

How Democratic Is Namibia's Democracy? An Anatomy of SWAPO's Political Hegemony

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Abstract

This essay analyzes Namibia's political culture since independence and assesses the dominance by the former anticolonial liberation movement, the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO), as a party. SWAPO is in sole control over the government and has expanded its dominance in parliament from an absolute majority at independence to 80 percent in six subsequent elections. The essay explores the origins, character, and nature of this political dominance, which increasingly turned into hegemony, and suggests the concept of democratic authoritarianism as a potential category to come to terms with the existing *de facto* one-party system in Namibia.

Keywords: Democracy, democratic authoritarianism, elections, Namibia, SWAPO.

SWAPO Party will grow from strength to strength and continues to rule Namibia for the next ONE THOUSAND YEARS.

—Sam Nujoma, former President of Namibia¹

Namibia is widely considered a positive example of decolonization, understood as a successful process of controlled change during the last stages of the transfer of political power. The political system's transition from a minority settler administration, which had been controlled remotely from Pretoria, to a democratically elected Constituent Assembly under United Nations

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¹ Sam Nujoma, first SWAPO President and Head of State (1990–2005), “Where We Came From,” speech delivered to the SWAPO Youth League Congress in 2010,” *SWAPO Party website*, http://www.swapoparty.org/where_we_came_from.html (accessed October 25, 2013).

supervision during 1989–1990, and the subsequent formation of a government without further bloodshed, were an impressive, though belated, achievement after more than a century of colonial rule.² The transition brought to an end the anticolonial struggle, led mainly by the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO of Namibia). Established in 1960, the nationalist movement decided to resort to armed resistance in the mid-1960s and emerged thereafter as the agency recognized by the United Nations General Assembly as the only legitimate representative of the Namibian people³—in retrospect, a rather dubious (though perhaps understandable) response to the continued illegal occupation of the territory by South Africa.⁴ SWAPO managed to obtain an absolute majority of votes in the United Nations-supervised general elections of November 1989.

The members of the Constituent Assembly elected in 1989 were later sworn in as members of the country's first National Assembly. In the course of negotiating and adopting Namibia's constitution, they also appointed SWAPO President Sam Nujoma as the first Head of the sovereign Namibian State, to be sworn in at independence, which was finally proclaimed on March 21, 1990. Parallel elections for a National Assembly and the president have been held during November every five years since 1994. SWAPO has secured a two-thirds majority and firmly established itself as the dominant party, continually expanding its political hegemony with every election. It is governing with the ever-increasing support of voters for the Head of State as well, thus SWAPO represents a unique case of a dominant party in firm control over the government and the state, gradually extending its dominance into hegemony.

² Among the last victims of politically motivated violence was the advocate, Anton Lubowski, a member of the German-speaking minority, who joined SWAPO in the early 1980s as a prominent activist. He was assassinated outside his home in Windhoek, Namibia, in September 1989. This essay is dedicated to his memory.

³ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3111 of December 12, 1973, recognized SWAPO as "the authentic representative of the Namibian people." This was amended in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 31/146 of December 20, 1976, to read "the sole and authentic," endorsing the exclusive status and political monopoly of SWAPO in the negotiations on behalf of the Namibian population.

⁴ For summary overviews of the negotiation processes with United Nations involvement, see, among other sources, Henning Melber, "Decolonization and Democratisation: The United Nations and Namibia's Transition to Democracy," in *The UN Role in Promoting Democracy: Between Ideals and Reality*, ed. Edward Newman and Roland Rich (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2004), 233-257; Henning Melber and Christopher Saunders, "Conflict Mediation in Decolonisation: Namibia's Transition to Independence," *Africa Spectrum* 42, no. 1 (2007): 73-94; Chris Saunders, "Managing Complexity in Mediation: The Namibian Case," *Mediation Arguments*, no. 7 (Pretoria: Centre for Mediation in Africa, University of Pretoria, 2015); and Henning Melber, "Mediating Decolonization—Dealing with Conflict Parties: The Long Way to Namibia's Transition to Independence," in *Leadership for Peace: Special Representatives of the UN Secretary-General and Their Work for the Maintenance of International Peace and Security*, ed. Manuel Fröhlich, Dorothea Prell, and Patrick Rosenow (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

This essay follows and assesses the shift from one-party dominance to political hegemony, which, in compliance with all formal criteria, is the result of a legitimately elected government in a society classified as an established constitutional democracy. After all, Namibia ranks in all comparative surveys of African states among the top five performers in terms of good governance on the continent.⁵ But the question remains, how democratic is Namibia's system, which, despite multiparty and relatively free competition, has all the features of a *de facto* one-party state. In the course of the assessment, the notion of "competitive authoritarianism" is introduced and tested as a possibly useful concept.⁶

From Party Dominance to Hegemony, 1989–2014

Subsequent to securing the mandate to constitute the first government of the Republic of Namibia by means of an absolute majority of votes obtained in the United Nations supervised elections of 1989, the former liberation movement, SWAPO, transformed itself after independence into the Swapo Party.⁷ In each electoral process since then, both on the national as well as regional and communal levels, it has considerably expanded its dominance (see table 1).

At the same time, the party's presidential candidate in each of the elections garnered more votes than the political organization, thereby showing a high degree of identification with both the political organization and its candidate nominated for president (see table 2).

The majority of Namibians have a high degree of confidence in and trust SWAPO's presidential candidates, who hold a large degree of executive power over state affairs.⁸ An Afrobarometer survey ahead of the last presidential election in 2014 showed the following exceptional approval ratings for trust and performance, respectively, which ranked among the highest on the continent: Nujoma, 76 and 78 percent; Pohamba, 81 and 88 percent; and Geingob, 79

⁵ These surveys include the Mo Ibrahim Index, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, and the Freedom House Index. In addition, the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index ranks Namibia among the best-placed African states, and the most recent surveys of Reporters Without Borders list Namibia as the top performer among African countries in terms of media freedom, ranked better than several Western democracies, including the United States.

⁶ In doing so, the essay resorts to and benefits from earlier works of the author. See, for example, Henning Melber, "Namibia: From Liberation to Domination," in *Party Systems and Democracy in Africa*, ed. Renske Doorenspleet and Lia Nijzink (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 87-104; id., *Understanding Namibia. The Trials of Independence* (London: Hurst, 2014); and id., "Post-Liberation Democratic Authoritarianism: The Case of Namibia," *Politikon—South African Journal of Political Studies* 42, no. 1 (2015): 45-66.

⁷ SWAPO and Swapo Party are both in common use. In this essay, the term SWAPO is used throughout.

⁸ Henning Melber, "From Nujoma to Geingob: 25 Years of Presidential Democracy," *Journal of Namibian Studies*, no. 18 (2015): 49-65.

Table 1. Parliamentary Election Results, 1989–2014,
for Namibia’s Largest Parties

Party	1989 Total Number of Votes, and Share of Votes Cast	1994 Total Number of Votes, and Share of Votes Cast	1999 Total Number of Votes, and Share of Votes Cast	2004 Total Number of Votes, and Share of Votes Cast	2009 Total Number of Votes, and Share of Votes Cast	2014 Total Number of Votes, and Share of Votes Cast
SWAPO	384,567 56.90%	361,800 73.89%	408,174 76.15%	620,609 75.83%	602,580 74.29%	715,026 80.01%
DTA*	191,532 28.34%	101,748 20.78%	50,824 9.48%	42,070 5.14%	25,393 3.13%	42,933 4.80%
UDF**	37,874 5.60%	13,309 2.72%	15,685 2.93%	30,355 3.71%	19,489 2.40%	18,945 2.12%
CoD***	- -	- -	53,289 9.94%	59,464 7.27%	5,375 0.66%	3,402 0.38%
RDP****	- -	- -	- -	- -	90,556 11.16%	31,372 3.51%

Sources: Based on official figures released by the Electoral Commission, as compiled in “Celebrating 25 years of Democratic Elections,” supplement to the newspapers *Republikein*, *Namibia Sun*, and *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Windhoek, Namibia: Namibia Media Holdings, December 2014), 10-11. The elections of 1989 were for the Constituent Assembly, subsequently transformed into the National Assembly.

Notes: * Democratic Turnhalle Alliance

** United Democratic Front

*** Congress of Democrats (founded in 1999)

**** Rally for Democracy and Progress (founded in 2007).

Table 2. Results for SWAPO Candidates in Presidential Elections, 1994–2014

Party	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
SWAPO	73.89%	76.15%	75.83%	75.27%	80.01%
Nujoma	74.46%	76.85%	-	-	-
Pohamba	-	-	76.44%	76.42%	-
Geingob	-	-	-	-	86.73%

Source: Based on official figures released by the Electoral Commission, as compiled in “Celebrating 25 years of Democratic Elections,” supplement to the newspapers *Republikein*, *Namibia Sun*, and *Allgemeine Zeitung* (Windhoek, Namibia: Namibia Media Holdings, December 2014), 18.

and 89 percent.⁹ The combination of a high degree of support for SWAPO among the electorate, the “social capital” vested in the party’s leadership, and SWAPO’s reputation of having liberated the country from colonial minority rule creates an almost insurmountable challenge for any political opposition. This is even more the case if such opposition reflects features that raise voters’ suspicion that it is not a meaningful alternative to the party in power.

There is a diverse collection of ineffective opposition parties. In-fights within and among them make no meaningful contribution to the democratic process and instead weaken rather than strengthen civil society.¹⁰ Most opposition parties qualify “as niche-oriented competitors that make specialised appeals to minority electoral constituencies.”¹¹ Their main support is often based on regional-ethnic affiliations. The challenges to SWAPO’s rule, therefore, have remained few, inefficient, and isolated. The “SWAPO Kingdom”¹² was never seriously contested—even though newly formed breakaway parties claimed to be political alternatives. Represented by contestants with “struggle credentials” who previously held political offices in SWAPO, the CoD and the RDP emerged as new, but rather temporarily relevant, elements. Their appearance caused intense debates and a tense atmosphere, but ultimately, they had only limited effect in terms of the party landscape, or rather the distribution of votes among the electorate, since they did not garner any votes from the SWAPO support base.

The credibility of any opposition party is further eroded by the fact that most opposition parties lack a proper alternative program. Rather, the interest of most opposition party leaders seems focused on obtaining a well-paid seat in the National Assembly to secure privileged status and living. This is a realistic aspiration for the top-ranked candidates even among the smaller parties, given that the proportional electoral system allocates parliamentary representation with less than one percent of the votes. In the end, parties managing to secure parliamentary representation often are bogged down in internal fights over access to the financial contributions thereby obtained. These disappointing

⁹ The approval rates for Nujoma were based on the results of a 2002 survey, while Geingob’s rates were for his position as prime minister. Institute for Public Policy Research/Afrobarometer, “News Release: Trust, Approval Ratings High for Namibia’s President and Prime Minister Following a Long Trend” (Windhoek, Namibia: Institute for Public Policy Research, October 28, 2014).

¹⁰ Henning Melber, “Governance, Political Culture and Civil Society under a Civil Liberation Movement in Power: The Case of Namibia,” in *Southern Africa—Civil Society, Politics and Donor Strategy: Angola and Its Neighbours*, ed. Nuno Vidal with Patrick Chabal (Lisbon: Firmamento, 2009), 199-212.

¹¹ Kenneth F. Greene, “A Resource Theory of Single-Party Dominance: The PRI in Mexico,” in *Dominant Political Parties and Democracy: Concepts, Measures, Cases, and Comparisons*, ed. Matthijs Bogaards and Françoise Boucek (London: Routledge, 2010), 155-174.

¹² Sebastian Elischer, *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

practices have further weakened already powerless opposition parties, which, nevertheless, increasingly resemble the features of the dominant liberation party in the sense that they await taking the reins of government to achieve political dominance that offers a wide range of privileges tantamount to self-enrichment.¹³ As a result, opposition parties have difficulty convincing the electorate that they would be a credible alternative for which a voter should risk being branded an “unpatriotic traitor” or “dissident” in his or her promotion of regime change for neo-imperialism.

The results for the first five parliamentary elections (1994 to 2014) since independence indeed have been sobering (see table 3).

Table 3. Total Results of Opposition Parties, 1989–2014

Year	Total Votes	Proportion	Total mandates*
1989	680,787	42%	31 out of 72
1994	497,508	26%	19 out of 72
1999	541,114	24%	17 out of 72
2004	829,269	24%	17 out of 72
2009	811,143	25%	18 out of 72
2014	893,643	20%	19 out of 96

Source: Compiled from data in the other tables.

* Based on constitutional amendments adopted in August 2014, the number of elected mandates for the National Assembly was increased from seventy-two to ninety-six, beginning from the legislative period commencing in March 2015.

As Phanuel Kaapama et. al., have concluded, “a weak opposition has contributed significantly towards one-party dominance.”¹⁴ This allows SWAPO to use (if not abuse) the state institutions for its further consolidation and to apply democracy in a way that strengthens the party even more. Based on the lackluster performance of opposition parties, it has been concluded, “if the process of challenging and overcoming single-party dominance is a marathon, Namibia’s opposition parties have been given up at the starting line.”¹⁵ Given the disproportionality of the party landscape, findings of an Afrobarometer survey presented in March 2014 concluded that the “political system seems to deliver more democracy than the population seems to demand,”¹⁶ as a

¹³ Henning Melber, *Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence* (London: Hurst, 2014).
¹⁴ Phanuel Kaapama, Lesley Blaauw, Bernie Zaaruka, and Esau Kaakunga, *Consolidating Democratic Governance in Southern Africa: Namibia*, EISA Research Report, no. 34 (Johannesburg, South Africa: Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa [EISA], 2007).
¹⁵ Ian Cooper, “It’s My Party: Opposition Politics, Party Motivation and Electoral Strategy in Namibia,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 1 (2014): 111-127.
¹⁶ Bill Lindeke, “The Perils and Complexity of Democratic Values in Namibia,” Afrobarometer Briefing Paper, no. 144 (Windhoek, Namibia: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2014), 1.

participatory political culture had not yet been developed. While democratic consolidation might be considered a feature in the institutional domain, “democratic values, behaviors and expectations are yet to catch up.”¹⁷

Results of the latest available survey by Afrobarometer Round Six, conducted in August and September 2014 among a sample size of 1,200 respondents, produced some mixed results. On the positive side, 74 percent of Namibians preferred democracy to any other form of government—an increase of 10 percent since 2012. Ninety-one percent felt free to say what they thought—but at the same time, 36 percent believed that they should avoid criticizing the government. Summarizing the trends, Graham Hopwood concluded:

[W]hile many people have started to recognize the importance of democracy, the inevitable follow on—robust plurality and diversity in opinions—is not seen as quite such a good development. Instead there is a tendency for citizens to feel they should go with the flow of the commonly expressed view or always concur with the views of the ruling political elite. It is seen as too much trouble and possibly counter-productive for individuals to express a different position from the view emanating from the top.¹⁸

More than ever, Namibia’s political sphere remains the arena of only one party. This transforms the slogan of the struggle days—that “SWAPO is the nation and the nation is SWAPO”—into the dominant political culture. The latest election results and subsequent developments testify to this.

Namibia’s Political Landscape since 2015: Consolidating Hegemony

On November 28, 2014, close to 900,000 Namibians (72 percent of the registered electorate of more than 1.2 million, among an estimated population of 2.3 million) went to the polls again to elect the members for the National Assembly from a list of sixteen parties. The extent of SWAPO’s enhanced dominance (see table 4) surprised most observers. Similar overwhelming support was expressed as well for the party’s presidential candidate, Hage Geingob, who scored more than 6 percent above the party, setting another impressive new record of endorsement by the electorate (see table 5). These are election results that would make totalitarian regimes envious. After all, Namibia’s elections are widely considered by most local as well as international observers to be free and fair, with only minor flaws. Opposition parties, in

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Graham Hopwood, “A Democracy in Need of Democrats,” *New Era* (Windhoek), March 27, 2015.

2014, refrained from any objections to the results and accepted the defeat.¹⁹

Table 4. Results of the National Assembly Elections, November 2014

Party	Votes (absolute)	Seats (in %)	
Swapo Party (SWAPO)	715,026	80.01	77
DTA of Namibia (DTA)	42,933	4.80	5
Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP)	31,372	3.51	3
All People’s Party (APP)	20,431	2.29	2
United Democratic Front of Namibia (UDF)	18,945	2.12	2
National Unity Democratic Organisation (NUDO)	17,942	2.01	2
Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP)	13,328	1.49	2
South West African National Union (SWANU)	6,354	0.71	1
United People’s Movement (UPM)	6,353	0.71	1
Republican Party (RP)	6,099	0.68	1
Congress of Democrats (CoD)	3,402	0.38	-
Namibia Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF)	3,259	0.36	-
Monitor Aksie Groep (MAG)	3,073	0.34	-
Christian Democratic Voice Party (CDV)	2,606	0.29	-
National Democratic Party (NDP)	1,389	0.16	-
Democratic Party of Namibia (DPN)	1,131	0.13	-

Source: Based on official figures of the Electoral Commission of Namibia, <http://www.ecn.na/> (accessed December 10, 2014).

Table 5. Presidential Election Results of the Three Top Candidates, 2014

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage
Hage G. Geingob	SWAPO	772,528	86.73%
McHenry Venaani	DTA	44,271	4.97%
Hidipo Hamutenya	RDP	30,197	3.39%

Source: Based on official figures of the Electoral Commission of Namibia, <http://www.ecn.na/> (accessed December 10, 2014).

The new cabinet was announced on March 19, 2015. Four new ministries were created and seven portfolios were renamed. The top-heavy executive structure seemed to represent an effort to reconcile internal party divisions and to secure loyalty. In particular, the expansion of the second tier of deputy

¹⁹ After the elections in November 2004 and November 2009, opposition parties disputed the results in court cases after long legal battles dismissed allegations of electoral fraud as unfounded. The courts, however, criticized the Electoral Commission for flaws in the voters’ role and for other organizational negligence. In 2014, for the first time on the continent, votes were cast by electronic voting. While the voting machines (supplied by India) did not match the requirements as stipulated in the Electoral Act (because a paper trail could not be technically secured), the results were not disputed.

ministers from eighteen to thirty-two was most likely aimed at inclusivity. Added to the twenty-eight cabinet members, this meant that almost 60 percent of all members of parliament (MPs) were top government officials, leading to an estimated 30 percent increase in the cost of government from N\$ fifty million under the Pohamba administration to N\$ sixty-five million.²⁰ This generosity was widely considered a strategic investment in internal party stability to anchor Geingob's office as president in structures to create loyalty among the beneficiaries. At the same time, the number of ministers and deputy ministers among the SWAPO MPs made control of the executive branch by the legislative branch a futile effort, since by wearing both hats, as MPs, they hardly can control themselves as members of the cabinet.²¹

Following substantial amendments to the constitution that were adopted in August 2014 by the SWAPO majority—despite objections from other parties and civil society agencies—the Namibian Head of State holds almost unlimited executive powers, which were increased further by means of internal party reshuffling. Amid controversies as to procedure and in a reportedly tense atmosphere, in a surprise move, Hifikepunye Pohamba handed over the party presidency to Geingob at a SWAPO central committee meeting on April 18, 2015, well ahead of the scheduled elections at the next party congress in 2017.²² The politburo rejected Geingob's proposal that he be replaced as the party's vice president by a trusted office holder. For the time being, he holds both party offices as well as the state presidency, which gives him a strong comparative advantage over potential contenders for the next round of leadership contests in both the party and the state.

The president's inaugural address²³ and his first state of the nation address²⁴ marked an interesting watershed in the official rhetoric of the party's heroic narrative. It shifted from the party-dominated patriotic history—an exclusive narrative of SWAPO as the sole liberator—toward more inclusive terminology. Geingob did not emphasize the role of SWAPO as the type of family that embodies the Namibian nation. Instead, “the Namibian house” was created as the new figurative core image and reference point. The powerful metaphor

²⁰ Jo-Maré Duddy and Estelle de Bruyn, “Geingob-span kan dúúr wees” [Geingob team can become costly], *Die Republikein* (Windhoek), March 23, 2015.

²¹ Henning Melber, “People, Party, Politics and Parliament: Government and Governance in Namibia,” in *African Parliaments: Governance and Government*, ed. Mohamed Salih (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 142-161.

²² Tileni Mongudhi, “Geingob Takes Charge of Swapo,” *The Namibian* (Windhoek), April 20, 2015.

²³ Republic of Namibia, “Inaugural Address by His Excellency Dr. Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia at the 25th Independence Day Celebration and Swearing In of the 3rd President of the Republic of Namibia, Independence Stadium,” Windhoek, Namibia, March 21, 2015.

²⁴ Republic of Namibia, “State of the Nation Address 2015 by His Excellency Dr. Hage G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia,” Windhoek, Namibia, April 21, 2015.

has been a constant and integral feature of the president's public statements since then. However, while deliberately stressing the inclusivity of the nation-building project, Geingob also has displayed exclusionary tendencies on certain issues, for instance, his refusal to comment on gay rights. He also confirmed that those who had fought on the side of the South African army against SWAPO would not be eligible for war veteran status and the pension awarded to those who had fought for SWAPO. Nor did the president show any inclination toward reconciliation with activists of the party's Youth League, who had become overtly critical of certain tendencies in the old leadership and its culture.²⁵ Four members of the Youth League (including its president) were suspended at the end of 2014, and finally expelled at a meeting of the party's central committee on July 23, 2015, reportedly at Geingob's instigation. The expelled members, in turn, took legal steps against what they considered a violation of internal party disciplinary procedures.²⁶ The Namibian High Court heard the case in February 2016 and ruled in April that the party had violated its own procedures. The judge ordered that the expulsion had to be revoked, although the claimants were not entitled to be reinstated in the party positions that they previously had held.²⁷ SWAPO decided not to appeal and complied with the ruling.²⁸ But since the return of the four to the status of ordinary party members, party officials have demanded publicly that they should terminate their memberships.

Reconciliation (or rather, co-optation) took place on other fronts, however. The former foreign minister, Hidipo Hamutenya, who had fallen out with the party leadership in 2004 in the battle for the country's presidency, established the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) as an opposition party. After initial success as the official opposition, the party faltered and became irrelevant. Hamutenya, still a presidential candidate for RDP in November 2014, returned to SWAPO on August 28, 2015, and other previously high-ranking SWAPO members who had joined him in the RDP followed his lead.²⁹ At a SWAPO gathering on November 21, 2015, ahead of the regional and communal elections, Hamutenya urged voters to rally behind President Geingob. The final collapse of the RDP, following the similar earlier fate of

²⁵ Heike Becker, "Namibia's Moment: Youth and Urban Land Activism," *Review of African Political Economy Blog* (2016), <http://roape.net/2016/01/18/namibias-moment-youth-and-urban-land-activism/> (accessed February 10, 2016).

²⁶ The suspension was in violation of the stipulated procedures, decided by the party leaders unilaterally and without authorization, thereby bypassing the authority on such disciplinary matters vested in other party organs such as the politburo and the central committee. See Tileni Mongudhi, "Swapo Hearing Starts," *The Namibian* (Windhoek), February 6, 2016.

²⁷ *Amupanda v Swapo Party of Namibia* (A 215/2015) (2016) NAHCMD 126 (April 22, 2016), <http://www.saflii.org/na/cases/NAHCMD/2016/126.pdf> (accessed August 3, 2016).

²⁸ Elvis Muraranganda, "SWAPO Welcomes Back Expelled Quartet," *New Era* (Windhoek), May 12, 2016.

²⁹ "Geingob Lures Hamutenya Back to Swapo," *The Villager* (Windhoek), August 30, 2015.

the CoD, was widely considered another sign that SWAPO's hegemony was even further entrenched.

Geingob resorted to other strategies to anchor the party's dominance even more. In a surprise move, on September 25, 2015, he appointed Katuutire Kaura, the former president of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, as advisor to the governor of the Kunene region.³⁰ This was the only region in which SWAPO had not yet held an absolute majority. The move was considered an effort to make inroads into the support base of the DTA—and it was successful, as the regional council and local authority elections on November 27, 2015, documented. In the build-up to the date, the media expressed great concern that the opposition parties seemed weaker than ever, and that election campaigns were largely absent. The only newsworthy items were local SWAPO power struggles over the list of candidates. SWAPO faced no contest in twenty-six of the 121 regional council constituencies and for five of the fifty-seven local authorities. Voter turnout for the ninety-five contested constituencies in the regional elections was 36.5 percent, an all-time low. SWAPO candidates took 112 of the 121 regional council seats and won a clear majority in all fourteen regions, seizing all but two of the forty-two seats in the National Council, the upper chamber of Namibia's bicameral parliament (composed of representatives from the regional councils), with one seat each for the DTA and the United Democratic Front of Namibia. SWAPO also extended its firm control by securing absolute majorities in fifty-four of the fifty-seven local authorities.³¹ For many observers, this was a clear indication that there was little democratic competition in Namibia, even in those regions where SWAPO previously had less influence due to ethnic local affiliations.

Mobilization, Money, and Media

With its unique status based on liberation history and its current dominance, SWAPO is able to secure additional support, which strengthens its hegemonic status further. Not surprisingly, the Commonwealth Observer Mission for the 2014 Presidential and National Assembly Elections noticed that “smaller parties had a lower level of visibility which was attributed to fewer resources.”³² Indeed, the grossly skewed resource base of political parties in Namibia is another aspect that contributes to the overwhelming dominance of SWAPO, beyond its image as Namibia's liberation party and the wide acceptance of the party being the government and the government being the state. This notion, which clearly blurs the boundaries, is indirectly the message of the SWAPO

³⁰ “New Advisor Kaura Coy on Political Affiliation,” *New Era* (Windhoek), September 16, 2015.

³¹ For more details on the election results, see Electoral Commission of Namibia, RC & LA Elections Results, <http://www.ecn.na/rc-la-elections-results-2015> (accessed January 5, 2016).

³² Artemisa Franco and Victor Shale, *Report of the Commonwealth Expert Team: Namibia Presidential and National Assembly Elections, 28 November 2014* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2014), 6.

election program, which identifies state-funded projects as party achievements. This perspective was evident when, in late 2012, in violation of the constitution, the party's secretary-general was appointed by President Pohamba as a member of the cabinet. The new cabinet appointed for the legislative period 2015–2020 also adopted the 2014 SWAPO electoral manifesto—with immediate effect—as the document directing all state institutions and agencies as well as state-owned enterprises in their strategic plans.³³

The dominant party system of Namibia has turned into a full-fledged hegemony, which cements the status quo: the more votes, the more influence, the more support, the more hegemony, reinforcing SWAPO's commanding position to the disadvantage of smaller parties. In the absence of any meaningful challenge, the dominant party can continue its command over society without any major obstacle. The party-controlled state is the main employer in Namibia, with its population of 2.3 million, among whom one hundred thousand civil servants are family breadwinners. The state is under the firm control of a government in which there is only one party with influence, thus political loyalty to the official discourse set by SWAPO is internalized, to a large degree, as a means for survival. Civil servants are dependent upon the state, which is run (if not owned) by the party. The party is perceived to be the decisive factor behind the state as the employer that provides one's job and secures one's income. Almost all officials who decide on recruitment for high-ranking positions have strong party loyalties, thus, publicly articulating deviating views risks job security.

With state tenders being the most important source of income for large parts of the private sector, there is little to no inclination among entrepreneurs not to toe the party line, even less to support parties other than SWAPO in any visible way. The limited restructuring of the economy under the label “black economic empowerment” promoted a culture of nepotism and favoritism linked closely to the party establishment. The new generation of so-called “tenderpreneurs” benefits from preferential allocation of state tenders as a result of close ties to the party leadership. Consequently, the only party able to secure meaningful private donations is the one in government, which also has party companies in operation that benefit from tenders of public land. The wide net of such patronage is another factor which further entrenches the political hegemony of SWAPO as the one and only party that promises returns on investment (i.e., returns on financial donations in support of the party).

Support for SWAPO is not limited to domestic support. In 2003, SWAPO disclosed that it had received a donation of N\$ 240,000 from the Chinese Communist Party.³⁴ At a gala dinner in the harbor town of Walvis Bay, held in

³³ Shinovene Immanuel, “Swapo Manifesto Becomes Govt Bible,” *The Namibian* (Windhoek), June 5, 2015.

³⁴ Max Weylandt, “Party Funding—An Overview,” *Perspectives on Parliament*, no. 2 (Windhoek, Namibia: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2016), 2.

support of the election campaign of SWAPO in November 2014, the Chinese company that was tasked with the port expansion pledged N\$ 60,000, while a local businessman contributed N\$ 500,000.³⁵ At a fundraising dinner in Windhoek for the same purpose, some N\$ 3.5 million were donated, while fundraising in the SWAPO home base of the Northern regions raised N\$ 8.6 million.³⁶ The party had the financial resources to rent airtime from the national radio and television broadcaster NBC for live televised nationwide coverage of the final Star Rally prior to the presidential and National Assembly elections.³⁷ While the amount paid was not disclosed, nobody seemed to consider it improper that a political party could rent the state-owned broadcasting company for its own purposes. It was critically observed, however, “that Swapo received a lion’s share of the airtime from the NBC,”³⁸ while the news coverage of opposition parties projected only negative images.³⁹

There were indications, as well, that “the ruling party was using state resources for election-related activities.”⁴⁰ The state infrastructure and assets of the public administration on numerous occasions have been useful for party-related activities. During the first week of July 2009 (some four months ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections), party and state president Pohamba toured several places for purposes of party political mobilization and, to a lesser extent, to fulfill official duties.⁴¹ His travels, which included a large entourage of civil servants, were arranged by the State House and conducted by state-financed transport. An editorial carried in the independent newspaper, the *Namibian*, questioned possible abuse of taxpayers’ money for political party purposes, to which the permanent secretary of the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting, in his role as spokesperson for the government, responded that President Pohamba, as Head of State, is on duty 24/7.⁴²

According to such logic, President Pohamba hosted a dinner in the State House to raise money for a forthcoming party congress in late 2012. Business personalities were invited to buy a seat at the table with the four

³⁵ Mathias Haufiku, “Gala Dinner Raises over N\$ 1 Million for Swapo,” *New Era* (Windhoek), November 10, 2014.

³⁶ “Swapo Raises N\$ 3.5 m at Windhoek Gala Dinner,” *Oshili 24* (Windhoek), November 21, 2014.

³⁷ Alvine Kapitako, “Geingob Thankful for Trust to Lead,” *New Era* (Windhoek), November 24, 2014.

³⁸ Franco and Shale, *Report of the Commonwealth Expert Team*, 8.

³⁹ Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), “Media Release: NBC Television News Coverage of 2014 Elections,” *Election Watch* (Windhoek, Namibia: Institute for Public Policy Research, November 10, 2014).

⁴⁰ Franco and Shale, *Report of the Commonwealth Expert Team*, 7.

⁴¹ Christof Maletsky, “Pohamba Appeals to Peace and Unity during Five-Day Tour,” *The Namibian* (Windhoek), July 9, 2009.

⁴² Mbeuta Ua-Ndjarakana, “President Is Head of State 24/7,” *The Namibian* (Windhoek), July 17, 2009.

top officials of the party (and also of the government), for N\$ 100,000. One of those in attendance, who made a fortune from government-initiated black empowerment deals, claimed to have donated N\$ 500,000.⁴³ Other habits include the use of state-funded transport for party purposes, adding to the clear advantage SWAPO has over any other political organization in Namibia. The concept that the party is the government and the government is the state in this way has very practical meaning.

Beyond generous self-serving opportunities for party officials in government, the dominant status of SWAPO is even more consolidated in financial terms through official party funding by the state, which is allocated proportionally based on election results. Party funding by the state was a cabinet decision introduced in 1997. Since public funding is allocated according to the number of votes received, the disparities are reflected in the financial contributions (see table 6).

Table 6. Public Funding for Political Parties, 2000–2015 (N\$)

Party	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2015
SWAPO	61,000,000	68,400,000	104,600,000
DTA	7,700,000	4,900,000	3,900,000
CoD	7,700,000	6,200,000	1,900,000
RDP	-	-	15,500,000

Source: Max Weylandt, “Party Funding—An Overview,” *Perspectives on Parliament*, no. 2 (Windhoek, Namibia: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2016), 3.

Note: These numbers are estimates only, and rounded to the nearest hundred thousand.

The 2014 Electoral Act formalized the funding arrangement and codified reporting rules.⁴⁴ The allocations are now based on proportional representation and a total allocation of government revenue not exceeding 0.2 percent of total revenue income for a financial year. Applying the formula for 2015–2016, a total of N\$ 116.8 million was put aside. Table seven shows the proposed distribution of these allocations based on the seat allocations for the National Assembly and the National Council. As a result, the SWAPO allocation for this year only “exceeds the funding all other parties have received over the last ten years combined.”⁴⁵

The Namibian case seems to confirm the resource theory of single-party dominance, which maintains that such parties under either democratic or authoritarian regimes “virtually win elections before election day, typically

⁴³ “N\$ 100k Dinner with Pohamba Raises Eyebrows,” *The Namibian* (Windhoek), November 12, 2012.

⁴⁴ For details, see Max Weylandt, “Party Funding—An Overview,” *Perspectives on Parliament*, no. 2 (Windhoek, Namibia: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2016), 4ff.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

Table 7. Public Funding for Parties, 2015–2016 (N\$)

Party	N\$
SWAPO	96,764,000
DTA	5,748,000
RDP	2,874,000
UDF	2,874,000
APP	1,916,000
NUDO	1,916,000
WRR	1,916,000
RP	958,000

Source: Max Weylandt, “Party Funding—An Overview,” *Perspectives on Parliament*, no. 2 (Windhoek, Namibia: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2016), 3, as tabled in the National Assembly on April 28, 2015.

Note: This calculation is based on the old composition of the National Council and does not include SWANU and UPM, with one seat each in the National Assembly.

without resorting to bone-crushing repression or persistent outcome-changing electoral fraud.”⁴⁶

A Case of Democratic Authoritarianism?

Renske Doorenspleet and Lia Nijzink explain the cases in which parties have enduring dominance by “the fact that they continue to be associated with important historical legacies, that they are well organized and deeply rooted political movements, and that they successfully manage leadership change and succession.”⁴⁷ SWAPO has scored remarkably well in all three categories. Transforming the liberation movement into a party, which more than twenty-five years into post-colonial governance is still largely dominated and controlled by the first generation of the liberation struggle’s leadership, is no minor achievement, although it comes at a price.⁴⁸ The tendency of a political gerontocracy to maintain control over the political sphere not only through the party but also in government and the public sphere has been described in a popular daily newspaper as follows:

⁴⁶ Greene, “A Resource Theory of Single-Party Dominance,” 156.

⁴⁷ Renske Doorenspleet and Lia Nijzink, “Why One-Party Dominance Endures in Some Democracies But Not Others,” in *One-Party Dominance in African Democracies*, ed. Renske Doorenspleet and Lia Nijzink (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 202.

⁴⁸ Henning Melber, Daniela Kromrey, and Martin Welz, “SWAPO of Namibia: Changing of the Guard? An Anatomy of Power within a Former Liberation Movement in a Dominant Party State,” *African Affairs* 116, no. 463 (2017): 284-310.

I looked at the faces of people attending the Foreign Policy Conference, and they are the same faces from Swapo Party and government of the last 26 years. The same people are being recycled with every new president, only in new positions. Nujoma, Pohamba and Geingob are all birds of a feather. Some people are more equal than others; more lucky (sic!) than others; more entitled than others. Without a godfather it is not easy in Swapo, even if you've been in exile.⁴⁹

SWAPO has provided continuity, a welcome stabilizing factor in the institutionalization of the new state. Also, it has allowed for a relatively smooth, unspectacular establishment of a new order under the hegemony of one party, whose “narrative connects powerfully to the ushering in of a new political order; the democratic regime of independent Namibia.”⁵⁰

To assume that a multiparty setting within a constitutional democracy would protect or prevent those executing political power from authoritarian forms of policy making, raises the question: How does one define authoritarianism? Despite all established institutional provisions and structures, which, based on democratic constitutional principles, in formal terms qualify Namibia’s political system as a full-blown multiparty democracy, the actual executed policy has strong elements of what could be labeled democratic or competitive authoritarianism. With regard to electoral dominance as “a near permanent feature of the post-apartheid political landscape,”⁵¹ Du Pisani therefore poses the question: “To what extent can a constitutional regime with free and fair elections be regarded as a consolidated social democracy if one party is guaranteed a comfortable majority in apparent perpetuity?”⁵² The overwhelming dominance of SWAPO and its advantages used to keep any opposition under control suggest that Namibia’s political system has the features of a hybrid regime. As E. Gyimah-Boadi reminds us, parties in most African countries (and presumably elsewhere) “are hardly conceived and developed as mechanisms for representation, conflict resolution, opposition and accountability, or institutionalization of democratic behaviour and attitudes.”⁵³ It hence ought to be no surprise that, in the absence of any genuine and credible alternative, in the spirit of the “struggle days” and one of its most

⁴⁹ “SMS of the Day,” *The Namibian* (Windhoek), July 28, 2016), <http://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?page=sms-all&date=2016-07-28> (accessed July 28, 2016).

⁵⁰ André Du Pisani, “The Politics and Resource Endowment of Party Dominance in Namibia: The Past as the Present and the Future?” in *Friend or Foe? Dominant Party Systems in Southern Africa: Insights from the Developing World*, ed. Nicola de Jager and Pierre du Toit (Cape Town: UCT Press, and Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2013), 136.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵² *Ibid.*

popular slogans (“SWAPO is the nation and the nation is SWAPO”), the former liberation movement as a party remains the nation to a large extent, and the nation to a similarly large extent remains SWAPO. It is an entirely different matter, however, if this equation from the so-called struggle days is a desirable integral part of a free and fair multiparty democracy based on the rule of law and the respect for otherness, in practice.

Recent analyses of authoritarian forms of democracy maintain that many regimes considered democratic “have either remained hybrid or moved in an authoritarian direction.” These analyses suggest that one should “stop thinking of these cases in terms of transitions to democracy and ... begin thinking about the specific types of regimes they actually are.”⁵⁴ The concept of “competitive authoritarianism” is defined as “civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents.” At a closer look, therefore, they are not truly democratic “because the playing field is heavily skewed.”⁵⁵

In its normative frameworks, Namibia fully embraces the legal franchises of a democratic state: universal suffrage, regular elections, legal guarantees for national civil and human rights, the right to associate and organize, and legal protection against the haphazard exercise of power. Political practices by the hegemonic party, however, document that these formal and legal aspects of the democratic state at times are ignored or bypassed. The “party state” is transformed into a “party machine” as “a vehicle for the upward mobility of party elites and for material accumulation justified ideologically to the historical rightness of transformation.”⁵⁶ Informal and shadow networks that are controlled by the party establishment are exercised through the state apparatus and applied to promote its own gains, but also to repress opposition by means of a skewed playing field. Given the features of the current democracy in Namibia, it seems no exaggeration to qualify it as “unfinished business.”⁵⁷

Little systematic comparative attention has been paid so far to the political practices that are manifested in the subregion of southern Africa under former

⁵³ E. Gyimah-Boadi, “Political Parties, Elections and Patronage: Random Thoughts on Neo-Patrimonialism and African Democratization,” in *Votes, Money and Violence: Political Parties and Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Mattias Basedau, Gero Erdmann, and Andreas Mehler (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute, 2007), 25.

⁵⁴ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-65.

⁵⁵ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

⁵⁶ Roger Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party & State in Southern Africa* (Woodbridge, UK: James Currey, 2013), 247.

⁵⁷ Bryan M. Sims and Monica Koep, eds., *Unfinished Business: Democracy in Namibia* (Pretoria: Idasa, 2012).

liberation movements that now are governments.⁵⁸ Their trajectory leads to a specific form of authoritarian rule. The case of Namibia offers a wide range of evidence that testifies to this. While Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way selected Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, four somewhat geographically related case studies, they neglected Namibia as maybe the best of these examples (jointly with South Africa) to support their hypothesis: “The most durable party-based regimes are those that are organized around non-material sources of cohesion, such as ideology, ethnicity, or bonds of solidarity rooted in a shared experience of violent struggle.”⁵⁹ As they conclude: “Revolutionary or liberation struggles also tend to produce a generation of leaders ... that possesses the necessary legitimacy to impose discipline during crises.” Hence, “new ruling parties that emerged from violent struggle, such as SWAPO in Namibia, ... appear to be more durable.”⁶⁰

Nic Cheeseman’s general assessment of the state of democracy in Africa (in which Namibia is missing) predicts in passing that “SWAPO and ANC will find it harder to sustain their broad membership base when the unifying force of nationalism begins to wane.”⁶¹ Indeed, the ANC is starting to show considerable wear and tear and is finding its dominance eroding after two decades in control of government. Twenty-five years and thereby a generation into independence (with the so-called born-free voters still representing a considerable portion of the electorate), such weakening of the dominant party clearly is not (yet) the case in Namibia. Cheeseman ends his comparative study with the somewhat comforting general conclusion: “It is far too early to give up on democracy in Africa.”⁶² Despite the sobering analysis of Namibia’s state of democracy, maybe one should end on a similar positive note by adapting this statement to the Namibian case. Because there is: an absence of open abuse of the structures, institutions, and normative frameworks as designed by the constitution and the existing legislation; an independent judiciary and a free press; hardly any physical harassment of a benign political opposition; and the general willingness to endure (though grudgingly) critical analyses without immediate punishment of those considered and labelled “unpatriotic” or “prophets of doom,” it might be far too early to give up on democracy in Namibia.

While competitive authoritarian regimes might not meet all criteria for political governance that is fully committed to democracy, at the same time,

⁵⁸ Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power*.

⁵⁹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Beyond Patronage: Ruling Party Cohesion and Authoritarian Stability,” paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, September 2-5, 2010, 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁶¹ Nic Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 189.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 232.

they fall short of full-scale authoritarian forms of political rule. Despite manipulating or bypassing democratic principles at times, “they are unable to eliminate them or reduce them to a mere façade.”⁶³ What this perspective does not consider, however, is the popular legitimacy on which the relative strength of such a regime could be based. Such strength allows those executing political hegemony and control to preserve formal democracy as the only game in town, at least officially, without any risk to their dominance. The real test of how democratic Namibia’s democracy really is will occur only when SWAPO’s dominance is challenged seriously for the first time.

⁶³ Levitsky and Way, “Elections without Democracy,” 53.