

Planning A Socialist Future

By Michael Shuster

Of all the important questions taken up at MPLA's First Congress in early December, the problem of the relationship between the countryside and the town probably has the most far-reaching consequences for the future of the Angolan revolution.

It is no accident that the Congress declared 1978 "the year of agriculture," and that soon after the Congress, the Angolan government carried out what one observer called a "light" reshuffling of the Cabinet, which included the replacement of the Ministers of Agriculture, Fishing and Commerce.

At first glance the declaration of a "year of agriculture" might seem to be pretty dull stuff. But in reports to the Congress, it became evident that many leaders in MPLA were beginning to realize that in coming to power in 1975, MPLA had somehow become disassociated from that base of power—the countryside—that had supported it and made it possible to survive throughout the anti-colonial struggle of the 1960s.

When it assumed governmental responsibility after independence the MPLA had transferred leadership from the liberated zones in the far east of the

country to Luanda, the capital. But it had been the peasantry in that liberated section who had contributed decisively to the development and progress of the national liberation struggle—because of the shift, the countryside had inevitably come to be seen as separated from the policy debates that



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Peasant women and members of Angolan Women's Organization at a political meeting with heads of government and MPLA in Mexico Province, Eastern Angola, 1976.

flourished in the towns, and from the subsequent decisions that were made.

War Effects

It is interesting to note here that during what the Angolans call the Second War of Liberation—fought against FNLA, UNITA, and the South African army after the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship—it was the populations of the towns that were mainly affected by the fighting as the invading forces sought to capture these centers. Afterward, the difficult phase of setting up the central structures of the state—difficulties aggravated by a badly damaged communications system—demanded most of MPLA's energy and attention. Again the countryside was neglected as MPLA failed to create the necessary conditions for the systematic political mobilization of the majority of Angolans—the peasants.

Addressing the problematic relationship between the countryside and the town had further implications for the Congress. Not only did it touch on the political behavior of those living far from Luanda, but it raised serious questions and produced important answers about the political behavior of those in the capital, before and after the abortive coup attempt last May.

Bureaucrats Survive

After MPLA came to power and won the war of 1975-76, the state functioned with most of the bureaucrats who worked for the Portuguese colo-

Mike Shuster, a member of the Southern Africa collective travelled in Angola from April to September 1976.

nial administration still at their desks. Most had remained aloof from the profound political change that had shaken Angola over the previous decade. According to many observers, including this reporter, the old functionaries, most of them non-white, had also manifested a real inability to run the state apparatus.

This is not surprising when it is realized that the primary function of the colonial state machinery was tax collection. Ignorant of the reality of life for most of the country's 6 million peasants and indifferent to their plight, these functionaries led a privileged existence. After MPLA came to power, they fought hard to maintain their status.

"There are those," President Agostinho Neto pointed out in his New Year's message, "who concern themselves only with their privileges. From there to corruption, and to sabotage, is but a single step."

"Perhaps it's normal," he added. "But we cannot accept their disobedience."

Many were prepared to defy the new system and its values. Nito Alves and his followers (known now as fractionists) organized against the leadership of Neto and MPLA Secretary Lucio Lara. They found a ready audience among the state's functionaries, who were anxious to challenge the power of those leaders and militants—peasant in origin—who had come from the struggle in the east.

Thus both among many MPLA loyalists and among the plotters against them, the peasantry had come to be considered the political "clientele" of the towns where the absolute "leadership" of the country resided.

Isolation of Militants

The further away MPLA militants were from Luanda, the more they felt this separation. Ironically, it was those in the remotest areas such as eastern Moxico province, where the guerrilla struggle had won MPLA its greatest victories and literally kept the movement alive during the very difficult days of the mid-1960s, who were most cut off. Fortunately they were also the most vocal in their criticism.

In August 1976, I traveled to Moxico and spent three weeks with the MPLA leadership of the province, visiting some of the outlying villages and settlements. Of all the militants and leaders I met in ten of Angola's 16 provinces, those of Moxico were the most politically conscious, and the most in touch with and concerned with the problems of the people.

The land rovers in which we traveled raised thick clouds of dust as we struggled through barely passable dirt roads. Rarely did we awake after dawn during those three weeks. The long distances between villages and the overgrown routes forced traveling in the very early morning hours if the Provincial Commissioner and his entourage were to have sufficient working time with the villagers to mobilize them and gauge their needs.

I traveled with the Provincial Commissioner, Armando Dembo, who was a veteran of the guerrilla struggle in Moxico, and his right hand man, Balthasar Messonge, a clandestine member of MPLA in the 1960s who worked at the Luso branch of the Bank of Angola. During the hours in the dusty land rovers, the talk always turned to politics. One morning, on our way to Caripande on the Zambian border, we talked of politics and its relation to language.

Criticism of Center

Angolans speak dozens of African languages, but the language of the government is Portuguese. During the colonial period, my hosts told me, the settlers considered the local languages "the talk of dogs," and the Luanda leaders had maintained an unfortunate prejudice against non-Portuguese speaking country people. "Many in Luanda don't understand how important it is for us to use the local languages," Messonge said. "It's really important for our people to hear their language on the radio," a rare occurrence, he added.

From that, the criticism broadened to include the already-hardening bureaucracies of the capital. Messonge and Dembo were convinced that the

consequent separation of the people from the government would have serious implications.

Messonge had recently attended meetings in Luanda and came back to Moxico fuming over what he termed functionaries bound up with pseudo-intellectualism about revolution who had no contact with the countryside. The bureaucracies had already become so calcified that spare parts for any machine were difficult to acquire. "The endless filing out of forms," Messonge said, would have serious consequences in our work here. It's the way the right can prevent the advancement of our revolution.

"It will have to be us, outside of Luanda, who show them how it's done, how to change."

Almost prophetic in his analysis, Messonge and others like him did show Luanda how to change, if the decisions taken at the Congress are any indication. Agriculture had suffered particularly from bad state management. If it was to be the "base of development" of the Angolan economy designated by an initial two year plan, production would have to increase. "In order to do this," Neto said recently. "We will have to create many cooperatives which will coexist with small private plots. This is indispensable."

"The year of agriculture" will be a year not only concerned with growing food. If MPLA's plans for the year are successful, it will affect the political organization of the state and MPLA itself. Coupled with the two year economic development plan put forward by the Congress, it will be MPLA's first political blueprint for a socialist future. □

NAMIBIA

South African Troops: Key to Talks

While its war of liberation with South Africa continues in the north and central regions of Namibia, the South West Africa People's Organization is bracing for a new round of talks with the five Western nations that have

been actively urging a "moderate" settlement for Namibian independence since last spring. Talks are now expected to begin in early February, according to SWAPO representatives at the United Nations.