



Getting involved: Namibians and governance issues

IPPR Comment

by Graham Hopwood

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On the whole, it seems Namibians are too passive when it comes to their own governance. When they do want to comment or make a point it is often anonymously such as via newspaper SMS pages. Even twenty two years after independence many of the letters published in newspapers are signed off by pseudonyms. Since we do not live in an openly repressive state, this would suggest that many Namibians are over-cautious about exercising the rights they have under the Constitution. We can speculate as to why this might be - but I suspect that several factors are at play. In part there is a feeling among some sections of the populace that they should show allegiance to the ruling party by keeping quiet and generally avoiding controversy, perhaps because they feel they will not receive some real or perceived benefits from the state if they are outspoken. The growing middle class is largely complacent - which unfortunately is a by-product of being more comfortable. The poorer sections of society may feel out of the political loop and are simply too busy with the day-to-day business of surviving to play an active civic role.

Every week, I am phoned by various journalists to give comments on all manner of political, social and economic developments. I often ask why the journalist is phoning me again when there are other civil society activists, academics, and experts who could comment. Usually, I am told that most academics - whether from Unam or the Polytechnic - decline to give their views for fear of wading into controversy. It is the same with some civil society activists who run organisations dealing with certain topics but do not want to develop a public profile through which they advance their views on those topics. Sometimes, it is politicians themselves who do not want to go on record on issues of national interest. The parlous state of the opposition, almost across the board, is apposite here. And because of the emphasis on loyalty within the ruling party, one finds very few back-benchers or other party figures willing to go beyond what they see as the party line (notwithstanding notable exceptions such as some youth league figures)

As a result of this reticence, important debates can sometimes be hogged by a few figures - some are informed and enlightening, but many have little to offer or are simply pushing the same old tired prejudices in every newspaper column or TV appearance they make.



Poor-quality inputs and limited public participation produce poor-quality national debates and ultimately policies and laws that all too often remain unexamined. Inevitably, these policies and laws can end up being inadequate, inappropriate and sometimes not much more than knee-jerk reactions.

Aside from the media (who despite some professional lapses do a very good job), we have very few effective bell-ringers in society - that is people and organisations who will wake us up to the urgent issues and problems we face and seek to ensure concerted action. The church is virtually asleep while civil society organizations are often too busy chasing donor funds rather than putting issues on the national agenda.

There is only a constrained culture of public protest in Namibia over national issues like massive corruption cases. For example, the reaction to the GIPF scandal was quite limited and has now largely faded away. One cannot imagine the kind of mass protests that took place recently in South Africa over labour brokers and road tolls happening here. We do see occasional protests at local level - such as demonstrations against corrupt local authorities - but these tend not to feed into larger social movements and do not have much national impact.

There is plenty of democratic space in Namibia, but it is not taken up and used effectively. There are signs of hope. Many of the born-frees appear to be ready take on issues with less inhibition. While this is clearly a bracing experience for the older generation, who sometimes equate robustness with disrespect, it does indicate that there is a generation emerging that is not so bothered about minding its political ps and qs in order to gain a job, promotion, tender etc. As long as this developing discourse is reasonably well informed and avoids the tendency to tackle the player not the ball (through hurling insults), an upsurge in youth participation can only be healthy.

In the longer term we need to look at our political system. Currently we have a set-up in which the National Assembly is disconnected from grassroots issues and sentiment because of the use of the party list system, which places party loyalty far above community accountability. By combining a constituency system with proportional representation - possibly in a unicameral parliament - we could maintain representativeness while enhancing the connection to grassroots communities.

In short, Namibians should exercise the rights set down in the Constitution. They were achieved through many years of struggle and therefore cannot be taken lightly or simply forgotten in the quest for greater material benefits.

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