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President José Eduardo dos Santos (1979-present) returns to Luanda following a one-month medical visit to Barcelona (Spain), though members of the ruling Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) claim dos Santos was on holiday. The Tribunal Constitucional de Angola (constitutional court) approves the participation of five political parties in the August presidential and parliamentary election. The main opposition União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) organises a 4,000-person rally in Luanda, demanding free and fair presidential elections. The Ministério Público (MP) (public prosecutor office) formally indicts Rafael Marques de Morais, who runs the anti-corruption website Maka Angola, and Mariano Bras Lourenço, publisher of weekly magazine, O Crime, for 'crimen injuria'.

Dos Santos returns from medical visit to Spain

Angolan state-owned news agency **Agência Angola Press (Angop)** confirmed on 29 May that President **José Eduardo dos Santos** (1979-present) had returned from a medical visit to **Spain**.¹ Dos Santos' medical visit had fuelled rumours about his death and concerns of political instability in the run-up to the 23 August presidential election. On 29 May, foreign minister **Georges Chikoti** admitted that dos Santos had been unwell but played down concerns about his health and refused to confirm Angolan media reports that he had a stroke.²

*"You know that there are moments in everyone's lives when we do not feel well. But he is fine. He is in Spain but when he is better he will return ... Dos Santos has regular check-ups in Spain so it is perfectly normal for him to be there."*³

Dos Santos arrived in **Barcelona** on 1 May, where he reportedly goes annually for medical treatment and stress relief.⁴

*"Dos Santos has been dogged by health problems and they have worsened in recent years. His public appearances have become more infrequent, his speeches shorter and his holidays in... Barcelona longer."*⁵

In November 2015, dos Santos was reportedly evacuated to Barcelona after falling in the **Futungo de Belas** (presidential palace).⁶ Dos Santos reportedly suffered a prostatic renal crisis⁷, which required him to spend at least 30 days under observation.⁸ In June and August of the same year, dos Santos spent more than 40 days outside of Angola, after a set of tooth implants caused him facial swelling.⁹

The government has described dos Santos' trip to Spain as a private visit.¹⁰ **Anastacio de Brito**, the spokesperson for the ruling **Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA)**, said "President

¹ Reuters, 30 May 2017.

² Reuters, 29 May 2017.

³ Reuters, 29 May 2017.

⁴ www.allafrica.com

⁵ DW, 3 Feb 2017.

⁶ Maka Angola, 29 Dec 2015.

⁷ A renal crisis is a condition in which the urine flow is obstructed by an enlarged prostate and production of urine ceases, necessitating dialysis in the case of kidney failure. (Source: Maka Angola, 29 Dec 2015.)

⁸ Maka Angola, 29 Dec 2015.

⁹ Maka Angola, 29 Dec 2015.

¹⁰ Reuters, 29 May 2017.

*dos Santos is on holiday in Spain, it is a private trip, he is in good health.*¹¹ The MPLA's stance towards rumours of dos Santos' reported poor health may indicate its fear of appointing an interim president in case dos Santos is unable to complete his mandate.¹² Although sources believe that Vice-President **Manuel Vicente** would not be "allowed to do anything"¹³ if he were to assume power as an interim successor, there are fears that Vicente could attempt a power grab, if he were given the opportunity,

*"The risk from Vicente is present, but the MPLA would not allow him to do anything. He was put in the position of vice president to protect dos Santos and his family interests, especially in case of his death. If this were to happen, he would be closely controlled."*¹⁴

Other sources speculate that the government may seek to ignore the constitution in order to push through parliamentary president and cousin of dos Santos, **Fernando da Piedade Dias dos Santos** (aka **Nando**), to the position of interim president.¹⁵ This speculation may have stemmed from a provision in the constitution that states the parliamentary president is third in line to the presidency if both the president and vice president are unable to serve,

*"Should both the president and the vice president become permanently and simultaneously unable to perform their duties, the parliamentary president shall assume the duties of the president until new general elections are held, which must happen within one hundred and twenty days of verification of their inability to serve."*¹⁶

There is speculation that the MPLA may use the ongoing **Portuguese** corruption investigation against Vicente to stop him becoming interim president.

*"Portuguese charges against Vicente might provide enough leverage to force him to stand down if necessary."*¹⁷

Other sources believe that power is so centralised around dos Santos that a power vacuum with a sudden exit could cause significant tensions within the MPLA,

*"In the **African** context, the father is the guarantor of unity in the family. This also occurs in the MPLA. When the father dies, the family dissolves in many cases. There are ambitions, there are people in the MPLA with ambitions, just like in African families where the uncle will come and demand his inheritance, the grandparents, nieces, sisters and brother all want their share of the inheritance. There will be a fracture in the MPLA if [dos Santos] were to pass, which could unfortunately turn for the worse. No one in the MPLA has dos Santos' stature, as below him, everyone is equal."*¹⁸

While the MPLA seeks to play down dos Santos' health concerns, it appears clear that the party will seek to protect dos Santos until after elections, and a transition to the defence minister and presidential candidate, **João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço**, is assured. The greatest fear for the MPLA is that dos Santos fails to complete his mandate before August elections, and Vicente becomes interim president. Although Vicente assuming interim power may seem a threat to the political status quo for the MPLA, the real capacity for destabilisation is small, unless he attempts a power grab or seeks to amend the electoral calendar.

¹¹ www.news24.com

¹² Source, analyst, Luanda

¹³ Source, Angola investigator, London

¹⁴ Source, Angola investigator, London

¹⁵ Source, journalist, Luanda

¹⁶ Constitution of Angola 2010, Article 132

¹⁷ Source, Angola investigator, London

¹⁸ Source, civil activist, Luanda

Constitutional Court approves five political parties for upcoming election

The **Tribunal Constitucional de Angola** (constitutional court), on 1 June, approved the participation of five political parties in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary election.¹⁹ Despite official participation of four opposition parties, the ruling MPLA is widely expected to comfortably win a parliamentary majority and therefore the presidency.²⁰ The participating political parties are:²¹

- The ruling MPLA,
- the main opposition **União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA)**;
- **Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA)**;
- **Partido de Renovação Social (PRS)**;
- **Aliança Patriótica Nacional (APN)**;
- and **Convergência Ampla de Salvação de Angola - Coligação Eleitoral (CASA-CE)**.

MPLA, UNITA, FNLA, PRS and CASA-CE have participated in past elections. The only newcomer is the APN.²² Voters will elect the president and vice-president, as well as 220 deputies to the national assembly (parliament).²³ Although the MPLA remains likely to secure re-election, sources believe the opposition could gain electoral strength if dos Santos were to depart ahead of the election (see above),

*"If there were dissidence in the MPLA, this would strengthen the opposition, and perhaps might assure transparency in the electoral process, but in any case the regime structure would resist it."*²⁴

Reportedly, Lourenço is the key to a smooth transition,

*"Lourenço created conditions such that the armed forces effectively would not get involved in the case of tumult or disturbances."*²⁵

...as thousands rally to demand fair election

Approximately 4,000 Angolans held a rally in **Luanda** on 3 June to demand free and fair elections.²⁶ The rally, which UNITA organised, increases pressure on the MPLA to ensure credible polls.²⁷ One UNITA member said, *"we want free and fair elections"*²⁸ and at the rally, UNITA leader **Isaías Samakuva** said,

*"This protest is to denounce the vicious system of fraud perpetuated in recruiting the same companies that participated in manipulating elections of 2008 and 2012."*²⁹

Protesters chanted slogans against dos Santos and against the two companies – Spain-based **Indra Sistemas S.A.** and Portugal-based **SINFIC S.A.** – that the government has contracted to count the votes.³⁰ There was a heavy police presence during the rally. Political protests are rare in Angola, as the government usually takes a heavy-handed approach to any form of dissent.³¹ However, UNITA did obtain permission from the police to hold the rally.³²

¹⁹ www.allafrica.com

²⁰ www.allafrica.com

²¹ www.allafrica.com

²² www.allafrica.com

²³ www.allafrica.com

²⁴ Source, civil activist, Luanda

²⁵ Source, newspaper editor, Luanda

²⁶ www.news24.com

²⁷ www.news24.com

²⁸ www.news24.com

²⁹ www.news24.com

³⁰ www.news24.com

³¹ www.news24.com

³² www.news24.com

The opposition, regardless of dos Santos' health or internal tensions in the MPLA, is weak. It is currently unclear to which extent international election observers will be present during the elections. It appears likely that the Angolan political environment will become relatively more volatile as a result of political changeover.

Public prosecutor formally indicts two journalists for insulting the state

The **Ministério Público (MP)** (public prosecutor office), on 21 June, formally indicted **Rafael Marques de Morais**, who runs the anti-corruption website **Maka Angola**, and **Mariano Bras Lourenço**, the publisher of the weekly **O Crime**, for 'crimen injuria' which is similar to insult laws against the state.³³ The formal indictments show the Angolan government continues to take a hard-line approach to any individual who exposes alleged high-level corruption, which remains a significant issue in Angola's business and political communities. The indictment stems from charges Angolan authorities originally filed in December 2016.³⁴ The original charges relate to an article first published on Maka Angola's website and later republished in O Crime, which alleged wrongdoing and corruption, with regard to attorney general **João Maria de Sousa's** purchase of state-owned land, under the alleged protection of dos Santos.³⁵ At the time, **United States (US)-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Africa** director **Angela Quintel** said in statement that,

"Angola's prosecution service should drop all charges against Rafael Marques de Morais and Mariano Bras ... Angola should immediately stop persecuting these journalists simply for doing their jobs by reporting on allegations of official corruption."³⁶

After the MP announced the formal indictment, de Morais remained defiant,

"I wrote that the president protects the corrupt. I not only reiterate but reaffirm that the president is the 'godfather' of corruption in Angola."³⁷

The Angolan government has targeted de Morais before. An Angolan court gave him a suspended six-month prison sentence in 2016 for defaming Angolan generals in his book "**Blood Diamonds: Torture and Corruption in Angola**" which documented allegations of torture and murder in Angola's diamond mining sector.³⁸ If convicted on the new charges, de Morais and Bras could face six months in jail and a fine.³⁹

The government crack-down on critical voices is likely to continue in the lead-up to the August elections. De Morais has a strong foreign reputation, which could afford him support from international anti-corruption and press freedom NGOs. This could increase criticism of the dos Santos' regime, and increase the risk that the trial become politicised.

³³ www.makaangola.com

³⁴ www.makaangola.com

³⁵ Multiple sources: City Press, 30 Dec 2016; www.africanews.com

³⁶ www.africanews.com

³⁷ www.makanagola.com

³⁸ City Press, 30 Dec 2016.

³⁹ City Press, 30 Dec 2016.

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