

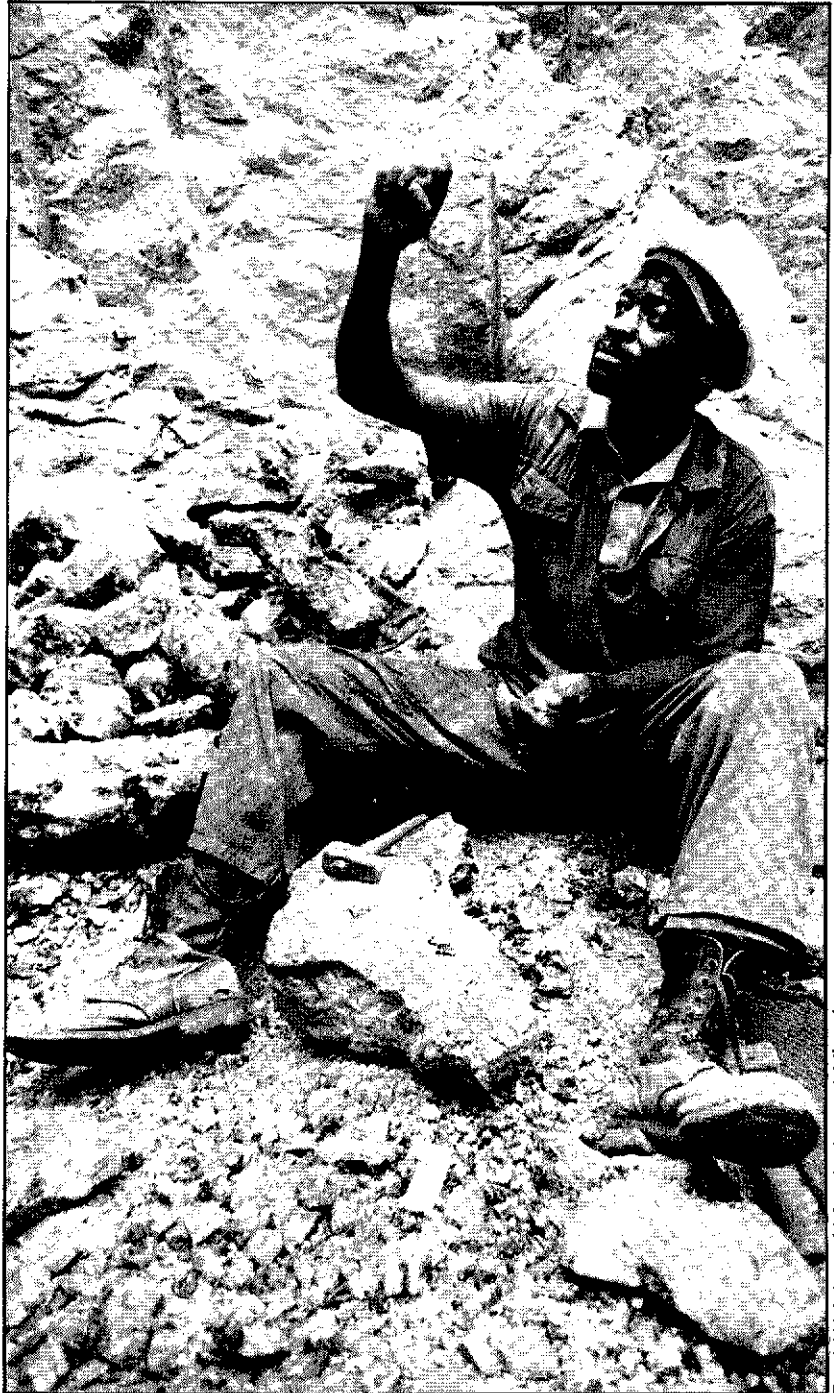
Namibia: A Class Act?

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The independence of Namibia in March of 1990 brought to an end more than a century of colonialism. For the majority of Namibians the history of colonial rule was characterized by dispossession, national oppression and poverty. The policies of this era served, moreover, to reify racial and ethnic divisions within the society, to the extent that different communities were segregated geographically, economically and socially. As in South Africa, class and racial categories in Namibia overlapped, and the small white settler population (backed by Pretoria's military might) controlled the economy as well as the political order. The settler community, together with a tiny black elite which had emerged under the interim government, comprised just five per cent of the population but in 1989 were estimated to control 71% of the GDP. The bottom 55% of the population, in contrast, controlled just three per cent of the GDP. In the context of this structured inequality, most Namibians hoped that the advent of independence would lead to a more equitable and non-racial social order.

In the post-independence era, the form of social stratification does appear to be changing, but not in the way that the dispossessed masses of Namibia might have wished. While it is not possible merely to read off class formation from a series of social indicators, there is evidence of growing stratification in class terms that transcends previous racial and ethnic boundaries. Key to this is the emergence of a new elite, with members of the pre-existing white settler elite now being joined by a new class of senior



Worker in amethyst mine, Namibia

Paul Weinberg/Afrapix-Impact Visuals

black administrators, politicians and business people. This new elite inhabits an economic and social world largely divorced from that of the majority of the urban and rural poor. Small wonder that visitors to Windhoek comment with surprise at the number of BMW and Mercedes Benz cars in what is, after all, a third world country. With the limited resources available to the country, critics argue, sustaining the lifestyle of this elite must inevitably occur at the expense of development projects for the poor.

While this trend is by no means unique among newly-independent countries in Africa, it is of special interest in a country ruled by a political party that was, until recently, viewed by many western governments as Marxist in orientation. Furthermore, South Africa in part justified its continued occupation of Namibia in terms of the need to stem the spreading tide of communism, and in this scenario SWAPO was portrayed as being the hand-servant of Moscow. Nor was such a portrayal entirely the fictive creation of Total Strategy theorists seeking to drum up support for their notion of a "total onslaught" against South Africa. SWAPO had, in its 1976 Political Programme, firmly committed itself to the pursuit of scientific socialism and the introduction of a classless society on assumption of power.

Nationalism and elite formation

The abandonment of socialist ideals in post-independence Namibia should not be seen merely as some reflex of the global decline of the socialist order. True, certain segments of SWAPO did embrace socialist principles, while the party as a whole was heavily dependent on support from Eastern Bloc countries. Nonetheless, SWAPO was first and foremost a nationalist movement, composed of a broad spectrum of social strata mobilized towards national liberation. As has been true of many other national-

ist movements, SWAPO's populism, packaged in the rhetoric of socialism, became in significant part a vehicle for the self-advancement of specific interest groups within the movement. Although there is little evidence that individuals from among the (extremely small) indigenous elite joined SWAPO specifically to advance their own interests (this only occurred, to a limited extent, towards the end of the liberation war), it is the case that the nationalist movement began to create its own elite, both amongst those in exile and even amongst those who remained at home.

Thus, beyond the consolidation in power of a cadre of political and military leaders who grew out of the liberation struggle and who now occupy leading positions in the new government, the primary determinant of social and economic standing in the post-independence era has become educational attainment. Of the 40,000 to 50,000 Namibians who went into exile, a relatively small proportion (15% at most) underwent comprehensive post-secondary training. The remainder were trained as soldiers or learnt rudimentary artisanal and agricultural skills in camps in Angola. And this differential access to training continues to differentiate exiles, both in their present employment opportunities and in the diverse life-styles to which it accustomed them: although educated individuals by no means lived lives of affluence in exile, their expectations regarding the good life post-independence were clearly influenced by their years in Europe, the USA and elsewhere.

Limitations of the Economy

While the demands of the liberation struggle may have served to differentiate its participants, the political economy inherited by SWAPO has also reinforced tendencies towards elitism. Namibia's economy is both dependent and narrowly based, and despite its size, the land is not richly endowed. The country's GDP

is largely accounted for by four sectors: mining and quarrying (32%), general government (18%), wholesale and retailing (13%), and agriculture and fishing (11%). A tendency towards greater capital intensity in both the mining and commercial agricultural sectors has increased the demand for skilled workers and, at the same time, has limited the potential for mass employment generation.

As a consequence of a distorted economy and as a legacy of apartheid rule, there is thus, paradoxically, both a critical shortage of skills (one exacerbated by the departure of many South Africans) and a severe problem of unemployment among the semi-skilled and unskilled. For those black Namibians with skills, demand generally exceeds supply and thus far there has been little competition for employment. Moreover, the jobs they fill tend to be in the urban areas (in Windhoek in particular) where social services are relatively good and life is easier. The converse applies to those who have limited skills. Competition for employment is fierce, wages are low, and many are forced to eke out a subsistence in the rural areas where services are limited or non-existent.

The decision to opt for a "mixed economy" - in practice a capitalist economy - was dictated in part by circumstance (Namibia's dependent economic status, and the collapse of support from socialist countries in particular). Once taken, however, it too limits any very egalitarian policy options that might be chosen by the new government. While SWAPO controls the political arena, it does not control the economy that continues to be dominated by forces which vary, in terms of their support for SWAPO, from indifference to outright hostility. Consequently, in its efforts to promote the confidence of the business sector (which retains the ultimate sanction of disinvestment from Namibia), the gov-

ernment has moved extremely cautiously on issues of affirmative action, minimum wages and the question of land redistribution.

In fact, the SWAPO government has yet even to fully capture the state. As a further consequence of compromises agreed to in the process of constitution-making, job security had to be guaranteed to the middle management of a public service still extensively controlled by civil servants from the former colonial administration. While some of these individuals have adapted to the new order, others appear insidiously to be obstructing efforts to build a more egalitarian and non-racial society.

National reconciliation and retention of the status quo

Viewed from one angle, the new government's pursuit of a policy of national reconciliation was both politically astute and economically necessary. Not only did it forestall the flight of much needed skills and capital, it also minimized the potential for political destabilization by disaffected opponents. Nevertheless, the policy of national reconciliation (mediated by a constitution which was forged through inter-party consensus) has done much to reinforce the status quo and further to strengthen trends towards elitism amongst the indigenous population.

Of course, defenders of the new order also point to the fact that subterfuge on the part of the South African government and other opponents of SWAPO in the run up to the 1989 elections (a charge further substantiated by recent revelations out of South Africa), helped deny the party a two-thirds majority in the Constituent Assembly. Such a majority, it is argued, would have freed SWAPO of the necessity of negotiating a constitution that entrenched many of the existing privileges of the colonial administration.

However, in assessing the motivations of the new elites in government, the aphorism that individuals



always have two reasons for doing anything, a good reason and the real reason, springs constantly to mind. It is true that most government policies can be rationalized as being in the interests of national reconciliation or as being determined by the inherent limitations of the constitution or the economy. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that certain specific segments of the population benefit more directly than others from the chosen courses of action. This is nowhere more evident than in state policy towards conditions of service in the public sector.

In that regard, Article 141 (1) of the Constitution served to reinforce the status quo by affirming that "any person holding office under any law in force on the date of Independence shall continue to hold such office unless and until he or she resigns or is retired, transferred or removed from office in accordance with law." This clause

has been interpreted to imply that individuals employed by the colonial government would lose none of their existing employment benefits including generous housing, pension, medical aid and car allowances. The provision, in essence, presented the SWAPO government with something of a dilemma: whether to implement a differential system of benefits for existing and in-coming civil servants (many of whom were SWAPO members) or whether to equalize all employment packages. For various "good reasons" the decision was taken to maintain the existing system of benefits. The result: Namibia is now reputed to have one of the highest civil service salary structures in sub-Saharan Africa. However understandable at one level, this decision does little to redress one of the most glaring inequities of the colonial system, the disproportionate spending of public funds on a largely urban elite.

Inter-ethnic accommodation

On existing evidence, there is little to suggest that elite formation is preceding primarily along ethnic lines, as many of SWAPO's opponents had predicted. A review of recent senior appointments to the civil service does not indicate any undue favouritism towards the Ovambo-speaking population who form the backbone of SWAPO and who comprise nearly 50 percent of the total population. Although race and ethnicity remain latent lines of stress, they do not, at present, appear to be a limiting factor in the development of a broader class identity.

As for racial integration in the post-apartheid era, that has tended to take place almost exclusively in the upper echelons of the social order. This process was set in motion by the establishment of a government of national unity, whereby a number of opposition leaders were brought into the Cabinet and white Namibians (not all of whom are SWAPO members) were appointed to key portfolios in the Ministries of Finance, Agriculture, Justice and Transport. But high incomes have also now ensured the purchase by most senior black civil servants of homes in the upmarket and formerly exclusively white suburbs of Windhoek. Not a single cabinet minister, for instance, now lives in Katutura, the African township formerly the bastion of political activism in Namibia. Senior government officials, in part for language reasons, have also tended to send their children to formerly exclusively white schools, where the medium of instruction is English and where the standard of education is generally higher than in predominantly black (but less expensive) schools.

Growing dissatisfaction

The government's caution in effecting extensive changes within the political economy has led to charges that national reconciliation is a one-sided process that is benefiting the white settler community far more than the poor majority. Such bit-

terness is perhaps most strongly felt by the thousands of repatriated exiles who are struggling to re-enter the labour market and to fully reintegrate themselves into Namibian society. For these individuals, the widening economic gap between themselves and their former comrades-in-arms is being most cruelly felt.

The "land question," in particular, remains a vexed issue. Unequal access to productive land and to water is a central feature of Namibia's colonial inheritance. In a context where both resources are absolutely scarce, the private ownership of some 45% of the total land area and 74% of the potentially arable land by some 4,045, mainly white, commercial farmers is a major factor in determining inequality of incomes and wealth. In attempting to redress these imbalances, however, the government once again confronts the challenge of matching increased production (or at least maintaining existing levels of production) with greater social equity, since much of Namibia is unsuitable for agriculture. Whilst a measure of consensus on the issue of redistribution was reached during the National Land Conference held in June 1991 (see the article on this conference by Susan Brown), the land question remains far from resolved.

The issue of social equity in the countryside is not confined solely to imbalances in land ownership between white and black Namibians, however. In the post-independence era the most vocal and articulate claims for land redistribution have come not from the land-scarce or landless poor but from wealthier black farmers seeking to increase their own access to land. Nor are these claims confined to the commercial farming areas. In a number of the communal areas (in Ovambo, Kavango and Hereroland in particular), there is a growing trend among certain larger-scale African farmers to illegally fence rangelands, hitherto recognized as communal pasture, for private use. For such indi-

viduals it is not the inequitable distribution of land *per se* that is unsatisfactory, but rather the size of their own share in the system. Although the government has indicated that it will take action against illegal fencing, it appears to feel little urgency to do so.

For many repatriated exiles, as well as many others who supported SWAPO during the liberation struggle, hard lessons are being learned about the distinction between party, government and state. For those repatriated exiles schooled in the old Marxist tradition, the three entities were supposed to be largely synonymous, or at least closely interactive. SWAPO was, after all, the party of the workers, of the students and of the dispossessed. Yet in the name of "national reconciliation," the government now chooses to portray itself as the government of "all Namibians." In so doing, it has not backed the workers in some celebrated instances of industrial dispute, for example, and has, in certain instances, pursued policies that favour minority groups rather than the masses.

Although there are no serious signs of desertion from SWAPO at present, there is unquestionably growing disillusionment in many quarters (particular in the populous Ovambo region - the party heartland) with the pace and form of economic and administrative reconstruction. NANSO, the national student organization and formerly a staunch SWAPO supporter, recently disaffiliated itself from the party. Rumblings within the trade union movement indicate similar dissatisfactions, particularly with regard to delays in the implementation of a labour code and the introduction of a policy on minimum wages. If present trends continue, the party might struggle to win a majority in the next election. Not that great numbers of former supporters would necessarily vote against SWAPO (traditional loyalties run deep). But it is quite possible they would demonstrate disapproval by abstaining.