

Elections and After: Gerald Caplan on Namibia

Gerald Caplan is former Federal Secretary of the New Democratic Party and is now a media commentator on Canadian public affairs. In November he observed the Namibian elections as a part of a delegation sponsored by the Canadian Council for International Co-operation.

Here are two statistically-rooted paradoxes. An incredible 97% of the registered electorate voted in the Namibian elections in November, yet some progressive observers insist on underlining the obstacles that existed to deter people from casting their ballots. And an impressive 57% of them voted for SWAPO in a ten-party race, yet many view these results as being close to a moral defeat for SWAPO. In Canada, a 75% turnout is par for a federal election, 66% for a provincial vote, and between 25% and 33% for local elections. Similarly, in Canada's three-party system, no party has ever come remotely close to winning 57% of the votes; Mulroney won 50% in his sweeping 1984 victory, and Pierre Trudeau never approached that percentage. How, then, do we explain the curious reactions in the Namibian context?

As to the first, it was the judgment of our group that in fact Namibians turned out to vote in such huge numbers in spite of, and in the face of, the constraints inherent in the electoral system. When Angola and Cuba made their deal with South Africa to determine the future



In Opuwo, a DTA party worker shows a voter where to make her mark on the ballot

of Namibia, they did Namibians few favours. In essence, the agreement left South Africa ultimately in control of the election process while the UN would merely supervise it.

The result, as should now be well understood, was a hundred different means to test Namibians' determination to vote. The number of polling stations were all too few and sometimes located far from African townships, often in such hostile envi-

ronments as magistrates' courts. A cumbersome voting procedure and insufficient election staffing left literally tens of thousands of people baking in the sun for hours upon end without food, drink or toilets, often losing a day or more of work. Many of the women carried children on their backs. Yet people came, they stayed, and they voted - almost every eligible soul in the nation. It was a people's triumph, almost a cliché come true, a people de-

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terminated to exercise their new rights against whatever odds and whatever impediments.

But they didn't all vote for SWAPO; 43% of them voted against SWAPO. SWAPO itself confidently expected at least three-quarters of the vote; some partisans, who denied it later, expected even more. After all, they reckoned, there'd have been no election at all without SWAPO, without the bloody 25 year war that SWAPO had led and fought. It's true it was Angola's defeat of the South African forces that finally brought Pretoria to the negotiating table. But who could doubt that SWAPO's struggle had taken its toll on South African morale and resources. SWAPO were the conquering heroes; they were all there was, surely, for a self-respecting Namibian nationalist to support. And who would refuse to give them at least the two-thirds support they needed to control the new Constituent Assembly?

Who but the people? SWAPO was out of touch. They minimized both the effects of decades of apartheid and the effects of some of their own blunders. In the end, they were scuttled from both sides.

Apartheid undermined them in two ways. First, South Africa had, over the decades, deliberately and methodically moved to heighten and exacerbate ethnic tensions among Namibians. Divide and rule had been a routine European strategy for colonial domination; apartheid simply raised the device to a fine art form, both within South Africa and in its little colony of Namibia. SWAPO remained a substantially Ovambo movement, with most other groups feeling more or less outsiders. Apartheid played on these tensions like a bow on a violin, and in the end only a virtually monolithic SWAPO vote from the populous Ovambo area gave SWAPO its decisive electoral margin.

Apartheid also produced fear, a fear that the presence of UN observers and the promise of even-

tual freedom was by no means sufficient to reassure many intimidated Namibians. All their lives they'd been brutalized by whites; why should voting day be any different? And, in fact, in those parts of Namibia, especially in the east and south, where Afrikaanderdom still held Africans in its thrall, the results demonstrated little electoral support for SWAPO. These whites were people who believed as a matter of unshakeable faith that SWAPO rule equalled violent, communistic domination, and they were not about to allow "their" farm workers or house servants to subvert their interests. True enough: the ballot booths were solid wood and the ballot boxes were good solid Canadian metal, so that literally no one could see how you voted. But watching Africans in those areas vote, you understood their instinctive confidence that their masters would immediately know exactly what mark they placed on that ballot paper. Few of them put it beside SWAPO.

But on top of apartheid's blows came SWAPO's own serious deficiencies. Ovambo domination was real. Male domination was real. Flexibility was not the keynote. Arrogance was not uncommon. Two stories, from a sympathetic and knowledgeable observer, more than suffice to make the point. During the liberation struggle, when the Reheboth district offered to ally its local organization to SWAPO, SWAPO demanded the locals completely integrate themselves within the larger movement; they refused, and Reheboth voted overwhelmingly against SWAPO. In another non-Ovambo district, the local chief sent his own nephew as his emissary to SWAPO outside the country. The young man was soon accused of being a spy, tortured and killed; the chief and the entire district voted against SWAPO.

The issue of the SWAPO detainees was also real. While the magnitude of these acts is unclear, their seriousness is indis-

putable. Even during the week of voting and counting, the most senior SWAPO leaders continued to insist to us either that all the horror stories were merely South African propaganda or, quite contradictorily, that only South African spies were ever detained and punished. Unquestionably there was some validity to both these assertions but we had great difficulty accepting SWAPO's sidestepping of responsibility for what went on - so did large numbers of non-Ovambo Namibians because, as it happens, most of those detained, disappeared and tortured were non-Ovambo. Instead of coming clean, instead of actively encouraging the UN or the Red Cross to pursue the detainee issue to its bitter end, thereby offering profound reassurance to the rest of the country, SWAPO leaders stonewalled, believing they would sweep the elections anyway. Again, they were out of touch, signally a failure to appreciate the distrust their own actions had engendered.

Yet in victory SWAPO indicated a genuine interest in reconciliation - a consequence perhaps of their disappointing showing. Now the question is how ready is SWAPO to assume the reins of power given the enormous difficulties ahead. Formal independence or not, no new nation can be less economically independent than Namibia. A Bantustan by any other name remains a Bantustan. South African leverage is total; the potential for radical development strategies seems commensurately limited. There is much reason for modest expectations.

On the other hand, it is a step. Any step forward, however halting, surely must be welcomed. Another chip in the South African empire has been nicked away. And that is the real significance of Namibia's move towards independence. For not until South Africa itself has been liberated can Namibia, or any other part of Southern Africa, look forward with real optimism to a better future.