

BOOK REVIEW

Rui Santos Verde. *Angola at the Crossroads: Between Kleptocracy and Development*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2021. 201 pages. List of Figures. List of Acronyms. Bibliography. Index. \$51.38. Paper. ISBN: 9780755640560.

Rui Santos Verde's timely book *Angola at the Crossroads: Between Kleptocracy and Development* examines the period from 2010 to 2020, covering the demise of Angola's long-serving dictator, José Eduardo dos Santos, and the first few years under his successor João Lourenço. The author serves as a legal advisor to *MakaAngola*, Angola's leading human rights NGO, which is led by investigative journalist Rafael Marques. Verde's legal expertise and position at *MakaAngola* give him an insider's access to a range of excellent sources, including Angolan laws, court cases, interviews, and his own private archives.

The book is broken into two main sections: I) Dos Santos's last moves (2010–2017); and II) Transition and hope in Africa? (2017–2020). In Part I, Verde explains how systemic corruption operates in Angola. He argues that the Angolan presidency under Dos Santos operated as a sort of shady business cartel, with the Dos Santos family at the center. The family used the state oil company, Sonangol, as its main source of illicit enrichment (34). None of this is news, of course, but Verde provides detailed examples that are illustrative of corruption in practice. For example, he details a series of money transfers, totaling roughly \$200 million, that Isabel dos Santos, head of Sonangol and daughter of the former president, made from Sonangol's accounts to other companies in her portfolio (76–80). Much of this material has been reported by *MakaAngola* and as part of the "Luanda Leaks" reported by the BBC in 2020. What is most effective about Verde's analysis is that it weaves the examples of corruption into a single narrative, which allows the reader to better understand the working of corruption and how it undermined Angola's institutions, economy, and moral fabric. The section ends with the resignation in 2017, after nearly 39 years in power, of José Eduardo dos Santos. Verde argues that a combination of factors explains the authoritarian Dos Santos's exit: his declining health, an acute economic crisis related to the fall of oil prices, and Dos Santos's increasing unpopularity among the Angolan public.

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Part II of the book, “Transition and hope in Africa? (2017–2020)” is the heart of Verde’s analysis. He focuses on the reform agenda of Dos Santos’s hand-picked successor, João Lourenço, and argues that although the systemic reforms have been limited, Lourenço’s attempts to fight corruption and a new openness in civil society give Angolans hope. Verde explains that the choice of João Lourenço, minister of defense, to succeed Dos Santos appeared to be the safe choice of a party insider, Soviet-trained like Dos Santos, someone who would not rock the boat. However, within a couple months of his inauguration in September 2017, Lourenço fired two Dos Santos loyalists: Valter Filipe, governor of the central bank, and Isabel dos Santos, head of Sonangol (130). These removals allowed Lourenço to go after some of the most egregious thefts of state assets and immediately endeared Lourenço to Angolans demanding action against corruption. As an example of Lourenço’s attempts to address corruption, Verde offers the case of the Sovereign Fund of Angola. When Lourenço assumed power in 2017, José Filomeno, one of the former dictator’s children, ran the Angolan Sovereign Fund, which had \$5 billion in assets, \$3 billion of which had been transferred to the management of Filomeno’s close friend Jean-Claude Bastos de Morais (137). In September 2018, Lourenço had Filomeno and Morais arrested. Six months later, Morais returned \$3 billion, and the charges were dropped. Verde cites the case as an illustrative example of how Lourenço went after some of the most egregious thefts of state assets by the Dos Santos family and their cronies, but without strengthening the legal system to tackle systemic corruption (140).

Verde’s *Angola at the Crossroads* provides an instructive, succinct analysis of Angola’s recent political and economic history. It is especially useful for providing an overview of how the Dos Santos family and the top echelon of the ruling MPLA party appropriated state assets for their own enrichment. The author ends on a guardedly optimistic note about President João Lourenço’s efforts to curb corruption and open space for Angolan civil society.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2023.1