

PHOTO ESSAY

Reflections on Angola's 1992 Election: A Photo Essay

CLAUDIA GASTROW

University of Johannesburg

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5148-1260>

In October 1992, Angola experienced its first democratic election. Although independence had been achieved in 1975, the rivalries between independence movements and the geo-political interests of the Cold War, led to an immediate plunge into civil war between the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), the FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola) and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). By the end of the 1970s, the FNLA, originally backed by Mobutu's Zaire and the USA, had become a spent force. However, the MPLA and UNITA continued to wage war, the former backed by international socialist forces and the latter by South Africa and covertly the United States. Angola's war thus became a microcosm, not only of the domestic tensions wrought by centuries of Portuguese colonial actions, but of the developing Cold War and the regional effects of apartheid militarism across southern Africa. With the gradual decline of the Soviet Union, the faltering of apartheid in South Africa as talks began with the ANC, and an acknowledged military stalemate reached with the defeat of South African troops at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, negotiations ensued for the mutual withdrawal of Cuban and South African troops from the country. These were followed by the Bicesse Peace Accords signed by UNITA and the MPLA in which, among other things, the two factions agreed to end hostilities and hold elections.

The elections, however, were poorly managed and, rather than ending the cycle of violence, led to a renewed outbreak of the conflict. UNITA had maintained some of its armed factions in the interior, while the MPLA had armed significant portions of Luanda's civilian population. When tensions erupted in the wake of the announcement of the election results, the capital became a killing field. The city that had been spared immediate fighting for the past seventeen years hid in fear for three days as armed attacks took place throughout its neighbourhoods.

The moment of the 1992 election remains one clouded by ambiguity. The only thing that seems clear is that neither the MPLA nor UNITA can claim to have been an innocent party to the bloodshed that characterised the post-election moment.

This photo essay captures the experiences of two individuals who lived through the 1992 election period. Paul Weinberg, a South African photographer well-known for his involvement in founding Afrapix, a South African photography collective which had documented anti-apartheid resistance, was there working for *Der Spiegel* documenting the election campaign. Rafael Marques de Morais, nowadays known as Angola's most prolific investigative journalist and recognised internationally for his human rights and anti-corruption work, was at the time beginning his career in the state newspaper, the *Jornal de Angola*. Each of these men brought with them

their own political histories. As Weinberg's piece makes clear, Angola's election was symbolic, not only of the end of the war in that country, but of the larger fall of the apartheid imperial project in the region. The photographs he meticulously took capture a moment of hope not only for Angolans but for a region that believed it was about to undergo substantive change. No one had yet had the opportunity to be disillusioned with the return to war in Angola, South Africa's post-apartheid settlements, or the ongoing crushing authoritarianism that ZANU-PF and FRELIMO wielded in Zimbabwe and Mozambique respectively. Marques de Morais, in contrast, brings us into the moment disillusion, reflecting on one photo in particular to track the continuities in repression and political dysfunction that characterised the election and what followed. In describing the brutal massacres that occurred in Luanda, his words prompt the reader to consider what continues to remain elided and side-stepped in discussions of Angola's war, which ended with all parties involved receiving a blanket amnesty for their actions. The photo essay therefore brings back to public discussion a crucial juncture in Angolan history, which nowadays has little scholarly reflection directed towards it, but yet remains a key moment for thinking through the silences and gaps in official narratives of Angolan and southern African history and politics.