

Namibia: Namibia's Liberation Struggle and the 2014 Elections



analysis

“What do you think will be happening with the Namibian elections next week?” we asked Henning Melber at his Indianapolis hotel bar; we were all attending the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association. Melber has long been involved in the study of his home country, Namibia.

Born in West Germany, Melber's family emigrated to Namibia in the 1960s. He graduated from Namibia's Deutsche Höhere Privatschule, and then joined the anti-apartheid movement, SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) in 1974. He was the first White Namibian to join the movement against South African apartheid occupation of Namibia.

“Well you know what's going to happen,” he chuckled. “SWAPO will dominate.” We first made contact with Melber while we were still in the early stages of planning our documentary *From Windhoek to Washington*. Like many of our interviewees, we've kept in touch with him over the past two years.

Since independence, SWAPO has run Namibian politics. Although Southern Africa is known for its “Liberation Movements in Power,” most other nations have viable opposition parties, such as the DA in South Africa and the MDC in Zimbabwe. Since the first democratic election in 1989, Namibia has none. SWAPO won the first election with 57% of the vote, with the apartheid-backed Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) at 28%.

SWAPO's share of the vote has only increased more and more, surpassing the two-thirds majority necessary to alter the constitution. In 1994, SWAPO received 74%; in 1999, 2004 and 2009, 76%. This November's general election, SWAPO received an all-time high of 80.01%. The next highest party, the DTA, had less than five percent, only earning them five seats in parliament to SWAPO's 77.

What is the reason for SWAPO's electoral dominance? It seemed strange to us at first that a political party could maintain such a majority in parliament without rigging elections. Indeed, trapped in an American electoral mindset, initially it was hard for us to fathom that Namibia's liberation history plays such a prominent role in present-day politics. We decided that the best way to answer our questions and understand SWAPO was to speak with those who played a role in the struggle.

We went into the project with two main ideas of how to tell the story. First, we felt it would be appropriate to reflect on our own heritage, to show how American foreign policy during the Cold War was connected to Namibia's independence. Martti Ahtisaari, the head of the United Nations Transition Assistance Group for Namibia (UNTAG)

and former Finnish President, told us "... it is very difficult to get anything done in foreign policy without the assistance of the United States." Namibia's independence was no exception to this rule.

Our second goal was to keep ourselves out of the film as much as possible. We tried to stay true to this by foregoing narration and using extended cuts of interviews: a more "oral history" style. These longer cuts of interviews are nontraditional for documentaries.

However, we believe that having individuals like the Namibian President-elect, Hage Geingob, former Asst. Secretary of State, Chester Crocker, and many others explaining their state of mind during important international events was better left as uncut as possible.

We first arrived in Windhoek in July of 2012. After sleeping off the twenty hour transcontinental jet-lag we decided to begin exploring the city. Beginning in the downtown "tourist" area and gradually making our way to the outskirts, we saw a clear economic and racial divide between the former White neighborhoods and the townships. We learned that in order to understand Namibian history and politics, we must understand the history of the townships, as SWAPO's influence holds strongest there.

On 10 December, 1959, the apartheid police opened fire on a group of Namibians in Windhoek's Old Location, killing thirteen and injuring at least forty-two. Unrest had been brewing in the native location's municipal beer hall for months in response to the upcoming relocation of Black Namibians to the planned township, Katutura.

Segregated by ethnic group and a considerable distance from the city center, the township would destroy the social fabric built by Namibians in the Old Location over the previous few generations. Katutura was the embodiment of apartheid. Community leaders refused to leave, and in response to heated arguments and stone-throwing, the police open-fired.

The shooting at the Old Location sparked the first movement of Namibian leaders into exile. Some such as Ovamboland People's Organization (OPO) leader (and first President of independent Namibia) Sam Nujoma, felt that Namibian nationalists must foster international ties and organize armed struggle from abroad.

He went to Tanganyika and began to pave the way for others to follow him. In order to create a more "national" image the region-based OPO changed its name to SWAPO, inviting Namibians from all ethnic groups to move into exile.

We could see the trauma of the struggle in the faces of the Namibians we interviewed. Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, one of the original founders of the OPO and SWAPO, rested his head in his right hand. He took a long pause...finally saying, "...we decided we would speak to the colonizers in the language they would understand. So we took up our guns, and that is what we did."

SWAPO leadership helped Namibians receive military training abroad, mostly in Tanzania and Ghana; some, however, went to the USSR and other Eastern Bloc countries. Many received scholarships abroad, with the stipulation that they use their education to help the liberation movement.

The President-elect, Hage Geingob, was awarded a scholarship to Fordham University in New York, where he took classes while lobbying for support at the United Nations. He eventually returned to direct the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka, Zambia. All of these military and academic opportunities were arranged and often funded

directly by SWAPO or SWAPO's supporters.

Those who left apartheid Namibia for exile but could not earn a scholarship were given training and support in one of SWAPO's refugee camps in Zambia, Tanzania, or Angola. SWAPO's military command structures administered daily life in the camps, arranging for food delivery, weapon caches, and transport of exiled Namibians.

One could argue that SWAPO's first real experience with governance was in these camps. Unfortunately, the environment was not a healthy breeding ground for experiments with democratic practices. Camps were constantly under attack by the South African Defence Forces and their Angolan "allies," UNITA. This fear led to accusations of spies being present in the camps, leading to SWAPO's detainment of scores of its own exiled membership, which because of apartheid violence within Namibia had swelled to upwards of 60,000.

During the liberation struggle, in exile and at home, SWAPO embodied the resistance. Although there were other smaller anti-apartheid movements, such as the South West Africa National Union (SWANU), they were unable to receive the same level of support. In the 1960s, the Organization for African Unity (OAU) declared SWAPO to be the "sole and authentic" representative of the Namibian people; most international aid under OAU or UN auspices would be directed towards SWAPO only.

Dwelling on this liberation history allowed us to begin to understand Namibians' overwhelming loyalty towards SWAPO. Namibians in exile were reliant on SWAPO for daily survival, whether one is a woman or child in a refugee camp or a soldier on the front lines. Within the country, the oppressed knew that SWAPO was the most reliable fighting force against apartheid in Namibia.

After sixteen months, on and off, of conducting interviews and editing the final cut of the documentary, we felt we had come to some conclusive answers as to why Namibians were still so loyal to SWAPO after two decades of independence. However, many informal conversations we had with people still left us wondering if we had only just scratched the surface.

We posed a question to a group of University of Namibia students: "Why can't the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) field more votes?" One of the more outgoing students responded, "The RDP? Oh, you mean SWAPO-lite." The RDP and the earlier opposition party, the Congress of Democrats, were both founded by dismissed SWAPO politicians spouting similar rhetoric; frankly, most Namibians do not take the parties seriously. Their leadership is respected, but they won't win many seats in parliament.

Responses like this were common when talking to Namibians. Henning Melber addressed this while sitting at that same bar in Indianapolis, "A pre-election survey was recently circulated in Namibia. It concluded that most people who plan to vote SWAPO are doing so out of loyalty. Not because of policies or improved quality of life; but out of loyalty."

It's no secret that Namibia is facing increasing economic hardships. In fact, the Gini coefficient, which measures income inequalities, is the highest in the world, normally competing with its post-apartheid neighbor, South Africa. Housing shortages abound; shantytown demolitions are increasing; drought relief is not where it should be. Watching our film will give you an in-depth and personal look into how Namibia made the great leap from the horrors of apartheid to a democracy of "loyalty."

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