The Management of a Dominant Political Party system with particular reference to Namibia

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1. **Cohesion and constructive functioning of the dominant party in society. Dominant parties as sources for stability and predictability**

The case in Nambia.

SWAPO Party being the dominant party in Namibia seized legitimate political power and thereby ending colonial rule on 21 March 2000. It was democratically elected during free and fair elections and gained majority support. SWAPO Party's growth as dominant party was as follows:

1989: Constituent Assembly elections   57.3%
1994: National Assembly elections   72.7%
1999: National Assembly elections   76.2%
2004: National Assembly elections   75.8%

From the above it is evident that SWAPO Party entrenched its political domain since independence. The party commands support in all population groups, but its main support base (± 95%) is in the Oshivambo speaking population group constituting approximately 51% of the total Namibian population. It originated in the Oshivambo speaking population.

The constant gain in support lead to the consolidation of SWAPO's political power and dominance in the political system. As such it controls the political policy- and decision-making process in Namibia. SWAPO's mass support in numerical terms has made it "an electorally dominant party" (Melber:65). The factual situation is that Namibia has become a dominant party state.

Since independence SWAPO Party has gone through a transition and transformation process, from a liberation movement to a political party. It is committed to the principle of a multi-party democracy and therefore to multi-partyism as enshrined in the Constitution. SWAPO Party is presently opposed in Parliament by some small, mostly ethnic based political parties. The most important one is presently the Congress of Democrats (COD) which was supported by 7.27% of the electorate during the 2004 National Assembly elections. COD is the only opposition party that can claim limited support throughout Namibia.

In general, it can be said that due to a weak opposition there is no political counterweight of any relevance in Namibia. All political parties represented in the National Assembly take ideologically spoken a middle position in the political spectrum. Party political programmes of those parties represented in the National Assembly do not differ fundamentally from those of the SWAPO Party on most issues. The opposition parties are divided among themselves and from time to time split up into smaller groups.

The history of political parties in Namibia since independence is marked by new formations and disintegration of existing parties. This particularly applies to   opposition parties. Breakaways from SWAPO Party but to a very small extent occurred in 1998 when the COD was formed and again in 2007 when the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) was constituted as a party. The latter's support cannot be verified yet.

The question arises why are the opposition parties so weak? While the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) was the strongest opposition party/alliance with 20.45 % support during the 1994 National Assembly elections it was only supported by 5.14 % of the electorate during the 2004 National Assembly elections. Not being able to offer political

positions and material gains as the ruling party can offer, as well as leader competition and ethnic/tribal differences were the main causes.

Before independence SWAPO Party considered itself as a socialist movement, but has since independence moved away from this ideological base. According to its party political programme and actions it could be considered as a party with trends towards neo-liberalism and social democracy with some diehards supporting democratic socialism and Marxism. Believing in a mixed economy, although hardly practicing it, SWAPO Party claims to be the only political force able to drive development based on equity and that can successfully pursue national integration and unity ("unity in diversity").

In his address to the SWAPO Party Congress on 27 November 2007, the Namibian President, H. Pohamba, emphasized that the party has entered the second phase of its struggle, namely economic empowerment of the Namibian people, lead by people who are both politically astute and economically informed in order to address the pressing needs of the people.

Reference:

Melber, H (2007): "SWAPO is the Nation, and the Nation is SWAPO" – Government and Opposition in a Dominant Party State. The Case of Namibia. In: Hulterström, K, Kamete, A.Y., Melber, H: **Political Opposition in African Countries. The Cases of Kenya, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe,** Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, pp. 61-81.

2. The quest for inter- and intra-democracy – the accommodation and role of socio-economic and other groups inside and outside the party.

Pertaining to democracy and democratic development, different concepts with slightly different meanings are used by Swapo Party politicians such as "active democracy", "accountable democracy", "democratic consolidation", "decentralized democracy", but also those with a more substantial difference in interpretation such as "guided democracy", "centralized democracy" and "controlled democracy", implying how to use democracy in a more regulative sense.

In his speech to the SWAPO Party Congress on 27 November 2008, President H Pohamba made the audience aware that democracy as such cannot be taken for granted. He continued: "We must continually educate our people on their rights and responsibilities in a democracy, so to internalize the concept of democracy. … Democracy can only be sustained if we reduce poverty, increase economic empowerment for the formerly deprived Namibians and implement affirmative action in all spheres of life." The implication of Pohamba's remark is that democracy has not been fully domesticated yet in Namibia and that it is notwithout its flaws.

What could be a challenge to the practice of democracy is what Melber (2007:71) calls any "tendency towards the abuse of state power" which "fails to acknowledge and hence disrespects the relevant difference between a formal democratic legitimacy (through the number of votes obtained in a free and fair general election) and the moral and ethical dimensions and responsibilities of such legitimacy".

A substantive distinction must be made between legality and legitimacy. Any ruling party is committed to legal rules and obligations as contained in legislation, but is equally bound to apply the principle of legitimacy which refers to the ethic/moral obligations when applying rules. Any ruling party, particularly in a dominant party state, is obliged to give legitimate status to its governance. It should shy away from common place statements such as SWAPO Party is simultaneously the people (this would contradict multi-party democracy), Swapo Party is the government (other political parties partake through their presence in the National Assembly in national governance) and the government is the state (government is only an organ or an agent of the state). Therefore a statement such as that the government serves the party and that the state is the property of the government is a misperception. This equally applies to the equation that loyalty to Namibia means loyalty to the SWAPO Party. This would amount to a misinterpretation of national loyalty and assigning exclusiveness to the concept loyalty.

A particular obligation that rests on the ruling party in a dominant party state is to be as inclusive as possible. Any society is composed of a number of interest groups and entities that must be accommodated in the governance (policy- and decision making and the implementation of policies) of a country. Namibia has a plethora of NGOs and CBOs that could be functionally and instrumentally used as partners and functionaries in the governance and administration of the country. Such assumption equally applies to the private sector.

In the Namibian context one can identify particular interest groups that could be consulted pertaining to the governance of the country and who could assist in securing the stability of the country. By implication this means that some interest groups have a definite standing and purpose in society. These groups have both the ability to stabilize and to destabilize the governance and administration of the country. They have a fellowship/ membership that is numerically strong enough to influence government particularly if the latter should deviate from democratic principles and norms in its governance and administration.

Namibia is a country with a strong religious fellowship. More than 90% of the population belongs to the one or other Christian denomination. Black indigenous Churches, united in the Council of Churches in Namibia, played a decisive role in the liberation struggle and have since then taken a firm stand on a number of socio-economic issues (e.g. unemployment, social welfare, the land issue, poverty, self-enrichment, corruption, reconciliation). These churches could, if they so consider, take a strong stand especially when fundamental rights are violated. They have at any time the capacity to mobilize their fellowship to take action on issues of concern.

Labour/trade unions are also not without influence, but will not take easily a strong stand against the government as the most important ones are affiliated to the ruling party.

Private enterprise is represented by Chambers of Commerce and by professional organizations. With the possible exception of the Farmers Unions their influence on government policy and actions is limited. It is more hidden than public.

As 60% of the population still resides in rural areas and is mostly occupying communal land, the traditional leaders and their authority cannot be overlooked in the governance of the country. This does not only apply to the land issue, but also to other issues such as socio-economic development and legal authority. In communal areas the traditional authority can be a guarantor of stability. Without its support development will fail in communal areas. Its support is also needed during elections.

Particular socio-economic groups per se are nor represented in the SWAPO Party. The affiliated labour/trade unions are an exception. The party itself is composed of wings or sections such as the Women Council, the Elders Council, the Youth Wing and the affiliated Labour Union, all of them strictly adhering to party policy.

A group that feels alienated from the ruling party, openly or silently, is the upcoming black middle class and the business elite. A number of members of these entities are not satisfied with the present ruling party and its policy. As a reaction they may be inclined either to become a-political or to use their economic power solely in their own interest and not for party-political purposes. It has still to be seen whether they will support the newly established RDP Party.

There is another group that is of particular relevance to any political party. It is the traditional community and its leadership. All political parties are eager to mobilize and gain support in the different ethnic/tribal groups. Except for the Congress of Democrats and to some extent the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance, all the opposition parties have an ethnic/tribal base. The ruling SWAPO Party has always tried to avoid this, and although it originated in the Oshivambo speaking population, it wants to be a truly national party, bridging ethnic/tribal affiliations.

No political party in Namibia will ever succeed to take over governance from the SWAPO Party if it cannot get substantial support in the Oshivambo speaking population. The recent breakaway of the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) from the SWAPO Party, led by predominantly Oshivambo speaking politicians, originating mainly in the Kwanyama tribe, is causing inter- and intra-tribal tensions. It is the first noticeable challenge to the ruling party to hold on to its dominance in the Oshivambo speaking population, equally not to lose significant number of voters to the RDP in other ethnic/tribal groups, for example in the Nama/Damara, Rehoboth, Kavango, Caprivi and white Namibian community.

Considering recent political developments such as the establishment of the RDP, the SWAPO Party is well advised to reconsider and where needed renaissance its structure and

working methods and update its programme. It must adapt to a new environment and new challenges, and how best to deal with expectations. It has to modernize and be more horizontal than vertical (e.g. dominant/autocratic) in its relations with its supporters. Constructive criticism should be welcomed and not outright condemned. Time and circumstances have changed. A political party such as SWAPO should be as communicative and accommodative as possible in its programme and approach.

The role the SWAPO Party played in the independence struggle was phenomenal, but the upcoming generation born after independence, has different expectations and perspectives on life and its own future than the older generation. The younger generation is not any longer particularly perceptive to slogans related to the hard won independence struggle. Their vision is on the road ahead and not motivated by the past. In addition, a generation gap on the relevance of particular issues is obvious and cannot any longer be ignored. If not adequately dealt with it will be to the disadvantage to the SWAPO Party. As from 2008, the new generation born after independence will be entitled to vote. Many of its members are urbanized with expectations different to those in rural areas.

Only a party with an articulated and substantive alternative programme that can grip the imagination of the population could be a challenge to the present dominant ruling party. The electorate is particularly concerned about an economic policy that efficiently and adequately eradicates the vast income gap between a few rich and the majority that is poor. It is equally concerned about unemployment, criminality, corruption, self-enrichment, nepotism, favouritism, and the impact of the HIV/AIDS on the well-being of the society.

In general, it would be to the benefit of clarity if SWAPO Party would pronounce itself which ideology underlies its programme. Marxism it was during the independence struggle. What is it today, social democracy, neo-liberalism or democratic socialism? Or is ideology not any longer at stake but instead certain values? Which ones?

Reference: Pohamba, H. (2007): **Statement by H.E. Hifikepunye Pohamba on the Occasion of The SWAPO Party Fourth Congress,** 27 November, Windhoek

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3. The party for common good and not personal gain

The question is what can endanger the credibility of a dominant party state? First one needs to be clear on the conceptualization of a dominant party state, normatively and structurally, for example how does it relate to civil society. Once clarity prevails on the concept, the question arises what is expected of a dominant party state, thus its functionality. This leads to another question, how does it use its dominance (e.g. negatively, destructively or positively, constructively). Equally important is how is dominance controlled.

In the context of our topic, how does one define a political party? One definition could be that a political party constitutes an interest group, representing certain ideas, objectives and has conceived an action programme. A political party is usually the outcome of perceived ideas and certain visions inspired by a mission to contribute to the well-being of society. Many political parties in Africa make it a point that they represent national interests although some of them, if not most, have their power base in a particular group (e.g. ethnic/tribal and to lesser extent in a socio-economic goup).

Voters expect that political parties pay equal attention to voters in rural and urban areas and that they are guided in their activities by a Code of Conduct committing them to democratic practices. In this respect the electors want to know what contribution a dominant party makes to a culture of tolerance. This is of particular relevance when a society is highly politicized, intimidated and marked by tension. It is by no means an easy task to substitute mistrust and skepticism by trust and confidence.

Multi-party democracy as guaranteed in the Namibian Constitution, presupposes the active participation of all recognized political parties in the political system. Opposition parties have, however, as much an important function in a political system as the ruling party. Opposition parties have the disadvantage that they have not the same access to privileges, power, rewards and advantages as the ruling party.

The Namibian democracy and the legal rules as laid down in acts do not permit the setting of certain limits to the role of any political party. It is important that any political party, be it the ruling (dominant) party or any opposition party, must always operate within the parameters of fairness, responsibility and accountability, and strictly adhere to the principles and rules of democratic practices. Such rules as among others reflected in a Code of Conduct for political parties, should be both normative and regulative.

Normative: committed to democratic values, rules and practices (e.g. liberty, rule of law, fair election campaign practices); no intimidation and victimization; no language that incites conflict and violence, freedom of expression and gathering; no cheating; no favouritism; tolerance.

Regulative: no interference with each other activities (e.g. meetings); no partisanship; no destruction or disfigurement of campaign materials of parties during elections; fair air time on radio and TV; he conduct of orderly meetings, rallies and demonstrations without fear of state intervention, particularly when permission has been officially granted to conduct such events.

Equally important is to address how a Code of Conduct can be enforced when transgressed. Without an instrument of enforcement the value of a Code of Conduct for political parties remains limited.

Interference by the (dominant) ruling party in the activities of other political parties can endanger the credibility of a democratic party political system. Political autocracy is not part of democracy. Moderateness and not radicalism should prevail, otherwise the state can easily move into state of paralysis. Conflict mediation and brokerage should be the practice

and not alienation and suppression. A potential threat to democracy is internecine quarrels, rumour spreading by political parties, backstabbing, witch-hunting, sowing suspicion and fueling resentments while there are important issues that need to be addressed. In a mature democracy political parties should be accommodative to each other.

Another hallmark of democracy is strong, uncorrupted and tolerant leadership of political parties. In addition, such leadership must be trustworthy, committed, honest and disciplined. There should be open competition for leadership. No political leader should impose him- or herself on his/her supporters. Internal politicking should be avoided and party unity demonstrated. A political party must have a collegiate face able to handle internal differences. Any party needs a reality check whether it complies with what is expected of it.

It is upon a political party to establish and build confidence in the political system, the government and its leaders provided that they have been democratically elected. A party must eventually be judged on its deliverance based on what it promised, equally on its communication and information ability. It must be strong in cognitive skills and less sensitive to criticism, particularly constructive criticism.

Unfortunately parties that have become too strong without having been exposed to an efficient opposition tend to become too self-assured and will not easily accept defeat. How mature are political parties to accept defeat particularly during elections? A culture of defeat has not emerged yet in many countries, also in countries that claim to be democratic.

Abuse of power, self-enrichment practiced by party leaders, also in dominant party states, at the cost of public goods, favouritism, nepotism, fraud, patronage, misuse of public resources for private gain to enrich oneself at the cost of other, corruption, influence peddling, claiming of positions due to party affiliation, improper handling of government property, gunsloon (kickback), are some of the issues that mark many political system and easier to be performed in a dominant party system. It can, however, in the end to lead to its downfall.

It is not seldom that political leaders and high ranking public officials in a dominant party state are exposed to corruption endeavours by outsiders (e.g. private sector domestically and internationally) from which they themselves and/or the ruling party could benefit. Such endeavours include the award of contracts/tenders for services and material goods to be delivered. When such practices are discovered, not seldom politicians rely on the protection by the "almighty" party being so dominant in politics that such "gentleman's delict" will not easily harm the image of the party. Naturally, political and social responsibility as well as credibility will suffer in this process. Morality is seemingly often very much underdeveloped in government ranks.

Ethics and public accountability are critical ingredients for credible political systems as they underline the legitimacy of government. What politicians and likewise high ranking public officials who are often political appointees do, must not only be legally but also morally defensible. Public accountability refers to the consequences of actions by both the public servant (e.g. permanent secretary) and the politician, individually and collectively. Of this a dominant party state should be duly aware.

4. **Linkage with civil society and the promotion of democracy in a dominant party state.**

In a dominant party state with a weak opposition, qualitative and quantity wise, it is important who can act as check-and-balance on the ruling party to keep it accountable.

It could be processes, sectors, bodies and institutions outside party politics and located in civil society. Among them are trade/labour unions, particularly those not affiliated to the ruling party, churches, the business sector, traditional leadership, academic community and civic organizations such as NGOs and CBOs. Equally important is public opinion and the mass media and the space it is given to perform its critical role. This is of particular relevance in Namibia where the official opposition is weak.

Processes can be as much of importance to keep the government and its bureaucracy on their toes as can be actors and institutions. To take as an example the electoral system and process. A proportional electoral system at whatever level of governance it is applied, favours a dominant party political system as the elected representative does not represent a particular constituency to whom he/she is directly responsible to. It is the party that is elected not the individual. More effective as a controlling mechanism is the winner-takes-all electoral system.In such system the elected member is directly responsible to the constituents in a particular electoral entity (e.g. constituency, ward) where elected.

To use Namibia as an example. Considering that the National Assembly and local authorities are elected according to the proportional (list) system and only regional councilors are directly elected according to the first-past-the-post constituency based system, no member of the National Assembly represents a particular constituency. Equally, the local authority councilors represent a village or town as a whole and not a particular ward. In both cases the direct linkage to the voter is a non-event. This makes it difficult for the voter to directly link with national and local representatives. Their check-and-balance role on national and local government is thus very limited. The only option is to operate through the party structures of those parties which are represented in the National Assembly and at local authority level.

The only political institution that can act as check-and-balance is the regional council which is also represented at National Council level, evaluating and approving all legislation that has been sanctioned by the National Assembly. Regional councilors can be individually taken to task by the voters who elected them individually at constituency level.

Another institution is the development committee established at local, constituency and regional level. Although not yet legally acknowledged, development committees can play an initiating and watchdog function in the compilation of policies and their execution at local and regional level. Once legalized their input function will gain more relevance particularly pertaining to development projects.

Another example how a process can act as a check and balance on national governance in a dominant party ruled state is the decentralization policy which has particular relevance in assuring that certain powers and authority are devolved and delegated from the central to the sub-national level. The intention is to bring government closer to the people and to make people at grassroots level co-responsible for governance at sub-national level. Such co-governance at sub-national level entices people to play a meaningful role in decision-making and the execution of policies which have been decided upon in cooperation with the people at regional and local level. Although some politicians at national level have expressed the fear that delegation of political and administrative power to the sub-national level is at the expense of national governance and administration, these fears are unfound. Strengthening power and democracy at local level empowers governance and administration and national

level. Whatever is decided at sub-national level must be done within the confines of national laws and values. Efficient and strong sub-national governance forms the basis for effective national governance, having a strong support basis at regional and local level. It gives equally an opportunity of particularly regional councils to check on national powers that they are not executed to the detriment of the people at sub-national level.

What about civil society? Civil society encompasses all public activity by individuals, their voluntary organizations, the private sector as a separate entity, and their relationships with each other as well as with government. Civil society comprises groups of different opinions, networks, movements and interests.

Civic organizations include NGOs and CBOs, and a variety of interests groups (e.g human right groups, legal assistance institutions, women and youth organizations, religious entities, labour unions, trusts, foundations). NGOs are expected to play a supportive and in some cases a supplementary role in developing the Namibian civil society. The fundamental question is then what critical role can NGOs play in both the democratization and development process? The government's attitude that NGOs should not involve themselves in party-political matters but through their development efforts and capacity building endeavours should assist in fighting poverty, in upholding human rights, and in promoting equality, equity, democracy and quality governance.

Although the state recognizes the role of NGOs in institutional development and democratization, a strong feeling prevails that they must be institutionally separated from the state apparatus. Policy dialogue and any meaningful contribution by NGOs to policy identification and formulation is considered as valuable to social, economic and political development. NGOs must however resist from usurping the power of the state or interfere in its activities. The emphasis is on partnership in all development efforts, project and human wise. On the other hand, NGOs would fail in their role if they did not point out government deficiencies and weak spots in development practice. NGOs must adhere to the ethics of social responsibility. This forms part of heir check-and-balance task in the development of both the country and society.

This brings us finally to the role of the media in society and particularly in a dominant party state. The mass media are often referred to as the Fourth Estate. The reason is the potential power they have and the watch control function they exercise pertaining to the misuse of power in the public and private sector, corruption, self-enrichment at the cost of the deprived, racism, and tribalism. The mass media can be considered as the guardian and as a conduit between those that rule and those that are ruled. It is the media's task to check on the abuse of power and inform the public accordingly.

Democracy and free mass media are synonymous. Mass media should be an important and essential tool in upholding democratic values and principles. It is the task of the media to hold people at the helm of all levels of governance responsible, for what they decide and implement and whether such actions comply with the fundamental rights as contained in the Constitution. This applies to all political role players, including those who oppose the government of the day. What a democracy cannot afford is the suppression of freedom of speech and the manipulation of the mass media. What is demanded is honest and responsible and not destructive reporting and criticism for the sake of criticism.

It is a fact that particularly politicians remain very sensitive to criticism. Often criticism is taken very personally although an issue or principle has been addressed and not the person involved with it. A high degree of sensitivity is certainly necessary. Frequently the mass media are rightly accused of having become too personal in their criticism, too sensational in their reporting and have violated the principle of personal dignity

Balance must prevail. What is reported must stand the test of verification and truth. The ultimate task of the media is to buttress and deepen democracy. This is of particular importance in a dominant party system where the media are obliged to substitute the role of an inefficient or weak opposition. The mass media should also make a significant contribution to reconciliation and in bridging differences that could harm the fabric of society.

In Namibia not all the mass media are privately owned. The National Broadcasting Corporation (Radio and TV) is state owned. Still it makes a valuable contribution to free exchange of ideas on many topics including controversial ones through their Open Line and Talk of the Nation programmes. Of course all government related issues get prominence in their news broadcasting.

Not all government politicians are happy with the mass media in Namibia. Criticism is not taken lightly. It is the obligation of the media to ensure that they are trusted by the public and the government alike. Their reporting rights should be respected and protected as long as they do not undermine the interests of the state, the principles and objectives of the Constitution, and as long as they intensively and in a responsible way promote democratic values and governance. It is upon the mass media to remain accountable to the public and should always see to it that ethical and professional standards are upheld. This is of particular relevance in a dominant party state.

The resolution (Resolution 29) taken by the SWAPO Party Congress early in December 2007 that government should establish a Media Council to regulate the activities of the media, has caused concern among journalists, fearing that it could affect the freedom of the press. A Media Council per se is not rejected as long it is a combined effort by the government and the mass media and complies with existing laws and international organization declarations as signed or ratified by Namibia, which all guarantee freedom of expression.

Taking all the actors and processes in consideration, the question still remains how effective are all these entities in their control or check-and-balance functions and what is their scope and space to influence central government within the context of a dominant party state.