

Namibia: Five Months After

BY COLIN LEYS

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In November 1989, UN-monitored elections brought a victory for SWAPO, the South West Africa People's Organization, with 57% of the popular vote and 41 out of 72 seats in the Constituent Assembly. This was less than the two-thirds majority needed to pass the independence constitution, and so SWAPO progressively accepted virtually all of the constitutional provisions originally proposed by the

Contact Group (of which Canada was a member) in 1981, guaranteeing many civil and human rights and the independence of the public service, etc. - guarantees the opposition parties were united in demanding. SWAPO induced two opposition leaders to join the new government and reassured the white population by appointing a white businessman (Otto Herrigel) as Minister of Finance. The Constituent Assembly was converted into the new National Assembly without a further election, SWAPO President Sam Nujoma became President of Nami-

bia, and the country became independent - minus Walvis Bay, which South Africa refused to give up - on March 21 1990. Recently Colin Leys visited Namibia and brought us back a report.

Within hours of arriving in Windhoek in July, I met a SWAPO MP and asked him how he felt things were going. He replied, "People are frustrated. They know that it takes time to make changes, and they want to give the government time, but they wonder what is really happening. They don't know whether to start making demands



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A survivor of the Cassinga massacre teaches children

or whether they should still wait." In the next five weeks, I heard the same sentiment expressed everywhere. The limitations on the SWAPO government's freedom of action are recognized (even if some - like the clause in the Constitution that prohibits getting rid of public servants of the illegal South African regime - are seen as unacceptable). People also accept that it takes time for the incoming ministers and permanent secretaries (deputy ministers in Canadian terminology) to initiate changes; and they have been told by the Minister of Finance that revenue is in short supply and that many needed expenditures must wait, pending aid negotiations. But they also wonder how

far the new government really envisages radical change of the kind that most Namibians dreamed of during the long years of the independence struggle - a drastic redistribution of education, health and housing resources, for example, and of personal incomes, between the races.

The leadership has understandably been absorbed by cabinet meetings and ministerial duties in Windhoek. Only recently have many of them moved out of their offices, but even then they have not given the impression of being keen to meet and listen to ordinary people. It is far more common for them to make public speeches at rallies where they speak in English,

now the national language, which usually only a handful of the audience understand. Their comments are laboriously translated, point by point, into Afrikaans and two or more vernacular languages. The long-awaited SWAPO Congress is now not to be held until 1992; and while intra-party elections have been organized, the party does not give the impression, as yet, of seeking the widest possible democratic input into policy-making, let alone seeking to make the leadership accountable to party members.

There are good and not so good reasons for all this; the point is only that the government's popularity and legitimacy, its one over-

whelmingly valuable asset, is being heavily drawn upon in this key transitional period. There is a notably low level of radical rhetoric, and people are conscious of it.

At the same time the radical nature of the change that has already occurred simply by ending South African control, and the war, should not be underestimated, above all in the north where the fighting took place. During the war people lived in constant danger of being blown up by a land mine, or shot for being out during the curfew, or tortured on suspicion of having dealings with PLAN combatants – or just for not being deferential enough.

An exchange with an Ovambo companion on our way north illustrated this: I asked him what people thought about the President's and the ministers' salaries, which had just been set at the rate of Rand 20,000 per month plus allowances for the President (more than De Klerk gets, according to the opposition press) and Rand 16,000 plus allowances for ministers. He replied that such things concerned people like him (an educated professional), but not most of the rural population in Ovambo. Most people were just deeply grateful to be free from fear and from white arrogance.

This is no doubt a significant difference, not just between rural people in the north, but to some extent between northerners and southerners (i.e. people from the old "police zone," the white settler regions) in general.

There is a deep well of loyalty for the SWAPO leadership in Ovamboland, stemming partly from ethnic solidarity and partly from the area's distinctive experience of oppression by the military and Koevoet (the brutal and lawless counter-insurgency force) during the war. It was notable that "Namibia Day," on August 26, marking the first exchange of shots in the war, at Ongulumbashe in 1966, proved to be almost wholly a northern, if not purely Ovambo, affair.

The difficulties facing the new government are serious enough – so serious, in fact, that one Namibian observer, sympathetic to the government, remarked that the real test was whether it could manage to "tick over on a good neo-colonial course" – not whether it could produce radical changes. The Finance Minister's budget speech in July contained the following caution:

Apart from being faced initially with a budget deficit of some R556 million for 1990-91 and a foreign debt amounting to R726.5 million, urgent attention has to be given to the increasing unemployment rate, conservatively estimated at 30%, urbanization and squatting, the escalating crime rate, the population growth rate of over three per cent, the sluggish economic growth rate and the illiteracy rate of 65%. In addition, the rocketing inflation which we in Namibia can hardly influence, increases the difficulties with which the new independent country has to struggle.

The crime rate escalated, in the opinion of the police, following the return of the 42,000 exiles from abroad before the November 1989 elections, with residents of the black townships as usual bearing the brunt of it. While it would be quite wrong to attribute all the rise in crime to this cause, a UNICEF survey published in August this year did find that only six per cent of the returnees of working age had obtained "formal sector" jobs. Many have no source of income at all.

The police force, reduced from 6,000 to some 1,300 of the former "SWAPOL" personnel, has been rapidly re-established with large numbers of returnees (former SWAPO police from the camps in Angola and Zambia and former PLAN fighters), as well as former "special constables" (untrained, daily-paid SWAPOL staff). A major drive to train the new, often uneducated, police officers is under way. Active steps have been taken to change the ethos and image of the

new force ("NAMPOL") from that of a repressive, military-style organization to that of a police *service*, respecting and protecting the people. But many problems have arisen. At one stage President Nujoma ordered the army onto the streets in Windhoek as a deterrent to criminals. Public reactions were mixed, however, and the measure lasted only for two weeks.

A force of 1,500 "border guards," recruited entirely from PLAN ex-combatants, was sent to Kavango and Caprivi to secure the border with the UNITA-controlled region of Angola. This force created a new problem through its high-handed treatment of the local population, especially individuals and localities seen as loyal to the opposition party, the DTA; following mounting attacks in the opposition press, including stories of maltreatment of tourists, the "border guards" were "withdrawn" by the Prime Minister at the beginning of September, and the newly-formed Namibian Defence Force replaced it along the border.

Anxieties about the risk of destabilization by elements in Namibia and South Africa opposed to the settlement with SWAPO persist. After the *Namibian* newspaper reported government concern about an alleged coup plot by Namibian ex-members of SWATF (the South African-controlled Namibian army) and Koevoet, its offices were fire-bombed on August 5. It is clear that De Klerk has no interest in destabilizing the SWAPO government, which has everything to gain from supporting his negotiation strategy; but it is also clear that the SWAPO government has at present virtually no way of controlling the movement in and out of Namibia of South African right-wingers with an obvious potential interest in destabilizing it. This applies also to members of the so-called "Civilian Cooperation Bureau," which seems to have been responsible for the murder of SWAPO leader Anton Lubowski in September last year.

Faced with such problems, both economic and political, the government's record to date possibly deserves more respect than its local critics are apt to give it. It has dealt, not very clearly, with the thorny question of citizenship, offering it to most people who have lived for five years in Namibia and are prepared to renounce any other. It has amnestied more than half the prison population inherited from the colonial regime. It has introduced promptly a 200 mile territorial limit off the coast, which is essential for Namibia to rebuild the fish stock and ensure that the national economy gets the benefit. It has announced plans to train teachers, so that the long process of rectifying the gross inequality in school provision between races and regions can begin (in 1986-87, R329 was spent on every Ovambo school student, compared with R1,071 for every Herero student, and R3,213 for every white student). Plans to remedy the similar gross inequalities in health services and housing were also said to be in hand.

Given Namibia's situation, few quick dramatic changes could be made. There are exceptions, however. For example, in the "white township" of Oshakati, the main military and commercial centre of Ovamboland, large houses stood empty in August this year, while a few hundred metres away the rest of the town's population live in what are largely shanty-towns almost entirely lacking in amenities (and often under water, floating in garbage and sewage, in the rains). In the vacuum left by the abolition of the old "second tier" (bantustan) Ovambo government, perhaps, no policy seems to have been adopted for using the empty "white" housing in the face of so much need. Remarkably, only some of the empty houses have been squatted in, and only some looted for their fittings.

The government has introduced a cautious budget, but one stressing the need for expanded public investment. It has had one piece of good

fortune, in that the predicted budget deficit has not materialized: on the contrary, a small surplus was forecast in the budget speech, and the economy of the north, which many observers expected to collapse with the withdrawal of the army, does not give the impression of being in terminal decline. There is acute unemployment, and so far no plausible means of expanding and diversifying the Ovambo economy has been proposed. Yet the region does not seem depressed. The big supermarkets in Oshakati and Ondangua are not full of people, but they are still full of goods. The explanation may lie partly in the revival of cross-border trade with Angola, which the end of the PLAN-South Africa war has made possible in this sector. But Ovambo business acumen and thrift should not be underestimated either. A great deal turns on what happens in this region, which contains half of the population, including 80% of the unemployed returnees, whose expectations have been raised by their sacrifices in combat and their education and politicization in Angola and overseas.

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SWAPO's socialist policy programme of 1976 now seems a distant memory. One socialist I met remarked that when he and a friend tried to count all the socialists they knew in the country, they could only think of six. Allowing for some exaggeration, it is still probably true that outside the ranks of NANSO, the student organization, very few people have other than liberal-egalitarian ideas and hopes, within the framework of a broadly individualistic, private enterprise economy. The question is rather whether a significant number of the SWAPO leadership are determined to bring about a much more equal society. It is too soon to tell. Some observers feel that under the watchword of "reconciliation," the new government has been accommodating itself all too rapidly to the inherited structure of power and status. Others see many of the old

leaders, in spite of their long years of dependency on the international community, as nonetheless dogged and persistent champions of the national cause, who will never be content merely to manage the old racialist and exploitative system, however gradual and limited the changes they may seek.

Municipal and regional elections, due in the next 18 months, will give some pointers, as will the 1991 budget, and the specific policies on housing, health, land reform and mining revenues that emerge over the coming year. Individual leadership appointments will also be significant. For those who believe that a "mafia" of Ovambo "securocrats" will eventually entrench themselves permanently in power, the deferment, in the face of a public outcry, of the appointment of Solomon Hawala as Army Chief of Staff of Solomon Hawala (Hawala was PLAN chief of security during the torturing of the "SWAPO detainees" in Angola), may force some reconsideration. The impulse to behave as if the SWAPO leadership were still an untouchable power elite, secure in their exile headquarters, may still be there, but it is no longer unchallenged. Other, more cosmopolitan and progressive tendencies are also evident.

On the other hand, the DTA and most of the smaller opposition parties are noticeably lacking in constructive ideas, and are mostly still discredited by their participation in the South African-sponsored "interim government" prior to 1989. The trade union movement, whose pre-independence growth was impressive, has been placed under SWAPO tutelage by the insertion of the exile leader John Ya Otto as General Secretary of the National Union of Namibian Workers over Ben Ulenga, its internal leader. In general, the lack of democratic traditions in most sectors of Namibian society under South African occupation means that for the moment, the initiative lies very much with the government.