

**Transitions in Namibia: *Which Changes For Whom?*** Edited by: Henning Melber  
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Struggles against colonial subjugation throughout the world, Africa in particular, were predicated on the urgent need to regain independence. The basis for mass political mobilization was, *inter alia*, the need to regain land, restore economic, political and social justice. On this basis, the masses supported the liberation movements, which culminated in African countries, such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia, regaining their independence. Did political independence translate into political, economic, and social justice for the majority of people in these newly independent African states? This is the big question the book, *Transitions in Namibia: Which changes for Whom*, edited by Henning Melber (which grapples the book, *Transitions in Namibia*), is a collection of 14 articles or papers that attempt to answer the question posed above in relation to different themes: the economy, land, labor, regional development, and gender, among others. In almost all of the articles, the authors endeavor to establish whether the SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) government delivered on its liberation struggle promises to the people. Emerging from the majority of these articles is the observation that the SWAPO government, just like other Liberation war movement governments in the region, especially ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front) of Zimbabwe, has not delivered much on its promises. The independence cake has not been equally shared. Issues of ethnicity, regionalism corruption and graft have permeated the post-independence Namibian state building project, with the result that the majority of Namibians have been excluded.

The articles in the book can be divided into two general categories, namely issues to do with participation in the economy and development of the country, and issues that concern gender equality in post-independent Namibia. The book begins with an

introductory overview of transitions in Namibia, by Henning Melber. It sets the tone for the book by providing a historic and graphic overview of transitions that took place in Namibia since the 19th century. Melber highlights the argument of the book when he notes, "The contributions in this volume challenge SWAPO's liberation gospel that the struggle for independence achieved meaningful change for the people" (p. 10). In the first category one can locate H. Melber's paper, *Poverty, Politics, Power and Privilege: Namibia's black economic Elite Formation*. The article, meticulously written, takes stock of SWAPO's liberation struggle rhetoric to redress colonial inequalities. Using non-emotive language, Melber cogently advances that the post-colonial Namibian state has tremendously failed to use its newfound political power to ameliorate the socio-economic standing of the majority. Instead, the political socio-economic institutional framework created only managed to reinforce the existing status quo; a race to the bottom by the majority of Namibians, and a race to the top by a politically connected minority, Melber correctly observes that, just like the situation of many independent sub-Saharan African countries, Zimbabwe being a classical example, efforts to empower the black majority in Namibia have been marred in controversy and serious reports of graft and greed have been reported. Affirmative Action and Black Economic Empowerment policy initiatives, for instance, only managed to empower a small clique with access to political power under corrupt under-hand dealings. Highlighting a number of high profile corrupt cases that have been documented, Melber concludes that political change in Namibia has not transformed the lives of the majority for the better.

In a related paper, *Commercial Land Reforms in Post Colonial Namibia: What happened to Liberation Struggle Rhetoric*, Phaniel Kaapama reviews the thrust of the liberation struggle's political and economic ideological outlooks contrasting them against present policies and programs being pursued (p30). It is argued that during the liberation struggle, SWAPO pledged to bring social and economic justice in land ownership by abolishing the free market system it accused of being responsible for the exploitation of the indigenous majority of Namibians. Land ownership models based on the principle of social justice were espoused, but like in other areas that needed reform, the land promise remained between a dream and a nightmare.

Constitutional constraints notwithstanding, Kaapama shows how the land

redistribution program was bedeviled by corruption and graft. The bulk of the land beneficiaries have largely been government officials and other well-connected members of society, not the peasants who bore the brunt of the liberation struggle. The author concurs with Sam Moyo's (a prolific writer on the Zimbabwean land) question that, "agricultural land reforms in Southern Africa are largely modeled on neo-liberal economic principles that has tended to perpetuate the concentration of land in the hands of both white and black economic elites" (p. 47). Kaapama calls on all stakeholders to rethink their handling of the land question in view of developments that took place in Zimbabwe.

*Between Politics and the Shop floor: Which way for Namibia's Labour Movement*, by Hebert Jauch, continues to reveal how the Namibian majority have been excluded. It is revealed that in the agricultural sector, for instance, where the bulk of the labor is employed, working conditions remain pathetic with paltry wages compared to other sectors. The important role played by the labor movement during the liberation struggle, as well as a multitude of progressive labor legislation passed after independence are acknowledged. Challenges that face the Namibian labor movement today, such as increased casualization, diminished membership base, and marginalization in critical decision making matters by the ruling SWAPO are well highlighted.

Volker Winterfeldt, in his article, *Liberated Economy: A case of Ramatex Textiles Workers Namibia*, brings closer to home how third world countries have continued to be exploited by the developed world, irrespective of their independence. Despite the generous concessions given, the company has had the worst labor relations record in Namibia. In 2005, the International Textile Garment and Leather Workers Federation had to turn to the ILO (International Labour Office) and founding president, Sam Nujoma, concerning "appalling labour practices and workers' rights abuse by the company" (p. 75). Winterfeldt chronicles the numerous strikes that rocked the company because of its poor agenda driven by the new wave of globalization, does not provide any respite to the many "developing" nations that urgently need to catch up with the developed countries. It is observed that at most, the activities and operations of the developed world in third world countries can only retard development of the later.

Gregor Dobler, in his article *Old Ties or New Shackles: China in Namibia*,

concur with the above analysis. The paper grapples with a growing and critical issue of Chinese growing influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, Namibia in particular. The author explores how and the extent to which the Namibian economy is linked to growing Chinese imperialism. It is rightly argued that Namibia is only enjoying short-term benefits, reminiscent of the colonial period, while China is the ultimate benefactor. A win-win relationship, where Namibia will also benefit in the long run, is advocated as one that would nurture sustainable cordial diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The second category of articles in the book is those that I would loosely deal with gender considerations in post-colonial Namibia. These are, *Ideas About Equality in Namibian Family Law*, by Dianne Hubbard; *HIV/AIDS in Namibia: Gender, Class and Feminist Theory Revisited*, by Lucy Edwards; and *Suzanne Lafont's Decolonising Sexuality*. Dianne Hubbard explores issues of equality at family level since Namibia's independence. A brief overview of family law reform in post-independent Namibia is given. The author argues that there was genuine political will to promote gender equality but this has conflicted with some community and religious traditions and individual beliefs, as shown in the heated nature of parliamentary debates on gender related law reform. These various law reform debates show a persistent male reluctance to contemplate any form of power sharing in the family. It is argued that the way forward is to remedy past discrimination and eliminate harmful stereotypes and practices.

*HIV/AIDS in Namibia: Gender, Class and Feminist Theory Revisited*, by Lucy Edwards, explores the relevance of western feminist theory in explaining the condition and status of African women vis a viz the HIV/AIDS epidemic. While acknowledging the contribution of western feminist thought as an important analytical tool for understanding gender inequalities in Africa, and Namibia in particular, she notes its inadequacy in understanding the gender dimensions of HIV and AIDS. It is correctly observed that in the case of Namibia, Africa in general, the high infection rates and people living with HIV/AIDS among women is not merely a reflection of private property ownership and biological determinism, but rather male control over the means of production and social surpluses (p. 232). According to the author, this reproduces and intensifies poverty, inequality and HIV/AIDS among women. In addressing the disease she, therefore, rightly calls for the need to go beyond biomedical issues and also consider policy measures that

address gender inequality.

Suzanne Lafont's *Decolonising Sexuality*, the last article in the book, traces transitions in the area of sexuality in post-colonial Namibia. The paper examines whether traditional and colonial attitudes to sexuality have also been "liberated". It is observed that sexual rights have not necessarily expanded due to independence. They have either remained the same or actually contracted. Human rights in terms of sexual rights have not been seriously considered to promote a more equal society in regard to the sexuality of women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans-gendered people. The author contends that the promotion of these rights should not be a Namibian project alone, as the world over sexual rights still needs to be widely accepted as part of today's human rights. In conclusion, the book is a masterpiece as a stock take of transitions that have taken place in Namibia since the achievement of political independence. The majority of the articles are well balanced in their arguments. While the general conclusion is that the SWAPO government has not delivered much on its promises, the authors do acknowledge the achievements that have so far been made. For those seeking a better insight into the political economy of development and underdevelopment, the book is a must read case study. It clearly articulates how changing global politics affect economic relations at a global level, as well as country-to-country level.