

Angola - a lament of hope

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Inspired perhaps, by having survived war and misery, Pedro cheerfully shared his story on how his truck had turned into a maternity hospital on wheels.

I met Pedro by the roadside, between the municipality of Cacula and Lubango, the capital of the southern Angolan province of Huíla. I was touring the south of the country by car. He was stuck in the middle of nowhere, in the evening, with his car broken down, and so I gave him a ride.

The road seemed like a long net of small and huge potholes - so awful that it took more than four hours to drive the 60 km between the two towns.

Along the way, Pedro told me a lively story about the state of the road. As the only fellow with a car in his community, for years now he has been taking pregnant women to the Lubango Hospital to give birth. He said no woman has yet made it to the hospital. All have ended up giving birth in his car due to the tortuous journey, and without a single fatality.

“It eases the burden on the maternity hospital”, he said.

On another car journey, to the east of the country, I came across Almeida Gonçalves, a young man who worked as an informal diamond digger. A single lucky stone had earned him US\$250,000. I asked him how he spent his money. He shrugged his shoulders and said: “I had to spend everything on clothes, food and drinks. I did not know how to spend it on other things.”

All he had left was a motorbike - until that was confiscated by the police in an act of extortion. Yet his eyes still light up when he imagines he might strike it lucky once again.

In other circumstance, Almeida Gonçalves might well be an Angolan government minister - provided he could upgrade his tastes from motorbikes to top luxury cars. As a minister, he would be entrusted with the mission of depositing, in his personal bank accounts, incalculable amounts of state funds, as it is a common government practice.

As for Pedro, he might fare well as a provincial governor. He has the virtue of finding advantages in total chaos, in the absence of management. The former governor of Kwanza-Norte province Manuel Pedro Pacavira managed to do the same; after more than a decade of misrule, he has been rewarded with *la dolce vita* as ambassador to Italy.

The train of indifference

The third and last example in my sketch of Angola as it is today has to do with the informal market set on the railway tracks in Viana, Luanda. The train passes through, whistling. People, unconcerned and in no rush, remove themselves and their goods from the tracks, just enough to make space for the locomotive to get past. As the train moves on, people reclaim their places on the tracks just inches behind it, and set their businesses once again. At times one can see the rusty train in the middle of the market. Once it has passed through, it is as though the train had never used those tracks.

Angolans continue to wait for something to happen. People are struggling for immediate survival, without the luxury of medium or long-term perspectives. There is no leadership to show a different way out, to share his or her vision of the future.

Notwithstanding three years of peace, society has simply given up the quest for common ground. Each person has become an island in search of individual peace and stability. To do so, one has to pledge allegiance to the families who control the chaos that we call the state.

The social and civic dynamics of 2001-2003, which seemed to have the potential to build common interests and ensure the fair participation of all sectors in bringing about changes, have crumbled.

Nowadays, war is no longer an argument to excuse people's inertia. By the same token, the regime's repression is also not a justification for inaction.

During the most violent and difficult years of our history, several names and values emerged out of the struggle for independence, for peace, for freedom of the press and of expression.

Repression has been replaced by corruption, by evil laughter at someone else's suffering, as the source of the real personal power in our society. Such a notion of power mirrors our own lack of purpose.

The regime, stretched in two directions between the ruling MPLA and its leader, José Eduardo dos Santos, has exhausted its ability to reinvent itself and to do better for the country. It has become a family feud that sustains itself on the apathy of the society at large. It survives by swallowing up the opposition. The regime also enjoys comfort in the belief it has secured itself through means of patronage rather than by its own merit or civic and political achievements.

For some time now, President dos Santos has been a little more than a chess player who entertains himself. He plays against himself. When it comes to

addressing social problems, he has notoriously little authority over the executive that he supposedly leads.

Meanwhile, his prime minister, Nandó, may as well not exist, except when he becomes the laughing stock of the independent media for his gaffes, and for the regular public beatings that his sons inflict upon defenseless citizens.

I see peace and the opportunity for a serious and transparent democratization process in just the same way as I see the train making its way through the market. I note:

- The absence of social solidarity in the struggle for the common good and people's indifference to the anomalies of the State;
- The collapse of forces such as opposition and organized civil society that ought to stand between the people and the regime;
- The stagnation and even backward movement in the development of the independent media outlets, which ought to be instrumental in the setting of a new culture of democracy, tolerance and transparency;
- The vast gulf between the ruling class (the plundering elite) and the proletariat and peasant classes (reclassified as simply "poor" or "the rest of society" and put at the mercy of the poverty reduction strategy programmes of the international community - World Bank, et al.)
- A political culture of postponing political and social problems to the extreme limit (e.g. civil disarmament, reducing unemployment, dealing with resource use, violence and social exclusion in the Lunda diamond fields, and the oil-rich Cabinda province, et al.)
- The potential for social upheaval, aggravated by the worsening of people's living conditions, in times of peace. Even the alternative forms of survival such as street vending are being brutally crushed by the police.

As an Angolan, I feel defeated by my own weaknesses and limitations. I live in torment for not being able to do more for the society, for the country I love. In anguish, I seek refuge in my loneliness to digest the bitterness for a lost battle in the pursuit of human dignity in Angola.

I assume defeat. I face the reality and I prepare myself for the triumph of my own consciousness and that of the society, against the evil that inhabits in and destroys us.

Agostinho Neto once said, to Angolans, "we shall come back..."

So be it.