

Zero Tolerance Against (Media Investigating) Corruption

*By Rafael Marques de Morais**

A 2010 investigative report named three of President José Eduardo Dos Santos' most trusted aides as business partners in seemingly illegal private business deals in oil, banking, telecom, bio fuel, and media, worth over US\$1 billion.

After the piece, "Angolan Presidency: The Epicenter of Corruption in Angola," was published, the resulting anti-corruption discourse was reminiscent of an Angola of 20 years prior, during its one-party Marxist-Leninist era.

In those days, the media sector was wholly owned by the state. The authorities had absolute control of its editorial line, and did not allow investigative journalism or references to corruption in government.

Since 1995, Angola's independent media has expanded and become more professional. Yet today, when government officials are called out on embarrassing allegations of corruption, the "concerned institutions" maintain silence, turning instead to the state-owned daily *Jornal de Angola*, to respond with searing editorials in defense of the named officials.

As illustrated by the government's reaction to the "Angolan Presidency" report, the country's independent media is at a tipping point, again facing the extraordinary fate of being owned, controlled or driven out of business by the regime.

The Government Reaction

The "Angolan Presidency" story depicted a series of joint-ventures with foreign investors and privatization deals that had the approval of the Council of Ministers, headed by President Dos Santos.

In one of the deals, the Council granted a license to a consortium established by Sonangol; U.S. oil company Cobalt Energy; and two Angolan private companies, Alper Oil and Nazaki, to explore deepwater oil blocks 9 and 21. The latter, according to the report, is 99 percent owned by three of Dos Santos aides: General Hélder Vieira Dias "Kopelipa," head of Casa Militar (Dos Santos's office of military affairs, which oversees the army, the police, the state security, and the presidential guard); General Leopoldino Fragoso, adviser to General Kopelipa; and Manuel Vicente, chairman and CEO of Sonangol.

Such deals seem to be in breach of anti-corruption laws that prohibit state agents from doing private business with or through

the state.

Throughout the autumn of 2010, the leading weekly newspaper *Semanario Angolense* regularly headlined investigations coming out of the “Angolan Presidency” report, adding its own editorials and contributions, causing a major public outcry. Other weekly newspapers, like *Folha 8*, *A Capital* and *Novo Jornal*, also followed the investigation, bolstering its legitimacy and making regular references to it.

Owing to the stir the report caused in the country and abroad, Rui Pinto de Andrade, member of parliament and spokesperson for the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA — *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*), told the Portuguese news agency Lusa that MPLA had discussed the report, but was not obligated to make a statement. “The country has competent bodies to respond to these kinds of accusations,” he said. “There is a rule of law in Angola and the MPLA would like to see these competent organs take a stand on these accusations.”

The government’s initial response to the report came on August 29, 2010, via the only daily newspaper in the country: the state-owned *Jornal de Angola*. A series of searing editorials defended the triumvirate of top officials exposed for their allegedly abusing their public offices.

The paper argued that government officials are beyond reproach because President Dos Santos and his officials have won the world’s “praise,” and that Angola is a role model for political stability and economic growth in Africa, as well as a magnet for Western and Chinese investments. “Corrupt are those who dishonor officials like General Kopelipa and Manuel Vicente,” it said.

Jornal de Angola claimed that the investigation amounted to an attack on the president: “To attack the President of the Republic,” said the editorial, “is to attack all Angolans.”

Some officials tried to defend themselves without dismissing the allegations. One in particular, Minister of Territorial Administration, Bornito de Sousa, acknowledged his joint-venture with state bank BPC in private insurance company Mundial Seguros. This acknowledgment came in the form of a one-page letter published by *Semanario Angolense* on March 20, 2010. The letter also included his resignation as chairman of the board of Mundial Seguros, and in it he made an offer of 5 percent of the company’s shares to the reporter who published the “Angolan Presidency” report.

The minister, who is also a law professor, had a stipulation to his offer: “it is valid for 30 days, to be claimed in writing, and in so far

as it is not understood as a means to corrupt anyone.”

The government’s defensive and indirect approach to the report substantially differs from statements made in November 2009, when President Dos Santos announced a “zero tolerance” policy against corruption, which he identified as the country’s biggest problem. The government’s reaction also is in conflict with comprehensive anti-corruption legislation that came into effect in June 2010.

New Media Ownership

In this context, a new strategy may have emerged from the bungled relationship between officialdom and the independent weekly newspapers: the wholesale purchase of such media outlets.

On June 5, 2010, various newspapers reported that a recently established company, Media Investments, had purchased both *Semanário Angolense* and *A Capital*, previously owned by independent journalists. It is unclear who owns Media Investments.

The reports also stated that Media Investments had taken over 40 percent ownership of the weekly *Novo Jornal*, partly owned by a subsidiary of the Portuguese bank *Espírito Santo*, *Escom*. The information about these purchases had been based on a press release provided to the media by Media Investments.

Media Investments later denied the takeovers. Manager of *Semanario Angolense*, Claribela Ferreira, said she could not comment on editorial matters, but dismissed the company’s press release as a mistake by the newspapers. “In the following issue, a new press statement denied the fact. Media Investments only bought *Semanario Angolense*,” she said.

Reginaldo Silva, a member of the government regulatory body National Media Council (CNCS) pointed out that media law requires full disclosure of the ownership structure of private media outlets. The purpose of the disclosure is to prevent the establishment of media monopolies, which could hinder impartiality, pluralism and market competition.

“Whoever bought the newspapers realized the serious infringement of the media law [on monopolies], only after the Media Investments’ press release,” Silva said. “Later we read that the weekly *A Capital* had a new owner, Media Vision.” At the end of 2010, he noted that “CNCS has not received any information that confirms the legal existence of Media Vision or of Media Investments as required by law.”

Silencing the “Independents”

With the relevant weekly newspapers now taking a more favorable approach to government news, a two-pronged strategy came into effect: The state media, led by *Jornal de Angola*, is on the attack against those who expose corruption and criticize the regime. Meanwhile, the private media has become the rear guard, censoring stories and journalists that address such issues.

Two incidents involving *Semanário Angolense* and *A Capital* underscore the new trend in Angola’s political economy, which is a threat to both media freedom and the public debate on corruption. Until the takeovers, both newspapers had stepped up their coverage of corruption issues, and were instrumental in stimulating political debate in the context of a paralyzed opposition and an incipient civil society in Angola.

On July 31, 2010, leading independent newspaper *Semanário Angolense* headlined the alleged participation of MPLA Deputy Chief Whip General Higinio Carneiro in the takeover of a Brazilian regional airliner Puma Air.

The article, based on an investigation by the Brazilian business magazine *Isto É*, revealed that during his tenure as minister of Public Works, General Higinio Carneir allegedly engaged in state deals in an airline with his Brazilian partner Gleison de Souza. The latter served in 2004 as vice-president of a small construction company, *MetroEuropa*, whose biggest client was the Angolan Ministry of Public Works.

The article described General Higinio Carneiro as one of the richest men in Angola and questioned the origins of his fortune, considering the general had only served in the military and in government, and neither of these institutions pay salaries analogous to his wealth

Former deputy director of *Semanário Angolense*, Silva Candembo, tells the story of how the editorial team working on the Carneiro piece used the Internet to send the digital layout of the paper to the two censors very late at night, when it had already gone to print. “We did this to bypass censorship and to challenge the new owners,” he said.

As a result, reports Candembo, the new owners of the newspaper confiscated the whole issue at the Lito-Tipo printing press and burned the newspapers, thus killing the story.

There was a similar incident on August 7, 2010 with an issue of *A Capital* which contained an article critical of President Dos Santos’ housing policies. The president had recently announced that new social housing for the low-to-middle income population would start

at US\$60,000, despite the fact that up to 70 percent of the Angolan population live on two dollars a day, according to United Nations statistics.

The A Capital story questioned the housing prices, pointing out that they seem extraordinarily expensive in a time when home loans are hard to come by and public sector salaries are low. The issue containing that article also was burned at the Lito-Tipo printing press.

Everything Old is New Again

In September 1990, during Angola's one-party Marxist-Leninist era, an anti-corruption task force at the Ministry of Justice (MJ — *Ministério da Justiça*) published a report (Multidisciplinary Study about the Phenomenon of Corruption in Society in General) stressing that the corruption scourge had a bearing on the country's civil war, through the sale of weaponry and other military equipment in informal markets.

The report also described how corruption had brought the state to a virtual halt due to the plunder of state assets and malfeasance, and proposed the use of the media to disseminate anti-corruption campaigns and to denounce the scourge as a deterrent.

But the media in those days was state owned. The anti-corruption measures were never implemented, except for the approval of strict legislation to prevent impunity for high-ranking government officials, which soon faded into oblivion.

Twenty years later, Angola seems to be back-tracking toward this period of oppression, as journalists are silenced and media outlets lose independence. Are we witnessing a new era of restricted media, or will Angolans find a way to report their news in an objective and truthful forum?

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