

Confrontation with SWAPO

Based in southern Namibia: The Landless People's Movement

Walter Sauer and Lydia Williams (Southern Africa Documentation and Cooperation Centre in Vienna/Austria) spoke to Bernadus Swartbooi, founder and „Chief Change Campaigner“ of the Landless People's Movement, the second biggest opposition party in the Namibian parliament. The interview on the party's political profile, education policies, land reform and German Namibian relations took place in Windhoek on Jan 19th, 2023 and was subsequently authorised (German version <https://www.sadocc.at/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IND-117-FINVersand.pdf>).



Honorable Swartbooi, there is a saying in Namibia that SWAPO's real strength lies in the weakness of the opposition. LPM has established itself a few years ago as another opposition party – does it make any difference?

I should ask you this question because you analyse African politics. If you look at South Africa, Angola, Zimbabwe etc. - why has the Democratic Alliance not won more than one province in South Africa, why is Frelimo still going and Renamo is not able to take over and so on. So this is a broader question that requires deeper political and socio-economic and cultural analysis.

But you can ask another question: Why did we as the LPM reach two regions in our first elections? Why is it that in about two, three years we were able to capture a number of local authorities? Why do we think we stand a chance? Are we perhaps starting at a fortunate time? Is it because of our programme? We have looked at other political parties and we found that they don't have real

programmes. The visions of the leader become everything, today they say this, tomorrow something else.

We have realised that none of the opposition parties believes that they can actually become a government. For them, it is about having a seat in parliament. But the question is: Can they govern? This opposition politics is not maturing. We as LPM were able to put a message across and to stay on point. We are guided by our ideological analysis and have a standpoint we are not shy about: We are a leftist political party. We have clarity of our ideological thinking, we have the ability to market it. Our confrontations with SWAPO are not hidden, they are direct and robust in parliament.

One of the areas which have been under heavy discussion in these days was the education system. Results for the last school year were disappointing, especially in grade 11. How does LPM address the education crisis? It is fine that you want to build more schools, but that cannot be the only step.

Everybody now is concerned about the education crisis, and that SWAPO has failed, etc. But it must also be said that SWAPO has been consistent since independence in focussing on education. About 40 % of the budget goes to the social sector, particularly the education sector, that is a lot of money. They have given attention to the malnutrition of learners, there is a school feeding programme that is actually working, they have succeeded in access to education both in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Literacy rates have gone up in this country, the proficiency of English has gone up, and massive training of educators has been done. So you cannot say that they have totally failed. Nevertheless, it cannot be disputed that our education system has become irrelevant to our changing society, and has practically collapsed. The clearest sign for that is that over 80% of the pupils' grades fail to meet tertiary education entry requirements. The ministry responsible struggles to plan in advance. Teaching staff is overwhelmed by conflicting circulars from the ministerial head office which they struggle to understand. And above all: Our system is defined by how much you can memorise to pass an exam. That is outdated and does not align with the country's aspirations. It is therefore not able to answer the current needs of local communities. Education needs to be reformed so that it would align with the country's fourth Industrial Revolution aspirations by introducing coding, robotics and artificial intelligence into the curriculum.

What about vocational training? Practical subjects are not taught any more resulting in a huge problem for the economy.

Yes, I fully agree. Vocational subjects are not in the teacher education, and wanting to train the children only after grade 10 is putting some sort of stigma on them, creating the unfortunate impression that only those who were not able to pass can go to vocational training. I just find that this government has never known what to do with the economy. The production sector only gets about 25 % of the budget, in order to create jobs at least 35 % would be required. So we are stuck in an economy that is not growing, and a successful child won't get a job even if successful in education.

Many a times school-leavers face difficulties to find entrance into the job market. If Small and Medium Enterprises would be better supported, they would be able to provide jobs. Do you agree?

Yes, but it is also a risky strategy. Normally SMEs are connected and providing services to big corporations, maybe equipment for an international car manufacturing company or so. This is hardly the case here in Namibia. Our focus could be to get people into productive agriculture, including agro-food processing. There SMEs can work, in relation to smallscale farming like it is popular in Tanzania, Kenya and elsewhere. This would for example offer opportunities to sell agricultural products to our retail shops which up to now import almost all of their products from South Africa. The retail sector doesn't speak to local sellers but it could provide an important market for processed agricultural products.

Another problem: If the results of the education sector look as they do, how do you as a President or Minister of Trade go to the USA or Austria and ask for investments – we have a good business climate, please come. But oops – your education results show that you don't have enough smart people, what have you done with your most important resource, your people? So that is something we also have to engage with.

Landreform is obviously an important part of your programme. Many in Europe would point to „land reform“ in Zimbabwe, thus the topic is not very popular. What would land reform in Namibia entail?

Hold on: The biggest land problem in Namibia is urban land! Maybe you drove around here in Windhoek and saw the shacks that have been developed. Only the old towns are properly developed, people in these new settlements, even on mountain tops are living in shacks with no access to water and electricity. Debates on land reform mostly speak of agricultural land – no, no, the first problem is in urban areas. When LPM got into the City of Windhoek Council, we stopped the process that police pulled down these shacks. But people need property rights, about 300 sqm to

set up a little house registered with the deeds office, and then they can leverage even to access a bank loan – registered title, my children can sleep in safety, it might not be a big house but this piece is mine. So the land question is also an urban livelihood question.

Many of these people are young people from rural areas, because the pull factors which could keep them there have not been optimally utilised, they can not make a productive living. If you go to communal reserves – there are old people with grandchildren, living from their old age pensions or social grants with a few cattle. Their children are in town to make a living, probably living in a shack, and if they got a child they are sending it back because of all these issues of childrens' safety in urban areas, so they send the child back to the grandparents in rural areas. Yet if we invest in the rural economy – I don't even speak of commercial farming – factors enabling people to stay would become stronger, water is one issue, road access etc. Consequently you would reduce the push factors, and therefore urban life would not be the only alternative as it is today.

Communal land is unutilised or underutilised for many reasons. Even international economic injustices come in. Zambezi Region for example is declared a conservaton area, connected with Ethosha. In other words: Europeans want to come and they want to look at elephants, and they want to look at the tiger and leopard, „wow we dont have this in Europe“, but the land has become useless in terms of agriculture because now where am I farming? Along the borders there are fences but not high enough to withhold lions, so the human – wildlife conflict is increasing.

But LPM also speaks of restitution of commercial land which historically belonged to original occupants of these regions. How would that work?

Who tells you that all black people want to become commercial farmers? That Mugabe did not understand. Zimbabwe would say land reform did not fail but the economy collapsed. But did the economy not collapse because land reform was done exclusively political? They did not consider economic facts.

Here in Namibia, agriculture is basically farming – lot of cattle, beef is being exported etc., but we have not turned it into a diversified agriculture. At independence there were about 6.000 commercial farmers. Many of them died or sold their farms, today there are probably only 3000 left. A number of farms has been bought by the government, they have placed people on farms and do not support them. But there are also 800 farms on the market which no one wants to buy.

Commercial farming has its own challenges. It needs to be supported by the government – as white farms were supported before independence – and then you will see the ones who really want to use land productively.

In South African they gave people the option to take money instead of land. That would work in Namibia too, and it would not create circumstances leading to agricultural collapse. People would have to decide, but restitution could mean direct cash payments or scholarships, decent education, access to opportunities so beneficiaries could have a stronger footing for their lives later on. Not everyone wants to become a cattle farmer, they can buy shares in companies, they can become their own SMEs etc. Everything would be done on a case by case basis, decided upon by some sort of institution.

Your programme is not very strong on social policies yet but it mentions the Basic Income Grant – a strongly debated issue in Namibia. What is LPM's position on the BIG?

We support the BIG given our ideological orientation, but things must make sense. It must be sustainable, the economy must be able to afford it. Our priority must be that the economy grows, and that people get jobs. So the economic base must be as broad of possible. It is true that the BIG can stimulate the local economy but primarily it is about consumption. Much of money went into food, so who were the ultimate beneficiaries – retail shops. There is also the danger that people become unemployable because they live from the grant, stop searching for jobs and lower their expectations for a decent life. And at the same time, you have mismanagement of whole economic sectors like fishing, there is no decentralisation of funds so that programmes could be implemented on the ground, by local authorities. Budget money is kept in the centre. Why? To dominate decision making. So the whole model is too centralised, and money is inefficiently spent and not used for development.

Together with eleven traditional authorities of the Nama and Ovaherero the Landless People's Movement has just made an application to the High Court to nullify the joint declaration between Namibia and Germany on the genocide of 1904. Can you please explain the background, and what do you want to achieve?

Well, our application centers on two main claims. First, the Speaker of Parliament deprived parliament the opportunity to meaningfully debate the declaration when he decided to merely note the declaration, and not to table it for ratification. This was beyond his powers, and we want the court to declare his conduct unlawful. Secondly, the joint declaration is inconsistent with the provisions of the Namibian Constitution as well as the 2006 house motion on genocide. Therefore, we want the court to set it aside.

Look, the joint declaration is not a meaningless international statement; it has domestic applications and an adverse effect on citizens' rights, particularly its paragraph 20 which declares all financial aspects related to the past settled. This is flouting the constitution! Government does not have the power to unilaterally make laws or sign international agreements that have a direct impact on what happens to citizens - that is a substantive law-making power that is preserved for parliament. This unilateral choice imposed on the country by government in the absence of parliamentary debate thus undermines parliament's ability to satisfy its obligation to protect previously disadvantaged Namibians. Parliament cannot fulfil an obligation where it is given no meaningful opportunity of participation or debate.