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Populist Rhetoric, Elections and the Media – the Case of Namibia 2024/25

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Abstract
Namibia is a democratic state and society based on a normative constitutional framework enshrining fundamental civil liberties. Freedom of speech and media freedom are elements of a vibrant public discourse in a multi-party democracy with regular elections being largely free and fair. This allows for uncensored political competition which utilizes also populist rhetoric, both by the so far dominant former liberation movement SWAPO - since Independence the political party in government - and several other political parties. It allows also civil society to openly comment and criticise. The build-up for the National Assembly and Presidential elections in late November 2024 fostered a noticeable populist trend in policy statements by several parties. These are a matter of debate also in the media, particularly the independent press. This article presents recent developments in political culture to assess the precarious balance between party political campaigns and the role of media. It examines political populist discourses and their media reporting and responses. It is a case study of contested space in Namibia's democratic society. The focus is on the interaction during the build-up to national elections in November 2024.

Keywords: Namibia, Media, Populism, Election campaign, SWAPO, IPC, PDM, LPM

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Introduction

Namibia is a democratic state and society based on a normative constitutional framework enshrining fundamental civil liberties. Freedom of speech and media freedom are elements of a vibrant public discourse in a multi-party democracy with regular elections being so far largely free and fair. This allows for uncensored political competition which utilizes also populist rhetoric, both by the hitherto dominant former liberation movement SWAPO - since Independence the political party in government - and several other political parties. It allows also civil society to openly comment and criticise.

The social cohesion during the 33 years of a sovereign state has been tested by an increasingly autocratic execution of political power facing growing opposition and – as indicated in the last national and regional elections in 2019 and 2020 respectively – a gradual loss of support of the dominant SWAPO among the electorate. This has in the build-up for the National Assembly and Presidential elections in November 2024 fostered a noticeable populist trend in policy statements by those competing for votes. These at times weird utterances are also a matter of debate in the media, in particular the independent press. This paper engages with the trends in political culture in the 2024 election campaign and the role of the media.

The term populism is used as a vague notion often applied in a wider sense, referring to certain rhetoric as a populist form of discourse. This falls short of a proper definition of populism as a specific or substantial strategy of policy making. The term had been used to qualify some of the narratives of former liberation movements as political parties in government (Melber 2018 and 2022). As was suggested, it could be replaced by "elitist plebeianism" of a self-declared "moral elite": "In the elitist plebeian vision, the superior faculties of this elite – their education, their wisdom, their insights and/or their ability – enable them to best judge what the people need and what course of action will best deliver it." (Paget 2024: 969) Also dubbed "vanguardist populism", this "highlights the limitations of highly-centralised populist movements whose vague commitments to radical transformation […] are primarily geared toward facilitating elite power struggles that can at best disrupt the status quo and make it work better for the elites and their supporters." (Beresford et al 2023: 14; see also Blum 2023 and Tyitende 2023).

This article first presents a summary overview on political trends in Namibia since Independence under the hegemonic rule of the former liberation movement SWAPO and its recent decline in voter support. It then offers an

overview on the Namibian media landscape. A final part presents some examples of the electioneering for the National Assembly and Presidential elections taking place in late November 2024. It suggests that the political propaganda unfolding despite a variety of claims by several parties does not differ substantially. They all offer lots of promises but no reliable prospects for a policy in the best interest of the people. Despite wearing different costumes, they all tend to be more of the same.

Namibia's Democracy

After more than 20 years of armed resistance against the illegal South African occupation, negotiated decolonisation in Namibia transferred political power to the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) through general elections which were held under the supervision of the United Nations (UN) and went relatively peacefully. Since then, Namibia has had remarkable social and political stability in all comparative surveys of African states (such as the Mo Ibrahim Index, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, and the Freedom House Index). Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index also puts Namibia among the best-placed African states. Namibia ranks among the top-ten performers in terms of good governance on the continent. Notably, it occupies throughout all the years rank one or two among African countries in terms of the annual Media Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.

Of lately these indexes suggest a decline, influenced not least of all by dismal economic performance which has affected social expenditure and seen the country failing to live up to promises of meaningful improvement in the lives of ordinary people. An increased frustration and complaints about governance are on record. Asked how often Members of Parliament (MPs) listen to what people have to say, 39% of respondents in an Afrobarometer survey in 2017 answered "never", 35% said "only sometimes", and 16% replied with "don't know" (Survey Warehouse 2017, 33). A striking feature of Namibian society remains the contrast between its political stability and the relatively deprived living conditions of the majority of the population. Despite being classified as a middle income country in terms of the annual average per capita income, Namibia remains after South Africa the most unequal society in the world in terms of the disparity in income distribution.

As the latest Parliamentary and Presidential elections of November 2019 and even more so the Regional and Communal elections of 2020 documented, the loyalty of the voters to SWAPO as the former liberation movement now as party

in government is not unlimited. For the first time, a meaningful portion of the electorate turned its back on the dominant party, and even more on the party's presidential candidate. This suggests a significant new shift in the political culture and the distribution of influence and control. The question therefore needs to be asked, how a hegemonic party will respond, when the democratic rules of the game are used for more democracy.

In mid-2018 the results of another Afrobarometer survey were summarised as follows:

> "The majority of Namibians say that government is not doing enough to address unemployment and poverty [...] As inequalities continue to persist, most Namibians feel that government is handling key issues related to poverty 'fairly badly' or 'very badly'." (Institute of Public Policy Research 2018)

Another Afrobarometer Survey, conducted with 1,200 respondents in August 2019 (Survey Warehouse 2019)), was similarly revealing: 80.6% declared the country is going in the wrong direction. 72.6% described the present economic condition as very or fairly bad. 58.2% believed the economic conditions are worse or much worse than a year before, while 47.3% expected them to become even worse or much worse in 12 months' time. But at least there remained a resilience to authoritarian tendencies. 56.3% considered democracy preferable to any other kind of government, for 63% it was more important for citizens to hold government accountable, even if this would slow down decision-making, and 71.9% were in favour of a constitutional two-term limit for the office of president. 43.7% were however not very or not at all satisfied how democracy works in Namibia, and 52.3% believed people have often or always to be careful of what they say about politics. In striking contrast to the democratic preferences, 43.8% agreed that the government should be able to ban any organisation that goes against its policies.

The Decline of Hegemonic Political Rule

The National Assembly and Presidential election results of 27 November 2019 marked a first turning point in Namibia's democracy (Melber 2020). SWAPO remained the dominant party, while its presidential candidate was re-elected to the office in the first round. But many among the 820,000 of the 1.3 million registered voters (60.4%) who went to the ballot told SWAPO and its

presidential candidate loud and clearly that the honeymoon was over. SWAPO lost the two-third majority it held since the elections in 1994 with the worst result since Independence. Ten more political parties managed to snatch enough votes to enter the next National Assembly. SWAPO remained the biggest party in all 14 regions of the country, in some of them with less than 50% of the votes. 63 out of 96 parliamentary seats were still a comfortable majority to govern.

The new kid on the block was the Landless Peoples' Movement (LPM), founded after a fall out of the deputy minister of land, Bernadus Swartbooi, with SWAPO. Like many other parties its basis is a particular regional-ethnic stronghold, in this case among the Nama communities in the Southern regions. It entered Parliament with four seats as the third biggest party. The Popular Democratic Movement (PDM) retained its status as the official opposition with a resounding success. It scored way above the widely held expectations and quadrupled its share from four to 16 seats. Five other parties secured two seats each. Three more managed to get one seat.

Even more challenging than the party competition became the direct election of Namibia's next president. In a surprise move, the SWAPO member Panduleni Itula registered as "independent" candidate, using a loophole in the country's electoral act. He claimed to have the right to challenge the official party candidate as an alternative and remained defiant to leave SWAPO, using the analogy of a family feud, which still allows you to stay in the family while seeking solutions. Itula did remarkably well. In the two regions with the highest degree of urbanisation (Khomas and Erongo) he even received with close to 50% most votes. In the end, he had 29.4% compared with Geingob's 56.3%. Interestingly, the votes of Geingob and Itula added up to Geingob's score in 2014.

While these results were a significant warning sign for SWAPO, the Regional and Local Authorities Elections of November 2020 were even worse (Melber 2021). Expelled in early 2020 from SWAPO, Panduleni Itula established the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC). At the same time the registration of the Affirmative Repositioning (AR) movement as an organisation to contest in the Walvis Bay and Swakopmund municipal elections was confirmed. It had already been registered to contest in the local authority election in Windhoek. The PDM and the LPM completed the field of significant competitors.

For the 14 regional councils (with a total of 116 constituencies), SWAPO's total votes dropped from 83% in 2015 to 57%. The party was in sole control of the National Council before (composed by three seats from each region) with 40 of

42 seats. This dominance was reduced to 28 seats. SWAPO remained the biggest party in 10 of the 14 regions. But absolute majorities were lost in four of these. In the local authority elections SWAPO garnered just 40% (2015: 73%) overall votes. It maintained full control over 20 of the previously held 52 (out of 57) municipalities and town councils. Windhoek, Walvis Bay and Swakopmund were seized by other parties – either single-handedly or in coalitions. A disaster was the loss of the capital Windhoek. With previously 12 of the 15 seats in the municipality, SWAPO was reduced to five seats.

Namibia's (Print) Media

As summarized in a recent overview compiled by the BBC (2023):

> "Journalists face few legal restrictions and generally work without risk to their safety. While state media outlets commonly self-censor, private media remain critical of the government, says US-based Freedom House."

In the 2024 Media Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders[1], Namibia faced a significant downgrading from rank 22 (score 80.91) out of 180 countries to rank 34 (score 74.16), with Mauritania ranked 33 as first African country.

Given a population of three million in 2024, of which many are very young and those old enough not regular readers, Namibia's media landscape is remarkably diverse. But financial constraints, as well as digitalisation, pose serious challenges (Remmert 2019). Print media are mainly published in English, at times with articles added in some of the vernaculars. Local languages occupy more space in the radio programmes of the state-owned Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), covering a large multi-lingual diversity (maintaining even a German language radio service). Broadcasting also includes several independent commercial radio stations, mainly focusing on entertainment. Television is dominated by the NBC, which offers also talk shows on politically relevant matters with a relatively open and diverse composition of participants.

This article has its sole focus on the print media, all reporting on the variety of parties and their positions with different intensity and nuances. Most in print, all are operating web sites and circulate daily overviews electronically. Democratic Media Holding (DMH)/Namibia Media Trust (NMT), initially established in 1977 by a leading local politician for publishing the Afrikaans newspaper[2], owns

[1] https://rsf.org/en/country/namibia.
[2] See on its history https://nmh.com.na/our-history.html.

with *Die Republikein*[3], *Namibian Sun*[4] and *Allgemeine Zeitung*[5] on weekdays published and printed papers in three locally spoken main European languages. Behind a paywall until noon and then open access, their reports are at times published in parallel in more than one of the papers in the different languages. The English paper engages far more often and critical with political topics and its regular editorials comment frankly on current issues. The Afrikaans and German papers devote more space and emphasis on non-political matters related to the specific language communities and their local activities, with the German daily covering events in Germany too. The DMH/NMT portfolio includes also community papers and other media.[6] The Namibian Sun has a video channel ("The Evening Review") recording and broadcasting interviews in English on political matters, freely accessible electronically.

Published by the independent Namibia Media Trust (NMT) and The Free Press of Namibia, *The Namibian* was initially founded as a weekly in 1985, guided by the motto "Telling it like it is". Its history is presented in the biography of its founding editor (Lister 2021). A daily since 1989, it remains the paper with the widest distribution and largest readership, despite being increasingly critical of the failures in governance and the policy of the former liberation movement as party in government. It has remained loyal to its popular slogan, adjusted to "Still telling it like it is" and the fundamental human rights values, committed to speaking truth to power. It is a popular platform for numerous diverse opinion articles from observers and members of civil society, often with critical if not even radical analyses of policy matters. In December 2000 the Namibian government imposed an advertising ban on the paper for being considered as too critical of its policy. This was lifted a decade later.

With *Desert Radio*, The Namibian introduced in 2023 a radio programme broadcasted mainly live, offering in-depth interviews and debates on political topics. The Namibian is the only local newspaper, which is connected to a transnational network of investigative journalism. It played a crucial role in the local coverage of the country's so far biggest known case of corruption, dubbed #*fishrot* (Grynberg/ Immanuel/ Amupadi 2023).

The black empowerment enterprise Paragon Investment Holding[7] has acquired and reanimated the *Windhoek Observer*. With the parole "Democracy in the

[3] https://www.republikein.com.na/.
[4] https://www.namibiansun.com/.
[5] https://www.az.com.na/.
[6] See the list at https://nmh.com.na/portfolio.html.
[7] https://www.paragonnamibia.com/.

mirror" it publishes daily online open access[8] and issues in print, with an emphasis on current politics in a fairly neutral and balanced way, despite its owner's relative closeness to the governing party and a beneficiary of state tenders. The state owned daily open access *New Era*[9] refrains from too much criticism. But far from transmitting openly pro-government propaganda, it remains a credible source of information. Its managing editor was end of September 2023 suspended for a critical editorial raising concerns over threats to the independence of the judiciary. This triggered protest by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and local media practitioners organised in the Namibia Media Professionals Union (NAMPU). NAMPU was founded by local media practitioners in late 2020 with the objective to organise and unite journalists and media workers operating in print, broadcasting and online mediums, to allow for better bargaining and improved working conditions. It declared in a statement:

> "This incident raises serious questions about press freedom, journalistic independence, and the protection of journalists' rights in Namibia. [...] The role of the media is to act as a watchdog, ensuring transparency, accountability, and the dissemination of unbiased information to the public and it is imperative that media professionals are allowed the freedom to report objectively and without undue interference. Any attempts to manipulate the media for political gain or to dictate what should constitute news are deeply concerning and detrimental to the principles of democracy."[10]

The editor was finally reinstated in early 2024. Next to The Namibian, New Era provides space and a forum for many opinion articles, albeit in general more in conformity with government policy. Other regular digital newspapers accessible online are *Informanté*[11], *Confidénte*[12], *The Villager*[13], and *The Brief*[14]. The latter two are like the *Namibia Economist*[15] mainly focusing on economic issues and business affairs, while the previous two also engage more with politics. Their funding depends much on advertisements. As part of this year's election campaigning, SWAPO brought its newspaper *Namibia Today* back to life for distribution on the

[8] https://www.observer24.com.na.
[9] https://neweralive.na/.
[10] https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/NAMPU_statement_on_JB_suspension.pdf.
[11] https://informante.web.na/.
[12] https://confidentenamibia.com/.
[13] https://www.thevillager.com.na/.
[14] https://thebrief.com.na/.
[15] https://economist.com.na/.

streets. The IPC has created a pseudo-paper *The Windhoek Times*, operating irregularly since August 2023 on X (Twitter)[16] with dubious occasional postings bordering to fake news, mainly to discredit SWAPO. The state-owned Namibian Press Agency (NAMPA)[17] completes the news related institutionalised services but has no significant visible impact.

Generally, journalists face a precarious professional environment lacking job security and appropriate payment. Many move to greener pastures (including party politics), while many enter the profession with no proper professional training. In the main they avoid voicing own criticism or analysing on their own issues reported on. The exception are the weekly editorials in The Namibian, which often call a spade a spade and don't shy away from harsh criticism of anyone who deserves to be challenged, independent of a political affiliation. A recent example has been taking to task SWAPO's presidential candidate Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah for claiming that the 16 million Namibia Dollar donated to her party by members of the business sector at a fundraising event were not motivated by economic interests. As observed:

> "It is difficult to shake off the thought that such donors are buying lobbying space to maintain a business advantage with ruling party officials. About 70% of Namibia's economy is dominated by the state's public works and purchasing contracts, better known as 'tenders'. Swapo companies and entities owned by cronies of ruling party officials routinely get preferential treatment in winning the bids. […] In short, Madam NNN, every time the ruling party has semi-transparent fundraising activities, the public knows there's a quid pro quo by which Swapo puts potential donors to the test and then rewards them with state resources." (The Namibian 2024a)

The editorials in the Namibian Sun, deal out in a similar way fairly to all sides. On the same matter, a more measured comment offered benefit to the doubt:

> "The jury is still out on whether this was merely podium rhetoric or a genuine promise. […] In the past, businesses scrambled to lick Swapo's boots to secure state tenders, mining concessions and fishing quotas. Donations were the way to Swapo's fragile heart." (Namibian Sun 2024a)

[16] https://x.com/windhoektimes.
[17] https://www.nampa.org/.

Other media practitioners usually refrain from taking sides but instead rely on external voices, approached and requested to comment. This emphasises the role of so-called political commentators, comprised primarily of a handful of mainly local scholars expressing their views on policy matters, with their opinions extensively quoted. Their views are a regular, almost daily feature in newspaper articles, on record several times a week. As an extreme example, three different articles on different political matters quoted in the same newspaper the same day the same "political commentator" (Ndeyanale 2024a and 2024b; Matheus 2024a).

While there is an Editors Forum of Namibia (EFN), the precarious situation of media practitioners has led to the foundation of NAMPU in late 2020. Since then, it seeks official recognition as a trade union. The delay in having this official registration was seen as a factor contributing to insecurity in employment conditions and unfair labour practices. NAMPU's acting Secretary-General Jemima Beukes issued in September 2023 a statement critical of media houses who consider the association as a "briefcase union": "The EFN deals with freedom of expression and freedom of the media – not labour matters." She summarised the difficulties journalists are facing as follows:

> "journalists have reported that they face threats from politicians and some supervisors who use their connections to political leaders to intimidate and hinder critical reporting. […] Such actions undermine the principles of a free and independent press. […] The absence of formal agreements hampers job security and employment rights. Then we have a mountain heap of sexual harassment in newsrooms – interns, and junior reporters exploited with the promise of permanent employment." (Karuuombe 2023)

An IPPR Briefing Paper confirmed a few weeks later the challenges media houses were facing in the digital age, with negative consequences for the employed journalists:

> "the difficult and often precarious financial situation that local media businesses found themselves in resulted in business closures and harmed press freedom. […] Strained finances limit resources for quality journalism, especially investigative and public interest reporting, both of which are costly and tend to generate little revenue. There was some evidence of sliding journalistic and editorial standards and increased tensions within newsrooms as a result of management decisions. Manipulation by vested political or business interests of media outlets was not unheard of. Working conditions for media workers had also become more difficult as evidenced by reports of experienced journalists leaving

> the profession, further underscoring concerns around quality reporting." (Remmert 2023: 5)

As suggested, "at least for some legacy media houses, quality hard-news and journalism has taken a backseat" (Remmert 2023: 17). Commenting on the report, Jemima Beukes observed:

> "we should recognise that the underpayment and increased workload for journalists, fuelled by media convergence or otherwise digitalisation, is indeed undermining the quality of journalism, especially investigative journalism in Namibia. […] Editorial demands should not compromise the integrity and well-being of journalists, because what we see is that the experienced journalists who remain are stretched thin, tasked with producing a relentless stream of content across multiple platforms, often without adequate compensation or consideration for their mental health." (quoted in Petersen 2023)

Election Campaign and the Media 2024

The recent trend indicating SWAPO's decline in Namibian elections, as summarised above, has made the competition for votes more open and competitive. This has markedly impacted on the election campaign, notwithstanding the fact that the governing party due to its prominence and omni-presence remains the most influential factor in the public sphere. For the first time a media monitoring report was presented in late August for the period 20 June to 21 July 2024 on political party reporting (all figures following from van der Walt 2024). Not surprisingly, the governing SWAPO received with 41% of all reports by far the highest media attention. Of these 4% were negative, 56% neutral and 40% positive. But as the breakdown disclosed further, 56% of the reports were from state owned media. New Era contributed 21% and NBC news programmes 14%, followed by The Namibian (11%) and the Namibian Sun (9%). The election campaign was the main item. Since the short period of monitoring covered four weeks in which party-related conflicts in the NEFF and the LPM made headlines, they ranked with 13% and 11% second and third respectively, followed by IPC and PDM with 6% each and the AR with 5%. Presenting the report, Media Ombudsman John Nakuta bemoaned the failure of political parties to set clear agendas, resulting in "reactive media coverage" void of any reference points in the absence of party manifestos, published only as late as September. As he stated:

> "There is clearly a lack of agenda-setting by political parties. What do we mean? It is very difficult to pinpoint what agenda any given political party institution has. It is definitely a case of the media reporting almost crisis-dominant, reactive reporting, if I can say that correctly." (quoted in Endjala 2024a)
>
> He further criticised the absence of a strategic media approach by political parties and pointed at "a very clear pattern that state-owned media houses are mainly covering the Swapo ruling party, the private sector also, but not as much as state-owned media." (Endjala 2024a)

Despite these disproportional dimensions, party political reporting has become much more diverse. Other parties were hardly visible until the 2019 elections. While the political manifestos of the major parties were only released in mid-September, on numerous occasions before a diversity of speakers at rallies and other events were an indication that the contestation had increased. This might have motivated the Information and Communication Technology Deputy Minister Modestus Amutse to a rather ambivalent message. At the opening of a four-day election training workshop he urged some 50 journalists from a broad spectre of media in attendance to fight disinformation, especially in times of elections. He stressed that the government does not want media houses that fuel disinformation. The electorate should vote "correctly" (Matheus 2024b, Nampa 2024). This leaves one wondering what he considers as a "correct" vote. Himself originally a journalist with the NBC before turning into a SWAPO-MP in 2020, Amutse only days before at a public rally declared the opposition party leaders would be "stupid" and "mentally ill" (Ndeyanale 2024c). The IPC vice president in return opined at the launch of the party's manifesto: "Namibia should be led by leaders and not by idiots." (Vatileni 2024)

Electioneering does not rely on such name calling only, but comes with optimistic prognosis being tantamount to wishful thinking. The strictly proportional Namibian election system requires voters' registration with the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN). The deadline was end of July. SWAPO Secretary General Sophia Shaningwa declared a week before that the aim is to receive 1.4 million votes for the party (Ndeyanale 2024d). After the registration closing date, the ECN declared that a total of 1 467 604 eligible voters had registered (Matthys 2024). More generously than Shaningwa, the former Minister of Defence Martin Shalli declared, that in the interest of democracy the opposition parties should get 15 seats of the elected 96 members in the National Assembly (Ndeyanale/ Vatileni 2024). This collided with the declared ambition of the Action Democratic Movement (ADM). Established in mid-2024, a

representative (who previously was a MP for another small party) announced at a media conference that the party aims at a two-thirds majority.

Being almost exclusively a country of (mainly Lutheran) Christian citizens, with religion an integral part of politics and public life, biblical references remain a common feature also during election times. At a SWAPO rally in Oshakati, SWAPO-MP Katamelo referred to the Bible's King Solomon to argue that the party's presidential candidate Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah (born 1952) is a recommendation for the wisdom that comes with age. Mentioning that 20 years ago she almost failed to stay in Parliament, he now concludes as a kind of holy determination:

> "So, it's not a coincidence that today the leader should be her. Some things are designed and God uses us as instruments to propel what he has given to us. This is a time for women, this is a time of meme (Oshiwambo for mother, H.M.) and this will be her time." (Ndeyanale 2024e)

Representatives of other parties are similarly careless or generous when it comes to dishing out ideas, which are even in breach of the country's constitutional principles. The manifesto of the newly created National Empowerment Fighting Corruption (NEFC) party announced to change the Constitution by removing the reference to a "circular" (meaning: secular) state and to introduce obligatory Bible Studies for all educational institutions up to the tertiary level (Kangumine 2024). IPC leader and presidential candidate Panduleni Itula declared the country's electoral system as unconstitutional. He demanded to replace the proportional by a first-past-the post electoral system and to change the election of the members of the second-tier National Council: instead of being voted into office by the electorate, its members should be appointed by the country's President, seemingly overlooking that this might not be him (Shalihaxwe 2024).

Despite all competition a striking consensus exists on the issue of refuting LGBTQAI+ rights. In a pioneering ruling, the country's Supreme Court had partially recognised in May 2023 legally entered same sex marriages as part of the civil liberties anchored in the Constitution (Thoreson 2024). But parties willingly violated the rule of law by adopting a new bill in parliament, which would counteract the judgement (Igual 2023). This was followed in mid-2024 by a High Court judgement decriminalising same sex relations (Amnesty International 2024), without reducing anti-gay sentiments. When pressed on his view on homosexuality, Job Amupanda as leader of the AR and presidential candidate, declared the issue to be "nonsense" and of no relevance: "When you

have a view on something, then they say you are homophobic", he complained (Haidula 2024).

In another case of disrespect of the country's clearly defined normative legal framework adopted by all members of the Constituent Assembly prior to Independence, the leader of SWANU (then part of the decision) now suggested that heinous crimes should be punished by death (Matheus 2024c). This ignores that the Constitution includes a provision which prohibits the introduction of corporal punishment. The proposal triggered a scathing response by an editorial in The Namibian, commenting on the experiences of the election campaigning so far:

> "Sadly, during elections politicians latch onto populist promises that are blatantly false in the hope of getting votes. […] Populist politicians […] have no place in a country that yearns for practical solutions to our intractable challenges." (The Namibian 2024b)

Overall, the reports and comments by mainly the independent media showed throughout the election campaign a highly critical positioning vis-à-vis controversial statements by parties and political office bearers. The prominence of parties in media reports did to some extent reproduce the political power relations in existence.

The final Election Monitoring Media Report recorded the monthly share of total media coverage for parties since mid-2024 in overlapping two-monthly intervals between June/July and November/December 2024. As stressed at its launch by the lead consultant, "no significant signs of systematic media bias were found" (Namundjembo 2025a). As reported in the Namibian Sun (2025), its final two periods (October/November and November/December respectively) document the shifts based on the final stages of the election campaign and the time after results were announced:

Party	October/November	November/December
SWAPO	37.0%	40.4%
IPC	8.6%	17.1%
LPM	2.3%	9.0%
PDM	21.0%	8.5%
AR	6.1%	5.6%

The report noted, that media were mainly reactive, covering events they attended. There were no significant initiatives to further investigate and analyse election-related issues to inform the wider public, observing a decline in topics such as gender and inclusivity (Namundjembo 2025a). In an election post mortem mid-December, the media ombudsman did to some extent blame the ECN for certain biases because of the selective use of media houses during the election campaign and the elections, limiting access mainly to the NBC (Haufiku 2024b).

Election Results and the Media

With Itula's IPC and Amupanda's AR as new kids on the bloc, the National Assembly and Presidential Elections of late November 2024 confirmed the gradual decline of SWAPO as hegemonic political actor since independence. While the party managed to keep an absolute majority with 53.4% and 51 seats of 96, a decline from 65.3% in 2019 translated into a loss of 12 mandates. With 20 seats (20.2%) the IPC became the official opposition, followed by the AR with seven seats (6.6%) as third force. The former official opposition PDM suffered with five seats and 5.5% similar losses as SWAPO, while LPM with 5.2% and five seats added one in its favour. This means that a total of 32 opposition seats (one third of the mandates) are held by three parties, whose leaders are all SWAPO dissidents. SWAPO's presidential candidate Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah fared slightly better than the party, being elected in the first round with 58%, while Itula as runner up scored with 25.8% less than five years before. Interestingly, Job Amupanda came only fifth with a meagre 1.8%, trailing PDM president Venaani (5%) and LPM president Swartbooi (4.7%). His low score and the loss of one of two seats by the Namibian Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF) suggest that pseudo-radical populist discourses are of little attraction to Namibian voters.

But not all was electoral honeymoon and roses: Consternation and protest were triggered by a decision taken by President Mbumba upon advice of the Electoral Commission. Since on the official election day of 27 November 2024 a shortage of ballot papers at certain polling stations prevented some voters to make use of their electoral right, two additional days of voting were announced by order of the President for a total of 36 of the country's 4,699 polling stations, which had reported the lack of ballot papers. While one of these was in Windhoek, where SWAPO had considerable decline in support, the other 35 were all in the Northern regions, most of these in the historical home and main support base of

SWAPO. Opposition parties considered this as a form of unconstitutional intervention and violation of the electoral law to the benefit of one party. But also some media commented critically. An editorial in The Namibian was titled in no uncertain terms “Free? Perhaps. Fair. Doubtful. Credible? A Resounding No!” and argued among others: “Most crucially, the ECN hit the decisive nail in the 2024 elections coffin by reopening voting after polling results were already been made public.” (The Namibian 2024c)

The IPC, supported by the LPM, filed two cases in courts (Menges 2024). It asked the Supreme Court to declare the presidential election results invalid and to order new elections. It also asked in a separate claim the Electoral Court to set aside the results of the National Assembly elections or to only recognise the votes of the first day as official result. The judicial challenges were considered as justified by legal experts (Matthys 2025). On 28 February 2025 all five judges on the Supreme Court bench dismissed the case (Menges 2025). The Court however conceded that there was merit in the claim, by ruling that legal costs should be covered by both parties. Itula as the main claimant accepted the ruling with no further objections (Namundjembo 2025b; Endjala/ Menges 2025).

This paved the way for the swearing in of Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah as the country’s next president on 21 March 2025. Subsequently, the IPC and LPM claimants withdrew their pending case from the Electoral Court (Amutenya 2025). What remains a matter of speculation, is the fact that the limited number of polling stations re-opened were accessible for any registered voters. This did provide opportunities that certain regions could register an increase of votes by those mobilised at a time when some of the preliminary election results were already announced. Due to mobilisation this could have possibly slightly (though most likely not decisively) shifted the election results for the party lists and seat allocation of the National Assembly.

Generally, media reported in a measured way the objections raised by frustrated parties and voters in a somewhat tense atmosphere. The growing intolerance by state financed media of unwanted views was illustrated by an intervention of the NBC. Its editor for political affairs and investigations had been interviewed in early December 2024 by the South African news channel Newzroom Afrika on the elected presidential candidate Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah. She then referred to an event at a campaign rally, at which Nandi-Ndaitwah was suspected to have a physical attack of weakness. Questioning her health was reasons for the NBC to suspend the journalist with immediate effect (Tafirenyika 2024). In a

statement released, the acting Secretary General of NAMPU did not mince her words:

> "This unjustified suspension represents a direct attack on press freedom and undermines the independence of journalists in Namibia. Nampu wishes to remind the NBC and all relevant stakeholders of the essential role that a free and independent press plays in a democratic society. Journalists must be able to exercise their professional duties without fear of reprisal, especially in the context of critical and investigative reporting. The suspension of Anna Nicodemus is not only an assault on her rights as a journalist but also a blow to the principles of free expression that are fundamental to our democracy." (Shikololo 2024b)

The journalist's fate was after a disciplinary hearing in January 2025a matter of being dismissed or receiving a final warning after being found guilty of charges of insubordination and disregarding cooperation or departmental rules, regulations and standard instructions; unfounded, speculative statements constituting personal commentary; and discrimination against women following her statement on Nandi-Ndaitwah's age and health (Tafirenyika 2025). As a prominent local lawyer had commented earlier:

> "This is just another case of the emperor clearly wearing no clothes and we must all pretend that madame president elect is clothed in an aura of health. […] Are we now expected to refrain from making comments and expressing our concerns about the health of our leader in the waiting?" (Haufiku 2024a)

Conclusion

Incidents of party-political propaganda are widely and prominently reported, especially in some of the independent media. This has peaked in the 2024 pre-election campaign with several new contenders for the National Assembly and Presidential Elections. Much of what is articulated by party representatives and political office bearers was rhetorically of a populist brand. While journalists themselves generally avoided taking an explicit stand, "political commentators" were usually requested to share their critical views, which some of them do on many occasions. Editorials also often challenge political office bearers, parties and policies. In addition, newspapers are platforms for numerous opinion articles contributed by civil society members, on many occasions with a critical slant. This elevates the local media into a role, in which they provide as a kind of transmission belt readers' access to information and views, allowing these to

form an opinion beyond the official party political statements. In times when the hegemonic political role of the former liberation movement as party in government is seriously challenged and contested by other parties and presidential candidates, this is a factor contributing to transparency and accountability in a democratic system and political culture.

Of lately, a decline in the quality of reporting has been a matter of concern. This was reiterated during a public dialogue on "The Role of the Media in Promoting Democratic Elections in Namibia" in August. The local coordinator of the Afrobarometer surveys pointed at the challenges media outlets are facing due to measures securing survival: "senior journalists are often asked to leave, which results in newsrooms being left with junior staff, people with less experience, or sometimes even interns, who are forced to handle critical news" (as quoted in Shikololo 2024a). This challenge was confirmed by one of the more seasoned journalists:

> "Many of us have not been in the newsroom for more than four years, which means we haven't covered previous elections. We saw them as voters, not as journalists, and there's a lot to pick up as journalist before and after elections". (As quoted in Shikololo 2024a; see also Endjala 2024b)

While state owned media benefit from preferential treatment by the government and SWAPO, independent media are tolerated but considered a nuisance. Their journalists are often ignored when asking political office bearers for responses. Despite such limitations, Namibia's media and their practitioners play a significant role in the public sphere. As Fourth Estate they cover widely and independently issues on politics and play a watchdog role in taking political actors to account, dismantling the prevalent populist rhetoric. While the final Election Media Monitoring Report had critically observed the lack of pro-active media initiatives to go beyond mere reporting of events, the EFN chairperson countered at the report's launch, that political parties seem to expect media to run their campaign (Namibian Sun 2025).

As already summarised a few years ago, Namibian media can be qualified as "mostly free but fragile" (Lister 2018). This fragility has increased. But notwithstanding the given constraints such as the "juniorisation of the newsroom" (Namibian Sun 2024b), Namibian media maintain their credibility as independent facilitators of information accessible to those who want to know. The relative press freedom deserves the recognition Namibia so far regularly

receives by Reporters Without Borders in its annual ranking as one of the two countries with the most media freedom on the African continent. When it comes to the media's role in the election campaign of 2024, one can only agree with the media ombudsman John Nakuta, who observed

> "I must say, the media has been keeping the nation abreast in terms of what is happening, [...] The media has a duty towards the electorate, the voters themselves. In other words, keeping and giving the voters relevant and up-to-date information with reference to the election processes." (as quoted in Matheus 2024d).

Despite all handicaps of a profession under siege, one is tempted to conclude that the mission has been accomplished. But it is an increasingly uphill battle. As the media ombudsman also observed towards the end of 2024 when commenting on the significant downgrading in the media freedom ranking of Reporters Without Borders: "Political interference, especially in the state media, has been identified as one of the causes." (Haufiku 2024a)

Most importantly, local media remain proud of their relative independence against all odds, as a final example testifies. Following the Trump administration's instructions, the US American embassy in Windhoek approached local print media indicating that continued subscriptions as well as advertising would depend on alignment with the newly defined US American goals. It asked if the newspapers are in any way associated with a list of several US American media, which had been targeted by President Trump. In a rebuke, the editor of The Namibian declared:

> "We do not determine how we do our journalism depending on whether the US government advertises or not. [...] we do not do our work depending on someone's agenda. We report and do our work based on our free press principles and good independent journalism." (Tafirenyika/ Petersen 2025).

One wonders if in other, also Western European democracies, media houses are willing to take a similar principled stand, which even merited an article in The Guardian (Savage 2025). Many among Namibia's media are generally an asset a government claiming to head a pluralist democratic society respecting the freedom of opinion and speech should and can be proud of.

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