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SURVEY ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICS IN NAMIBIA

INTRODUCTION

On November 27th and 28th, about one million registered voters in Namibia are called upon to cast their vote at the elections for a new parliament. Since independence from South Africa in 1990, it is the fifth time that the country has a chance to confirm the government or to support the opposition parties. Currently, SWAPO Party holds 55 of the 72 seats in parliament (about 76 % of the votes). However, Swapo's two thirds majority might be challenged for the first time since 1994, as the party lost some support in the last years.¹

The Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation commissioned a survey to find out about the Namibians' attitudes towards politics in general and the upcoming elections in particular. Namibians were asked how they feel about the political, economic and educational situation in their country. What are their hopes and fears for the upcoming elections and which issues should the new government address most urgently? What piece of advice would they give political parties to gain more supporters?

The survey was conceptualized and supervised by the University of Zimbabwe Professor Eldred Masunungure, who is also the Director of the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), based in Harare. UNAM (University of Namibia) students conducted standardized interviews in four cities/regions: Keetmanshoop, Windhoek, Otjiwarongo

¹ In the 2008 Afro Barometer survey, only 51 per cent of the participants said they would vote for SWAPO if a presidential election was held tomorrow. Afro Barometer is an independent research instrument that interviewed 1200 Namibians, who are representative for the entire population. Cf. Afro Barometer Round 4, p. 53.

and Rundu. The survey focused particularly on young people and women. So in each region, two groups of about 10 people each were interviewed: a male group at the age of 18 to 31 and a female group ranging from the ages of 18-31, 32-45 and 46+. The participants were drawn from all economic and educational backgrounds. Although the groups are not representative for the entire Namibian population in terms of age and gender, they allow a very good insight into the main issues and problems that young Namibians and women are concerned with. The small number of people interviewed ensures a detailed record of each person's opinion and provides for an in-depth view on their respective attitudes.

KEY ISSUES FOR NAMIBIANS

When asked about the current situation in Namibia, all groups agree concerning the most urgent problems: education, high unemployment and the health system. In the education sector, the participants mainly criticize the costs for schools. One woman from Windhoek points out: "Women cannot help their children because they do not have the money for the schools or the transport money, since schools are very far away." Students also criticize high fees for university. Another problem they see is that students who fail grade 10 or 12 have no job opportunities and should be granted another attempt to finish school. Moreover, there is a need for vocational training centers, for example in mechanical engineering. Most participants agree that a good education is a prerequisite for economic development in the country. The current data for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) also shows that Namibia needs to put in some extra effort to achieve the goal of universal primary education.²

The income inequality in Namibia is also a big issue. Recently, the Institute for Public Policy Research published a study stating that the income inequality in Namibia has not improved between 1993/94 and 2003/04 – unlike former studies claimed. Instead, the Gini coefficient which measures the income and wealth distribution in an country remained at 0,6, which represents a large inequality and is among the highest all over the

² Cf. UNDG, *MDG Report Namibia*, p. XII <<http://www.undg.org/docs/10517/Namibia-MDG-Report.pdf>> (30.9.2009).

world.³ High unemployment and the lack of job opportunities – especially in the rural areas – is another main problem for the participants of the survey. Many feel that economic development and investments are not spread equally over the country but that rural areas are often neglected. The participants point out the connection between unemployment and further problems such as high crime rates, drug and alcohol abuse or teenage pregnancies. As a means of solving these problems, they suggest better education, government investments and strategies for development. Loans for smaller businesses and a monthly income for everyone are proposed as ways to alleviate poverty and to close the huge income gap between the people in Namibia.

Many participants also criticize the health care services in the country, including clean water supply in the rural areas. According to the latest MDG stats, only 14 % of the rural households have access to basic sanitation – this is far from the goal of 65 % until 2012.⁴ HIV/Aids is considered a major problem in the population. Young men and women alike ask for projects promoting HIV/Aids awareness and youth involvement in reproductive health activities. Especially among young Namibians, the HIV prevalence has steadily increased in the past years.⁵ 60 % of all Namibians have one or more close friends or relatives who died of Aids.⁶ These are two important reasons why health care in general and the fight against HIV/Aids is so important for many Namibians. Also, diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria are a point of concern.

When comparing the most serious issues that young male Namibians and women see to the results of the Afro-Barometer, it becomes apparent that the participants of this survey clearly focus more on education and health services than the participants of the Afro-Barometer survey. Although economic development and job opportunities are very important to both groups, there seems to be a greater awareness of the linkage between education and economic development among the younger generation and women. Moreover, they seemed to be more concerned about issues such as health care, crimes, security or alcoholism than the respondents of the Afro-Barometer.⁷

³ Cf. IPPR, *Poverty, Inequality and Growth Linkages*, <<http://www.ippr.org.na/>> (30.9.2009).

⁴ Cf. UNDG, *MDG Report Namibia*, p. XIII.

⁵ Cf. National Planning Commission, *Namibia MDG Report 2004*, Windhoek 2004. <http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?P=87&f=N> (30.9.2009).

⁶ Cf. Afro-Barometer Round 4, p. 51 f.

⁷ Cf. Afro-Barometer Round 4, p. 29 ff.

FOCUS ON WOMEN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Both women and men pointed out that women are especially vulnerable and need more support. For example, they usually take care of the children and often cannot afford school fees. They are also subject to domestic violence, crimes and rape and have no equal job opportunities. One young man from Rundu says: “Cases of violence against women have been reported but nothing has been done to the culprits. The government must come back to traditional leaders on how to treat such men that cause this problem.” One man also suggests that women should be empowered, especially in financial matters. Men and women both criticize that pension funds should be increased.

However, many young people are in a difficult economic situation, too. Unemployment, peer pressure, gender inequality and alcohol abuse are problems they have to face. Some participants also mention the need for counseling and psychological help. A young man from Keetmanshoop explains the situation in his town: “Kids often drop out of school for nothing and they are becoming street kids and gangsters. Sometimes they are involved in violence and then they are in jail.”

However, a few participants also hold the view that young people should take more responsibility for their lives. A young woman from Otjiwarongo points out: “Sometimes children don’t use their money for school fees or the household properly. They rather use it for drinking alcohol and using drugs and so on. So sometimes it’s also the youth – you don’t think about your future.” Nevertheless, most participants feel that young people do not have enough opportunities in terms of education and work.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION AND THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS

The groups assess the political situation in Namibia differently. Some people find that it is quite stable, others see many problems in terms of political representation, trust in political parties and information about them. There is one issue that almost all participants agree on: They criticize the political parties for making empty promises and they are disappointed with their work. The participants express the demand that political parties should listen to the people, take their problems seriously and consequently act

upon them. The unfulfilled promises are also a major reason for low trust in political parties.

Many feel that too little has changed in the country in general and their respective region in particular during the last years. They criticize that parties are only visible during election times and that parliamentarians do not feel responsible for the region they are from but only for the people who put them on the nomination list. One young man from Keetmanshoop remarks: “The system of voting is not effective. Say I vote for the ruling party or the opposition. Those people are appointed by the party itself, that is the problem. They get instructions from the party, they are not there for the people’s interest. This is how the structures are not right at all.”

In terms of the upcoming elections, fairness, freedom and security were considered key issues in the participants’ opinions. The views of the voters should be accepted and the political parties should treat each other with respect. Furthermore, the participants want the parties to address important issues such as land and wealth distribution or gender equality and stop making promises they do not fulfill after the elections. The fight against corruption is also seen a key issue for the 2009 elections.

When it comes to the question of whether the elections will be free and fair, there is a mixed picture. Almost all women are convinced that the elections will be free and fair. Men, however, often say ‘no’ or are indecisive about it. For example, one young man points out that “the ruling party is making sure that the staff at the election commission will be the so called party members”. This would be an obstacle to free and fair elections, as the election commission is supposed to be unbiased and independent.

Others are afraid of ballot rigging. One man from Rundu says: “I won’t believe the elections are free and fair unless ballot papers are counted at the polling stations and are not transported to a central place.” Furthermore, tribalism and nepotism are considered major problems. Another fear is that Swapo would disrupt other parties’ rallies and thus keep people from supporting opposition parties. Especially older women say that some people are not aware of the registration and voting process and need more information about it. All these factors add to people’s insecurity concerning the elections and this makes it harder for them to decide which party to vote for.

WHO TO VOTE FOR?

Most participants say that they want to vote in the upcoming elections. However, many of them feel that political parties do not care about the people but that they just want to win the elections. When asked about their reasons to vote, most participants say they want to express their opinion and make a difference. One young man says: “I am still part of the youth and the youth are the leaders of tomorrow. So I should vote and know what is going on.” Another young man adds: “I think as a citizen in the country I have to vote. I vote to have changes in the government and to be able to criticize.”

When asked which party they want to vote for, many young males say they want to go for RDP. Some feel that RDP understands the needs of the young generation, and they hope for a change because it is a relatively new party. They like their election manifesto and the promises the party made, for example to improve the education and hospital facilities and to address unemployment. One young man from Keetmanshoop says: “All these years from the time when we became independent, it was SWAPO who were the ruling party. And I see no development in the south and in the north. When RDP had a meeting here, it was not only one tribe or one culture who attended the meeting, but it was the whole Keetmans.” One main criticism of Swapo is that they have not solved the problems in the country and that they focus too much on the liberation struggle.

When looking at women’s preferences for the elections, it becomes obvious that most of them support the ruling party. Swapo’s background in the independence struggle is one important reason for this, as a woman from Katutura, Windhoek, says: “Swapo fought for our country. They are the first party in Namibia.” Many women feel that Swapo fulfills their needs and guarantees peace and freedom. One even claims that Swapo is “god-given”. In fact, the fear of the unknown is a major reason for women to trust the party they know and not to turn to opposition parties. One woman from Rundu explains: “We don’t know if the opposition will perform better or not.” However, some young women also support opposition parties, especially DTA of Namibia.

Some participants choose not to vote. Their main reason is that they feel their voice does not make a difference, that nothing in the country will change, or that the ruling party will win anyway. One young woman from Otjiwarongo says: “I am not going to vote because

[...] if I vote for a party to win it is just for their own interest, it's not for the interest of the community and for the country." Clearly, some participants are disappointed with the party leaders who only seem to work for their personal gain.

The parties the participants would vote for:

	SWAPO	RDP	DTA	APP	UDF	SWANU	NUDO	'opposition'	unsure	none
Men	10	9	0	2	0	1	1	2	4	2
Women	16	1	6	0	1	0	0	0	1	4

Note: There were no results from the female group from Rundu.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS OPPOSITION PARTIES

The results of the Afro-Barometer look somewhat different. According to the findings from December 2008, about 50 % of both men and women would vote for Swapo if elections were held tomorrow. Overall, 9 % would go for RDP and 4 % for DTA.⁸ The participants were asked why, in their view, especially young people and women often support Swapo and tend to distrust the opposition parties. The liberation struggle is certainly one important argument. Some women say they feel like they would let "their" party down if they voted for a different party. Especially young people also hint at the fact that many older people pressure their children to vote for Swapo.

Apart from these factors, there is another main reason why people are afraid of opposition parties: They know very little about them. Many participants of the survey are only familiar with very few parties and their ideas. One young male from Windhoek says: "We believe and were told that if you give the country to the opposition party, the whites will take the country away." Many think that opposition parties do not have the power to rule the country. Furthermore, one young man points out: "Political parties were formed through tribes. For example, Ovamboland people's organization was for the Ovambo people and most of them are supporters of Swapo. In this case, it is difficult for them to support opposition parties." Some men and women feel that many Namibians lack political education. But almost all of the participants also stress the parties'

⁸ Cf. Afro-Barometer Round 4, p. 53.

responsibilities in telling the population about their programs and most importantly, to listen to their supporters' views and problems.

THE IDEAL POLITICAL PARTY

So when they were asked what their ideal party looks like, the participants had many suggestions. Some ask for free land, ploughs or a braai and drinks for supporters. However, there are also many practical suggestions for the parties how to organize, communicate and structure themselves better. One young man from Rundu says: "The government needs clear politics and should reveal an implementation strategy accordingly." The strategy should be written on paper so people can follow it. "Also, different departments and agencies should submit quarterly reports. They must be supervised to get better performances." Thus, a clear message and a plan to implement the changes in the country are crucial to the participants.

Furthermore, they want a political party to understand their needs – and this can only be achieved by talking to the people in their own language. Face to face interaction is by far the most popular way of communication. Many participants suggest that parties should not focus too much on big rallies but rather come to community meetings in small villages and listen to the people's problems and needs. The creation of employment and education opportunities, reduction of poverty and crime rates are seen as the most important issues that should be addressed. Many participants say that building schools and clinics would help to generate trust and support.

Thus, the communication and visibility of their representatives is very important to Namibians, and many like the idea of a door to door mobilization campaign. Although the media like radio and TV reach more people, it is also a less personal way to communicate. Moreover, one young man points out: "They should notice that the media is maybe three quarters controlled by the ruling party. So I think the media is not the best way to communicate for the opposition."

What would boost people's trust in opposition parties? Most people say they should address the most important problems in the country and act upon them. One young man from Rundu said: "They should explain to the people the duties of and differences

between government, opposition, and ruling party.” The participants by and large say they understand that the opposition party cannot solve problems if it is not in the government. Especially for women, however, this is no reason to give them a chance to do better than the current government. Some people are hopeful when they look at the opposition parties. They think that a new party could bring a change and a new beginning.

Most participants want to see actions first and then they would consider voting for a party. This is quite difficult, though, if parties are not in charge of the government. One young woman from Rundu admits: “It is difficult for opposition parties to convince us or to get us to listen to them.” Nevertheless, some participants point out that in other countries, government and opposition work together and that they also have a say in parliament; they demand that Namibia’s opposition parties should do the same and make use of their influence.

THE IDEAL PRESIDENT

The participants have similar views on the ideal president. It should be someone who respects people’s views, listens to them, is well educated and who does not favor one group over the other. A young man says: “He should be like Mandela.” (Rundu 8) Also, the person should be respected by the people.

Especially women favor the idea of a female president. She should be tough, grounded and educated. One woman from Otjiwarongo says: “I prefer women because they are the ones that realize that people are suffering unlike men. She must really care for the people.” Many also favor the idea that the president should come from a poor family, because he or she would understand the needs of the poor better. Some men also like the idea of a female president because they think that the empowerment of women and young people is crucial for the country’s development.

Everyone thinks that it is important that the president is not corrupt, is trustworthy and honest. It is apparent that the ideal president and the ideal party share many features in the participants’ views: integrity, honesty, a good program or a good education, fairness, respect for each other and for the people and trustworthiness.

CONCLUSION

The survey has shown that the people interviewed agree on the most important issues in Namibia: education, unemployment, health sector, rural development, income inequality, gender inequality, tribalism, crime. They also came up with good ideas how parties should address these issues and even suggested some practical means how to solve these problems, such as investments and loans for small businesses.

When it comes to political parties, some people are well informed and have a clear opinion on the government and the opposition. Others, however, seem to be unsure about what opposition parties do, what they stand for and what they criticize. This is partly due to a lack of information and education on the people's side, and partly due to the fact that many opposition parties only become visible during election times.

People do not know if they form a good alternative to the ruling party because they often do not know their programs and ideas. Most women tend to support Swapo. There are several reasons for this, for example fear of opposition parties, the conviction that Swapo performs best or a feeling of obligation to the party which brought independence. Although many men also support Swapo, there are many among them who will vote for an opposition party because they want to see a change in the country. They hope for better and faster development and they especially want the young people to be understood and represented. Therefore, many young people support RDP.

All participants ask for more presence of the political parties – not just during voting times. They want them to address the most urgent issues in Namibia and they expect them to present possible solutions to the existing problems such as unemployment. Many people do not trust opposition parties because they know little about them or because they think they just make empty promises. Moreover, they criticize political parties for being biased and just representing a certain groups or tribes. In terms of communication, the overwhelming majority prefers face to face talks with the politicians. They want them to come to their regions and listen to their views. Especially young people also suggest communication via cell phones or the internet.

Most people want to vote and make their opinion count in the upcoming elections. However, they also make clear that they see the difference between the promises and the

actual outcomes of the parties' actions and that they are unwilling to tolerate empty promises any longer. They expect the parties to respect each other during election times, to listen to the needs of the people and to do what is best for the country and all Namibians.

The summary of the findings was compiled
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