

# Angola: Birth of a movement

***80% of Angolans alive today have only ever called one man President***

November 5, 2012 By Megan Eardley

<http://africasacountry.com/2012/11/05/80-of-angolans-today-have-only-ever-called-one-man-president/>



Eighty percent of Angolans today have only ever called one man President. Sure, some have had other allegiances; there was a serious armed opposition and there were 27 years of civil war, but José Eduardo dos Santos has remained the head of state for 33 years. His party hasn't lost power since the anti-colonial war was won in 1975. But following impossible uprisings in Tunisia and elsewhere, talk of regime change in Angola has grown more serious.

When underground rappers emerged as key players in a burst of anti-government protests in 2011, Al Jazeera went to investigate. Their film, *Birth of a Movement*, asks: "Can young activists inspired by Angola's underground rap scene take on a political elite that has ruled for decades?" It is an important question, which only raises more questions — what constitutes the long-ruling political elite? Outside of dos Santos and his family (and who is family? already more questions), who has the power to influence business as usual in the Angolan parliament? Perhaps this is asking too much of a 25-minute documentary.

*Birth of a Movement* is ultimately a portrait of three prominent activists: Carbono Casimiro, Mbanza Hamza, and especially Luaty Beirao, as they struggle to take on MPLA's propaganda networks through popular media outlets.

Cameras show the work of allies at a radio stations holding roundtable discussions on how to assert civil rights. They also follow the taxi-to-taxi distribution of political rap albums. Just a few years ago public criticism of the regime was rare; now it's been played inside the most public form of transportation in the city. Filmmaker and journalist at Al Jazeera, Ana de Sousa puts these actions in context:

Though hard for others less familiar with Angola's history to understand, the very fact of 17 people attempting to hold a protest felt like a huge change. And as the year progressed and the protests grew, it just got more interesting. ...widespread fear of a return to war, and the distant memory of a political massacre several decades ago, had successfully stifled the spirit of public protest among those old enough to remember those events.

Later, the journalist's bleak footage of a bloodied, ransacked room gives another indication of the state's brutal crackdown on protestors, and public space. In the face of this violence Carbono, Mbanza, Luaty, and other activists featured in this film show tremendous strength and courage. The journalists and film crew documenting their efforts also have our respect.

But *Birth of a Movement* is also up against the constraints of the show it was made for — Al Jazeera's *Activate* promises a focused, resolving narrative in under a half hour. The show has this own rhythm, and stories are fit into their general format. First, the audience is introduced to prominent activists filmed in the middle of direct community action. Key facts about the history of their fight and the current situation are provided in a text bar on the right simultaneously. This opening sequence helps give each episode a sense of urgency and the excitement of breaking news. Once we know a little bit about the larger movement, we learn more about the individual activist's decision to fight. We hear most from well-educated secular young men who frame their fight in terms of rights (appealing either to civil rights or human rights vis-à-vis group identity), while messier historic alliances are put aside.

So, watching the documentary, we see fantastic shots of hundreds of people marching on the streets carrying the colors of UNITA, but there is no discussion of the long and complicated history of this political party, turned rebel army, turned political party. In the lead up to the August elections, journalists in the country raised concerns about increased violent attacks carried out by both MPLA and UNITA supporters in the strategically important, symbolic provinces of Huambo and Benguela. [Maka Angola's](#) António Capalandanda and Rafael Marques wrote that the lack of media coverage and dialogue at a societal level points to greater distrust between citizens and a climate of fear in front of the August 31st elections and its results.

Two months on, UNITA has continued to dispute the results of the August election through official channels. But not much is being said about efforts to acknowledge past violence. Christopher Pycroft puts this violence in some perspective:

During 1993, UNITA laid siege to pockets of government control in the central Angolan towns of Cuito, Menongue, Malanje, and Luena, seeking to divide Angola in two. Despite a partially effective unilateral UNITA cease-fire, announced in September 1993, which enabled humanitarian aid agencies to bring relief to some of the 3 million people who were faced with imminent starvation, the situation in Angola remained critical. At least 2 million people were forced from their homes because of the war.

Can young activists work through the painful associations of their parents and grandparents?

And what about their music? We hear rap playing in the background of many scenes, but there is less discussion of who and how this music inspires. How do they see their work in relation to the larger body of important music styles in Angola, and to their political histories? Can they make truly popular music without being co-opted by commercial interests closer to dos Santos? We have seen for example, a complicated story of international investment in Kuduro. (Marissa Moorman has considered brand Kuduro [on this blog](#).) Maybe we see a little more when Luaty goes to help his friend make a music video.

So we're back to these questions: what constitutes the long-ruling political elite? Outside of dos Santos and his family, who has the power to influence business as usual in the Angolan parliament?

See for example, these ministers of the church and party:



From the Catholic Church's pre-election endorsement of the MPLA, to reports of certain Pentecostal churches announcing the presence of the SINSE (the state intelligence agency) [to ensure members vote MPLA](#), to SINSE's [recent attacks on Father Pio Wakussnga](#) for his efforts to fight housing demolitions and the forced relocation of poor and vulnerable communities, we can't ignore the campaigns carried out under powerful church media networks. But given their own complicated histories with the MPLA the target of anti-government protest movement keeps moving.

What is clear is that the political fight is wherever people gather.

# Luaty da Silva Beirão is prepared to take the rap

<http://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-24-00-luaty-da-silva-beirao-is-prepared-to-take-the-rap>

Angolan rapper refuses to be intimidated by a government that doesn't take kindly to opposition.

Angolan rapper Luaty da Silva Beirão, who performs under a number of different stage names, including Ikonoklasta, Brigadeiro Matrafrakuxz and Nkwa Kobanza, is, by his own admission, not easy to define.

"If you had to call me something, I suppose 'activist' would be one word you could use, but I'd rather be known as 'someone who is active' in terms of fighting for social justice and people's rights," he said.

As articulate as he is outspoken, Beirão has become an important voice in Angola, calling for better distribution of the country's oil wealth and an end to corruption and political intimidation.

Through music, blogs and street protests, he has challenged not just the ruling MPLA party and the authorities, but also weaknesses among civil society groups and opposition parties, as well as the attitudes of the population at large.

He said: "This country is being run by a mob and a mafia. By being silent people are being complicit and they are contributing to the injustices.

"Everyone knows things aren't right, but the people are too scared for their own jobs and families to stand up to what is happening. It's like a spider's web of fear and patronage, and it's so thick that people are trapped. We need to cut those strings so we can renew this country and start again."

## **de facto**

The 31-year-old speaks from the heart. He was born into a respected MPLA family and, like most of the children of the elite, he enjoyed a comfortable upbringing, shielded from the war, living between Angola and Portugal and studying in France and England.

"It was while I was abroad that I started having this terrible guilt about how my education had been paid for and who had suffered for that.

"We, the elite in Angola, tend to create clouds in our heads because we don't want to think about things. But I did start to think about it, and I decided that I would go back to Angola and give back to my country what my education and time away had given me."

Beirão didn't take a job in government, or use his engineering degree and three languages to join an oil company, like most of his overseas-educated peers.

Instead he has become the de facto (though not officially appointed – he hates rules) leader of an organic group of young people who have been staging anti-government street protests. They are calling for, among other things, the resignation of Angola's long-serving president, José Eduardo dos Santos.

Though small in size, these demonstrations are largely unprecedented in Angola, where few dare to criticise or challenge for fear of social or economic repercussions in a country where the media is tightly controlled and heavily pro-government.

Those fears are not wholly unfounded. Members of Angola's opposition parties are locked out of public sector jobs and their children out of universities, while active MPLA membership brings many community benefits and opportunities.

### **Threats**

Although freedom of assembly is enshrined in Angola's 2010 Constitution, most of the youths' demonstrations have ended in arrests, and many in violence. It is perpetuated, Beirão says, by undercover groups who are sent in by the police to deliberately attack him and his friends.

A large scar along his hairline is a lasting reminder of when his skull was cracked open by an iron rod last year. Other members of the group – which calls itself Central7311, after its first protest in March 2011 – have had teeth knocked out or have suffered broken bones, and many have had their houses raided and their family members threatened.

"They have tried to stop us every way they can," Beirão told the *Mail & Guardian*, recalling his arrest in Portugal after 1.7kg of cocaine was found in his luggage after a flight from Luanda. He was subsequently released without being charged.

"The threats are getting heavy; we can feel the weight on our shoulders, but there is no turning back now."

He added: "We are already known as troublemakers. We will never be able to operate normally in this society. We must finish what we have started."

What have they started? What is their aim? Beirão isn't totally sure.

"It's hard to say," he said. "From the beginning, our goal was to remove Dos Santos, but we've since realised that is not a very complete goal. What about after he leaves power? Will our job be done?"

### **Scrutinising politicians**

"I think we have realised now that that is just the first step. What we need is a stronger civil society which can scrutinise politicians to make sure they work for the people, not just the power."

Why doesn't he join a political party and take this fight to the ballot box?

"Well, that wouldn't make me much of an activist, it would just make me a politician," he replied.

"I don't believe in political parties, where people very often are chasing power and wanting to force their own visions on to others, I believe in civil society.

"People in Angola and Africa in general need to realise the power they have and how they can actually influence politicians to do what we the people want."

He shakes off the criticism that he is just a rich kid playing at politics in order to sell rap records and is frustrated that the government – and even his social circle – attack him for damaging Angola's image.

Image has become so important for Angolans and Africa in general, he said, that often the truth is obscured to fit the desired picture.