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Namibia's parliamentary and presidential elections: the honeymoon is over

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ABSTRACT

For the first time, the former liberation movement SWAPO as government and its presidential candidate have recorded a loss in voter support. The National Assembly and Presidential election results of 27 November 2019 were the worst since Independence and suggest a turning point in Namibia's democracy. This analysis presents some factors which might have influenced a change in voting patterns ahead of the elections. It then analyses the results of the parliamentary elections, followed by an anatomy of the vote for the country's president. It then engages with the controversy triggered by the electronic voting process and ends with an overview on the stage possibly entered by Namibian democracy and the country's political culture after what seems to have been a shifting ground.

KEYWORDS

Namibia; elections; SWAPO; Hage Geingob; Panduleni Itula; EVMs

Introduction

The South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO of Namibia) has performed exceptionally well among the liberation movements as governments. 'One Namibia, one nation' and 'SWAPO is the nation and the nation is SWAPO' were two of the struggle slogans. They translated in the false equation that the party is the government and the government is the state. In November 1989, the first democratic elections for a Constituent Assembly took place under the supervision of the United Nations. Since then, every 5 years elections for a National Assembly and the country's President were held. In November 2014, SWAPO scored 80% of votes. Its presidential candidate Hage Geingob came close to 87% of votes (for full details see Tjipueja, 2014). As these figures document, the political hegemony had been firmly in place for almost 30 years (Melber, 2017). SWAPO's patriotic narrative remained rooted in the official discourse and daily political culture. But the electorate gradually changed. The 'born free' has become a relevant factor, while the party displayed a growing gerontocratic structure. It remains firmly embedded in 'struggle credits', though the first generation is more and more replaced by the second struggle generation (Melber, Kromrey, & Welz, 2017).

The wear and tear, exacerbated by an economic crisis, also had its effects. The country entered a recession in 2016, with devastating effects on the socio-economic realities. With unemployment on a steady increase, it was approaching in the age group under 35 almost

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50% (Haidula, 2019). For respondents to the latest Afrobarometer survey (Survey Warehouse, 2019a, p. 3) unemployment was the most important matter (54%). Drought (30%), poverty (21%), education and water supply (20% each) followed. Corruption (16%), land (13%) and crime (11%) ranked surprisingly lower. As the local Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) concluded in its third Quarterly Economic Report for 2019:

With elections now on the horizon, the current President and Cabinet must decide what their legacy is going to be: will they reform and reverse the decline of the past five years or go down in history as the people who crashed the Namibian economy? (IPPR, 2019, p. 23)

Hiccups ahead of the poll

New political parties, even when created by SWAPO dissidents, never managed to establish a sustainable alternative. They snatched votes from other opposition parties to become irrelevant later on. This time, the new kid on the block is the Landless Peoples' Movement (LPM). It was founded after a fall out of the deputy minister of land with the party over the land policy (Melber, 2019, p. 77) and emerged as a force to reckon with in the sparsely populated areas South of Rehoboth. But as so many other of the existing parties its basis was almost exclusively rooted in a particular regional-ethnic stronghold among the Nama communities.

More challenging than the party competition became the direct election of Namibia's next president. In a surprise move, the SWAPO member Panduleni Itula registered as 'independent' candidate, using a loophole in the country's electoral act. He adamantly claimed to have the right to challenge the official party candidate as an alternative and remained defiant to leave SWAPO, using the analogy of a family feud, which still allows you to stay in the family while seeking solutions (The Patriot, 2019). SWAPO-internal factionalism and divide over the leadership issue seemed indeed a significant factor triggering this rivalry (Haufiku, Mongudhi & Immanuel, 2019). Itula had not disclosed the sources funding his campaign and thereby fuelled speculations further. Not surprisingly so, President Geingob was not amused (Ngindi & Shikwambi, 2019).

Geingob also reacted thin-skinned to media reports covering corruption scandals. He smelled 'media sabotage' (Nembwaya, 2019), undermining deliberately his credibility through 'fake news' (Tjitemisa, 2019a). Reports on a large-scale fraudulent fisheries deal made international headlines (Kleinfeld, 2019a). The bombshell circulating since then as #Fishrot files disclosed massive fraudulent transactions bordering on state capture the Namibian way, involving the biggest Icelandic fishing company, two Namibian ministers and several other high-ranking officials (Immanuel & Iikela, 2019).

While Geingob suspected that the timing of the disclosures was deliberate, an editorial in the weekly *Windhoek Observer* (2019) bemoaned: 'Stealing public funds and misusing government resources are the natural state of affairs in Namibia.' A documentary broadcasted by Al Jazeera only after the elections on 1 December¹ disclosed further delicate details (Kleinfeld, 2019b). Both SWAPO and Geingob, as well as the party's and his personal lawyer, were implicated by the disclosures, with revelations that the lawyer serving the party and Geingob as personal client suspected of being a facilitator in money laundering (Amakali, 2019). Meanwhile, in marked contrast to the grand-scale embezzlement, people are in Namibia killed over a tin of fish (Hartman, 2019).

Given the crisis mounting at different fronts, the increased appeals by President Geingob to national unity indicated that the ‘one Namibia one nation’ mantra had shown signs of erosion. ‘Unity in diversity’ had moved further from reality than at any given time since Independence. Tirades in the social media testified to an utter disrespect for those in power and displayed insulting language of hitherto unknown proportions. For the first time after 30 years, due to several factors, elections were widely expected to be more than business as usual: ‘a stumbling economy, a surprise presidential candidate, and a major corruption scandal have combined to make these elections Namibia’s most competitive yet’ (Hopwood, 2019).

Parliamentary elections: a changing landscape

The final results, announced on 30 November, came not so much as a surprise. Despite a watershed, they rather confirmed some of the prognoses. Many among the 820,000 of the 1.3 million registered voters (60.4%) had used their power to tell SWAPO and its presidential candidate loud and clearly that the honeymoon is over. While SWAPO lost the two-third majority it held since the elections in 1994 with the worst result since Independence, 10 more political parties managed to snatch enough votes to enter the next National Assembly, whose members will be sworn in for a five-year term in office on 21 March 2020. SWAPO remained the biggest party in all 14 regions of the country, but in some of them with less than 50% of the votes (see Table 1).²

New political parties, even when created by SWAPO dissidents, had so far never managed to establish a sustainable alternative. They snatched votes from other opposition parties to become irrelevant later on. This time, the new kid on the block has been the Landless Peoples’ Movement (LPM). It was founded after a fall out of the deputy minister of land, Bernardus Swartbooi, with SWAPO over the land policy. It could be considered as a force to reckon with in the sparsely populated areas South of Rehoboth. But as so many other of the existing parties its basis was likely to be almost exclusively rooted in a particular regional-ethnic stronghold among the Nama communities. In the end, the LPM secured enough votes, mainly from the !Kharas region as its home base, to enter Parliament in 2020 with four seats as the third biggest party.

Table 1. National Assembly Election Results 2019.

Party	Votes	%	Seats
SWAPO Party of Namibia (SWAPO)	536,861	65.5	63
Popular Democratic Movement (PDM)	136,576	16.6	16
Landless People’s Movement (LPM)	38,956	4.7	4
National Unity Democratic Organisation of Namibia (NUDO)	16,066	1.9	2
All People’s Party (APP)	14,644	1.8	2
United Democratic Front of Namibia (UDF)	14,644	1.8	2
Republican Party of Namibia (RP)	14,546	1.8	2
Namibian Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF)	13,580	1.7	2
Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP)	8,953	1.1	1
Christian Democratic Voice Party (CDV)	5,841	0.7	1
SWANU of Namibia (SWANU)	5,330	0.6	1
Congress of Democrats (CoD)	4,654	0.6	0
Namibian Democratic Party (NDP)	4,559	0.6	0
Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP)	3,212	0.4	0
Namibia Patriotic Front (NPF)	1,785	0.2	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>820,227</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>96</i>

Hardly anticipated by any of the observers, the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM) emerged as the main beneficiary of the frustrated voters and retained its status as the official opposition with a resounding success. The party under its president McHenry Venaani had a name change only during the ongoing legislative period in an effort to leave behind the association of being a pro-South African and predominantly white party, which already in the first elections campaigned as the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA). It now scored way above the widely held expectations and quadrupled its share from four to 16 seats.

Five of the other parties secured two seats each. Three more managed to get one seat, to fill the total number of 96 Members of Parliament. Since the electoral system is strictly proportional, some 8,500 votes were enough to obtain a seat, while the last seats were snatched by those parties with even less votes. SWAPO is now left with 63 seats (one short of a two-third-majority, which is required for constitutional changes), and can, of course, continue to govern comfortably. But of less comfort is the punishment. It also affects a number of loyal party cadres, who ranked lower on the electoral list. These include some cabinet members, deputy ministers and struggle veterans. While Geingob as re-elected state president has the privilege vested in his office to appoint an additional eight MPs without voting rights, he faces some tough choices. Who will be brought back at his mercy, and who will be left out in the cold? Does he pursue a co-optation strategy or does he reward those most loyal to him? He has time to think about it. The new MPs will only be sworn in together with the Cabinet he appoints from the MPs on 21 March 2020.

By then also the newly elected 33 MPs from 10 opposition parties will have to make up their mind if they use the newly gained strength to form any meaningful alliance. Among them are a number of very young 'born free'. So far, opposition politics in Namibia did not deserve the name. Parties were small, had hardly any appealing alternative party programmes to offer and mainly followed their ethnic-regional particularistic courses. With enemies like these, SWAPO did not need any friends. This might change for the first time, with a strong PDM opposition and a new LPM. Together they already have about the same number of seats the total opposition occupied before. This could encourage the formation of alliances to shape new discourses. So far, opposition parties hardly ever created some visibility during parliamentary debates. As of next year, they might make life much more difficult for the dominant party and thereby use the opportunity to appeal to even more voters.

The presidential elections: another warning

Early voting results of ballots cast in foreign polling stations at embassies and for those serving on duty (such as soldiers and fishermen) were – another absurdity of Namibia's democracy – already published ahead of election day. These were too close for comfort for Geingob, with Itula neck-to-neck (Ngindi & Shikwambi, 2019). The presidential incumbent had all reasons to be irritated. According to the final results released (see Table 2), Itula did remarkably well. In the two regions with the highest degree of urbanisation (Khomas and Erongo), he even received with close to 50% most votes. In the end, he had 29.4% compared with Geingob's 56.3%. For the latter, this borders to a humiliation. After all, Geingob was not only the first presidential candidate who

Table 2. Presidential Election Results 2019.

Candidate	Votes	%
Dr. Hage Gottfried Geingob (SWAPO)	464,703	56.3
Dr. Panduleni Filemon Bango Itula (Independent)	242,657	29.4
Hon. McHenry Venaani (PDM)	43,959	5.3
Mr. Bernardus Clinton Swartbooi (LPM)	22,542	2.7
Hon. Apius Auchab (UDF)	22,115	2.7
Ms. Esther Utjiua Muinjange (NUDO)	12,039	1.5
Hon. Dr. Tangeni Iijambo (SWANU)	5,959	0.7
Mr. Henry Ferdinand Mudge (RP)	4,379	0.5
Hon. Mike Ratoveni Kavekatora (RDP)	3,515	0.4
Hon. Shixwameni Ignatius Nkotongo (APP)	3,304	0.4
Mr. Epafra Jan Mukwilongo (NEFF)	1,026	0.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>826,198</i>	<i>100</i>

Tjipueja (2019, p. 5).

scored less votes than the party, but he lost about a third of those who gave him the confidence and trust 5 years ago. Interestingly so, however, the votes of Geingob and Itula added up to Geingob's score in 2014. This means that despite the success of the PDM, its presidential candidate Venaani received less votes than in the last elections, having to share some with the new candidate Swartbooi, who came in fourth. Obviously, the PDM benefitted as party from protest voters, who were voting for Itula as 'independent' SWAPO candidate and were unwilling to vote for SWAPO as party with Geingob as candidate. Rather, they opted for other parties to voice their dissatisfaction. Notable is also that with Esther Muinjange for the first time a female candidate entered the competition (Amupanda & Marenga, 2019). Esther Muinjange had during the year been elected as the new president of the National Unity Democratic Organisation of Namibia (NUDO) – an ethnically based party with the stronghold in parts of the Ovaherero community. As a lecturer with the University of Namibia, she also has a high profile in prominently campaigning as chairperson of the Ovaherero Genocide Foundation for the recognition of the genocide committed by the German colonial army in 1904–1908 and the demands for reparations.

Among the questions now is how Itula will seek to position himself. And how Geingob will handle the maverick. Assuming that he stands for a party faction mainly from the Northern regions, his dismissal from the party by means of disciplinary procedures will not solve the problem. On the other hand, surprisingly so, Geingob maintained the highest percentage of votes in the very northern regions, which are believed to be the home to an anti-Geingob party faction. One reason for this might be that similar to Zimbabwe and some of the areas in South Africa, the rural population remains more loyal to the erstwhile liberation movement. The government's recognition of the local traditional leaders, which also includes occasional material privileges (and in earlier times even gifts ahead of elections), might be another factor, using traditional hierarchies for ensuring loyalty to those in the party leadership. This might reinforce through local affiliations with and by traditional authorities that voting remains in favour of the official party candidate. Based on the participatory observation in a village in the Northern region during the 2014 elections, Dobler (2019, p. 10) suggested that electoral participation 'implies acknowledging one's integration into a joint moral and political order. Those who no longer can or want to do so tend not to vote for the opposition, but to refrain from voting.'"

But Geingob's authority is certainly weakened. In a first statement (Geingob, 2019, p. 4) he declared that he has heard the people and the message they had sent. The question remains, if he is also willing or able to listen, or if his dented ego will provoke him to display more authoritarian tendencies. So far, he has not been known for dealing well with criticism.

Disputes over electronic voting

In 2014, Namibia was the first African country to introduce electronic voting machines (EVMs) (Freyer, 2017). But the 2014 Namibian Electoral Act required a simultaneous introduction of a Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT). The verification system was supposed to ensure direct control by the individual voters that their votes were registered correctly. Despite such legal provision in clause 97(3) of the Act (cf. Shejvali, 2019, p. 11), the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) made use of EVMs without VVPAT, since the Electoral Act allowed a transitional period for implementing different provisions of the Act becoming operational. Concerns and legal objections by some opposition parties in 2014 were dismissed by court. While the ECN started negotiating with the Indian supply company Bharat Electronics Limited in mid-2018 to place bulk orders for VVPAT-enabled EVMs (Agarwal, 2018), this remained without consequences. In response to queries raised ahead of the elections, the ECN explained that the Indian supplier could not provide the required technology for an upgrade.

As if this would not be enough to fuel discomfort, another 'mishap' became known, not suitable to eliminate doubts and concerns: investigative journalists disclosed in October 2019, that the ECN had 'borrowed' SWAPO four EVMs for party internal election purposes in 2017. These had gone missing and were never returned (Namibia Fact Check, 2019). The news strengthened the already existing reservations regarding the voting process. That the ECN had swept the matter under the carpet and now had egg on its face strengthened the already existing reservations regarding the body's impartiality. Not surprisingly, therefore, Itula and some parties strongly objected to the use of EVMs and approached the electoral tribunal, albeit rather late. The body reserved judgement over complaints for 2 days ahead of the elections. This made it a foregone conclusion that instead of a postponement, elections would be held according to schedule after dismissal of the objections (Ndeunyema, 2019).

A main argument for the introduction of EVMs is usually that they are more efficient than voting by ballot papers, reduce the time and would speed up the counting and verification processes as well as enhance credibility. But in 2014 it still took over 3 days before the election results were announced, causing much frustration. This time, the voting again met some hiccups because the technology was not properly functioning in some cases, causing delays in the voting process. The official results were again only announced after 3 days, provoking again frustration and doubts. EVMs, therefore, have not enhanced credibility. They rather nurtured suspicions that irregularities could happen, abusing the technology with the intention to manipulate the results. The delay confirmed the warning of some British researchers (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2018). As they cautioned, the switch to electronic equipment in African elections should either improve the chances that digital technologies will work, or one should avoid using them (quoted in Shejvali, 2019, p. 3).

The ECN has claimed that in the case of a dispute over the results, there will be a paper trail recording the votes cast (Nakale, 2019). A post-mortem paper trail documenting voting, however, is different from a paper trail for the voter to see that the vote was registered properly for the party/candidate s/he voted for. Not surprisingly, Itula, but also the PDM and other parties, have despite the surprisingly good results already announced that they will object to their recognition (Tjitemisa, 2019b). All international observer missions have, in contrast, testified that the elections were free and fair and gave them their thumbs up. Since then, Itula and several opposition parties have submitted their objections to the country's Supreme Court (Shikongo & Iikela, 2019). The main argument aims at the violation of constitutional principles, since the continued use of EVMs without VVPAT is in violation of the legal provisions (Tjitemisa, 2019c). While most local legal experts seem sceptical that the case could be successful, it seems that the final act is not yet over and that the highest court will have a say.

Conclusion

The summary of results of the latest Afrobarometer Survey, conducted with 1,200 respondents in August 2019 (Survey Warehouse, 2019b), should serve as another eye-opener to those who govern. It is as much an awakening call as the election results of late November. 80.6% think the country is going in the wrong direction. 72.6% describe the present economic condition as very or fairly bad. 58.2% believe the economic conditions are worse or much worse than a year before, while 47.3% expect them to become even worse or much worse in 12 months' time. But the good news is that there remains a resilience to authoritarian tendencies. Only 12.9% of respondents approve or strongly approve of a one-party-state, while 16.5% approve or strongly approve that the army governs, and 11.4% that the president rules without elections and a parliament. 56.3% consider democracy preferable to any other kind of government, 63% find it more important for citizens to hold government accountable, even if this would slow down decision-making, and 71.9% are in favour of a constitutional two-term limit for the office of president. 43.7% are however not very or not at all satisfied how democracy works in Namibia, and 52.3% believe people have often or always be careful of what they say about politics. Strikingly, 43.8% agree that the government should be able to ban any organisation that goes against its policies.

Despite the obvious frustrations within the electorate, SWAPO remained the dominant party, while its presidential candidate was re-elected to the office in the first round. But there was a marked if not dramatic reverse trend for the first time in 30 years. The increased appeals by President Geingob to national unity indicated already during the campaign trail that the 'one Namibia one nation' mantra has shown signs of erosion. Currently, 'unity in diversity' seems to be further from reality than at any given time since Independence. Tirades in the social media show a disrespect for those in power of hitherto unknown proportions. For the first time, SWAPO's presidential candidate garnered less votes than the party. This does not only dent the ego of the job incumbent, but weakens Geingob's authority during his second term in office. It will also likely influence the decision-making process over his succession as party president and head of state.

Itula might have well created an example copied soon at local and regional government levels. Job Amupanda, a former SWAPO Youth League leader and social movement

activist has already announced that he will campaign in 2020 for mayor in the Windhoek municipality elections. More such ‘centrifugal’ tendencies might emerge as long as SWAPO leadership remains an ‘old men’s’ club (with a few elderly women at their side). As for SWAPO, in the light of the mind-boggling dimensions of the fisheries fraud, which includes officials and political office bearers in the highest echelons, a moral-ethical renewal is a precondition to regain credibility. The motto of the liberation movement, maintained as party, has been ‘solidarity, freedom, justice’. If no political will to follow such values will be visible soon, the decline might continue. The people had enough of promises without delivery. They expect good governance more than continued heroic struggle narratives, while ‘a luta continua’ translates into ‘the looting continues’. As Dobler (2019, p. 25) concluded:

A growing number of young people ... have never felt part of the moral order and are increasingly marginalised by its power relations. The big question for liberation movements in power in Southern Africa in this situation is not so much whether they will be re-elected in the next election, or the one after. The question is whether they will be able to integrate such people into the social contract, and what will happen if they fail to do so.

Namibia’s political stability has so far been vested in the dominance of SWAPO in a de facto one-party state. Those opposing such hegemony engaged in an uphill battle. The inroads they made for the first time should not be side-lined by manipulations of the election results or other manoeuvres. After all, democratic governance means respect for the will of the people. It makes democracy the winner, not a party.

Notes

1. The 51-min documentary ‘Anatomy of a Bribe’ broadcasted by Al Jazeera Investigations (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FJ1TB0nwHs) has by mid-December 2019 been accessed by close to 800,000 viewers.
2. For an interactive map displaying detailed results for the National Assembly and Presidential elections in all 14 regions see Electoral Commission of Namibia, <http://elections.na/RaceForVotes.aspx>.

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