

From Nujoma to Geingob: 25 years of presidential democracy

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Abstract

Namibia's first 25 years of independence were characterized politically by a democratic regime influenced by the presidential governance of Sam Nujoma (1990–2005) and Hifikepunye Pohamba (2005–2015). With Hage Geingob, sworn in on Independence Day 2015, the third (and probably last) of the first 'struggle generation' entered the highest state office on behalf of Swapo, the former liberation movement now in firm political control. This article takes stock of Namibia's presidential democracy by summarizing the institutional and structural features contributing to the strong executive role of Namibian presidents. It assesses the terms in office of the first two Heads of State and provides insights into Geingob's path to office and his efforts to consolidate his status. It characterizes and compares the different personalities of the Namibian presidents and their style of political rule. It ends with a preliminary outlook at what might be expected from the current president Hage Geingob.

Introduction

Presidential politics have emerged as a new focus for scholarly debate, seeking to explore further the impact and influence of presidents in democratic settings within a multi-party environment.¹ Such debate on what is also termed 'presidentialization' might find a fertile ground in a Namibian case study. At the centre of interest is the impact and negotiating space presidents have or seek vis-à-vis the political party or parties and the manoeuvring space utilized and applied.²

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¹ See as examples Gianluca Passarelli, (ed.), *The Presidentialization of Political Parties. Organizations, Institutions and Leaders*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Ludger Helms, (ed.), *Comparative Political Leadership*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

² See Paul Chaisty, Nic Cheeseman and Timothy Power, Chaisty, "Rethinking the 'presidentialism debate': conceptualizing coalition politics in cross-regional perspective", *Democratization*, 21 (1), 2014: 72-94.

While Namibia has a presidential democracy, it is, however, to some extent an empirically different case from most others in this category. Sam Nujoma, the first President of the Republic of Namibia, was elected prior to independence by the members of the Constituent Assembly and sworn in on Independence Day on 21 March 1990. Since November 1994 general elections for both the National Assembly and the President have taken place every five years in separate but parallel polls. But at times one wonders if the emphasis is on the presidency or on democracy, given the far-reaching powers vested in the office of the Head of State and given the fact that he is backed by an overwhelming parliamentary majority. His authority as President, nominated by his party (the former liberation movement SWAPO), is even more widely anchored and accepted than the hegemony of the political organization he represents. Presidential election results have confirmed this: the party's presidential candidates garnered more votes than the party at every parallel election for parliament and president. Notably, there was a marked increase in the difference at the last elections.

Table 1. Election results for party and president 1994–2014

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
Swapo	73.89%	76.15%	75.83%	75.27%	80.01%
Nujoma	74.46%	76.85%	–	–	–
Pohamba	–	–	76.44%	76.42%	–
Geingob	–	–	–	–	86.73%

As this shows, the three presidents elected by popular vote reached office almost uncontested, despite several other parties and candidates seeking electoral support. Securing their position therefore depends less on appealing to the electorate than on the inner-party constellation and support base. This contributes to making Namibia a case of 'democratic authoritarianism', which stresses the hitherto decisive relevance of the hegemonic party, while at the same time confirming the large authority vested in the head of state as the party representative.³

The party's 2014 election campaign under the motto *The Legacy Continues* portrayed all three leaders with the sub-heading 'Consolidating Peace, Stability, Prosperity', associating Nujoma with peace, Pohamba with stability and Geingob with prosperity (see fig. 1). Such personified equation is more than a construct of spin-doctors. It resonates with the view of the majority of Namibians who have a high degree of confidence and trust in the office holder. An Afrobarometer survey showed the following exceptional

³ Henning Melber, "Post-liberation Democratic Authoritarianism: The Case of Namibia", *Politikon – South African Journal of Political Studies*, 42 (1), 2015: 45-66.

approval rates for trust and performance: Nujoma 76% and 78%, Pohamba 81% and 88%, and Geingob 79% and 89%.⁴

This article summarizes the role and influence of the three leaders as 'big men' whose rule was or is based on a democratic legitimacy.⁵ It explores the extent to which personalities matter and the degree to which they had to apply political strategies for inner-party support, especially in the case of the latest office holder, who was nominated by the party after an internal campaign and contest, which for the first time was a relatively open process with unpredictable outcome.

Fig. 1. The legacy continues.



This picture was taken at the launch of the Swapo election manifesto, 8 September 2014 and shows the Swapo Party's presidential candidate, Hage Geingob (right), together with his predecessors Sam Nujoma and Hifiki Punye Pohamba. In the run-up to the presidential elections, pictures such as this were published in the *New Era* and the *Namibian Sun*. This particular one was retrieved from Hage Geingob's official Swapo Party Facebook page (photographer unknown).⁶

⁴ Institute for Public Policy Research / Afrobarometer, 28 October 2014, *News Release: Trust, approval ratings high for Namibia's president and prime minister following a long trend*, Windhoek, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2014. The approval rates for Nujoma were based on results of a survey from 2002, Geingob's rates were for his position as Prime Minister.

⁵ Oda van Cranenburgh, "'Big Men' Rule: Presidential Power, Regime Type and Democracy in 30 African Countries", *Democratization*, 15 (5), 2008: 952-973.

⁶ *New Era*, "SWAPO moots free tertiary education", 8 September 2014, <<https://www.newera.com.na/2014/09/08/swapo-moots-free-tertiary-education/0>> [accessed 14 October 2015]; *Namibian Sun*,

Namibia's presidential democracy

When the Constituent Assembly drafted the normative framework for the sovereign state to come, SWAPO advocated a strong presidential democracy. Members of other parties expressed preferences for a strong parliament and cabinet instead. At the end, a compromise secured far-reaching powers for the president, but also some control function for the parliament, based on the assumption that the latter's plural nature would allow for a certain watchdog role vis-à-vis the president's party. Given Swapo's hegemonic status, with a two-thirds majority in parliament ever since the 1994 elections, this has proved more wishful thinking than political reality.

Evidence for this was the first constitutional change in 1998, when Swapo with its two-third majority in parliament modified the two-term clause for presidents. The party created a *lex Nujoma*: as Sam Nujoma was not directly elected by the people the first time round but appointed by the Constitutional Assembly, he was allowed to stand for re-election by popular vote for another (third) term. This was adopted against the votes and abstentions of all other Members of Parliament. However, one must also say that, with this exception, Namibian presidents have thus far never tampered with term limits and, in contrast to counterparts in neighbouring states, have been willing to hand over power.

The authority and competence of the Head of State is defined in chapter 5 of the constitution (articles 27 ff.). Although there is a prime minister, the president also has the ultimate authority over the cabinet, whose members are appointed and dismissed at his sole personal discretion. He is in supreme command of the army and decides over appointments in all security organs and the Judicial Service Commission. The president can also single-handedly declare a state of emergency or war. Parliamentary control could, in principle, be executed if a majority supports a motion of no-confidence in ministers; while the president, according to article 57, can also dissolve parliament. This, however, implies that the president must also face elections again.

In contrast to the constitutional ideal, the political reality is that much depends on the composition of parliament and the power of the parties when it comes to the influence of the president. After all, the president could also be ousted from office by a two-thirds-majority in parliament. Given the *de facto* one party system prevailing, with Swapo holding 80% of the mandates, this remains theory. Thus, it is mainly at the discretion of the president and the party as to how much they obey democratic rules. The only obstruction for the Head of State could therefore come from within his own party ranks. This seems highly unlikely, since many of the Members of Parliament, who are supposed to exercise control over the cabinet, are also appointed either Ministers or Deputy Ministers by the president.⁷ While they are supposed to have a controlling function, they

"SWAPO launches election battle plan", 8 September 2014, <<http://www.namibiansun.com/politics/swapo-launches-election-battle-plan.70959>> [accessed 13 October 2015].

⁷ See Henning Melber, "People, Party, Politics and Parliament: Government and Governance in Namibia", in: Mohamed Salih, (ed.), *African Parliaments: Governance and Government*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005: 142-161.

normally take the floor in parliamentary debates as spokespersons of the party or the president, to whom they owe ultimate loyalty. This lack of limitations renders the current President of Namibia virtually omnipotent. The only restricting factors are party-internal power relations and factions. Therefore, under the current constellation the real election of the Head of State takes place within the party and follows the party line. Since 2007, this has ultimately been decided by vote of the 400 plus delegates at the party congresses held every five years. These are the decisive moments when the party president and the deputy president – and thereby the party's presidential candidate – are elected.

The era of Nujoma

An anything but modest claim was characteristic for the leadership style of the country's first Head of State. As the 'Founding Father of the Namibian Nation' (the official title bestowed upon him by parliament when leaving office in 2005), he had a generous understanding of his competences and power and acted accordingly. Transparency and accountability were not among his strengths.

When in November 1993 the then Minister of Agriculture left a cabinet meeting after a dispute with the president over disciplinary action against a senior official in his ministry, the minister's actions were equated with resignation and his dismissal came the next day. In August 1998, the president made use of his authority as commander of the Namibian army to dispatch soldiers to rescue his friend, Laurent Desiré Kabila, under siege in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Neither the cabinet nor the prime minister were consulted or informed in advance. In early August 1999 the president proclaimed the first state of emergency in response to the failed secessionist attempt in the so-called Caprivi Strip.⁸

These and other examples – such as sporadic outbursts during official speeches and anything but diplomatic rhetoric – testified to the particular leadership profile and qualities of someone at the helm of a liberation movement for three decades before moving into state office. He was the personification of the patriarch, responsible for the family called Swapo and Namibia. Such understanding is also documented in his autobiography, the title of which flagged his assumption that failure is not possible.⁹

⁸ See Henning Melber, "One Namibia, One Nation? The Caprivi as a contested territory", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 27 (4), 2009: 463-481.

⁹ Sam Nujoma, *Where Others Wavered. The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma*, London, Panaf, 2001. For critical analyses of this patriotic history and heroic narrative par excellence see especially Christopher Saunders, "Liberation and Democracy: A Critical Reading of Sam Nujoma's Autobiography", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia: Political Culture Since Independence*, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute 2003, 87-98; idem, "History and the armed struggle. From anti-colonial propaganda to 'patriotic history'?", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia: Which Changes for Whom?*, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 2007, 13-28.; and André du Pisani, "Memory Politics in 'Where Others Wavered: The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma. My Life in SWAPO and my Participation in the Liberation Struggle of Namibia'", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 1, 2007: 97-107.

Nujoma, the autocratic personality and father figure, identified with others from a similar milieu, not least Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe.¹⁰ His desire for a heroic narrative, including the celebration of his personal role, entered Namibia's popular culture and public space not only in the form of a costly Hollywood film of his life, which was in terms of both art and commerce a disaster for the local film industry. The personal cult during his reign and beyond was manifested in several monuments. The gigantic Unknown Soldier dominating the Heroes Acre outside Windhoek which was inaugurated in 2002 resembles Nujoma. The statue's base reinforces the message with a quote from Nujoma in his handwriting and with his signature.

On Heroes Day (26 August) 2013, an over-sized Nujoma statue was also inaugurated at the memorial site in Omgulumbashe in the northern Namibia, where on 26 August 1966 the first military encounter between SWAPO and the South African army took place. Nujoma attended the ceremony as a guest of honour, dressed in a military uniform. There is also a Nujoma statue in front of the Independence Museum in Windhoek, opened on Independence Day 2014, this time dressed in civilian clothing and armed with the constitution. In honour of Nujoma, born on 12 May 1929, the Swapo Youth League established the '12th May Movement' in 2012, with the aim (so far in vain) of having the day declared a national holiday.

There is hardly any town which does not have a main street name after him; Namibian bank notes carry his portrait; and his picture is still hanging in all public offices. The insignia of a personality cult are at the same time a manifestation of his widely accepted authoritative role, both in the liberation struggle and in independent Namibia. Criticising Nujoma is tantamount to blasphemy, though clandestine critical remarks about the 'old man' are heard even within the party, where his continuing role is at times considered an anachronism or a hindrance to other factional interests. In his late 80s, Nujoma has access to all party meetings and is still considered a figure whose word has some weight, although his influence on party politics seems to be waning gradually.

Despite all reservations concerning the *leader maximo* habitus and style, Nujoma can indeed claim to have used his paternalistic, if not patronizing, authority for promoting national reconciliation during the initial years of independence – at least with regard to the interaction of the former colonized with the white minority and the political opposition. During his second term in office, "reconciliation took a back seat, and a certain authoritarian tone emerged".¹¹ His third and last term was dominated by projects cultivating heroic narratives on a grand scale, at times bordering on

¹⁰ See on this mutual admiration and affinity beyond Nujoma Henning Melber, "In the Footsteps of Robert Gabriel Mugabe: Namibian Solidarity With Mugabe's Populism – Bogus Anti-imperialism in Practice", in: Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gathenseni, (ed.), *Mugabeism? History, Politics and Power in Zimbabwe*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015: 107-120.

¹¹ Bill Lindeke, "Presidential Power and Performance in Namibia: The first quarter Century", in: *Celebrating 25 Years of Democratic Elections, 1989–2014*, Supplement of the Namibia Media Holdings on 23 December 2014 to the newspapers *Republikein*, *Namibian Sun* and *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2014: 19-20 (19). Bill Lindeke since then lost his fight against cancer. I dedicate this article to his memory.

megalomania in combination with manifestations anchoring his eternal legacy in the public sphere.

At the same time one must concede, however, that Nujoma ultimately resisted the temptation to 'do a Mugabe'. While not being immune to such temptation, he was still willing and able to put the collective interest above his individual wishes. When confronted with the insight that any effort to remain in power beyond the third term would risk harming the party over the contested issue, he was ultimately willing and able to put the party and the country above his personal ambitions.¹² While credit is due to the Founding Father, it also due to other party leaders' unwillingness to surrender leadership for a lifetime to the party's founding figure, if only because some of them still cultivated ambitions to replace him as Head of State.

The era of Pohamba

While Nujoma was willing to vacate the bridge of the Namibian ship, he was determined not to surrender power over the decision as to who should succeed him. His declared crown prince was his decades-long confidante, Hifikepunye Pohamba. Born in 1935, Pohamba served as Swapo's Secretary for Finance, mainly in charge of infrastructure for the movement's civilian exile camps in Zambia and Angola, and the main contact on the ground for those providing material support for the struggle. As an administrator respected for his integrity and loyalty, he was a trusted low-key ally of Nujoma from the early 'struggle days'. Serving as a minister with different portfolios since independence, his terms in office were remarkable for their lack of noteworthiness.

Despite the blessing of the 'old man', as Nujoma is fondly and respectfully referred to, a fierce battle over his succession took place. Upon the initiative of Nujoma, Pohamba was appointed uncontested at the congress in August 2002 to serve as the party's deputy president. But it was only in 2004 that Nujoma finally confirmed that he would definitely leave office at the end of his term. A subsequent extraordinary party congress had to elect a presidential candidate from three contenders, and Nujoma's still decisive influence ensured that his preferred candidate was sailed through, though the waters were rougher than anticipated.¹³ The collateral damage included not only the dismissal of the main rival Hidipo Hamutenya from his office as foreign minister, but a much wider McCarthy-like vendetta against all those suspected of being opposed to the president's choice. The fall-out ultimately led to the founding of a new opposition party, Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP), by Hamutenya and other like-minded politicians,

¹² See Henning Melber, "'Presidential indispensability' in Namibia: moving out of office but staying in power?", in: Roger Southall and Henning Melber, (eds.), *Legacies of Power: Leadership Change and former Presidents in African Politics*, Cape Town, HSRC Press and Uppsala, The Nordic Africa Institute, 2006, 98-119 (104–108).

¹³ See Melber, "Indispensability".

including other long-serving party officials in higher ranks from the first 'struggle generation'.¹⁴

Against expectations Pohamba, who was reportedly reluctant to accept the new role, managed to develop his own leadership style once in office. But not much of that style suggested any specific leadership qualities. Far more moderate and modest in tone and behaviour than his predecessor, Pohamba personified the humble servant of the people for most of his two terms in office, seeking to heal the political rifts, some of which were a result of his nomination, and building bridges to other parts of the Namibian community. Guided by a strong Christian faith and, like his predecessor, rather conservative in his moral values and lifestyle, he had a 'man of the people' appeal. In his personality, he was more of a 'father of the nation' than the more autocratic and patriarchal Nujoma. But Pohamba's kind of father figure soon showed wear and tear. He was too lenient and lacked the drive to bring about reform and fight corruption and graft, goals he announced when taking office. Following his establishment of the Anti-Corruption Commission, spectacular misappropriation of public funds either increased noticeably or became more known, while those prosecuted and punished were mostly small fry rather than big fish. While Pohamba's personal integrity was largely undisputed, he disappointed those who had welcomed his promise not to compromise in the fight against corruption.

Not least due to his shyness and unwillingness to enter into conflicts, there were few spectacular developments during his decade in office. This was both a source for comfort and discomfort. The ambiguity of Pohamba's presidency was that too little too late (if anything at all) took place in terms of reforms, and that the malpractices which had become widespread in the upper echelons of administration and politics continued unabated.

Pohamba's presidency illustrated vividly that populist rhetoric is no substitute for action. The State of the Nation Address (SONA) delivered in 2012 serves as a striking example. During the course of its delivery, Pohamba announced a Public Finance Reform Programme and, as an integral part of it, revisions to the Public Procurement Regulations. He promised "that these measures are implemented without delay". He also reinforced his "determination to fight corruption" and reiterated that this fight "must be waged without fear or favour". He would therefore "direct the Ministry of Justice to expedite the tabling of a strong and comprehensive legislation on the protection of whistle blowers". He tasked the National Planning Commission to finalize without any delay the National Human Resources Plan and ordered "that the cleaning of public buildings and their surroundings be improved without delay". Before ending, he

¹⁴ The career of Hamutenya outside of the party was however mixed and short-lived. While the RDP emerged as the official opposition in the parliamentary elections of 2009, it became almost irrelevant with the election results in 2014. Under pressure, Hamutenya surrendered the party presidency – and returned to the Swapo family under Geingob's presidency in August 2015.

stressed twice that words and policies “must be turned into practical actions in order to make a difference”.¹⁵

These almost imploring appeals contrasted with the realities, and documented weakness rather than strength. The lack of leadership contrasting with this SONA was bemoaned by the former editor of the popular independent daily *The Namibian*, who in her weekly column suggested “that the former President should never have coerced Pohamba into accepting the offer of the Presidency, because he has been a reluctant participant from the outset”. According to her, he is a man,

who to all intents and purposes, has good and decent attributes and the best of intentions [...] Had this been accompanied by a resolve to ensure he would not leave his office without having brought about some fundamental improvements in the lives of the people, President Pohamba would most definitely have passed muster. As things stand right now, he is the President who should never have been.¹⁶

The impression of a toothless tiger (or rather, in the African context, a clawless lion) was reinforced shortly afterwards when 11 out of the 24 Permanent Secretaries were replaced on 1 June 2012. The president had already ordered such a reshuffle a year earlier. When massive mismanagement in the health system and other sectors was being discussed at a cabinet meeting held towards the end of May 2012, he lost his usual patience. Visibly enraged with Prime Minister Nahas Angula, he reportedly interrupted the debate saying: “I wonder who is in charge of the government if I gave instructions and a year later we have to sit with the same problem that was not addressed”.¹⁷ As rhetorical as such a question was supposed to be, it would have been beyond imagination that his predecessor would have posed it.

During his last months in office Pohamba increasingly displayed the features of an impatient and angry man, contrasting with his image as a father seeking to accommodate differences and diversities. He articulated increasingly radical views, especially on the unresolved land issue, seemingly unaware that he himself had been responsible for land matters as a minister. This led a weekly newspaper close to the party to publish a scathing editorial entitled “our lame duck president”, suggesting that

no one will take the outgoing president seriously when he starts screaming about lazy and incompetent officials when under his watch during the last ten years, a number of incompetent ministers kept their jobs. To some degree, incompetence has been the hallmark of his presidency. [...] It is time for Pohamba to fade away.¹⁸

As a direct comparison between the first two Namibian presidents shows, personality structures do make a difference, given that both held the same position and powers with similar support from the electorate and the party. Pohamba never managed to obtain as

¹⁵ Republic of Namibia, *State of the Nation Address 2012 by His Excellency Hifikepunye Pohamba, President of the Republic of Namibia*, Windhoek, 25 April 2012 (2, 4, 8, 9 and 13f).

¹⁶ Gwen Lister, “Political Perspective”, *The Namibian*, 27 April 2012.

¹⁷ Jan Poolman, “Reshuffle to ‘stimulate’ PSes”, *The Namibian*, 30 May 2012.

¹⁸ Windhoek Observer, “Our lame duck president”, *Windhoek Observer*, 12 December 2014.

much authority and omnipresence as his predecessor. Even when he emerged from Nujoma's shadow he was not high-profile. While he occupied the moral high ground for most of his time in office, he initiated no meaningful corrective measures. As Lindeke observed:

Until recently, when he became more of a scold, his leadership style was more grandfatherly (moral leadership) than interventionist, activist. In such a scenario, the Cabinet becomes empowered (for good or otherwise), but bad behaviour also creeps in and corruption or incompetence becomes frozen and protected.¹⁹

Given the critical assessments, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's announcement on 2 March 2015 of the awarding of the 2014 Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership to the outgoing Namibian Head of State came rather unexpectedly. With this recognition Pohamba left office on a high note, praised by a proud Namibian public for such an outstanding achievement. But a much more somber conclusion seems justified:

As Africa's fourth Ibrahim Prize laureate retires [...] his moderation should be regarded as a two-edged sword. Namibia is marginally more free today than it was ten years ago, with political dissent more readily tolerated, minorities less frequently demonised, government pressure on independent media outlets diminished, and intra-SWAPO squabbles more skillfully resolved. But Pohamba's caution, conservatism, and lack of dynamism have also combined to ensure that President Geingob faces almost as many developmental challenges in 2015 as his predecessor did in 2005.²⁰

Geingob's presidency

In contrast to his predecessors, Hage Geingob has the highest formal education; during the 'struggle days' he was almost exclusively engaged in the spheres of diplomacy and training. He studied at the US-American Temple University (1964–65), did a BA at Fordham University (1965–1970) and an MA in political science at the New School of Social Research in New York. He finally obtained a PhD at the University of Leeds in 2004.²¹ In 1972 he began working for the United Nations Council for Namibia in New York, before being appointed director of the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka in 1975, a high-ranking international civil service position. In mid-1989, he returned to Namibia to manage SWAPO's campaign in the elections supervised by the United Nations. He then chaired the elected Constituent Assembly and became the country's first Prime Minister.

¹⁹ Lindeke, "Power": 20.

²⁰ Ian Cooper, "Namibia and President Pohamba's Legacy", guest post at *Presidential Power: Presidents and Presidential Politics Around the World*, posted on 26 March 2015 at <<http://presidential-power.com/?p=3053>> [accessed 10 October 2015].

²¹ His supervisor was the late Lionel Cliffe. Part of his thesis (entitled *State formation in Namibia: promoting democracy and good governance*) was published locally in a booklet as Hage Geingob, *Drafting of Namibia's Constitution*, Windhoek, Trustco, 2006.

Widely considered a potential candidate for the highest political office, he fell out with Nujoma in 2002. While he had earlier orchestrated the 'third-term-campaign', it is assumed that he refused to be instrumental in promoting Nujoma's 'president for life' agenda. After being removed from his post as Prime Minister, he turned his back on Namibian politics and joined the World Bank's Global Coalition for Africa as executive director in Washington (2003/4). He returned to local politics as a Swapo-MP when voted onto the party list as number 40, and re-entered parliament as a backbencher in March 2005. The party congress in 2007 elected him party vice president, which was the ultimate rehabilitation. President Pohamba finally appointed him Minister for Trade and Industry in 2008, during which he became popular for his determined negotiations with the European Union over an Economic Partnership Agreement, advocating a 'Namibia first' approach.²²

The 5th post-independence ordinary Swapo Congress took place from 29 November to 2 December 2012. President Pohamba, like his predecessor before him, had already declared that he would remain party president, which was accepted unopposed. Given that his second term as Head of State ended in March 2015, the party's elected deputy president automatically became the next presidential candidate. Hage Geingob stood for (re-)election as party deputy president against the party's Secretary-General (and Minister for Justice) Pendukeni Iivula-Ithana, and the Secretary for Information and Publicity (and Minister of Regional and Local Government, Housing and Rural Development) Jerry Ekandjo. Ithana was the first female candidate seeking to become Head of State; Geingob was the first candidate not to hail from the Northern Namibian Oshivambo-speaking regions, but with roots in the Damara community; and Ekandjo was the first candidate not to have been in exile. He had been a local activist (and political prisoner on Robben Island). The result was clearer than expected: Hage Geingob secured an absolute majority of 312 votes in the first round, ahead of Jerry Ekandjo (220) and Pendukeni Ithana (64). Geingob supporters were also elected into the other relevant positions.²³ In a cabinet reshuffle of 4 December 2012, Geingob was reinstated as Prime Minister. Since then, with the active support of Pohamba, 'Team Hage' has consolidated continuously its position in the party and managed to further entrench its network.

On 21 August 2014, the Swapo parliamentary majority adopted far-reaching constitutional amendments, tabled on 29 July 2014.²⁴ The controversial procedure ignored the demand for proper prior nation-wide consultation and strong objections by other parties. A civil society alliance articulated the fear that "several of the proposed changes

²² See Henning Melber, *Understanding Namibia. The Trials of Independence*, London, Hurst, 2014: 137-141.

²³ Selma Shipanga and Shinovene Immanuel, "Moderates prevail", *The Namibian*, 3 December 2012.

²⁴ Republic of Namibia, *Motivation of the Namibian Constitution Third Amendment Bill, 2014 in the National Assembly, July 29, 2014, by Honorable Dr. Albert Kawana, MP, Minister of Presidential Affairs & Attorney-General; and Republic of Namibia, National Assembly, Namibian Constitution Third Amendment Bill (as read a first time)*, B.9 – 2014.

appear to be an attempt to further centralize power and therefore undermine democracy”.²⁵ The 40 amendments included an increase in the number of seats in the National Assembly by one-third from 72 to 96 as of the legislative period 2015–2020. A similar expansion was decided on for the National Council, based on the now 14 (originally 13) regions of the country. The appointment of regional governors by the Head of State was also introduced as a constitutional clause. President Pohamba had already made such appointments, guided by a previously adopted law. This was in violation of the original constitutional clause which foresaw the election of governors by the elected members of the regional councils. The amendments also introduced the office of a vice president (as with all others in government, appointed by the president alone), consolidated presidential control over state affairs, and thereby added further power to an already strong executive president. Thus, with the legislative period commencing in 2015, Namibia’s de facto one-party democracy moved even closer to a one-person democracy, depending upon the degree to which the office holder was willing to use (or abuse) those increased presidential powers. As was observed, “the badly managed Third Constitutional Amendment process also presents a worrisome potential of abuse in the two-thirds majority”.²⁶

Notwithstanding such tendencies, Afrobarometer results released just ahead of the national elections suggested that the approval ratings for both the President and the Prime Minister were over 80%, among the highest of all countries surveyed since 1999.²⁷ But despite such a comforting point of departure, there are indications that Geingob, for all his overall popularity and approval ratings, has ascended to the presidency with the most fragile inner-party support base of the three presidents to date. His road to the highest position in the state was the result of a complicated (though smart) co-optation strategy, one that was dependent upon there being no obstructions from his predecessors. But it also made it necessary to keep them contented, and not just the ex-presidents but also his former rivals, who both continue to have influence among the party ranks. An indirect confirmation of this vulnerability could be seen in the establishment of a Presidential Council (PC), announced at a media conference on 2 February 2015. It is composed of Geingob and his two predecessors, the previous prime ministers and their deputies. As Geingob declared with special reference to Nujoma and Pohamba, this was important for:

[c]amaraderie, consultation and the continuity of government policy. It is rare that you find a situation like that in Africa. Honestly, that situation is unique to Namibia. These two icons and stalwarts of the struggle, Nujoma and Hifikepunye Pohamba, have 15 and 10 years of governance experience between them respectively, and will be engaged in advisory roles on the Presidential Council.²⁸

²⁵ NANGOF Trust, *Media Statement*, Windhoek, 30 July 2014. NANGOF is the acronym for Namibia Non-Governmental Organisations Forum.

²⁶ Lindeke, “Power”: 20.

²⁷ Institute for Public Policy Research, *News Release: Trust, approval ratings high for Namibia’s president and prime minister following a long trend*, Windhoek, 28 October 2014.

²⁸ Elvis Muraraganda, “Hage brings back Nujoma”, *Namibian Sun*, 3 February 2015.

Observers wondered if this was a strategic move to eliminate any unwanted interference by confining his predecessors to a limited role in such a body, or if it was a sign that they were still too influential for him to be ignore. Whichever way, it can be seen as a confirmation that the new government will continue to recognise the old guard. This was reinforced with the appointment of Nickey Iyambo as Namibia's first vice president. He had served for the previous 25 years in all cabinets, holding six different portfolios, and is the oldest within the first struggle generation still holding office.

The composition of the new cabinet as announced on 19 March 2015 can be seen as further recognition of the need to unify party factions. The expansion of the second-tier level of deputy ministers from 19 to 32 in particular was most likely undertaken to promote inclusivity. Added to the 28 cabinet members, this brought the size of top government officials to almost 60% of all MPs. It is an unplanned challenge for future state budgets with an estimated annual increase of expenditure of NAD 15 million (30%) to NAD 65 million, compared with costs under the Pohamba administration.²⁹

New drama was then added by the surprise resignation of party president Pohamba. Amidst controversies over procedure and a reportedly tense atmosphere, he handed over the party reins to Geingob at the Swapo central committee meeting on 18 April 2015, well ahead of the scheduled elections at the next party congress in 2017.³⁰ For the time being, Geingob continues to act as deputy president. His plan to appoint a close confidante to this position was rejected by members of the party, who saw this transfer of power as a kind of inner-party coup d'état, providing Geingob with a very early pole position for re-election.

Seemingly confident in his new role, Geingob's position might not be as strong as he would make believe. While both his predecessors did not block his way to the highest office, they seem to be quite unimpressed with his lifestyle, as he is known to be fond of *la dolce vita*.³¹ But he is also an intellectual strategist who knows his trade. Widely considered a technocrat, he entered office with a new metaphor for the 'Namibian house', thereby deliberately reaching out beyond the party to embrace all Namibians. As he stated in his inaugural address:

I take this oath on behalf of all Namibians and promise to serve all Namibians without exception. No Namibian must feel left out. [...] All of us must play our part in the success of this beautiful house we call Namibia. We need to renew it from time to time by undergoing renovations and extensions. [...] Let us stand together in building this new Namibian house in which no Namibian will feel left out.³²

²⁹ Jo-Maré Duddy and Estelle de Bruyn, "Geingob-span kan dúúr wees", *Die Republikein*, 23 March 2015.

³⁰ Tileni Mongudhi, T "Geingob takes charge of Swapo", *The Namibian*, 20 April 2015.

³¹ Being a divorced bachelor, he re-married only on Valentine's Day 2015 as President elect.

³² Republic of Namibia, *Inaugural Address by His Excellency Dr Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia at the 25th Independence Day Celebration and Swearing In of the 3rd President of the Republic of Namibia*, Independence Stadium Windhoek, March 21, 2015: 3, 7 and 8.

His measured speech was free of most of the customary heroic pathos. This new sound was reinforced by a much-applauded SONA, considered the best ever held in parliament. The speech was indeed carefully crafted and remarkable in several ways, not least because Swapo did not feature as the almighty party. Instead, repeated reference was again made to the 'Namibian house' as a strong and appealing metaphor.³³ But on closer inspection the question arises: to what extent is this house constructed on firm and sustainable foundations; and is it truly a house for all Namibians?

Geingob is also wont to indulge in his predecessors' bogus anti-imperialist antics. To what extent these two sides of his politics complement each other or are merely applied according to circumstance without indicating his true convictions is difficult to assess. In the past, on various occasions during election campaigns, his tirades against political opponents have bordered on incitement to hatred. He has also displayed a tendency to dismiss internal social and political protest as remote controlled efforts for regime change, almost as if they were part of a neo-imperialist conspiracy. He engaged in such antics at the summit of the African Union held in Johannesburg on 14 June 2015. Surprisingly, Geingob decided not to hold his prepared speech, but simply introduced himself as the new President of Namibia, while also declaring that Robert Mugabe is his 'idol'.³⁴ It is fitting that on the same occasion he decided to invite Winnie Madikizela-Mandela to Namibia in honour of her role in the struggle.³⁵ In addition, while the indictment of Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir dominated the headlines, Geingob had already dismissed the role of the International Criminal Court in Kenyan affairs:

no institution or country can dictate to Africans, who and by whom they should be governed. The International Criminal Court (ICC) must therefore stay out of Kenya's domestic affairs.

Some are saying that we are the ones who created the ICC. However, when one creates something to be an asset but later on it becomes an abomination, you have the right to quit it since it has ceased serving its intended purpose.³⁶

Such 'pragmatism' in relation to values that were adopted as international law and ratified in treaties by Namibia (and thereby also embraced as domestic law) is worrying. Comparing and contrasting the variety of faces Geingob has already displayed makes it difficult to predict the substance of his governance. It requires more time to properly determine what is show and what is genuine in his presidency.

³³ Republic of Namibia, *State of the Nation Address 2015 by His Excellency Dr. Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia*, Windhoek, 21 April 2015.

³⁴ Jo-Maré Duddy and Catherine Sasman, "Geingob kies stilte op Afrika-verhoog", *Die Republikein*, 15 June 2015.

³⁵ Elivs Muraranganda, "Hage to honour Madikizela-Mandela", *Namibian Sun*, 26 June 2015. According to the report, which is based on a confirmation from sources at the State House, "it is not yet clear whether the veteran politician will receive a house or a street named after her".

³⁶ Republic of Namibia, *Statement by His Excellency Dr Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia, to the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government*, 14 June 2015, Johannesburg, South Africa, 5.

Namibia's presidents

The three presidents to date all came from the first generation of the anti-colonial liberation struggle. If the biological clock now ticking should allow a fourth member of this group to enter office, then this will only happen after Geingob's current term ends. It is however unlikely that Geingob's ambitions are limited to a one-term-presidency. His political priorities appear to include ensuring a second term, and retaining the Swapo presidency beyond the next party congress. As Swapo enjoys political hegemony the decision as to who will be the country's Head of State is a purely party internal one. Whoever is appointed their presidential candidate will be elected. Thus support within the party is more important than popularity among the wider general electorate. Support among the ordinary voters does not impact this decision-making process. Up to now support within the party has not been based on any candidates' political programmes, but rather on their skills in building personal alliances. As a consequence, Namibia's presidents, despite their far-reaching powers, have not been guided primarily by a subject-related compass which puts general policy matters at the centre of their strategy. Instead, handling the party and its factions has continued to top the agenda.

The announcement that Cabinet had adopted the 2014 Swapo electoral manifesto with immediate effect as the document directing all state institutions and agencies as well as state-owned enterprises in their strategic plans³⁷ illustrates, despite all executive powers, the limits on the authority of any president in Namibia. But as shown, personalities make a difference. A strong president means State House's influence on policy-making will be considerable, provided the president has the will and ability to steer the boat. Geingob's first 100 days suggest that he is of such calibre. But the exact coordinates of his compass remain unclear as does the course of that boat.

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³⁷ Shionovene Immanuel, "Swapo manifesto becomes Govt bible", *The Namibian*, 5 June 2015.

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