

Namibian Politics – Nothing but SWAPO?

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for the NALEDI Policy Bulletin, May 2008

Since independence, Namibia's political landscape is dominated by the former liberation movement SWAPO. The ruling party comfortably controls both houses of parliament after obtaining almost 80% of the vote, and is also still able to draw large crowds to its public rallies. By contrast, the political influence of both opposition parties and civil society organisations is in sharp decline. Namibia's largest trade union federation, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) is an affiliate of the SWAPO party, staunchly supporting the mother body.

SWAPO's history

SWAPO history is closely linked to the struggle of migrant workers. It was formed in 1960 out of the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO), which had campaigned against the exploitation of migrant workers and colonial occupation. The change from OPO to SWAPO signified the attempt to build a national resistance movement instead of being restricted to the Northern regions of "Ovamboland", where about half the Namibian population resided. The regions known as "Ovamboland" were retained by the colonial administration as "communal areas", characterised by subsistence agriculture. They were also the main source of migrant labour for the mines, farms, railways and fishing companies. Thus, SWAPO was always deeply rooted in the rural areas of the Northern regions as well as in the emerging urban working class that retained strong links with the rural areas until this day.

During the liberation struggle, SWAPO won a major diplomatic victory when it was recognised by the United Nations as the "sole and authentic" representative of the Namibian people. It was able to wage the independence struggle at 3 fronts, namely political, diplomatic and military. This earned SWAPO the reputation of being the liberators of Namibia and the party's popularity today is still largely based on this historic claim.

National liberation or socialist revolution?

In terms of its political orientation, SWAPO was primarily a national liberation movement although its 1976 constitution contained socialist rhetoric and stated that: "*In fulfilling its vanguard role, SWAPO organises, unites, inspires, orientates and leads the broad masses of the working Namibian people in the struggle for national and social liberation*". Similarly, SWAPO's political programme of 1976 defined one of SWAPO's key tasks as uniting "*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 ideals and principles of scientific socialism*".

However, as the crisis in the Soviet Union deepened in the 1980s, coupled with the counter-revolutionary wars in Angola and Mozambique and the refusal by the South African apartheid regime to implement UN resolution 435 (which was meant to pave the way for Namibia's independence), it became

clear that SWAPO regarded national independence - and not the proletarian revolution - as the primary goal of its struggle. A contributing factor to this shift away from socialist rhetoric was SWAPO's attempt to seek Western support for Namibia's independence by showing allegiance to market-related economic policies. This was clearly reflected in the party's policy proposals for an independent Namibia in the late 1980s as well as the election manifesto of 1989. SWAPO's "Economic Policy Position Document" of November 1988, for example, no longer called for the nationalisation of key industries but instead promised "*fair and just compensation in those instances where state acquisition of assets from private hands is considered necessary for the rebuilding and restructuring of Namibia's national economy*".

SWAPO's secretary for economics at the time, Ben Amathila, declared that it was not SWAPO's intention to nationalise mining companies. Instead, the party envisaged using "*revenue from mining to diversify production in other sectors, to decrease the economic imbalance, break dependency on South Africa and give Namibia a better chance for development...A greater part of the mining sector's profits should be reinvested here, for diversification, training and economic growth*". Furthermore Amathila assured white farmers that SWAPO recognised "*the titles they hold on farms, whether inherited or acquired. We do not interfere with land ownership as set out at present... We foresee a mixed economy for the simple reason that the present structure of the economy is such that we may not be able to afford any drastic rearrangement. For change from the present state to be effective, it must be gradual*". In the run-up to independence, SWAPO had already accepted a non-racial capitalist order, enshrined later on as "mixed economy" in the constitution of independent Namibia.

"Pragmatism" after independence

Once in power, the SWAPO government proceeded with "pragmatic" policies, keeping property relations intact, retaining the private sector as the "engine of growth", "commercialising" parastatals and regarding foreign investment as the panacea for job creation. Furthermore, narrowly defined approaches to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action paved the way for the emergence of a new elite, often through a system of patronage, while the country's huge socio-economic inequalities remained. On the other hand, the SWAPO government expanded the provision of services that had been denied to the majority under apartheid rule such as education and health. In the area of labour, government introduced the notions of tripartism and social partnership, with labour being the weakest party and government choosing the role of a "referee". Although the new dispensation was clearly more favourable for Namibian workers than the colonial apartheid system, the fundamental inequalities between capital and labour remained unchallenged. Why then, has SWAPO remained so popular and powerful in Namibia?

Opposition politics

Most of Namibia's "traditional" opposition parties (such as the DTA) are discredited on the basis their collaboration with the colonial regime or are limited to small ethnic constituencies (such as the UDF). These opposition parties are conservative in their orientation and lack substantive inner-party

democracy. Challenges to SWAPO thus came in the form of “break-aways” from the party. These were caused by a lack of inner-party democracy, by internal power struggles or by policy differences. Already before independence, a break-way group formed the “SWAPO Democrats” (SWAPO-D), which was short-lived and failed to get a seat in parliament in the first democratic elections of 1989. After independence, Ben Ulenga, a former Robben Island prisoner and trade unionist left SWAPO in 1998 to form the Congress of Democrats (CoD). Ulenga challenged SWAPO on the question of a lack of inner-party democracy, the third term in office for founding president Sam Nujoma and Namibia’s involvement in the DRC war in the late 1990s. However, the CoD did not provide a coherent and fundamentally different policy framework. The new party also failed to make inroads in working class constituencies and despite the initial excitement (which was largely based on Ben Ulenga’s struggle credentials), the CoD turned into merely another opposition party without working class support, without a different vision and characterised by internal power struggles, which led to a split within the party. As soon as the CoD had been formed, SWAPO mobilised its structures, attacked Ulenga viciously as a “traitor” and “agent of imperialism” and ensured that the newly formed party made no inroads into the SWAPO strongholds. Part of this strategy was to strengthen SWAPO’s influence on the trade union movement, particularly the NUNW.

Another break-away occurred almost 10 years later when a group of senior SWAPO leaders, including long serving cabinet members Hidipo Hamutenya and Jesaia Nyamu, left the party to form the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) In November 2007. This split could be traced to SWAPO’s extraordinary congress in 2004, which elected a successor to the founding president Nujoma. Former Trade and Industry Minister Hidipo Hamutenya, alongside the current Prime Minister Nahas Angula and SWAPO founder member Hifikepunye Pohamba were the candidates. President Nujoma used all his influence to campaign for his preferred candidate, Pohamba, who was eventually elected as the party’s presidential candidate and later on as the country’s president.

Following the 2004 extra-ordinary congress, Nujoma played a central role in what his inner-party opponents saw as a systematic marginalisation of those who were associated with Hamutenya. SWAPO was essentially divided into a “Nujoma camp” and a “Hamutenya camp” although there were no ideological differences between the two. It was merely a question of which group would gain power within the ruling party. When it became clear that Nujoma remained in control of SWAPO, Hidipo Hamutenya and a group of supporters left SWAPO in what looked to become the biggest challenge to the ruling party’s hegemony since independence. The new RDP managed to draw substantive crowds to some of its public rallies but it failed to gain substantial electoral support at a by-election in Eenhana in Northern Namibia in early 2008. The new party only obtained 6% of the vote compare to SWAPO’s 93%. Once again, SWAPO had managed to mobilise its structures against the perceived threat and used similar tactics to those it had deployed 10 years earlier when dealing with the CoD.

Challenges?

Any serious challenge to Namibia's ruling party will need to make inroads in SWAPO's two key constituencies - the urban working class and the northern rural areas – which have been SWAPO's support base since the days of the liberation struggle. A serious challenge will also have to inspire young people (most of whom are unemployed) and will have to be based on a new approach to politics and economics, away from the current hierarchical political cultures and exploitative free-market policies towards participatory democracy, redistributive policies and socio-economic equality. Currently, there seems to be no organisation capable of presenting such a challenge and thus SWAPO is likely to remain the dominant political force in the years to come.

The author works as a senior researcher for the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in Namibia. The views expressed in this article are his personal ones.