Cabinda: Prospects for an Oil Insurgency in the Angolan Exclave

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Angola is one of the few bright spots in global oil production—oil production is expected to increase by roughly 2 million barrels per day to around 3.4 mbpd within the next 10 years. Angola has been wracked by civil war and violence since its independence from Portugal, with perhaps 1.5 million people dying in conflict. That 27 year civil war ended, however, in 2002, and Angola is generally seen as a relatively stable host for oil production, a perception that is further enhanced because the far-offshore, deep-water nature of most Angolan oil production makes it a difficult target for local groups with an axe to grind.

Is there anything standing in the way of this "Angolan Oil Miracle?" Other than the majority of present and future oil production being locatdd in a small and ethnically separate territory, a territory with an active and violent independence movement, and with the budding capability to effectively disrupt oil production, no.

Is Angola a budding success story or the next Nigeria?

Through a quirk of colonial cartography, Angola includes the exclave province of Cabinda (it was actually three independent African kingdoms who collectively asked the Portugese for protection from the Belgians). And, to complicate matters further, the offshore territory controlled by Angola by way of this exclave is home to the most productive present and future oil fields—currently accounting for roughly 700,000 barrels per day of production, and home to many of the major production blocks currently making Western oil companies salivate.

Figure 1: Map of Cabinda Exclave, with location relevant to Angola shown in inset.

Figure 2: Cabinda's offshore oil "Production Block O"

The situation with regards to the Cabinda exclave would be far less problematic if the people of Cabinda were happy participants in the "Angolan Oil Miracle." The huge royalties derived from Cabinda's oil production, however, flow directly to the Angolan capital of Luanda, with very little flowing back in the form of development funds. This is especially significant considering that Cabinda has a population of only 300,000 people—that's nearly two barrels of crude produced per person, per day, with this number expected to increase significantly over the next few years. The people of Cabinda understand that they should be among the wealthiest in Africa. Instead, only 10% of the oil revenues produced in Cabinda stay there--in theory. Because Angola hasn't held elections in 14 years, and because provincial governments are appointed top-down from Luanda, the theoretical 10% that "stays" in fact enriches the pockets of Angolan officials hand-picked for these luctrative positions (*see* Ghazvinian, "Untapped," pg. 154-65)

Complicating the situation further, there is a long history of armed struggle for independence in Cabinda. The FLEC (Frente para a Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda, or Cabinda Liberation Front) and FAC (Fuerzas Armadas de Cabinda, or Armed Forces of Cabinda) have been longtime participants in Angola's past conflicts, and were the lone holdouts to the 2002 cease fire. The Government of Angola claims that the FLEC & FAC signed a cease fire in the Summer of 2006, but this is widely considered a sham by the people of Cabinda, and is disputed by the "President" of the "Republic of Cabinda," Nzita Henriques Tiago. Communiqués by various independence organizations from as recently as March, 2007, suggest that this movement is very much alive. John Ghazvinian, while visiting Cambida several months after the "cease fire," reported that the armed conflict continued in the mountainous villages outside Cabinda City (Ghazvinian, id.).

The Potential for a "Nigerian-Style" Oil Insurgency

What is the potential for the Cabinda insurgency to significantly impact the future oil output from Angola? While some major oil facilities are located ashore in Cabinda, the majority of oil infrastructure is far offshore (See Figure 2). What are the probabilities that Cabinda will decide to target its own oil production as a means of gaining independence or autonomy? Do they have the tactical capabilities to carry out such a campaign? Are there any signs that this will happen?

In analyzing these questions, I think the "open-source" model for learning in insurgencies is highly relevant. Increasingly, due to better access to information and global communications, as well as lower barriers to entry for potential violent actors, insurgents around the world are using an open-source methodology to innovate in the areas of tactics and targeting methodology. The effect of oil-infrastructure targeting in Nigeria, for example, is likely not passing unnoticed in the cafes of Cabinda. Likewise, the tactical methods for attacking oil infrastructure—especially the developments in the tactics for attacking far-offshore infrastructure—are being effectively communicated "open-source" by the news media. To the extent that tactical and targeting innovations are being made in Nigeria by groups like MEND, or other violent factions, they are available for adoption by insurgents in Cabinda. Does this mean that insurgents in Cabinda have the means of disrupting the "Angolan Oil Miracle?" Probably not yet, but it seems likely that if more development funds and revenue sharing efforts are not advanced by Luanda, this combination of capability and intent cannot be far off.

In a troubling recent development, a Total oil platform in the Nkossa field (in neighboring Congo, see Figure 2 above) caught fire on May 10th. There is insufficient evidence at this time to firmly establish the cause of the fire, but investigations have turned up a "suspicious boat, its hull and body completely burned." The result of the fire: 60,000 barrels per day are currently shut in, with no word on when the production will be restored. Is this the opening salvo in a new Cabinda Oil Insurgency? It's far too early to tell, but one thing is certain: if the incident was not an intentional attack, it certainly publicized a potentially effective tactic to carry out such attacks. Admittedly, the incident did not take place in Cabinda's "Block O," but rather a few miles away in Congo's Nkossa field. Ethnic groups in Africa do not tend to neatly conform to the borders laid down by former colonial masters—this may mean that there is an ethnic component to discontent in the region that has its sights set on both Brazzaville (Congo) and Luanda (Angola), it may be a mere coincidence, or it may be a very intelligent tactical move: One of the key limiting factors (at least in the past) to MEND's operations in Nigeria was the desire to maintain future production potential—it is possible that, IF this was an attack, it managed to inform Western companies operating in the region without damaging Cabinda's infrastructure, the revenues from which Cabinda hopes to one day enjoy.

I must concede: this is largely speculation at this point. However, given the importance of increasing Angolan oil production to a world facing the onset of Peak Oil production, and given the success of inhibiting oil production in places like Nigeria, I think that this is highly important speculation. This is yet another example of geopolitical feedback loops spawned by geological peaking in oil production. The technical complexity of oil production off the coasts of Angola and Congo are well understood. I, for one, have been generally unaware of the concomitant geopolitical complexities in the region. Will the word "Cabinda" become as commonplace as the term "MEND"? It is certainly an area worth watching. I wrote this article primarily to fill in my own knowledge gaps on this topic. I hope that it has been equally useful to TOD readers--there is no shortage of institutional knowledge to lean on here, as a quick search for "Cabinda" in the TOD archives shows that one reader had mortar shells land within 50 yards of him while in Cabinda.