
Rezensiert von: Reinhart Kößler, Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, Freiburg

Up to attaining independence in 1990, Namibia enjoyed celebrity status in international politics as the ‘trust betrayed’ by South African occupation after the termination of the old League of Nations mandate. Namibia’s transition to an independent country with an exemplary constitution after protracted independence conflict and liberation war was considered as exemplary at the time. It had been one of the largest UN operations to date and was considered as a template for conflict resolution in neighbouring South Africa. Even though Namibia – vast in area but modest by population size – ever since has attracted much less public attention than prior to independence, it remains exemplary in important respects; this is not least on account of the country’s role as a forerunner for pacted transition in South Africa, but also for the emerging literature on a special kind of regime that across Southern Africa has emerged from the blending of guerrilla radicalism with the restraint of elite pacts. Various strands associate such regimes alternatively with the reproduction of colonial domination with merely a change in the skin colour of the rulers, as famously presaged by Frantz Fanon, or with the logic of party machines that with independence and majority rule have occupied government. Obviously, both interpretations are complementary rather than contradictory. Henning Melber’s account of the first quarter century of Namibian independence is posited squarely within this framework, yet he also brings a particular gaze to his task, being a long-standing member of SWAPO, the erstwhile hegemonic liberation organisation and since 1990, the ruling party. The chasm that is apparent between the programmatic planks of liberation organisations, including SWAPO on the one hand, and the effects of their policies once in power on the other, can be seen as the pervasive concern that drives Melber’s critical analysis. In this way, the author’s personal commitment and life experience remain closely enmeshed in the overall analysis.

The book sets out by reviewing the transition process which was instrumental in ending more than two decades of liberation war and reaching a peaceful settlement, including an exemplary democratic constitution. Step by step, the following eight chapters probe into the processes and circumstances that unravelled this high promise. This review of the post-independence record begins with a review of the SWAPO’s political regime and corresponding ideological tenets as well as basic issues of economic policy and social structure and lastly, foreign policy. Thus, the book represents a broad sweep across vital issues that emerged during the time in question and in decisive ways, shaped Namibia’s current socio-political complexion. However, this is not an encyclopaedic account, leaving out, for instance, the entire security sector which besides its rather arcane aspects, also provides a fair share of public employment and thus is, as is also shown in the book, of strategic importance in more than the most obvious respects.

The hegemonic ideological orientation hinges on the interrelated perpetuation of ‘struggle mentality’ and the iconisation of Sam Nujoma, styled after stepping down from the presidency as the Founding Father of the Namibian Nation. Above all, this implies a strong penchant against dissent and opposition. Even though Namibia remains a multi-party democracy, specifically breakaway parties from SWAPO are ostracised and in public discourse SWAPO is conflated with the nation at large. This happens in spite of the unchallenged electoral and parliamentary position of the party which since the second elections in 1994, enjoys a majority of more than two thirds in the National Assembly. The consolidation of this powerful position is traced in a special chapter, as are the peculiarities of Namibian democracy. Here, the author inserts an extensive account of the much neglected drama that followed an ill-conceived secession attempt in the north eastern Caprivi (now Zambezia) region in 1999. The trial of more than 100 accused for high treason has not been terminated at

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the time of writing and in its conduct attests both to the strong penchant against dissent amongst the ruling party and to the limits of adherence to constitutional values and procedures. This situation is complemented by a comparatively weak civil society, which however is set off to an extent by a vibrant and critical press.

In socio-economic respects, Namibia’s performance after attaining independence is deeply problematic. While the agricultural potential of the largely arid country is clearly limited, attempts at using the rich mineral, but also marine resources to set afoot a process of industrialisation largely have not met the desired success. As Melber demonstrates, this obvious and apparent failure is due to a number of factors, including a rent-seeking approach to the allocation of exploitation rights, as exemplified in a closer look at the fisheries sector; minerals, above all diamonds and uranium, are not specially addressed in this study. Another dimension is the almost pervasive failure by government agencies to follow up basic policy papers by consistent strategies and action. The absence of serious advances at industrialisation can also be seen, as Melber argues, as aggravating the symbolically highly charged land issue. Against the background of forcible land alienation in the South and Centre of the country in the wake of the genocide committed by the German colonial army in 1904–08, the land issue presents itself in clearly different forms in these regions and in the northern areas which had been subjected to indirect rule. At the same time, economic and symbolic concerns overlap, and this linkage cannot be disentangled – or a rising tension diffused – in the absence of viable employment opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors. These very serious problems are clearly related to dynamics of class formation that are predicated on the elite pact and marked by the emergence, besides longer established groups, of a blackoisie that thrives on quotas accorded by the state or a form of affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment that has done little to spread opportunities and life chances more evenly among the underprivileged majority. Rather, relevant figures show a persistently high level of social inequality.

Considered in connection with the elite pact, this amounts to the accession of a very limited group of black Namibians into the existing ranks of privilege, while the overwhelming majority remains marginalised. With unemployment figures given as high as over 50 percent, such a situation points to a potential social crisis. In a closing chapter, popular sentiments relating to this situation are given voice by quoting extensively from SMS that are regularly printed in the Namibian press.

The book has been put out ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections of late 2014. While the outcome of these elections in terms of a parliamentary, most likely once again two-thirds majority of SWAPO and the person of the next president can hardly be in doubt, Melber’s analysis demonstrates once again that the tasks are daunting, and to a considerable extent these tasks have accumulated over the years after attaining independence by inaction as well as by self-interested behaviour of policy makers and administrators. Understanding Namibia, while certainly not offering an exhaustive account of the present situation, does pinpoint the central problems that beset this (as many other) postcolonial societies. Amongst void spots that seem important or even vital for an understanding of the present situation one would mention the role of the churches who seem still to be struggling for an independent stance after their vital support for SWAPO during the liberation struggle; another instance concerns the rather volatile situation in the organised labour movement, and still another the fibre of local power relations involving the ambivalent role of traditional authorities. However, this is little more than to say that an intervention such as the present one, which does not shy away from also entering the political fray – albeit from a position of scholarly rigor – can hardly aspire to encyclopaedic completeness at the same time. This said, it is not an exaggeration to say that from now on, this is required reading for anyone wishing to seriously discuss problems related to Namibia, and possibly also for policy makers in the country. Moreover, Melber contributes towards a broader conception of liberation movements in power which is of particular relevance for Southern Africa as a whole. In
particular for all those who persevere in seeing aspirations for human rights, justice and equity as central not only to their personal agenda but to a salubrious perspective in the Southern African region and beyond, this book will also be an important milestone not just to grapple with ‘what has gone wrong’, but to reach an understanding of the regime type that has emerged and possibly also of the social dynamics that may lead beyond that type.