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The Swapo Extraordinary Congress – Entering Uncharted Territory

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The Swapo Central Committee that met on 2-3 April confirmed that a Swapo Extraordinary Congress would be held on 28-29 May to decide who will be the party's presidential candidate for national elections due on 14-15 November. The race between the three candidates nominated at the Central Committee meeting - Higher Education Minister Nahas Angula, Foreign Minister Hidipo Hamutenya, and Lands Minister Hifikepunye Pohamba - is an open one. The decision to hold a Congress to select one of three candidates was unprecedented for Swapo and Namibia. While this is a major step forward in the history of Namibia's democracy, it inevitably has prompted some speculation and uncertainty about the future. The outcome of the Congress, as well as the way it is organised, will have a major influence on democracy in Namibia for years to come. This opinion paper examines several factors that could have a key influence on the Congress.

Who Decides?

The Congress is the supreme decision making body of the Swapo Party. According to Article V of the party's constitution the Congress shall be composed of:

- All members of the Central Committee (83 people)
- Ten delegates elected from each of the Regional Executive Committees (130 people)
- Three delegates elected from each of the District Executive Committees (306 people)²
- 15 delegates from the Swapo Party Youth League (SPYL) elected by their congress
- 15 delegates from the Swapo Party Elders Council (SPEC) elected by their congress
- 20 delegates from the Swapo Party Women's Council (SPWC) elected by their congress
- 15 delegates from the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) as an affiliated organisation.

Table 1: Composition of Congress delegations

<i>Section of party</i>	<i>Number of delegates</i>	<i>Percentage of total</i>
Central Committee	83	14%
Regional Committees	130	22%
District Committees	306	52%
SPYL	15	3%
SPEC	15	3%
SPWC	20	3%
NUNW	15	3%
Total	584	100%

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² The number of districts, 102, corresponds with the number of constituencies in Namibia.

In April, the Central Committee decided that the delegates would be the same as those that attended the ordinary Congress in 2002. This should prevent the composition of delegations being manipulated to favour one or another candidate, since they were selected two years ago when this contest was not envisaged. It also means the candidates' camps can easily identify the individuals they have to win over.

What can be seen from Table 1 is that the vast majority of delegates come from regional and district level. In theory, this is not an election that will be decided by Windhoek-based politicians, although much will depend on what influence Central Committee members have over delegates from the regions. Some 436 of the total 584 votes available will come from regional and district delegations (75%). Exact details on the composition of regional and district delegations are hard to come by, but it is probably fair to surmise that many of their members will be local authority councillors, regional councillors or local party officials.

As can be seen from Table 2 below, the four north-central regions (Omusati, Oshana, Oshikoto and Ohangwena) account for 163 votes, 37% of regional and district votes and 28% of the total votes available.

It is expected that the regional breakdown of invited delegates from regions and districts at the 2004 Congress should be as shown in Table 2 below³.

Table 2: Expected regional breakdown of delegates

	<i>Regional</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% of total delegates from regions/districts</i>	<i>% of total delegates</i>
1. Caprivi	10	18	28	6.4	5
2. Erongo	10	21	31	7.1	5
3. Hardap	10	18	28	6.4	5
4. Karas	10	18	28	6.4	5
5. Kavango	10	24	34	7.8	6
6. Khomas	10	27	37	8.5	6
7. Kunene	10	18	28	6.4	5
8. Ohangwena	10	30	40	9.2	7
9. Omaheke	10	18	28	6.4	5
10. Omusati	10	33	43	9.9	7
11. Oshana	10	30	40	9.2	7
12. Oshikoto	10	30	40	9.2	7
13. Otjozondjupa	10	21	31	7.1	5
Total	130	306	436	100.0	75

Rules of the Game

The only elections between different contenders for a top party post in Swapo's history took place in 1991 and 1997. At the first Swapo Congress after independence Moses Gaorëb defeated Andimba Toivo ya Toivo for the post of Secretary General. More recently, at the 1997 Congress, Hage Geingob challenged Hendrik Witbooi for the post of party Vice President. In a secret ballot Witbooi won with 198 of the 337 votes (59%). The existing rules for elections at Swapo Congresses make it clear that a secret ballot should be used⁴. Although an election for a presidential candidate has not taken place before, it is highly unlikely that this system would be changed for this Congress. Under current rules the winner is required to obtain over 50% support, which means there may well be a run-off vote between the two leading candidates. This

³ *The Namibian* in an article ahead of the 2002 Congress ('Swapo faces busy schedule', 27 August 2002) said that the Erongo region had 28 delegates in total, rather than the 31 reported here. It could not be established whether Swapo only had six district committees in the region at the time, even though there were seven constituencies. If it is the case that Erongo only has 28 delegates the percentages in the table will differ slightly.

⁴ Swapo Party Rules and Procedures for Conducting the Congress and Election of National Officers.



could put the third-placed candidate in a crucial position, in which he could urge his supporters to back one of the remaining candidates, possibly in exchange for a senior post, such as Prime Minister.

As long as the election is held according to a secret ballot then delegates will be free to vote for their candidate of choice, even if the heads of their delegation favour another candidate. For example, it may be that the NUNW's 15 votes would be split three ways. Some NUNW leaders appear to be backing Hamutenya, but the unions affiliated to the NUNW have said that no decision has been taken to support a particular candidate, indicating they could favour Pohamba or Angula, rather than Hamutenya. In a secret ballot the delegates could vote for whom they choose, while disregarding any 'official' candidate put forward by the heads of their wing or regional delegation.

The Campaigns So Far

Much of the lobbying has gone on behind the scenes. In terms of visible campaigning all the candidates have been interviewed in the government newspaper *New Era*, while two so far have been interviewed at length in *The Namibian* (despite Cabinet still imposing a ban on Government advertising in the newspaper). All the candidates have reportedly been keen to be featured in a favourable light on NBC-TV, particularly on the evening news.

Angula has produced a card stating his core values of 'unity, fairness, and progress' and an A4 pamphlet featuring his CV and headed 'Comrade Education for All'. Hamutenya has said that he is mainly campaigning by "talking" to comrades, especially those who are delegates⁵. Pohamba has done little obvious campaigning himself, but President Sam Nujoma and his other supporters have been active in lobbying the regions on his behalf.

While there is much speculation about which candidates other Cabinet Ministers and senior Swapo figures are backing, hardly any have openly declared their support for their preferred nominees. On the record, all we know is who nominated the candidates at the Central Committee. At least two of these people are on the verge of retirement from government – Nujoma (who put forward Pohamba's name) and Andimba Toivo ya Toivo (who recommended Angula). It is not known if Hamutenya's backer, National Assembly Speaker Mosé Tjitendero, is planning on retirement. With the race being as open as it is, it seems likely that most of the other senior party figures do not want to be seen campaigning too vigorously for a candidate in case their man fails to make it and they fall out of favour with the successful nominee. Those party figures who are working behind the scenes for one or other of the candidates will no doubt expect a reward later, in terms of a significant posting. Such deals may have been agreed secretly, but anyone who openly plays their cards could jeopardise their future careers if they back the 'wrong horse'. It will be interesting to see if Ministers openly campaign for their candidates at the Congress or leave overt lobbying to low-key delegates.

Internal campaigning in Swapo is virtually unprecedented and it is difficult to ascertain what might be the most effective campaign tactics. Some delegates have reported being persistently phoned by candidates' supporters. However, individuals may react to pressure from one camp by choosing an alternative candidate. In the same way delegates may balk at being told by a regional party official which way to vote and use the secret ballot to exercise their own choice. There has been talk of 'dirty tactics' and mudslinging in the press. However, only a few examples of this have emerged (see below). Since electioneering within the party is a new phenomenon, it may be that some hard-sell tactics are being interpreted as dirty tricks because of their unfamiliarity.

Factors at Play

None of the candidates have indicated they would embark on any major policy departures if elected President of the country, although they all have their different emphases and themes. In the end delegates' voting choices may be influenced by the style of the candidates as much as their substance. Other factors

⁵ 'Head To Head With Hidipo', *The Namibian*, 10 May 2004



at play include how the candidates might relate to President Nujoma in the future, whether the candidate would maintain or disrupt existing systems of patronage, and tribal affiliation.

Perhaps the most significant factor is what Nujoma thinks of the candidates and how he expresses this. A clear rejection of one candidate would have a strong influence on the Congress. Nujoma nominated his old friend and comrade Pohamba and has reportedly been active in canvassing support for him. Some party insiders believe that Angula would be his second choice and that he is least sympathetic to Hamutenya. In this scenario, Nujoma's recent tirades about "imperialists" at Swapo local election campaign meetings are interpreted as covert attacks on Hamutenya as he is the most foreign investor-friendly of the candidates.

Some observers believe that many Swapo members are prepared to go their own way, even if it is in direct contradiction to what Nujoma wants. As a sign of the increasing independence of the party rank and file, the delegates at the last Congress did not accept his plea for a women's quota on the Central Committee. However, it also has to be remembered that the same delegates did accept without complaint all Nujoma's nominations for the top party posts at the 2002 gathering. They may choose to vote for a situation that would maintain peace in the party – that is the candidate who would work most harmoniously with Nujoma who remains party president until at least 2007. It is difficult at this point to gauge whether delegates will be in meek or defiant mood when it comes to possible injunctions from the party's founding father.

As President of the party, Nujoma is also the chairperson of the Congress and would have the casting vote in the case of any ties. As the chairperson of the proceedings one would expect him to remain neutral during the Congress. However, he has already made it clear that Pohamba is his preferred candidate. This sets up an intriguing dynamic. He could choose to play a statesmanlike impartial role or he could become actively involved in the campaigning by either supporting or criticising candidates. Since he is party President until 2007, any outright denigration of a candidate could have a significant influence on voting as delegates will have to address the issue of how the winner would work with Nujoma as head of the party. This relates to the era after March 21 2005, when the winner at the Congress would expect to be in power, but also to the period before then. If President Nujoma is seen to distance himself from or be overtly critical of the victor, this will undoubtedly affect the new candidate's popularity at the presidential elections in November, as many Swapo supporters will be influenced by the views of the father of the nation and may end up not voting. While such a scenario cannot be ruled out, it has to be borne in mind that over the years Swapo has consistently been able to maintain a united front, despite reports of schisms behind the scenes.

There has never been a congress like this one and so it is difficult to predict the agenda. However, the gathering has been set down for two days, so it will consist of much more than just voting. It seems likely that the candidates will have a chance to address the meeting before the initial vote, and possibly again before any run-off contest. Since the media have been barred from previous congresses (except for opening and closing ceremonies), it is almost certain that journalists will once again be excluded.

Just as in national elections, the votes of the four north-central regions will be crucial in determining the final outcome. If they vote monolithically the delegates from Swapo's heartland could swing the result for their candidate. However, if the vote fragments, which it may do given that all the candidates hail from these regions, then this will bring other interest groups into play as possible kingmakers. There are already signs that the four regions are being seen as the key battleground. This is why events on May 1 2004 at Onayena were seen as significant. Hamutenya, who had been scheduled by the NUNW to speak at a public rally, was reportedly snubbed by Swapo's senior regional politicians in the North. Some senior officials in the north-central regions are said to be opting for Pohamba, in part because they want to stay in Nujoma's good books.

The 'patronage effect' – whereby delegates back the candidate they believe would best protect and secure their future careers (whether as politicians, civil servants, or in the party structures) – may well extend beyond the North. This inevitably favours the status quo, which in this case would be a Pohamba presidency strongly backed by Nujoma. Those who have been personally appointed by Nujoma over the years may well have this in mind when they vote. However, as long as the ballot is secret, they could

indicate they are voting one way to their party superiors, but then follow their own line of thinking when it comes to placing the cross on the ballot paper.

Tribal Chatter

The strange document being distributed to northern delegates, headed 'Political Observation, Notes and Analysis', is another sign that the votes in the former Ovamboland are regarded as key (see *New Era*, May10-13, 2004). The document, which accuses Hamutenya of leading an 'anti-Nujoma' campaign and Angula and Pohamba of being in the 'pro-Nujoma camp', appears to be an anonymous attempt to play the tribal card. The document alleges Hamutenya is running a tribalist campaign in favour of the Kwanyama and against other tribal groups in the North. Despite such claims, there is no concrete evidence that Hamutenya has a tribal agenda.

Much of the speculation about the Congress centres on claims of tribalism influencing voting patterns. Although no breakdown of the ethnicity of delegates is available, it seems unlikely that one tribe will dominate to the extent that it could deliver the winner (if one takes the north-central regions as being the home area of seven different tribes at least). This means that to get over 50% support, the winning candidate would have to have a broader appeal than just one language group. If a candidate did seek to push a tribal case for voting for him then it would risk alienating the many other groups. So it may be that claims about tribalism underpinning campaigns are essentially 'red herrings' that are being spread either through idle chatter or possibly for more invidious reasons.

One doomsday scenario has it that those with vested interests in the status quo want to see the campaign for the presidential nomination descend into tribal mudslinging so that President Nujoma has to step in and impose his own solution – either by standing himself or by recommending a compromise candidate of his choosing. The smear document referred to in the *New Era* report could be a sign that there are those (even if a tiny minority) who are pushing for such a scenario to develop.

Turning Point

The May 28-29 Congress is uncharted territory for Swapo and Namibia and it is not surprising that there is some turbulence in the run-up to it. The decision to allow a contest between three candidates demonstrated that Swapo was ready for a new level of democracy. The whole process is an indication of the growing maturity of the party.

Democracy is by its nature exciting and at times messy, but any potential confusion can be mitigated by proper and transparent procedures. It is important the ground rules for the election at the Congress are clear, accepted by all the candidates, and understood by all delegates. In this regard the Election/Credentials Committee and the Chief Elections Officer at the Congress have a crucial role to play.

It will be vital for the future stability of the party that the election is seen to be genuinely democratic. This will enable Swapo to close ranks behind the winning candidate and move on. If there are widespread perceptions of manipulation, underhand tactics or unfair procedures – either beforehand or at the Congress – these could allow festering resentment of the outcome to develop into open rancour later. If it is true, as Attorney General Pendukeni Ithana recently remarked, that "whenever the Swapo Party sneezes, everybody in Namibia catches a cold", then the ramifications of a confused, ill-tempered Congress could be severe for the nation.

Delegates should be mindful of the historic importance of the Congress and put aside thoughts of tribal identity and lines of patronage. Instead they should make up their minds on the basis of their assessments of the candidates' leadership abilities, track records, and personal qualities. Then the maturity of the decision to have an open race will be surpassed by the maturity of the contest itself.

