

UNITA—Looking at the Past



South African troops on Angolan border operations in 1978.

As the Reagan administration's policy towards southern Africa begins to take shape, one theme that emerges from the shadows is renewed support for Jonas Savimbi and his National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Savimbi, Reagan and his advisors argue, "controls half of Angola." And according to secret State Department documents leaked to the New York Times, the administration may now demand that the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) share power with Savimbi as a precondition for the US supporting Namibia's independence.

The current US administration is also pushing strongly for the repeal of the US law known as the Clark Amendment, which bans covert military aid to Angola. Although administration staffers deny that repeal of the Clark Amendment will automatically imply renewed aid for Savimbi, they have left no doubt that if aid goes to anybody in Angola it will go to Savimbi.

Savimbi is not a new face on the Angolan scene, he has a long history in African political circles. Although he is now placed in the limelight by the US administration, it is likely that Washington would prefer some of that history to remain buried.

by William I. Robinson

Jonas Malheiros Savimbi was born in the central Angolan province of Bie in 1934. He went to Europe as a student in the late 1950s and it was there that his active involvement in politics began.

In the early 1960s Savimbi was persuaded to leave his studies and return to Africa to join Holden Roberto's Union of the People of Angola (UPA), an organization which later became part of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA). Both Roberto and Savimbi,

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however, were strong individuals and Savimbi's alliance with Roberto and the FNLA proved to be short lived. At a June 1974 summit meeting of the Organization of African Unity Savimbi delivered a fiery denunciation of the FNLA leadership and resigned.

Following the split, Savimbi seemed to have dallied with the idea of joining the MPLA, who pressed him to do so. Savimbi, having grown up in the southern part of Angola among the Ovimbundu people, was able to draw some support from that area and this made him an attractive partner for any national liberation movement wishing to draw support from all parts of the coun-

try. But instead of joining the MPLA Savimbi announced in March 1966 the formation of an entirely new organization, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), with himself as president.

Savimbi's supporters today are fond of saying that he fought the Portuguese colonialists, but it seems that these activities were confined to a few sporadic military operations against the Portuguese in the late 1960s.

Between 1966 and 1974, Savimbi did organize a southern ethnic base for UNITA among the Ovimbundu people, playing on tribal rivalries and racial differences for support. UNITA never became a serious military force, however, and one CIA source quoted in the British *Guardian* described the movement as consisting of "twelve guys with knives before US backing turned it into a well-financed, heavily armed force."

Distracting Sideshow

In 1969, a United Nations survey noted that "there has been no mention of UNITA in the Portuguese military bulletins since 1968." Noted author Basil Davidson records that by 1970, a year of important military victories for the MPLA, western European and OAU observers in eastern districts of Angola were unanimous in concluding that UNITA had become "little more than another distracting sideshow."

In 1972, Savimbi wrote the new commander-in-chief of the Portuguese army in Angola to congratulate him on his appointment. "We will never entertain taking up arms against the authorities," he wrote. "We use our arms so that one day we will force the MPLA to abandon the east."

Several sources have revealed that Savimbi worked for the colonial army and PIDE (the secret police) from the early 1970s on. Although Savimbi has consistently denied these allegations, published writings of former Portuguese dictator Marcello Caetano and several of his generals recall the colonial command offering a deal with Savimbi's "movement" in which he would be left alone providing he turned what guns

he had against the MPLA (whom Savimbi consistently referred to as "the common enemy"). Savimbi eagerly accepted the offer. According to classified military documents released in 1974 by the new Lisbon regime and first published by the French magazine *Afrique-Asie*, Savimbi wrote the Portuguese army offering to provide UNITA guides to the MPLA operational zones.

With the end of the colonial war in 1974, Savimbi signed a separate ceasefire with the Portuguese and at once set out to woo the settlers, who saw him as their hope for a new neo-colonial order. Abandoning his earlier 'Maoist' rhetoric which had served to mystify the real nature of UNITA and mask his own virulent anti-communism, he declared that "the people of Angola are not ready for independence" (*Le Monde*, 7-8 June 1974).

At the same time, however, UNITA continued to try and forge alliances first with the FNLA and, on three occasions, with the MPLA. All of these efforts at reconciliation, including a brief agreement between all three groups in early 1975, failed as the movements both feared and mistrusted each other.

Full scale civil war broke out in Angola in early July 1975. Throughout this period, however, Savimbi continued to scramble for an ally. Several attempts were made to forge a cease fire between UNITA and the MPLA and Savimbi also made a number of approaches to the South African government.

Later that year the third and last cease fire was signed between UNITA and the MPLA. According to Angola expert Gerald Bender, the CIA intervened at that point and let Savimbi know that covert funding from the Americans would be cut off unless the cease-fire with the MPLA was ended. UNITA, with Savimbi in charge, finally opted for CIA support and an alliance with the South Africans.

On September 21, Savimbi met the South African commanding general in Namibia who agreed to provide UNITA with military instructors, and 6000 UNITA troops were rapidly trained. Within one month a team of South African military instructors reinforced by Zairean regular troops, weapons, and armored vehicles, had arrived in Silva Porto (central Angola) to train and assist UNITA forces. When the South African army launched its full scale invasion in October, UNITA troops hooked up and trailed in its wake.

US Support

UNITA was by now receiving, along with the FNLA, millions of dollars worth of US arms and equipment from the CIA. The CIA also began sending advisors and recruiting mercenaries for the two "movements." Although it is difficult to ascertain exactly when Savimbi first made contact with the CIA, one of the best sources of information on American involvement in Angola, the Pike Report (a report of the US House of Representatives Select Committee on Intelligence), records that UNITA began receiving US funds in the mid-summer of 1974. The flow continued throughout 1975, including regular monthly political action payments for internal propaganda and organizational sustenance. US assistance to UNITA and FNLA topped \$60 million before the funds were cut off in 1976.

When the South Africans withdrew in March of 1976—despite pleas by Savimbi that they stay—the UNITA leader and some of his troops went back with them into Namibia (to be used as auxiliaries in later raids into Angola). Other UNITA remnants in the central provinces of Huambo and Bie (Savimbi's traditional area of ethnic strength) took to the hills and forests with large quantities of ammunition left for them by the retreating South Africans. At the time, they took thousands of villagers with them, threatening that the MPLA would come to kill them all.

Since then UNITA forces have been continuously armed, trained, and supplied by air from Namibia or Zaire by the South Africans. Savimbi currently operates out of the Moroccan capital of Rabat.

While Savimbi's base probably cannot be simply ascribed to South African support,



Jonas Savimbi.

noted Angola expert and author John Marcum has noted that "without continued South African support he would not be able to maintain a serious level of counterinsurgency." At the same time Marcum maintains that UNITA has probably been able to maintain some support among the local population and that it is probably an oversimplification to say UNITA support is based solely on Savimbi's charisma or South African support. "UNITA," says Marcum, "probably does have some local support and undoubtedly a whole lot of South African assistance."

Savimbi, his allies, and the Western press claim UNITA now controls between one-third and one-half of Angola, and has rallied widespread popular support. Writing in the London *Times* in early 1980, Patrick Cosgrave went as far as to say that Savimbi has brought the Angolan government "virtually to its knees."

Reports from people who have recently been to Angola, however, indicate there is nothing to substantiate these claims. Although UNITA could, at one time, probably claim some support from the population; the emergence from the hills and forests of central Angola in mid-1980 of hundreds of thousands of starving and disease-ridden peasants fed up with UNITA and ready to work with the MPLA government signalled the final collapse of any valid UNITA claim of mass support. The British *Guardian* reported in mid-1980 that at the same time over 1,000 rank and file UNITA soldiers also came into the towns to give themselves up.

Gerald Bender, a scholar who visited Angola last year, presents a similar picture. Quoting US and Western European intelligence sources, Bender notes that UNITA has "practically no appeal to ethnic groups other than the Ovimbundu." And although the Ovimbundu make up about one-third of the population, Bender also points out that "Most Ovimbundu live in areas administered by the MPLA, and that 'many thousands of Ovimbundu men fight against UNITA in the MPLA army and militia.'"

In mid-1980 Bender drove through Huila and Cunene provinces on a 630 mile trip that brought him within five miles of the Namibian border. In a summer 1981 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Bender relates how Savimbi told him that UNITA controls Huila and Cunene provinces. Bender then goes on to say "UNITA does not control

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has come to push beyond the Sullivan Principles. As outgoing president, Doug Fraser said here yesterday, we must greatly broaden the base of our campaign to deny pension and other monies to firms doing business in South Africa.

In conclusion, my friends, I believe no system as rotten as apartheid can ever be reformed, moderated, or softened sufficiently to make it a tolerable way of life. Every "improvement" put forward, or grudgingly accepted, by such a system tends inevitably to extend its control by subtler means.

We in the UAW know therefore, that the steps already taken by our union, by church, civil rights, and international groups, by the United Nations—and above all by the brave and decent people of South Africa—are only a prelude to the final confrontation that must come.

That confrontation will be decided mainly by the South African people themselves, but we must help in every way we can. Rather than relax our sanctions against Pretoria, we must strengthen them. When the proper coordination and effect can be achieved, we must move from an investment freeze to outright disinvestment, from a limited embargo on arms and trade to a total embargo. History shows these things are easier said than done, but they can and must be done in the interest of humanity.

Apartheid is doomed. And when it ends, I hope we can all meet again to celebrate its burial! □

Republic Day

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In Port Elizabeth, following the suggestion of the Coloured Management Committee, a committee of the city council named three new streets in a move clearly timed to coincide with Soweto day. Nelson Mandela Street, Steve Biko Crescent, and Mandela Street were approved by the committee as names for streets in a new township called Bethelsdorp Extension 10.

The unprecedented scale and diversity of the Republic Day protests was a severe embarrassment for government officials intent on presenting an image of national unity to the world. As Dr. Motlana noted, "The most outstanding feature of this boycott has been the unanimity of the people outside the Afrikaner who are utterly and totally opposed to this sectional, divisive

apartheid state, namely the Republic of South Africa."

Even those Afrikaners who gave little attention to anti-Republic and Soweto demonstrations could not ignore the first-time shock of being publicly frisked and having bags inspected by police searching for ANC saboteurs and sympathizers during the height of guerrilla activities. The ANC itself had declared: "Slowly but surely we are mobilizing ourselves. We confront the enemy of all fronts. The 'Republic Day' celebration is just one of those fronts."

The June events gave vivid evidence of the fact that across South Africa people are organizing themselves in factories, schools, and communities. Only the foolish among even the most ardent apartheid supporters could have gone to bed on June 1 dreaming about the next Republic Day celebrations in 1991. S.V.□

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these provinces."

Isolated Rebels

Rather than a populist-based and organized guerrilla campaign, the picture that emerges today of UNITA in central Angola is one of small and isolated bands of rebels who are able to find cover in the mountains and bush while occasionally raiding an undefended village. One reporter who visited central Angola in September 1980 was able to write in the London *Times* that "such claims [of widespread UNITA activity] belong in the realm of fantasy. . . I could find no sign that most of this area was anything other than under firm government control."

Testimony of a Mercenary

Further insights into how UNITA operates were disclosed by Jose Ricardo Belmundo, a Black Angolan who deserted to MPLA forces from the South African Defense Force Battalion 32 in January 1980 (see *Southern Africa*, March-April 1981). A captain in the "Buffalo Battalion," (composed of mercenaries and ex-FNLA members), Belmundo described "baiting out" actions in which his unit gave assistance to UNITA forces who radioed South African military security personnel for help. In addition, he explained, SADF soldiers "go and give instruction in UNITA bases and sometimes carry out operations with UNITA without the presence of Battalion 32 personnel." In outlining relations between his unit and UNITA, Belmundo

stated, "we had different spheres of activity but were serving one and the same boss. We were both controlled by South Africa."

The current Reagan Administration desires to repeal the Clark Amendment, which prohibits US aid to UNITA and other anti-government groups in Angola, underscoring the importance of Savimbi as a key pawn in the US drive to undermine the Angolan revolution.

Their Man in Angola

The Administration reportedly made contact with Savimbi almost immediately after Reagan's election, when he flew to California to meet with Reagan people here last year. Since then, there have been a number of contacts between Savimbi and US officials, including a meeting with then-acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Lannon Walker in Morocco, after Washington reportedly asked Savimbi to postpone a planned trip to the US.

Other reports have surfaced which indicate that despite the present congressional ban, Washington might already be aiding UNITA. A March 27, 1981 SWAPO communique from "a reliable US source" informed them that: "a delegation of UNITA personnel met recently with General Haig to discuss US assistance to UNITA. Haig apparently gave an undertaking that the USA would assist UNITA but wish to approach the matter cautiously . . . at present they [the US] have three or four people with UNITA in southern Angola assessing the situation in preparation for giving military assistance."

But whatever the particulars may be, the US is once again moving to bolster up Savimbi as their "man in Angola." Washington may find, however, that it is banking on "a perennial loser," to quote John Stockwell, former CIA station chief in southern Africa.

"Savimbi has no ideology," he said. "He believes in nothing beyond his own selfish ambitions." Stockwell concluded by advising the US government to avoid "seeking new bloody involvement with the likes of Savimbi."

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