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## **Support for the Political System and Democratic Regime Among the Youth in Namibia**

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The IPPR *Youth and Politics Survey 2000* revealed that young Namibians prefer democracy to non-democratic alternatives. Their support for the political system is high and diffuse and they are happy with the way democracy works at the moment. They regard the government as legitimate, responsive and trustworthy. They are also satisfied with the way some key actors have performed their duties over the past year. Although the number of young Namibians that are unhappy about their current economic conditions is quite high, more than two in three felt that matters would improve in the near future. The Namibian youth is no longer very active in the public sphere of life. Although most claimed to have voted in the last election, the majority have not attended meetings with a clear public interest agenda (e.g. meetings of political parties and trade unions). Instead they are far more likely to attend meetings with a more private agenda (e.g. church meetings and family gatherings). The youth has a strong sense of what they would like to see on the public agenda: unemployment, HIV/AIDS, crime prevention, poverty and health.

### **1. Methodology**

The IPPR in collaboration with Research Facilitation Services (RFS) conducted a nationally representative, sample-based, household survey among young Namibians. One thousand two hundred (1 200) men and women across all thirteen regions were interviewed. The sample was stratified by gender and area of residence (rural/urban). All interviews were face-to-face interviews and were conducted at the respondents' place of residence. The sample was drawn from Namibians aged eighteen (18) to thirty two (32) years. One thousand one hundred and ninety-nine (1 199) cases were included in the final analysis.

This briefing paper reports on three sections of the survey:

- Public Participation.
- Attitudes toward the regime (democracy).
- Attitudes toward the political system.

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## 2. Public Participation

It is a commonly held view in Namibia that the youth is no longer very active in the political and civic life of the country. We measured participation in elections, as well as, a number of other public events such as attending political party and trade union meetings.

### *Elections*

- 67% of respondents reported that they are registered for elections.
- Slightly less, approximately 65% claimed that they had valid registration cards.
- Of these only 59% could produce a valid card.
- 61% of respondents voted in the Presidential and National Assembly Elections of 1999.
- Thus, well over 90% of all those that were registered for elections, voted in 1999.

### *Civic Participation*

Following recent developments in the literature on democracy and public participation, we included a number of questions regarding participation in events other than those with a clear public interest agenda. These include: family gatherings, church events and arts events (music, dance and plays). These events are important because of the theoretical assumption that democracy is learned not only in the public sphere, but also in the private.

In the past year, approximately:

- 38% of respondents never attended a meeting or event organised by a *political party*.
- 72% never attended a meeting or event by a *trade union*.
- 17% never attended a meeting or event by a *church*.
- 37% never attended a meeting or event by a *community group* or organisation.
- 39% never attended a *music or dance show*.
- 57% never attended a *play*.
- 13% never attended a meeting or event organised by *family or friends*.
- 35% never attended a meeting or event organised by a *ministry*.

Three indexes<sup>1</sup> were constructed from these items by using Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis. These indexes show that the overall level of civic participation is quite low. On a four-point scale where 1= 'never' and 4 = 'more than five times' young Namibians score 1.16 (i.e. much lower than the scale mid-point 2.5). Furthermore, young Namibians throughout the country score higher on the Private Participation Index (PPI) than on the Public Interest Participation Index (PIPI). They are thus more inclined to attend the events and meetings activities that have a private agenda than those with a public interest agenda.

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### **3. Attitudes Towards the Regime**

#### ***Support for Democracy***

For democracy to become consolidated it must be the only preferred regime type among its citizens. Citizens must no longer contemplate or express large-scale support for non-democratic alternatives. When asked whether or not democracy is preferable to all other kinds of government, slightly more than half (56%) of the Namibian youth expressed outright support for democracy.<sup>2</sup> Only 14% indicated that in some circumstances a non-democratic alternative would be preferable. Almost 20% said that it does not make a difference. This is a fairly large group consisting of both ruling party and opposition supporters, voters and non-voters, rural and urban dwellers. They express no outright cynicism toward the political system and cannot be labelled apathetic. Hence, there are no clear indicators to which side of the equation they will move to when having to choose between democracy and a non-democratic alternative.

A second question probing for support for democracy contrasted democracy with support for a strong leader when things get tough.<sup>3</sup> Some 33% of young Namibians would under some conditions prefer a strong leader whereas, approximately 63% said that democracy is always best. When probed about preference for strong leader, some 43% of those with without any preference for democracy or a non-democratic alternative (the previous question) indicated that they would support a strong leader. Those without any strong preference for or against democracy on the first question can therefore not be regarded as a latent support base for democracy.

#### ***Satisfaction with Democracy***

Democracy stands a better chance to become consolidated if those living with it are satisfied with it. That is, if citizens are happy with what democracy delivers (these could be material and/or socio-political goods). Firstly, young Namibians were asked about whether or not they regard Namibia as a democracy. Two-in-every-three young Namibians (67%) do regard the country as either completely democratic or democratic with minor problems. On the other hand, one-in-every-four (25%) see the country as either democratic with major problems or not democratic at all.

Asked whether or not they are satisfied with the way democracy currently works in the country, 39% were either very satisfied or satisfied, 38% were fairly satisfied and 19% were not satisfied. This suggests that there is room for improvement as far as the performance of democracy is concerned. Far more positive is the fact that 75% of respondents regarded elections in Namibia to be either completely free and fair, or free and fair with minor problems.

### **4. Attitudes Towards the Political System**

One of the key areas of analysis in the study of democratisation and consolidation theory is the relationship between citizens and their institutions. In any democracy, some key public institutions (such as Parliament, the Presidency) are under control of those that are elected by citizens whereas others (such as the courts, the defence and police force) are not. Therefore, the two types of agencies are often treated as being conceptually different – government and state.



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Attitudes toward the political system are assessed under four different headings: trust, responsiveness, legitimacy and performance.

### ***Trust***<sup>4</sup>

Past surveys have revealed fairly high levels of trust in all levels of government: the presidency, parliament, regional councils and local authorities. They have also revealed that there are significant variations in the levels of trust between the agencies with the president comfortably outscoring all others.

This survey finds that very little has changed. Approximately,

- 73% of respondents trusted the *president* always, just about always or most of the time.
- 56% of respondents trusted *local authority councillors* always, just about always or most of the time.
- 57% of respondents trusted *regional councillors* always, just about always or most of the time.
- 57% of respondents trusted *Members of Parliament* always, just about always or most of the time.

There are significant variations in the levels of trust across the regions. The four north-central regions of Oshana, Omusati, Ohangwena and Oshikoto show the highest levels of trust and Hardap and Karas regions lowest. This does not however mean that these two, or any other low scoring regions, do not trust the government - it simply means that compared to the others they score lower. Overall, there are no pockets of significant distrust among the Namibian youth.

### ***Responsiveness***<sup>5</sup>

Responsiveness was assessed by asking whether or not respondents feel that certain agencies are interested or not in their well-being. In the past, surveys have shown that most Namibians regard their system as very responsive. This survey brings no surprises.

- 80% of young Namibians think that the president is interested or very interested in their well-being.
- 64% feel the same about local authority councillors.
- 69% felt this way about regional councillors.
- 65% of young Namibians felt that MPs are either interested or very interested in their well-being.

The data shows that there are significant variations between the agencies: the president out-performs all other agencies by some distance.

### ***Legitimacy***

No political system can expect stability and long-term support if that system is not perceived to be legitimate by its citizens. Legitimacy exists when citizens afford the various agencies of government

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the right to govern. In democracies, legitimately usually comes through elections but this does not have to be the only source.

Young Namibians deem their system as legitimate on three accounts:

- 83% feels that the Namibian government deserves support because the Namibian people elected it.
- 80% feels that the government was elected to power through accepted procedures.
- 67% felt that the Namibian constitution expresses the values and aspirations of the Namibian people.

Two additional items were originally added to the analysis: whether or not the government abuses its powers and whether or not the government has the right to make decisions that all have to abide by even if they don't agree with them. Factor analysis has shown that these two elements load on different dimensions from the others and from each other. This shows that legitimacy does not mean that citizens will allow the government to do what it wants with the powers invested in it. It also means that that government cannot take major decisions without broad public consultation. The scores on the responsiveness index do show that the majority believe that decisions are made according to the demands of the population.

### ***Performance***<sup>6</sup>

At first respondents were asked about the general economic conditions in the country. The positive and negative feelings are almost equal: 42% felt satisfied or very satisfied whereas 36% felt dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Almost half (48%) felt however, that things were better than the previous year whilst approximately 30% felt that things remained the same. 18% felt that things are worse than a year before. When asked about their future expectations two-in-every-three respondents felt that matters will improve. Only about 13% felt that matters would deteriorate over the next year whilst 21% felt that they would remain the same. A second set of questions identified a number of policy areas and asked respondents to rate government's performance on the specific issues.

- 40% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in creating jobs.
- 67% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in building houses.
- 33% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in keeping prices stable.
- 54% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in reducing crime.
- 79% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in improving health services.
- 68% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in addressing education needs.
- 53% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in managing the economy.
- 66% felt government is doing very well or fairly well in delivering basic services.

A third set of questions enquired about the various institutions of government and how well they have performed their jobs.

- 85% felt that the president performed well or very well.
- 57% felt the same way about local authority councillors.



- 61% felt that way about regional councillors.
- 62% felt that MPs have performed well or very well.

Hence, the overall picture is rather mixed. There are clear areas in which government as a whole is believed not to have performed well: employment creation and keeping prices stable are just two cases. There is a clear correlation between the feelings expressed above and what the youth sees as the most important problems facing the country today. The following are considered the main problems:

- Unemployment (69%)
- HIV/AIDS (32%)
- Poverty (19%)
- Health (14%)
- Crime (25%)

## 5. Conclusions

At most levels, young Namibians do not deviate from the feelings and attitudes of Namibians as found in previous surveys. They do support democracy and generally believe that democracy is preferable over non-democratic alternatives including a strong leader. They are generally happy with the performance of political system and show high levels of support for and satisfaction with the political system. The support is distributed throughout the entire system. This all counts favourably for the process of consolidation. There is, however, sufficient evidence to show that the level of civic participation among the youth is on the low side, especially in meetings and events with a public interest agenda. Future analysis will determine, however, whether or not this level of participation is any lower than what is the norm in the society.

## Acknowledgement:

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<sup>1</sup> The indexes were constructed by means of Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis. These items are standard statistical techniques to determine, firstly, whether or not the items belong together and secondly, if the scale is a reliable one. The Civic Participation Index (CPI) is the overall index consisting of all items. The Public Interest Participation Index (PIPI) includes four items: meeting or events by political parties, community groups, trade unions and ministries. The remaining items comprise the Private Participation Index (PPI).

<sup>2</sup> "With which of the statements are you most in agreement? A, B or C?"

Statement A: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement B: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable to democratic government.

Statement C: For someone like me, a democratic or non-democratic government makes no difference."

<sup>3</sup> "Sometimes democracy does not work. When it happens, some people say that we need a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections. Others say that even when things don't work, democracy is always best. What do you think?"

<sup>4</sup> "How much of the time do you trust the following persons to do what is right?"

<sup>5</sup> "How interested do you think the following persons are in you and your well-being?"

<sup>6</sup> "What about the way the following persons have performed their jobs over the past twelve months?"



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