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A questionable victory

Namibia's historic election ushers in its first female president, but flaws in the process cast a shadow over SWAPO's victory

Following the presidential and parliamentary elections on 27 November 2024, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) will once again form the government of Namibia and maintain its absolute majority in parliament. The current Vice President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah (72) entered the race for the presidency as the big favourite. With 58 per cent of the vote, she will be the first woman to take over as Namibia's leader on 21 March 2025.

Like other former liberation movements in southern Africa, SWAPO had recently come under increasing pressure. As the ruling party, it launched into independence in 1990 with great euphoria and unrelenting success at the ballot box; election victories for the liberation movement, which had become a state party, with 70 or 80 per cent of the vote were the norm. Whilst the party did bring about fundamental changes, particularly in the education, health, justice and welfare sectors, over the years it lost its dynamism, creative imagination and ability to react.

Loss of trust in the ruling party

High unemployment, particularly among the youth, housing shortages, social inequality and the growing frustration among the population noticeably increased the pressure on the ruling party. The 2019 elections saw the first signs of change: President Hage Geingob only received 56 per cent of the vote, and SWAPO lost its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time.

More than three decades after the end of colonial oppression and the apartheid regime, Namibia remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. The widespread poverty is insufficiently counteracted by the state. The supply of public goods such as electricity, water and health services is often either inadequate or unaffordable. After the 'independence of the flag', economic independence failed to materialise:

Many citizens are still waiting in vain for an 'independence dividend'. The state does not respond adequately or promptly to the needs of the population and is prone to corruption and cronyism. This has led to a significant loss of trust in SWAPO, particularly among the younger generation.

As soon as the polling stations opened at seven in the morning, queues of 100 or more voters formed in many places. These queues remained throughout the day and even grew as the day progressed. The inadequate technical equipment for registering voters and the nationwide shortage of ballot papers meant that many registered citizens ended up going home frustrated without having cast their vote.

In its initial analysis, the African Union Election Observation Mission identified the main reason for the chaos: voters were free to decide at which polling station they wanted to cast their vote. This made reliable planning and resource allocation almost impossible. In the greater Windhoek area in particular, massive physical voter movements led to extreme overcrowding at all surrounding polling stations, which were already completely overloaded when they opened.

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Despite these serious shortcomings, the population maintained an admirable calm and composure. The most regrettable aspect was the national Electoral Commission (ECN), which was completely overwhelmed by the task assigned to it. After the media and social networks became increasingly vocal about the obvious irregularities during the course of the election day, and after some polling stations allowed voters to cast their ballots until early in the morning even after closing at 9 pm, the full extent of the disaster became apparent the following day: The major opposition parties declared on the evening of the election day that they would not recognise the results of this – in their view unsuccessful – election and would have them annulled by the courts.

In a controversial decision, the ECN ordered that voting could take place again on the following two days, but only in selected areas that are predominantly in the northern strongholds of the ruling SWAPO party. In the entire Windhoek metropolitan area, however, only one polling station was reopened.

The ECN has thus contributed to even more incomprehension and annoyance, not to say astonishment, at this rather brazen behaviour, both among the political parties and among large sections of the population.

These events are already casting a shadow over the – for many observers surprisingly clear – election success of the future president. Under these circumstances, the start to the highest office of state is anything but ideal, especially in view of the enormous challenges facing Namibia. SWAPO will also only be able to act to a limited extent in parliament, as the opposition parties as a whole have gained significant strength.

Challenging times ahead

Yes, these elections have produced a result. Shortly before the end of the count, SWAPO declared that it was quite satisfied with the outcome. However, many Namibians are dismayed and ashamed of how these results came about. Even if the outcome is upheld in court, it will not be able to pacify the country internally and socially to the extent that the next five years of government can be confidently anticipated.

The change of era expected by some observers, which would have seen SWAPO in a coalition government with one or more opposition parties, did not materialise. It is possible that young voters under the age of 35 – who make up around 60 per cent of the registered electorate – did not participate in the election in as high numbers as expected. In particular, the so-called born frees, those born after independence in 1990, may not have been sufficiently represented in this election. All of this will have to be analysed, and it may also be one of the aspects that the opposition will cite in its judicial review proceedings.

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It is difficult to predict what this situation will mean for the transitional period until the new government is sworn in on 21 March, the traditional Independence Day. The country and its population have no experience of this kind. The frustration, especially among the young population, with SWAPO's government performance remains high and will probably not disappear any time soon, regardless of a court ruling on the legality of the election results.

Political scientist Ndumba Kamwanyah aptly summarises the situation: 'People deserve better than a flawed process that makes them doubt the legitimacy of their leaders. If these problems are not addressed, the country risks sliding into a future where elections are not seen as a

celebration of democracy, but as a contest to see who can manipulate the system better. Namibia can and must do better.' For the country, democracy and especially the new government under the leadership of the ageing liberation movement SWAPO, which has become a state party, an extremely challenging phase of the post-colonial era is thus looming.

Ultimately, SWAPO's decades of experience in government and mobilisation once again prevailed in the competition for voters' favour. No other party is as well organised throughout the country and is anchored in communities, trade unions, associations and churches. The political opposition, on the other hand, is present and loud in the public debate and in the media, but is often weak and fragmented in terms of content and strategy. Only united could it have posed a serious threat to SWAPO — a scenario that could well become a reality in the next elections in 2029.



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