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# **SWAPO: The Beginning of the Political Challenge**

Selma EL OBEID  
John MENDELSON

Sub-Saharan  
Africa Center



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#### **Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

**Website:** [Ifri.org](http://Ifri.org)

# Authors

**Selma el Obeid** is a freelance consultant based in France. Her multidisciplinary background includes research and development within SECADEV (Secours Catholique et Développement) in Chad, the Ministry of Environment & Tourism in Namibia, and the Institute of Developmental Studies in Sudan. Partner for nine years of RAISON (Research and Information Services of Namibia), she co-authored seven books on Namibia's environmental and rural conditions. Selma is a graduate of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Khartoum, and has a Master's degree in Social and Economic Development from the Sorbonne University and a Master's of Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School.

**John Mendelsohn** is the executive director of Ongava Research Centre in Namibia. He was previously the director of the Durban Natural History Museum, and Namibia's National Museum. Founder of RAISON, he has written and co-authored more than thirty books. He is the primary author of *Atlas of Namibia: A Portrait of the Land and its People*. He has a PhD in Zoology from the University of Natal in South Africa. Most of his work has been in Namibia and Angola, but he has also been involved in Bolivia, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Indonesia, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Nigeria, Palestine, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda.

# **Abstract**

Increasingly, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) is on shaky ground, caught between internal factionalism and external resentment. SWAPO's old guard is engaged in hardened leadership battles, while SWAPO Youth League members claim populist reforms. Rival SWAPO members are openly calling for Geingob's government to be recalled. It has become commonplace that SWAPO hardliners make direct and veiled threats towards their opponents. In this context, the 2019 ballots reflected a major slump in the party's popularity. SWAPO presidential candidate Hage Geingob was elected with a majority of 56%, way down from his 86% of the vote in 2014. For the first time, the party lost its two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, as well as its dominance in the local councils during the 2020 local authority election. This slump came as a result of Namibia's economic woes, high-level corruption scandals, and internal power struggles, and younger and more discerning voting public. SWAPO has become a business empire that benefits its elite patrons and clients, a far cry from its role in gaining Namibia's independence in 1990 and its promise to deliver comprehensive social and economic development. As a result, young voters of the so-called "born free" generation and Namibia's rapidly urbanizing population are shifting political dynamics as they clamor for accountable leadership and better economic opportunities.

Despite growing dissatisfaction with the ruling party, no major new political party has emerged since independence. However, opposition parties are gradually gaining support, mainly among young voters, and now control the three most important economic centers – Windhoek, Walvis Bay and Swakopmund. After thirty years at the helm, SWAPO's one-party domination has weakened, and is now challenged to earn its place in the future.

This paper analyzes these new political dynamics through the results of the last national and local elections. It explains the reasons behind SWAPO's decline, and their chances of holding onto power.

# Résumé

L'Organisation du peuple du Sud-Ouest africain (South West Africa People's Organization – SWAPO) se trouve de plus en plus sur un terrain instable, entre les divisions internes et le ressentiment externe. La vieille garde de la SWAPO s'est engagée dans une lutte acharnée pour le leadership, tandis que les membres de la Ligue des jeunes de la SWAPO réclament des réformes populistes. Des membres rivaux de la SWAPO appellent ouvertement à la révocation du gouvernement de Geingob. Il est devenu monnaie courante que les partisans de la ligne dure de la SWAPO profèrent des menaces, directes ou indirectes, à l'encontre de leurs adversaires. Dans ce contexte, les scrutins de 2019 ont mis en lumière le déclin important de la popularité du parti. Le candidat présidentiel de la SWAPO, Hage Geingob, a été élu avec une majorité de 56 %, bien en deçà des 86 % qu'il avait obtenus en 2014. Pour la première fois, le parti a perdu sa majorité des deux tiers à l'Assemblée nationale, ainsi que sa prédominance dans les conseils locaux lors de l'élection des autorités locales de 2020. Cette dégringolade est le résultat des difficultés économiques de la Namibie, des scandales de corruption de haut niveau et des luttes de pouvoir internes, ainsi que d'un électoral plus jeune et plus avisé. La SWAPO s'est muée en un véritable empire commercial, au bénéfice de son élite de patrons et de clients, loin du rôle important qu'elle avait joué dans l'indépendance de la Namibie en 1990 et de sa promesse d'assurer un développement social et économique global. Les jeunes électeurs de la génération dite « born free » et la population namibienne qui s'urbanise rapidement changent ainsi la donne sur le plan politique, en réclamant des dirigeants responsables et de meilleures opportunités économiques.

Malgré le mécontentement croissant à l'égard du parti au pouvoir, aucun nouveau parti politique important n'a vu le jour depuis l'indépendance. Cependant, les partis d'opposition gagnent progressivement du terrain, principalement parmi les jeunes électeurs, et contrôlent désormais les trois centres économiques les plus importants – Windhoek, Walvis Bay et Swakopmund. Après trente ans à la tête du pays, l'hégémonie du parti unique de la SWAPO s'est affaiblie et le parti devra désormais se battre pour conserver sa place dans la vie politique.

Cette note analyse les nouvelles dynamiques politiques à l'œuvre en Namibie, à travers les résultats des dernières élections nationales et locales. Les auteurs de la note rendent compte des raisons du déclin de la SWAPO et de ses perspectives de maintien au pouvoir.

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# Introduction

Namibia's liberation war ended in a negotiated settlement which led to its independence in 1990. After thirty years in exile, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), which was founded in 1960 came to power and its leader, Sam Nujoma, was elected president of Namibia in 1990.<sup>1</sup> SWAPO has since ruled the country and dominated politics thanks to its role in the liberation struggle. But thirty years later, SWAPO's failure to address the rampant unemployment, the social and economic problems, and corruption is a source of deep frustration. Policies and programs to develop the economy and promote Black Economic Empowerment increasingly favor only a small ruling elite and their acolytes. The national elections in 2019 and local authority elections in 2020 witnessed the decline of SWAPO's supremacy. SWAPO's share of eligible voters has steadily declined in eight out of thirteen regions. In 2020, SWAPO lost control of Windhoek (the capital city) and Walvis Bay (the second largest city) in municipal elections for the first time. Moreover, a presidential opposition candidate unprecedently gained important ground in the northern Aawambo regions that used to be the SWAPO stronghold. The party's luster is starting to fade as urban and young voters desert the party and a wind of change starts to blow over the Namibian political landscape.

This paper analyzes these new political dynamics through the results of the last national and local elections. It explains the reasons behind SWAPO's decline, and their chances of holding onto power in the near future.

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1. About the history of SWAPO, see appendix.

# **Thirty Years at the Helm, SWAPO's Grip on Power Is Slipping**

SWAPO has won all elections since independence and has enjoyed continuous rule of the country for the last 30 years. But for the first time SWAPO suffered a blow in the national elections of November 2019 and the regional and local authority elections of November 2020. Although SWAPO won these elections, it lost considerable support, especially in urban centers and the southern and central regions. Both national and local elections demonstrate that its electoral slide downhill has begun against the background of growing abstention.

## **Box 1. Namibian Electoral System**

The President is directly elected by the people of Namibia every five years. 96 members of the National Assembly are elected on a proportional representation basis every five years and 8 members are appointed by the president. The Parliament of Namibia is a bicameral legislature having two houses, the National Council (upper house) and the National Assembly (lower house).

The first Regional Council and Local Authority elections were held in 1992, and until 2010, these elections were set at 6-year intervals (1992, 1998, 2004, 2010). Political changes subsequently allowed these elections to take place every 5 years (2015 and 2020). Before 2010 Regional Council Act, Regional Governors were nominated by their fellow elected regional councilors. Regional Governors are now appointed by the President. Following the changes to the constitution, 3 members of each Regional Council are elected in the National Council totaling 42 National Council MPs (26 in the past).

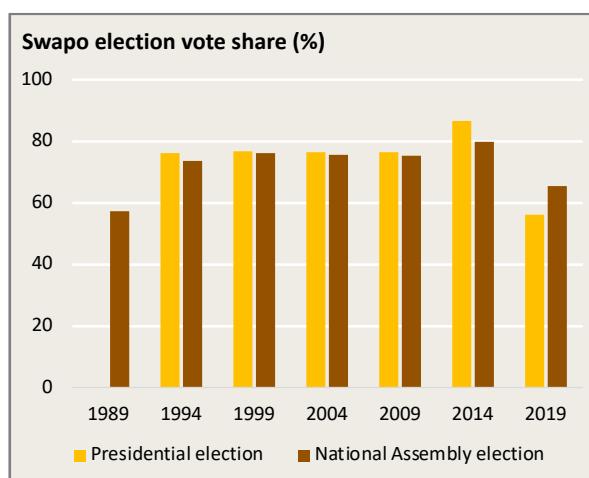
Namibia is divided into 14 regional councils and 57 unitary local authorities which comprise 13 municipal councils, 26 town and 18 village councils.

## **National elections: SWAPO's Unprecedented Low Score**

Since independence, SWAPO has overwhelmingly won the presidential elections with over 70% of the votes and held a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly. However, the 2019 elections were not “business as usual”. Eleven candidates ran for the presidency and 15 political parties for

the National Assembly. Hage Geingob won 56% of the presidential vote, the lowest ever score recorded by a SWAPO leader and a considerable drop from his 86% score in the 2014 presidential elections. SWAPO also lost its two-thirds majority in the National Assembly but retained a majority of 63 seats out of the 96 seats. For the first time, support for SWAPO as a party was higher than support for its presidential candidate.

**Chart 1. SWAPO Election Vote Share 1989-2019**



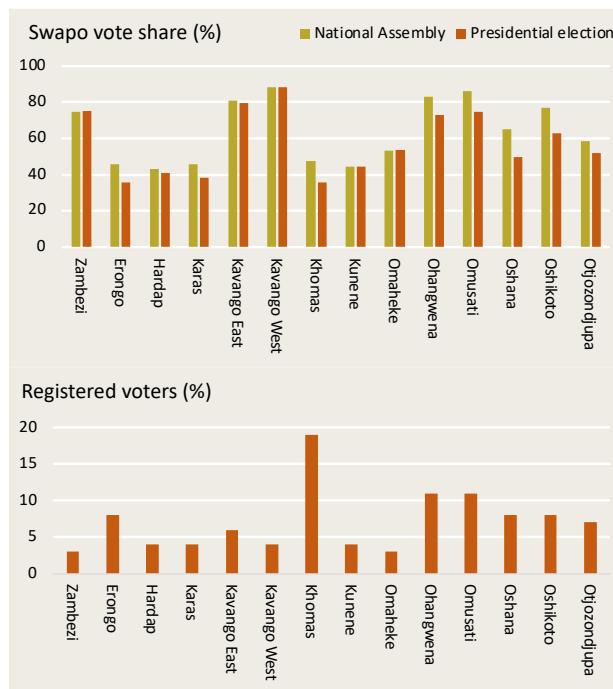
*Data source: Website of the Electoral Commission of Namibia, 2020.*

SWAPO's major loss in the 2019 presidential elections came from urban areas (Windhoek, Walvis Bay, Swakopmund, Oranjemund, and the northern towns of Ondangwa and Oshakati) where candidate Panduleni Itula posed a real challenge to president Hage Geingob's second mandate. Itula was a former SWAPO member but ran for president as an independent candidate. He was expelled from SWAPO in March 2020 and founded the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) in August 2020.

Windhoek is by far the largest urban center and accounts for 19% of total registered voters in the country. Seven out of Windhoek's ten constituencies voted for Panduleni Itula although they voted solidly for SWAPO in the past. However, rural northern Namibia, which represents 51% of registered voters, provided massive support for SWAPO.<sup>2</sup> SWAPO won the National Assembly elections in 12 of Namibia's 14 regions, polling over 80% of votes in four regions.

2. See chart 2.

## Chart 2. SWAPO's Share of Votes and Proportion of Registered Voters in Each Region in 2019



Data source: IPPR, *Election Watch Issue No. 1, 2020*.

As shown in the table below, for the first time, a presidential candidate got more votes than a SWAPO candidate in the important economic regions of Erongo and Khomas, and came close to achieving the same in Oshana, long a heartland of SWAPO support.

**Table 2. Geingob v. Itula in the 2019 National Elections by Region**

	Hage Geingob	Panduleni Itual
Zambezi	75%	11%
Erongo	36%	48%
Hardap	41%	13%
Karas	38%	26%
Kavango East	80%	10%
Kavango West	88%	6%
Khomas	36%	50%
Kunene	45%	7%
Omaheke	54%	9%
Ohangwena	73%	24%
Omsati	75%	22%
Oshana	50%	46%
Oshikoto	63%	33%
Otjozondjupa	52%	25%

Data source: IPPR, *Election Watch Issue No. 1, 2020*.

## Local Authority Elections: Voters Stayed at Home

SWAPO also suffered serious setbacks in the regional and local government elections of 2020. Its support dropped from 83% to 57% in the regional elections and from 74% to 40% in the local elections.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, SWAPO maintained control of 10 of the 14 regional councils. The Erongo region was won by the Independent Patriots of Change (IPC), a party formed by Itula after his strong performance as the presidential candidate in 2019. The southern regions of Kharas and Hardap were won by Landless People' Movement (LPM), and Kunene region by the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM) and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

While SWAPO had a majority of seats in 52 out of the 57 local authorities in 2015, the ruling party lost its majority in 33 local authorities. SWAPO major losses were in the central and southern areas of Namibia. But it continued to have strong support in the rural constituencies where the majority of voters live in the northern regions. The newly formed IPC succeeded to penetrate into SWAPO's northern heartland to win 29 local authority seats in 12 town councils and two village councils.<sup>4</sup> In towns where about 50% of the Namibian population live,<sup>5</sup> the voters gave a blow to SWAPO in the economically important municipalities of Windhoek, Walvis Bay and Swakopmund. SWAPO won only five out of fifteen seats on the Windhoek City Council, while it had 12 seats before. For the first time, the opposition is running the capital city. Today, in the Windhoek City Council, Panduleni Itula's Independent Patriots for Change have four seats. The Landless People's Movement and the Affirmative Repositioning movement (AR) have two seats each, while the Popular Democratic Movement and Nudo<sup>6</sup> have one each. The current mayor of Windhoek, Job Amupanda, was expelled from the SWAPO Youth League after he co-founded the AR in 2014. SWAPO also lost the Swakopmund Town Council (the third largest city), winning only three seats out of ten. The SWAPO's attempts to form alliances with other parties or independent councilors have been rejected.<sup>7</sup>

3. Institute for Public Policy Research, *Election Watch X*, No. 8, 2015, available at: [ippr.org.na.pdf](http://ippr.org.na.pdf).

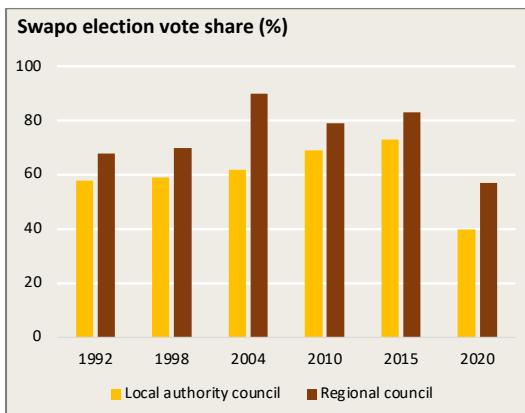
4. "SWAPO Loses 29 Local Council Seats in the North", *The Namibian*, 29 November 2020, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

5. Namibia Statistics Agency, *Namibia 2011 Census Population Projections 2011 to 2041*, 2014, Windhoek.

6. The National Unity Democratic Organisation (NUDO) is a political party in Namibia

7. "Opposition Rejects SWAPO Left, Right and Centre", *The Namibian Sun*, 2 December 2020, available at: [www.namibiansun.com](http://www.namibiansun.com).

### Chart 3. Local Authority and Regional Council Elections

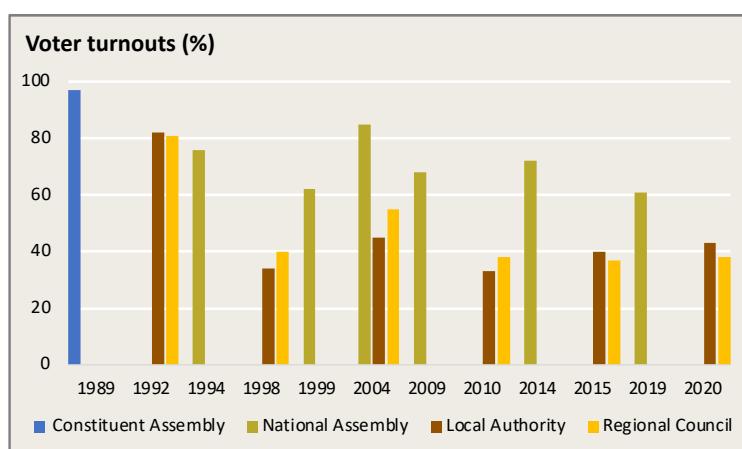


Source: Website of the Electoral Commission of Namibia, 2020.

## The Rise of Abstention

The national elections of 2019 were marked by rising abstention. The turnout of voters (about 60%) was the lowest since Namibia independence. Turnouts for national and local authority elections have been declining with each poll. Furthermore, local authority elections have much lower turnouts compared to national elections. Growing absenteeism may reflect disenchantment with the ruling party and politics in general. Voters may perceive regional elections as having minimal interest since they have little influence in the appointment of the regional governors after a parliamentary motion led by SWAPO in 2010 gave the president sole authority to appoint regional governors.<sup>8</sup>

### Chart 4. Election Turnouts since 1989



Source: IPPR, Election Watch, December 2008 & Website of the ECN.

8. Before 2010, regional governors were elected by the regional councilors.

# An Opposition Coming from within SWAPO

Since the first National Assembly elections, the number of elected opposition parties has increased from five in 1994 to ten in 2019.<sup>9</sup> During the 2019 and 2020 elections, opposition parties gained some ground and have succeeded for the first time to reduce SWAPO's electoral dominance. The highest number of parliamentary seats obtained by an opposition party was 16 seats by the Popular Democratic Movement in 2019. Together, opposition parties won 33 seats out of 96. Landless People' Movement (LPM) made its first entry to the Assembly with four seats and the Namibian Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF)<sup>10</sup> got two seats. For the first time, the 2019 presidential election produced a serious contender to SWAPO's absolute dominance. Panduleni Itula attracted 30% of the votes, the highest opposition result since Namibia's first presidential elections in 1994. This was the first time that an opposition party attracted substantial numbers of SWAPO followers. Itula's party went beyond just splitting the votes among the opposition parties and encroached into SWAPO's preserved ground.

Despite the opposition parties' electoral progress facilitated by the proportional representation system in Parliament, the opposition landscape is fragmented. In fact, most parties are small and regionally based; they are sometimes breakaways from SWAPO, all of which makes it difficult to mobilize electoral support nationwide. They are also weakened by their internal power struggles, organizational difficulties and limited financial resources.<sup>11</sup> Former SWAPO members founded six of the opposition parties. Breakups from SWAPO are not new but dissidents often fail to challenge the mother party. Ben Ulenga, the first dissenter, resigned in 1998 in protest against the third five-year presidential term arranged for Sam Nujoma and the Namibia's military involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He formed the Congress of Democrats (CoD). Other dissenters include Hidipo Hamutenya who lost the SWAPO presidential position to Hifikepunye Pohamba at SWAPO's elective congress in 2004.<sup>12</sup>

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9. See table 3.

10. A radical leftist movement inspired by the South African Economic Freedom Fighters of Julius Malema.

11. "Where Is the Opposition... When Swapo Is Fighting Itself?", *The Namibian*, 24 August 2017, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

12. Hidipo Hamutenya was a member of SWAPO for 46 years and served at SWAPO central committee for about 30 years.

Jesaya Nyamu, who was expelled from SWAPO in 2005 for disobedience, also left SWAPO and formed the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) in 2007. Nevertheless, both parties have faded away. Other examples of breakups from SWAPO include the All People's Party (APP), which was founded in 2008 by former SWAPO Party Youth League leader Ignatius Shixwameni,<sup>13</sup> and the Namibian Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF), led by Epafras Mukwilongo. In 2015, Job Amupanda, Dimbulukeni Nauyoma, and George Kambala were fired from the SWAPO Youth League because of disagreement about the land policy.<sup>14</sup> They now lead the Affirmative Repositioning movement (AR). More recent dissidents include former deputy minister of Lands and Resettlement, Bernadus Swartbooi. He was fired by President Hage Geingob in 2016 after accusing the then minister of Land Reform of resettling people from other regions into the south of the country. After his dismissal, he formed the Landless People's Movement (LPM) in 2017. Panduleni Itula was expelled from SWAPO for challenging the party's presidential candidate Hage Geingob and founded the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) in August 2020. Itula claims that Hage Geingob was fraudulently chosen at the 2017 party congress.

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13. Shixwameni joined the opposition Congress of Democrats in 2000. He resigned from the Congress of Democrats in December 2007 to form All People' Party.

14. Job Amupanda, George Kambala and Dimbulukeni Nauyoma were expelled from SWAPO Young League after their occupation in November 2014 of a piece of land in an affluent suburb of Windhoek, which belonged to the Windhoek City Council. They dragged SWAPO to court following their expulsion. They have succeeded in having their membership reinstated.

**Table 3. Number of Seats at the National Assembly 1994-2019**

<b>Political Party</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>
SWAPO Party of Namibia	53	55	55	54	77	63
Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) renamed Popular Democratic Movement in 2017	15	7	4	2	5	16
United Democratic Front (UDF)	2	2	3	2	2	2
Democratic Coalition of Namibia (DCN)	1	0				
Monitor Action Group (MAG)	1	1	1	0	0	
South West African National Union (SWANU)	0	0	0	1	1	1
Workers' Revolutionary Party (WRP)	0				2	0
Congress of Democrats (CoD)		7	5	1	0	0
National Unity Democratic Organisation (NUDO)			3	2	2	2
Republican Party (RP)			1	1	1	2
Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP)				8	3	1
All People's Party (APP)				1	2	2
Democratic Party of Namibia				0	0	
National Democratic Party (NDP)				0	0	0
United People's Movement					1	
Namibian Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF)					0	2
Christian Democratic Voice (CDV)					0	1
Landless People's Movement (LPM)						4
National Patriotic Front (NPF)						0
<b>Total number of seats</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>96</b>

Data source: Website of the Electoral Commission of Namibia, 2020.

# The Causes Behind SWAPO's Political Decline

The SWAPO defectors and the last elections have shown that SWAPO's popularity is on the decline. Several factors can explain this evolution: SWAPO's growing factionalism, the deterioration of the social and economic situation, the widespread corruption and the generational disconnect. Furthermore, opposition parties have gained ground, in particular among young voters who are not receptive to SWAPO's populist and outdated rhetoric. Nahas Angula, the Namibian former Prime Minister, said "I had observed that Namibian young people no longer had faith in the ruling party and that SWAPO needed to do something to give them hope".<sup>15</sup>

## SWAPO's Internal Fighting

During each transition of power, SWAPO struggles from one leader to another during the party's elective congress.<sup>16</sup> For the first time in 2004, SWAPO held an elective congress to choose the party's presidential candidate for national elections. Sam Nujoma made it clear that Pohamba was his preferred candidate. However, the 2007 SWAPO congress was dominated by factionalism, ending in the resignation of Hidipo Hamutenya who described SWAPO's congress as "a sham".<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, before the elective congress of 2012, Hifikepunye Pohamba accused Hage Geingob and Pendukeni Iivula-Ithana<sup>18</sup> of creating "bad blood" within the party.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, SWAPO's elective congress in 2017 saw party members divided into two teams to contest SWAPO's leadership: team SWAPO and team Hage or Harambee. Team SWAPO, headed by Nahas Angula, campaigned for reviving and restoring the party. Team Harambee was led by Hage Geingob and advocated the continuity with SWAPO's current line. Henning Melber wrote "on 15 October the central bureau endorsed the nomination of

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15. "Namibia: 30 Towns, Villages Reject SWAPO", *All Africa*, 20 November 2020, available at: <https://allafrica.com>.

16. The Congress is the supreme decision making body of SWAPO. The first elections between contenders for a top party post took place in 1991 for the post of Secretary General. In 1997 Congress Hendrik Witbooi won the post of party Vice President.

17. "SWAPO's Crisis of Legitimacy", *The Mail & Guardian*, 16 November 2007, available at: <https://mg.co.za>.

18. Pendukeni Iivula-Ithana is the former Secretary-General of SWAPO and former minister of Justice and former minister of Home Affairs.

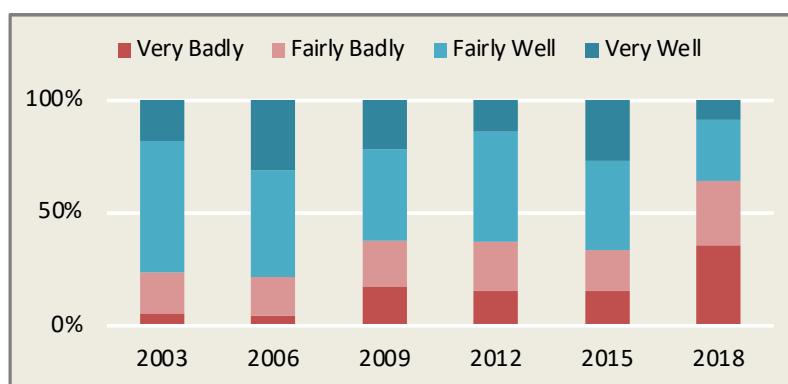
19. "Mr Pohamba Condemns In-Fighting within SWAPO", *Economist Intelligence*, 1 December 2011, available at: <http://country.eiu.com>.

two other ‘old hands’ from the first struggle generation, Nahas Angula and Jerry Ekandjo as candidates for the party presidency... the campaign turned bitter and nasty, with accusations and counter accusations of betrayal, tribalism and incompetence as well as personal insults”.<sup>20</sup> Team Harambee succeeded in consolidating Geingob’s leadership by taking the party’s four key positions (president of SWAPO, deputy president, Secretary General, and deputy Secretary General), besides gaining control over the party’s central committee and politburo. This division seems to haunt the ruling party even now. Indeed, the elections of 2019 have seen schisms within SWAPO and rising discontent with Geingob’s administration.<sup>21</sup> Former SWAPO Secretary General Nangolo Mbumba and Hage Geingob were accused of violating SWAPO’s constitution by attempting to impose Geingob as the party president while he was only acting as president. They also broke the rules when they expelled four youth leaders. SWAPO youth leaders Elijah Ngurare, Job Amupanda, Dimbulukeni Nauyoma and George Kambala went to court contesting their exclusion of SWAPO. The high court ruled in their favor and ordered SWAPO to reinstate them.<sup>22</sup> All of these conflicts and divisions have weakened SWAPO’s ability to attract voters.

## Economic Hardships

Namibia has a reputation for economic stability and is classified by the World Bank as an upper middle-income country. However, only one third of Namibians now trust the government’s way of handling the economy, down from 73% in 2003.

**Chart 5. How Well or Badly the Government Manages the Economy**



Data source: Website Afrobarometer.

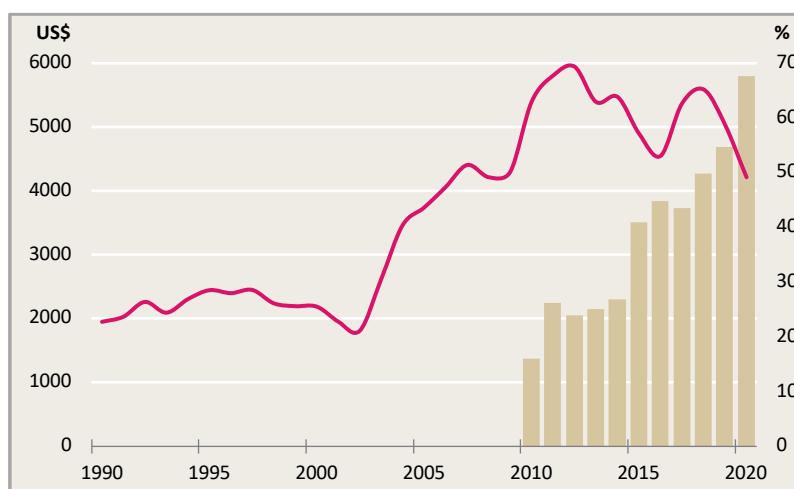
20. Henning Melber, “Namibia”, in *Africa Year Book*, Vol. 14, Boston 2017.

21. “The Enemy Within”, *The Namibian Sun*, 29 January 2019, available at: [www.namibiansun.com](http://www.namibiansun.com).

22. *Ibid.*

Namibia's formal economy is highly dependent on revenue from minerals which contributed about 10% of GDP<sup>23</sup> in 2020 and more than 50% of export income.<sup>24</sup> Falling commodity prices, a drought that has persisted for several seasons, as well as high level corruption, have caused Namibia's gross domestic product to decline and enter in recession since 2016 (from 6% in 2010 to -1.1% in 2019). The ratio of debt to GDP rose from 26% in 2011 to 67.6% in 2020.<sup>25</sup> Although progress was made since independence in 1990, the GDP per person in 2020 is lower than it was in 2012. Despite the progress made in social and economic development, Namibia's society is still highly unequal. In 2015, its Gini index was 59 with 63.7% of its income held by the wealthiest 20% of Namibians in 2015.<sup>26</sup>

**Chart 6. GDP per Person (current US\$)  
and % Ratio Debt to GDP**



Data source: *The World Bank and International Monetary Fund, 2020.*

In 2018, only 46% of the national labor force was employed.<sup>27</sup> Youth unemployment rate has been soaring and could reach 50.3% by the end of 2021.<sup>28</sup> The growing urban population is increasingly jobless and unable to settle securely. Pressures to obtain tenured plots of urban land on which to build permanent homes will thus increase. At current rates of informal settlement growth, tin shacks will be the predominant form of housing in

23. Bank of Namibia annual report 2020.

24. The World Factbook, CIA, 2021, available at: [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov).

25. IMF, *World Economic Outlook*, 2020.

26. The World Bank data, GINI index, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org> and income of wealthiest 20%, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org>.

27. Labour Force Survey, *Namibia Statistics Agency*, 2018.

28. "Youth Unemployment Expected to Reach 50%", *The New Era*, 26 July 2021, available at: <https://neweralive.na>.

Namibia by 2025.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Namibia's poverty rate is high for an upper middle-income country. About 38% of Namibians live in multidimensional poverty.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Namibia's business climate has deteriorated significantly over the last decade. Indeed, mounting populist measures coupled with pervasive corruption have put off potential investors. From ranking 54<sup>th</sup>, the country dropped to the 104<sup>th</sup> position (out of 190 countries) in the *World Bank 2008 Doing Business report*.<sup>31</sup>

## Corrupt Party

The mounting corruption and self-enrichment are undermining public faith in politicians and public service, in particular among young Namibians. The 2019 Global Corruption Barometer reported that 78% of Namibians thought corruption increased in the previous 12 months.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, after independence, a web of patronage was deployed by SWAPO to place its cadres in all key functions. Corruption has escalated to reach major proportions as ruling party members and their cronies divert public resources for their own benefit, giving them well-paid jobs, large farms, fishing quotas, mineral concessions and contracts to supply public goods and infrastructure. Nepotism and patronage networks rule much of the economy and gave rise to a class of rich black businesspeople known as "tenderpreneurs". Corruption scandals dominate the news, some of them linked to the president. As a result, SWAPO has been accused of focusing on self-enrichment during the last three decades of the party's rule without caring about the welfare of citizens. Even Nahas Angula, the former Prime Minister, criticized the party, saying there was a "distance between the elite and the general masses".<sup>33</sup>

Other high-profile allegations include the resignation of the minister of Defense in April 2021<sup>34</sup> over allegations of corruption, which, among others, involve an undeclared bank account in Hong Kong. Moreover, the former Namibia Defense Force chief was forced to quit his functions because he was accused of being paid bribes by a Chinese state-owned weapons company.<sup>35</sup> In August 2019, the former minister of Education, Arts

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29. Weber B & Mendelsohn JM, "Informal Settlements in Namibia: Their Nature and Growth. Exploring Ways to Make Namibian Urban Development More Socially Just and Inclusive", *Development Workshop*, Namibia 2017.

30. UN Human Development Reports, Namibia, 2020. Multidimensional poverty is estimated on the basis of three dimensions: monetary, education, and basic infrastructure access.

31. Santander Trade: <https://santandertrade.com>.

32. Transparency International, Country Data, n.d., available at: [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org).

33. "Tjiriange: SWAPO Must Reinvent Itself", *The New Era*, 1 December 2020, available at: <https://neweralive.na>.

34. "Defence Minister Resigns", *The Namibian*, 6 April 2021, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

35. "Vilho Falls on His Sword", *The Namibian*, 7 April 2021, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

and Culture resigned, as she was found guilty of using her position to obtain gratification.<sup>36</sup>

Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) schemes to redress apartheid's injustices have been widely abused to enrich SWAPO members. Back in 2004, a highly controversial deal led to a joint venture between Sasol and Philco Twenty, a Namibian BEE company whose shareholders were top government officials from the state president's office, the Ministry of Justice, and individuals closely linked to SWAPO. The national anti-corruption commission of Namibia has decided not to investigate further the controversial deal.<sup>37</sup>

President Hage Geingob himself has been tainted by scandals and dodgy friendships. Through his HG Consultancy, Hage Geingob was linked to the Uramin-Areva scandal. He is also involved in the infamous Fishrot scandal.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, President Geingob is connected to Chinese millionaire Yuequan Jack Huang who was arrested in 2017 (and released on bail) for allegations of fiscal evasion.<sup>39</sup> Although President Geingob announced in 2016 that he will not deal with business people at the state house,<sup>40</sup> in 2019 President Geingob met Mexican billionaire Alberto Baillères, who wanted to buy the Erindi private game reserve. In February 2021, President Geingob received the Russian oligarch Rashid Sardarov during the visit of Botswana president Mokgweetsi Masisi to discuss a desalination plant that will supply Namibia and Botswana.<sup>41</sup> The oligarch's proximity to Geingob raises questions. It is supposedly difficult for foreigners to purchase land under Namibian law, particularly if they are absentee property owners. But in 2013 Sardarov acquired more than ten farms through his Comsar Properties SA.<sup>42</sup> In addition to his 2013 purchases in Namibia, Sardarov wanted to buy additional land for expansion.<sup>43</sup> In 2018, Sardarov bought four more farms outside Windhoek, donated them to the state, and will now lease them from the government for 99 years.<sup>44</sup>

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36. "Another SWAPO Politician Convicted of Corruption", *The Namibian*, 29 July 2021, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

37. Paulus Noa is the Director General of the Nation anti-corruption Commision, directly recommended by the president Geingob. See more: "Noa's Reappointment 'an Insult to the Nation'", *The Namibian*, July 2021, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

38. Read Box 2.

39. "President's Friend Arrested", *The Namibian*, 2 February 2017.

40. "No More Tender Talks at State House", *The Namibian*, March 2016, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

41. "Rashid Sardarov, the Russian Oligarch Teaming Up with Geingob", *Africa Intelligence*, 12 March 2021.

42. "From Russia, with \$\$\$", *The Namibian*, October 2018, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

43. "Russian Billionaire's Namibian Land Purchases Linked to Offshore Company", *Panama Papers*, n.d., available at: <https://panamapapers.investigativecenters.org>.

44. "Russian Buys Four Farms", *The Namibian*, October 2018, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

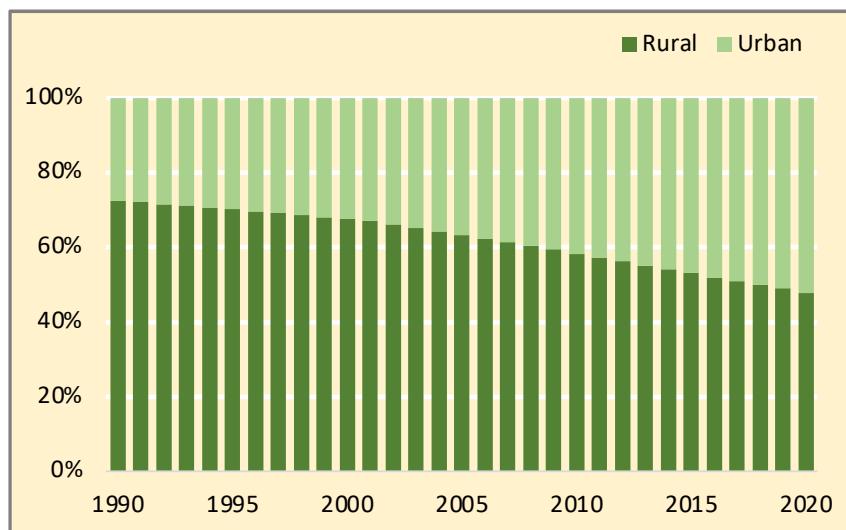
**Box 2. Fishrot Scandal**

Fishrot scandal is the largest political scandal to be revealed in Namibia. It came to light in 2019 and involves the Icelandic fisheries company Samherji. This company is accused of paying millions of dollars in bribes to well-connected politician and public officials in order to secure lucrative fishing quotas in Namibia's resource-rich waters. Among those accused of receiving bribes are the former Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources Bernhard Esau, former Minister of Justice Sacky Shanghala, state-owned Fishcor's Chairman James Hatukulipi, and their close associate. With others, they were arrested on charges of corruption and money laundering. On 12 November 2019, WikiLeaks published leaked documents provided by Jóhannes Stefánsson, a former Managing Director of Samherji's operations in Namibia. He provided WikiLeaks with over 30,000 documents (dated from 2010 to 2016) that WikiLeaks named the Fishrot Files. By bribing officials, Samherji has now become the biggest single recipient of fishing quotas in the country. But Samherji's promises to build infrastructure in the country and create jobs were never fulfilled as the company has managed to smuggle its earnings out of the country through intermediaries in Cyprus and Mauritius. In addition, Samherji has set up secret account in Dubai, for transferring kickbacks to the corrupt entities in Namibia. Recent revelations suggest that Hage Geingob's campaign during SWAPO's elective congress was funded by Fishrot funds. In January 2021, a leaked affidavit implied that SWAPO proxies managed to transfer US\$ 4.5 million between July 2017 and November 2018. Implicated persons are imprisoned and waiting trial while president Hage Geingob denies any implication in this scandal.

Source: Aljazeera Investigations, "[Anatomy of a Bribe](#)", December 2019, available at: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

## The Generational Disconnect

**Chart 7. Percent of Rural and Urban Population**



*Data source: World Development Indicators, the World Bank, 2020.*

Namibian youth aged 18-30 represent 24% of the population.<sup>45</sup> This means that a quarter of voters belong to the “born-free” generation, having been born after independence in 1990 and thus in a free country administered by a democratically elected government. They never knew the years of war, nor the harsh times of apartheid. Thus, they are not attracted by the rhetoric of the liberation struggle, nor the version of history tailored to venerate SWAPO. Furthermore, they are mostly living in the urban areas and SWAPO is increasingly a rural party. The born-free generation voted for the first time in 2009 and their share of votes is growing slowly. They focus on the present living conditions and are facing the escalating unemployment while the SWAPO elite has been enriching itself quite openly. Presently, the political symbol of the disgruntled youths is Job Amupanda (AR) who challenged SWAPO and managed to become the mayor of Windhoek at the age of 35.

45. Namibia 2011 Census Population Projections 2011 to 2041, Namibia Statistics Agency, Windhoek, 2014.

# Conclusion

The mix of corruption, generational disconnect, high unemployment and rising economic challenges is a major source for Namibians' dissatisfaction with the ruling party. In this political context, SWAPO is becoming more and more intolerant. The president expressed some anti-white Namibians sentiments, accusing them of conspiring to vote for "anything else but SWAPO".<sup>46</sup> The former Namibia Defense Force chief, Martin Shalli, suggested at a SWAPO campaign rally at Okahandja that those who resign from SWAPO to start their own political parties should be killed.<sup>47</sup> In order to reconnect with the young electorate, president Geingob appointed three young parliamentarians out of eight nominated members and one of the Africa's youngest cabinet members, the 23-year-old deputy minister of Information, Communication and Technology.

However, the SWAPO decline does not mean that the political situation will be reversed soon for two reasons. Firstly, the playing field remains skewed in favor of SWAPO. It remains the biggest and only party represented in all 14 regions while the presence of opposition parties is sometimes patchy. In addition, the opposition parties are financially stretched. Meanwhile, since independence and due to its overwhelming majority in parliament, SWAPO has been the biggest beneficiary of the funds allocated to political parties by the government. SWAPO also owns various businesses, including property, farming, media, fishing, transport, printing, security, healthcare and mining enterprises.<sup>48</sup> Secondly, Namibians tend to express their disenchantment by deserting the ballot box rather than turning to political rivals. Even if they are making progress, the opposition parties are struggling to convince the electorate that they represent a credible alternative to SWAPO. A survey by Afrobarometer in 2018 showed low levels of trust in the opposition parties: 36% of respondents did not trust the opposition parties while only 15% said they trust them a lot.<sup>49</sup> SWAPO may resist the downfall for some years, but its glorious times are drawing to a close.

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46. "Geingob Violated Racial Discrimination Law – LAC", *The Namibian*, 20 October 2020, available at: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

47. "Namibia Defense Force Chief", *The Namibian*, 8 November 2020.

48. SWAPO owns at least three investment companies: Kalahari Holdings, Zebra Holdings and Guinas Investment. See: [www.namibian.com.na](http://www.namibian.com.na).

49. Afrobarometer online data analysis, available at: <https://afrobarometer.org>.

# Appendix

## SWAPO Short History

SWAPO was formed in 1960, emerging from the resistance that had grown during the past 70 years of colonial rule. Born out of the Ovamboland People's Organization (OPO), SWAPO had, and still has its base, among the Aawambo people. After the massacre in the so-called Old Location in December 1959, Sam Nujoma went into exile and on 1 March 1960, he became the president of SWAPO.

In exile, SWAPO engaged in a worldwide diplomatic mobilization, rallying support from the UN, the Organization of the African Union, the Non-aligned Movement and the Eastern bloc. On 12 December 1973, SWAPO was recognized by the UN Resolution 3111 as the “Sole and authentic representative of Namibian people”. The liberation movement worked to build up international support by opening offices in Cairo (1962), Algiers (1963), Lusaka (1964), Helsinki (1965), London (1968), New Delhi (1982), and Moscow (1987). Moreover, SWAPO had established strong relationships with other liberation movements, such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

SWAPO's liberation struggle was tainted by purges of its members, corruption, and political crisis. Best known is the SWAPO crisis of 1976<sup>50</sup> and the so-called “spy-crisis” in the 1980s.<sup>51</sup> In both circumstances, members of SWAPO were arrested and some were tortured. SWAPO did not acknowledge these purges and President Nujoma maintained his silence on the matter.<sup>52</sup>

After negotiations between SWAPO, the South African government and the Western contact group,<sup>53</sup> a ceasefire agreement was signed in March 1989 and it led to elections with the support of the United Nations. Since 1994, Namibia has been ruled by SWAPO presidents Nujoma, Pohamba and Geingob.

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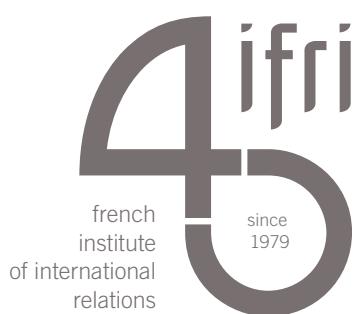
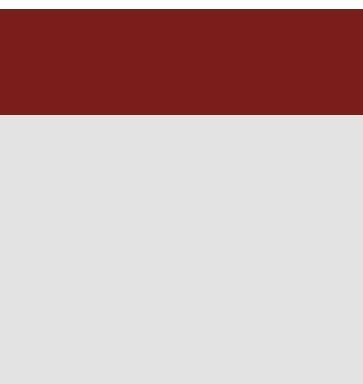
50. M. Wallas, *A History of Namibia, from the Beginning to 1990*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

51. B. Moore, “SWAPO in Exile and After: Dilemmas of Pragmatic Nationalism”, *Southern African Digital History Journal*, 2015.

52. P. Trewheala, “Inside Quattro: Uncovering the Exile History of the ANC and SWAPO”, *Jacana Media*, 2009.

53. France, United Kingdom, United States, Canada and West Germany, a group formed in 1977 to rally for the independence of Namibia.





27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – France

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