

Ricardo Soares de Oliveira.

Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola since the Civil War.
London: Hurst & Company, 2015, 288pp.

Ricardo Soares de Oliveira has written what, in my opinion, will become a classic work not only for an understanding of post-conflict Angola, but also for an understanding of post-independence Angolan politics and society.

In five intensive chapters that can be read as an economic, diplomatic and political thriller, this book offers a fascinating journey into what has probably been Africa's most complex political process over the past forty years. This process has been led by an elite that learned quickly from both the failed Soviet-style socialist experience and the twenty-seven-year long civil war how, on the one hand, to use their country's natural resources and the huge revenues derived from them to create a solid, brutal and corrupt regime and how, on the other hand, to use oil production and its revenues as a key instrument for instituting a very smart and aggressive diplomatic practice and network within international and world affairs. At the top of a pyramid of power, like a modern Pharaoh who is the object of a North-Korean-type cult of personality, is President José Eduardo dos Santos, who has been in power since 1979 and who shows no signs of wishing to retire anytime soon despite his repeated promises to do so—and no one in Angola dares to question such an issue, which has become something of a dangerous topic of conversation in national politics.

Around him are the barons of the Party-State MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), which has been in power since 1975. In reality, this Party-State has become a rather shadowy structure, as it has been transformed over the years into an instrument of the highly personalized and unlimited power of its president. So much so that the latter can impose his will on the political direction of the party without fear of encountering any real opposition. The same is also true with the army, which is analyzed in the book: a powerful structure whose millionaire generals have no reason to challenge the man who gives them free reign for filthy enrichment and who closes his eyes to flagrant abuses committed by their diamond firms against the populations of Lunda's diamond

production region in Northeast Angola, abuses which have been denounced for years by human rights activists and locals.

But the basis of power in Angola is the oil industry. As the largest oil producer on the African continent after Nigeria, Angola relies for about 90% of its GDP on the exportation of this natural resource. This has created a fragile situation which, as Ricardo Soares de Oliveira stresses in his excellent book, would lead to the breakdown of the Eduardist system in the case of a long-term fall in the price of oil on the international market. Meanwhile, the author describes and deconstructs this very sophisticated clientelist system, showing the essential role played by the second real power of the regime: SONANGOL, the State Oil Company. A State within the State, SONANGOL became the primary instrument for the implementation of the regime's strategy in local politics and world affairs.

Ricardo Soares de Oliveira's book is an important academic and methodological achievement. And this is most evident in the way in which he succeeded in making many members of this secretive, elitist group talk about some of the taboo issues in Angola's social and political arena, and then smartly used material from these interviews for a very astute analysis of the system as a whole, from politics to business connections. This is not a cheap accomplishment: anyone who has been doing research in Angola on historical and social science issues knows just how complicated it can be to penetrate this very protective and traditionally secretive elitist Angolan milieu.

The fact of the matter is that President José Eduardo dos Santos skillfully built up over many years a quite sophisticated system in which corruption became a sort of second- and auto-reproductive nature, and, thus, a kind of omertà makes these people mutually protective of the very basis of their dubious wealth and existential security. No one dares to risk losing the huge advantages they receive from the system by criticizing even the least problematic aspects of it. Nevertheless, the book also shows the patrimonial nature of the regime. The debate about the enrichment of President José Eduardo's family has been for years one of the most controversial issues in Angolan politics, a "lethal" taboo, and a subject of the most thrilling speculations in local and international opinion. In fairness, it is important to stress the fact (and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira honestly does this in his book) that this debate was initiated by the pioneering investigative and extraordinarily courageous journalist Rafael Marques—who has been in trouble since then and who has been sued by important military and millionaire figures of the regime. Ricardo Soares de Oliveira's analysis of this

aspect of the regime confirms through a different methodological approach (a political science analysis combined with striking interviews from inside members of the milieu under examination) what Rafael Marques has been denouncing for years. But Ricardo Soares de Oliveira also goes beyond Marques's work with a brilliant analysis of the structuration of what he calls "Oligarchic Capitalism, Angola-Style" (Chapter 4). This is definitely, in my opinion, the most important part of the book, as it goes deep into the roots of the powerful system created by José Eduardo dos Santos in local and international spheres and shows how oil production became key both to rebuilding the country after the twenty-seven-year long civil war and to constructing a powerful international network that gives Angola a special place in world affairs. The best expression of Angola's presence as an international power can be found in the way its business elite has been taking control of Portugal's economic and financial system. This fact is illustrated and emblematically symbolized mostly by the way and extent to which Isabel dos Santos, the billionaire elder daughter of José Eduardo dos Santos, is taking over important business stakes in the former colonizer's market, from the banking industry to major communication enterprises and several other businesses. But it can also be seen in the recent and very polemical and controversial nomination of Isabel dos Santos as head of SONANGOL. This move provides the most recent proof that President Dos Santos intends to strengthen further his family's grip on the country at all costs with the certainty that even his party, the MPLA, will not stop him.

Within the context of the long history of the always complicated relations between Angola and its former colonizer, Portugal, Ricardo Soares de Oliveira shows the reader how this "Angolan Style" of oligarchic capitalism—led primarily by Princess Isabel dos Santos—is practically subjugating Portugal, transforming this European country with high rates of unemployment into a sort of neo-colony and, in the process (due to the nature of "Oligarchic capitalism" in which corruption becomes a basic mode of structural survival and functioning), is also using Portugal—where Angola's elite buy lavish mansions and spend fortunes in Lisbon's most expensive shops—as the site for its money laundering practices.

Overall, *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola since the Civil War* sheds important light on the complex structuration of one of Africa's most sophisticated political regimes, led by a very skillful elite through two institutions. On the one hand, there is the Party-State MPLA: a huge economic machine, whose wealthy barons actively participate in the oligarchic capitalism described by the author, though

they are without any real political power, having totally submitted to the president's personal power and political agenda. On the other hand, there is President José Eduardo dos Santos at the head of a quite secretive group of crony billionaires. Through clearly patrimonial and nepotistic practices, he and his family control a truly cronyistic form of oligarchic capitalism that has been developing an aggressive capacity for using oil as a powerful tool for the hegemonic, continental and international affirmation of the regime. One shortcoming of this great work is that more attention might have been paid to the social breaking-lines that exist within the key institution of the Eduardist system, which warrants a much deeper analysis than it here received. The military, which is essential to security, is an important social and political actor with, on the one hand, an immensely rich and entrepreneurial class of generals and an intermediary class of socially frustrated officers and, on the other hand, the rank-and-file people who are much lower on the social scale. Since the military will surely play an important role in the immediate post-Eduardist era by providing security for the country and quelling any potential social unrest, these social breaking-lines are not a minor issue for Angola's political future.

jean-michel mabeko-tali is Professor of History at Howard University.