

Autocratic Exports, Local Consequences, and Civic Resistance: China and Russia's Reinforcement of Angola's Authoritarianism

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Summary

A. Authoritarian states like Russia and China are active participants in Angola's autocratization through practices such as opaque financing and the provision of digital surveillance capacity. Although engagement in Angola by Beijing and Moscow, the two regimes' antidemocratic influence has accelerated over the last few years. Beijing and Moscow's deepening engagement in Angola has systematically reinforced corruption, weakened governance, and restricted civic space.

B. Key Trends in Foreign Authoritarian Influence in Angola:

1. Russia and China both make use of the endemic corruption in Angola to the benefit of their companies and governments.
2. As a result, other international companies struggle to compete and local labor suffers.
3. Russia and China also exploit the weak media environment to suppress negative coverage of their activities and spread propaganda to sabotage competitors.

C. Practical Responses to Authoritarian Influence in Angola:

Civil society in Angola can counter the effects of foreign authoritarian influence by: 1) strengthening transparency on development financing and debt; 2) protecting democratic activists; 3) bolstering independent media; 4) raising public awareness about negative economic and labor impacts; and 5) building democratic solidarity with regional partners.

D. Challenges for Civic Resistance to Authoritarian Influence in Angola and Beyond:

Angolan civil society faces several structural obstacles to their work, including: 1) lack access to primary documents necessary for evidence-based advocacy; 2) intensified legal risks; 3) acute resource constraints; and 4) a lack of understanding of the long-term benefits of democratic institutions.

More than two decades after the end of Angola's civil war, the country presents a troubling paradox: formal multiparty elections coexist with entrenched executive dominance, systemic

corruption, and shrinking civic space. These dynamics are reinforced by weak institutional checks on abuses of power, limited parliamentary oversight, constrained judicial independence, and opaque public financial management systems.

Angola's domestic civic actors must contend not only with homegrown constraints on meaningful democratic practice, but also with the compounding influence of external authoritarian powers that face minimal accountability in the country's permissive political environment.

Authoritarian states like China and Russia are not just spoilers or obstacles to Angola's democratic progress. They are, unfortunately, active participants in the country's autocratization. They have helped entrench a kleptocratic political order through practices such as opaque financing, provision of digital surveillance capacity, security cooperation, partnerships in extractive industries, and assistance with information control.

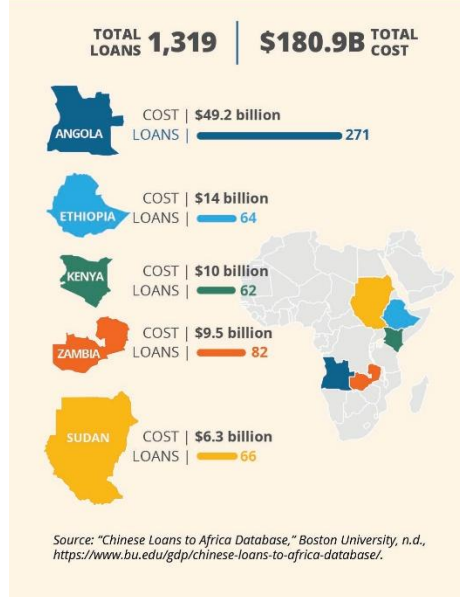
Although engagement in Angola by Beijing and Moscow is not new and has had a poor track record in terms of debt accumulation and failed efforts at ideological influence, the two regimes' more practical and institutional forms of antidemocratic influence have accelerated over the last few years. This trend presents massive challenges to civic actors in Angola and their counterparts in similar settings as they seek to advance democratic goals. However, there are some immediate steps that Angolan prodemocracy activists can take to clear the way for meaningful progress.

Beijing and Moscow's Long-Standing Engagement and Impact in Angola

The Russian and Angolan governments maintain a diplomatic and strategic relationship that dates to Angola's independence from Portugal in 1975. Their ties deepened during the final decades of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union provided military support and ideological backing to the ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) as it fought a civil war against the anticommunist National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), now the main opposition party.

As a result of this relationship, Angola has become one of the leading foreign clients for Russian military exports.¹ Arms deals between the two countries are calculated in the billions of dollars, and are often rife with corruption involving senior Angolan officials.² Investigative outlets such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) have detailed sordid transactions between then-Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos and middlemen with ties to Russia's oligarchy.³ The pattern of corruption extends beyond arms purchases, reflecting a broader system of opaque financial practices and networks that benefit Angolan elites at the expense of the public interest.

Top 5 Recipients of Chinese Loans to Africa (2000-2024)



Beginning in 2002, Beijing introduced an aid model in which it offered infrastructure development in exchange for access to oil, providing loans to Angola that totaled \$49.2 billion between 2002 and 2024.⁴ While often described as “no-strings attached” deals, these arrangements typically carried implicit conditions, including resource-backed repayment structures and requirements to use Chinese contractors and labor.⁵ Beijing’s aid model was nevertheless appealing to the Angolan leadership, as it entailed fewer domestic transparency, governance, and reform requirements than those imposed by democratic and multilateral lenders.⁶

After more than two decades, however, this approach has done little to improve the lives of most Angolans. Oil-based loans negotiated without public scrutiny have enabled a political elite associated with the MPLA and the executive branch to embezzle billions of dollars, while more than half of the population lives in poverty.⁷

Development contracts are issued without parliamentary review or public disclosure,⁸ often resulting in poor-quality infrastructure projects, especially in housing and road construction.⁹ In this environment, international companies that are subject to strong anticorruption safeguards in their home countries find it nearly impossible to compete in Angola,¹⁰ as corruption has become not an exception, but a core governing method sustained by Moscow and Beijing.

Despite their overall continuity, the strategies employed by the Russian and Chinese regimes are not static. New legal, informational, technological, and economic tools provide fresh opportunities for these powers to increase the antidemocratic impacts of their engagement in Angola. The examples described below offer some insight on how the evolving forms of authoritarian influence have affected governance and civic space in Angola just over the last few years. A better understanding of these new conditions will help Angolan and international civic actors to adapt and respond effectively.

Undermining Angolans’ Labor Rights

Angola’s natural resources and construction sectors are marked by a high degree of corruption.¹¹ As with the better-known cases of Venezuela and Zimbabwe, a combination of graft, large-scale infrastructure projects, and political influence has enabled the enrichment of Angola’s ruling elite at the expense of its citizens and workers.¹² This corruption, however, has been enabled not just by weak domestic oversight, but also by the exploitative practices of China’s state-affiliated enterprises.

One prominent figure who has been implicated in corruption allegations is General Manuel Hélder Vieira Dias Júnior, better known as “Kopelipa,” a former senior official in charge of

construction projects. According to *Imparcial Press*, Kopelipa allegedly received some \$200 million in bribes linked to contracts for the construction of three major housing developments (*centralidades*) in Angola. *Imparcial Press* also reported that the payments were allegedly made by a Chinese construction company, Pan-China Group, through intermediary firms connected to Kopelipa.¹³ In 2021, the United States announced corruption-related sanctions against Kopelipa.¹⁴

However, the public exposure and sanctions stemming from these transactions did not prevent Pan-China Group from exerting further harmful influence on Angola’s construction sector and the rights of its laborers.

Pan-China Group’s Treatment of Angolan Workers



Congresswoman Maria do Espírito Santos Monteiro (UNITA) speaking with workers during a visit by members of the Angola Parliament to the Pan-China Group construction site in January 2026. (Image credit: Navita Ngolo)

In January 2026, members of the Angolan National Assembly visited the site for a major local construction project built by the Pan-China Group in Luanda. Their visit followed disturbing allegations that Angolan workers had faced degrading treatment at the site.¹⁵ The visit raised serious concerns among local civil society organizations about the credibility of Angola’s labor protections, oversight institutions, and commitment to human dignity.¹⁶

The parliamentary delegation found that Angolan workers were housed in overcrowded 20-foot shipping containers, with up to 10 individuals per unit and no air conditioning, in a city where temperatures typically range from 68°F (20°C) to highs of 87°F (31°C).¹⁷ Foreign workers—reportedly Chinese nationals—received significantly better accommodations.¹⁸ Paulo Faria, a member of the National Assembly, argued that the Angolan workers were “treated as slaves,” while a separate unit was reserved for Chinese nationals¹⁹ and noted the stark discrepancy between the worker accommodations featured in Pan-China’s promotional materials and the

conditions actually observed during the site visit. He said that the sanitation facilities resembled pigsties (*pocilgas*), and characterized the meals provided to Angolan workers as inadequate and degrading.²⁰

Equally concerning were reports that the Angolan workers allegedly earned about 70,000 kwanzas (\$75) per month, well below the legal minimum wage of 100,000 kwanzas (\$108) per month.²¹ During the visit, workers reportedly expressed fear of retaliation or dismissal if they spoke openly with members of parliament.²² Although Angola's labor law regulates employment relationships and provides formal protections related to wages and working conditions,²³ enforcement remains inconsistent due to corruption, weak institutional capacity, and the prevalence of informal employment in many sectors.²⁴ According to UNITA, the parliamentary delegation tried to communicate its findings to the General Labor Inspectorate, but the relevant officials were unavailable.²⁵

Pan-China Group is reported to have originally operated under the direct administrative oversight of China's Ministry of Construction.²⁶ It remains a major Chinese state-owned construction enterprise known for large-scale international projects and its role in developing Angola's domestic infrastructure, including the MPLA's own headquarters.²⁷ The company works closely with Beijing and foreign government entities and contributes to Chinese state priorities like "smart cities," other urban development, and the Belt and Road Initiative.²⁸

Pan-China Group's established relationship with the MPLA, combined with its ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, raises important questions about the political dimensions of its operations. While direct evidence of influence activities remains limited, Chinese firms in general often pursue projects linked to Beijing's political goals, warranting further investigation into their potential role in advancing CCP interests abroad.²⁹

The allegations that emerged from the recent site visits by Angolan lawmakers raise serious concerns about labor conditions, elite capture, and corruption within major infrastructure projects operating under foreign management in the country.³⁰ The Angolan government's limited response to such violations illustrates how foreign-backed projects can proceed within, and benefit from, an environment in which authoritarian elites' political and economic priorities override regulatory enforcement, the rule of law, and public accountability. In this context, labor abuses are not only a human rights issue but also a symptom of a broader antidemocratic governance model.

Digital Surveillance and Technology Imports

As in countries across Africa, Chinese technology companies like Huawei and ZTE have played a major role in building Angola's telecommunications infrastructure. They have been particularly active in the construction and modernization of mobile networks, fiber-optic systems, and digital backbone projects.³¹ In addition, Angola is often cited as hosting "smart cities"—urban digitalization projects that feature integrated high-tech surveillance systems—developed with Chinese firms' support.³² There are indications that the Angolan government is stepping up its use of surveillance technology in cooperation with the Chinese government and Chinese companies.³³ For instance, an AidData report lists Angola among the countries that have reached

an agreement to deploy China-sourced facial recognition technologies for population monitoring.³⁴ Since Angola does not have a comprehensive data privacy law, it is difficult to determine who has access to the data that these technologies collect.³⁵

China's export of surveillance technologies is not a novel phenomenon. However, the simple transfer of these technologies has increasingly been integrated with institutional training, infrastructure development, and government diffusion.³⁶ In Angola, the expansion of Chinese-built digital infrastructure, combined with access to surveillance technologies from multiple global providers, has strengthened the state's capacity to monitor and deter dissent.³⁷

The trend is visible in the deepening role of Huawei, which is providing telecommunications infrastructure and digital systems along with technical training programs that shape how information is managed and monitored.³⁸ Huawei's expanded footprint includes plans for a research and development hub in Luanda that would focus on "connectivity, artificial intelligence, and data storage." Such a facility would fit within the company's wider African strategy as "a regional hub for innovation and technological training."³⁹

Angola's relationship with the Chinese company KEDACOM provides another example. Angolan government entities have consulted with the firm as part of its National Public Security Integrated Platform project,⁴⁰ which entails the construction of digital monitoring centers across Angola. The centers are likely to expand the state's surveillance and data management capabilities, mirroring Chinese-supported "smart city" models that aim to deliver both enhanced public security and increased capacity for population monitoring and information control.

Among other impacts, such ubiquitous high-tech surveillance creates what analysts describe as a "chilling effect" on journalists, opposition figures, and civil society activists, who could face reprisals by Angolan authorities for their work or critical speech.⁴¹

The threat of domestic repression is compounded by the many cross-border risks associated with such Beijing-backed projects. For instance, the CCP government can compel Chinese companies to provide access to data stored on the systems they install abroad. China's legal and governance framework as a whole blurs any distinction between state-owned and ostensibly private enterprises, further compromising the security of private data.⁴²

Moscow's Information Manipulation Campaigns

The Russian regime's long-running propaganda campaigns across the region have taken on new significance in the context of heightened interest and engagement in Angola by well-resourced powers like the United States, the European Union (EU), the United Arab Emirates, and China.

Moscow's well-documented campaigns have sought to shape public opinion by utilizing social media influencers, fabricated content, local lawyers, and amplification loops through state-controlled media networks. Findings published by Radio France Internationale in 2025 indicated that the Russian regime is adapting its influence strategies while maintaining a significant presence across Africa. In Angola, this evolving approach became evident on August 7, 2025, when authorities arrested two Russian nationals in Luanda following violent protests linked to

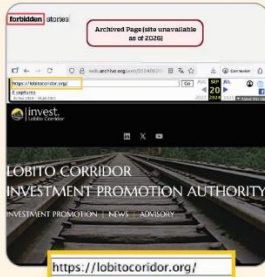
rising fuel prices. The individuals were charged with offenses including criminal conspiracy, document forgery, terrorism, and the financing of terrorism. According to Angolan officials, they had established a propaganda network aimed at inciting unrest and supporting the demonstrations.⁴³ The suspects' trial was ongoing at the time of writing.⁴⁴ The indictment noted multiple alleged payments to local journalists and experts to disseminate propaganda and falsehoods in local media, with the goal of "provoking political change." The payments amounted to more than \$24,000.⁴⁵

Beyond the immediate goal of shaping public opinion, such Russian-linked information campaigns contribute to a fragmented public sphere in which accountability becomes more difficult to sustain.

In a separate case documented by Forbidden Stories, a network of propaganda agents controlled by Russia's Foreign Intelligence Services (SVR) reportedly created a fake website to discredit the U.S.-backed Lobito Corridor project in Angola, which is considered by analysts to be the largest and most strategically significant U.S.-supported infrastructure investment in Africa in recent years.⁴⁶ The project will create a railway and logistics link that connects the mineral-rich interior of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zambia to Angola's Atlantic coast.⁴⁷ In 2024, the SVR-affiliated network, known as "the Company" or "Politology," reportedly spent about \$3,400 on graffiti and a public demonstration meant to discredit U.S. President Joseph Biden's visit to Angola. The same group has also reportedly been active in the DRC,⁴⁸ whose government recently signed a minerals agreement with the current administration of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Propaganda Strategies Targeting the Lobito Corridor

The Corridor provides a direct connection between Angola's Lobito Port and areas rich in critical minerals like copper and cobalt.



To discredit the project, a Russian intelligence network produced a fraudulent version of the real Lobito Corridor website, with a URL that misspells “corridor.”

Credit: Forbidden Stories
https://forbiddenstories.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Photo_6_EN.png?x32741



The network also paid \$3,400 to produce anti-United States graffiti.

Credit: Carlos Reis, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



The network also organized protests ahead of a visit by then-U.S. President Joe Biden to promote the Corridor.

Credit: Simão Hossi, CC BY 3.0

Note: Photos are for illustrative purposes only.

By creating fake websites and organizing symbolic protests to denounce the Lobito Corridor project, these operations aim to undermine public confidence in major, democracy-backed international infrastructure initiatives. As it unfolds, the Lobito Corridor will provide well-paid jobs to locals in Angola, with employment standards far above those associated with other major Angolan projects.⁴⁹ If Moscow were to succeed in souring Angolan citizens and their government on the enterprise, it could exacerbate the lack of social and economic mobility that many families have faced for generations, while also hampering the ability of the United States and the EU to diversify their supply chains for critical minerals. Information manipulation by

external authoritarian actors in general has the potential to disrupt transparent public debate among policymakers and civil society about key development projects and international partnerships.

The Transfer of Authoritarian Legislative Models to Angola

In recent years, Angola’s government has enacted a series of controversial laws on national security and civil society that resemble authoritarian legislation in Russia and China. For example, Angola’s 2024 National Security Law defines “national security” in vague terms that mirror those in Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy,⁵⁰ effectively reinforcing authoritarian norms on “domestic stability.”⁵¹ Angola has also followed a global authoritarian trend by adopting overly broad, state-centric cybersecurity laws that threaten to further constrict the country’s already limited civic space.⁵²

Similarly, Angola’s recently enacted Law on Nongovernmental Organizations echoes foreign funding laws around the world that followed the example of Russia’s 2012 “foreign agents” law and restricted the activity of both independent media outlets and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The Angolan law requires NGOs to obtain government authorization to operate, and it empowers authorities to suspend operating licenses for up to 120 days, without judicial approval, based on vaguely defined “unlawful conduct” or “national security threats.”⁵³ These provisions resemble elements of restrictive NGO frameworks in Russia and China, where administrative suspension mechanisms have long been used to silence civil society.⁵⁴ The inspiration for repressive NGO laws may not come just from Russia and China, however. Similar measures in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique suggest that Angolan officials may have drawn on multiple regional and international models.⁵⁵

Angola’s Repressive Legislative Framework

National Security Law (2024)	Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (2026)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Similar to China’s Hong Kong National Security law and Russia’s National Security Strategy. - Vague definition of national security that goes beyond issues of national defense and includes threats to political stability, economic development, and social order. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has similar provisions to Russia’s “foreign agents” law and other such laws on foreign funding that have since been enacted in other African countries. - Requires NGOs to apply for registration with a newly-created state monitoring body. - Allows the state to suspend NGOs’ licenses for up to 120 days on the basis of vaguely defined national security concerns without judicial approval.

Statements made by Chinese and Angolan officials indicate at least some degree of collaboration on governance issues. In March 2024, CCP leader Xi Jinping stated that China was willing to strengthen “exchanges of governance experience” with Angola, though the exact nature of these exchanges remains unclear.⁵⁶

Practical Responses to Authoritarian Influence in Angola

Beijing and Moscow’s deepening engagement in Angola has systematically reinforced corruption, weakened governance, and restricted civic space, ultimately prioritizing elite enrichment over the well-being of ordinary citizens. The two regimes’ evolving strategies—spanning economic influence, digital surveillance, legal frameworks, and information manipulation—continue to entrench antidemocratic systems and practices that stunt Angola’s long-term development.

Despite these headwinds, Angola’s civil society has survived and remains active. It includes independent journalists, youth movements, human rights organizations, church-based groups, labor associations, and diaspora networks. The Angolan government is more tolerant of socially focused civil society organizations,⁵⁷ while those engaged in advocacy for stronger governance, anticorruption safeguards, and human rights protections face sustained pressure from state institutions and political elites, who often perceive the activists’ work as a threat to their own interests.⁵⁸ However, even civic groups that do not experience political pressure tend to lack resources and capacity, particularly those based outside major urban centers such as Luanda.

What Civil Society Under Pressure Can Do in Places Like Angola



PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY

by monitoring of large infrastructure projects, reporting on procurement and public spending, and publishing summaries of loan agreements and contracts.



PROTECT ACTIVISTS

by setting up legal defense funds, providing secure communications training, and advocating for greater surveillance transparency and accountability.



SUPPORT INDEPENDENT MEDIA

by providing grants and offering training to identify manipulated online content.



SHED LIGHT ON LOCAL IMPACT OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

by supporting community monitoring of foreign-funded projects, providing information on labor rights, and advocating for environmental impact transparency.



FOSTER REGIONAL DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY

by partnering with organizations in neighboring countries and regional networks to exchange information, provide technical support, and collaborate across sectors.

In this context, it is important to identify practical, achievable priorities that would help Angolan civil society deliver greater government accountability and counter foreign authoritarian influence. In the short and medium terms, civil society actors are most likely to secure progress on less politically sensitive and more technically oriented topics. These would include transparency practices, public awareness, and localized accountability mechanisms, as opposed to systemic political reform or high-level corruption cases.

The following measures are among those that remain within reach for Angolan activists, and may also be applicable in similar political environments in the region and around the world.

Strengthen Transparency on Development Financing and Debt

Civil society organizations can help address the lack of accountability and transparency in Chinese development financing in Angola. They could find ways to monitor large infrastructure projects, such as mining operations, even in the absence of publicly available databases. They could then create accessible public reports that explain how large infrastructure projects impact local communities.

Investigative media outlets could similarly focus their work on procurement, debt contracts, whistleblower engagement, and public spending. Even small transparency initiatives, such as an effort to publish simplified summaries of loan agreements or infrastructure contracts, may significantly improve public understanding and accountability and allow Angola's civic actors to more meaningfully press for change through the National Assembly and the government.

Protect Democracy Activists

The emerging legal and surveillance conditions described above raise serious concerns about the normalization of digital oversight as a tool of political control. These structural challenges complicate civic responses in Angola and comparable countries worldwide.

Legal defense resources and rapid response mechanisms should be provided for journalists, activists, scholars, and religious leaders who face politicized charges under repressive national security, cybercrime, and "fake news" laws. Efforts should also be made to enlist local lawyers and pursue strategic litigation, both domestically and internationally, that challenges legal restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

In addition, it is critical to strengthen digital resilience amid the proliferation of surveillance tools and online manipulation campaigns. This can be achieved through training on cyber hygiene and secure communications for the prodemocracy community. Civic actors could hold social media platforms, telecommunications providers, and spyware companies accountable for any problematic cooperation with the authorities by advocating for transparency on surveillance requests, data retention rules, and procurement contracts. For example, in their advocacy regarding the use of Predator spyware against an Angolan journalist, Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders, and Friends of Angola called on the Angolan National Assembly to push for greater transparency on the use of surveillance tools.⁵⁹

Bolster Independent Media, Local Radio, and Investigative Journalism

In Angola, as in many countries across the continent, private media outlets face mounting financial and political pressures,⁶⁰ a vulnerability that both Beijing and Moscow actively exploit. To address the problem, donors should provide direct grants to local radio stations for equipment and journalist salaries; support regional partnerships that connect Angolan reporters with investigative networks in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), as well as in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa; and sponsor training on the detection and verification of manipulated online information. While the groups and networks providing such services are not media outlets themselves, they bolster media ecosystems and strengthen journalistic capacity. It is also important to note that despite the difference in media-sector sustainability between some of these partner countries and less free societies like Angola, independent media and radio stations in Angola are still able to carefully navigate financial and political pitfalls to report transparently on the activities of foreign powers.

Raise Public Awareness About Negative Economic and Labor Impacts

Concerns about labor practices, environmental standards, and resource extraction linked to investments by authoritarian regimes must be addressed at the local level. This requires support for community-based monitoring of infrastructure projects, legal literacy programs on labor rights, and public campaigns calling for transparency on environmental damage. Such work would help ensure that economic engagement by foreign actors yields broad public benefits rather than elite enrichment, which is all too common under Beijing's development model. In countries like Angola, the civic space for labor, environmental, and business groups remains far more open than for democracy or human rights organizations, and a focus on the practical impacts of development projects may provide opportunities for partnerships with human rights-focused advocacy groups that typically face greater pressure.

By contrast, framing foreign authoritarian influence in abstract geopolitical terms is often an ineffective strategy. Civil society activists should localize the narrative by connecting external influence directly to citizens' everyday experiences, such as low wages, unsafe working conditions, land displacement, environmental degradation, and lack of public services.

Their communication strategies should employ clear, nontechnical language and trusted local platforms—particularly radio, community meetings, church assemblies, and labor associations, which remain influential outside major urban centers. Storytelling through the testimonies of affected workers and communities can be especially powerful in illustrating how opaque contracts and weak oversight affect people's livelihoods.

Build Democratic Solidarity with Regional Partners

Angola's civil society would benefit significantly from partnerships with organizations in other Lusophone countries and broader African regional networks. Democratic resilience is stronger when like-minded governments and activists collaborate across borders. Technical support and cross-sector cooperation among civil society organizations can, at times, be even more valuable

than financial support. Organizations like Opening Central Africa (OCA) and Democratic Solidarity Africa (DSA) encourage this sort of information exchange, mutual support, and collaboration.

Challenges for Civic Resistance to Authoritarian Influence in Angola and Beyond

While the approaches described above could generate meaningful responses to foreign authoritarian influence, Angolan civil society continues to face deep structural obstacles. These problems are not unique to Angola, as other societies in the range between partly free democracies and closed, totalitarian societies face similar challenges. All prodemocracy actors, including foreign funders, must take account of such barriers when designing and implementing their vital work.

- First, for civil society in Angola, the concepts stemming from expert analysis of corrosive authoritarian influence remain largely foreign and unfamiliar. Regardless of their source, many foreign loan agreements and security arrangements are opaque, and local civil society organizations, scholars, and journalists often lack access to primary documents necessary for evidence-based advocacy. *How can civil society effectively respond to foreign influence when the necessary information and transparency are largely unavailable?*
- Second, legal risks have intensified in recent years. New laws on cybersecurity, NGOs, “fake news,” and national security have created potential criminal liability for civic watchdog activities. The result is a climate of fear that stifles public engagement and discourages critical oversight. At the same time, journalists and other civic actors have limited avenues for legal recourse, as judicial institutions are often perceived as lacking independence or not adequately equipped to protect fundamental rights.⁶¹ *How can journalists, activists, and civil society organizations carry out accountability efforts when the legal framework increasingly exposes them to prosecution or harassment?*
- Third, resource constraints remain acute. Independent media and civil society organizations struggle to maintain domestic sources of financing, while international funding has encountered increasing political opposition in donor countries as well as state interference in Angola. Many private media outlets, particularly in traditional formats like print and radio, have collapsed, gone bankrupt, or been brought under state control. The few surviving independent radio outlets operate with extremely limited resources, and are often unable to pay adequate salaries or access the tools and equipment necessary to perform their work effectively.⁶² *How can civil society remain independent and stable with limited domestic resources and growing constraints on external funding?*
- Fourth, there is a conceptual gap regarding governance models. Many local stakeholders lack a clear understanding of how authoritarian systems often fail to deliver sustainable development.⁶³ Democracies cannot win this contest for influence through trade agreements or economic coercion alone; democratic success requires informed civic actors who understand the new geopolitical dynamics and possess the tools to protect their sovereignty and basic freedoms.⁶⁴ *How can civil society promote democratic*

governance if the long-term benefits of democratic institutions are not widely understood or communicated?

In short, the Angolan case demonstrates that authoritarian influence operates through the corrosion of institutions, such as the media, government procurement agencies, law enforcement bodies, labor regulators, and businesses. Beijing's oil-backed development financing and digital infrastructure investment have enabled limited growth and modernization without the requisite accountability, while Moscow's historic security ties and information operations have reinforced elite insulation and narrative influence. Together, the two authoritarian powers have deepened structural vulnerabilities in Angola's political system, narrowing its civic space and weakening its basic mechanisms of public oversight.

Yet the negative trajectory is not inevitable. The longevity of kleptocratic governance relies more on the weakness of domestic oversight than on the influence strategies of external actors. Strengthening transparency, protecting civic space, and investing in digital resilience are not merely defensive measures against foreign influence. They are indispensable engines of progress toward a more democratic future for the country. The outcome of the struggle in Angola and the wider region will ultimately depend on whether free and independent public institutions can take root in a political environment long shaped by foreign exploitation of unchecked elite control over resources.

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