

# **Election Fetishism: Perceptions of Southern African Democratization**

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## **Abstract**

*The recent wave of "democratization" in Africa has met with mixed success. Even in those countries where democratization is perceived as successful, the expectations of participants in democratization and liberation movements are often far from met. In Namibia, for example, observers sympathetic to SWAPO are now concerned that its recent electoral victory may obscure its "commitment to real democracy," and may mean a long wait for many of the movement's promised social reforms.*

*Using a set of in-depth interviews and media studies from the Namibian independence movement and post-independence period, as well as examples from coverage of the Zambian, South African, and Angolan cases, this paper examines the tendency for "grand dreams" of independence and democracy to be "replaced" by more mundane, concrete steps: open elections, freedom of the press, and power sharing, among others.*

*What is a reasonable definition of "democracy" in an African context? What is the relationship between a movement for national liberation or democratic renewal and managed steps like elections and constitutional reform? What happens, in essence, when a far-reaching grassroots movement wins its battle?*

*This paper examines the process by which the grand aspirations of movements for democracy become managed and redefined in relatively technical, operational terms and strategies southern African grassroots movements might employ to reconnect political decision making with their populist base.*

The past few years have seen astonishing changes on the southern African subcontinent -- and perhaps more astonishing claims about those changes from western governments, academics, and journalists. The wave of "democratization" sweeping Africa in general, and for my purposes southern Africa in specific, is an extraordinary set of events both on the geopolitical level and in the everyday lives of ordinary Africans. Yet southern African democratization has met with mixed success at best. In many cases,

"democratization" refers to political restructuring in the form of the North American and European state -- and a *de facto*, if not generally acknowledged, renunciation of the political form and content of the liberation movement. Popular notions of democratization fetishize events and institutions such as elections and a free press, ignoring whether democracy operates as a vehicle for popular aspirations -- a more complicated, but far more crucial, question.

Cases like Angola and, to some extent, Zambia, are well-known instances of the disappointments of domestic and international hopes for real democratic renewal. But even in those countries where democratization is widely perceived as successful, the expectations of participants in movements for democratization and liberation are often far from met. In Namibia, for example, where my own research is based, observers sympathetic to SWAPO are now concerned that the movement's recent landslide electoral victory may diminish its "commitment to real democracy," and may mean a long wait for many of the movement's promised social reforms.

Democracy in southern Africa is the result of years of struggle on the part of societies, movements, and people. What I hope to examine here is the process by which these movements' grand dreams and interests become focused on particular notions of "democracy," and to what extent democratization as practiced offers a path to the realization of movements' political fantasies. In addition, I will discuss the processes by which these "grand dreams" become managed, technical "transitions to democracy," stripped of their political muscle

by a will to compromise and consensus. Finally, I suggest that domestic and particularly international fixations on "free and fair elections" as icons -- indeed, *fetishes* -- for the scattered meanings of democracy are in large part to blame for the disappointments of southern African democratization.

In large part this paper is based on my own research in Namibia in the years immediately following independence; I have supplemented my interviews and media analysis with observations of transitions in other southern African states including Zambia, Angola, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

During 1993 I interviewed eighteen members of Namibia's independence movements, including current Prime Minister Hage Geingob, Foreign Minister Theo-Ben Gurirab, other members of the government, community activists, subsistence farmers and unemployed former combatants in the People's Liberation Army of Namibia. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, and spanned the interviewees' experiences in the movement, memories of their political expectations of independent Namibia, and analyses of the successes and failures of independence. In addition, I have examined over 150 issues of *The Namibian*, a populist and liberation movement-oriented newspaper, searching for similar issues of democracy, liberation, and freedom.

### ***The Democracy-Liberation Link***

The notion of democracy, although often discussed, is rarely well defined. In general, most theorists and governments think of democracy principally as a

**form: a set of institutions designed only to represent some other content. Indeed, regimes in which some content is assumed to be part of the governmental system are often considered undemocratic. However, as Peter Murphy writes, "A purely self-referential theory of democracy will be unable to answer all kinds of crucial questions about the human condition: about appetites, desire, happiness, justice, value, etc." (13). Most democracies are born out of struggle and conflict. It is entirely reasonable for those involved in the conflict to expect democracy to be linked with the other goals of their movement -- justice, freedom, liberation, etc. -- and not just a set of governmental institutions.**

**Tsenay Serequeberhan has suggested that African philosophy must be integrally linked to the practices of African liberation and independence struggles:**

**In contrast to the recent past (i.e., the period of armed anti-colonial liberation struggles), today it is in these very terms ["freedom" and "liberation"] that post-colonial "independent" Africa *misunderstands* itself. What seemed to be clear and unambiguous has become obscure and opaque. Thus the lethargic inertness of neocolonialism passes for the actuality of "freedom" and "liberation." To explore and decipher the source of this vexing "misunderstanding" is the proper task of contemporary African philosophy (16) (emphasis added).**

**In a similar vein, it is my contention that ideas of democracy in an African context must be rooted in the political history out of which African**

democratization springs. Purely formal democracy -- advocated by the international community and southern Africa's new elites -- has proved deeply disappointing, not only in transitions from "neocolonial" authoritarian states like Zambia but also in what has often been called "Africa's success story:" Namibia's simultaneous transition to independence and democracy.

The current rage of interest in African democratization thus deserves a link to previous discussions of African liberation, independence, and the emergence of the new states in Africa during the 1950s and '60s and lasting through the end of South Africa's formal *apartheid* system last year. The two phenomena bear important similarities, since each is the culmination of years of popular struggle. Importantly, each is often mistakenly seen as the end-point of that struggle, the embodiment of the goal of the movement that bears its name: *democracy; independence; liberation*. As Neil Lazarus has pointed out, "...the independence ceremony was taken to signal that the revolution had been won, rather than merely begun" (12).

Following independence, following the election, the new government, there is little place for a movement. Movements coalesce divergent interests into unified voices; they unify groups that otherwise might be at odds, masking their differences. < 3 > They manifest themselves as conflicts with the existing order; as a Namibian independence activist, Hilifa Mbako, told me:

When independence was on the horizon, when people could see that now there was no going back, I think these sectors, sectors within the broad

movements, started to cut themselves out.... The unions started to be more union.... it became a party, it was no longer a liberation movement.... from then on, up to after independence, all sectors became clear cut, with each one knowing where it stands in relation to the others.... Now that we are moving towards... a normal situation, I think some of these changes are positive.

Mbako's emphasis on the *normality* of life in post-independence Namibia is revealing. He does not claim that Namibians have *achieved* all the independence movement was fighting for -- "We are struggling with issues of hunger, poverty, drought, all these things are forces which are equally as bad as the forces of oppression, of apartheid," he says -- but he emphasizes that the movement as a *movement* was useful primarily as a means toward formal independence and parliamentary democracy. Throughout my interviews, similar ideas were common: *maturity, rationality or normality* required the formerly "irrational masses" of the independence movement to accept that democracy could not mean the fundamental changes they had expected. As Nairo Mbako (no relation to Hilifa), an unemployed former PLAN combatant, said:

I've been expecting a lot of things [before independence]. I thought maybe when we gain our independence everybody... will get job, will get houses, will so on. But I found it different. Because in the first place when we came here after independence, I found out that... there is no jobs in the country. Then I asked myself why there is no jobs, why there is a democracy, there may be a democratic country and everybody has to work. But then I found out myself and *I didn't know what was democracy, actually*. I thought myself if there's

democracy then everybody will get a job, everything will change (34-41)

(emphasis added).

Nairo Mbako attributes his disappointment with post-independence Namibia to his own prior misconception of what "democracy" means. Quite reasonably, he saw independence and democracy as fundamentally linked -- and as strongly related to another category, *liberation*. He expected jobs, housing, health care; interestingly, though, his top agenda item for the country now, he said during his interview, is to tear down the statues of German and Afrikaner colonial heroes that dot the landscape of downtown Windhoek, replacing them with statues of heroes of the Namibian liberation struggle. He attributes the colonial statues to a sense that the struggle has not been fully successful -- the democracy he was fighting for has not yet been implemented:

three years it's been now, let me say, if a boy was born in 1989, he's now, 1993, he'll... say this Curt von Francois, who is he? No, he's one of these colonial rulers. He will ask you why did you not put, I mean, take it off? I want to see Maharero. Every time at home we are telling them we have our rulers, the Mahareros, ...whoever they are, but still now we still have this. I mean, statues, I mean. They have to take it off. It's one of the things maybe I say that, after they take off that thing, Walvis Bay is back, and then it's when I say that Namibia is completely free (156-61).

There is another important way to look at Nairo Mbako's disappointment with the progress of Namibian independence, though: we can assume he is right in his estimation of "democracy." The movement he was part of -- and to which he

dedicated much of his life -- did, in fact, stand for much more than free and fair elections, a free press, and the other formal manifestations of democratization for which Namibia is rightly famous. These goals -- the social agenda of the Namibian liberation movement -- cannot be separated from the achieved goals of formal independence and structural democracy.

The notion of African democracy, then, must strive for a synthesis between two poles: the formal, western notion of institutional democracy, and a theory of democracy derived from recent African experiences with liberation struggles and national identity. It must come to some sort of resolution between democratic theory's emphasis on checks and balances and institutional structures to protect against abuses, and Africans' understandable, entirely reasonable expectation that the liberation movements of the past thirty years must mean more than a shift at the top, a change of position, and a free election.

Traditional democratic theory takes democracy to be essentially *formal*: that is, it consists of institutions, rules, laws, structures, and so on, all designed to represent adequately the will of the people. The desires of the populace are assumed to be relatively static, and the structures of government -- the process of representation itself -- is held not to have much bearing on those desires. Indeed, the perfection of this conception of democracy has little or no predetermined *content* whatsoever. Democracy need mean nothing more than rituals of shifting power -- elections, trials, newspapers, and so on.

That view clearly conflicts with movements' notions of democracy, both



movements for national liberation such as Namibia's and movements more specifically for democracy, like Zambia's Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). The MMD, of course, started during a period of economic turmoil in Zambia -- the price of mealie meal, the national staple, had increased tremendously, and riots threatened Lusaka. The MMD did not simply promise abstract structures of democracy; it promised *content*. More so, the liberation movements promised more than simple national statehood; they filled the idea of independence with notions of what life would be like under independence and why independence was important. Africans, therefore, saw their struggle not merely as one for a political order, but also as one for real, concrete changes.

Political examinations of Africa have often foregrounded the very real dangers of despotism emerging from movements for national liberation. Frantz Fanon, of course, warned of postcolonial African states becoming "not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature" (Fanon 175). Following a generation of critical theorists, Fanon understood democracy, imperialism, and fascism as a triad, each feeding off the other even as they stood in opposition. The African states would be unable, in his understanding, to build even European-style democracy because they lacked the strong bourgeois class necessary to bolster capitalist liberalism. Instead, he warned of a new class of African elites developing as rulers.

From a very different tradition, Dunduzu Chisiza's predictive 1961 booklet *Africa: What Lies Ahead* foreshadowed exactly the path many African leaders

took from liberation movements to dictatorships legitimized by histories of anticolonial struggle. Chisiza's warning stems from the conception that resistance really does follow naturally from oppression and that it is therefore essentially *corrupted* with the forms of oppression itself.

Each of these concerns, echoed by international observers over the last thirty years from the U.S. Government to the Carter Center, the United Nations, and numerous others, is obviously entirely valid. The reaction, however, has tended to *fetishize* democratic structures, often to the detriment of meaningful democracy: the democracy for which Africans have long struggled.

The fetish, in both its Freudian and Marxist incarnations, refers to a displacement of meaning or desire; the real object of desire is obscured, and desire is transferred from that object to some other -- a substitute, place-holder, fake. For Marx, the commodity fetish was a peculiarity of capitalism: "A commodity is... a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour" (*Capital* 320).

These ideas of the fetish inform Michael Taussig's exploration of "State fetishism." Taussig suggests that the power of the state itself is a kind of fetish: "...not the reality behind the mask of political reality, but as *the mask* which prevents us seeing political reality" (113) (emphasis added). Election fetishism, I contend, operates in much the same fashion: concentrating attention and energy on icons of democracy that obscure and sometimes even derail more central,

meaningful democratic accomplishments.

Namibia's post-independence experience highlights the tendency of election fetishism. No observer of Namibia has suggested that the country is short on democratic institutions; the parliament is elected by free, fair and multi-party elections, president Sam Nujoma is the first African head of state to be invited to the Clinton White House, and even the leader of the white, conservative Democratic Turnhalle Alliance remarked to a reporter early on after independence: "In 17 years of dealing with black leaders, I have never respected any of them more than I do the Swapo people I have been working with in the Constituent Assembly" (Mudge, quoted in Lush 266). People who were instrumental in building that democracy, though, are often disappointed with its progress. Megan Biesele reports, for example, on the "People's Land Conference" held in September, 1994:

1. We had a big debate on land reform in June, 1991. Isn't it? What has happened ever since that big Land Conference?

2. Government is currently planning to finalise a Bill on Land. What is the content of that given Bill? Does it reflect our aspirations? Will we be allowed to have an input?... (Biesele 15-16).

Naftali Uirab, the executive director of the Bricks Community Project, a community development organization and self-described "social movement," describes independence this way:

Well, the best changes one can talk about is that really we can, we are

having the freedom of talking. Talking for what, that's it, total freedom of talking. But I mean the effect, or the impact this talking has, we don't see.

Because we can make recommendations, we can say anything because of that freedom which is guaranteed in the Constitution. But in the effect of that freedom I don't see it (Uirab 221-24).

### ***Democracy and Discipline***

Members of the Namibian government had a very different take on the successes and failures of the revolution than did the activists not involved in the government. A typical comment came from Minister of Housing and Local Government Libertine Amathila. Amathila had traveled the week before the interview to Eenhana, a rural village in the north of the country, a few miles south of the Angolan border. She addressed a rally organized to celebrate the opening of a new block of government offices at Eenhana; at the end of her speech, she led the crowd in a feverish, revolutionary-style chant: "Keep Eenhana Clean! Keep Eenhana Clean!"

The difference between that slogan and the ones that might have been heard around Eenhana or Katutura before independence is striking; when I asked Amathila about the switch from rousing chants for freedom to those against littering, her reply was instructive:

You've got to drum it on them, you know? It's much harder to work in an independent, responsible position as a government than it was, I think, kind of out there (99-100).

Several other government officials echoed the theme: independence and

democracy are successful when they are disciplined and responsible. They do not usually see the danger to democracy being, as Appiah has suggested, a lack of "mechanisms by which the rulers can be restrained by the ruled" (171). Rather, the concern is closer to Afrifra K. Gitonga's: "the ones to be governed (ruled) [must] be governable!" (18). Gitonga's concern is more classically about unruly masses with un-Reasonable desires endangering the state and its stability; Amathila's is a more subtle form of a similar worry. The expectations of the Namibian people must be toned down, since they are neither realistic nor responsible.

As Gitonga suggests, a starting point for a definition of democracy is "government of the people." Yet the concerns for realism and responsibility are in an important sense calls for discipline and restraint on the part of the people; where democratic institutions are held to represent accurately the desires of the people, one of the principal missions (and successes!) of the government of "Africa's success story" is to hold those desires in check in the name of reason and international responsibility.

Examining these developments in the Namibian revolution, the pitfalls of transplanting western ideas of democracy directly into African situations become clear. Fanon's "caricature" of European democracy has, in a sense, occurred in "success stories" like Namibia every bit as much as in the more commonly discussed autocratic "failures" of Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, etc. This is not by any means an argument *against* traditional democratic institutions; rather, it is an argument *for* a deeper democracy whose center is the aspirations of the majority of the country, rather than one that sees its job as keeping those aspirations in check.

## ***Democratic Culture and Civil Society***

Numerous authors -- see, for example, Coser, Appiah, and others -- have suggested that the presence of a strong, viable civil society is a necessary prerequisite to meaningful democracy. As John Saul acknowledges, though, "...a discourse premised on the claims of 'civil society' is a two-edged sword, much of its original historical thrust as a concept reflecting a liberal desire to keep the hands of the state off the marketplace" (113). Nevertheless, the idea that a strong independent sector -- groups and interests putting pressure on the government -- is essential to a meaningful democracy makes sense; Saul quotes Moses Mayekiso, General Secretary of the South African National Union of Metalworkers:

Because of the nature of the broad alliance of social forces that the ANC has come to represent, there may well be limits beyond which the party cannot go (113-14).

At the same time, Adam and Moodley criticize the ANC for exactly the opposite problem; in their view, the ANC, "by emphasizing the forced 'transfer of power,' albeit to all South Africans in a democracy and not to the ANC alone, the ANC does not truly prepare its constituency for power sharing" (49). In other words, the movement keeps its constituency too much in the forefront instead of rationally lowering the people's expectations to make room for a realistic democracy.

In either case, in a situation such as Namibia's, where government figures

see their role, in a sense, as tempering the desires of the people -- whether represented through pressure groups in civil society or not -- the presence of a strong civil society is not sufficient for making democracy meaningful. Few government officials attended the People's Land Conference Biesele refers to; little policy action has since come of it. The model of a strong civil society sending messages received, interpreted and implemented by a democratically elected government breaks down in the Namibian case, and as Jennifer Clare Mohamed has suggested, will likely break down in South Africa as well; "too often," she writes, "we have witnessed the creation of *prima facie* democratic institutions and forms of government that have resulted in little change for the people" (53).

### ***Prospects for Namibia and South Africa***

What can we expect in the next few years in Namibia and South Africa? Swapo recently won the second round of national elections, capturing the two-thirds majority it had missed in the independence elections, and some observers have suggested that the change will lead it either to be more actively partisan toward its own poor and unemployed base constituency or to be more despotic. So far, neither has come to pass, and the government has operated largely as it did with a simple majority. It seems most likely that Namibian democracy is well entrenched -- as far as it goes. The question is if, as *Namibian* editor Gwen Lister suggests, "Swapo will split down the middle as a political

party into moderate and extreme factions" (112). Lister expects a faction of Swapo to reinvigorate the notion of active democracy, changing the current course of the Namibian government.

In both Namibia and South Africa, the former liberation movements have, in the words of Benedict Anderson, "inherit[ed] the wiring of the old state:... files, dossiers, archives, laws, financial records, censuses, maps, treaties, correspondence, memoranda, and so on.... the state awaits the new owner's hand at the switch to be very much its old brilliant self again" (160). And in each case, the new owners feel enormous pressure from international and domestic players to restrict the meaning of democracy and thereby the will of the majority to strictly formal measures. In a cruel irony, the uniquely democratic institutions these last new states of the African continent have developed seem destined to circumscribe the realm of possibility in the new era the liberation movements ushered in.

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This paper has benefited greatly from advice and readings by John Krinsky, Ellen Perrin, Jim Perrin, and Joe Razza, and from discussions with Megan Biesele and Robin Wagner-Pacifi. Any errors are, of course, my own.

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See Laclau and Mouffe's extended discussion of the process of "quilting" for an interesting exploration of the dynamics of social movements.



