

Namibia's South West African People's Organisation ([Swapo](#)) has performed exceptionally well as a governing party among the liberation movements of sub-Saharan Africa. All contemporary liberation movements that subsequently became governing parties remain in power. But none has managed to retain a similar degree of support since independence.

The first democratic elections for a constituent assembly took place under the supervision of the United Nations in [November 1989](#). Since then elections for a national assembly and the country's president have been held every five years.

The last poll was held in 2014 when Swapo scored [80% of the votes](#). Its presidential candidate, Hage Geingob, came close to 87% of the votes.

One does not need prophetic gifts to predict which party will win in the [upcoming elections](#). Despite some setbacks, such as the failures to live up to the anti-corruption and pro-poor policies promised, Swapo will remain the dominant party. But there might be a reversed trend for the first time in 30 years. For both the party and its presidential candidate the scores could decline.

For three decades Swapo's grip on power has held firm. Its patriotic narrative remains rooted in the official discourse and daily political culture. Two of its liberation struggle era slogans were: ["One Namibia, one nation"](#) and "Swapo is the nation and the nation is Swapo".

These translated into the false equation that the party is the government and the government is the state. But the electorate gradually changes, and those born after independence from South Africa on March 21, 1990, have become a relevant factor.

Geingob's [increased appeals](#) to national unity indicate that these mantras might be showing signs of erosion. Tirades in the social media show disrespect for those in power of hitherto unknown proportions and tempt the government to [discuss regulations](#).

For the first time, Swapo's presidential candidate might garner less voter support than the party. This would not only dent Geingob's ego. It would also weaken his authority during his second term in office. And it would influence the decisions over his succession as party president and head of state.

What matters

Unemployment in the age group under 35 is [approaching 50%](#). Concerns about this are reflected in the responses of respondents in the latest [Afrobarometer survey](#). Unemployment was cited as the most important matter (54%). Drought (30%), poverty (21%), education and water supply (20% each) followed. Corruption (16%), land (13%) and crime (11%) ranked surprisingly lower.

The country faces a serious economic crisis on the occasion of this year's 29th Independence Day [on March 21](#). As the local Institute of Public Policy Research concluded in its third [quarterly economic report for 2019](#):

With elections now on the horizon, the current President and Cabinet must decide what their legacy is going to be: will they reform and reverse the decline of the past five years or go down in history as the people who crashed the Namibian economy?

Unknown variables

New political parties, even when created by Swapo dissidents, have never managed to establish a sustainable alternative. They snatched votes from other opposition parties to become irrelevant later on.

This time, the new kid on the block is the [Landless People's Movement](#). It was founded after fallout of the deputy minister of land with the party [over the land policy](#). Its aim to secure 20 of the 96 elected seats in the national assembly [seems wishful thinking](#).

How many votes the Landless People's Movement will garner from a Swapo electorate remains to be seen. It is a force to reckon with in the sparsely populated areas south of Rehoboth. But, like many of the existing parties, its basis is likely to be almost exclusively rooted in a particular regional-ethnic stronghold. Most interesting will be whether its support is sufficient to replace the [Popular Democratic Movement](#) as the official opposition.

More challenging than the party competition is the direct election of Namibia's next president. In a surprise move, the Swapo member Panduleni Itula registered as an "independent" candidate, using a loophole in the country's electoral act. He adamantly

claims to have the right to challenge the official party candidate as an alternative while [refusing to leave Swapo](#). He uses the analogy of a family feud, which still allows you [to stay in the family while seeking solutions](#).

Swapo's internal factionalism seems a motivating dimension. Itula has not disclosed the sources funding [his campaign](#). In pre-election polls published by the local media, Geingob and Itula were [neck-and-neck](#).

Not surprisingly, Geingob [is not amused](#).

Contested voting procedures

If credibility and legitimacy are key, the electoral commission would be well advised to avoid previous mistakes. In 2014 Namibia was the first African country to [make use of electronic voting machines](#). In violation of the electoral law, these had no paper trails. This was not corrected despite a court ruling.

As investigative journalists [have disclosed](#), the electoral commission had "lent" Swapo four of the machines for party internal election purposes in 2017. These have [gone missing](#). The news strengthened the already existing reservations regarding the voting process.

The electoral commission has claimed that in the case of a dispute over the results, there will be a [paper trail recording the votes cast](#). A postmortem paper trail documenting voting, however, is different from a paper trail for the voters to see that they were registered properly for the party or candidate they voted for.

And the winner is?

Namibia's political stability so far has been vested in the dominance of Swapo. Those opposing its control face an uphill battle. If they make inroads, they should not be sidelined by manipulation of the election results.

After all, democratic governance means respect for the will of the people. It makes democracy the winner, not a party.

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