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Namibia Political Party Prospects Leading to the 2009 Elections

Introduction

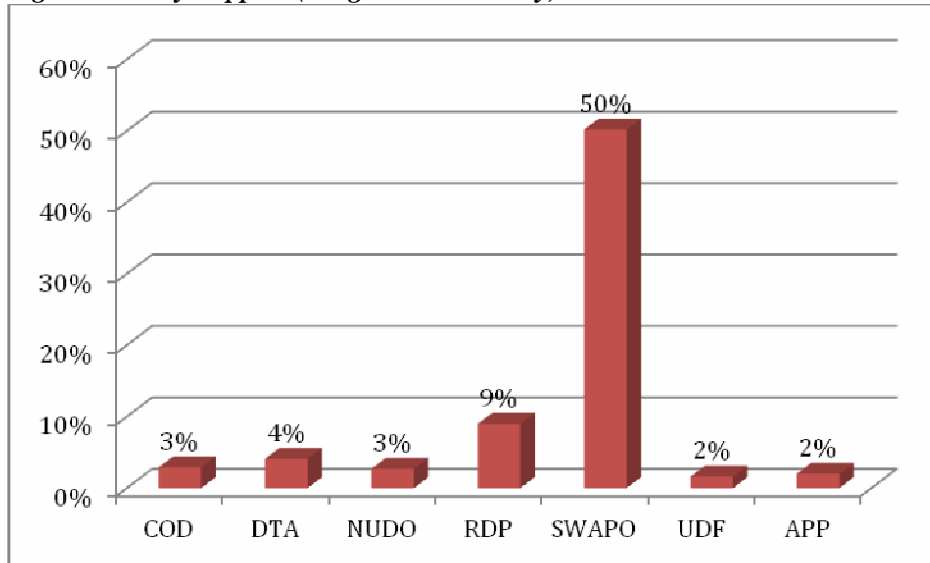
The structure of government and opposition in Namibia as a dominant party system became solidified after independence in 1990 (Du Pisani and Lindeke, IPPR 2009). But, over the past year a number of new political parties have been formed to challenge the established ruling party, SWAPO Party of Namibia, as it has been officially called since independence. These new parties are also challenging the existing opposition parties in Namibia. These new parties raise the possibility of breaking the effective monopoly of voters from the north-central regions, where up to now SWAPO has received enough votes to automatically win a majority. Furthermore, the new parties may receive votes reallocated from different ethnic groups and populations allied to existing opposition parties or from those who have fallen out of electoral participation.

The fixation among politicians and voters on the coming elections scheduled in November 2009 has already challenged the peace and stability of the country in ways unseen since independence. Popular emotions are running high, judging by the unprecedented confrontations around recent by-elections and rallies. Missing so far has been reliable information as represented here by the *Afrobarometer* survey, which gives a national picture of potential party support a year ahead of elections.

Support For Political Parties

Figure 1 below shows the current projections of the parties likely to gain votes according to respondents' preferences. Namibians were asked, *If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?* The current preferences reported in the survey are SWAPO at 50%, opposition parties at 25%, and undecided at 25%.

Figure 1: Party Support (Largest Parties Only)



Question: If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?"

A more complete listing of the various party preferences is captured in Table 1 below. The results suggest that many of the smaller and newer political parties will struggle to find support and to have national presence in the 2009 elections. However, they may have better performance in regional and local elections at a later date due to their more concentrated support in regional constituencies and local communities. These smaller parties may provide opportunities for coalition building in national elections. That would conform to longstanding practices of coalition and splintering among Namibia's political parties.

Table 1: Voting Preferences for All Political Parties 2008

Vote for which party	Total (%)
APP (All People's Party)	2
CoD (Congress of Democrats)	3
DTA of Namibia (Democratic Turnhalle Alliance)	4
MAG (Monitor Action Group)	>1
NDMC (Namibia Democratic Movement for Change)	>1
Nudo (National Unity Democratic Organisation of Namibia)	3
NDP (National Democratic Party of Namibia)	>1
RDP (Rally for Democracy and Progress)	9
RP (Republican Party of Namibia)	>1
Swanu of Namibia (South West African National Union)	>1
SWAPO (Swapo Party of Namibia)	50
UDF (United Democratic Front of Namibia)	2

Note: Estimates are reliable with a margin of +/- 3 percentage points

Existence of undecided voters

Not all respondents in the survey expressed an interest in particular parties. Table 2 below shows the existence of undecided voters. This fact creates a degree of uncertainty about election outcomes greater than previously experienced since independence.

Table 2: Undecided Voters [No party preference given]

	Percentage undecided voters
Would not vote	7%
Refused to answer	10%
Don't know	7%

Combined, these potential voters usually would be referred to as “undecided”, leaving a great deal of uncertainty about some of the prospects for different parties. About ten percent of respondents refused to say how they might vote. A further seven percent indicated they would not vote. Another seven percent did not know how they might vote.

Given the results of the current survey, many smaller parties will depend on the “lowest remainder” allocation in hopes of gaining at least one seat in the seventy-two-member Parliament without the minimum votes. Symbolic importance and public credibility, as well as access to public funding, are at stake for these minor players in the dominant-party system. Nonetheless, several findings seem clear from the tables above and the analysis of the survey data:

- SWAPO appears to retain its dominant position in the electoral landscape.
- SWAPO also retains its near monopoly of north-central (Oshivambo-speaking) regions’ voters (see Figure 2). Its bare majority of intended voters in November 2008 is significantly diminished compared to previous election results, when SWAPO secured over ninety percent of the actual vote. Assuming many currently undecided voters swing their way, perhaps SWAPO might gain up to seventy percent of the vote in the next election.
- According to the survey estimates, RDP will become the new official opposition.
- Moreover, DTA will survive as a viable party.

SWAPO also continues to be a national party with solid, double digit support from all regions and population groups. Figure 2 below shows the strong SWAPO preferences above forty percent except in Otjozondjupa at 20%.

Figure 2: Regional voting for SWAPO

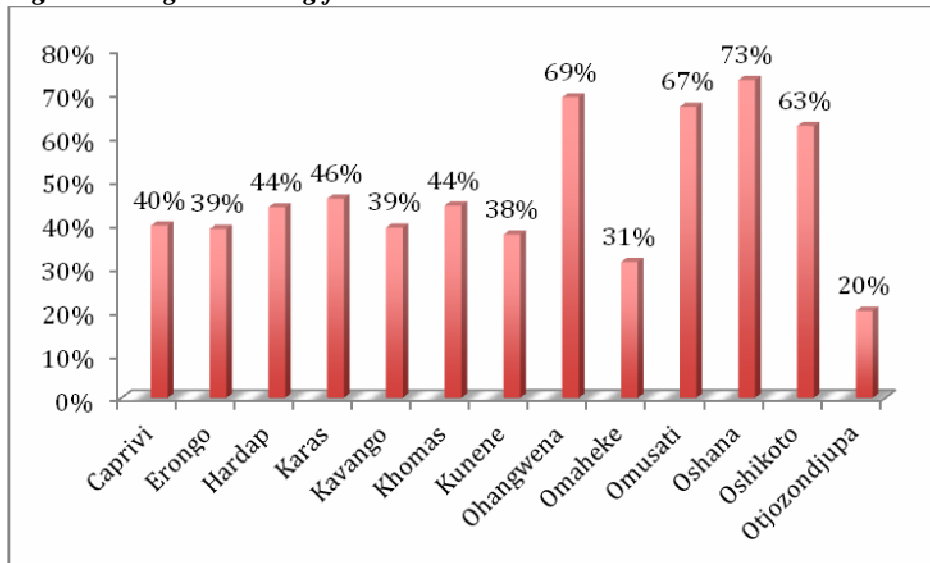
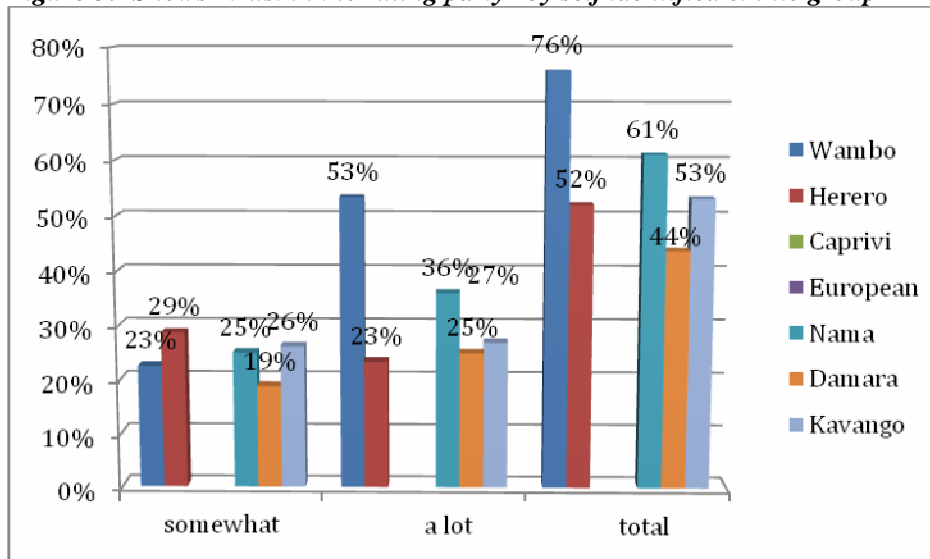


Figure 3: Shows “trust in the ruling party” by self identified ethnic group



If the election had been held last November, when the data for this analysis was collected, Namibia would have continued to have a large number of smaller parties, as is typical for party list electoral systems. Many of the parties will be challenged for survival if they fail to secure any seats in the new parliament.

Some respondents indicated a likelihood to vote for a party other than the one to which they claimed a “closeness”. That suggests that at least among opposition party voters there is some substantial “swing vote” that can change party fortunes, although no clear direction for a voter shift appears at this time. A “bandwagon” effect might be possible but is not indicated in the results.

In the Ohangwena Region a high 17% refused to say for which party they would vote. Perhaps this indicates greater RDP support beyond the ten percent otherwise indicated in that region. Or

it could be just an indication of the current sensitivity of political issues there. No other indicators show strong negatives from this region.

In this respect the results do not indicate whether SWAPO will retain its constitution-amending supermajority or will return to the majority level of the first Parliament after independence. Nonetheless, the ruling party continues to be trusted by the vast majority of respondents.

Figure 4: Comparison of Trust in the Ruling Party v. Opposition Parties

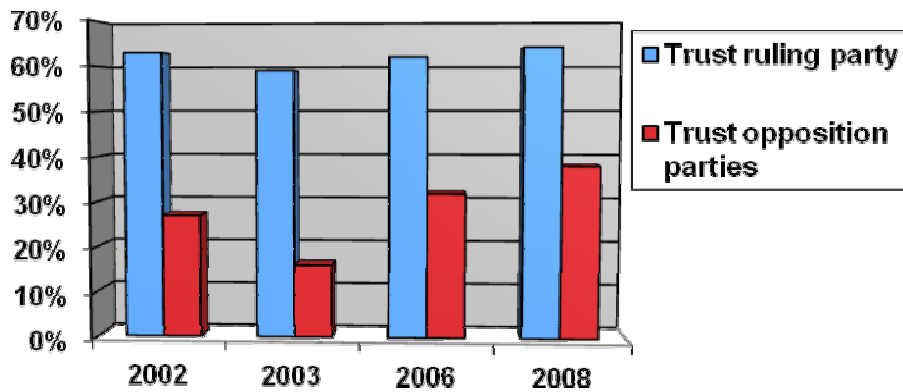
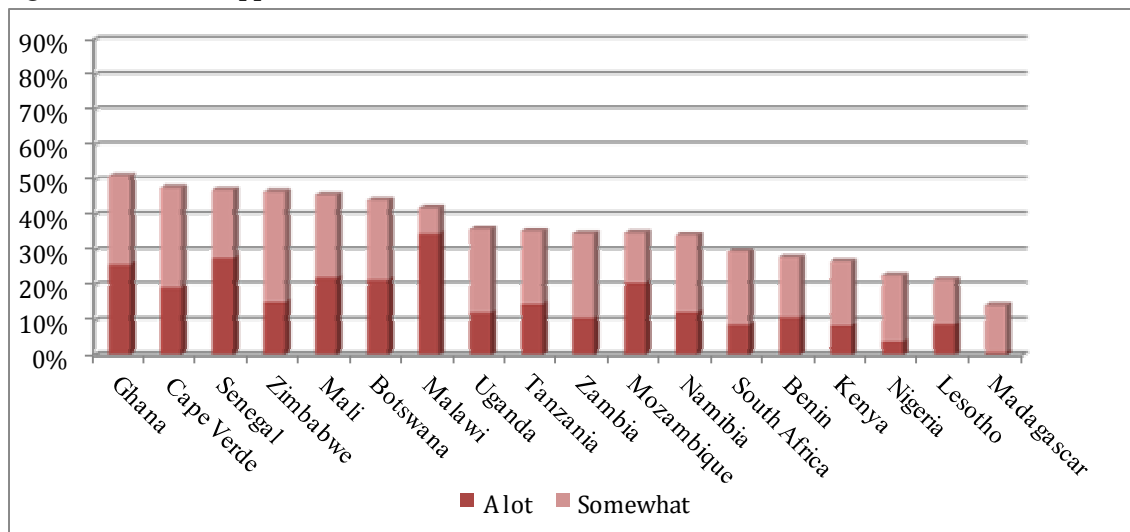


Figure 4 clearly indicates that Namibians retain a consistently high degree of trust in the ruling party. This is congruent with most other countries in southern Africa (except a few indicated in Figure 5 below such as Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi). In general, opposition parties usually fare less well in terms of trust than do ruling parties in democracies around the world and certainly in Africa (See Figure 5).

However, Namibia’s opposition parties, as a group, have steadily improved in terms of popular trust among *Afrobarometer* respondents. The trend of opposition parties becoming more trusted may be a function of a growing democratic maturity. Namibia ranks in the middle of African experiences in terms of trust in opposition parties, as the following figure from *Afrobarometer* Round 3 suggests:

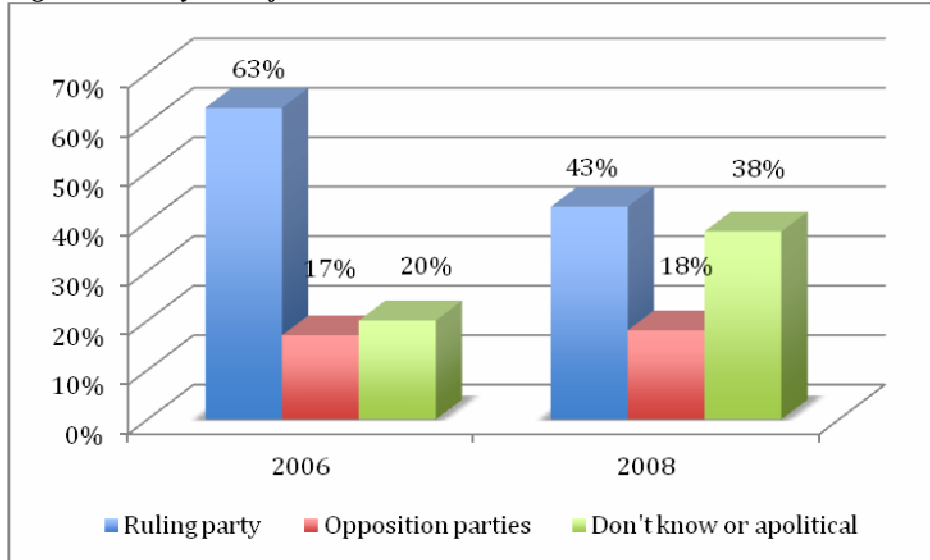
Figure 5: Trust in Opposition Parties 2005-6 (AB Round 3)



Does trust in opposition parties convert into electoral support?

Figure 6 indicates that the opposition parties collectively are increasing their support base slightly, while the ruling party identifiers have declined according to the survey results. (Remember the relatively large undecided category in this survey compared to the 2006 findings). When respondents were asked, *Do you feel close to any particular political party? If so, which party is that?* In general, party identifiers have declined over the past two years, with 66% feeling close to a political party in late 2008, compared to 82% in early 2006. Thirty-eight percent did not feel close in 2008, compared to only fifteen percent in 2006.

Figure 6: Party Identification



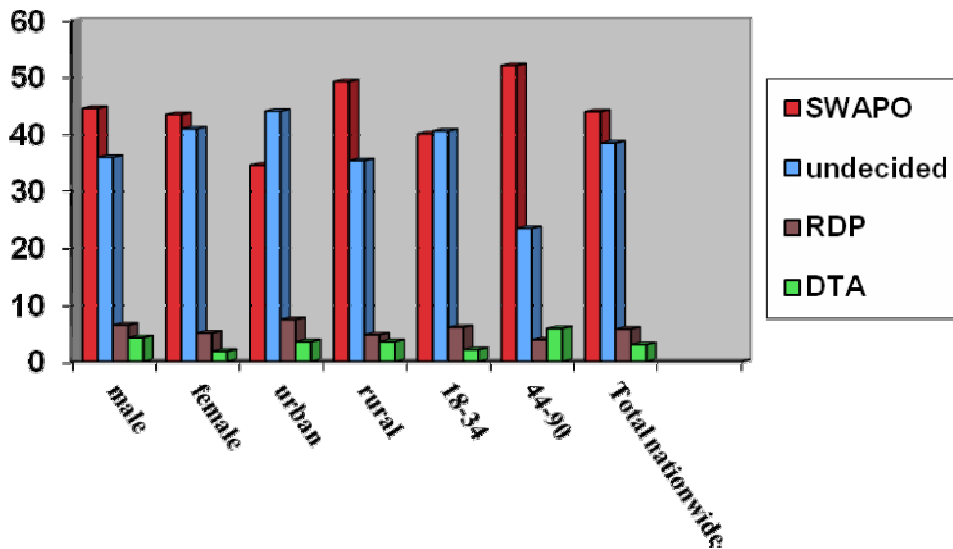
Question: "Do you feel close to any particular political party? Which party is that?"

Which categories of supporters may be changing their party closeness? Let's examine three categories: age, urban/rural, and gender.

- Among younger voters, SWAPO underperforms. Compared to a national average of fifty percent who "feel close" to the party, over sixty percent of respondents above 44 years of age do so compared to just about forty-five percent of those aged 18-34..
- Some older opposition parties such as NUDO and DTA also appeal more to older voters.
- RDP does poorly among older voters, but better among 18-44 year olds.

This distribution of party affiliation can be examined more carefully in Figure 7, where the major parties and the undecided category can be compared. The results shown below make clear that urban, female, and younger voters represent a growing challenge for the ruling party. As the data show, the core support for the ruling party primarily remains older, rural, and minimally educated respondents from the north-central areas. As Namibians become more educated and more urban, their ties to the ruling party seem to weaken and people become more apolitical in everyday life. Nonetheless, respondents without close party ties may also vote for that party at election time. Of course, all such speculation remains within the context of a still-dominant ruling party.

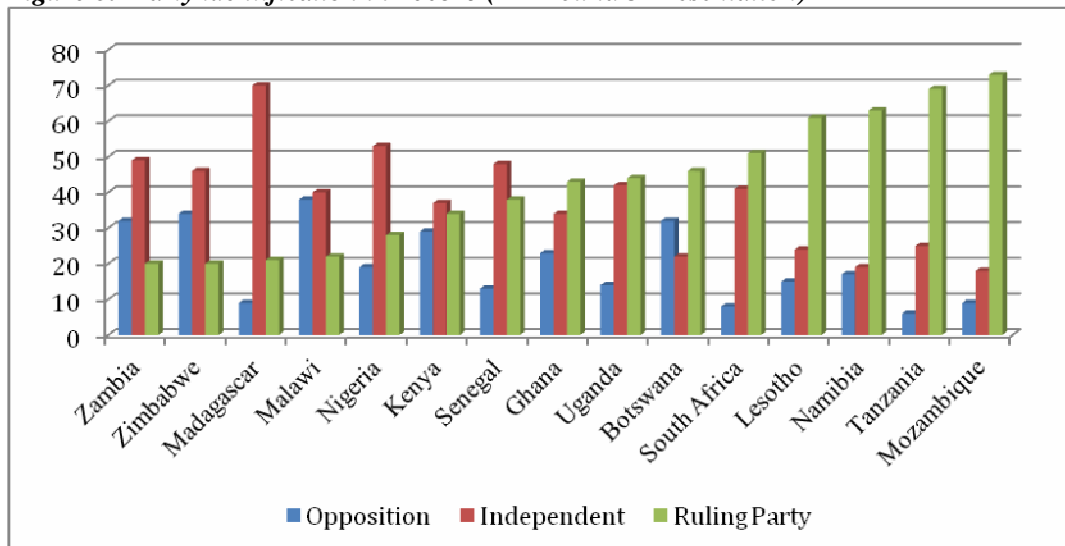
Figure 7: Categories of party identifiers for larger parties, 2008



Conclusion

Namibia continues to feature a popular, dominant party system with a large number of smaller parties experiencing growing, though uncertain, competition. Based on the Round 3 Afrobarometer in 2005, Namibia continues to possess one of the most dominant party systems in Africa. Citizens identified more strongly with the ruling party only in Mozambique and Tanzania from among 15 countries measured at the time. (See Figure 8)

Figure 8: Party identification in 2005-6 (AB Round 3 Presentation)



Yet by 2008, urban voters in Namibia (at 36%) and younger voters (at 43%) were more likely to state that they were “not be close to a political party”. Whether these non-party respondents are alienated from politics or more apathetic would require a more intensive survey of motivations than possible in the present effort. As the election campaign gets underway far ahead of the

actual election day, Namibian political parties should focus heavily on mobilising their core supporters and persuading the large number of young, undecided voters to turn out to vote. The significant level of uncertainty leaves this election relatively more open than in the past.

It would be tragic if increased party competition, which is healthy for a democracy, should somehow undermine the hard won peace, stability and democracy that Namibia has enjoyed all these years. It does not seem to be the wish of the vast majority of Namibians according to this survey!

The Survey

Face to face interviews were conducted in November, 2008, in five languages with a nationally representative probability sample of 1200 respondents across all thirteen regions. In the first stage of sampling, 80 census enumerator areas (EAs) were randomly selected from a frame of all EAS that was stratified by region and urban-rural differences, with the probability of selection proportionate to population size, based on the most recent 2005 census estimate. This ensures that every eligible adult has an equal and known chance of being selected. In the second stage of sampling, eight households were randomly selected within each EA. In the third and final stage, one citizen over the age of 18 was randomly selected from a list of all household members to be interviewed. The realised sample was then weighted by ____ and ____ to ensure that it matched current population estimates. The final sample size of 1,200 supports estimates of the national population of all adults, that is accurate to within a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points, at a confidence level of 95 percent. Estimates of sub-groups will have larger margins of error.

Fieldwork for this survey was conducted by an experienced professional team from Research Facilitation Services. For more information about RFS, email them at lizl@rfsn.org.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Professor Bill Lindeke, IPPR

The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RDMFA/DANIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for Afrobarometer Round 4 research, capacity building and outreach activities. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org