

# The SWAPO Sweep

BY LAUREN DOBELL

*Lauren Dobell is a doctoral candidate in politics at St. Antony's College. She recently returned from Namibia, where she has been studying post-independence development strategies.*

On March 21 Namibians celebrated the fifth anniversary of the country's independence. Here we look briefly at how Namibia has fared over the last five years, the first post-independence general elections that recently returned Swapo to office with a resounding majority, and the challenges that should occupy the government's attention for the remainder of the millennium.

## The first five years

On the eve of the fifth anniversary celebrations, the Minister of Health and Deputy Minister of Justice were reminiscing over a cup of tea in the parliamentary restaurant. "I remember that first day we sat as a Constituent Assembly. You could have cut the tension - especially between the DTA and Swapo - with a knife," recalled the latter. "And the amazing thing was that it was [then DTA leader] Dirk Mudge who found a way out. He said 'Look here, we are sitting with seven different draft constitutions on the table. If we argue from all of them we're never going to get anywhere. What I propose is that as Swapo is the majority party, we take its draft constitution as a starting point, and use the others as the basis for proposing amendments.'"

"And then," the Minister interjects, "Hage [Geingob], who was chairing, suggested that we deal with all the issues where there was substantial agreement first, and leave the controversial ones to the end."

"And we discovered that on 90% of the issues we were substantively in agreement," the other replies.



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## SWAPO young pioneer

"And by the time we got to the controversial issues these were less controversial and difficult because all this time we had been learning about each other, learning to work together ..."

Indeed, five years later, the prevailing collegiality of the Namibian National Assembly is striking, as is the success of the government's policy of national reconciliation, at least among Namibia's political and

economic elites. Beyond the confines of this elite, however, progress since independence on national reconciliation, national reconstruction and nation-building has been mixed. On the positive side, Namibia has enjoyed five years of peace and political stability, loyal support from donors, and modest economic growth (variously calculated at between 2% and 3.5% per year), although this is much tempered by a booming population. Walvis Bay has been returned, and two major highways – the Trans Caprivi and Trans Kalahari – are well underway, which should help Namibia to diversify its trade patterns. And in December 1994, the South African government cancelled Namibia's colonial debt, bolstering the country's enviable position *vis-à-vis* the IMF, whose loans Namibia can afford to refuse.

On the other hand, although government and non-government efforts have made advances in the areas of health care, housing and education, the dramatic imbalances of wealth have not been effectively addressed. Foreign investors have been less forthcoming than anticipated. Unemployment is commonly estimated at 40%, while the continuing absence of a land reform policy, exacerbated by the 1992 drought and belated rains in 1995, has contributed to the steady flow of job-seekers from rural to urban areas, with the concomitant social stresses. Anxiety about the overall increase in crime is widespread. Finally, the government's sluggish response to corruption within its own ranks is cause for concern, as is evidence of extravagant spending by the executive, most notably in the purchase of a presidential (Falcon) jet during the 1992 drought, and a Lear jet (delivered immediately after the 1994 elections).

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the peace dividend, however, and despite the slow pace of reform in other areas, the majority of Namibians are willing to give Swapo another five years, at

least, in which to pursue what its leaders are calling the "second phase of the liberation struggle."

#### The 1994 elections

In the final days of Swapo's election campaign, incumbent President Sam Nujoma addressed party rallies with the call "72 for Swapo" – a reference to the total number of seats in the Namibian National Assembly. And on December 7 and 8 1994, in Namibia's first national and presidential elections since independence, Namibian voters gave Nujoma what he asked for, if not precisely what he meant. Its 72.72% of the votes cast secured for Swapo 53 of 72 seats in parliament. Whether or not the burden of governing in the absence of an effective opposition comes to weigh heavily upon the new Swapo government, the election results – and certain aspects of the process – did, to the minds of some observers, carry some potentially worrying implications for the entrenchment of a participatory democratic political culture in Namibia.

Eight parties contested the 1994 general elections, though only Swapo and the official opposition, the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), fielded presidential candidates – incumbent Sam Nujoma and opposition leader Mishake Muyongo respectively – with Nujoma polling 76.33% of the total. Namibia's oldest, but now marginalized political party, SWANU, chose to run its own campaign, after a last-minute withdrawal from the newly-formed Democratic Coalition of Namibia (DCN), a centre-right merger with a high profile leadership. The United Democratic Front (UDF), whose four seats in the 1989 elections had made it the second largest of the opposition parties in parliament, chose not to join the alliance, for reasons its leaders now suggest were borne out in the DCN's acrimonious internal struggles during its brief and chaotic election campaign.

The three remaining parties contesting the elections were the Mon-

itor Action Group led by erstwhile African Christian National (ACN) MP Kosie Pretorius (the acronym in Afrikaans means "power"), the Rehoboth-based Federal Convention of Namibia (FCN), whose last-minute alliance with a newly-sprung women's party resulted in an uncomfortable fit between its stated policy and its election rhetoric, and the Worker's Revolutionary Party (WRP), whose outspoken representatives injected the only sparks into otherwise lacklustre campaigns by all parties.

As in 1989, party histories were once again more salient than party policies. Manifestos were both difficult to come by and difficult to distinguish from one another. With production funds at its disposal (state funding was denied to the opposition parties), and the accomplishments of five years in office to enumerate, Swapo's manifesto was glossy in appearance and comprehensive in its promises, displaying a consummate command of the language of governance in the 1990s.

The opposition parties' manifestos were pretty uninspired, lending poignant credence to the rueful observation by a local observer that the forthcoming general and presidential contests were, in effect, "elections without a choice." With neither the resources nor a policy record, however mixed, to allude to, most of the opposition parties opted for a law and order platform. The DCN distinguished itself only by a special plea for the importance of strong and independent interest groups; the DTA by a thinly-disguised nod to its ethnic constituencies in its recognition of "the interests of peoples," and a particularly hard line on the issue of crime. The UDF joined its competitors in calling for drastic steps to fight crime, in decrying government intervention in market forces and in lamenting the state of the education system. SWANU's claim to distinction rested in the costliness of



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Prime Minister Hage Geingob & Mines & Energy Minister Andimba Toivo ya Toivo

its proposed programme, which envisaged, inter alia, free and universal education, health care and social security, and proper housing for all. MAG's manifesto explicitly declared the party's exceptional nature as "the only party endeavouring to have the word 'secular' removed from the constitution."

Slightly more original was the FCN's manifesto which catered to the strong separatist leanings of its Rehoboth-based constituency. Once again, the WRP manifesto was the only one that evinced any real spark. The manifesto addressed several sensitive subjects skirted by the other opposition parties, heaping scorn on the "law and order hysteria" which formed the basis of their election campaigns, and dismissing as "a farce" their performance in Parliament. The WRP polled less than 1% of the overall vote in this election, but can be credited with attempting to

campaign on issues in an election dominated by personalities.

#### Election days

Not altogether coincidentally, the Swapo government was the beneficiary of two political windfalls during the campaign period - the signing of a profit-sharing arrangement with Consolidated Diamond Mining (CDM) and the waiving of Namibia's N\$1 billion colonial debt by the South African government - the latter announced by "a jubilant Prime Minister Geingob" at a rally in Grootfontein the day before the elections.

Organized by a Directorate of Elections operating out of the Office of the Prime Minister, this was the first general election run by Namibians themselves and, as with the local and regional elections of 1992, demonstrated that a foreign presence was not required to ensure a peaceful vote.

A number of procedural problems were highlighted, however. Before the counting was complete, officials confirmed that in four northern constituencies the ballots cast had exceeded the number of voters registered. Although the officials concluded that the irregularities could be explained on the grounds of compounded inefficiencies and administrative error, the DTA, smarting especially at the loss of the traditional stronghold of Katima Mulilo, announced its intention to pursue allegations of fraud through a court case.

The court case notwithstanding, members of both parties joined independent observers in acknowledging that if fraud had taken place it was not sufficient to have significantly affected the overall results, which gave Swapo 53 seats (an increase of 12), the DTA 15 seats (a loss of 6), and the UDF 2 seats (a loss of 2).

The rest of the parties polled less than 1% of the votes apiece, although the quota system gave MAG and the DCN each one seat, returning parliamentary veterans Kosie Pretorius and Moses Katjuongua. The WRP, to the disappointment of its fans, failed to gain a seat, a condition party spokespersons cheerfully vowed to rectify next time.

## Post mortem

Apart from the DTA allegations of malpractice, critical post mortems of the election have concentrated on five themes, all falling under the general rubric of "threats to democracy." The drop of approximately 200,000 votes overall from the numbers polled in the 1989 election caused some concern among observers, though less among the parties themselves. A 76% turnout, the victors were quick to point out, is still significantly higher than most

established democracies can boast of. Another concern is the continuing "ethnicity" of voting patterns in Namibia. Once again Swapo swept the North, polling upwards of 94% of the votes cast in all but four of the thirty-eight northern constituencies where Oshivambo-speaking Namibians are concentrated, while opposition parties in many cases failed to win a single vote. The DTA polled the majority of votes in the south and east of the country, and most of the Caprivi, splitting the Windhoek area constituencies with Swapo. The UDF once again drew its support from the Damara-speakers.

While ethnicity undoubtedly played a role in the elections, it is a factor that must be treated with some care, conflating, as it does, different experiences of colonial occupation, apartheid and war with eth-

nic identification. It should also be noted that a third of Swapo's votes came from non-Oshivambo speakers, and that its party list was itself drawn, as in 1989, from across the Namibian spectrum. As with signs of apathy, it will take another election to judge whether ethnic affiliation will continue to play a substantial role in Namibian politics.

The dramatic diminution of the parliamentary opposition - from 31 to 19 seats - is a third source of anxiety, most of all, naturally, to those dropped from the ranks. Certainly, among the other parties, there are those who recognize that opposition parties will not recoup their losses until they can divest themselves of their perceived associations with a colonial past. It's a transformation that may only be fully achieved with the emergence of a new generation of



*President Sam Nujuma & Justice Minister N. Tjiriange*

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political leaders. Nonetheless, the damage to the opposition's electoral performance wreaked by personality clashes and power struggles among opposition leaders is also widely acknowledged, and there are moves afoot to overcome some of the existing barriers to a more unified and effective opposition.

While seasoned parliament-watchers maintain that the quality of the opposition has not been much affected, the drop in numbers is closely related to a fourth concern – and the one uppermost in the minds of many political observers: that Swapo's two-thirds majority enables it to unilaterally amend the non-entrenched provisions in the Namibian Constitution. Rumours are rife that Swapo may seek to extend the term of the president, currently fixed at two five-year terms, while a successor is groomed. The president himself is coy, promising only that there will be a national referendum before the Constitution is amended in any way, but it is known that there is widespread opposition within Swapo's inner circles to such an amendment. Other amendments are considered unlikely, even those cynical about Swapo noting that the Constitution is too valuable in its present form to be much tampered with.

The least discussed but perhaps most worrying aspect of the election was the further weakening of already struggling structures within Namibian civil society, with the incorporation of civil leaders – three senior trade unionists, and prominent youth, community and women's representatives – into parliament. That the union leaders (Bernard Esau, John Shaetonhodi, and Walter Kemba, who now join former NUNW president Ben Ulenga in parliament) were apparently among the 32 Swapo candidates personally put forward for election by President Nujoma, in response to a strong lobby from their respective unions, is submitted as evidence that it is not a deliberate

Swapo strategy to coopt potential sources of dissidence. Critics, however, have argued that the fact that such incorporation is necessary in the minds of union leaders is further evidence that organized labour's ties to the government are too close.

### **A term of consolidation?**

*Namibians had 'finally' given Swapo the mandate to rule the way it wanted, President Nujoma told cheering supporters at Swakopmund on Saturday ... "You have given us the mandate and we won't let you down ... the capacity is there to deliver the goods at the end." Namibian 12/12/94*

The new parliament was sworn in on March 20. Taking the oath of office himself the following day, President Sam Nujoma announced the launch of the "second phase of the liberation struggle," in which the enemies were poverty, disease, hunger, ignorance, unemployment and crime.

A far-reaching cabinet shuffle provided the first post-manifesto indications of how the government intended to address these challenges. At a glance the shuffle appears to add to the already considerable executive powers of the President, who has appointed himself Minister of Home Affairs, promising to take a hard line on crime, with the assistance of a newly-created Ministry of Prisons and Correctional Services. The fate of the National Planning Commission, in theory responsible for coordinating development policy and on the verge of submitting to Cabinet its first five-year development plan, hangs in the balance, after the replacement of the Director-General with an exceptionally young unknown (to the general alarm of NPC staff and donors), and the shifting of the Secretariat to the Ministry of Finance.

The combatting of ignorance will now be the responsibility of two ministries, the education portfolio having been split between a Ministry for Tertiary Education

(to all appearances supererogatory) and another for Basic Education and Culture. Unemployment becomes the key concern of Swapo Secretary-General Moses Garoeb, who adds Minister of Labour to his list of titles. Tackling disease remains the responsibility of Health Minister Nicky Iyambo, who acquires a new special advisor and an inspector of hospitals. As to how the most pressing and seemingly intractable problem of all, widespread poverty, will be addressed, there are few immediate clues.

Within Swapo's ranks, there are some who see the party's sweeping victory as potentially opening up the rigid internal hierarchy which has seen the party operate as a "Cabinetocracy" for the past five years, eschewing consultation and input from its own caucus. Many hope that the boost in confidence that a two-thirds majority may provide will permit more open discussion within the party itself, and make space for a larger role for the backbenches in government policy-making. This question remains open, however; the logic could easily cut in the exact opposite direction.

As for the Namibian people themselves: they have voted into office a party, Swapo, with a detailed manifesto and an electoral mandate sufficiently strong that it will not be able, next time, to point either to the opposition or the constitution as obstacles to implementing its promises. The implications? Perhaps one can do no better at this juncture than to quote the Prime Minister's undertaking on behalf of the government:

*We are going to be judged on our promises in the manifesto. We have to address the needs of those who voted for us ... because we were elected on that basis. Now our performance can be measured. We are going to work, and when we fail we will admit where we have fallen short and why. And people will feel they have had an input. [Interview with the author, 29 January 1995]*