

Struggle Against Silence Reclaiming History in Namibia

BY LAUREN DOBELL

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The late Moses Garoeb, Swapo's administrative secretary in exile from 1971-89 and the party's first secretary-general following independence, was, for many, the public face of Swapo's "hardline." More at home with confrontational than conciliatory politics, intolerant of dissent, and uncomfortable with democratic freedoms, especially as

exercised by Swapo's opponents, Garoeb personified the autocratic style which many of its critics believe remains the true bent of Namibia's governing party. The unenthusiastic response of the Namibian people to the lavish state funeral held following his death in October must be read in part as a message to the party to which he dedicated his life.

Party tricks

Although perhaps a natural fit, Garoeb's post-independence role was prescribed by necessity. While

the government got down to business, forging alliances with local entrepreneurs, enticing foreign investors, and wooing the donor community, the party's function was to reassure Swapo supporters that they had not been forgotten. As dissatisfaction at the slow pace of economic reform grew among Namibian youth, labour unions, ex-PLAN fighters and the rural majority from which Swapo draws the bulk of its support, it was Garoeb who identified – and pilloried – scapegoats for their grievances.



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Moses Garoeb with cabinet colleague Dr. Libertine Amathila

Constitutional concessions to minority rights and the protection of private property, press freedoms, the composition of the judiciary, protections for civil servants left over from the previous regime – all, since independence, have felt the sting of Garoeb's scathing tongue. While his colleagues consolidated their hold on power, Garoeb ostensibly spoke for the people. The populist role was a balancing act, particularly as he also held a Cabinet position and enjoyed the generous perks of office, including a government-issued Mercedes-Benz, but Garoeb played it with apparent conviction and vast reserves of apoplectic rhetoric. He also played it with some success, at least in the eyes of party loyalists, among whom he was known as "The Chief."

A chapter closing

Garoeb's death in October of this year, at the age of 55, marks the beginning of the end of an era in Namibia. Swapo's top leadership has changed little in thirty years (half of the current Cabinet have held executive positions in the party since its Tanga Conference of 1969), and some are now in poor health. Other well-known Swapo figures – John ya Otto, Axel Johannes and Danny Tjongarero among them – have passed away since independence, but none were so integral to the movement's internal workings, nor privy to as many of its secrets as Garoeb.

Based mainly in Angola during the 1980s, Garoeb is known to have been involved in Swapo's darkest moments in exile, and, according to former Swapo detainees, was one of the few Swapo leaders to have personally visited the "dungeons" of Lubango where alleged spies were imprisoned. Former captives, however, generally accuse him only of carrying out orders, shielding the identities of those responsible for launching the spy-hunt. His cousin and political foe, United Democratic Front leader Justus Garoeb, would allude to this at his funeral, saying that those looking for

Swapo's "Gestapo" chief should look elsewhere.

After independence and Swapo's smooth segue into political power, Garoeb continued to serve as a buffer between the Swapo government and the people who put them in power. As Chief Coordinator and subsequently Secretary-General of the party, he harnessed the popular discontent with chronic high unemployment, continuing widespread poverty and rising crime rates, and deflected it from the Swapo leadership towards other targets. At the same time, he was free to articulate Swapo's worst instincts, lashing out at perceived foes on the government's behalf, while his parliamentary colleagues put as much distance between themselves and his bellicose rhetoric as they deemed politic.

Historical silences

Rumours fly fast and furiously in Namibia's capital city, and already there are murmurings in Windhoek that Garoeb confessed on his deathbed to none other than Reverend Nakamhela. The Secretary-General of the Council of Churches of Namibia (CCN), Nakamhela was object of some of Garoeb's most virulent attacks over the past 18 months, as he tried to steer a fractious CCN executive towards a controversial conference on national reconciliation. Despite the CCN's demurrals, the conference was seen by some as a first step towards a truth commission for Namibia, a process Garoeb, and those he sheltered, were anxious to avoid.

The reinvigorated detainee issue, to which such a conference would have lent momentum, not only delves into an aspect of Swapo's past Garoeb strove hard to conceal. It represents, in the present, a challenge to Swapo's post-independence definition and practice of national reconciliation – in essence a policy of letting bygones be bygones. Since the English-language release of Siegfried Groth's *Namibia: The*

Wall of Silence (reviewed in Vol. 11 No. 4 *SAR*) in early 1996, and the resultant formation of a "Breaking the Wall of Silence" (BWS) movement comprising mainly former Swapo detainees, the detainee issue has kindled unprecedented debate within Namibia. In the process it has both expanded the parameters of democratic dissent, and thrown the limits to the government's tolerance of expressions of dissent into sharp relief. The BWS' efforts exposed not only the extent of historical silences, but the contemporary boundaries of political space. These ambitions were retroactively made explicit in the group's first annual report, released in April 1997:

- To find a lasting solution to the unresolved problem of the Swapo ex-detainees, the missing people and their families and relatives, including those who died under South African rule,
- To work with other groups and individuals in civil society to help create a culture of democracy, tolerance, openness, truthfulness, and human dignity in Namibia.

Sound and fury

Initially, however, the group's efforts were more narrowly focused on creating as wide as possible an audience for Pastor Groth's book through an official launch and homemade translations into the more widely-spoken Afrikaans and Oshivambo – the latter directed at the heartland of Swapo's support.

It was a measure of how close to home the charges struck that it was President Sam Nujoma who spearheaded the attack on Groth's book. It was Garoeb, however, who sustained the assault with a vigour that to many eyes seemed disproportionate to the threat. Subsequent events seem to have borne out his fears however, although the ranting may have been a tactical mistake, drawing the attention of Swapo's supporters and detractors alike to the movement's deepest insecurities and its proclivity for authoritar-

ian measures when cornered. Despite Garoeb's warning that bloodshed could result from attempts to reopen old wounds, several new voices took up the call for Swapo to "come clean." To predictable exhortations from the Legal Assistance Centre, the National Society for Human Rights and the independent press, were added urgings from historical allies such as the branch of the national student organisation (NANSO) officially affiliated to Swapo, and NANGOF, an umbrella body of non-government organisations. Radio phone-in shows and the letters section of newspapers testified to a growing interest in the topic, as well as a general unease, even among sympathetic contributors, with the histrionics of some high-profile Swapo leaders. While these remained defiant, however, there were signs of strain within the broader leadership of the party, whose unified front appeared to be faltering under the weight of a guilt that many are weary of shouldering for the past actions of a few.

Catching up to the critics

Neither the proportion of the population actively involved in the debate, nor the position the detainee issue occupied in the hierarchy of quotidian concerns of most Namibians should be exaggerated, but Swapo leaders' appalled reaction to the phenomenon of sustained open criticism was a reflection of its novelty. Whether owing primarily to these domestic pressures or evidence of heightened external interest (Nujoma was repeatedly questioned about the detainee issue by reporters during a state visit to Germany in June), Swapo finally took its first constructive step in August 1996. On the national Heroes Day holiday it released a long-promised, though hastily compiled, list of Namibians who "sacrificed" during the struggle against South Africa or died of natural causes in exile while under Swapo's care. Though welcomed as a positive contribution, *Their Blood Waters Our Freedom* (as the bound

volume was called) failed to satisfy former detainees and human rights activists, who pointed to numerous errors of omission and commission, while former detainees demanded that their fellow captives not be included in a list of Namibian patriots without formal exoneration from the accusations of treason which had caused their families so much suffering.

The CCN too has found itself both trailing public opinion and facing fissures, along ethnic and religious lines, within its own organisation. Having declared 1997 The Year of God's Grace, it has repeatedly postponed the series of conferences on reconciliation (the first of which was originally promised in early 1996) that were to have been its centrepiece. The bishops of the major northern churches appear to be under considerable pressure from the President, apart from any discomfort they themselves – and their congregations – feel about appearing to jeopardize a longstanding secular alliance with Swapo.

Fraying alliances

Though not the sole factor, the detainees issue has also contributed to the fraying of ties between Swapo and other historical allies. The wing of the national student organisation, NANSO, which remained affiliated to Swapo following a split in the organization in 1991, voted to

break from the ruling party at its Congress in August. Its president, Abraham Ndumbu, had earlier been expelled from the party "for not acting according to Party values and norms" following his public call for Swapo to come clean on the detainees issue, accompanied by demands for a tougher approach to government corruption.

Although not without consequences, as the newly-renamed "Mighty NANSO" quickly discovered, such outspokenness set an important precedent, widening the window for more open criticism of the ruling party from within its ranks, as well as from without. It seems to be spreading to other hitherto more pliant structures. In recent months the Swapo government has come under unprecedented fire from its union affiliates, among others, for what is, admittedly, some of its most outrageous behaviour to date. A Cabinet decision to award lavish retirement benefits to senior political and military officials created such a public furore that the government was forced to back down while the President dissociated himself from the decision – implicitly undermining the authority of the Prime Minister and the notion of collective responsibility for government policy in the process.

Political space

An indignant media kept the pressure on, and eventually forced the additional retraction of a new "domestic workers allowance" for Cabinet members, which had initially bypassed notice, and a retreat from the planned purchase of another new jet for the President. The independent press, led by *The Namibian*, which earned its stripes monitoring abuses of power by the erstwhile South African administration, is running ever more strongly-worded editorials and publishing stories more censorious than it would have contemplated even a year ago. A similar candour has infused the national airwaves. On a recent episode of the popular televised public affairs pro-



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gram, "Talk of the Nation," government spokespersons attempted to justify lucrative allowances for political leaders on the grounds that such measures were needed to counter corruption. In sharp contrast to the usually deferential routine, however – and to the evident surprise and discomfiture of the government representatives – they were raked over the coals by a panel comprising opposition politicians, journalists and trade union representatives.

A measure of the extent to which the government has lost touch with the people may be inferred from the response to the arrangements for Moses Garoeb's state funeral. The government's declaration of a public holiday was sharply criticised by businesses, banks and the media, while annoyance over the cancellation of sporting events and the replacement of the regular NBC schedule with four days of mournful music was more in evidence than sorrow among the general populace. Attendance at the funeral itself – which was modelled in many respects after Princess Diana's – was surprisingly small, in light of the national public holiday and the central venue of the Parliament gardens. This apathetic observance of the passing of the most senior Swapo leader to die since independence may be the most flagrant sign to date that the party's liberation movement glamour has faded. It can no longer simply equate support for Swapo's leadership to patriotism, nor prescribe and choreograph expressions of patriotic sentiment.

Against the evidence that Namibian civil society is at last finding a voice, and carving out an enlarged space for acceptable political discourse, must be weighed continuing efforts by the ruling party to limit that space. In a disturbing reminder of Administrator-General proclamations of the past, the President recently declared that demonstrations and public meetings would require official permission to proceed, in absolute contravention of

constitutional guarantees of freedom of association. A new National Intelligence Service Bill hurried through Parliament in August attaches wide powers to such a body in putative defence of state security. Another motion now before Parliament which appears to give Parliamentary committees the power to subpoena journalists and compel them to reveal their sources, is also a source of concern. Finally, in the wake of the Swapo Congress, it now seems certain that the President will run for a third term in office, a move requiring the ruling party to avail itself of its two-thirds majority in Parliament in order to unilaterally amend its model constitution, and thereby setting another dangerous precedent.

Conclusion

For Swapo's leadership, its rapid consolidation of political power since independence has entailed persuading the majority of its

followers that it represents their interests despite growing evidence to the contrary, and effectively marginalizing its critics, including those who seek to recover and expose the truth about the dark side of its history. As government colleagues distanced themselves from both tasks, Moses Garoeb was on the frontline. In the end, however, Garoeb was unable to bury Swapo's past and may even, if the rumours are true, have helped in the end to uncover it. And recent events suggest that it will be more difficult in the future for his successor to protect the government from the consequences of public discontent. Seven years after independence, as it becomes harder to persuade the people that it is in touch with their real concerns, the government's options are to resort to more draconian measures to muffle the criticism, or to pull up its socks and live up to its promises.

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