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Thinking about democracy in Namibia

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Democracy has become a totem. As a concept and process, it has taken new meaning with the end of the Cold War and some predicted the end of history to highlight the triumph of democratic values¹. Namibia whose independence was attained in 1990 represents one of the many countries whose democratic experiment takes place within a changed context. Its transition to democracy is not necessarily borne out of a desire by the liberators to forge ahead with a democratic experiment, but it is a process of elite pacts between on the one hand: a liberation movement whose ideology was a cocktail of the two divides of the Cold War Era; and on the other, a western-led alliance which sought to protect the interests of an existing order through the entrenchment of certain liberal norms. Thus, the normative commitment of the new liberation leaders to democracy was untested and has been one of trial and error over the past 18 years. In light of these, it is fitting to problematize and think about Namibia's democracy eighteen years on. This paper seek to do so by analyzing and highlighting what could be considered shortcomings in the democratic life of Namibia as a republic.

In Robert Dahl's² classification of democracy as "participation and contestation", Namibia exists as a realistic democracy. Importantly it is a democracy that exists in a vertical sense. The country has functioning institutions and there is widespread respect for these, even on the part of the ruling executive. The signs of success are evident when one considers that the country has one of the more solid judicial and legal systems in Africa. For a developing country falling within the third wave democratization, if one invokes Samuel Huntington's terminology³, Baron de Montesquieu would be proud of the separation of powers that exist between the executive, the legislature and importantly the judiciary. Decisions of the judiciary are largely respected. In addition, democracy in Namibia exists on the bedrock of an important transformation that took place since independence in the form of a weaved public sector. While in the past, the public sector management jobs were the exclusive reserve of whites, it has now become representative

¹ See Francis Fukuyama. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press

² See Robert Dahl, 1956 *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago University Press

³ See Samuel Huntington. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman

of the new Namibian reality. These are important democratic and institutional advances that were unthinkable at the time of independence.

Namibia has had three legislative and presidential elections. They have passed the international test of being classified as free and fair. We have witnessed the successful transfer of power from one President to another on the 21 March 2004, albeit this power resting within the same ruling party. The country is now moving into its fourth election in late 2009. These things are commendable on a continent that is usually characterized by instability, where democracy exists only in a historical context.

Thinking about the present and the future, Namibia's discussion about its new and young democracy must be replaced by efforts aimed at understanding the nature of democratic institutions, how they function, and the reasons why they develop and collapse. Recent political history suggest that at some point Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe met the definition advanced by Joseph Schumpeter⁴ in his path-breaking study, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*: democracy as a process of fair, honest and periodic elections through institutional arrangements. However, holding regular elections didn't stop Mugabe's Zimbabwe from descending into the chaos of the past nine years and more. Thus, thinking about democracy in Namibia demands that we think outside the institutional framework, which in theory would guarantee the basic tenets of a democracy. What such a discussion may reveal is that the existence of democratic institutions is not a sufficient condition for the consolidation of a democratic order. In fact, the idea of a country's democracy existing as an electocracy is not sustainable. Nor is it desirable for the consolidation of a democratic culture. Elections, while serving as an important starting point for the emergence of a democratic culture, should not be considered as an end in themselves. Alas, they are considered as such in the Namibian context.

So, when thinking about democracy today, a more helpful starting point would be to think about the erosion of democratic thinking in the country. As a corollary, even though outside the purview of this discussion, it is crucial to think about the implications of this thinking on the stability of democratic institutions in the medium to long-term. As an inlet to this discussion, one would be talking about the pervasive selective and limited usage of what it means to be a democratic country. One is inclined to think about what the country has lost and what it has gained over the past eighteen years. In that regard, four salient features could be identified as posing a threat to the sustainability of Namibia's democracy. A more politically correct way of putting it would be to refer to these as "missing links" before the country can be called a confident democracy.

⁴ See Joseph Schumpeter. 1942. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London (Allen and Arwin)

First, democracy in any given state should not only exist in political terms. That is to say it should not only exist as a political regime. Here, the temptation exist to introduce what the 19th century French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville⁵ referred to as “horizontal democracy” or democracy as some sort of *savoir-vivre ensemble*. In shorthand, it would mean that when thinking about democracy in Namibia, it becomes evident that despite some of the initial successes in the transformation process, the country has not been able to construct or nurture a meaningful community of democratic values.

With values, we mean also to say that we have not really discussed, nor have we internalized what it means to live in a democracy outside the institutional obligations. We have difficulties having our democracy exist once we have met the formal obligations of elections, slugfests in the two chambers of parliament to name but a few. Democracy in Namibia has in essence not shifted to another gear in the sense that it exist to quote Joseph Schumpeter:⁶ “*as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by way of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote*”. The ritual of casting a vote every few years is not enough and has somewhat led to a certain depoliticization of society. The view being advanced here is that Namibia has not really asked the pertinent question: What does it mean to live (and not to exist) in a democracy?

Since Namibians have not asked that question, the country’s democracy exists in a paradoxical manner. The paradox of democracy in Namibia is that there has been a resurgence of a vocabulary that is explicitly anti-democratic. While Namibia is a democracy that prides itself and seek recognition as such, the government imposed an advertising ban on *The Namibian*, which is the biggest English daily in the country. The logic behind such an action is to sanction take the said newspaper and take it out of business. Second, with the emergence of the Rally for Democracy, a political party largely composed of a faction that broke away from SWAPO after the 2003 SWAPO internal presidential candidate nomination, the political discussion has deteriorated to alarming levels.

Political rallies, in particular those of the ruling parties are platforms to incite hatred toward the leaders of the RDP party by calling them names such as traitors, cowards etc. In fact, the Minister of Local Government and Housing has on occasion referred to the leaders of this party as “Satan”. The consequences of such language on the psyche of the masses could be ghastly to contemplate. The purpose here is to mobilize the masses in a combination of terror and ideology in order to ensure total domination of the ruling party. On the whole, it is observable that there

⁵ See Alexis de Tocqueville. 1835. *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835–1840)

⁶ See Joseph Schumpeter. 1942. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London (Allen and Arwin)

is a tendency to label everybody who differs with SWAPO as enemy agents whose agenda is to reverse the gains of the revolution. So, democracy in this case, and it could be considered an esoteric need, yet it escapes the political life of the country.

The second threat that exists in Namibia's democracy has to do with the nature of the relationship between the state and the ruling party, SWAPO. SWAPO has shown over the years a desire to establish a permanent relationship with the state machinery in order to protect itself, and thereby entrenching its hegemony in the allocation of resources. As a consequence of the fused party-state apparatus, it has become the norm for ministers, who are also party leaders to use officialdom for party-dom, if one could use such a word. A case in point is when the President of the country campaigned for SWAPO while in the Northern parts of the country to inaugurate a regional government office. The danger here is clear in that through the usage of state-resources for party-affairs, SWAPO has a distinct resource advantage over other political parties when it comes to political campaigns and mobilization. These actions also compromise the very integrity and essence of the constitutional state that ought to be nurtured because it places the political party above the nation it ought to serve. The monopolistic party has reduced the formal institutional processes of government to a mere appendix at the whims of a factional political elite.

Third, tribalism is threatening the constitution of Namibia's democracy and the type of kind of country that should be nurtured. Tribalism here entails the use of the concept of ethnicity to establish a hierarchy of power relationships. It is used here in a hegemonic manner, and its usage as a socio-economic and political mechanism is becoming a concern for certain segments of country. This "othering" has now led to a situation where minorities could possibly feel that they are denied their humanity. The humiliation that minorities may have started to feel, could lead to a disengagement from politics. Alternatively, such sentiments are being expressed through ethnic solidarity, and the country is now seeing a resurgence of tribal political parties to counter the phenomenon of hegemonic tribalism.

Fourth, Namibia has lost as a nation the voice of political morality in the public discourse. Of concern is the absence of such voices in government. To illustrate this point, one is tempted to gaze into the first decade of independence without necessarily romanticizing that era. During the year 2000, the Office of the Prime Minister under the then Prime Minister, Hage Geingob, published a book titled "Namibia: A decade of peace, democracy and prosperity, 1990–2000"⁷. Throughout the 1990's and also as is evident from the aforementioned book, democracy is one of the salient words, notably in the introductory remarks of the President and the Prime Minister.

⁷ Office of the Prime Minister. 2000. "Namibia: A decade of peace, democracy and prosperity, 1990–2000". Solitaire Press

It could be argued that the idea of a democracy enjoyed a certain degree of prominence in the discourse of the Prime Minister at the time. Additionally, the concept and vision of a democracy enjoyed prominence to the point where the same plea is made that one of the key strategic challenges identified for vision 2030 is the strengthening of democracy in all aspects. The Prime Minister at the time served as the guardian of democratic values in the face of sporadic onslaught from key government leaders, including President Sam Nujoma's attacks on gays, lesbians and other minority interests on various occasions. However, democracy, as a word does not resonate anymore with the very same leaders who used to be passionate about it.

It has become uncommon to use it, especially in the face of an increasing disconnect between the Party and Government with regard to the relevance of a democratic order. The point deserving emphasis here is that democracy does not have leaders to defend it in government. It has become an orphan. Even when a minister reportedly takes out a gun, fires shots in the air to threaten his cousin who has allegedly joined the RDP, there is no sanction. On the contrary, the ruling party tried everything to hide the fact that such an event did occur. And the said minister was rewarded with an opportunity to speak at a rally in the coming weeks to save the public face of the minister and not the victim.

In a nutshell, Namibia is struggling to make the synthesis between human rights, liberalism and democracy as a means to realize political modernity. As such, democracy lacks a coherent philosophical charter. If transitions to democracy, including the consolidation of democracy take time and effort, it becomes an issue of concern to think that democracy will be consolidated in the absence of a strategic visionary leadership. To conclude, when thinking about democracy in Namibia, the observer is in a conundrum about the prospects for democratic consolidation in the medium to long-term.

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