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## The Paradox of Isabel dos Santos: State Capitalism, Dynastic Politics, and Gender Hostility in a Resource-Rich, Authoritarian Country

### ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, the sons and daughters of many state leaders attract media attention for their exploits. Like other famous children of politicians, Isabel dos Santos, the daughter of José Eduardo dos Santos, the former president of Angola (1979-2017), is the object of much media scrutiny regarding her investments and lavish spending habits. We rely on a systematic study of newspaper articles by Angolan and international media, readers' comments, social media and websites to examine the conflicting portrayals of Isabel from 2010 to 2018. This period covers celebratory depictions of Isabel during the growth of her business empire to her dismissal as head of Sonangol after her father left the presidency. We argue that the change in portrayals of Isabel over time offers insight into the dimensions of dynastic politics in authoritarian settings. Whereas her position as wealthy presidential daughter ironically reinforced patriarchal political oligarchy, her downfall demonstrates the limits of hereditary politics in Angola.

Keywords: Angola, West Africa, Isabel dos Santos, dynasties, feminism, gender, media, political economy, politics, wealth.

### RÉSUMÉ

Dans le monde entier, les fils et les filles de nombreux chefs d'État attirent l'attention des médias pour leurs exploits. Comme d'autres enfants célèbres de politiciens, Isabel dos Santos, fille de José Eduardo dos Santos, ancien président de l'Angola (1979-2017), fait l'objet d'un examen approfondi de la part des médias au sujet de ses investissements et de ses habitudes de dépense fastueuses. Nous réalisons une étude systématique d'articles de journaux des médias angolais et internationaux, de commentaires sur les réseaux sociaux et des sites web pour examiner les représentations contradictoires d'Isabel de 2010 à 2018. Cette période contemple les représentations célébrant Isabel pendant la croissance de son entreprise, allant de son licenciement à la tête de Sonangol et après le départ de son père de la présidence. Nous soutenons que le changement de portrait d'Isabel au fil du temps offre une idée des dimensions de la politique dynastique dans des contextes autoritaires. Alors que sa position en tant que fille présidentielle aisée renforce de manière ironique l'oligarchie politique patriarcale, sa chute témoigne des limites de la politique héréditaire en Angola.

Mots clé : Angola, Afrique occidentale, Isabel dos Santos, dynasties, économie politique, féminisme, genre, médias, politique, richesses.

Isabel dos Santos is the daughter of José Eduardo dos Santos, the former President of Angola who served from 1979 to 2017. With an estimated net worth of about 2.2 billion US dollars in 2018, she is often portrayed by the global and national media as an “African princess” whose wealth derives from her connection to her father rather than to any business acumen (Dolan & Marques de Morais 2013, Smith 2013). Over the course of her 45 years of life, she has acquired business interests in banking, oil, real estate and the media, not only in Angola but also in Portugal, the former colonial power, and in the Netherlands (Fernandes 2015). Before being dismissed in 2017 from her position by the current president of Angola, João Lourenço, Isabel dos Santos also served as chairwoman of *Sociedade Nacional de Combustíveis de Angola*—Sonangol, Angola’s national oil company. Oil sales are the country’s main source of revenue (Ennes Ferreira & Soares de Oliveira 2018).

All over the world, the sons and daughters of many state leaders frequently attract media attention for their exploits. Donald Trump Jr., the son of President Trump, has received relentless media coverage for allegedly lying to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the United States Congress about a meeting with Russian officials close to President Putin. On the African continent, Nyimpine Chissano, the eldest (now deceased), son of former President of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano, was believed to have been involved in the murders of a journalist and a banker who were investigating acts of corruption involving high-ranking officials of the ruling *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (Frelimo). The current President of Gabon, Ali Bongo Odimba, is the son of Omar Bongo who governed Gabon for 42 years until 2009. Like his father, he is considered the richest man in Gabon owing to the revenue he receives from the country’s oil production. Among his assets are luxury properties in France and expensive sports cars.

Like these other famous children of politicians, Isabel dos Santos is the object of much media attention regarding her investments or her lavish spending habits. Yet, portrayals of Isabel dos Santos reflect contradictory, gendered and temporal modalities that characterize the coverage of dynastic politics in Angola. First, building on insights by Amina Mama (1995: 41), we argue that Isabel is the ultimate “femocrat”: because her prominence and authority derive from her connection to her father, she is complicit in maintaining the largely “patriarchal *status quo*” in Angola. Media coverage of Isabel exposes this “femocracy” in two conflicting ways. On the one hand, when Isabel’s father was president, the mainstream media in Angola celebrated her entrepreneurial spirit, her modernism, and her cosmopolitanism—as might be expected of a media mostly controlled by the state. In so doing, their depictions served to legitimate the accumulation of political power and wealth by a “patriarchal oligarchy” (Mama 1995: 41) centered around the Presidency (Soares de Oliveira 2015: 40-47). They also aimed to validate the importance of family connections, which are said to be ubiquitous or essential in Angola (Schubert 2017).

On the other hand, for many critics, Isabel is emblematic of the entrenched authoritarianism and savage capitalism that characterizes post-war, post-socialist Angola, and of the role played by race, ethnicity and status divisions in party politics. Being mixed-raced or *mestiço*, Isabel belongs to a privileged group within Angolan politics and society and, for that reason, she is an easy target for criticism emanating from within the regime’s inner circle and from the opposition. Inside the ruling party, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), complaints that the *mestiços* have more power than any other

group resurface from time to time (Soares de Oliveira 2015). Moreover, the main opposition party, Unita (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola), perceives the MPLA as a party that mainly represents the interests of the *mestiços* rather than of the “authentic” Angolan (Pearce 2017).

More critical national journalists and the foreign press, in particular, have frequently accused Isabel of flagrant abuse of power and money. They allege often that her wealth and prestige were made possible by her father and, occasionally, they also reference her race or her racial preferences to condemn her actions.<sup>1</sup> In addition, her frequent displays of conspicuous consumption in a country known for high levels of inequality and widespread impoverishment generate outrage among selected national and foreign journalists, their readers and members of the public. Since her father stepped down from power, these accusations have intensified. She is now the subject of a government inquiry regarding possible acts of graft that she committed as former head of Sonangol (*Agência Lusa* 2018).

Second, the change in portrayals of Isabel over time especially by the national media offers insight into the excesses and limits of dynastic politics in authoritarian settings. Whereas the state controlled media once praised Isabel’s successes and offered stylized snapshots of her glamorous lifestyle, they now produce measured reports of her transgressions, often linking them to a larger state project by the new Angolan President to eliminate corruption. In charting her rise and fall over time, we reveal the means by which authoritarian regimes periodically reproduce and cleanse themselves.

Finally, unlike the stereotypical critiques of corrupt African “big men,” we argue that the tone and the frequency of negative portrayals of Isabel are rooted in a deep seated misogyny towards women, especially African women who display an interest in business.<sup>2</sup> References to Isabel as an “African princess” or a “Daddy’s girl” are indicative of the more dismissive caricatures of her by the media (*e.g.* Smith 2013; Eisenhammer *et al.* 2017). Insofar as these critiques of Isabel reference her gender and her family connections, they paradoxically project a subordinate role for women in African society. Moreover, whereas the singular position of Isabel as wealthy, presidential daughter ironically reinforced the patriarchal political oligarchy, her downfall demonstrates the limits of hereditary politics in Angola.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the issue gained visibility when after being fired from Sonangol, she reacted to criticism that her administration privileged foreigners instead of Angolan entrepreneurs. Here is a fragment of her response: “Military personnel, from soldiers to generals, whites and *mestiços*, gave their lives and many died in order for us to achieve peace. I think racism is unacceptable! To accept that someone is hired for Sonangol based on the color of his/her skin is wrong. People should be hired on their merit” (<<https://sol.sapo.pt/artigo/603923/isabel-dos-santos-e-obvio-que-sou-uma-gestora-capaz-e-competente>>).

<sup>2</sup> Valentina Guebuza, the deceased daughter of former President Guebuza of Mozambique was treated similarly. In 2013, she was also on *Forbes*’ list of the 20 most powerful women in Africa which was headed by Isabel (<<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2013/12/04/the-20-young-power-women-in-africa-2013/#31d93ad65431>>). See also the inclusion of her as one of the three most wealthy “African princesses”: <<https://www.elmundo.es/blogs/elmundo/billonarios/2015/07/08/tres-princesas-africanas.html>>.

Content analysis of newspaper and magazine articles about Isabel from the state and private media in Angola, Angolan blogs, and articles in the foreign press (particularly in Portugal) from 2010 to 2018 serve as the basis for our claims. Our argument also draws on posts from Isabel on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram as well as comments by readers to newspaper articles or on social media. Below, we present a short biography of Isabel dos Santos and situate her professional life within the context of post-socialist, post-war Angola. We then examine the ways in which the media presents contrasting images of Isabel and how she attempts to brand herself through the use of social media. We explore the reasons for the juxtaposition of flattery by the state media with the condemnation of her family linkages and business practices by independent national critics and the foreign media while her father was president. We also explain the shift over time in domestic depictions as the dos Santos family fell from grace. We end this section by examining the misogynistic attitudes about Isabel reflected in print and on social media. Finally, we conclude the article with some broader reflections on the paradox of Isabel's portrayals by the media.

### Understanding Isabel

Isabel is the eldest daughter of José Eduardo dos Santos (JES), Angola's second and longest-serving president, who stepped down in 2017 after 38 years in power. She is his daughter from his first marriage to a Russian woman, Tatiana Kukanova. She was born in 1973 in Baku, Azerbaijan where her father studied in the 1970s. Her father was a member of the MPLA, one of several anti-colonial movements fighting against the Portuguese in Angola from the 1960s until the early 1970s. Following the overthrow of the Portuguese dictatorship in April 1974, the MPLA extended its power in Angola and has been the only ruling party since independence was declared in November 1975. After the first president of independent Angola, Agostinho Neto, died of cancer, Isabel's father acceded to the presidency and occupied that position continuously until 2017. He and his party oversaw—and survived—a long and failed experiment with socialism, a 27-year civil war, and now, a kind of state capitalism based on the exploitation of Angola's vast offshore oil wealth.

The “poster child for Angola's oligarchic decade, Isabel is amongst its richest, and the person whose lifestyle and aspirations strive for global respectability” (Soares de Oliveira 2014: 151-152). She has been commonly depicted as the “princess” of Angola, and although Ana Paula dos Santos, the former president's spouse, was the official first lady, Isabel is often the one in the headlines. She is the face of the family's business empire and therefore epitomizes the capitalist ethos of the regime.

Isabel does not fit the conventional expectation of how women who are related to powerful politicians behave in Africa, which is to be apolitical, feminine and charitable, nor does she have a special relationship with “the masses” as has been said of Chantal Biya and other first ladies (Eboko 2004; Messiant & Marchal 2004). Although she was president of the Angolan Red Cross for twelve years (2006-2018), and was involved in some social work via her businesses, she was never considered a particularly charitable person who

was loved by the people.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, until recently, she was not strongly committed to women's empowerment issues, even though she occasionally referred to the challenges of being a businesswoman in Africa (Burgis 2013). Instead, Isabel has mainly sought to portray herself as a competent, hardworking self-made woman whose wealth and success are independent from her family fortune.<sup>4</sup> When *Forbes* magazine declared her Africa's richest woman in 2013 (with a net worth of 3 billion US dollars) Isabel was quoted as saying:

I've had business sense since I was very young. I sold chicken eggs when I was six. [...] I work all the time. Seven days a week. [...] I think there's lots of people with family connections but who are actually nowhere. If you're hard-working and determined, you will make it and that's the bottom line. I don't believe in an easy way through (Burgis 2013).

Isabel's career trajectory has been unusual for first daughters. She was educated at St Paul's School for Girls, and received an engineering degree at King's College London. Her first business ventures when she returned to Angola were a restaurant on the beach in Luanda (the capital) and a rubbish-collection business (Soares de Oliveira 2015: 152). As much as she attributes her success to her hard work, Isabel has been a prominent and major beneficiary of the massive profit from oil and other resources siphoned off by the Angolan elite and, particularly, by her father. Sonangol (the state-owned oil company), and other prominent Angolan elites, such as generals Leopoldino do Nascimento and Manuel Vieira Dias (otherwise known as Kopelipa), were shareholders in Isabel's first major business, Unitel. Founded in 2001, Unitel is a telecommunications company that became the country's first private mobile phone operator following privatization of the state-owned company (Fernandes 2015; *Visão* 2017). The creation of Unitel (sarcastically referred to as "Isatel") was announced by presidential decree rather than established through a competitive public bidding process. Furthermore, the president continued to play a crucial role in the "making of Isabel." He awarded her major national projects including the Metropolitan General Master Plan for Luanda and the Commission for Oil Sector Reform (Gaspar 2016).

As Angola shifted from a state-driven economy to a more "statist market economy" during the 1990s and 2000s (Pitcher 2017), Isabel benefitted from the privatization of other parastatals and privileged access to major investors. Besides investments in Angola's telecommunications company, she is involved in diamond mining, retail trade, cement factories, banking and private health clinics in Luanda. During the global financial crisis of 2009, she relied on holding companies to acquire shares in the real estate, energy, multi-media, and financial sectors primarily in Portugal but also in the Netherlands (Siun,

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, she was highly criticized when she used her Instagram to ask people to make donations to the Pediatric Hospital David Bernardino. One follower stated ironically: "If only there was one millionaire who read this request (...)" (<<http://www.redeangola.info/isabel-dos-santos-pede-doacoes-para-hospital-pediatrico/>>). Her activity in the Red Cross often consisted of extravagant fundraising galas she organized (attended by famous singers like Mariah Carey, John Legend and Craig David) that made little social impact. Nor was it clear whether the money raised was applied to the intended cause (<<https://www.makaangola.org/2018/03/mestra-da-gestao-as-aventuras-de-isabel-dos-santos-na-cruz-vermelha/>>). Articles accessed on October 23, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> In 2017, José Eduardo dos Santos, was the richest president in Africa with a net worth of US\$20 billion (*Sunday Independent*, October 8 2017, <<https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/the-sunday-independent/20171008/281852938783333>>).

Akinyoade, *et al.* 2017; Table 1). Her many assets earned her the title of “Queen of Africa and Empress of Portugal” from a Spanish-language newspaper (Del Barrio 2014).

In addition to her investments, she was formerly CEO of Sonangol, which contributes 95% of the value of the country’s exports (Eisenhammer 2018). Founded in 1976, Sonangol’s revenue from oil has enabled it to make major investments abroad and it has stakes in most of the dos Santos family businesses. During the initial years of independence, the company escaped the “predatory and centrally planned logic of Angola’s political economy” (Soares de Oliveira 2007: 595), but it has been a lynchpin of Angola’s shift to crony capitalism since the 1990s. Despite the company’s apparent sophistication, the wealth generated by Sonangol largely served the interests of the president and his closest allies (Soares de Oliveira 2007: 606).

The decision by JES to make Isabel the new CEO of Sonangol in 2016 was highly controversial. Charges of nepotism and favoritism came from all quarters—including former ministers, lawyers, intellectuals, and rappers (*Novo Jornal de Angola* 2016). A group of 12 Angolan lawyers even filed a motion alleging violation of the Public Probity Law. The Supreme Court’s failure to hear the motion eventually led to a call for protest, but the Luanda Provincial Governor prohibited it using a flimsy excuse that another demonstration was taking place at the same location and time (*Agência Lusa* 2016). Isabel eventually assumed the post.

**Table 1—The Assets of Isabel dos Santos in Angola and Portugal (2016-2017)**

Angola	Portugal
UNITEL (25%) <sup>2</sup>	NOS—formerly Zon multimedia (52,14%) <sup>2</sup>
BFA—Banco Fomento de Angola (51%) <sup>1</sup>	BIC—Banco Internacional de Crédito Portugal (42,5%) <sup>1</sup>
BIC—Banco Internacional de Crédito Angola (42,5%) <sup>1</sup>	GALP (33,34%) <sup>5</sup>
ZAP (70%) <sup>2</sup>	Efacec Power Solutions (72,62%)
CONTIDIS (100%) <sup>3</sup>	Millennium BCP (14,87%) <sup>1</sup>
CIMINVEST / NOVA CIMANGOLA <sup>4</sup>	Santoro Financial Holdings, SGPS (100%) <sup>6</sup>
SODIBA <sup>3</sup>	Upstar Comunicações (70%) <sup>2</sup>
IMOLUANDA, S.A. (35%) <sup>7</sup>	Amorim Energia (18%) <sup>5</sup>

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Banking, <sup>2</sup> Communication; <sup>3</sup> Retail trade, <sup>4</sup>Cement, <sup>5</sup>Oil, <sup>6</sup> Personal holding, Real Estate<sup>7</sup>.

This is not an exhaustive list.

Sources: Costa, Lopes & Louçã (2013) and *Visão* (2016, 2017).

Although Isabel is the most well-known member of the dos Santos clan, all of the former president’s ten children seem to have benefited from their father’s fortune, either through patronage (lucrative public procurement contracts) or through directorships of

state institutions and parastatals (Fernandes 2015: 36; Bruno 2017; *Visão* 2018). Isabel's half-brother, José Filomeno dos Santos (Zénu), has also attracted a considerable amount of media attention (Fernandes 2015, *Visão* 2018). His first business was an investment bank (Banco Kwanza Invest) and between 2013-2018 he presided over the Sovereign Wealth Fund (*Fundo Soberano de Angola*—FSDEA). Contrary to Isabel, who has not gotten formally involved in politics, José Filomeno dos Santos became and has remained a member of the MPLA central committee since 2016 (*Expresso* 2016). Another half-sister, Welwitschia dos Santos (Tchizé)<sup>5</sup>, has stakes in the diamond sector (Di Oro company), and financial interests in the print media and advertising. She is also a member of parliament (elected in 2017) and of the MPLA central committee (elected 2016).

To a lesser extent than these three children, the seven additional children of JES have also managed to increase their personal wealth by benefiting from public contracts and garnering stakes in banking and telecommunications (Fernandes 2015; Bruno 2017; *Visão* 2018). The media rarely mentions the internal dynamics of the Dos Santos family, but available evidence suggests that there is animosity amongst its members regarding how the wealth generated by the family businesses should be shared (*Club K* 2016; *Agência Lusa* 2019, Fernandes 2015: 34-36). Several times, Isabel has denied accusations that her father favors her, but the nature, extent and speed of her acquisitions suggest otherwise.

Finally, as long as JES was president of Angola, the members of the Dos Santos family (and their protégés) were considered to be “untouchable”; there were few limits to wealth accumulation and they seemed to be above the law. But this changed once João Lourenço replaced JES as president and MPLA party leader (*Visão* 2018). Sticking to his campaign promises to fight favoritism, corruption and nepotism in Angola, President Lourenço dismissed Isabel as CEO of Sonangol in 2017, Welwitschia as CEO of Angola's Public Television (TPA) (also in 2017) and José Filomeno as president of FSDEA in 2018. The subsequent investigation of their management of these organizations—which has so far resulted in the detention of José Filomeno on charges of fraud—suggests that the family is no longer “untouchable” (*New Vision* 2015; *Visão* 2018). It also speaks to the limits of wealth accumulation and reproduction in an authoritarian, statist market economy. Below, we examine portrayals of Isabel by the media and highlight her own efforts at image making. We then offer an explanation for the differing depictions of Isabel by domestic and foreign media outlets and the change in her image over time.

### Isabel dos Santos' Presence in the Media: The Rise and Fall of the Angolan “Princess”

Despite the reticence of the Dos Santos family to occupy the media spotlight, Isabel's presence on social, print and broadcasting media has increased substantially since 2010. Projecting Isabel dos Santos as a positive example of African entrepreneurship, the state-owned newspaper *Jornal de Angola* awarded her the title of “Entrepreneur of the Year” in 2012 when her father was still president (Domingos 2013). The South Africa-based, *African Business Review* followed by declaring her the top African woman entrepreneur in 2014 (*Africa Monitor* 2014). Other accolades have followed.

Until her father stepped down in 2017, extensive official censorship of the media and the fascination of the Angolan elite with ostentatious displays of wealth meant that

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<sup>5</sup> From José Eduardo dos Santos' relationship with Maria Luísa Abrantes.

most portrayals of Isabel dos Santos in Angolan popular culture were laudatory and sycophantic. They reinforced a public narrative regarding female empowerment and the socialist new woman that was articulated by the MPLA after independence, via the *Organização da Mulher Angolana* (OMA). OMA is the women's wing of the MPLA and the party's largest organization. It played an historical role in terms of mobilizing and defending women's interests (Liberato 2016), but it has lost its strength over time (Tripp 2015: 119) in tandem with the drift away from socialism. Even as the civil war raged in the 1990s, the president and the party shifted towards a more market driven economy. The speed of this shift accelerated after the end of civil conflict in 2002. As some form of socialism gave way to state capitalism, articles extolled Isabel's "entrepreneurial instinct" and her business acumen.

To better illustrate our claims regarding media depictions of Isabel, we performed a content analysis of online national media to demonstrate the frequency and tone of the portrayals of Isabel. We looked at all articles that mentioned "Isabel dos Santos" on the website of *Agência Angola Press*<sup>6</sup> (ANGOP), between 2010 and 2018, and classified these as either "positive" or "negative" portrayals of Isabel<sup>7</sup>. This time frame allowed us to observe the nature of media coverage: 1) before *Forbes* ranked Isabel as Africa's richest woman in 2013; 2) when Isabel was at the peak of her visibility and prestige (as Sonangol CEO in 2016); and 3) after the presidency transferred from JES to João Lourenço in 2017. This latter period coincided with the "downfall," not only of Isabel but of other members of the Dos Santos clan and their protégés. The analysis is not exhaustive, but it does provide a valuable assessment of Isabel's media profile. We also searched the website of *Jornal de Angola* for editorials written after the election of João Lourenço as these chronicle a shift in domestic media coverage.<sup>8</sup> Finally, we highlight a sample of articles that exemplify the misogynistic representation of Isabel by the international media, as they focus on how the Portuguese media depicted Isabel and her business ventures.

Figures 1 and 2 show the frequency and tone of Isabel's media coverage; we can see different trends before and after 2016. Until 2016, only a few ANGOP articles mentioned "Isabel dos Santos." These mainly referred to her work in the Red Cross, her leadership of the Metropolitan General Master Plan for Luanda, and her distinction as one of "Angola's Divas"<sup>9</sup>. In 2016, the number of mentions of "Isabel dos Santos" increased considerably and the majority had to do with her work as the new CEO of Sonangol. The general tone of the articles was overwhelmingly positive. The domestic articles promote the image of a successful entrepreneur who competently manages her businesses in energy, communications, and finance and at the same time oversees Luanda's urban revitalization.

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<sup>6</sup>ANGOP is the government news agency:

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/en\\_us/portal/informacoes/angop/sobre-a-angop/2013/4/21/The-Agency,b6a60f15-0e0d-42cf-918a-310ae7438060.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/en_us/portal/informacoes/angop/sobre-a-angop/2013/4/21/The-Agency,b6a60f15-0e0d-42cf-918a-310ae7438060.html)>.

<sup>7</sup> Articles that give attention to Isabel's work as entrepreneur are coded as positive. These include portrayals of her closing deals, attending important meetings or inaugurations, developing social work, reaching out to international partners. Articles coded as negative refer to: bad management, her dismissal from Sonangol and the Red Cross, accusations of alleged corruption, disagreements between Isabel and João Lourenço and assorted criticisms of her.

<sup>8</sup> <<http://jornaldeangola.sapo.ao/>>. A longer and more comprehensive search of articles from *Jornal de Angola* was not possible owing to flaws in the journal's search engine.

<sup>9</sup> See <[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/lazer-e-cultura/2013/10/47/Distinguidas-Divas-Angola-edicao-2013,60ce1c19-8139-4ea2-9ee5-b5f789ac44f6.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/lazer-e-cultura/2013/10/47/Distinguidas-Divas-Angola-edicao-2013,60ce1c19-8139-4ea2-9ee5-b5f789ac44f6.html)>.



Some examples of the tone of these positive articles are the following: “Isabel dos Santos’ Nomination [to Sonangol] is Appropriate”<sup>10</sup>; “Isabel dos Santos sets the First Stone for the Construction of a Female Boarding School”<sup>11</sup>; “Metropolitan General Master Plan for Luanda Receives Award in London”<sup>12</sup>; “Unitel Wants to Expand Business in the SADC Region”<sup>13</sup>.

Negative portrayals of Isabel begin to emerge in 2016 in the state owned media, increase throughout 2017 and become dominant in 2018 (see Figure 2). Isabel’s dismissal from Sonangol owing to accusations of mismanagement, the end of her mandate as president of Red Cross amidst complaints by its workers, and the crisis in her jewelry business are among the issues that contribute to the negative portrayals of Isabel. The headlines that exemplify this are: “Isabel dos Santos Jewelry in Switzerland Enters Crisis”<sup>14</sup>; “Isabel Dos Santos Ignores Attorney General’s Office Notification”;<sup>15</sup> “Isabel dos Santos Denies Accusations of Mismanagement”;<sup>16</sup> “Isabel dos Santos’ Company Defies the Angolan State.”<sup>17</sup>

**FIGURE 1. — NUMBER OF ARTICLES IN STATE OWNED MEDIA MENTIONING  
“ISABEL DOS SANTOS” BETWEEN 2010-2018.**

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<sup>10</sup> English translations of Portuguese media quotes are the authors. “Angola: Nomeação de Isabel dos Santos é acertada,” June 5, 2016.

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/politica/2016/5/22/Angola-Nomeacao-Isabel-dos-Santos-acertada-Analista,67a4b113-0429-49a6-8713-a4ff6145176d.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/politica/2016/5/22/Angola-Nomeacao-Isabel-dos-Santos-acertada-Analista,67a4b113-0429-49a6-8713-a4ff6145176d.html)>.

<sup>11</sup> “Isabel dos Santos lança pedra para construção de internato feminino,” November 25, 2016.

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/sociedade/2016/10/47/Moxico-Isabel-dos-Santos-lanca-pedra-para-construcao-internato-feminino,4c211bd5-3fb9-4d60-848a-b9068764b6df.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/sociedade/2016/10/47/Moxico-Isabel-dos-Santos-lanca-pedra-para-construcao-internato-feminino,4c211bd5-3fb9-4d60-848a-b9068764b6df.html)>.

<sup>12</sup> “Plano Director-Geral de Luanda é premiado em Londres,” April 14, 2016.

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/economia/2016/3/15/Angola-Plano-Director-Geral-Luanda-premiado-Londres,0dc52633-6aaa-4add-9a8f-11342ad29f25.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/economia/2016/3/15/Angola-Plano-Director-Geral-Luanda-premiado-Londres,0dc52633-6aaa-4add-9a8f-11342ad29f25.html)>.

<sup>13</sup> “Unitel quer expandir negócio na região da SADC,” March 13, 2015.

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/economia/2015/2/11/Angola-Unitel-quer-expandir-negocio-regiao-SADC,cf4e8155-98e1-4d50-a0e9-cfd00f333c02.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/economia/2015/2/11/Angola-Unitel-quer-expandir-negocio-regiao-SADC,cf4e8155-98e1-4d50-a0e9-cfd00f333c02.html)>.

<sup>14</sup> “Joalheria de Isabel dos Santos entra em crise na Suíça,” April 12, 2018.

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/economia/2018/3/15/Joalheria-Isabel-dos-Santos-entra-crise-Suica,445baa68-e335-49c0-a8c5-16e523093a14.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/economia/2018/3/15/Joalheria-Isabel-dos-Santos-entra-crise-Suica,445baa68-e335-49c0-a8c5-16e523093a14.html)>.

<sup>15</sup> “Isabel dos Santos ignora notificação da procuradoria,” July 30, 2018.

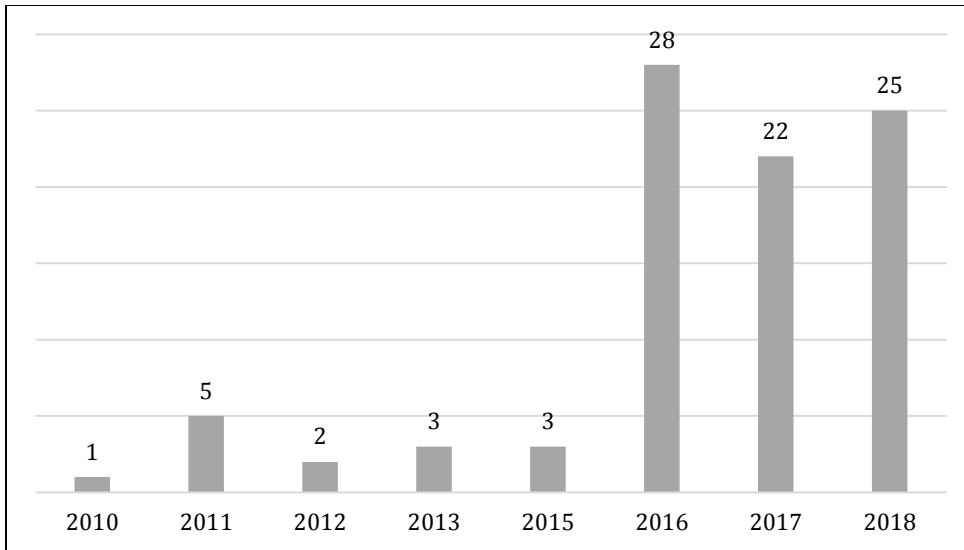
<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/politica/2018/6/31/Isabel-dos-Santos-ignora-notificacao-procuradoria,04285691-80d0-404c-8879-4f253d49ba2d.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/politica/2018/6/31/Isabel-dos-Santos-ignora-notificacao-procuradoria,04285691-80d0-404c-8879-4f253d49ba2d.html)>.

<sup>16</sup> “Isabel dos Santos nega acusações de má gestão,” March 5, 2018.

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/economia/2018/2/10/Isabel-dos-Santos-nega-acusacoes-gestao,aed03043-6327-4be4-affa-e8460776b8fb.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/economia/2018/2/10/Isabel-dos-Santos-nega-acusacoes-gestao,aed03043-6327-4be4-affa-e8460776b8fb.html)>.

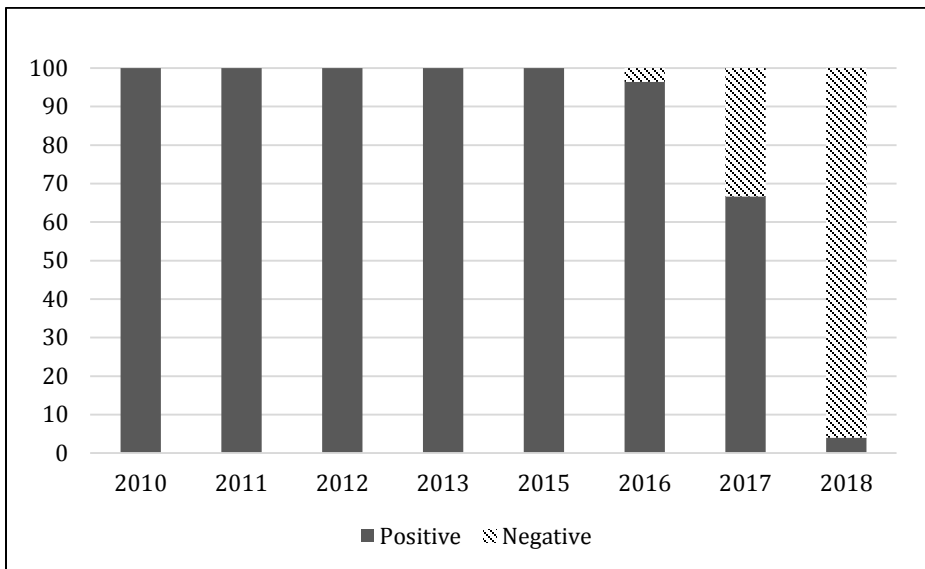
<sup>17</sup> “Angola: Empresa de Isabel dos Santos desafia Estado angolano”, July 16 2018.

<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/politica/2018/6/29/Angola-Empresa-Isabel-dos-Santos-desafia-Estado-angolano,9ea8448f-e145-4c58-af20-56b568fdd232.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/politica/2018/6/29/Angola-Empresa-Isabel-dos-Santos-desafia-Estado-angolano,9ea8448f-e145-4c58-af20-56b568fdd232.html)>.



Note: 89 articles mentioned “Isabel dos Santos.” Search made between 23-24 October 2018.  
 Source: Authors’ content analysis of the articles published on the *Agência Angola Press* website (<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/en\\_us/index.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/en_us/index.html)>).

**FIGURE 2. — TONE OF ARTICLES IN STATE OWNED MEDIA MENTIONING “ISABEL DOS SANTOS” BETWEEN 2010-2018**



Note: 89 articles mentioned “Isabel dos Santos”. Search made between 23-24 October 2018.  
 Source: Authors’ content analysis of the articles published in the website of *Agência Angola Press* (<[http://www.angop.ao/angola/en\\_us/index.html](http://www.angop.ao/angola/en_us/index.html)>).

In many articles by foreign journalists, we find a more acute form of criticism that predates her fall and more consistently questions her competence, highlights her family connections, and interrogates the legality, legitimacy and fairness of her wealth accumulation. A number of titles are illustrative. One article in *Forbes* (Dolan & Marques de Morais 2013) was entitled “Daddy’s Girl: How an African ‘Princess’ Banked \$3 Billion

in a Country Living on \$2 a Day” and another, in Reuters (Eisenhammer *et al.* 2017), was called “How the ‘Princess’ of Angola Lost her Oil Crown” Rafael Marques de Morais (2012, 2016, 2018), the most well-known domestic critic of the Dos Santos family, adopts similar critical stances, either through his blog *Maka Angola*, or through the international press, which often republishes his blog posts.

For example, the South African Press recently published a polemical piece about Isabel by Marques de Morais that he had already posted on his blog:

Through her father’s presidential decrees, Isabel built her fortune. Now, ironically, the man her father personally chose to replace him is first and foremost taking away the family’s fortunes that are tied with the state, thus recapturing it from their hands. [...]

Isabel dos Santos’ insatiable greed to devour Angola’s political economy was only matched by her own arrogance that the country was hers for the taking. [...] During her daddy’s reign, Isabel dos Santos used UNITEL as her piggy bank. Without the Angolan cash cows, Isabel’s empire in Portugal, where she parked much of her international investments, will also become unsustainable (Marques de Morais 2018).

The Portuguese media has also extensively reported on Isabel, especially since the period of the economic crisis when she acquired extensive shares in Portugal’s multimedia, energy, real estate, and banking sectors (Fernandes 2015; *Visão* 2016; Siun *et al.* 2017). An exploratory search online produced hundreds of articles mentioning Isabel, from niche journals (*e.g.* *Jornal de Negócios*, *Jornal Económico*) to more mainstream newspapers (*e.g.* *Público*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Jornal de Notícias*, *Expresso*, *Visão*, *Observador*). As a result of her increasing interests in Portugal and other investments by Angolans, some articles suggested that the relationship between Angola and Portugal had been reversed: the former colonizer (Portugal) was now depicted as being colonized (by Angola) (Onishi 2017).

In addition, like many other news outlets, the cover of the weekly magazine *Visão* condemned the repressive nature of the regime when the rapper Luaty Beirão and 16 other activists were detained in 2015 on trumped up charges of attempting a *coup*.<sup>18</sup> The journal later caricatured the fall of the Dos Santos family with the headline: “Angola: The Hunt of the Untouchables”.<sup>19</sup> The headline of the weekly newspaper *Expresso* reflects the tone of more recent portrayals when it declares: “The New Owners of Angola: Who are the close confidantes of João Lourenço, the man who is destroying what is left of the previous power?”<sup>20</sup> In addition, when an investigative report broadcast by the private television company, SIC (which belongs to the media group that also includes *Expresso*— and until recently—*Visão*<sup>21</sup>) also criticized the Dos Santos era, Isabel intervened personally to suspend its transmission in Angola. She argued that she was not retaliating against the station; she was only defending her business interests (*Novo Jornal de Angola* 2017b).

Isabel has aggressively tried to offset the negative portrayals she gets in the news. She has embraced social media and started using Instagram, Facebook and Twitter more systematically to brand her image and defend herself. Through these outlets, ordinary people and the mainstream media have had increased, but highly controlled, access to her private and personal sphere in the last five years (Galvão 2016). As of February 2019, she

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<sup>18</sup> See cover here: <<http://visao.sapo.pt/revistas/2015-10-28-Edicao-1182>>.

<sup>19</sup> See cover here: <<http://visao.sapo.pt/revistas/2018-09-26-Edicao-1334>>.

<sup>20</sup> See front page here: <<https://expresso.sapo.pt/Capas/2018-09-28-A-primeira-pagina-do-Expresso#gs.udRFLRI>>.

<sup>21</sup> Impresa media group: <<http://www.impresa.pt/apresentacao-grupo>>.

had over 131,000 followers on Instagram, 30,400 followers on Twitter, and 237,000 followers on Facebook. Her posts mix together photos celebrating food, culture, hotspots, flora and fauna of Angola, family photos and selfies, but also they contain inspirational sayings about women and children, or being a good business leader. Her personal webpage, “Sharing by Isabel dos Santos,” begun in 2018, spins a narrative around her as a woman and an entrepreneur that is meant to inspire others. She gives advice on leadership, development in Africa, how to start a business, and how African women should empower themselves in the business world.<sup>22</sup> Here she defines herself simply by saying: “If I had to summarize who I am in a few words I would say that I am: Angolan, woman, mother, business woman, and entrepreneur.”<sup>23</sup>

Similar to other global celebrities, she also uses social media to engage with the public, create controversy, react to criticism, and challenge what she perceives as “fake news.” In 2016, as perhaps any jet lagged passenger might do, Isabel posted pictures of herself on Instagram looking hot and tired when she experienced a half-hour delay at the Lisbon airport. 4,000 followers “liked” the post and 621 people commented on an article about it. More recently, following her dismissal from Sonangol, and the launch of an investigation by Angolan authorities into potential graft and illicit financial transfers during her tenure there, she used tweets to send ironic messages to current President João Lourenço. She also got involved in a heated discussion with the activist and rapper Luaty Beirão after he tweeted, “Hey, sista with a gr8 mind, how does it feel being sacked? You ought to get used to it now @isabelaangola?” (*Diário de Notícias* 2017). Isabel then created a webpage to tell “her truth” and to present “facts” that contradicted the accusations of bad management.<sup>24</sup> Social media can be valuable tools in Isabel’s endeavors to fashion herself, as it seems she can no longer count on the support of state-led media (*Novo Jornal de Angola* 2017a). However, her sometimes careless use of Instagram and Twitter and the resulting over-exposure have made her more vulnerable to direct and immediate reactions from regime critics.

Although we have so far been focusing on Isabel, it is important to note that the negative portrayals have targeted not only Isabel, but also several members of the Dos Santos family. Searches on the state owned *Jornal de Angola*’s editorial page “A palavra do Director” reveal a shift in the patterns of support: 17 out of the 39 editorial articles published between 7 January and 14 October 2018, convey veiled criticisms of the Dos Santos family and their protégés, while praising João Lourenço and the inauguration of a new political cycle. For example, a particularly damning extract from an editorial titled “Sopranos” states:

In pursuit of the primitive accumulation of capital, a minority took advantage of public goods for their own personal benefit. In several ways, this minority now struggles against a campaign carried out by newly elected officials to improve public morals and fight against corruption and a culture of impunity. This minority thinks that it can stand above everything and everyone, that it can do everything regardless of the means used. As one renowned prosecutor said, they are without fear because they believe that the law is for others and a dead letter for their insatiable appetites (*Jornal de Angola* 2018).

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<sup>22</sup> <<https://isabeldossantos.com/>>, accessed October 23, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> <<http://www.factos-sonangol.com/>>, accessed October 23, 2018.

Given that the title of the article references an American television series about a family connected to the mafia and the extract alludes to illegal and immoral tactics allegedly used by a “minority” in Angola, the implication is obvious. The minority is being compared to the mafia.

### Explaining the Obsession with Isabel

In many ways the attention paid by the media to Isabel is no different from *People* magazine following movie stars, or telling us which designer is preferred by the former first lady of the US Michelle Obama. It is no different from coverage of other wealthy sons and daughters of African presidents—or American presidents for that matter. Moreover, for every Isabel dos Santos, there are hundreds of big men and sons of big men who gain notoriety for their corporate acquisitions or extravagant spending habits (Olingo 2014). Figures such as former President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, former President Guebuza in Mozambique, former President Zuma in South Africa or Teodorin Obiang Mangué, the son of President Obiang of Equatorial Guinea and current first vice-president, have allegedly amassed their wealth through gatekeeper politics, that is, they have used their political positions to participate in lucrative business deals, to acquire shares in companies, to receive kickbacks that enrich themselves and their supporters. Yet, the high quantity and sheer vitriol of articles about Isabel over the last five years requires explanation.

We offer several arguments to explain why Isabel is the focus of so much attention by journalists and readers. The first is that contrasting representations of Isabel in print and on social media call attention to competing discourses regarding economic conditions and the economic “rules of the game” in Angola. Indeed, the national and foreign accolades awarded to Isabel owing to her wealth, influence, and commercial acumen combined with Isabel’s efforts to brand herself as an entrepreneur and business woman help to legitimate the adoption of market driven policies in Angola over the last two decades. By rewarding Isabel’s entrepreneurship, the domestic and foreign media sanction the shift to the market and private property rights, and the individual accumulation that accompanies such shifts. By noting Isabel’s investments in telecommunications in Angola or banking in Portugal, the media narrative seeks to normalize such business transactions in a country that previously proclaimed its adherence to Marxism-Leninism at independence.

An editorial in the state-run *Jornal de Angola* is a case in point. Commenting on Isabel’s inclusion on the *Forbes* list, the editors stated in 2013, “As we do our best for an Angola without poverty, we commemorate the fact that Isabel is a reference for world finance. This is good for Angola and the Angolans are proud. After all, our golden dream is that all human beings be rich, in whatever part of the planet” (quoted in Louçã & Ash 2018: 96). By treating wealth accumulation as a virtue, this statement seeks to overturn previous official denunciations of global corporate capital and to instantiate new values within Angolan society.

Yet, as Isabel has gained international visibility she also has become a target of criticism, particularly by the Portuguese media and participants on social media. American and European news outlets have also aired suspicions regarding the origins and merits of her wealth, while also acknowledging her style and beauty (Soares de Oliveira 2014; Fernandes 2015). The negative depictions of Isabel by journalists or critical comments by

readers on social media reflect disapproval of the means by which wealth has been accumulated and capitalism has been constructed in post-war, post-socialist Angola. For example, critics often draw contrasts between the extent of Isabel's wealth, and the fact that a majority of Angolans live on \$2 a day (Dolan & Marques Morais 2013; Caminada 2017). They also highlight the frequent participation of Sonangol and powerful generals in some of her businesses or the lack of transparency of many of her investments. In doing so, they call attention to shady business practices in the country, and favoritism. Even business journals frequently point out the role that political and family connections may have played in her wealth accumulation, although she still receives invitations to speak at business events. Besides emphasizing the privileges enjoyed by the elite and the unfair advantages enjoyed by those with connections, many of those who respond to her posts on social media often notice the contrast between Isabel's wealth and that of ordinary Angolans. As one woman commented when Isabel complained about having to wait at the Lisbon airport: "In a country in which she is a woman with the most money and her father is the president, there are children waiting a lifetime for a meal, a school, a doctor, a decent house and for their parents to have freedom" (*Jornal de Notícias* 2017).

For many critics, Isabel personifies widespread corruption in the country, the accumulation of wealth outside of the law by elite Angolans, the disappearance of billions of petrodollars into the pockets of the powerful, the reliance on personal contacts to get ahead, and the common practice of stashing finances in off-shore accounts. That she is a glamorous "femocrat" (Mama 1995: 41), that is, a prominent woman who owes her power to her connection to her father, the former president, seems to intensify the rage. Women in Angola may run small businesses as Isabel herself has acknowledged, but few women head parastatals or run large companies (Siun *et al.* 2017). Besides Isabel, no other Angolan woman seems to be on the list of multimillionaires and billionaires in the country. Whereas some analysts like Carlos Rosado de Carvalho, economist and the director of *Expansão*, a weekly financial newspaper in Angola, make it clear that the recent removal of Dos Santos family members from prominent positions is about enhancing the morality of economic life in Angola (Rosado de Carvalho 2017) and not a vendetta against the Dos Santos family; others like Rafael Marques de Morais (2012, 2018) view Isabel and other billionaires like General Leopoldino do Nascimento and General Manuel Vieira Dias as representative of the kind of crony capitalism that has been institutionalized in Angola. Angola's economy is so intertwined with the Dos Santos clan and their affiliates that it is not easy to see how it can be morally cleansed.

The second interpretation explores the temporal representations of Isabel. We argue that the change over time—from celebratory depictions of Isabel and her family to reports on investigations of irregularities under her directorship of Sonangol—by the state-controlled media illustrate the potential limits of dynastic politics in cases where ruling parties are powerful. Moments of dynastic succession are often periods when differences escalate within the national elite, the leading families or clans, and the ruling party, particularly in authoritarian cases. Understanding instances when dynastic succession is expected, but does not occur, can provide additional insight into the mechanisms by which dynasties survive and decline. The study of political dynasties, or the familial transmission of political power, has a long tradition in the social sciences and includes case studies spanning all continents (Brossier & Dorransoro 2016: 10-11). In Africa, autocratic regimes such as Togo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Uganda as well as more democratic countries

often receive media and scholarly attention (Handy 2005; Bernault & Tonda 2009; Yates 2017). One interesting case of politics as a family business is Benin, where Rosine Soglo founded a party (Renaissance du Bénin—RB) to help her husband Nicéphore Soglo win the presidential race (Tozo 2004).

What distinguishes Angola from most of these cases is that following his decision to depart, there was no transmission of political power from JES to any of his children, nor did the “official” first lady assume a prominent political role in the family political enterprise as was the case of Simone Gbagbo in the Ivory Coast (Touré 2004). JES would have preferred a dynastic succession, according to some scholars, but he never took the necessary steps (Dias 2017). His first choice, José Filomeno dos Santos was not prepared or trained to be president, while Manuel Vicente—his second choice—faced dissent within the party (Pearce *et al.* 2018: 149). Like José Filomeno dos Santos, Isabel was often floated by the media as possible successor but she never invested enough in her political career nor did she demonstrate a clear interest in following in her dad’s footsteps (Rosa 2016). When asked about her political ambitions she stated:

My real passion is to be an entrepreneur, I love building something new, waking up in the morning and having an idea, gathering the right team around me in order to challenge me [...]. I believe there are many ways to solve Africa’s problems: creating jobs, creating opportunities, creating business is as good a way as politics (Gomes 2017).

Perhaps individual decisions by members of the Dos Santos family explain their inability or unwillingness to retain political power, but it is also likely that the ruling MPLA party thwarted opportunities for family members to succeed their father. Isabel’s position as a person of mixed race (*mestiça*) may have been one of the strikes against her. According to Fernandes (2015: 32-33), citing Catarina Antunes Gomes, one of the reasons that JES was chosen to be president instead of Lucio Lara after the death of Agostinho Neto in 1979 was because JES was black whereas Lara was mixed race. Since the majority of the population was African, the party did not think it was appropriate for Lara to take the helm (*ibid.*). In turn, when the question of a successor to JES arose, at least one analyst indicated that owing to the “racial politics” of Angola, the party would not choose Isabel. “She is *mestiça* and that immediately constitutes a barrier difficult to overcome” (Vines quoted in VOA 2016). Support for this claim is provided by several articles and comments on social media that suggest there is widespread resentment against *mestiços*, not only because of their perceived privileges, but also because of their alleged racism. Although discussions of race may still be taboo in Angola, racist statements and accusations of racism have begun to surface since the domestic media began to condemn Isabel.<sup>25</sup>

Another important consideration is that like the Frelimo party in Mozambique, the MPLA derives its political power and organizational coherence from its origins as an armed, anti-colonial liberation movement; a high degree of hierarchy and centralization during the period when it was a one party state; and its dependence on military and inclusion of military

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<sup>25</sup> See the comments in response to the following article, “Isabel dos Santos nega possibilidade de vender participação na GALP à Sonangol,” *Angonotícias*, October 23, 2018, <<http://www.angonoticias.com/Artigos/item/59385/isabel-dos-santos-nega-possibilidade-de-vender-participacao-na-galp-a-sonangol>>, accessed January 23, 2019. See also Isabel’s response to charges of racism in footnote 1 *supra*. Among others, R. MARQUES DE MORAIS (2016) has written about the racism towards Mozambicans and Angolans by Portuguese nationals.

officers during the long period of armed struggle both before and after independence. Owing to the long period of civil conflict between the MPLA and the opposition movement, Unita, after independence, the government has had to rely heavily on the military and the ruling party has included many officers as members. As a party, the MPLA also has investments in several sectors of the economy.

Together these reasons may explain why party members were reluctant to see the continued accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of the Dos Santos family (see also Pearce *et al.* 2018). According to one Angolan analyst (Soren Kirk Jensen in Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2017): “There are indications that the old guard and real powerbrokers had grown increasingly weary of appointments of family members to key political positions (...) and moved to block their further political rise.” Now that Isabel is under investigation and her brother, José Filomeno dos Santos, is still in protective custody (as of February 2019), it would appear that the MPLA party has re-asserted itself (*Jornal de Angola*, 2019).

In addition, the critical coverage of Isabel by *domestic* media since 2017 reflects a power struggle within the Angolan elite over control of the country’s most lucrative resources. Along with that of her brother, Isabel’s swift downfall calls attention to the consolidation of power by João Lourenço and the cultivation of a new set of domestic elites ready to serve his interests (Coroado *et al.* 2018). Close allies of JES such as Norberto Garcia, a spokesman for the MPLA, and Valter Filipe da Silva, formerly head of the Bank of Angola, are currently facing corruption charges. Moreover, the fact that Isabel’s replacement as head of Sonangol is Carlos Saturnino, a man who had previously been fired by her father, suggests that President Lourenço is constructing a coterie of followers linked by their dislike of former President Dos Santos. Others such as Manuel Vicente, the former vice-president, have become close confidantes of the new president, likely because they are both politically compromised in some way and/or because their experience and insider knowledge is useful to Lourenço (Filipe 2018). The rest of the emerging coalition around Lourenço are party members who have voluntarily shifted their allegiances (*Africa Confidential* 2018). Whether the rejection of personalistic and dynastic politics represents a new direction for Angola is doubtful, however. As Pearce, Peclard and Soares de Oliveira (2018: 160) observe, the emerging coalition has “been socialized within the MPLA over more than 40 years, marked by the experience of war, centralized power and elite control of the political economy, about which they never expressed misgivings.”

As a final point, we argue that the tone and frequency of criticisms of Isabel convey deeply misogynistic positions regarding the presence of a powerful African female in big business ventures. A small contingent of Angolan journalists, a large percentage of the Western media, particularly in Portugal, and those who make comments on social media often deprecate and infantilize her, belittling her as an “African princess,” “Daddy’s girl”, or *menina Belinha* (little Bella) who basically depended on her father to get her wealth. One Italian journal referred to her as a “Black Goddess” (cited in Marques de Moraes 2012). She has been described as “cold” as any woman who has stepped outside of the stereotypical female role must invariably be. She has been derided for flying in a choir from Belgium and planeloads of guests for her wedding (Smith 2013).

Misogyny does double duty in these characterizations. First, attacks against Isabel are a synecdoche for criticisms of an economy that is highly unequal. As Laura Mandell (1999: 1) writes: “In the wake of work by Mary Douglas, critics have shown that misogyny



in representations is not about women but rather about society: representations that inspire passionate hatred of women and disgust with the female body provide a place for people to work out passionate feelings about changes in economic and social structure.”

In this case, since the misogynous depiction concerns not a woman in literature (the focus of Mandell’s analysis), but a living woman, misogynous references to Isabel are not just expressions of disgust with Angola’s political economy. They also demonstrate resentment of her wealth, education, power, and cosmopolitanism. Outside of Angola, she challenges common and comfortable understandings of African women as oppressed, rural, and illiterate. Inside Angola, critics are suspicious of her Russian roots; her modern, Western, and iconic status. Implicit in these criticisms perhaps is longstanding disapproval of the subversion of traditional social hierarchies by a colonial regime that used women for their labor, including labor traditionally performed by men.

Moreover, embedded in the critiques is a gendered condemnation of the ruling MPLA’s emphasis on the emancipation of women (at least in the public sphere) which has echoes in the political divisions after independence. During the civil conflict, for example, the opposition movement Unita relied heavily on the rhetoric of “tradition,” “tribalism,” “heritage” and “chiefly control” as a recruitment tool to gain support from men in the initial years of the war. As Scott points out, “Unita’s ideology [...] effectively taps into sentimental and romantic notions of African tribal life and women’s role within it” (Scott 1994: 103). Moreover, because a private relationship between a father and daughter became instrumental to Isabel’s success in the public sphere, she has crossed the boundary that the ruling party itself drew between publicly affirming the liberation of women while ignoring the efforts by men to subordinate women in the family and the household (Scott 1994: 99). Isabel’s apparent transgression of what is considered appropriate for women to do may explain why we did not see a transfer of political power to her.

Post-imperial patriarchal and racial resentment of her wealth and privilege by Portuguese men is also starkly evident in the media and in readers’ comments. Because Isabel and other Angolan elites are buying property or companies in Portugal, repetition of the distorted trope regarding reverse colonialism is common. Yet, were it not for Angolan investment in Portugal after the 2009 financial crisis, the effects of the housing crisis there likely would have been greater.



Isabel is the ultimate femocrat. During the years her father was president, she was able to vastly increase her wealth and to garner stakes in key economic and financial sectors inside and outside Angola at a surprising speed. Observing Isabel’s trajectory is not enough to fully understand the transformation of the Angolan economy in the post-war, post-socialist period, but it is, nevertheless, illustrative of a larger phenomenon: the promotion by the ruling party of primitive forms of resource accumulation by an oligarchic elite. As a major beneficiary of this form of crony capitalism, Isabel, like other femocrats, is complicit with the “patriarchal *status quo*” that has been the main source of her wealth. Her position as a woman and wealthy entrepreneur in a highly unequal society is controversial and contradictory, and has generated strong criticism in the national and international media, particularly since power transferred from JES to João Lourenço.

In the preceding pages, we tried to document and explain how the different features of Isabel’s femocracy are represented in the national and international media over time.

Our analysis revealed that negative depictions of Isabel accelerated after her father left power. This was observed not only in state-led national media, but also in international media, particularly the Portuguese media. We have argued that attacks on her mainly represent an indictment of the kind of state capitalism that exists in Angola. They challenge the unequal distribution of privilege, power and wealth in Angola. Her status as the richest woman in Africa is perceived as an affront to the quality of life of the average Angolan citizen, particularly women.

Isabel is not the first woman to betray other women by privileging her access to capital and to powerful men over solidarity with other women. But given the post-war context, the dependence on oil, the diverse investments abroad and the longevity of her father's rule, her betrayal of ordinary Angolan women is particularly egregious. Via her Facebook and Twitter, she recently publicized that she attended the United Nations debate on equal rights for women, but she is not like most ordinary women and they might find it difficult to identify with her. The opportunities she has had from the outset to grow and prosper are not equally available to others. At most, what she has received is only comparable to other (African) women who are either spouses or daughters of wealthy presidents.

Although most of the negative portrayals of Isabel have to do with way she has accumulated her wealth, highly gendered critiques of her abound in articles, in comments and in posts on social media. Their negative and derogatory tone reflect the persistence of misogynistic attitudes towards women not only in Angola but also in Portugal. Although attacks against Isabel should in no way overshadow the gains that women have made in these two countries, they do indicate that unlike men, women, even powerful women, continue to confront significant barriers to equal treatment.

At the same time, Isabel's rise and fall provides a window into the changing nature of the elite coalition that now governs Angola. With the succession of João Lourenço into the leadership, the Angolan government and the ruling party are re-setting. Partly performance and partly power struggle, the attacks against Isabel suggest a settling of scores and a changing of the guard, although we should not expect to see a radical restructuring of the way that business is done in Angola. State capitalism will structure economic relationships for the foreseeable future, but the participants in those relationships will be different.

Finally, the present study offers important contributions beyond Isabel and the Angolan case. It illuminates the processes of oligarchic elite political formation and exposes the limits to wealth accumulation in an authoritarian regime. Second, it demonstrates how an institutionalized and strong political party can offset attempts at dynastic succession even by a seemingly entrenched leader. Lastly, it shows that powerful women in Africa face not only legitimate criticism for their actions but also ridicule and vilification because of their gender. Despite the many gains made by women on the African continent since independence, such treatment suggests that women have failed to dislodge deep seated attachments to male dominance.

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