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***“One Namibia, One Nation”?  
Social Cohesion under a Liberation Movement as  
Government in Decline***

Henning Melber\*

**Abstract**

*Namibia has been widely perceived as a successful case of negotiated independence, governed since 1990 by the former liberation movement. For a quarter of a century the movement turned party expanded its political dominance. Of lately, this hegemony showed cracks. The credibility and reputation, and hence the trust into those in government has been damaged due to a number of contributing factors. This has also resulted in a decline of social cohesion as part of the slippery road in so-called nation building. This article examines the course since independence and the more recent tendencies, pointing at the failures to enhance a social contract, which the ordinary people in the various communities could identify with and honor. Rather, centrifugal tendencies suggest, that the high tide of the former liberation movement as government has entered a phase of ebb.*

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## Introduction

Social cohesion is a bond that holds a group together, even if individuals within the group have different backgrounds or circumstances. This bond can be seen through members' common values and behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

This article investigates the degree of social cohesion in the context of Namibian society more than 30 years into independence. The analysis revisits the transformation of the anticolonial South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO of Namibia) as the dominant Swapo Party in political power since independence<sup>2</sup> and its recent decline in hegemony. In the absence of any meaningful political alternative at independence, the impact of a de-facto one-party regime unfolding during the first three decades as a form of "competitive authoritarianism" in midst of a multi-party democracy is scrutinized in the light of more recent erosion of the largely uncontested SWAPO dominance.<sup>3</sup>

Namibia continues to rank in all comparative surveys of African states among the top five performers in terms of good governance on the continent.<sup>4</sup> But the comparatively favorable assessments go hand in hand with symptoms of social anomy such as exceptional high rates of suicides, so-called passion killings,<sup>5</sup> baby dumping, child abuse, rape and other forms of gendered violence. In contrast to the positive global rankings this documents a deeply entrenched daily brutality in human interactions. The relative political stability contrasts with the deprived living conditions of the majority of the population in one of the most unequal societies of this world. The authoritarian social engineering within such environment by the dominant party and the signs of eroding hegemony are the focus of this article.

It draws attention to the notion of social cohesion as a relevant ingredient to a sustainable social contract for functioning democracies. Langer et. al. (2017: 325)

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<sup>1</sup> ""What Is Social Cohesion? - Definition & Theory." Study.com, 14 March 2016, [study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-social-cohesion-definition-theory-quiz.html](https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-social-cohesion-definition-theory-quiz.html).

<sup>2</sup> SWAPO and Swapo Party are both in common use. In this paper the term SWAPO is used throughout.

<sup>3</sup> The analysis is partly based on earlier efforts to come to terms with Namibia's socio-political culture (see more recently i.a. Melber 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2020, 2021a, 2021b and Melber/Kromrey/Welz 2017). I am grateful to A. Nonny Mouse for the reliable supply with official documents.

<sup>4</sup> These surveys include in particular the Mo Ibrahim Index, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, and the Freedom House Index and the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index. Reporters Without Borders rank Namibia's media freedom highest in Africa, and higher than in several Western democracies, including the USA.

<sup>5</sup> "Passion killing" is a euphemism, which refers to forms of mainly male brutal violence against female (former) partners, often ending in gruesome murder followed by (attempted) suicide.

identify three substantive components for a Social Cohesion Index (SCI) in African societies: inequalities, trust and identities. As they maintain, “social cohesion is a matter of how people perceive the society in which they live” (Langer et. al. 2017: 336). As summarized elsewhere in parallel: “Cohesion has been linked to positive economic performance; stronger consensus; support for democracy, stability and conflict prevention in times of crisis; and better health and livelihood outcomes” (UNDP 2017: 39).

Langer et. al. (2017: 332) base their SCI overview on aggregated data for 2005, 2008 and 2012 using Afrobarometer surveys from 19 countries (including Namibia). The score of Namibia’s SCI lands on position 8 (2005), 13 (2008) and 12 (2012). It seems a justified assumption, that given recent trends Namibia has since the 2012 SCI not headed for a course “From Divided Past to Cohesive Futures”. As the editors of a volume with this title suggest, at the heart of social cohesion (a concept they consider as “poorly researched and understood”)

lies the notion of a society that is greater than and therefore protective of its various parts. Such a society allows its individual members and their several smaller communities of cultural, regional, gendered, or religious belonging to pursue mutually fruitful relationships with confidence. (Hino et. al. 2019: 2)

Measured against such parameters, this article observes rather less than more social cohesion under the continued government of the former liberation movement. The erosion of political legitimacy and trust is a significant indicator that more is required than a heroic narrative of “we have liberated you” to maintain support and identification with the form of governance executed.

### **From liberation movement to dominant party**

Founded in 1960, SWAPO, from the mid-1960s onward, decided to wage an armed struggle against the illegal South African occupation of Namibia. The liberation movement was subsequently recognized by the United Nations General Assembly as the only legitimate representative of the Namibian people<sup>6</sup> – in retrospective a rather dubious (though maybe understandable) response to the continued violation of international law by the Apartheid regime (Melber 2004). After securing the mandate to constitute the first government of the

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3111 of 12 December 1973 recognized SWAPO as “the authentic representative of the Namibian people”. This was amended in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 31/146 of 20 December 1976 to “sole and authentic”, endorsing an exclusive status and political monopoly of SWAPO in the negotiations on behalf of the Namibian population.

Republic of Namibia by means of an absolute majority of votes obtained in the United Nations supervised elections of November 1989, SWAPO soon after independence (21 March 1990) transformed into Swapo Party. The former liberation movement for the next 25 years entrenched and expanded its power as the elected Namibian government. The official discourse and political practice during the first generation into independence displayed the affinity to authoritarian structures required waging a war. Independent Namibia was largely dominated by the heroic narrative of a patriotic history, according to which SWAPO liberated the people, who in return owe SWAPO their unconditional loyalty (cf. Melber 2003 and 2005).

The internal logic of a former guerrilla movement organized through a military hierarchy and chain of command, and its fear of enemy infiltration remains a central reference point to the way many members of Namibia's ruling party work and think. The unofficial view remains widespread from the national leadership down to the party foot soldiers that SWAPO, the government, and the state are identical and indivisible. According to the official paradigm, SWAPO single-handedly brought democracy as well as development and progress to Namibia, and any form of opposition is undermining the peace and unity needed for the nation-building project. The identification with such reading of history by the former liberation movement was indeed a strong factor, which guided the voting behavior of the electorate for a quarter of a century. This, however, despite all its success, carried a flaw. As Abrahams (2016: 105), summarizing Gilian Hart (2013) with regard to the similar trajectory pursued by South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), pointed out, narratives using national myths, symbols and heroes "are not just forms of draconian power from above as coercive tropes of citizenship". Rather, they carry moral weight by connecting

with specific histories, memories and experiences of racial oppression, racialized dispossession and struggle against apartheid. Precisely because official articulations of nationalism tap into popular understandings of freedom, justice and liberation from racial oppression, they bolster the ruling bloc's hegemonic project in crucial ways. (Hart 2013: 23)

At the same time, and in marked contrast to the rather bumpy rides of South African presidents in the succession of Nelson Mandela, SWAPO's three candidates in the first five presidential elections (1994 to 2014) received massive approval among the electorate by garnering even more votes than the party.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> While in many states (including South Africa), the Head of State is appointed by the governing party, Namibians elect every five years not only the members of the National Assembly based on party lists by a strictly proportional voting system, but in parallel the state president based on a list of individual

directly elected Head of State holds a large degree of executive power over state affairs (Melber 2015b). SWAPO’s first president Sam Nujoma served through a change of the Constitution a third term as Head of State (1990-2005),<sup>8</sup> followed by his trusted confidante Hifikepunye Pohamba (2005-2015), who at the end of his second term was awarded the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Good Governance.<sup>9</sup> Hage Geingob, the third (and most likely last) of SWAPO’s first-generation veterans, when voted the first time into the highest state office in 2014 scored even higher than his predecessors. An Afrobarometer survey in 2014 confirmed exceptional approval rates of the SWAPO candidates for trust and performance, ranked among the highest on the continent: Nujoma 76% and 78%, Pohamba 81% and 88%, Geingob 79% and 89% (Institute for Public Policy Research/Afrobarometer 2014).<sup>10</sup>

The electoral conformism with one party in what has been considered as by and large free and fair elections, as well as the social capital (i.e. trust) vested in the party’s presidential candidates, in combination with the reputation of having liberated the country from colonial minority rule, suggested a high degree of social cohesion. At least the election results for the National Assembly suggested so until 2014 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Parliamentary election results of Namibia's larger parties (1989–2014)<sup>11</sup>

Party	1989*	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
SWAPO	384.567	361.8	408.174	620.609	602.58	715.026
	56.90%	73.89%	76.15%	75.83%	74.29%	80.01%

candidates, until 2014 each representing one of the competing parties and internally nominated by these.

<sup>8</sup> This was motivated by the fact that he was appointed for the first term by the members of the Constituent Assembly and not through direct election by the voters. He therefore was allowed to stand for a third term in the national presidential elections (see Melber 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See for a critical assessment of his achievements Melber (2016).

<sup>10</sup> The approval rates for Nujoma were based on results of a survey from 2002, Geingob’s rates were for his position as Prime Minister.

<sup>11</sup> Based on official figures released by the Electoral Commission of Namibia in the Supplement: “Celebrating 25 years of Democratic Elections”, published jointly by the local newspapers *Republikein*, *Namibia Sun* and *Allgemeine Zeitung* (December 2014), 10–11.

DTA**	191.532	101.748	50.824	42.07	25.393	42.933
	28.34%	20.78%	9.48%	5.14%	3.13%	4.80%
UDF***	37.874	13.309	15.685	30.355	19.489	18.945
	5.60%	2.72%	2.93%	3.71%	2.40%	2.12%
CoD****			53.289	59.464	5.375	3.402
			9.94%	7.27%	0.66%	0.38%
RDP***					90.556	31.372
					11.16%	3.51%

Election results in thousands

\* Elections for the Constituent Assembly, which in 1990 became the National Assembly

\*\* Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, renamed the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM) in 2017

\*\*\* United Democratic Front

\*\*\*\* Congress of Democrats (founded in 1999)

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

SWAPO was almost insurmountable for any political opposition. – Even more so, when such opposition for decades was hardly any alternative to the party in power: “a weak opposition has contributed significantly towards one-party dominance” (Kaapama et. al. 2007: 92). Based on the lacklustre 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” (Cooper 2014: 127). Given the disproportionality of the party landscape, an Afrobarometer survey presented in March 2014 concluded that the “political system seems to deliver more

democracy than the population seems to demand” (Lindeke 2014: 1), since a participatory political culture had not yet developed. While democratic consolidation took place in the institutional domain, “democratic values, behaviours and expectations are yet to catch up” (Lindeke 2014: 14). With the election results of 2014, Namibia’s political sphere remained more than ever the arena of one party. The slogan from the struggle days that “SWAPO is the nation and the nation is SWAPO” illustrated the dominant political culture.

Doorenspleet and Nijzink (2013: 202) explain such cases of enduring party 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”. Namibian political culture and realities illustrated this in an almost unprecedented way. Not only provided the continuity a welcome stabilizing factor in the institutionalization of the new state. It also allowed for a relatively smooth and unspectacular establishment of a new order under the hegemony of one party only, whose “narrative connects powerfully to the ushering in of a new political order; the democratic regime of independent Namibia” (Du Pisani 2013: 136). This corresponds with the assessment by Levitsky and Way (2010: 3, 44 and 45):

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. (...) Revolutionary or liberation struggles also tend to produce a generation of leaders ... that possesses the necessary legitimacy to impose discipline during crises. ... new ruling parties that emerged from violent struggle, such as SWAPO in Namibia, ... appear to be more durable.

But even such durability needs to bridge a generational divide. At a moment in time where the expiry date for most first generation SWAPO activists with struggle credentials approaches, the heroic narrative turns into an anachronism. Already an Afrobarometer survey of November/December 2012 showed that only half of those interviewed in the age group between 18 and 24 years were interested in public affairs. 23% among them and 25% of the 25 to 34 years old did not care if they lived in a democratic state. In almost all age groups the importance of religion was rated higher than politics (Institute for Public Policy Research 2013).

### **Social versus political realities**

The promises during the days of the anti-colonial struggle of “Solidarity, Freedom, Justice”, were after independence reiterated as the party’s official motto in its revised constitution<sup>12</sup> - while, interestingly enough, the term “equality” never featured in official vocabulary. But as Abrahams (2016: 107) observed for South Africa: “What good is an imperative for justice if it is only an aspirational goal espoused in the Constitution, but never finds expression in choices by ordinary people every day?”

Instead, national reconciliation became the programmatic slogan for a cooptation strategy based on the structural legacy of settler colonial minority rule and its corresponding property relations – SWAPO’s strategy becoming one of facilitating, as cultural entrepreneur an elite pact, which by means of an Africanization of the settler structure, reinvented “a historical communality and continuity among the Namibian people(s) and projected a common destiny into the future” (Du Pisani 2010: 16). The reconfiguration of the socio-economic landscape, based on control over the political commanding heights of the Namibian state, operated through the vehicles of Affirmative Action (AA) and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), a redistributive strategy based on the cooptation of a new elite into the old socio-economic structures. National reconciliation of such a class character could only be “an elite discourse bent on maintaining the legitimacy of the state and responding to the inherent contradictions that characterize SWAPO’s [own] anti-colonial discourse” (Du Pisani 2010: 31). Public procurement and other outsourcing activities by those in control of state agencies turned AA and BEE into a self-rewarding scheme based on struggle credentials and credits among the activists of the liberation movement. Through such practices, the skewed class character of Namibia’s society changed little. But cooptation into the ruling segments of an existing socioeconomic system is very different from social transformation. The ongoing exclusion of the impoverished and marginalized from the benefits of the country’s wealth and resources is no longer only the result of the structural legacy of Apartheid, as is so conveniently claimed by the new postcolonial elite. To that extent the official position, which continues to put the blame squarely on settler colonialism alone, is misleading and shying away from the real issues at

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<sup>12</sup> SWAPO PARTY, Constitution of SWAPO PARTY. Adopted by the First Congress of SWAPO PARTY in an Independent Namibia, December 6 – 12, 1991 and amended by SWAPO PARTY EXTRA ORDINARY CONGRESS, 27 – 28 August 1998. Windhoek, Republic of Namibia. Undated, p. 26 [[http://www.swapoparty.org/swapo\\_constitution.pdf](http://www.swapoparty.org/swapo_constitution.pdf)]

stake:

the term “previously disadvantaged” ... is being misused to the advantage of those who already have more than enough ... We’d do better to concentrate on efforts on the “presently disadvantaged” because only then will we make a real difference in our very economically divided society. (Lister 2005)

Policy turned in the main into self-enrichment within an unchallenged system of crude capitalism and related class structures. As a trade union-affiliated local think tank warned:

Affirmative action does not necessarily eradicate socioeconomic inequalities. Instead, inequalities may merely be shifted from the basis of race, ethnicity or gender to the basis of class. Affirmative action may promote the redistribution of opportunities in favour of previously disadvantaged groups, but it’s not the principal mechanism to redistribute wealth or to overcome poverty. (LaRRI 2005: 11)

The lifestyle enjoyed by a tiny (previously almost exclusively white) elite continued to contrast with the poverty of a majority of the people. As a report by the World Bank on the (lack of) achievements in expanding so-called human capital noted:

Inequalities inherited at independence persist, despite major efforts to eradicate them. They are evident in the distribution of access, learning outcomes, and resource inputs. These inequalities ... represent a threat to national cohesion, peace, and political stability, and a failure to realize the productive potential of a large proportion of the population. (Marope 2005: xviii; my emphasis)

An analysis of the first 15 annual state budgets saw “little reason to believe that public spending is becoming more equitable and more focused on the poor”, but “that public spending is becoming more rather than less inequitable” (Mbai/Sherbourne 2004: 1). The assessment concluded that “it is quite possible that poverty and inequality have worsened and that the national budget has done little to offset this trend” (Mbai/Sherbourne 2004: 4).

Average annual per capita income of US\$ 9,418 in 2014 put Namibia into the category of a higher middle-income country. According to the data presented in the Human Development Report (HDR) for 2015 (UNDP 2015), it ranked along with Morocco as 126th out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) in the medium human development category. But adjusted for inequality,

the HDI fell by 43.6%, leading to a drop of 25 places (the second worst worldwide after Iran). On the basis of 2013 data, the HDR 2015 categorised 44.9% of the population as living in multiple poverty.<sup>13</sup> Another 19.3% of the population were classified as close to multiple poverty. Hunger remained a daily experience for many. According to the UN State of Food Insecurity Report for 2015 (FAO/IFAD/WFP 2015), 42.3% of the population was undernourished in 2014, compared with 27.3% in 2002. In retrospective, these sobering socio-economic realities existed at the end of some “fat years” with high annual economic growth rates.

### **Shifting political discourse**

Given the huge discrepancy between the promises and the socio-economic realities even during the “good” times, it might have been a well-advised strategic decision to promote the Geingob presidency as one tasked to create more equitable distribution of the country’s wealth. While his predecessors - according to the 2014 election slogans - stood for peace (Nujoma) and stability (Pohamba), the party campaign promoted Geingob as the president tasked to bring prosperity.

After a year in office, local observers acknowledged that President Geingob had introduced new discourses, initiatives and programmatic declarations, but “struggled to turn rhetoric into action” (Hopwood 2016). His performance

... has been some mixed bag made up of some great rhetoric, wonderful intentions, interesting policy pronouncements, and some sound action and consultation on certain policies. There have also been actions that have seemingly contradicted the positive rhetoric and some inaction on certain issues, raising question marks about how much progress can be achieved. (Shejvali 2016: 3)

The president’s inaugural address as well as his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) marked an interesting shift in the official rhetoric towards a more inclusive terminology. Geingob did not any longer stress the role of SWAPO as the family embodying the Namibian nation. Instead, the “Namibian house” became the new figurative core image and reference point. In his inaugural address, Hage Geingob concluded:

All of us must play our part in the success of this beautiful house we call

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<sup>13</sup> Multiple poverty considers beyond the monetary income access to health and education facilities, sanitation, water and related services as factors contributing to destitution.

Namibia. We need to renew it from time to time by undergoing renovations and extensions. ... Let us stand together in building this new Namibian house in which no Namibian will feel left out. (Republic of Namibia 2015a: 7 and 8).

The first SONA elaborated in much detail his new approach in the opening passages:

Nation building is similar to building a house, and in our case, building the Namibian house. Firstly, you clear an area on which you build a solid foundation. You then lay the bricks and use cement to ensure that the bricks are kept in place. Allow the house to dry and firm up. Finally, you plaster the wall and it is important to let it dry before you paint the house.

The same is true for building the Namibian house. We cleared the area with United Nations supervised elections. After which we drafted the constitution as our foundation. The bricks of our house are the different ethnic groups and the mortar is the various laws passed in Parliament to hold us together. Allow the democracy to firm up and mature.

We are intent on building and maintaining a high quality house in which all its residents have a sense of shared identity. We are determined to build a house that will be a place of peace and refuge for all its children and a house in which no Namibian will be left out. (Republic of Namibia 2015b: 4; original emphasis)

The powerful metaphor continued to be a constant and integral feature of the president’s public statements. Concluding a series of 16 town hall meetings between 7 August and 10 November 2015 in the regional capitals, he again summarized his vision of the “strong unified house”, in which “the family moves in and lives together in unity and hopefully in peace”. Once “the house is plastered, the individual bricks disappear, meaning the individual ethnic and cultural groups are united into one wall. There is just one wall, one Namibia, One Nation.” (Republic of Namibia 2015d: 4; original emphasis) This approach was also stressed when opening the annual meeting of the Council of Traditional Leaders. The president then in no uncertain way emphasized the nature of a unitary state beyond ethnic and cultural bonds above the level of traditional leadership:

Cultural beliefs is (sic) the glue that holds communities together. Beliefs of cultural superiority is the poison that destroys nations. Therefore, it is expected of all Namibians to practice their traditions and cultures in a

manner that respects the rights of others and contributes to the process of nation building and national reconciliation.

In so doing, we can and will build a cohesive society, in which culture and tradition are unifying, rather than divisive forces. (Republic of Namibia 2015c: 2; my emphasis)

He further stressed the collective responsibility to promote welfare and advancement of all people, which required unity, leaving no Namibian behind: “Let us not think inward about ‘my tribe’ or ‘my people’ but let us think about the collective” (Republic of Namibia 2015c: 3). The Namibian House is a core term in the president’s statements since then. As a mantra cultivated, it recognizes the need for meaningful social cohesion, to transcend ethnicity “as the salient group division in society” (Langer et. al. 2017: 338). To be successful, however, it requires more than words.

The emphasis on inclusivity was complemented by the introduction of another core term during Geingob’s first year in office: “As leaders of our communities, let us always endeavour to accentuate the spirit of Harambee which is a Swahili principle that describes people pulling together in the same direction” (Republic of Namibia 2015c: 4; original Italics). Dubbed as the “Harambee Towards Prosperity for All” plan – subsequently the Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP) - he explained that the name was selected “because it resonates well with the Namibian public. It was chosen as a word that all Namibians speaking different languages could get behind and is consistent with the ideal of ‘no one should feel left out’” (Republic of Namibia 2015e: 14). In his opening speech of the 2016 National Assembly he elaborated further: “when I refer to the spirit of Harambee it is not a mere slogan but it is a call on the people of this Nation to adopt an ethos of unity, devoid of selfish ambition, and to pull in one direction for the sake of National prosperity” (Republic of Namibia 2016a: 6).

### **From promises to failure**

Subtitled “Government’s Action Plan towards Prosperity for All” and launched soon thereafter, HPP offered a wide range of promises, which – as Geingob pointed out in his Foreword - included among others a more transparent Namibia; a culture of high performance and citizen-centred service delivery; and a significant reduction in poverty levels (Republic of Namibia 2016b: 5). The illusionary wishful thinking was based on an anticipated annual economic growth rate of 7% at a time, when the economic prospects already signalled

tough times and rough waters ahead. With Angola’s oil economy in shambles and South Africa under the Zuma government’s state capture in full swing towards hitting rock bottom, the two most important economic partner countries in direct vicinity offered no promising exchange relations bolstering economic growth, while one of the worst droughts in Namibia’s recorded history was ravaging.

Since 2016 the country entered a recession, exacerbated by the devastating impacts of the Corona pandemic unfolding since early 2020. On occasion of the annual budget for 2021/22 the economic growth rates were given as 0% for 2016, -1.0% for 2017, 1.1% for 2018, -0.6% for 2019 and -8% for 2020 (Institute for Public Policy Research 2021: 1). Data released by the Statistics Agency showed a decline of gross domestic product in real terms as well as the corresponding average per capita income in 2020 to 2013 levels, which motivated a local journalist to title her article “economy on life support” (Duddy 2021).

The Plan was recycled for a second phase with the launching of HPP II for 2021 to 2025. It is indicative that its subtitle declares economic recovery as its goal. In his Foreword, President Geingob points out that poverty had been dramatically reduced between 1993 and 2016, while the first HPP “contributed in the fight against hunger poverty” (Republic of Namibia 2021: 6) – so much about the “significant reduction in poverty levels” as one of the main goals of the HPP for 2016/17 to 2020/21. “Now it is time”, urged Geingob at the launch, “to hold hands and build an economy that is inclusive and where growth is shared” (Republic of Namibia/The Presidency 2021: 7). 31 years into independence such insight seems a bit belated for anchoring a social contract enhancing social cohesion.

A comparison of the data and ranking in the HDR 2020 (UNDP 2020: 349 and 353) with the HDR 2015 figures presented above, confirms the sobering lack of progress during Geingob’s first term in office. Ranked 130, Namibia’s HDI dropped slightly, while – as a minor comfort – the inequality adjusted HDI “only” declined by 14 ranks (the eighth biggest difference of all countries). However, the income discrepancy maintained a top position: the richest 1% in society had an income share of 21.5%, the richest 10% of 47.3%, while the poorest 40% had an income share of 8.6%. A rather drastic contrast to the “prosperity for all” mantra, underlined by the second highest Gini-coefficient (measuring income inequality) with 59.1 – only topped by neighbouring South Africa. Despite all rhetoric under the Geingob administration, Namibia remained among the most unequal societies in the world.

Ordinary Namibians were aware of the lack of improvements. For respondents to an Afrobarometer survey undertaken in August 2019 (Survey Warehouse 2019a:

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.<sup>14</sup> 80.6% of the 1,200 respondents thought the country was going in the wrong direction. 72.6% described the economic conditions as very or fairly bad. 58.2% believed the economic conditions were worse or much worse than a year before, while 47.3% expected them to become even worse or much worse in 12 months' time (Survey Warehouse 2019b).

Those who trust the country's president decreased from 81% in 2014 to 60% in 2019. The trust in the National Assembly was with 46% the lowest since the first survey in 1999 (when it stood at 48%, peaked in 2012 and 2014 at 74% and declined to 47% in 2017). A decline in trust was also registered for the army (from 74% in 2012 to 61% in 2019), the police (from 76% in 2012 to 60% in 2019) and the courts of law (from 75% in 2012 to 54% in 2019). And while in 2014 still 74% trusted the Electoral Commission, this dropped to 54% in 2019 (Survey Warehouse 2020).

### **From political hegemony to reduced dominance**

Beyond these survey results, the first signs of wear and tear in the SWAPO hegemony became visible with the elections in November 2019 and November 2020, when dissatisfaction translated into a first decline of SWAPO's political control over the country's governance.

#### National Assembly and Presidential Elections 2019

As SWAPO's decline shows, ignoring or even dismissing criticism vested in factual evidence is not the best way to maintain legitimacy. The self-righteousness was displayed when Geingob during his election campaign at a townhall meeting rebuked criticism by declaring "elections are coming – go and defeat me there" (Tjitemisa 2019). As the election results then suggested (see Table 2), the sands were shifting slowly. With 65% SWAPO lost its two-third majority (2014: 80%).

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<sup>14</sup> Within three months following the survey, however, three ministers resigned for being implicated in corrupt practices. Notably, none of them was dismissed, but all were allowed a face-saving exit and explicitly recognized for their services in government.

Table 2: National Assembly Election Results for the top three parties 1989-2019<sup>15</sup>

	<b>SWAPO</b>	<b>DTA/PDM</b>	<b>CoD</b>	<b>RDP</b>	<b>LPM</b>
<b>1989</b>	56.9 %	28.3 %			
<b>1994</b>	73.9 %	20.8 %			
<b>1999</b>	76.2 %	9.5 %	9.9 %		
<b>2004</b>	75.8 %	5.1 %	7.3 %		
<b>2009</b>	74.3 %	3.1 %		11.2 %	
<b>2014</b>	80.0 %	4.8 %		3.5 %	
<b>2019</b>	65.5 %	16.6 %			4.7 %

As previous election results show with regard to the Congress of Democrats (CoD) and the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP), new political parties – even when created as break away by prominent SWAPO dissidents – failed to establish a sustainable alternative. They snatched votes from other opposition parties, only to become irrelevant later on (see Table 1 and 2). This time, the new kid on the block was the Landless Peoples’ Movement (LPM). It was founded after a fall out of the Deputy Minister of Land Bernadus Swartbooi (previously the regional governor of the !Karas region) with his Minister Utoni Nujoma (a son of Sam Nujoma) and the wider party over the land policy (Melber 2019: 77). LPM’s home base are the Nama communities living mainly in the Southern regions of Hardap and !Karas. With four seats LPM entered Parliament on 21 March 2020 as the third biggest party.

Hardly anticipated, the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM) became the main beneficiary of the frustration among the electorate and retained its status as the official opposition with a resounding success. Under its president McHenry Venaani the party had a name change during the legislative period 2015-2020 in an effort to leave behind the association of being a pro-South African “white”

<sup>15</sup> Based on Table 1 figures and Tjipuea (2019: 6) for the last elections.

party, which already in the first elections of 1989 campaigned as the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA). It quadrupled its share from four to 16 seats.

It became even worse for Hage Geingob, who was re-elected with a humiliating 56% (2014: 87%). Scoring almost 30% of votes, the “independent” SWAPO candidate Panduleni Itula personified the dissatisfaction among party followers and the deep internal factional rifts.<sup>16</sup> Expelled since then, he subsequently established the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC).

Confronted with the loss of the two-third parliamentary majority (if only by one seat) and his own humiliation by losing a third of the votes obtained in 2014 to Itula, president Geingob originally responded with a certain degree of humbleness: “I have heard you”, he reassured the citizens after the official election results were announced (Nakatana 2019). At the first Cabinet meeting after the elections, he declared 2020 as the “Year of Introspection” (NBC 2020). But in the build-up of the November 2020 Regional and Local Authority Elections the SWAPO campaign showed no signs of eating humble pie.

### **Regional and Local Authority Elections 2020**

Ahead of the elections, the fielding of candidates from the LPM and IPC created a new map of alternatives. The political panorama was further diversified by a wide range of independent candidates campaigning locally. Most notably, members of the social movement Affirmative Repositioning (AR) registered with the Electoral Commission (Mbathera 2020) for participating in the major urban constituencies. The AR was founded as a SWAPO-internal revolt, when leaders of the party’s Youth League embarked on a grass root course: in November 2014 they symbolically occupied land under development in the Windhoek municipality for an upmarket suburban expansion to highlight the lack of affordable access to urban plots and housing (Becker 2016). This part of challenging the party’s gerontocratic structures (Melber/Kromrey/Welz 2017: 305-307). The youth leaders subsequently lost their positions and finally abandoned the party to engage in local initiatives for improved living conditions of the marginalized. They thereby joined Swartbooi, Itula and others, who all had a political career in SWAPO before.

While this could have well been a warning signal, especially after the results of the National Assembly and Presidential Elections, party leaders continued to

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<sup>16</sup> Namibia’s electoral act requires beyond certain minimalist formal criteria (such as citizenship, age and no prison sentence) only a limited number of signatures by supporters to allow registering for and campaigning in presidential elections. Political affiliations of the candidates are irrelevant. Itula therefore remained defiant to leave SWAPO, using the analogy of a family feud, which still allows to stay in the family while seeking solutions.

brush aside the signs of dissatisfaction. Addressing soldiers in late August 2020, Defence Minister Peter Vilho accused whites being “obsessed with the idea of the black government failing”. He warned of regime change and lashed out at “misguided intellectuals” and “unpatriotic members of society”, who he blamed of seeking political mileage.<sup>17</sup> Responding in an opinion article to the wide range of criticism, he linked the white minority as root cause to all governance failures (Vilho 2020).<sup>18</sup> In mid-October President Geingob commented on the growing number of whites (their total number estimated at less than 5% of the population) registering as voters for the forthcoming elections. Suspecting them to do so in order to support anything but SWAPO he warned: “I will not forget that. People are declaring war against SWAPO”.<sup>19</sup> The targeted attack was widely criticized by other parties for being anti-democratic and promoting hate speech. Testifying to the heated atmosphere, the former commander of the Namibian army encouraged at a rally those in attendance to slit the throats of party defectors (Thlage 2020). The public outrage forced him to apologize on national TV (Nakale 2020).<sup>20</sup>

The blend of arrogance and intimidating rhetoric throughout 2020 lacked any signs of the declared “introspection”. The arrogance of power during the build-up to the election did not soften the frustration among voters. This was clearly articulated at the ballot boxes (see Table 3).

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<sup>17</sup> The remarks were recorded by The Namibian and documented at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwunrqKtWt8> (accessed 25 May 2021).

<sup>18</sup> It bears some irony, that the same minister was a few months later forced to resign. It was disclosed that in violation of his obligations as minister he had failed to declare a unit trust account in Hong Kong, where N\$ 3.4 million (2020 value) were deposited, most likely as a “bonus” for an arms deal entered with a Chinese company.

<sup>19</sup> His statement was recorded and is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHOOCU-R4WY>, (accessed 25 May 2021).

<sup>20</sup> He had earlier joined those who were forced leaving office, after he was implicated in the same dubious arms deal with a Chinese company, over which also Peter Vilho stumbled.

Table 3: Regional Councils Election Results 2020<sup>21</sup>

SWAPO	IPC	PDM	LPM*	NUDO	Other**
293,626	89,030	35,010	35,184	12,258	50,296
56.66 %	17.49 %	6.95 %	6.87 %	2.35 %	9.72 %

\*There is an inconsistency comparing the figures given with the official ranking and the percentage, compared with PDM. The overview is dated 01 April 2021 but seems to have not properly integrated the figures from the rerun elections for the Mariental Rural Constituency. The figures here are reproduced as given on the ECN web site.

\*\* Including nine parties and 90 independent candidates.

Total votes for SWAPO dropped proportionally from 83% in 2015 to 57%. The party was in sole control of the National Council before (composed by three seats from each region) and held 40 of 42 seats with an absolute majority in all 14 regions. It remained the biggest party in 10 of the 14 regions, but the dominance has now been reduced to 28 seats in the National Council. A further decline was stopped mainly because the strongholds in the North remained to a large extent loyal. The first-past-the-post election system for regional councilors also prevented worse. Since in many constituencies several opposition parties competed, SWAPO candidates were elected at times with a mere one-third of votes (in one Windhoek constituency by three votes only). “The combined opposition vote beat Swapo in at least 16 constituencies where the Swapo candidate was declared the winner” (Hopwood 2020).

In the local authority elections (see Table 4) SWAPO garnered just 40% (2015: 73%) overall votes. It maintained full control over 20 of the previously held 52 (out of 57) municipalities and town councils. The official election results announced by the Electoral Commission for the local elections had the following aggregated scores for all 57 local authorities:

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<sup>21</sup> Regional Council 2020 Elections results, <https://elections.na/RegionalCouncil.aspx> (accessed 24 November 2021).

Table 4: Local Authorities Election Results 2020<sup>22</sup>

SWAPO	IPC	LPM	PDM	AR	Other*
76,680	40,723	27,380	15,266	8,501	23,934
39.84 %	21.16 %	14.22 %	7.93 %	4.42 %	14.25 %

\*Including independent candidates. A total of 31 parties were campaigning in one or more of the local authority elections.

A disaster was not only the loss of the capital Windhoek but the degree of defeat. With previously 12 of the 15 seats in the municipality, SWAPO now holds five seats. Eight seats were won by the new competitors IPC (4), LPM (2), and AR (2), while party candidates from the PDM and the NUDO each gained one seat. Maybe the biggest symbolic humiliation was the subsequent appointment of Job Amupanda, the most prominent among the AR activists, as Windhoek’s mayor for 2021.

It suggests some loss of realism when President Geingob at the opening of the SWAPO’s Central Committee in May 2021 declared:

Let me make it categorically clear – Swapo did not lose the elections. Yes, we suffered setbacks in some towns but overall Swapo achieved victory, albeit with a reduced majority. (New Era 2021a)

Such denialism cannot detract from the fact, that these elections have put Namibia’s political culture at a crossroad. Frustrated members of the SWAPO establishment even suggested to withhold funds to financially starve towns and regions governed by other parties. Such threats were met with accusations that this would border to ethnic cleansing (Namibian Sun 2020). This stresses the centrifugal tendencies emerging, fueling regional if not tribal animosities.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Local Assembly 2021 Elections Results, <https://elections.na/LocalAssembly.aspx> (accessed 24 November 2021).

<sup>23</sup> The term tribalism and warning of tribal tendencies is increasingly used in the public discourse, also by highest-ranking political office bearers (including President Geingob).

### **The German-Namibian bilateral agreement**

Namibians also remain sub-divided over fundamental issues of how to come to terms with the past over and above the way of addressing the redistribution of wealth. Most prominently is the dispute over how best the bilateral Namibian-German relations address the issue of genocide committed by the soldiers of the German empire between 1904 and 1907/8 mainly among the Ovaherero and Nama, but also the Mbanderu, Damara and San in the eastern, central and southern parts of what was then colonial “German South West Africa” (cf. Melber 2017). While the Namibian government claims sole authority to represent the descendants of the victims, these have their own agencies through which they had mobilized and campaigned relentlessly for recognition of the historical guilt and adequate compensation. They were to a large extent ignored in the negotiations. In their view, the government denies them the recognition as those, whose ancestors were the first to engage in anti-colonial resistance also by military means with huge sacrifices and lasting effects.

The destructions inflicted upon the indigenous people by the colonial warfare and the subsequent entrenchment of what became known as Apartheid changed the demography of the country significantly. It impacted decisively on what emerged since then in terms of power relations among local groups and their degree of influence over national affairs through a centralized state. Not surprisingly, therefore, tempers flared high still 110 years later in a National Assembly debate in 2016, when MPs from the Ovaherero and Nama communities over and above party affiliation engaged in a dispute with the official policy approach by the SWAPO government. The leader of the official opposition party DTA (being a member of the Ovaherero) claimed that those directly affected as descendants of the victim groups were excluded from the negotiation process between Namibia and Germany initiated at the end of 2015 over how best to achieve reconciliation (The Namibian 2016). When he was supported by a SWAPO Member of Parliament from the Nama community, who had declared that the descendants felt like “stepchildren of their government”, the Minister of Land Reform Utoni Nujoma reminded her: “You are a member of this party, you must take note that all of us are affected” (Beukes 2016). This dismissed the fundamentally different degrees of exposure of communities to historical injustices committed during colonial times.

The government maintained such monopolistic approach throughout the more than five years of negotiations, which resulted in mid-May 2021 in a draft agreement initialled by the special envoys of the two countries. What has been

dubbed as “reconciliation agreement” faced since then enormous criticism by those agencies representing the descendants of the most affected groups (Kössler/Melber 2021). Government submitted a motion to Parliament seeking acceptance of the draft. Debated in June and (after an interruption related to a surge of the Covid-pandemic) September 2021, all parties except SWAPO rejected to endorse the document for ratification by the two foreign ministers. The controversy also included inner-SWAPO dissent, leading among others to a demonstrative public resignation from the party by a high-ranking state official (Ashipala 2021), and critical observations by SWAPO parliamentarians (Jason 2021). More importantly, it further entrenched the ethnic-regional animosities and rifts between groups in the Northern parts of the country under indirect colonial rule and those in the regions, which were (separated by the so-called Police Zone) under direct German settler colonialism and thereby much more massively affected by war, expropriation and through resettlement into reserves the destruction of their cultures as embedded in their original ways of life.

Confronted with the massive criticism, the government and SWAPO blame the communities for cultivating “tribal tendencies” by not accepting the state’s authority to represent them. But beyond the proclaimed “nation state” politics subsuming different groups under the “one Namibia one nation” mantra, there is a relevant different moral and historical perspective, which can claim legitimacy. This is about how best and most adequate to deal with a colonial past, which directly affected specific groups in markedly different ways from others, but who are nowadays (maybe even because of the consequences then) not adequately represented in the country’s central state and governance. As the leader of the official opposition PDM, McHenry Venaani, stated during the parliamentary debate, an agreement with some token payment of “nothing but aid” (New Era 2021b) is “lack of empathy on the part of both governments with the affected communities that led to the most logical conclusion on the part of the affected communities that the suggested agreement before us is not worth the paper it was written on” (Ngatjiheue 2021).

But when the central state and the party occupying the government rule at arm’s length, such kind of imposed nationalism as “version of social cohesion inadvertently becomes the seedbed for racism and ethnic chauvinism against those who are perceived not to belong”, as Abrahams 2016: 106) warned with reference to South Africa. After all,

Where ethnicity is politicized and people see themselves, whether defensively or triumphally, as belonging primarily to a particular group rather than to the nation as a whole, then the cohesion of a society is

clearly at risk.

It follows that policies conducive to social cohesion must aim to weaken exclusive identities and strengthen inclusive ones. (Hino et. al. 2019: 3).

As the impact on inter-ethnic relations by the way bilateral German-Namibian negotiations were conducted shows, the deepening divide between those governing and those marginalised translates “one Namibia one nation” practically into the exclusion of those who should be central to the solution. It is therefore not the frustrated and alienated communities to be blamed for fuelling ethnic tensions, but those who govern through disrespect of legitimate local and regional agencies and thereby fail to integrate and to instil a sense of common collectiveness. The leader of the LPM articulated this in his speech to the National Assembly in no uncertain terms:

In Namibia the state belonged to the Germans, then the Afrikaners, and today, it's the Northern elites. (...)

The question is: do the victims of the Genocide belong to the political community of Namibia, or is their identity a hindrance to their full enjoyment of citizenship? ... this Declaration of projects demonstrates that this nation-state does not belong to all. (Swartbooi 2021: 13)

### **Conclusion: Between cohesion and coercion**

This article has summarized the transformation of the anti-colonial movement SWAPO into the government within a de facto political one party state guided by a constitutionally enshrined system of multi-party democracy, and pointed at the further reproduction of huge socio-economic disparities under the politics of a new elite in the post-Apartheid era; it then presented the essential shift in the official narrative as introduced by the country's third president Hage Geingob since 2015 and the subsequent decline of popular support in the elections of November 2019 and November 2020. Finally, the fall out over the bilateral German-Namibian reconciliation agreement underlines the cracks in social cohesion, understood as “building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a community enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community” (Stanley 2003: 7). Such understanding clearly points to the need of a material basis, without which social cohesion remains an empty rhetorical shell reduced to a

promise and remote goal. A socially cohesive society “involves aspects which are part of the individual life situation and in this sense components of the individual quality of life”, which should be “the common overarching policy goal with social cohesion as an important component to be addressed” (Berger-Schmitt 2000: 7).

In the absence of a more efficient policy coherence, which would be able to link the narrative of the SWAPO government(s) with material delivery for the majority of the people and dismissing sufficient recognition of multiple identities in terms of political, cultural and ethnic background as well as other forms of deviating behaviour from the established norms and values defined by those in political power, social cohesion in Namibia remains superficial and less anchored than it claims to be. While there is undeniably a link between social cohesion and a political discourse relating to the (albeit inexplicit) notion of a developmental state, its lack of implementation contrasts with social realities and economic disparities. Social relationships remain vulnerable in the light of the degree of inequality among the citizens and the absence of a joint identity among the citizenry beyond the pithy “Namibian and proud of it” – a popular slogan displayed on stickers at independence. It has since then lost its powerful message and disappeared from the public domain.<sup>24</sup> Belonging remains defined alongside the “Namibian-ness” to a large extent by local-cultural and historically connected factors and a definition of “previously disadvantaged” translating into a new class of politically connected beneficiaries from access to state power and public administration. Namibian unity has not achieved a state of “organic” growth, measurable also in terms of more socio-economic equality. But

social cohesion derives basically from equity in the distribution of the very social outcomes (e.g. health results, security, economic well-being, education) that it contributes to’. If society fails to distribute its social outcomes equitably, social cohesion deteriorates and social outcomes suffer. Social cohesion is not merely an appeal to compassion and a council of virtue. (Stanley 2003: 8)

As the recent political developments indicate, Namibian society is in 2021 further away from “unity in diversity” as it had been at independence and turned into a deeply divided society. The social imaginary that guides politics remains more impregnated and designed by the heroic narrative of SWAPO as the national liberation movement executing control over politics and society than by the

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<sup>24</sup> It occasionally resurfaces when Namibians perform exceptionally well abroad on international stages – be it in beauty contests or in track and field athletics. Significantly so, such individual achievements become nationalized and serve to bolster the collective pride.

diversity of historical experiences brought together in the “One Namibia, one nation” paradigm. This has become increasingly anachronistic and has lost its appeal especially to younger voters, who see no need to be loyal to SWAPO for historical reasons. They have not been liberated from settler-colonial rule but were born into an independent Namibian state, in which they measure governance against delivery. As summed up by Dobler (2019: 25) after having observed the elections in 2014:

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.

For SWAPO, this is unpatriotic and a betrayal. Speaking at a press conference on occasion of a meeting of the Southern Africa Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation in Windhoek, the Inspector-General of Namibia’s police warned of “the phenomena of radicalisation of the youth in our region who are singing the song of regime change” (NAMPA 2020). But, as Stanley (2003: 9) categorically states: “Socially cohesive societies incorporate diversity and use it, not exclude it.”

When drawing conclusions on the degree of social cohesion in Namibia, one should – despite (or even because) of the political hegemony under a former liberation movement occupying the commanding heights of government and state – consider the warning by Stanley (2003: 9):

Authoritarian societies ... mimic many of the characteristics of socially cohesive societies. They coordinate action of members in a way which looks like willing cooperation (but which always has a coercive component). They have a very stable social order. The dominant values of the state or group are shared or even mystically clung to (at least in public), leading to communities of interpretation. They exhibit a dramatic capacity for collective action. However, they succeed in achieving these characteristics at the price of coercion and exclusion.

Notwithstanding a so far still better performance in terms of consolidation of political dominance than any other of the former liberation movements in power, Namibia under SWAPO faces a similar challenge as South Africa under the ANC, when “enmeshing social cohesion with nation-building”, which “reduces social cohesion to a banal form of nationalism that required enactment of certain

allegiances – to the symbols and historical narratives of ... liberation” (Abrahams 2016: 105). This loses sight of the required social compact (and contract), which aims at inclusivity far beyond party-political affinities. Despite the overwhelming dominance of one political agency, Namibia has remained a deeply divided society. Current tendencies of further divisions illustrate that cohesion remains a remote goal as long as nation building is limited to the exclusive project of a former liberation movement as government.

While “living in a cohesive, high trust, low inequality society is likely to increase general wellbeing”, it is an entirely different story if “groups across society have very different perspectives” (Langer et. al. 2017: 337). After all: “Democracies are more resilient and function better when ties of trust and reciprocity bind citizens to each other and to the state”, while “inequality and exclusion undermine social cohesion and the fabric that hold a society together” (Menocal 2021: 394). After three decades in political power, SWAPO has wasted social capital and sacrificed the asset of social cohesion for short-term individual gains of a new elite.

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