

The impact of persecution upon the Igreja Evangelica Congregacional in Angola 1950-1974

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My interest in the research stems from personal experience of a warring Angola during the 1980's. Growing up in Angola, as an Igreja Evangelica Congregacional in Angola (IECA) pastor's son, I knew fear, social exclusion, and religious alienation.¹ Much of the persecution which the IECA faced during this period of history can be ascribed to the impact of Marxism-Leninism, the political ideology adopted by the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) after independence in 1975.

The hostile attitude adopted by the new independent authorities was itself not a new experience for the IECA; it had known similar forms of treatment under the previous colonial authorities. There are, in fact, several important, albeit general and broad studies that have been conducted on the experience of the IECA during the colonial period. According to these studies, the IECA was founded by The American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Mission (ABCFM), in conjunction with The Congregational Foreign Missionary Society of British North-America, who together worked in the southern central plateau of Angola (i.e., Benguela, Bie, and Huambo) among the Ovimbundus (the main ethnic group of Angola).

However, the period of escalating persecution of 1950-1974 saw the rapid dispersal of members of the IECA into other parts of Angola. This was mainly due to the execution of many of her prominent leaders, the expulsion of foreign missionaries, and the concentrated hostility against her congregations in the central parts of the country.

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¹ The IECA (translated) is the Evangelical Congregational Church of Angola.

Many factors underlie the escalation of persecution against the IECA. So, for instance, a strong emphasis on the education and empowerment of Angolans by the IECA presented a threat to the ideologies and purposes of the colonial authorities (Tucker 1933:85). The Portuguese traders and settlers believed strongly that Angolans were inferior, and therefore incapable of contributing to the development of the country; thus the education of Angolans was decidedly frowned upon. More than that, it was in the best interests of the Portuguese colonial initiative to utilize Angolans as forced labor (Byam 1997:109). Such a situation could justly be described as exploitive and dehumanizing; nonetheless, it constituted a major cornerstone for the colonial development of Angola (Malaquias 2007:35). The lack of universities in Angola in the 1950s forced the IECA to send young Angolans to be equipped in various fields in other parts of the world (Henderson 1990:195-196). One such student who benefited immensely from an IECA scholarship, and subsequently played a vital political role in colonial Angola, was Jonas Savimbi (Marcum 1969:112).² Savimbi became a popular political figure, and a major character for Angolan liberation movements; he was sent by the IECA to study medicine in Portugal (Bridgland 1987:32).

Examples such as Savimbi illustrate why the colonial authorities in Angola associated the IECA with anti-colonial factions. As a result, systematic persecution against the Church and her members ensued. Such a turn of events is not surprising when we consider the volatile relationship between the church and the Portuguese authorities since the church's establishment in 1880. The presence and policies of American and Canadian missionaries in the central part of Angola was often viewed as a serious threat to the interests and the future prosperity of Portuguese traders and settlers. Thus, the church was not exempt from harassment from local officials and Portuguese traders who resented the growing presence and influence of the mission schools in the central part of Angola. Thus the persecution intensified between 1950-1975 when the anti-colonial sentiment in the country escalated (Byam1997:97). The colonial government reacted by expelling missionaries, arresting members of the church, and executing some of the clergy, leaving the church without firm leadership.

² Jonas Savimbi studied at mission stations of IECA in Chilleso in 1951 and Dondi in 1954.

Definitions

This study seeks to draw out the specific implications of the persecution of the IECA for its development in Angola under the colonial authorities between 1950-1974. The development of the IECA under persecution is, ultimately, my interest in the persecution. Thus I will present the situational character of persecution faced by the IECA in the late colonial period 1950-1974.³

I should not, of course, be taken aback by the fact that IECA faced such harsh antagonism from the realm of a corrupt system of Portuguese colonialism. Jesus emphatically announced that all ministry work would be met with opposition and persecution (John 15:20). Paul, likewise, told Timothy that “in fact everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). In order to define persecution, I will employ a biblically informed, theological definition of persecution, which gives a more specific meaning to our understanding of the term. According to Tieszen (2005:20), persecution should be understood as “any unjust action of mild to intense levels of hostility, directed at Christians of varying levels of commitment, resulting in varying levels of harm, which may not necessarily prevent or limit these Christians’ ability to practice their faith appropriately”. Tieszen’s definition, with which I agree, implies that Christians are always suffering some sort of persecution as a result of the nature of their convictions. Nevertheless, despite the unavoidable nature of persecution for Christianity in general, the specific manifestations thereof are significant.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis underlying the study is that, far from impeding its subsequent growth and development, the IECA’s experience of suffering under colonial domination actually contributed to it, and still does so today. This hypothesis will be tested in the following way:

³ It is important to note, however, that the persecution of Christians in Angola did not end after 1974, but simply changed shape as the colonial era came to an abrupt end, and another regime came into being, similarly hostile towards Christianity, albeit for different reasons.

Method

This study seeks to investigate how, and in what manner, IECA survived the colonial, state-initiated persecutions between 1950 and 1974, and the formative influences (positive and/or negative) of this period of suffering for the subsequent development of the IECA in Angola.

This central research question gives rise to the following subset of questions:

1. What was the historical background of the persecution of the IECA?
2. How did the rise of nationalism influence the intensification of persecution on the IECA?
3. How did the IECA develop under the impact of persecution?
4. What positive and/or negative aspects are associated with the development of the IECA under persecution?
5. How does the IECA's experience fit into the biblical view of the effects of persecution on the church?

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