, Jamba was visited by a stream of conservative politicians and journalists who celebrated the role of UNITA and Jonas Savimbi as 'freedom fighter'. Every visit was the opportunity for the movement to showcase its ability to run a civilian administration and operate as a state-like structure. Throughout the Cold War, UNITA was in the privileged position of not needing to draw on local fiscal resources thanks to the international aid that kept flowing, and life in Jamba is remembered by many UNITA supporters as a time when the party provided for food, education, health and security to its 'citizens'.⁹ Jamba was indeed a de-monetised economy. As one of Pearce's informants who grew up in Jamba recounts, the first time he saw money was in 1995 (Pearce 2015, p. 109).

Fully equipped with an air-strip, a complex system of anti-aircraft defence,¹⁰ Jamba was of course primarily a military base that became crucial for UNITA's military supplies, especially in view of its direct vicinity to South African territory. It also grew into a highly securitised and tightly controlled political and social space. While references to 'traditional' Angola were central to UNITA's claim for legitimacy,

Savimbi also growingly instrumentalised 'tradition' to sustain his claim to power and his authoritarian rule (Heywood 1998, 2000). According to several written accounts (Bridgland 1995, Chiwale 2008) and oral testimonies,¹¹ any kind of dissent was met with very harsh violence, including death sentences as in the case of the party's former representative in the USA, Tito Chingunji (Bridgland 1995), or the burning alive of women accused of witchcraft. The triple process of 'ethnisation', 'tribalisation' and 'personalisation' of power (Messiant 2008) referred to above was key to strengthen Savimbi's growingly totalitarian hold over UNITA but it also led to conflicts and divisions within the party.¹²

In May 1991, a first peace agreement was signed between UNITA and the MPLA-led government, under the auspices of a troika of observers (Portugal, the USA and Russia). The Bicesse Peace Accord, as it was known, was made possible by the end of the Cold War and the so-called 'linked solution' which saw for the retreat of Cuban forces from Angola and the granting of Namibia's independence by South Africa. In September 1992, the country's first democratic elections were held under UN supervision. UNITA, which had the military upper hand when the Bicesse Accord was signed, went to the election convinced of its own force and of the power of its rhetoric. Under the slogan '*agora é nossa vez*' ('our turn has now come'), it mobilised the tropes and symbols that sustained its claimed to legitimacy with 'marginalised' Angolans. But Savimbi's posture in 1992 was also one of military aggressivity. He appeared in Luanda in full military attire, while his opponent's image had been carefully brushed by a Brazilian electoral marketing firm which made him much more compatible with the expectations of the international community and supported the MPLA's campaign to depict Savimbi and UNITA as 'barbarian' (Martins 2021b).

As the war broke out again immediately after the failed electoral process in September 1992, UNITA quickly retreated to its strongholds in the Central Highlands, especially in the cities of Huambo and Bailundo. In Huambo, Savimbi's exercise of power, however, proved ill-adapted to the social and cultural diversity of an urban setting, and when the city was taken over by governmental troops in 1995, UNITA's violence and the near-total social control that party structures, including its infamous secret police BRINDE, exerted left deep negative marks (Beck 2012, Pearce 2015). Besides, in the course of the 1990s, UNITA also lost its international allies and became a pariah movement in the wake of the 'conflict diamonds' campaign, as we shall see in the next section.

Peace and the Politics of Oblivion

On 20 February 2002, Jonas Savimbi was killed in an ambush in the East of Angola, not far from the Zambian border. Within weeks, surviving UNITA generals and the political direction of the party agreed to lay down their weapons and surrender to the MPLA forces.¹³ A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the two parties on 4 April 2002, and 4 months later, more than 80,000 ex-UNITA soldiers had been demobilised, while 5,000 former UNITA soldiers were integrated into the *Forças Armadas de Angola* (FAA) (Porto *et al.* 2007, p. xiv). The surrender of UNITA was as much a political victory for the ruling MPLA and President dos Santos as a military success. In what follows, I turn to the context that explains the 'outbreak of peace' in 2002 (Pearce 2005), and I explore the consequences this outright victory had over UNITA's legacy as a former rebel ruler.

(Conflict) Diamonds Are Not Forever

UNITA's defeat in early 2002 was the result of a significant military offensive launched by the MPLA in 1999. The offensive took place after half a decade of 'no peace, no war' (Richards 2005) and in a context that was, both internationally and nationally, growingly unfavourable to UNITA. With the end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, it had lost one of its main sources of supply. The US, under the Clinton administration, officially recognised the Angolan state in 1993 and shifted their support to the MPLA. As of 1997, however, pressure also started to rise on the MPLA when voices calling for a negotiated settlement to the Angolan civil war became more vocal, both within the country and internationally. In particular, for the first time in the country's history, Protestant and Catholic churches overcame their historical divisions and joined efforts in an ecumenical pro-peace committee that called on the two parties to find an agreement and engage in a wide-ranging process of reconciliation so as to overcome Angolan society's deep divisions (Messiant 2003b, Comerford 2005). In 2001, the pro-peace movement caught further international traction when Bishop Kamwenho, one of the movement's leaders, was awarded the Sakharov price of the European Parliament for his role in the search for peace in Angola.¹⁴ Against this backdrop, imposing a military end to the war became the MPLA's strategy to prevent the Churches, and beyond them, civil society associations, from gaining influence and forcing the dos Santos regime to make political concessions, not only to UNITA itself as part of a potential peace settlement but towards more pluralism and democracy in general. As for President dos Santos, he exonerated Prime Minister Marcolino Moco by abolishing the function itself in December 1998, thereby concentrating all executive powers in his own hands in order to lead what he presented as a 'small war to end the war' and to brand himself the 'Architect of Peace'. Far

from being just a 'small war' (Messiant 2001, 2002), however, the 1999–2002 offensive proved very costly to the Angolan population, with thousands of civilians forcibly displaced, subjected to extreme violence and famine.¹⁵

Angola's 'illiberal peacebuilding' (Soares de Oliveira 2011) also strongly impacted UNITA's strategies of legitimisation. This was even more so as UNITA became increasingly delegitimised, both internally and internationally in the last phase of the war. At the height of its military power in the months following the resumption of war in 1992, UNITA controlled up to 80% of Angolan territory (Vines 1995, Messiant 2008, Chap. 3), including Huambo, the country's then second-largest city. By the mid-1990s, however, the tide had turned, and UNITA was forced to retreat into a guerrilla mode of operation after losing Huambo and most of the towns it had conquered, except Bailundo and Andulo, two small towns in the Central Highlands from where it continued to operate in a growing isolation. In this context, it is mostly control over Angola's diamond fields, in the provinces of Lunda-Norte and Lunda-Sul that allowed UNITA to sustain its war effort (Cramer 2006, p. 149). However, with the campaign against 'conflict diamonds' that started in the mid-1990s (Global Witness 1998) and eventually paved the way for the signature of the Kimberley process in 2003, UNITA's international position became even more delicate. The civil war in Angola had turned into a paramount example, both academically and in the policy world, of a depoliticised 'resource war' (Le Billon 2001), and Savimbi into the archetype of a ruthless modern warlord (Reno 1998). The Angolan civil war thereby ceased to be considered as political and came to be seen as resorting mainly to the domain of international justice, as rebel movements drawing on conflict diamonds were increasingly considered as criminal entrepreneurs rather than as 'rebels with a cause' (Marchal and Messiant 2002, 2003). This shift, that Messiant aptly called the 'judicialisation' of the Angola civil war (Messiant 2003a), also meant that a political or negotiated settlement to the war was becoming more and more difficult to stand for, since it would imply a negotiation with a potential 'war criminal'.¹⁶

The 'judicialisation' of the war played an important role in supporting the MPLA's decision to opt for a military solution, since it largely contributed to turning UNITA and its leaders into international pariahs and therefore unfit negotiation partners. This was even more the case as the MPLA's military offensive was sustained by a media campaign aimed at demonising the enemy. As a result, when the Angolan civil war drew to a military close in 2002, it is not just UNITA and Savimbi who were denounced as 'warmongers' and 'creators of divisions', but all the social groups that UNITA claimed to stand for who became potential enemies of the nation.

In other words, the 'outbreak of peace' (Pearce 2005) made it possible for the MPLA to impose its own narrative about the war thanks to its military victory and the international support it gathered. This narrative wove several

threads together: it poised to create peace as a complete rupture from the past, thereby casting the war into oblivion; it re-cast the conflict not as the result of long-standing divisions within Angolan society, but as the product of the greed for power of one individual and his close allies within UNITA; it aimed at delegitimising not only UNITA as a rebel movement, but the individuals and social groups who recognised themselves in the movement's narrative of marginalisation, i.e., UNITA's people – *o povo da UNITA* (Pearce 2008, Martins 2015); and, finally, by giving a central role to President dos Santos as the 'Architect of Peace' it paved the way for the increased centralisation and personification of power that took place after 2002.

The New Angola of the 'Architect of Peace'

The Luena Memorandum of understanding signed on 4 April 2002 envisaged a blanket amnesty 'covering all infractions committed in the framework of the armed conflict that opposed UNITA and the Government' (quoted in Lima 2019, p. 115). This was the cornerstone of the MPLA's strategy towards the civil war: rather than engaging in a complex and protracted process of 'dealing with the past', its military victory allowed it to circumvent public discussions about the war and 'move forward' towards a 'new Angola' (Schubert 2015). Amnesty was also the basis upon which the regime was able to integrate and co-opt a number of UNITA senior officials into the Angolan armed forces. This was made easier by three interrelated factors. By the time of Savimbi's death, UNITA was very divided. The main division line ran between an 'urban faction', led by Abel Chivukuvuku, a former lieutenant of Savimbi, who had moved to Luanda in the wake of the Lusaka protocol and participated as of 1997 in a government of national unity, and Savimbi's group which continued the war until 2002. For this group, the last 2 years of guerrilla fighting following the MPLA's massive offensive in 1999 proved to be particularly strenuous,¹⁷ and the end of the war came as a relief to many.¹⁸ Finally, the MPLA's rhetoric of peace also struck a very positive chord within the Angolan society at large. After four decades of violent conflict, severe restrictions, internal displacement and suffering, Angolans were yearning for peace. The politics of amnesty, while it was part of the MPLA's strategy to control all aspects of the war-to-peace transition, also eased the reunification of families and communities who had been divided by the war, with members of the same family fighting on both sides.

In this context, UNITA was no longer in a position to draw on the imaginary and the rhetoric of historical, regional, racial and ethnic marginalisation upon which it had built its legitimacy in the eyes of its *povo* – at least not in public discourses and electoral campaigns. Any attempt to do this would be met by accusations formulated in public media or by MPLA officials of warmongering, 'divisionism', 'ethnicism' and of secret intentions to return to war. This,

together with a widely felt war fatigue and a hope for a brighter future in peace, certainly helps explain why UNITA fared poorly in the first post-war general elections held in 2008 (Péclard 2008, Roque 2009),¹⁹ even if the marginalisation of important sectors of Angolan society continued to grow against the backdrop of entrenched ethnic and other stereotypes relations in Angola (Martins 2015).

UNITA's marginalisation in post-war Angola was reinforced by two other factors. Firstly, while power has been historically very centralised in post-independence Angola, after 2002 the centralisation and personalisation of power around the figure of the 'Architect of Peace' grew markedly. Besides, the absence of elections at any other level than the national one meant that UNITA was not able to use the local arena in order to pursue its strategy of defence of 'its' marginalised. Traditional authorities, who could represent in certain areas an important transmission belt for UNITA's discourse, were integrated into the party and state structures, following a long historical dynamic of instrumentalisation that started during colonial times (Orre 2008, Florêncio 2010).

Secondly, while the concentration, centralisation and personification of political power were made possible by the transition from war to peace, an impressive economic boom between 2002 and 2014 permitted hitherto unprecedented levels of economic accumulation. On the back of staggering oil prices, the Angolan economy grew at approximately 14% per year over that period (Soares de Oliveira 2015). For UNITA, this had two major consequences. On the one hand, it reinforced the power of the MPLA as 'gate-keeper' (Cooper 2002) of the Angolan state, making the former rebel movement ever more dependent for its own survival on access to state resources. On the other hand, the economic boom supported the regime's narrative, as the end of the war and the ensuing economic boom inaugurated a period of accelerated 'high modernism' (Scott 1999) that seemed to give credibility to the regime's rhetoric of a 'new Angola'. This rhetoric was also sustained by a broad discourse of individual, social and spiritual 're-birth' borne in particular by the Tokoist movement, an Angolan prophetic Church (Carducci and Péclard 2021). The first post-war decade also confirmed, entrenched and reinforced a long-established dynamic in the history of Angola, the 'extraversion' (Bayart 2000) of its economy and polity, as exemplified by the role of Chinese investments (Power and Alves 2012). More importantly for the argument of this paper, the post-war economic boom and its accompanying modernisation reinforced the MPLA's own narrative about the Angolan nation and its place in the world.

Against this backdrop, UNITA's room for manoeuvre as a political party remained very limited in the first 15 years after the end of the civil war. First, the modalities of the war-to-peace transition meant that its narrative of marginalisation was no longer publicly audible. Second, the post-

war reconstruction of the Angolan state was accompanied by rampant centralisation and concentration of power in the hands of the MPLA and of the inner circle around President José Eduardo dos Santos. Third, Angola went through 10 years of unprecedented economic boom, fuelled by staggering prices on the international oil markets (Soares de Oliveira 2015), which lent credence to the MPLA's own discourse about peace as a new era.

Youth Politics and UNITA's 'Urban Turn'

One of the major social and political developments in post-civil war Angola has been the emergence of protest movements among disenfranchised urban youth. Echoing other similar movements that took place across sub-Saharan Africa in the wake of the Arab Spring (Branch and Mampilly 2015), Angola *Revús* (revolutionaries), as they called themselves, started to make their voices heard in March 2011, when an anonymous activist going by the name of Agostinho Jonas Roberto dos Santos²⁰ called for a public demonstration against President dos Santos' 'dictatorship' so as to force him to step down (Lima 2013, Blanes 2023). The demonstration took place on 7 March 2011, but it only gathered a handful of activists, against massive police presence. Well aware of the potential threat that such a movement represented and showing great concern and nervousness, the Angolan government responded by organising its own 'Peace March' 2 days before the demonstration announced by the *Revús*. The 'Peace March', for which hundreds of thousands of people were bussed by the government and the ruling MPLA, had a double purpose: on the one hand, it was meant as a proof of the regime's mobilisation capacities, and on the other, by placing the march under the banner of 'peace', it clearly indicated that any criticism of the President, would be seen – and treated – as an attempt to 'go back to war', a further indication of the shrinking public space (Faria 2013).

The 7 March demonstration was the first in a series that the *Revús* went on to organise in the capital Luanda and in some other urban centres over the following months and years (Mukuta and Fortuna 2011). While they never gathered more than a few thousand participants, these demonstrations, and the new kind of civic activism that the *Revús* initiated or brought to centre stage, were significant in a number of ways. In a society still deeply bruised by the experience of the civil war and by the traumatic memories of the fierce repression that followed an attempted coup on 27 May 1977 (Pawson 2014), public manifestation of civic or political activism had until then remained marginal. By taking to the streets and confronting police repression, Angola's urban youth of the 2010s broke a social taboo, and contributed to forging new perceptions of citizenship and belonging within Angola society and polity (Faria 2013, Blanes 2023), challenging state control and echoing parallel

struggles around housing and slum demolitions in a context of rapid urbanisation (Gastrow 2017, Buire 2018).

The regime's response to the rise of youth activism was typical of the authoritarian 're-conversion' (Péclard 2008) that characterised it after the end of the war. On the one hand, activists and the demonstrations they organised were severely repressed. This led to a regular stream of arrests, harassment and beatings during demonstrations, and even some cases of physical elimination.²¹ In 2015, repression against youth activists in Angola caught international traction when 15 youths were arrested, while gathered for a regular 'book club' meeting and discuss Gene Sharp's essay *From Dictatorship to Democracy*. They were jailed on charges of 'crimes against the security of the state' and 'rebellion', and eventually condemned to sentences ranging from 2- to 8-year imprisonment.²² On the other hand, the regime also attempted to coopt some of the leaders of the *Revús* into prominent positions within the party structures, or to 'buy' their silence with important sums of money,²³ while relying on its narrative of modernisation and the post-war economic boom to delegitimise dissent.

The *Revús* were obviously – and vocally – against the dos Santos regime and, in great part at least, against the MPLA's enduring hegemony. Their main motto since the 7 March 2011 was '*32 é muito*' (32 is enough), pointing to the number of years José Eduardo dos Santos had been in power since he had been handpicked by the Politbureau of the MPLA after the death of Angola's first President Agostinho Neto. But being opposed to the MPLA did not mean that they were aligned with UNITA. On the contrary, like that of several other youth movements of the 2010s in sub-Saharan Africa (Honwana 2019), their main strategy was to remain outside of the party system, so as to criticise the regime from a civic activism perspective. UNITA, on its part, was caught by surprise by the rise of the *Revús*. It was also ill-equipped to champion their demands. Under President Samakuva (2003–2019), the ideational, symbolic and social centre of gravity of the party had remained very much in line with what it had been under Jonas Savimbi, that is, mostly turned towards the country's hinterland of small cities and rural areas, and very critical of the MPLA's strategy of high modernist urban development with a strong focus on coastal cities. Therefore, while UNITA could no longer fall back on its traditional narrative of historical marginalisation of Angola's rural heartland in order to garner political support, it was not able, until the late 2010s at least, to reach out to new forms of social and economic marginalisation that the *Revús* had managed to bring into the political limelight, namely to connect with the demands and revindications of Angola's urban youth.

Yet, in electoral terms, UNITA has been on the rise since its historical low of 2008, when it only gained 10.5% of the votes in the first post-war elections, while the MPLA's results have been steadily declining.²⁴ In 2022, with a new leader and at the head of a broad electoral coalition, UNITA was closer than

ever to winning the legislative elections with an overall result of 43.9%.²⁵ Most importantly, it won for the first time in two provinces: the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda, and the capital Luanda, home to about a third of the country's population, where support from youth activists was key.²⁶ Several dynamics can account for what seems to have been a successful 'urban turn' on the part of UNITA.

Firstly, while the MPLA had clearly dominated the political and economic scene since the end of the war (Soares de Oliveira 2015, Schubert 2017), by 2017 its image had been tarnished by rampant corruption during the economic bonanza of the 2000s and by the growing personification of power around José Eduardo dos Santos and his family (Pitcher and Rodrigues Sanches 2019). In view of the 2017 elections, the party's political bureau had felt sufficiently at risk to force President José Eduardo dos Santos to step down and make room for a new generation instead of running for a new term (Pearce *et al.* 2018). His successor was João Lourenço, who was once a rising star within the party apparatus, but had been marginalised by dos Santos after showing 'too much' ambition in the early 2000s, before being reinstated as Minister of Defence in 2014. Months after being sworn in as President, João Lourenço took everyone by surprise and launched a hitherto unthinkable attack against his former patron José Eduardo dos Santos and his family in the name of the fight against corruption.²⁷ While this made him very popular with many Angolans, he also succeeded in seducing part of the youth activists who had been criminalised by his predecessor. However, the honeymoon did not last long. By 2019, in a context of deepening economic crisis due mainly to low prices of oil since 2014 (Angola's economy is oil-dependent for over 90% of its revenue), it seemed clear that continuities between João Lourenço's regime and his predecessor's were far more important than the winds of change he had announced. Angola's 'securitised state' (Roque 2021) was still in full swing and repression against youth activists started again.

Secondly, in 2019 UNITA elected Adalberto da Costa Júnior as its new leader, Isaías Samakuva having decided to step down after 16 years at the head of the party. Costa Júnior, a well-known historical figure of the party, former representative in Portugal, spokesperson and head of the party in Parliament, was chosen against other party heavyweights, especially two former generals, and in spite of having no military credentials to build on. While Samakuva had been elected as Savimbi's successor in 2003 in great part because he represented continuity with the movement's founder in terms of his origins (Bié) and political outlook, Costa Júnior's election was a clear break from the past for UNITA. The son of a Luso-Angolan family, he was the first *mestiço* to rise to such a position within the apparatus of a party which had built part of its claim to legitimacy by portraying the MPLA's social and racial structure as representing the interests of the sons and daughters of former Portuguese settlers rather than those of 'true' Angolans (Messiant 2008,

Péclard 2012, Pearce 2015, Martins 2021a). He was also the first leader with no war credentials. With Costa Júnior at its head, UNITA was in a better position to speak to Angola's urban youth. In view of the 2022 elections, it also formed an electoral platform with a new party founded by Abel Chivukuvuku, a left-wing party, *Bloco Democrático*, popular with urban intellectual elites, and several prominent figures of the former *Revús*.

Lastly, UNITA also benefitted from the partial 'de-demonisation' of the memory of Jonas Savimbi under João Lourenço. As part of the policy of relative reconciliation that he put in place at the beginning of his presidency, João Lourenço allowed Jonas Savimbi's mortal remains, which had been kept in a secret location by the MPLA since his death in 2002, to be given back to his family and party. They were eventually buried in his native village in Bié province in May 2019. Although the tone of the speeches by UNITA's leaders was of reconciliation rather than the revenge of the party's nationalist vision, the burial marked the symbolic return of Savimbi in the public sphere. While his memory had been used in the post-war environment 'as a technology of fear and control that assist[ed] the MPLA government in asserting its hold over Angolan society', it became growingly referred to, including by young political activists, 'as a blueprint of a moral order that many believe has been lost in Angola' (Martins 2021b, p. 260) – thereby providing a new social space to UNITA's claim of representing an alternative 'nation view'.

These different dynamics highlight the ambiguities (and potential contradictions) of the legacy of defeat for UNITA. While the party's success in the 2022 elections was largely due to its 'urban turn' and the profound changes this implied in terms of its legitimisation strategies, its electoral base, as well as its historical and symbolic weight, still greatly depend on its ability to uphold the moral economy of its decade-long struggle for what it presents as the defence of the historically marginalised populations and social elites of Angola's 'interior'. As a defeated rebel group, UNITA therefore has to navigate between different and potentially contradictory narratives of legitimisation, while having very limited power to ground its claim to legitimacy in concrete practices of power, and while having to deal with the contradictory long-term effects of the exercise of violence.

Conclusion

After a military defeat, armed groups depend for their political survival on their capacity to keep alive the imaginaries and narratives that supported their armed struggle, as well as on their ability to articulate new imaginaries and craft a new kind of symbolic capital adapted to the post-war environment. Their claim to legitimacy, in other words, depends on their ability to instil belief in the rightfulness of their political agenda and on their capacity to represent a credible political alternative. Indeed, their military (or political)

defeat deprives them of the sort of control and power they had over 'their' populations during wartime, even at the local level. Thus, they are no longer in a position to anchor their narratives of legitimisation in a concrete social project, they can no longer provide services to 'their' population, and they have most often lost the kind of international support or access to natural resources that were central to sustaining the polities they claimed to govern (Duyvesteyn 2017). Hence, the importance to focus on the imaginary representations that defeated rebel groups can mobilise in the post-war context as a symbolic rather than performance-centred source of legitimacy (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015, p. 417).

In order to understand what these legacies of defeat can represent for a former rebel movement such as UNITA, this article has focused on the dynamics of continuities and change in the movement's strategies of legitimisation during and after the civil war. UNITA's capacity to challenge the ruling MPLA on the political terrain 20 years after its military defeat rests on three main elements. Firstly, the deep divisions that ran through Angolan society and largely account for the internal dimensions of the civil war have not disappeared. In particular, the experience of historical marginalisation and estrangement lived by social groups from rural areas and small towns and cities of the interior, and upon which, as we saw, UNITA based its own 'nation view' (Duara 1995), not only survived the end of the war but have increased along with the staggering inequalities that accompanied Angola's post-war economic boom, while negative ethnic stereotypes about UNITA and its 'people' have further entrenched these divides (Martins 2015). Secondly, as we saw, UNITA under Adalberto da Costa Júnior made a successful 'urban turn' and it managed to champion some of the political, social and economic grievances of the disenfranchised urban youth, strategically coopting some of its representants. This strategy proved essential in the former rebel party's electoral victory in Luanda at the 2022 national elections – and to a lesser extent Cabinda. Thirdly, after close to half a century in power, the MPLA's rule is increasingly challenged socially and politically within Angola. The 'other side' of the legacy of defeat is that the ruling party's domination over Angola has been absolute since 2002. It has also been characterised by unprecedented levels of corruption, especially under the last years of dos Santos administration (Soares de Oliveira 2015), and by a growingly authoritarian rule in a highly 'securitised state' (Roque 2021). In this context, the memory of Savimbi is being used, especially by a generation that was born after the end of the war, as a metonym for change and even moral values of order and disciplines – irrespective of the violence that he was also responsible for.

As suggested by the case of UNITA, the main legacy of defeat for former rebel movements is that they are entangled in a complex field of contradictory forces and tensions. On the one hand, they must uphold the narratives that legitimised their very existence as armed

groups and to take up the grievances of the social groups they set out to defend by violent means. On the other, they must address the – potentially contradictory – need to adapt their political narrative to the post-war environment in order to speak to new social groups, while at the same time navigating the intricate issue of the memory of violence – all this without access to the resources that victorious armed groups can draw on.

Notes

1. In this article, I use Portuguese acronyms for all political parties and military movements.
2. For an in-depth analysis of the 2017 elections see (Pearce et al. 2018) and for a follow-up comment on the 2022 elections, see <https://democracyin africa.org/angolas-2022-election-the-more-things-change-the-more-they-stay-the-same/>.
3. This paper is based on the author's long-term research in and on Angola. Interviews with UNITA cadres were conducted during several research stays between 2016 and 2019 as part of a research project funded by the Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS), as well as in 2022 and 2023. I would like to thank Nelson Pestana and the Centre for African Studies of the Catholic University of Angola in Luanda, for their support, as well Jon Schubert, Gilson Lázaro and Claudio Ramos Fortuna with whom many of the interviews were conducted.
4. The Central Highlands or *planalto central*, is a plateau in the centre of the country, covering roughly the present-day provinces of Huambo and Bié, as well as part of the provinces of Benguela, Kwanza-Sul and Huíla.
5. See for instance the account made by Samuel Chiwale, first commander of UNITA's army, in his autobiography (Chiwale 2008, pp. 217–242). For an analysis of how this episode was portrayed in UNITA's propaganda magazine *Kwatcha-Angola*, see (Höring 2022).
6. The Ovimbundu represent the largest ethnic group in Angola, making up approximately 35 per cent of the population. While the group originates in the Central Highlands, today, large numbers of Ovimbundu, live in cities outside of the *planalto*, mainly in the capital Luanda.
7. Jardo Muekalia, a UNITA official, quoted in (Pearce 2015, p. 107). Justin Pearce's book offers to date the most precise analysis of Jamba and what it represented for UNITA and its claim to power and legitimacy. For insiders' accounts see (Chiwale 2008).
8. According to various testimonies collected with former or current UNITA cadres, both women and men, who joined UNITA in the mid-1970s when they were in their late teens or early twenties. Interviews conducted in Luanda in 2017 and 2019.
9. Interviews with former Jamba residents, Luanda, July 2022.
10. In 1986, Jonas Savimbi famously managed to convince Ronald Reagan to provide UNITA with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles (Wright 1997, pp. 118–129).
11. Personal interviews with high-ranking UNITA officials, Luanda, February 2019.
12. In 1992, two prominent UNITA figures, Tony Fernandes da Costa and Miguel N'Zau Puna, both from Cabinda, and who had been with Jonas Savimbi since

the early 1960s, fled from Jamba and surrendered to the MPLA. For a personal account see (N'Zau Puna 2019).

13. For UNITA insider's account of the last phase of the war, see (Sakala 2005).
14. See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sakharovprize/en/dom-zacarias-kamwen-ho-2001-angola/products-details/20200331CAN54183>.
15. The French NGO Médecins sans frontières (MSF) was one of the very few humanitarian NGOs present on the ground. On 9 November 2000, as the country was about to celebrate 25 years of independence, it alerted the international community on the severity of the humanitarian crisis (See: <https://www.msf.fr/sites/default/files/2000-11-09-MSF.pdf> for the full report in French and: <https://www.msf.org/angola-pretence-normality> for a summary in English). The war went on and after the end of hostilities the situation had severely worsened according to the teams who could eventually reach the populations who had been isolated and trapped by the hostilities (<https://www.msf.fr/actualites/angola-l-urgence-apres-27-annees-de-guerre-civile>).
16. Although UNITA and Savimbi were increasingly condemned in the Angolan official media as 'criminals' and 'thugs', in the 'no peace no war' situation that prevailed between 1994 and 1999, generals from the government army and UNITA cooperated around diamond mines as long as it served their interests (personal or those of their party).
17. See Sakala 2005 for a first-hand account of these last few years.
18. Interviews conducted with several UNITA generals and former generals confirmed both the divisions within the party and the fact that the last few months of the war were extremely difficult for the movement.
19. In the 2008 legislative elections, the MPLA won 81.6 % of the votes, and UNITA a mere 10.5 %. Even if the campaign and the elections were marked by irregularities and if the MPLA, as the party in power, had incommensurably more financial and political means at its disposition (Roque 2009, Schubert 2010), the results were an indication of UNITA's difficulties to find its place in the post-war political environment.
20. The nickname was made out of the name of the leaders of the three main nationalist movements (Agostinho Neto for the MPLA, Jonas Savimbi for UNITA and Holden Roberto for the FNLA) and President dos Santos.
21. See for instance <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/angola-brutal-silencing-dissent> (consulted on 15 June 2023).
22. For accounts in the international press, see for instance <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/30/angola-book-club-dos-santos-arrests> or https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/07/02/un-enigmatique-coup-d-etat-en-angola_4667571_3212.html.
23. According to several interviews with *Revús* conducted in Luanda in 2013, 2015 and 2016, these attempts had very limited success, and in one instance at least, one of the leaders took the money but used it to buy the material needed to produce and distribute the movement's pamphlets.
24. In 2008, the MPLA won 81.6% of the votes, 71.8% in 2012, 61% in 2017 and eventually 51.9% in 2022. Elections results in Angola have been repeatedly denounced by the opposition for being flawed, and it is evident that elections are not a level-playing field (Schubert 2010, Pearce *et al.* 2018). But whatever the actual credibility of the results, they indicate clear trends.
25. UNITA's share of the votes at earlier national legislative elections were: 10.5% in 2008, 18.6% in 2012, 28.8% in 2017.

26. Interview with the Head of UNITA's Luanda delegation, Luanda, October 2023.
27. Isabel dos Santos, the former President's first daughter, who had been hailed internationally as 'Africa's first female billionaire', was dismissed from the presidency of the state-owned company Sonangol – the regime's main source of cash (Soares de Oliveira 2007) – and eventually forced to live in a golden exile in Dubai after the 'Luanda Leaks' (<https://www.icij.org/investigations/luanda-leaks/>), which led to several judicial processes. Her younger brother Filomeno dos Santos, whom his father had appointed as President of the newly funded Angola Sovereign Fund in 2013, was condemned to 5 years in prison after a 500 million USD fraud scandal (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53774288>).

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