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How does one atone for genocide?

Germany is admitting its responsibility, as a colonial power, for the Herero and Nama genocide. In Namibia, however, the agreement is widely rejected

There's an eery silence around the Namibian government leadership at the moment. That's strange considering that, after almost six years of tough negotiations, a draft for a German-Namibian reconciliation agreement is now ready to be signed. The agreement is about coming to terms with the murder of tens of thousands of Nama and Herero by German colonial troops in what is now Namibia between 1904 and 1908. It's really extraordinary news. But, so far, the Namibian government has been conspicuously reticent about taking a position in public. Why is that?

If one follows reports in the media, it does not seem to be particularly opportune in Namibia at the moment to make positive comments about the agreement. It's an 'insult' read a headline of the largest daily and independent newspaper, the *Namibian*. 'Germany did not negotiate in good faith,' says Inna Hengari of the largest opposition party, the PDM. Joseph Kauandenge, Secretary General of the small opposition party NUDO, even claims that Germany does not respect Namibia 'because we are black. For them we are inferior'. And Evilastus Kaaronda from the (even smaller) SWANU party comes to a particularly bold conclusion: 'Our government and the German government are our only enemies.'

The conclusion of the Namibian-German government negotiations seems to suddenly have created unity in the otherwise rather divided Namibian opposition. The same also holds true for the numerous Nama and Herero organisations, some of which were involved in the negotiations themselves. What is now driving the agreement's critics to close ranks in opposition to the Namibian government on the one hand and Germany on the other?

Differences that can't be bridged

From the outset, it was clear that there couldn't be a solution acceptable

to all interest groups in the negotiations on coming to terms with the genocide – the positions are too far apart. On the one hand, this applies to the internal Namibian debate itself: The question as to which regional, local and traditional authorities have the legitimacy to represent population groups affected by the genocide doesn't have an easy answer, because there are often competing claims.

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At the same time, there are irreconcilable differences between the positions of the German government and representatives of the Herero and Nama. For example, the German side strictly rejected the term 'reparations' from the very beginning, since, from the perspective of international law, it implies a legally justified claim to compensation payments. Especially considering potential further reparation claims by other countries, the German government repeatedly rejected the claim. Instead, it emphasised that Germany's interest in the reconciliation dialogue had its roots in political and ethical reasoning.

By contrast, many Namibian population groups, including the Herero, explicitly demand the concept of reparations for cultural-spiritual reasons: For them, if a crime has taken place, neither peace nor a restoration of the spiritual order is possible as long as the crime is not atoned for through 'reparation' in the sense of making amends. In other words, it must literally be paid, and usually directly to the victims, their relatives or descendants.

An 'indirect' payment, on the other hand, as envisaged in the agreement with the planned infrastructure projects, is neither immediately understandable nor easy to communicate in this context. What makes matters more complicated is that some traditional authorities had whipped up unrealistic expectations. Those who had already been looking forward to individual cash payments, inevitably feel cheated when all the money flows into a common, centrally administered pot. This is not least because one can now look back at numerous experiences with large-scale projects coordinated by the central government, where the benefits rarely reached the local population.

The complexity of representation

The demand for reparations in the sense of individual compensation weighs heavily in the current debates. Nevertheless, it is quite possible

that understanding for and acceptance of the agreement could prevail in the medium and long term. That is because, if the projects planned in the Herero and Nama areas are implemented in a participatory, good and fair manner, future generations could benefit from improved living conditions and prospects. Here, too, the key issue emerged at the beginning of the negotiations: Both governments regarded the negotiations as an intergovernmental matter. Reportedly, the Namibian government had reached out to all stakeholders involved in the genocide debate in Namibia with an invitation to send a representative. However, some stakeholders claim, they never received any; others rejected the Namibian government's dialogue-oriented approach and rather wanted to see their demands met in full.

In the so-called *Chiefs' Forum,* the delegates sent by the communities were not only keeping the Chiefs informed during the six years of negotiations, but also received instructions from them on how matters should proceed. The forum is said to have remained open to new members until the end, but at no point did it include all gazetted Nama and Herero Chiefs. In this respect, the agreement does indeed not represent all the central victims' associations. However, this decision was not made by the government, but by the associations themselves.

As imperfect as this agreement may be, one should hope for it to be successful.

This complex point of departure not only made the negotiations more difficult, but also clouded, from the very beginning, the prospect of an agreement accepted by the broad majority of the Nama and Herero. Now, in an unexpected final spurt, the two delegations have presented a compromise solution. In principle, it corresponds to the three demands of victims' associations: recognition of the genocide by the German side; payment of a higher sum for reconstruction and reconciliation projects; and, finally, an apology from the highest level of government (the German President). Determining the amount of the payment was difficult right up until the end: What would be appropriate in view of the losses suffered during the 1904-08 genocide?

The agreement is just a starting point for reconciliation

There can never be ‘enough’ in the face of genocide and the agreed sum of

€1.1bn over 30 years doesn't sound very high at first. But it can make a huge difference to the descendants of genocide victims – provided it is used as intended: for investments in education, roads, houses, water, electricity and agriculture, and exclusively in the predominantly Nama and Herero regions; provided also that the procedures are transparent, with local participation, and the management of the funds is the responsibility of an independent supervisory body.

Furthermore, a 'reconciliation foundation' should facilitate meetings between descendants of genocide victims and Germans. Town twinning, church twinning, exchanges between schools – the more, the better. There is also no doubt that, with the signing of the agreement, addressing the common colonial past has basically only just begun. Here, too, dialogues and meetings are the key to reducing mistrust and resentment. How important this is becomes clear from the anti-German undertones in the current debate.

As imperfect as this agreement may be, one should hope for it to be successful. For there will probably be no other agreement in the foreseeable future. If it is implemented democratically and transparently, it offers a very realistic prospect of taking an important step in the reconciliation process. Therefore, it's all the more important to facilitate broad and inclusive debates on the agreement that do not see it as wiping the slate clean, but as an important moment in the special relationship between Germany and Namibia.



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