

Thousands stay away from Angolan elections

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Angolans queue at a voting station in Kicolo, Luanda, Angola to cast their ballots Friday, Aug. 31, 2012. Victory for the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, (MPLA) would give Angola's ruler for 33 years, President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, another five-year term.

Thousands stayed away from polling stations in Luanda and thousands more were unable to vote Friday in Angola's second election in 20 years which is expected to give an easy victory to the ruling party, despite accusations of corruption and mismanagement of the country's oil and diamond riches.

Office cleaner Amalia Masungo said she chose not to vote because "they (politicians) are all bad men and I don't think my vote will make any difference."

The government was committing "the most sophisticated fraud" by excluding local election observers from critical civil society organizations and by confusing voters with a lack of information, charged election observer Elias

Isaac of the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa.

"Thousands of people are unable to vote," he told The Associated Press. "The whole system was created to exclude people rather than including as many as possible."

Earlier Friday, voters banged at the gate to one polling station which remained closed 90 minutes after voting was to start. Electoral official Delfina Manuel explained that there was no electricity and it had been too dark inside to open earlier.

The lines that grew because stations opened late quickly disappeared. The usually boisterous and noisy seaside city was abnormally quiet.

Two hours before polls were to close, two stations reported about half the registered voters had cast ballots. In 2008 elections, 87 percent of voters participated. One polling agent suggested there might be a last-minute rush of voters before polls close at 7 pm (1800 GMT).

Friday's vote was largely seen as a test of the popularity of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, who has ruled for 33 years without being directly elected. Presidential elections were constantly postponed until last year, when the government changed the constitution so that the leader of the party with the most votes becomes president.

Voters are to elect 220 legislators from nine parties and coalitions. Preliminary results are expected by Saturday, ANGOP state news agency said.

Victory for the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola , or MPLA, would give dos Santos another five-year term.

The Web site of an underground youth movement that has been protesting for a change of government reported people were protesting at one Luanda station because their names had been transferred to distant provinces and "many are returning to their houses without any possibility to vote."

Opposition parties had objected that the National Elections Commission did not publish the electoral roll. The commission said it had sent people information by SMS messages to mobile phones and had published the information on the Internet.

Isaac estimated that less than 10 percent have access to the Internet in a country where more than a third of the population is illiterate.

New on the election scene is the Broad Convergence for Angola's Salvation, a coalition created in April which unites former key opposition figure Abel Chivukuvuku and Andre Gaspar Mendes de Carvalho, a former general in dos Santos' army and the son of one of Angola's most famous nationalists. Chivukuvuku had belonged to UNITA, the biggest opposition party, which won 10 percent of votes and 16 seats in the 2008 election.

Calling itself "the leader of change," the new coalition is expected to come in third place with promises to fight corruption. Many young people appeared to be voting for the new coalition.

"Every vote will make a difference. We have to believe in the electoral process," Braulio Silva, a 26-year-old who works for a logistics company, said as he waited in a line early Friday.

Dos Santos' party holds 191 national assembly seats after it won 2008 elections in a landslide. UNITA is expected to pick up a few more votes from people who complain about a lack of democracy and an unequal spread of wealth.

A 32-year-old IT engineer, Jose Tomas, said he was pleased by the election process.

"I'm so proud of my country right now. I wish all those foreigners who 'fled' to Europe in packed planes right before the elections could see this, that we're not a group of savages killing each other," said Tomas. "Angola is showing that it CAN organize itself if it wants to."

Tomas expected that the MPLA would win in part because voters are used to the party.

"You see all those old mommas voting?" he said of a group of women wearing traditional cloth wraps. "The MPLA for them is like a cell phone: As long as it doesn't break or get stolen, they'll never change brand."

The MPLA has presided over the resurgence of Luanda, a once-decrepit seaside town that has turned into a building construction site. Human rights officials complain that poor Angolans have been forced from their downtown homes to distant suburbs with no electricity, water or transport, to make way for luxury high-rise apartment buildings.

Both UNITA and the coalition have complained of the uneven playing field in the election and the possibilities for fraud. Opposition parties are particularly concerned that votes will not be counted until they reach the National Electoral Commission in Luanda. UNITA leader Isaias

Samakuva said he has confirmed that soldiers in the Military Affairs Cabinet that reports directly to the president's office have been installed there as logistical supervisors. The same thing happened in 2008 when the military was involved in transportation, distribution and handling of ballots, ballots boxes and minutes for election results, according to Chatham House, the London-based independent policy institute.

Dos Santos' party also has a near-monopoly on the national media. It has emphasized the government's reconstruction of the country after the civil war, the president's role as an "architect of peace," improved democracy, housing, educational, health and entrepreneurial projects and job creation.

Still, unemployment stands officially at 26 percent and is much higher among young people.

This southern African nation was a Cold War battlefield for 27 years, with dos Santos' MPLA backed by Cuban soldiers and a Soviet war chest, pitted against UNITA, which was backed by apartheid South Africa and the United States. Half a million people died in the war, more than 4 million - a third of the population - was displaced and much infrastructure was destroyed.

Since the war ended in 2002, Angola has dominated the list of the world's fastest growing economies and is sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest oil producer, after Nigeria. Oil-backed credit lines from China - Angola is China's No. 1 oil supplier and its second biggest importer is the United States - have fueled a building boom of houses, hospitals, schools, roads and bridges. Average life expectancy went up from 45 in 2002 to 51 in 2011.

But 87 percent of urban Angolans live in shanty towns, often with no access to clean water, according to UNICEF, and more than a third of Angolans live below the poverty line.

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