

A Country on Fire: Protests in Namibia

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Namibia celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of its independence from South Africa in March 2020, today the country is on fire. Heike Becker writes about the Namibian activists, students, working youth, and artists who have taken to the streets of Windhoek and other towns in the past few weeks.

Six months after Namibia celebrated the 30th anniversary of her independence from South Africa in March 2020, the country is on fire. For the past three weeks Namibian activists, students, working youth and artists have been protesting in the streets of Windhoek and some other towns. Hundreds of young people were driven into street action from 7 October after the body of a young woman was found murdered in the harbour city of Walvis Bay. Twenty-two year old Shannon Wasserfall had been missing since April this year.

The scourges of femicide and gender-based violence triggered the current protests of a young generation who are tired of living in a violent society. #OnsIsMoeg (Afrikaans: “We are tired”) has been one of their social media hashtags, the other one is, significantly: #ShutItAllDownNamibia. They thus express their aim of disrupting business-as-usual in a situation of crisis. Protesters have been marching on various ministries and demanded the resignation of Namibia’s Minister of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, Doreen Sioka. Anti sexual gender based violence (SGBV) activists forwarded a petition to parliament, demanding political action to address femicide, rape and sexual abuse. In response Prime Minister Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila issued a statement, which said the protesters’ petition would receive “priority” and that the government was “in full agreement” that the high incidence of sexual and gender-based violence “cannot be allowed to continue”. Young activists and established gender equality advocacy groups such as *SISTER NAMIBIA* have pointed out however that the government had promulgated two national plans of action against SGBV before, in 2016 and 2018, but little had been implemented.

“The system has failed us” read one of the hard-hitting placards a young woman held up at one of the ongoing protests in Windhoek. With radical WAP inspired hip hop moves (drawing on Cardi B’s recent hit single WAP – *wet-ass pussy*) young protesters taunted the police force. During one of the early marches on Saturday, 10 October, protesters had to scatter in central Windhoek after security forces threw tear gas and shot rubber bullets at them. Twenty-six activists were detained, although the charges against them were later dropped. One of the arrested protesters said that the dropped charges were a bittersweet moment for the movement as the activists did not have the opportunity to expose the police’s abuse of power (The Namibian, 13 October 2020).

The protests against sexual gender based violence are the latest in a series of protest action. In increasing numbers young Namibians have taken to the streets time and again over the past few months. In early June, following the murder of George Floyd in the US, protests under the Black Lives Matter banner were organised in Windhoek too. At the time Namibia’s BLM activists focused on a statue near the Windhoek municipality of German colonial-era officer Curt von François, deemed the “founder” of Windhoek in colonial historiography. They demanded the removal of the statue with a widely circulated petition under the hashtag #CurtMustGo. Along with this local

impression of activism against colonial iconography, the Namibian BLM protesters addressed other pressing demands of structural racism and social inequality. They called for an end to police brutality during the Covid-19 lockdown, then in full force, which had hit the impoverished urban areas hard. Speakers also insisted that the long-standing issues of gender-based violence had to be addressed, not in the least because they had become exacerbated during the hard lockdown. A few weeks later, in mid-July, protesters took to the streets again. This time around they demanded the legalisation of abortion and expansion of women's reproductive health rights. The pro-choice action was organised by a newly-formed alliance Voices for Choices and Rights Coalition (VCRC), which had by then already collected 60,000 signatures (note: Namibia's population is only 2.5 million) to a petition that called for the right to safe abortion and the abolition of the country's Abortion and Sterilisation Act of 1975, a South African legal colonial legacy.

The series of connected protests against coloniality and structural violence have brought increasing numbers of young Namibians out. They have claimed the streets, have marched and danced and unleashed incredible creative energy in performances. Social media users from across the African continent have posted on twitter and instagram in solidarity, linking the Namibian protests to political action happening elsewhere on the continent, from Nigeria in the West to Zimbabwe in Southern Africa.

This is no longer just a protest about sexual gender-based violence. Thirty years after the end of apartheid colonialism, a new generation of young Namibians are again speaking up. Challenging the vestiges of coloniality in the country, they follow in the footsteps of an earlier generation of young activists who made enormous contributions to the political, though socially incomplete liberation of Namibia in the 1980s. In the light of the new generation of Namibian activists who have been forcefully asking penetrating questions and engaging in collective action over the past few years, culminating in the 2020 protests, the history of the popular urban revolt of the 1980s has become particularly significant again.

In the 1980s, social and political developments in Windhoek and other towns of central and southern Namibia critically challenged the politics of the nationalist struggle. From 1983 onwards residents protested against the price of electricity and formed street committees in several towns; a popular revolt against poor living conditions and the oppression under apartheid colonialism was staged by residents' associations, and movements of workers, students and women, and significantly reflected in an emerging alternative press. In 1987 twenty-nine community-based organisations were listed, ranging from residents' associations to women's, church, education and health groups.

The social movements took up people's day-to-day concerns under the conditions of worsening poverty after the (partial) abolition of influx control laws led to accelerated urbanization, and an economic recession hit the economy towards the end of the 1970s. The crisis hit urban Namibia at about the same time that the South African regime began to use its colony as a 'testing ground' for limited reform. In the later 1970s South Africa lifted certain apartheid restrictions, which it did not yet dare do in the South African heartland. In a particularly significant move, in 1979 the legal requirement for separate residential areas ended with the promulgation of the Abolishment of Racial Discrimination (Urban Residential Areas and Public Amenities) Act 3 of 1979.

Social occasions, which had been greatly restricted following the forced removal of Black Windhoekers to the apartheid townships twenty years earlier, became gradually revitalized. Night clubs and soccer tournaments provided increasing opportunities, especially for young urbanites, to meet across the divisions of race and ethnicity. The urban population which crossed ethnic and racial boundaries remained small but became significant for an emerging new layer of activists who, in the mid-1980s, founded social movements and community-based organizations (CBOs). This cosmopolitan nationalism became an important driving force of the anti-apartheid decolonization

struggle in urban Namibia; the leading activists of the new urban movements of the 1980s came from this background.

A particularly suggestive dynamic behind the rise of the new movements was the emergence and life experience of a growing Namibian intelligentsia with increasing educational opportunities in the country and at South African universities. This happened at precisely the moment when South Africa erupted in vibrant protests of youth and particularly students. During the well-known uprisings of 1976 and again during the widespread popular revolt of the mid- and later 1980s students from the apartheid state's colony too took part in campus protests in South Africa and some young Namibians became intensely involved in South African township protests. In student reading groups the young Namibian revolutionaries were influenced by the writings of Fanon and Biko, Lenin and Gramsci, Samir Amin and Paolo Freire.

The transnational entanglements of southern African social movement politics were remarkable. The members of the nascent Namibian intelligentsia who had studied in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s returned to Namibia and brought back ideas and practices of student politics and the new forms of anti-apartheid activism that had arisen after the 1976 Soweto revolt, along with the 'alternative' styles of South African oppositional politics. The boundary-crossing desires of the young anti-apartheid activists significantly broke down the barriers that prevented people from creating networks among Namibians of different social and cultural backgrounds.

In the late 1980s the revolutionary activism of youth and students became ever more pronounced. Thousands of Namibian high school students throughout the country, joined later in the year by those attending the 'Academy of tertiary education' (the predecessor of the University of Namibia, UNAM) in Windhoek, came out for a massive school boycott in May 1988 to demand the withdrawal of army bases near schools. The *Namibia National Students' Organisation* (NANSO), which had been formed in June 1984, became a leading force. NANSO spearheaded many rallies and marches in the last few years of South African rule over Namibia. Several youth leaders were arrested and imprisoned for their activism.

The late photographer John Liebenberg's amazing images of the vibrant protests against occupation in the late 1980s invariably point to the tremendous significance of the student struggles. Some times they were directly related to student issues, for instance, students challenged the Rector of the 'Academy' publicly regarding his academic credentials, asking: "Are you Koevoet or Academicus?" Students thus called an institution into question that was still largely in cahoots with the apartheid colonial dispensation. Other student activism was even more overtly connected to broader politics, including massive public rallies in Katutura on Cassinga Day and May Day 1988, which were led by NANSO activists.

Remarkably too, in the 1980s young women played leading roles in the community activism, student and worker struggles. They also formed a vibrant autonomous women's organisation, known as the *Namibian Women's Voice* (NWV). The NWV set out to address not only women's practical gender interests (such as earning an income or securing childcare), but also their strategic gender interests and the project of national liberation. They insisted that their main target group, "grass-roots women" in urban locations and rural areas, were oppressed because they were black, poor women in a situation marked by a web of racist-colonial domination, exploitation, and sexist subordination.

Although, for several reasons, Namibian civil society proved not to be very robust in the years following independence, the community activism of the late 1980s helped significantly to undermine South African rule over Namibia. Its absence in the historiography of Namibian decolonisation struggles is quite undeservedly a blind spot. It is not the only one. Postcolonial Namibian narratives of nationalism are peppered with silences. In the 21st century the narrative of Namibian anti-colonial

struggle has begun to open up, if tentatively, to more inclusive perspectives. Thus far, these have largely been restricted, however, to an increasing consideration of the early anti-colonial resistance in southern and central Namibia. This has recently gained momentum in the context of ongoing, contested negotiations about [Germany's colonial genocide in Namibia](#) (1904-1908), and thrust forward by the Namibian apology and reparations movements and their supporters in German decolonization movements.

Regarding the period of the nationalist struggle, between the 1960s and 1980s, however little has changed regarding the postcolonial narrative. Public memory narrations, the country's ritual political calendar and monumentalisation continue to celebrate the armed struggle from exile as the foundation of national liberation. This goes along the line: The exile-based political and military nationalism of SWAPO won independence through the barrel of a gun; the part played by the civilian population during the liberation war has been, at best, contingent on the hegemonic discourse.

The silences surrounding the urban, community-based activism during the final decade before Namibian independence reach even deeper. To some extent this relates to what has become known as persistent tension between the 'external' and 'internal' wings of the organized nationalist movement, SWAPO, those who had mobilized from exile and others who had kept up the struggle at home. What is more, and more complicated, is the erasure of Namibia's urban struggles of the 1980s due to the pronounced history of strained relations between SWAPO and the community organisations, which the politically organised liberation movement considered too independent. The tensions did not subside after independence. The postcolonial state, particularly during the Nujoma presidency (1990-2005) resisted presumed 'hidden agendas' of certain civil society initiatives.

The community activism of the late 1980s had helped to undermine South African rule over Namibia. However, for several reasons, Namibian civil society largely faltered in the years after independence. Co-optation further weakened civil society organisations when a number of leading activists were recruited into senior positions in the civil service after independence. There certainly were positive sides to the recruitment of former activists into the new state. In a number of instances, activists-turned-civil servants achieved progressive developments. In the 1990s postcolonial Namibia could certainly be counted as a relative success story in terms of gender equality – though not for long.

The Namibian Women's Manifesto, for instance, was an attempt in 1999 to bring together a coalition to push for increased representation of women in the political sphere. The manifesto was denounced as deflecting from gender equality because some of its proponents were known for their advocacy against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

The current protests of young Namibians are certainly different from those fought by the youthful social movements of the late apartheid colonial period. The local and global worlds of the 21st century have seen profound change, which is faced by Namibia's young social movements. There can be no doubt however that over the past few years the post-independence lull of civil society activism has made way to a new vibrancy of young people's desire for liberation and full decolonisation, and the current protests are the best expression of this development.

Since the mid-2010s the popular politics of young movements such as the Landless People's Movement (LPM) and [Affirmative Repositioning](#) (AR) have been engaging Namibia at a new crossroads. One fascinating development is owed to an engaging vibrant scene of young artists in the performing as well as the visual arts, who take up pressing concerns in their works and come together in pulsating events such as the 2019 Owela Festival. Young activists and activist-researchers have also become active in long-standing grassroots politics such as the members of the Namibia Housing Action Group (NHAG) and the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia (SDFN).

The amazing array of recent and current political and artistic activist initiatives and protests are part of an essential conversation about the entanglements of Namibian past, present and future. The challenges cut both ways. The history of the earlier anti-colonial struggles of young people need to be told again, including those of the community uprisings of the 1980s. Revisionist narratives of liberation contribute to a better understanding of the channels through which young Namibians make their voices heard thirty years after the country's independence. At the same time the youth of 2020 deserves to be listened to so we can grasp how they imagine postcolonial Namibia as their 'project'.

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