

We are your children of the native quarters
which electricity never reaches men dying drunk
abandoned to the rhythm of death 's tom-toms.

So wrote Agostinho Neto, the poet, doctor and revolutionary who became Angola's first President in 1975. The tom toms pounded for Neto la...st week when he died in a Moscow hospital at the age of 56, following surgery for cancer of the pancreas. The son of a Methodist minister, Neto had spent years in prison and exile. When Portugal granted independence to the 400-year-old colony in 1975, Neto's Popular Liberation Movement of Angola (M.P.L.A.), backed by Russia and Cuba, became involved in a three-way power struggle with the rival guerrilla forces of Jonas Savimbi and Holden Roberto, both of whom had Western support.

After gaining the upper hand with the aid of some 2,000 Cuban troops, Neto embarked on a troubled presidency marred by continued civil war, serious economic difficulties and bitter dissension within his party. That dissension contained the seeds of a succession struggle that is now developing in Angola. Neto did not designate a successor before flying off to Moscow on Sept. 6.

Speculation about the country's new leader revolves mainly around four figures within the M.P.L.A.: José Eduardo dos Santos, the pro-Soviet Minister of Planning and provisional head of government during Neto's absence; Lucio Lara, the provisional president of the M.P.L.A.; Defense Minister Iko Carreira; and Lopo do Nascimento, former Prime Minister, whom Neto fired last year.

A change in Angolan policy could shift the balance of power in southern Africa. Neto had recently shown a growing independence from Moscow and some openness to the West, backing deals with Gulf Oil and Texaco and seeking to establish diplomatic relations with Washington. The Soviets are now expected to use their privileged position in Angola to support a pro-Moscow hardliner.

Washington obviously would prefer a moderate of Neto's stamp, but has little bargaining leverage. Said one U.S. official: "With the Cuban situation so volatile right now, Neto's death could hardly have come at a worse time."

www.time.com