

Namibia: a trust betrayed – again?

Henning Melber*

Dag Hammar skjöld Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden

As Namibian youth, and as Africans, you must therefore be on the full alert and remain vigilant against deceptive attempts by opportunists and unpatriotic elements that attempt to divide you. As the future leaders of our country, you should act with dedication and commitment; to always promote the interests of the SWAPO [South West African People's Organisation] Party and the national interests before your own. It is only through that manner that the SWAPO Party will grow from strength to strength and continue to rule Namibia for the next ONE THOUSAND YEARS. (Sam Nujoma, Founding Father of the Republic of Namibia, in a speech to the SWAPO Youth League in 2010)¹

Such faith-based antics document not only ignorance over the analogy to the failed empire building of a Third Reich calibre ending in the Holocaust and the Second World War. Twenty years into Namibian Independence, the above gospel stands for a mindset obsessed with maintaining political power and control literally until eternity. Liberation from colonial rule is perceived as a kind of 'end of history'. It resulted in a political project devoid of any meaningful agenda for socio-economic change beyond the pursuance of own narrow interests by the party leadership and its clientele. Namibian elite politics of a new class in the making has perpetuated deeply rooted, structurally anchored socio-economic inequality at the expense of the majority of the people.

A brief history of SWAPO

Namibia's decolonisation process had been insofar unique, as it had been an official United Nations (UN) responsibility. The League of Nations had, under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, transferred the administration of what was 'German South West Africa', as a now Class C mandate, to the British Crown. Britain, in turn, had delegated the task to the Union of South Africa. But, after the Second World War, South Africa simply refused to acknowledge the UN as the legitimate and responsible successor to the League in this respect.

The dispute that then emerged, from the late 1940s, over the mandated territory resulted, beginning in the 1960s, in an increasingly active role for the UN, guided by the understanding that the continued South African occupation of the territory was tantamount to 'a trust betrayed', in the conflict. The UN instituted both the UN Council for Namibia and the UN Institute for Namibia, its mission in support of national sovereignty for Namibia ultimately

*Email: henning.melber@dhf.uu.se

being accomplished, through the UN-supervised transition to Independence, during 1989/90.²

The South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO of Namibia) was officially established in 1960. It managed to rally the support of large parts of Namibia's colonised majority under its banner of 'Solidarity, Freedom, Justice'. Equally importantly, SWAPO's backing by a majority of UN member states, especially from the non-aligned movement and the Soviet bloc, further consolidated its status as the exclusive agency of anti-colonial resistance. Although unable to influence decisively the UN Security Council's more hesitant posture (as promoted principally by various Western states), those in support of the liberation movements made their voices heard in the UN's General Assembly. Indeed, by the mid-1970s, a UN resolution recognised SWAPO as 'the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people' – such a UN-sanctioned monopoly in representation encouraging the movement's slogan that SWAPO is the people and the people are SWAPO. And this, in turn, spawned the ominous formulation that SWAPO is the government and the government is the state – implying that SWAPO itself *is* the state and therefore has the sole power of definition over who is entitled to be a true Namibian on the basis of his/her loyalty to the party!

The Political Program adopted by the SWAPO Central Committee meeting from 28 July to 1 August 1976 in Lusaka stated that among the movement's present and future tasks was 'to unite all Namibian people, particularly the working class, the peasantry and progressive intellectuals into a vanguard party capable of safeguarding national independence and of building a classless, non-exploitative society based on the ideas and principles of scientific socialism' (SWAPO of Namibia n.d., p. 39). It further elaborated that 'the economic reconstruction in a free, democratic and united Namibia will have, as its motive force, the establishment of a classless society. The social justice and progress for all is the governing idea behind every SWAPO policy decision' (*ibid.*, 45). This claim, and the fact that the trust betrayed by South Africa was transferred by popular vote in the UN-supervised elections of November 1989 to the new government formed by SWAPO at Independence on 21 March 1990, merits further examination. To what extent, in short, has the trust as defined in this programme of SWAPO been fulfilled through the political actors – still to a large extent the very same persons who had adopted this document – now in control of the sovereign Namibian state?

SWAPO: from promises to failures

Not that many informed observers really believed in the stereotypical, pseudo-socialist gyrations that the SWAPO representatives abroad undertook in the course of their diplomatic efforts to garner support from the Soviet regime and its allies. Thus, as Brian Urquhart, directly involved as UN Under-Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs in the negotiations for Namibia's independence since the 1960s, dryly testified (in his biography, published prior to Namibian Independence), regarding SWAPO's president (and later Namibia's head of state for three terms in office, 1990–2005): 'I doubted if Nujoma would know a Marxist-Leninist idea if he met one in the street, but like most liberation leaders, he would take help from wherever he could get it' (Urquhart 1991 [1987], p. 321).

Nonetheless, despite such realistic assessments, there were activists who wanted to believe in the political aims declared by leaders who claimed to be among those representing the 'wretched of the earth'. This in spite of Frantz Fanon's warning (in the chapter of his book *The wretched of the Earth* entitled 'The pitfalls of national consciousness') as to the strategy of selfish enrichment adopted by the new and opportunistic nationalist elites. As he

critically observed, they managed to occupy the commanding heights of newly accessed state power in order to serve primarily their own class interests (Fanon 2001 [1961]) – an assessment of the early 1960s, which since forced itself many other observers who agree ‘that the discourse of justice and liberation were often used in pursuit of exclusive nationalist and separatist agendas that went against the needs of ordinary people’ (Francis 2010, p. 2).

Unfortunately, SWAPO of Namibia provides a clear case in point of this sobering reality – not least in the willingness of the leadership in control of the exile wing to commit human rights violations in its own ranks if need be in order to protect vested interests of the established hierarchy, as well documented by several studies published early in the Independence period (cf. Leys and Saul 1995, Dobell 1998). Post-Independence statistics speak a similarly sobering language: the life expectancy of Namibians has been reduced from an estimated 60 years of age at Independence to 47 years in 2005 (not least through the HIV/Aids pandemic). Similarly, the situation as regards under-five mortality and maternal mortality has deteriorated, while poverty remains at a chronically high level.

Thus an official Household Income and Expenditure Review published towards the end of 2008 by the Central Bureau of Statistics revealed that almost one third of the country’s two million people lived on US\$1 or less per day. Moreover, the report also noted a sharp rise in households classified as ‘severely poor’, that is, living on less than US\$20 per month. The same survey found that one fifth of the population has a share of 78.7% of the country’s total income, while another fifth has to survive on 1.4% of the country’s annual income.³ Moreover, according to official figures released in 2010, the unemployment rate has crossed the 50% mark. In sum, this social reality contrasts sharply with the statements quoted above from SWAPO’s Political Program, suggesting that present-day Namibia is quite another country from the one the movement – as guided by promises of ‘solidarity, freedom, justice’ – suggested that it wanted to lead ‘towards the abolition of all forms of exploitation of man by man’ (SWAPO of Namibia n.d., p. 46).

Liberation or self-aggrandisement

In short, the nationalist claim merely ‘operated as a rhetorical device, casting SWAPO in the role of “revolutionary agent”, bent on reconfiguring the socio-economic and political landscape’ (du Pisani 2010, p. 24). Yet, in fact, the reconfiguration of the socio-economic landscape, based on control over the political commanding heights of the newly proclaimed Namibian state, operated only through the vehicles of ‘Affirmative Action’ (AA) and ‘Black Economic Empowerment’ (BEE), a redistributive strategy based on the cooptation of a new elite into the old socio-economic structures (cf. Melber 2007). As underscored by André du Pisani, ‘national reconciliation’ of such a class character could only be ‘an elite discourse bent on maintaining the legitimacy of the state and responding to the inherent contradictions that characterize SWAPO’s [own] anti-colonial discourse’ (du Pisani 2010, p. 31).

In contrast to past promises, the new terminology by which the ordinary people have responded to the sobering realities since 1990 highlights reference to a new species, the ‘fat cats’. For it is well understood that a new political and bureaucratic class now uses its access to the country’s natural wealth to appropriate public goods and state property for private self-enrichment. As suggested above, legitimacy for such appropriation strategy has been cloaked in a nationalist discourse which has operated through an aggressively crafted version of ‘patriotic history’ (Melber 2003, Saunders 2007) supportive of the

erstwhile liberation movement's claim to be the dominant (*de facto*, one and only, solely legitimate) political force as representative of 'the' Namibian people.

Permitting, as seen, no distinction between its role as party, as government and as state SWAPO has, since Independence, stressed the notions of peace and stability while also paying lip service to democracy (while, interestingly enough, the terms 'justice' and 'equality' have never featured prominently if at all in its official vocabulary). Instead, 'national reconciliation' has become the programmatic slogan for a cooptation strategy based on the structural legacy of settler colonial minority rule and its corresponding property relations – SWAPO's strategy becoming one of facilitating, as 'cultural entrepreneur' an elite pact designed to 'reinvent', by means of an Africanisation of the settler structure, 'an historical communality and continuity among the Namibian people(s) and [to project] a common destiny into the future' (du Pisani 2010, p. 16).

That this had worked only partially was first visible in the failed secessionist attempt by a desperate minority in the so-called Caprivi region, this in turn leading to the first and so far only declared state of emergency since Independence as invoked in August 1999. Those arrested and accused of high treason have since been on trial for a decade, even though the majority of them fall under Amnesty International's definition of political prisoners (cf. Melber 2009). Nonetheless, the consolidation of the dominant party state by means of parliamentary and presidential elections held every five years illustrates the continuing hegemonic status of SWAPO – though it also suggests that the basis for such a status outside of its stronghold in the Northern regions of the former Ovamboland (which offers up to SWAPO more than half of the Namibian population and an absolute majority of votes in any national elections) is fairly weak.

Indeed, the results of the last National Assembly elections (held at the end of November 2009) suggest, in growing ethnic-regional voting patterns, an increase of local identities guiding the preference for political parties; moreover, in parts of the few urban centres SWAPO's dominance has become more contested by opposition parties than ever before. Nonetheless, SWAPO has clearly retained its dominant status. Despite the formation of new opposition party, comprised primarily of those who had lost out in the internal power struggle over the post-Nujoma succession, SWAPO lost only one seat, keeping, with 74.3% of the votes, 54 out of 72 MPs with voting rights. The new Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP), led by former Foreign Minister Hidipo Hamutenya and founded at the end of 2007, managed, with eight seats, to become the official opposition (Cooper 2010, Melber 2010).

In any case, the RDP has seemed chiefly to promise more of the same, rather than any real alternative. For the most part, individuals promoting alternative political parties to SWAPO tend to campaign more to promote personal ambitions than political alternatives, seeking principally to secure at least some limited access to the honey pots provided by publicly financed political posts. This means that there is no sign of any meaningful socio-political alternative to SWAPO on the horizon. Indeed, if there is to be change, it is, for the moment, most likely to emerge as an alternative policy direction being articulated from within the former liberation movement. And yet, unfortunately, any such fancied alternative currently appears to be more the product of wishful thinking than the embodiment of some readily discernible tendency on the horizon.

Class formation, land grabs and international actors

What, in the meantime, of Namibia's social structure? Here Volker Winterfeldt (2010) has recently offered some helpful methodological arguments as to the need to apply a more

rigorous class analysis. He pays little attention, however, to the rent-seeking nature of the new black class-in-formation, a blend of political office bearers and of entrepreneurs. These are mainly fledgling business people, although more in the sense of ‘tenderpreneurs’ who lack substantial elements of the classic features of a bourgeoisie in the making.⁴ Their networks are interwoven with higher-ranking state and government officials. In the absence of any empirical research so far, it is difficult to quantify their numbers. But it remains a small segment of society, now sharing a similar social status with the hitherto almost exclusively white elite – often displaying their wealth far more unashamedly. Their strategies for securing and maximising profit are of a parasitic nature and not – like a ‘patriotic’ bourgeoisie – oriented towards long-term investment in productive sectors for the further accumulation of capital. Instead they use access to the state coffers for their self-enrichment strategy at the expense of the public purse (Melber 2007). According to a government official, himself a beneficiary of this form of ‘redistribution’, politics and economics are close bedfellows but clearly not about any meaningful kind of social reconstruction: BEE, is quite simply, about, ‘empowering individuals who have business ideas and need information and capital to take off’.⁵

In a similarly selective fashion, one that also smacks far more of class self-interest than of concepts of equality and redistribution, the government’s land policy has for two decades been idling, seeking mainly to satisfy the appetite of the new black elite for securing their own private farms. Thus, while the issue of land is at the core of much contestation in Namibia, the government has wasted time on, at best, half-hearted and half-baked legal fiddling with the matter. Harring and Odendaal (2002, p. 96), for example, have noted that during the first decade of Namibian Independence only 90 commercial farms were acquired. This would equate to 900 farms over a century – less than one fifth of all commercial farms in the country. One is tempted to cynically observe that the efficient implementation of the Odendaal Plan in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which introduced the Bantustan policy of the South African administration in Namibia by creating and/or consolidating reserves (including the resettling not only of tens of thousands of Africans, but also of white commercial farmers), was implemented much more efficiently than the Namibian government seems capable of (or willing) – despite the declared intention to reverse the effects of institutionalised ‘separate development’.⁶

In the end, then, land has become every bit as much a natural resource for individual acquisition by a new political class and its allies – be it for commercial farming or for the use of protected parks and reserves for tourism enterprises or other forms of utilisation – as the country’s collective natural wealth. In fact, it is yet another sad irony that it is not the (still predominantly white) commercial farmers who are most at risk in all this. Rather, it is the peasants in the communal areas (the former reserves, where people do not hold any private land titles and hence can claim no ownership over land but rely on the patronage of the traditional authorities [who, in fact and in most cases, cooperate closely with SWAPO or represent the party’s interests]) who are the most vulnerable. The most recent evidence is the currently discussed Land Bill, which according to Werner (2010, p. 21) ‘does not introduce any innovation, although this is absolutely necessary in view of the [recent] “land grabs” that have affected Namibia. Without improved accountability and transparency towards land right holders, people in communal areas will be vulnerable to the predations of international investors and their local allies.’

These latter ‘international investors’ currently represent a wide panorama of old and new players. They range from British, Australian, French, Canadian, German, US and Japanese multinationals, mainly operating in the mining and energy sector (while Spain has concentrated on the lucrative fish industry), to the government’s fiercely competitive

new friends: Russia offering to develop a nuclear reactor for local use of Namibian uranium; India and South Korea joining the race for access to uranium deposits (Namibia ranks fourth among the world's producers of uranium); Iran holding a smaller portion of shares in one of the established uranium mines; the Chinese entering the race not only for access to the country's mineral and energy resources, but also for large parts of the construction sector; and with the North Koreans having built the pompous Heroes' Acre and the megalomaniacal new State House complex. Out of business in all this are many pre-existing Namibian companies and their local workforces – while local hawkers and street vendors are confronted with the fierce competition of Chinese shops (the relatively small capital, Windhoek, with two shopping complexes called Chinatown made up exclusively of Chinese traders).

In fact, most new short-term ventures simply generate high profits at the expense of the local economy and people; the beneficiaries, such as they are, are to be found only in the higher echelons of the public service or political offices – as the saga of the Malaysian textile manufacturer, Ramatex, suggests. This company started to manufacture apparel and textiles for export to the North American market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in a newly established complex in Windhoek. In a classic kind of 'race to the bottom', several southern African governments had competed for favours in return for the sanctioning of the investment, with Namibia, in the end, winning out. But not for long. For several years Ramatex did indeed produce profits (to be transferred primarily to its Malaysian owners, of course) – before closing down abruptly one day and relocating its production to China where the Multi-Fiber-Agreement provided a more lucrative option. The Namibian taxpayers and the Windhoek municipality were the losers in this deal, while several thousand unqualified workers (almost exclusively young women) could merely return, after years of hard work under horrible conditions (no trade union was allowed in the factory and the Namibian labour laws were not applicable, since the location was declared a Free Trade Zone) to their shacks without any compensation or savings. In his detailed case study, Winterfeldt (2007, p. 91) concludes:

Does this hold out the prospect of social progress, as measured against the principles of social equity? The liberal discourse, whether in its classical or its present shape, boldly rests on the glorification of the principle of social retardation: first comes the successful individual, the entrepreneur; then (if all goes well, and always to a lesser extent) society, that productive majority actually instrumental in creating economic wealth. First come, first served. The liberal economic ideology is not the epitome of social responsibility. It is class-biased, and so is its concept of development ... The analysis of Ramatex's Namibian operations shows that neoliberal economic orientations, seen in the long term, tend to affect or even negate collective structures based on social solidarity. Conversely, any vision of social welfare must [instead] make the preservation and promotion of collective structures of social solidarity the focal point of accelerated sustainable development.

Basic income grant: enemy of the 'fat cat' syndrome

A recent Namibian debate around a basic income grant (BIG) bears the promise of something a bit different, however. Indeed, BIG has help launched a significant symbolic discourse as regards social policy priorities under the current government, thus complementing our assessment here. The BIG initiative, springing from a campaign spawned by a church and labour movement alliance, in collaboration with like-minded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), raised money from donors and undertook a pilot project in one selected (and quite destitute) village, that paid monthly cash allowances of N\$100 (approximately US\$14) over the past two years to each individual resident there

– in an effort to convince government that, in the absence of any other meaningful alternative, this might for the time being begin to contribute to the empowerment of local communities. Yet since its inception BIG has been met with an almost knee-jerk response that ridicules such proposals for financial transfers as naïve justifications for free rides for those who do not really want to earn a decent living by working with their own hands.

Thus, when President Hifikepunye Pohamba delivered his State of the Nation address in Parliament earlier this year, he was asked his views on BIG and on the attendant demands that the Namibian government should introduce a generalised BIG for all Namibians. His position: to dismiss BIG as a form of exploitation of those who are able and privileged to earn their living through work, which provides them and their families with a salaried income, while their taxes would then be used as payouts for others! Quite simply, for Pohamba and for other political leaders, greed seems to be much the more acceptable way. Note that it was these same political leaders who reportedly celebrated the twentieth anniversary of Namibia's Independence by toasting with French champagne at N\$1000 a bottle. Moreover, cabinet members recently received new top-class limousines – perhaps because the old ones had become too small for their well-fed bodies!⁷

As if to add insult to injury, the Namibian trade-union umbrella body, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), announced in July out of the blue, that with immediate effect it had abandoned the BIG coalition. NUNW is affiliated to SWAPO and the move was widely seen as a response to the President's dismissal of the initiative.⁸ Seemingly representatives of the organised Namibian labour movement had come a long way from the days when the slogan 'an injury to one is an injury to all' had a different meaning – forgetting, apparently, that solidarity is a complementary notion to social justice and part of an ongoing struggle to achieve it. Interestingly, the BIG debate has since not faded away. The delegates to the trade-union congress at the end of August revoked the decision by its leadership and adopted a resolution that the NUNW is re-joining the BIG coalition. Also inside of SWAPO – as documented in some postings on the party's web site – the debate over BIG remains a contested issue.

Conclusion

Of course, BIG may not be, in and of itself, the best answer in order to solve the challenges of structurally rooted inequality and destitution in Namibia. It seeks to ease symptoms instead of eliminating the root cause. But the initiative is concerned with creating a society in which all members obtain the minimum standard of living they deserve. It has been an effort to create an environment that could begin to enable the excluded to master their living conditions in a more empowering way and with some degree of dignity. In Namibia, any such effort is simply dismissed by those who seem to care more about securing and further advancing their own privileges than showing empathy with the plight of ordinary people. But the hard-fought-for liberation from minority rule (and against privileges for a few at the expense of the majority) must now mean more than merely the renewed promotion of Social Darwinism. As a result of this latter mindset the fat cat (species *Namibiana*) prospers and advances – while, in sharp contrast, the people of Namibia, who are battling to survive their anything-but-self-inflicted misery, are once again quite simply losing out. The BIG initiative does at least suggest that some resistance remains. Indeed, for so long as '*a luta continua*' continues to be translated, in practical terms, as 'the looting continues', the struggle in Namibia will be far from over.⁹

Note on contributor

Henning Melber is Executive Director of The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in Uppsala, Sweden, and Associate Researcher at the University of Pretoria. He joined SWAPO of Namibia as a son of German immigrants in 1974, and was Director of The Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU) in Windhoek (1992–2000) and Research Director at The Nordic Africa Institute (2000–2006). He is co-editor of the *Africa Yearbook* and managing co-editor of *Africa Spectrum*.

Notes

1. Sam Nujoma, 'Where we came from' (capital letters in the original), posted at the SWAPO Party web site: http://www.swapoparty.org/where_we_came_from.html (accessed 16 July 2010). 'Founding Father of the Republic of Namibia' is the official title conferred upon Sam Nujoma by the members of Parliament when he retired after three terms in office as Head of State (1990–2005). For the third term in office a first change of Namibia's constitution was required.
2. This represented the relevant background to the award to Martti Ahtisaari – the UN Commissioner for Namibia at the time and in charge of the UN Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) – of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008.
3. Namibia ranks among those countries with the biggest income gaps in the world and the highest discrepancies in the distribution of wealth, in terms of the Gini coefficient. Nominally, the average income per capita even among the poorer segments of society has grown slightly. But when measured against the cost of living and the lack of basic social services, as well as other criteria contributing to the Human Development Index, the overall trend is negative. As one UNDP-affiliated economist concluded, 'over time income poverty appears to be decreasing while human poverty is increasing' (Levine 2007, p. 29).
4. This term has been used by Andrew Feinstein (2010) with reference to similar strategies in South Africa: 'The practice of high-ranking members of the party, and those close to them, benefiting from decisions about tenders of the government has become so widespread that the title "tenderpreneur" has been coined to describe the beneficiaries.'
5. Quoted in Brigitte Weidlich, 'Namibia: politics and economics are bedfellows – Shangala', *The Namibian* (Windhoek), 27 May 2010.
6. It therefore comes as no surprise that Kaapama (2010, p. 202) concludes: 'The implementation of the Land Resettlement Programme seems to be riddled by numerous significant challenges which lead to procrastination of implementation. The same applies to the significant downgrading of the initiatives for integrated rural development and poverty reduction . . . [I]t is alleged that the "economics of affection" have found expression in the ties of political patronage, which are being exploited by some bearers of political office and bureaucrats alike as elaborate avenues for allocating preferential treatment to party stalwarts, as well as friends and relatives of the ruling elite.'
7. This is by no means some kind of weird satire but was indeed the reason given by the Permanent Secretary justifying the expense of a brand new Mercedes Benz fleet at a total cost of N\$300 million for members of the new cabinet.
8. The NUNW President, in a Press Conference, cited a lack of creative ideas to address poverty as the reason for this move and stated: 'We are sincere in our belief that there's serious need for poverty alleviation in this country. We believe that that the [BIG] coalition's idea is good but not the best. We're striving for the best.' He further emphasised the need to reproduce wealth, which, in his view, would be almost impossible if money were handed out to individuals for free: 'We'd rather suggest that instead of giving out \$100 to everyone each month, Government should be pushed to make it easier for equity participation by Namibians in local companies.' Quoted in Toivo Ndjebela, 'NUNW dumps BIG Coalition', *New Era* (Windhoek), 8 July 2010.
9. Recall the social awareness and responsibility expressed by Thomas Paine, in his tract 'Agrarian Justice' of 1797, where he argues for the creation of a national fund to provide every citizen above the age of 21 with an annual financial amount independent of their other income and property. 'Poverty', as he diagnosed, 'is a thing created by that which is called civilized life'. As a result, so-called civilization, 'make[s] one part of the society more affluent, and the other more wretched, than would have been the lot in a natural state'. He therefore maintained: 'It is not charity but a right, not bounty but justice, that I am pleading for.' In Namibia, more than two centuries later, the argument still holds.

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