The "Corruption" Narrative: Who’s Afraid of Isabel Dos Santos? And Why?

The words they use to describe her are nasty, cliché, but all too familiar. They call her “Princess,” “Oligarch,” and accuse her of “embezzlement” “peddling influence” etc. The truth is that Isabel Dos Santos, the richest woman in Africa, has for decades been on the hit list of the most powerful people in the world. In the first month of 2020, the international media has doubled down, taken aim, and decided to go for the kill.

And who are the hitmen? The same folks who brought you the Panama Papers, the shady International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). The outlet with ties to the Democracy Fund of the United Nations, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and George Soros’ Open Society Foundation is repeating their same old mantra. They accuse independent leaders around the world, from Russia, China, Latin America, and Africa of being “corrupt.” They display in rather convenient “leaks,” as if it is somehow shocking, that the leaders of countries with massive populations and resources in-fact possess lots of wealth. The international audience is led to the conclusion that the targeted leader should be removed.

Misuse of government funds and other malpractice is certainly a plague rampant in many developing countries. When nations are working to raise themselves out of poverty, shady practices often become a kind of way of life as the population learns to “take care of each other.” The result is often widespread inefficiency.

But what is the obvious goal of these Soros, USAID backed ICIJ operations? To keep intact the corrupt, monopolistic global financial order that exists by selectively targeting those who challenge it. The deeply corrupt global order where Wall Street and London bankers rule the world, keeping it poor so they can stay rich, pushing policies of “de-regulation” and “free markets” that have failed over and over, never gets called into question.
“Corruption” charges were used to oust Dilma Roussef, to imprison Lula Di Silva who would have won the 2018 election according to every poll, and install autocratic free market demagogue Jair Bolsanaro in Brazil. “Corruption” allegations are constantly used to stir up opposition to the Putin government by forces who were quite satisfied with the free market looting during the Yeltsin-era, and dislike that Russia has been restored as an economic power and energy exporter. Leftist Vice President Christina Kirchner in Argentina was also hit with a series of “corruption” charges by supporters of the IMF and the free market policies, who attempted to undo her progressive reforms during the Mauricio Macri.

Meanwhile, many politicians in the “free” western capitalist countries have offshore bank accounts, take care of their relatives and business associates, and otherwise engage in notably corrupt behavior. The President of the United States is pretty obviously tied to a chain of “Trump Hotels” around the world, and many questions have been raised about that since the 2016 elections. Former Vice President Joe Biden’s son conveniently got a well paying job at a Burisma Holdings, a Ukrainian Natural Gas corporation, at the very moment when the USA was backing the “EuroMaiden” events that toppled President Yanukovych.

An Oil Rich Country, Kept Poor by Western Capitalism

Angola is not a poor country. It has lots of oil. Its natural gas potential is just being realized. It has minerals and a vast population. However, poverty is widespread in this southern African nation. Until 1975, Angola was a colony of Portugal. The population lived as colonial slaves, worked to death, kept in poverty, as their resources were utilized to line the pockets of Portuguese businessmen.

The People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was formed in 1956 to throw off the colonial chains. The MPLA was a Marxist-Leninist political organization backed and armed by the Soviet Union. It waged a guerilla insurgency, fighting Portuguese troops, right up until the Carnation Revolution. When the fascist government of Portugal fell in 1975, colonial territories were granted independence. The MPLA took power as the elected government of a newly free Angola.

Immediately following independence, the apartheid government of South Africa invaded Angola. Over 65,000 Cuban soldiers were sent to support the MPLA in fighting off this and subsequent invasions by the apartheid regime. Cuba continued to maintain a military presence in Angola to support the MPLA.

At the time of independence, the United States government had already been arming and training a group of terrorists and extremists called the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) that conducted assassinations and other acts of violence against the MPLA. UNITA at first claimed to be Maoist Communists and had relations with China, but by the late 1970s they were Evangelical Christians and advocates of western capitalism. The United States was their primary supporter, and anti-communism was their rallying cry.

The leader of the CIA trained and armed UNITA terrorists like Jonas Savimbi. Savimbi murdered civilians, bombed schools and hospitals and committed horrendous atrocities. Savimbi was a practitioner of witchcraft and a literal cannibal, who ate the corpses of MPLA soldiers. The horrendous atrocities of Jonas Savimbi has been well documented, but this did not stop the Reagan White House and other US administrations from embracing them as freedom fighters.

The goal of the MPLA was to peacefully develop Angola into a prosperous socialist country. This was not possible in a state of total civil war, as US-backed terrorists ravaged the country for 27 years. Even when peace was finally declared in 2002, the United Nations noted that Angola was littered with landmines, and most of its bridges and essential infrastructure had been destroyed.

“Angola Starts Now!”

In 2002, with peace declared, the MPLA declared “Angola Starts Now!” and began to eradicate poverty and economically develop the country. Their efforts were aided significantly by the highest oil prices in world history. The GDP increased at a staggeringly high average of 11.1% from 2001 to 2010. China worked with Angola to build new railways connecting previously isolated parts of the country. The capital city of Luanda became a prosperous business center. Millions of Angolans were lifted from poverty.

Who was key in making all of this happen? Isabel Dos Santos. Isabel is the daughter of the country’s first elected President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos. It is largely because of her efforts that Angola now has a state controlled mobile telecommunications corporation, Unitel. She also helped to set up Banco de Fomento Angola and Banco BIC, two private banks based in Angola. These are banks subsidized with state oil profits, that have provided loans allowing
the domestic economy of Angola to flourish. Isabel Dos Santos has traveled around the world working to bring foreign investment into her homeland.

In 2016 Isabel Dos Santos moved out of the private sector and was named as the director of Sonangol, the state-run oil company that remains at the center of the Angolan economy. Much like Putin did in Russia with Gazprom and Rosneft, Sonagol is a “national champion.” It is a state-controlled energy corporation utilized to create economic growth and stabilize the market. It was with Sonangol’s proceeds that the mining and agricultural sectors were stimulated.

Nigeria is now the top oil exporting country in Africa. It has been a playground for Chevron, BP, Royal Dutch Shell, and Exxon-Mobile for years. Nigeria has a few billionaires, but the population is overwhelmingly poor and illiterate.

While lots of oil is extracted and lots of profits made by western corporations, nothing like Angola’s economic boom of 2002-2014 has ever happened in Nigeria, despite decades and decades in the oil business. The successes of Angola cannot be blamed on high oil prices alone, but rather on state central planning, utilizing oil proceeds to eradicate poverty and construct.

Isabel Dos Santos has spent very little time working in government. She prides herself on her success as a businesswoman in the private sector. Her dynamic leadership and strategic management of private companies, in coordination with state central planners, created all kinds of spectacular results. “There are thousands of people whom we gave their first job,” she told BBC.

When a new President took office in 2017, the Wall Street Journal celebrated Isabel Dos Santos’ departure. It accused her of running “turgid bureaucracy.” American oil companies were angry that she “required that they buy supplies from select domestic firms.” Dos Santos enforced environmental laws, and would not privatize the newly discovered natural gas resources that “by law belongs to the government.” Immediately before the ouster of Isabel Dos Santos from Sonangol, Total, BP, Haliburton, and Exxon-Mobile had terminated their relationship with the state-run firm. It appears that the big oil bankers almost demanded her ouster from the new administration of President Juan Lourenço and their wish was granted.

A Failed Administration Scapegoating Its Predecessors

Lourenço promised to usher in an “economic miracle” with his free market reforms once elected. The opposite has occurred. Unemployment has risen. Strikes and social unrest are also increasing. 28% of Angola’s population lives on less than $1.90 per day. Lourenço has signed on with the International Monetary Fund, known for pushing deregulation and Milton Friedman style economic reforms in exchange for “development loans.”

Since he cannot fix the economy, Lourenço seems to be focused scapegoating his predecessors, who presided over huge economic achievements. President João Lourenço calls himself “the terminator,” and he has worked hard to single out members of the Dos Santos family and their allies for prosecution. 45 cases are currently in court, and Isabel Dos Santos is now among those facing charges, as is her younger brother.

However, a BBC article published on January 16th seems to have revealed that the campaign against Santos isn’t simply about retaliation against the Dos Santos family. During an interview, Isabel Dos Santos “declined four times to rule out” running for the Presidency. Later she told a Portuguese network “it’s possible” that she may intend run for head of state in 2022.

And what else, she could very well win, despite massive huge efforts to besmirch her reputation with the convenient “Luanda Leaks” presented by the Soros, USAID tied outlet. To Angolans who have endured decades of civil war followed by miraculous amounts of growth, the name “Dos Santos” is associated with the legacy of the anti-colonial struggle, as well as a decade of exciting hope.

The “Iron Lady” Southern Africa Needs?

Indicating why she might consider a Presidential run, she told BBC “President Lourenço is fighting for absolute power. There’s a strong wish to neutralize any influence that [former] President Dos Santos might still have in the MPLA…. If a different candidate would appear [ahead of the 2022 presidential election] supported by former President Dos Santos or allies linked to him, that would really challenge [Mr Lourenço's] position because his current track record is very, very poor.”

In fact, Isabel Dos Santos could be the kind of leader that Southern Africa desperately needs. Her father was a guerilla fighter who fought the Portuguese and went into exile. Her mother was a Russian Communist. While the
MPLA backed away from Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism in 1991, it remains a Democratic Socialist Party, and its members are dedicated to building a society where all Angolans have what they need. Already, from both the private sector and as the head of Sonangol, Dos Santos has put into practice a successful implementation of policies that could be called “petro-socialism” i.e. using state-run oil profits to centralize and build up an economy.

On the northern end of the continent, Libya flourished under such policies. The Islamic Socialist government of Moammar Gaddafi built the world’s largest irrigation system, “the man-made river.” Libya had the highest life expectancy on the African continent until 2011 and had achieved universal housing and literacy. Libya worked hard to suppress Al-Qaida and terrorist groups and provided financial support to the Irish Republican Army, the Nation of Islam, the Black Panthers, and many other socialist and anti-imperialist forces around the world. In his final year, Gaddafi openly spoke of establishing an African currency and an African bank, laying the basis for independence from western financial power.

All of this culminated in the USA funding an uprising against him, and NATO bombing campaign that destroyed the country. During Gaddafi’s leadership, Africans from across the continent piled into the Libya where the state provided them with employment. Now, in a war-torn, newly impoverished and destroyed post-Gaddafi, pro-western Libya, Africans are trying to get out on rafts, and drowning in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe.

Russia and China were both deeply impoverished countries at the beginning of the 20th Century, but it was with state central planning, mobilizing the population and rationally organizing the economy that they became superpowers. Both countries have learned the lessons of the Soviet Union’s demise, and recognize the need for foreign investment and a private sector, which will allow more entrepreneurialism.

However, Russia and China continue to get stronger because they have not fallen into the trap of “profits in command” and the chaos of the market. All across the developing world, the absolute failure of Milton Friedman-style economics can be seen. Even the Bretton Woods institutions now admit that they have been “too Neoliberal.” All out “free trade” Adam Smith-style capitalism is not the answer, for Angola or any other country.

If Isabel Dos Santos, a savvy businesswoman was elected, carrying with her a family name that is associated with better times, and resilient leadership, she could very well turn things around. As Russia becomes more involved in helping strengthen African countries, and as China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank works to build infrastructure to help the development of independent economies, Isabel Dos Santos has great potential as a leader. With her strength and boldness, she could bring economic growth, financial independence, and hope to millions of people, not just in her own country, but throughout the region.

_Caleb Maupin is a political analyst and activist based in New York. He studied political science at Baldwin-Wallace College and was inspired and involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._