

Angola - Ovimbundu

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June 19, 2015



Profile

Ovimbundu constitute the largest ethnic group in Angola, and are concentrated in the country's highland plateau. A largely rural people whose farming systems were once highly productive, Ovimbundu became migrant wage-earners in large numbers as Portuguese settlers began taking over their lands in the 1940s and 1950s.

Historical context

In the face of privilege, corruption and arrogance among the MPLA nomeklatura, UNITA's leadership, frustrated at being shut out of power, successfully played on feelings of humiliation and resentment among Ovimbundu and other minorities. As less than 2 per cent of the MPLA's members in 1980 were small farmers (a category comprising about three-quarters of Angola's population at the time) and as its policies neglected rural residents and enriched urban elites, there was ample basis for discontent. However, UNITA's leadership sought to channel this bitterness chiefly into anti-mestiço and anti-White feeling. Yet for the Ovimbundu the war brought suffering on a scale and depth felt by no other ethnic group.

National elections in 1992 revealed a strong but by no means universal Ovimbundu allegiance to UNITA; in the three Ovimbundu-dominated provinces it gained two-thirds of the parliamentary vote. The elections also revealed an even stronger fear among Angolans of UNITA's barbarism and ruthlessness; two-thirds of the national parliamentary vote went against it. UNITA's rejection of the election results and its return to war provoked countermeasures: waves of 'ethnic cleansing' of Ovimbundu (and Bakongo) broke out in several cities, and the MPLA itself returned to war, with terrible blood-letting on both sides. Since 2002, UNITA has transitioned into a political party, reducing the threat of violence between the Ovimbundu and other communities.

Current issues

There have been no major developments affecting the rights of the Ovimbundu people in

2005/2006.