

The Autocratic Temptation Politics in Namibia Now

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Slide from democracy

Seven years ago, Namibia made history as the last colony in Africa to attain its independence. At the time, SWAPO's commitment to multi-party democracy, human rights and national reconciliation were heralded as the beginnings of a democratic renaissance in Africa. This perception was reinforced by the new government's much publicised commitment to al-

leviate poverty and improve the welfare of all Namibians. To that extent, the new state was portrayed by many in the international community as a model for other countries in Africa.

It is now evident, however, that despite its auspicious beginnings, the country is increasingly displaying patterns that have characterised autocratic, neo-colonial states elsewhere on the continent. These include the arrogation of power by a newly emergent political elite, the drift towards a *de facto* one party state, the slow but progressive erosion of civil liberties, growing pub-

lic sector corruption and the continuing poverty of the masses. It is further evident that while Namibia has in place the formalistic dimensions of a multi-party democracy (a bill of rights, a legislative assembly, an official opposition), substantive parliamentary democracy has failed to take root.

Authoritarianism

In the 1995 elections, SWAPO returned to power with an increased majority and supported by three quarters of the electorate. This victory has accelerated the drift towards a *de facto* one-party state



Celebrating the November 1989 election victory

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and has accentuated the arrogance of power that has bedeviled other states on the continent. There is increasing evidence, moreover, that with the consolidation of power there has been a resurgence of a strain of authoritarianism that had been latent in SWAPO's leadership since the days of the independence struggle. This authoritarianism may be traced back to the late 1970s and 1980s and the predominance of the military/security establishment in eliminating real and imagined spies within the party. The era was characterised by a highly centralised structure of authority, intolerance of criticism and the repression of any perceived dissent.

With the events of this period suppressed in the official history of the struggle, SWAPO at independence declined to investigate any of the accusations of human rights abuses made against its members by former detainees, on the grounds that this would be against the spirit of national reconciliation. It was argued that, to be fair, the process would have to apply equally to officials from the former colonial and South African forces, and that the exercise would not only be difficult to conduct (since the SADF had withdrawn from Namibia), but that it would stir up old enmities and impede the development of a new national identity. Many of those reputed to have been implicated in the abuse of prisoners were appointed to positions of influence in the new government and, most pointedly, within the military.

The recent publication of Pastor Groth's *The Wall of Silence* (an account of events and conditions in the detention camps of Angola and Zambia in the 1970s and 1980s) met with fierce denial from the SWAPO leadership, including an extraordinary denunciation of the book and its author by President Sam Nujoma himself. Seemingly in response, in late 1996 SWAPO released the publication *Their Blood Waters Our Freedom*, which purportedly accounted

for all persons missing or killed in exile whilst under the charge of SWAPO. Calls by opposition parties for an independent commission of enquiry into missing persons, however, continue to be rejected.

Although the tendency towards greater authoritarianism appears, for the present, to be held in check by the more liberal and social democratic tendencies within SWAPO, there have been repeated attempts to exercise more rigid control over the polity. An example was a move in 1995 to promote a bill to prohibit the publication of "biased reports" on the deliberations of parliament. Although the more contentious dimensions of the bill were subsequently removed, the fact that it was put before parliament at all indicates how sensitive certain sectors of the SWAPO leadership are to criticism.

While it is significant that both the press and judiciary remain independent, both have been strongly attacked by SWAPO ideologues in recent years. The parastatal Namibian Broadcasting Company (NBC), which in the years immediately after independence had aspired to journalistic autonomy, has increasingly become the mouth-piece of the government, and allows little if any substantive criticism of official policy in its reporting. This first became evident in 1995 when the then Director General of the NBC, Nahum Gorelick, was replaced by Danniell Tjongarero, Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting, and a long time SWAPO stalwart. Gorelick had aspired to liberal notions of the autonomy of the media, but since his departure, the tone of coverage by the NBC has changed significantly - now programmes perceived to be critical of or embarrassing to the government have, on occasion, been summarily withdrawn at the behest of the SWAPO leadership. At the same time, Namibia's national newspaper, *The Namibian*, which was the champion of SWAPO's liberation struggle and which was vic-

timised by the colonial regime, is increasingly vilified by SWAPO leaders following its critical stance on corruption within the state.

Attacks against the judiciary have generally been on the grounds of the alleged racism of white judges, magistrates and lawyers and their stated leniency in dealing with criminals. Whatever the legitimacy of these claims, they have undermined public respect for the judiciary and confidence in it.

For example, the Legal Practitioners Bill, which was intended to address racial imbalances in the profession by exempting would-be lawyers from mandatory practical exams, has been criticised for its perceived threat to the independence of the Namibian judiciary. This was because the Bill suggested that lawyers would qualify at the discretion of the government. In particular, it was felt, this could lead to a situation where the government, by determining who could enter legal practice, could indirectly dominate and control the Law Society and thereby influence the composition of the Judicial Service Commission which is influential in the appointment of judges. Much of the opposition to the Bill was expressed by the white-dominated Law Society of Namibia and the Society of Advocates of Namibia (hence reflecting their own corporatist interests). Meanwhile, it is significant that the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of the Judiciary, in a visit to Windhoek, asserted that the Bill "violated the universally accepted norms for the protection of an independent legal profession."

Emerging Corruption

Along with the concentration of power in the hands of the political elite has been growing evidence of corruption among senior civil servants and members of the SWAPO leadership. While some of these malpractices may be ascribed to poor financial management rather than dishonesty, others clearly may

not. The most publicised of these cases were allegations of the illegal drilling of drought relief boreholes on the farms of leading politicians, the abuse of board regulations for making tenders and the receipt of kickbacks. The press has frequently speculated on the sudden enrichment of the president's brother-in-law, Aron Mushimba, whose increasing well being has raised charges of preferential access to state tenders. While a measure of corruption might be expected in any democracy, it is inconsistent with the ideals of public accountability to use inconclusive commissions of enquiry as a mechanism to cover up and eventual quash what appear to have been *prima facie* cases.

The opulent tastes of the ruling elite were first revealed in the early 1990s, when in the middle of a critical drought and with the threat of widespread food shortages, the president took delivery of an executive jet, costing N\$70 million. At the time, the deal aroused considerable criticism both domestically and internationally, and precipitated cutbacks in emergency food aid by a number of key donors. At the time, the purchase of the jet was justified on the grounds that it would be open to use by all senior members of government, and that it would have a lifespan of twenty years. Despite this, a smaller jet was subsequently purchased for use by the prime minister, and more recently, it has been announced that the president's jet is to be replaced by a new and more expensive model.

A Weak Civil Society

The growth of a self-serving elite and the drift towards authoritarianism within the public sphere have been made easier by the weakness of civil society within Namibia. This state of affairs may be ascribed to policies of the colonial government and to SWAPO's political strategies during the independence struggle, both of which inhibited the development of NGOs, community-based organi-

sations and other organisations outside of formal politics.

The fact that much of the population of Namibia live in dispersed rural settlements alone has limited the development of a broad national identity. The South African occupation forces, furthermore, actively discouraged the establishment of independent community-based NGOs in the belief that they could be mobilised towards resistance by forces sympathetic to SWAPO. At the same time, although SWAPO was never officially outlawed during the three decades of the armed struggle, the party leadership in exile strongly discouraged the development of internally-based leadership structures – in strong contrast to developments in South Africa at the time, where mass based resistance was a characteristic of the anti-apartheid struggle.

The trade union movement, which in other contexts has been an important player in civil society, is generally weak. This is partly because the organised labour movement is small (scarcely fifty percent of those in formal employment are union members) and partly because of the role of the trade union movement in the national liberation movement and its relationship to SWAPO. Up until independence, the trade union movement was notable more for mobilising politically than for winning concessions for its members. Since independence the fact that some of its most prominent leaders are still closely linked to SWAPO has constrained the emergence of a strongly independent union movement. Under these circumstances, the trade union movement has yet to find its own voice in civil society.

In the post-independence era, it is argued, the presence of securocrats in the upper echelons of government (and associated with repression while in exile), has served to restrict free speech within SWAPO, and has limited critical debate on issues of national importance. It

is no coincidence that the most frank discussions and the most explicit criticisms of government policy are to be heard through the anonymous medium of phone-in radio shows. With the passage of time, these "chat shows," broadcast in English and in the vernacular and dubbed the "peoples' parliament," have become the forums for increasingly vociferous attacks on the government. In November 1995, open criticism and veiled threats against the SWAPO leadership led to the suspension of the Oshiwambo call-in programme, Ewilyamangaguluka, because of the abusive tone of callers. That such a step was deemed necessary within SWAPO's political heartland illustrates both the levels of frustration that exist within certain segments of the community, and the party's growing intolerance of popular criticism.

The lack of open debate and free expression within the party has created a climate for intrigue and subterfuge which appears to be reinforcing the factionalism that plagued SWAPO in exile in the 1980s. This is manifesting itself in a variety of different forms. It is evident, for example, in the resurgence of ethnicity within the party. During its first term of office, and despite the fact that the bulk of its support came from the Oshiwambo speaking people, SWAPO had prided itself on the fact that it drew its support from all ethnic groups within the country. Since then, however, a popular perception among many of the smaller ethnic groups is that SWAPO is first and foremost the party of the Owambo people, and that *their* interests are the primary concern of the government.

There has also been a reassertion of tribal identity within several of the seven sub-ethnic groups that make up the Oshiwambo speaking population. Thus the Kwanyama group, who historically were the most defiant of the Owambo people



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The crossing of worlds on 9 November 1989 - election doings between a Mahimba tribeswoman and a DTA party worker

the SWAPO leadership, it's more likely that voting will parallel the case in Zimbabwe - a decline in poll percentages rather than a swing to opposition parties.

Given that many of the tendencies discussed above are still at an early stage, an array of internal and external factors might yet mitigate them. Thus while the influential international donor community in Windhoek recognised that a new elite would inevitably emerge, the corruption has not been well received. The sanction of reduced aid, at least in the short run, could serve to hold overt corruption in check.

Similarly, the excessive authoritarianism and the associated human rights abuses that occurred in the SWAPO camps in exile would not as easily be concealed in independent Namibia from either the public at large or the international community, including the leading countries within SADC. The autonomy of the press, whilst under assault, remains an important bulwark against such developments. Any steps to formally curb the independence of the news media, however, must be interpreted as an ominous move towards authoritarian rule.

It is also possible that a new configuration of political forces within Namibia, including disaffected members of SWAPO, could emerge to challenge the hegemony of the ruling party, even if they do not seriously threaten its hold on power in the short run. A newly established political party, *SWAPO for Justice*, consisting of disenchanted former PLAN combatants, illustrates this trend, although it must be noted that the move has drawn little popular support.

Even though various factors might constrain current trends, recent developments in Namibia strongly indicate that power is increasingly being centralised in the hands of the SWAPO elite, and that growing authoritarianism and political intolerance are part of this process.

and who had provided the bulk of SWAPO's combatants in the armed struggle, have resurrected a monarchy which had been dormant since the death of King Mandume at the hands of South African forces in 1917. It is still too early to interpret the full significance of this development, but it does suggest a narrowing rather than a broadening of national identity.

The potential for factional struggles is likely to be accentuated should Nujoma step down (as constitutionally obligated) at the end of his current term of office (in the year 1999), and succession struggles ensue. Current trends, however, indicate that Nujoma will make full use of SWAPO's two-thirds majority in parliament to change the constitution, and ensure himself a third (or more) term of office. While such a move might be politically expedient,

forestalling splits within the party, it also paves the way for a long and increasingly autocratic rule by the president.

Conclusion

While SWAPO's gains in the 1995 elections would appear rather surprising in view of the party's inability to significantly improve the living standards of the majority of Namibians and with the growing wealth and arrogance of its leaders, they are not inconsistent with trends elsewhere in Africa. For many of SWAPO's supporters, their loyalty transcends party political issues. Being a member of SWAPO during the long years of struggle often meant as much about personal and family identity and commitment to one's community as it did about loyalty to political leaders. Thus, as people become disenchanted with