The Perils and Complexity of Democratic Values in Namibia

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1. Introduction

Namibia has been unique in its transition to democracy, both in the formal role of the international community and in the expression of democratic values and practices as illustrated in numerous international indices including the Afrobarometer surveys conducted in the country since 1999. In some respects the values of Namibians revealed in the surveys correspond to those of other surveyed countries. On the other hand, Namibia is an "outlier", with responses on certain key questions that greatly differ from the responses of other countries. Namibian survey respondents have recognised a solid extent of democracy and have expressed a high satisfaction with the democracy they experience. In 2002 this uniqueness led Keulder and Wiese (2005) to proclaim Namibia a "democracy without democrats", because the supply of democracy by the government and the ruling party far exceeded the demand for democracy expressed by survey respondents. This weak demand is most typically expressed by a relatively weak "preference for democracy" as shown in the data.

In subsequent surveys over the past decade Namibia has regressed somewhat toward the mean results of all survey countries, as satisfaction with democracy has declined, while demand has increased from the 2003 low point. Nonetheless, Namibia continues to be at, or near, the bottom when it comes to preference for democracy, especially when compared to other high performing African democracies. The low levels of support for democracy in Namibia continue to be surprising given the stable multi-party system and high democratic ranking that Namibia achieves in international indices. Once again in Round 5 of the Afrobarometer Survey, the Namibian political system seems to deliver more democracy than the population seems to want. This continuing puzzle requires deeper analysis. This briefing paper explores the greater complexity of Namibians' democratic values and democratic practices evidenced in the latest survey.

2. Afrobarometer Surveys

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, evaluations of the quality of governance, and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The Afrobarometer's main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa, while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research and research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as four rounds of surveys have been held from 1999 to 2008, and Round 5 is currently being completed.

During Round 5, Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in 35 African countries using a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries over time. The methodology was based on a national probability sample of 1200 adult Namibians selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a sampling margin of error of +/- 3% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions, gender as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Namibian citizen had an equal and transparent chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Namibia was conducted by Survey Warehouse and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), between 19 November 2012 and 18 December 2012.

3. Afrobarometer's View of Democratic Consolidation

The Afrobarometer organisation has understood democratic consolidation primarily to mean a balance between opinions on the demand for democracy and those on the supply of democracy in any given country. The supply side of democracy is usually measured through the responses to questions on the extent of democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and free and fair elections. Namibia ranks high among the Afrobarometer countries on these questions, as it does in other surveys and indices.

On the supply side of democracy, Namibians continue to feel they are well served under the current dispensation, according to Round 5 data:

- 71% say the country is moving in the right direction
- 75% of respondents report that the 2009 elections were completely free and fair or free and fair with minor problems
- 73% of respondents think that Namibia is a "full democracy or a democracy with minor problems" (This is equal to results from 2008 but is weaker in the full democracy category.)
- 62% say they are "fairly or very satisfied" with Namibia's democracy (2008 was slightly higher at 67%.)

These results are depicted in the following figures:

Figure 1. Extent of democracy

Figure 2. Satisfaction with democracy
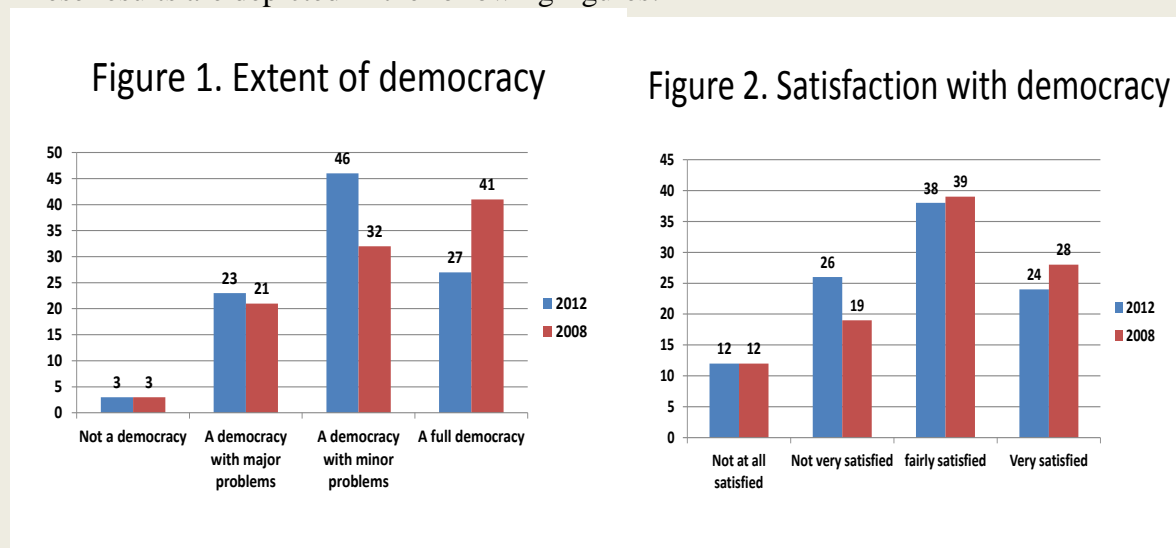
An important measure of the supply of democracy, according to political scientists, is regular elections which are seen as a free and fair reflection of the wishes of the voters. Continuity in such elections over time helps in the consolidation of democratic values and practices. The public's expectations strengthen for the idea that their consent is necessary for government legitimacy. Namibians value elections as an essential part of democracy since the 1989 independence elections and have seen their elections as being free and fair in all the Afrobarometer surveys as shown in Figure 3. Dissatisfaction and a court challenge to the 2009 national elections was reflected in the slight decline in the election judgment by respondents; however, the trend of strong support for Namibia's elections remains intact. Again the supply of electoral democracy is well established in the public's view.

Figure 3. Elections free and fair
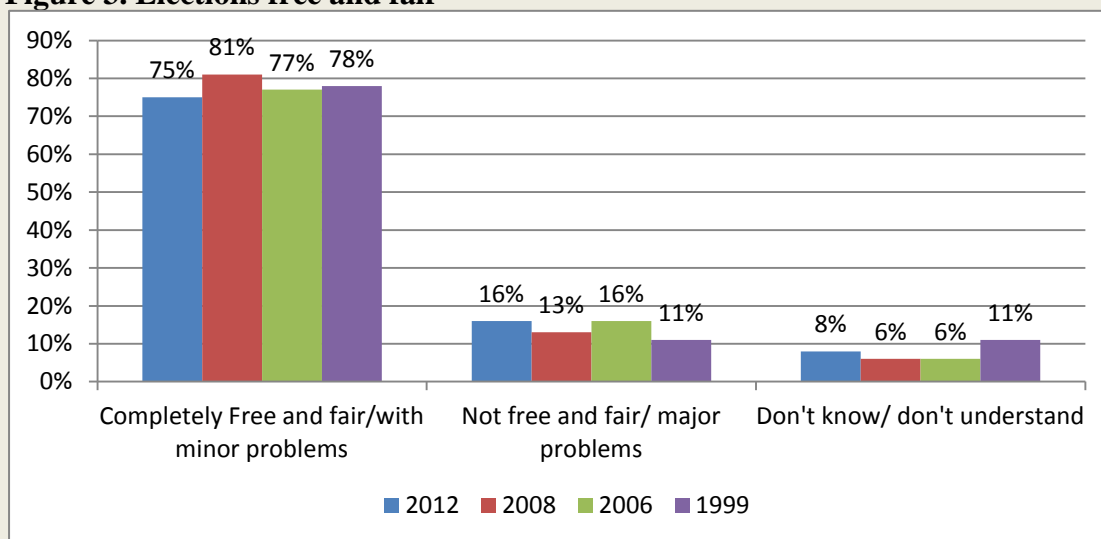
The demand side questions and answers are the most puzzling in Namibia. The decisive question in the Afrobarometer asks if democracy is "always preferable" for governing Namibia. A fairly consistent majority (56%-64%) have agreed with this statement over the past decade, but some respondents say that it doesn't make any difference, or sometimes an alternative might be needed. Although the majority favours democracy, Namibia's preference rates have always been among the lowest in Afrobarometer countries. Round 5 results are no different, with Namibia in 19th place among the first 22 countries out of the 35 to complete their reporting.

In Round 5, as Figure 4 shows, 64% of the respondents "always prefer democracy" as the desired political system. Relatively few (15%) reported that sometimes non-democratic government can be preferable and 20% said it doesn't matter. These numbers are little changed from the 2008 survey and show a trend near this level (56%-64%) since 1999. Compared to respondents in other survey countries, Namibians do not have a strong preference for democracy on this question. (For 2008 the average preference among 20 countries was 70, with Namibia ranking 16th. With a larger number of countries in Round 5, Namibia may well be around 30th!) This is not the expected placement of a country that usually is found in other indices in the top tier for African governance.

**Figure 4. Preference for democracy 1999-2012**

Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
A: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
B: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
C: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.
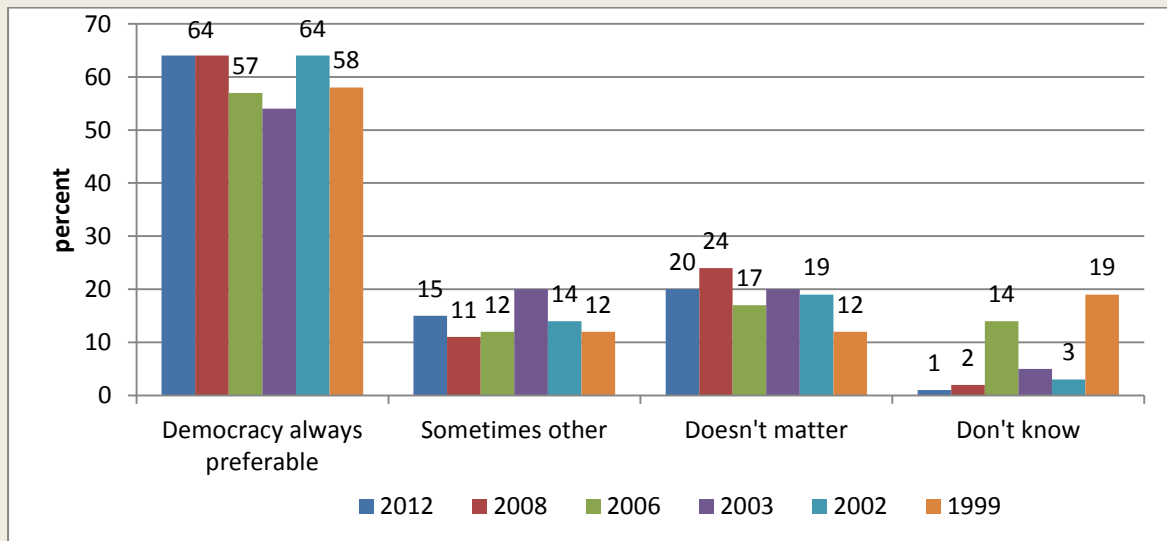
In addition to queries on preference for democracy, respondents were asked about the common alternatives to democracy in Africa. The main alternatives are a one-party state, military rule, and personal rule. Namibians in past surveys rejected these alternatives, but in smaller proportion than other countries in the Afrobarometer Survey. In 2012, Namibian citizens increased their rejection of these non-democratic forms up to or above the twenty country average level (70%) in 2008. Figure 5 shows disapprove/strongly disapprove and approve/strongly approve categories for three types of government. Each of these results is higher than in past surveys, and maintains the Namibian trend toward the mean for survey countries, and also records the highest rejection of authoritarianism.

Figure 5. Rejection of non-democratic alternatives 2012.

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?
Only one party is allowed to stand for election and hold office? The army comes in to govern the country?
Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything?


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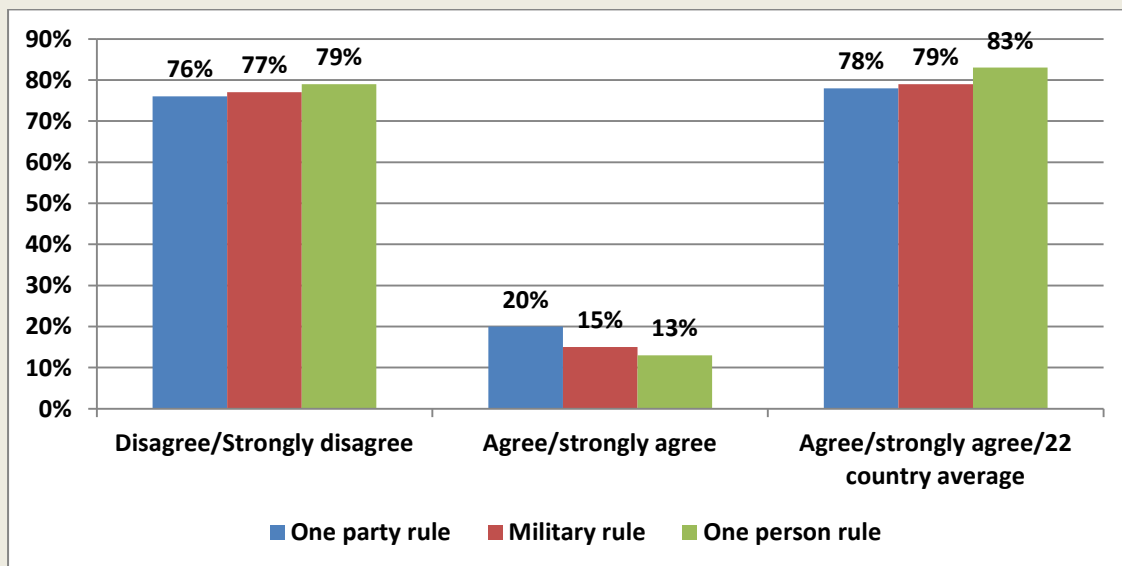
Again, Namibia is slightly lower (by 2%-4%) in these rejection levels for non-democratic alternatives than are most of her peers among the top democratic performers and among the 22 countries that have released Round 5 results. The demand for democracy according to the preference question remains problematic for Namibia, but a closer examination of democratic values and expectations might add depth to the analysis.

4. Namibians' belief in democracy

While demand for democracy remains relatively weak, when it comes to future projections, Namibians have repeatedly indicated support for a democratic future. In Round 3, 63% of Namibian respondents indicated that it was "likely or very likely" that the country would remain democratic (q. 48), a higher figure than that of Botswana. Again in Round 5, the Afrobarometer Survey asked respondents to rate levels of democracy in their countries and others. Figure 6 shows Namibians' measure of their democracy over time on a ten point scale (0 low and 10 high). It exemplifies a strong expectation for Namibia's democracy to strengthen in the future, and also indicates an optimistic view of current democratic conditions compared to those of the past.[1]

Figure 6. How Democratic is Namibia? [On a scale of 1 to 10]
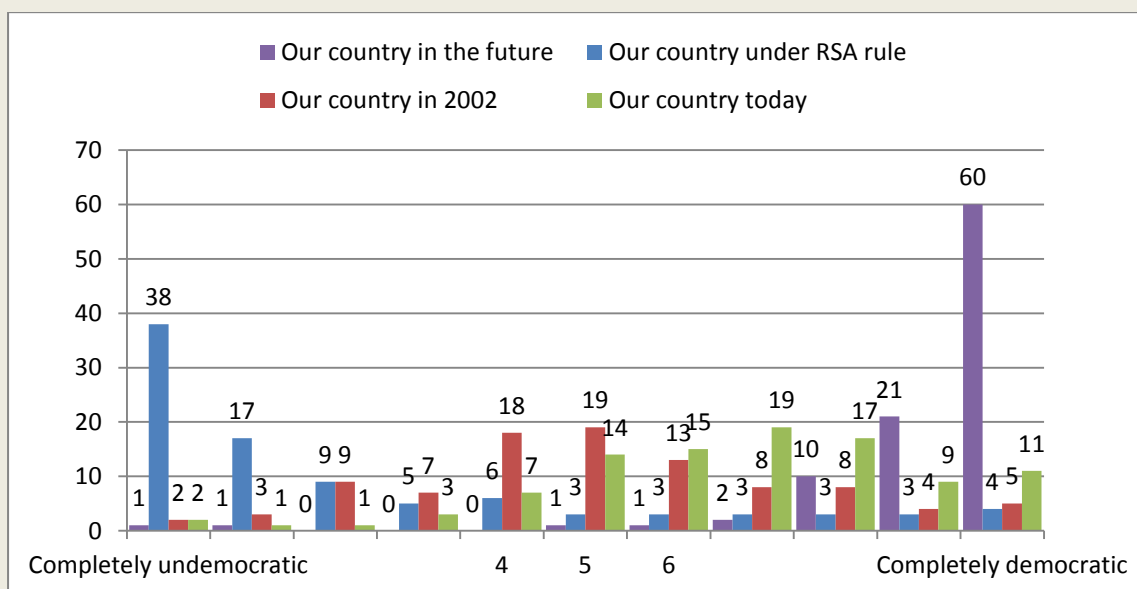
In addition to elections being seen as free and fair, and an optimistic view of the country's supply of democracy, a large part of the democratic legitimacy in Namibia is underscored by the strong trust and performance evaluations of the major political and governmental bodies. Namibia often has been at or near the top of the tables when it comes to institutional evaluations, with both trust and performance of national institutions favoured by strong majorities. Both the president (Nujoma and Pohamba) and the National Assembly (Parliament) rank second highest among all survey countries in previous surveys as well as in Round 5 thus far. Figure 7 illustrates the 2012 results for trust in major national institutions.

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[1] This reflects the orderly transition from the founding president to his successors in government and in the ruling party.

Figure 7. Citizens' Trust in Public Institutions 2012
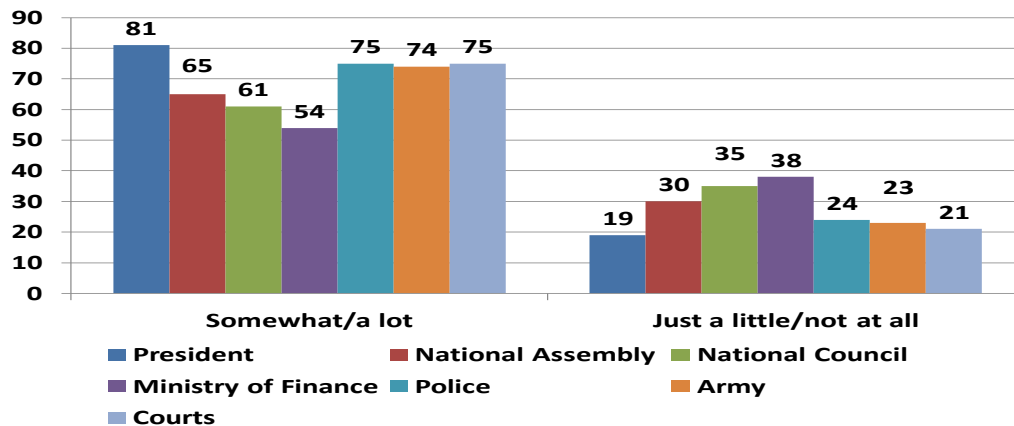
Beyond the national institutions, Namibians also support the ruling political party and elections with many political parties:

- 79% say leaders should be chosen through regular, open and honest elections (this is up sharply from 57% in 2008)
- 72% of Namibians say that many parties are needed to give Namibians real choices (up from 59% in 2008)
- 67% trust the ruling party (64% in 2008) and 32% trust the opposition parties (38% in 2008) "somewhat or a lot"

It is clear from these results that the key electoral element of democratic, multi-party competition receives solid support, even as the ruling SWAPO Party entrenches a one-party dominant result from those elections. Elections do matter to Namibians, but they are not the sole criterion for democracy.

Effective governance also enhances trust and consolidation of democracy over time.[2] A further enhancer of democracy is the capacity to "deliver the goods" in terms of economic or material rewards. While Namibians hold critical views of government's efforts to deal with poverty, inequality, and unemployment, the percentages that approve of the government's overall economic management are among the highest for any country in the Afrobarometer surveys. This positive outlook on economic performance helps to reinforce the important instrumental side of democratic values in generating material benefits. Figure 8 shows the last three survey results, where Namibia receives the highest positive responses among Afrobarometer countries.

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[2] (Namibians' Trust and Approval of Performance in their National Government Remains Generally High 10 April 2013)

Figure 8. Trends in national economic conditions

Economic Conditions 2006/08/12

"In general, how would you describe the present economic conditions of this country?"
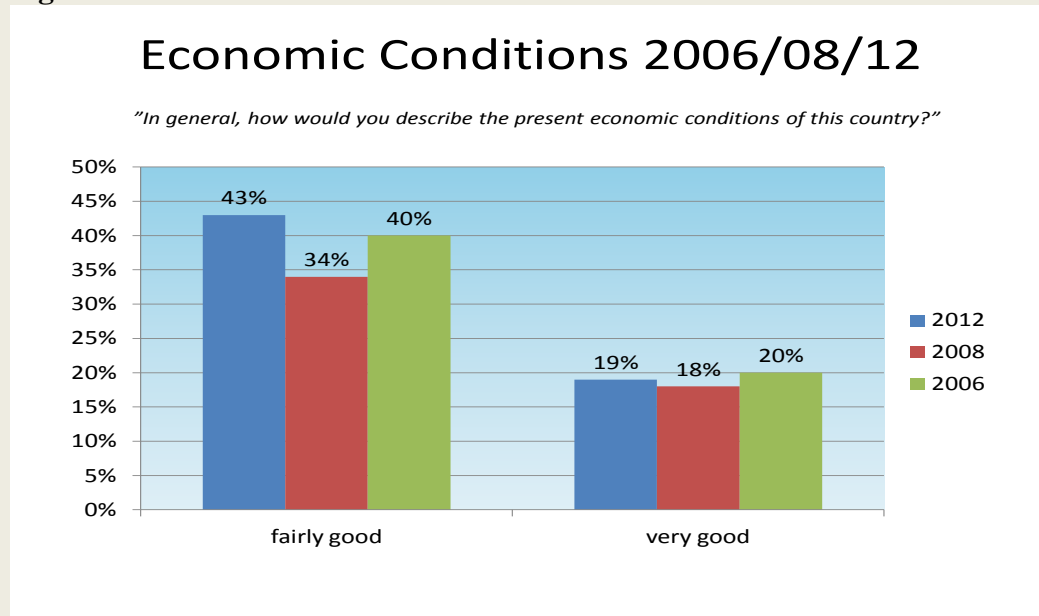
Confidence in elections and government performance are powerful support for democratic consolidation in Namibia. Namibians' survey responses reinforce a strong sense of good government performance and optimism for a better future.

5. What do Namibians mean by "democracy"?

Two different conceptions of democracy have been expressed by Namibians in the Afrobarometer surveys over the past twelve years. On the one hand, early rounds featured a "free choice" preference for civil liberties definitions, emphasising basic personal freedoms (speech, information and organisation). In 2000, 42% of respondents gave civil liberties as their first choice (compared to the Afrobarometer average of 30%) and again in 2006, 31% gave that answer (compared to the 29% average). Personal and civil liberties are important values for Namibians as a basis of democratic life, but they do not seem to be at risk in Namibia twenty-three years after independence.

The second conception of democracy revolves around more instrumental elements of democracy in terms of more material benefits such as employment and government assistance for those in need. As civil liberties have become more secure over time, the priority of economic goods becomes more important in the views of the respondents.

In earlier rounds of the Afrobarometer, civil liberties and personal freedoms were the most common responses to the "free choice" question of what democracy means. By 2012 such freedoms were well secured in the views of the vast majority of Namibians. Figure 9 below shows the array of personal freedom responses strengthening over time and the main problems facing the country. Importantly, unemployment is clearly the country's most important problem, while democratic rights do not feature at all as problems in Namibia. Personal freedoms of speech, group membership, and voting are seen as well secured by very large majorities in Namibia.

Figure 9. Trends in basic freedoms and main problems

	1999 better/much better than before	**2006** better/ much better than before	**2008** somewhat or completely free	**2012** somewhat or completely free
Freedom to join organisations	85%	77%	88%	93%
Freedom to say what you think	80%	76%	84%	85%
Freedom to vote	86%	76%	91%	96%
Main problem Unemployment	**33%** first response	**42%** first response	**33%** first response	**36%** first response
Main problem Poverty	3% Poverty but 16% education first response	5% Poverty first response	13% Poverty first response	10% Poverty first response
Main problem rights	1% Democracy/political rights	0% Democracy/ political rights	0% Democracy/ political rights	0% Democracy/ political rights

In Round 5, as shown in Figure 10 below, the responses to four "forced choice" questions showed a stronger preference for instrumental dimensions of democracy than for procedural ones. In other words, they chose delivering the goods – jobs and economic support for the population as essential for democracy. However, political procedural issues such as elections also ranked highly among respondents as did anti-corruption. Differences between males and females were negligible and very few said they didn't know, or indicated none of the choices. In other words, Namibians had opinions on these choices of essential characteristics of democracy.

Figure 10. Essential elements of democracy #1
Q44. Many things may be desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. If you have to choose only one of the things ... which one would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?
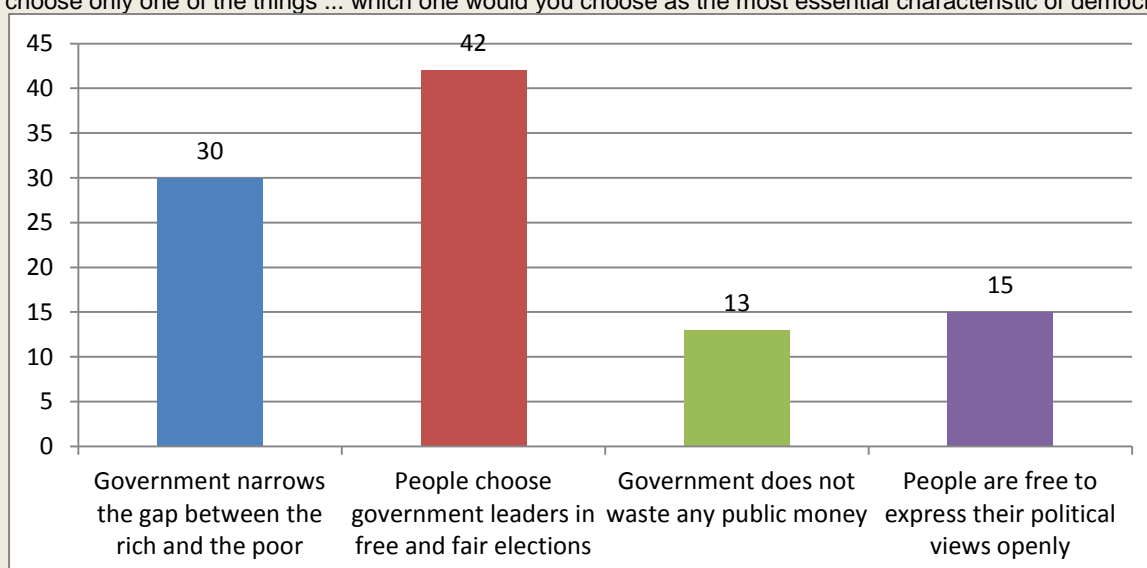

In this first set of choices Namibia was similar to the larger pool of surveyed countries, but with several percentage points higher in the main two selections favouring elections and

narrowing the gap between rich and poor. Namibia is on the high end of the surveyed countries' responses with respect to favouring elections. In addition to gender similarities, no particular differences were detected between urban and rural respondents' views.

Figure 11. Essential characteristics of democracy #2

Q45. And here is another list. Which one of these things would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?
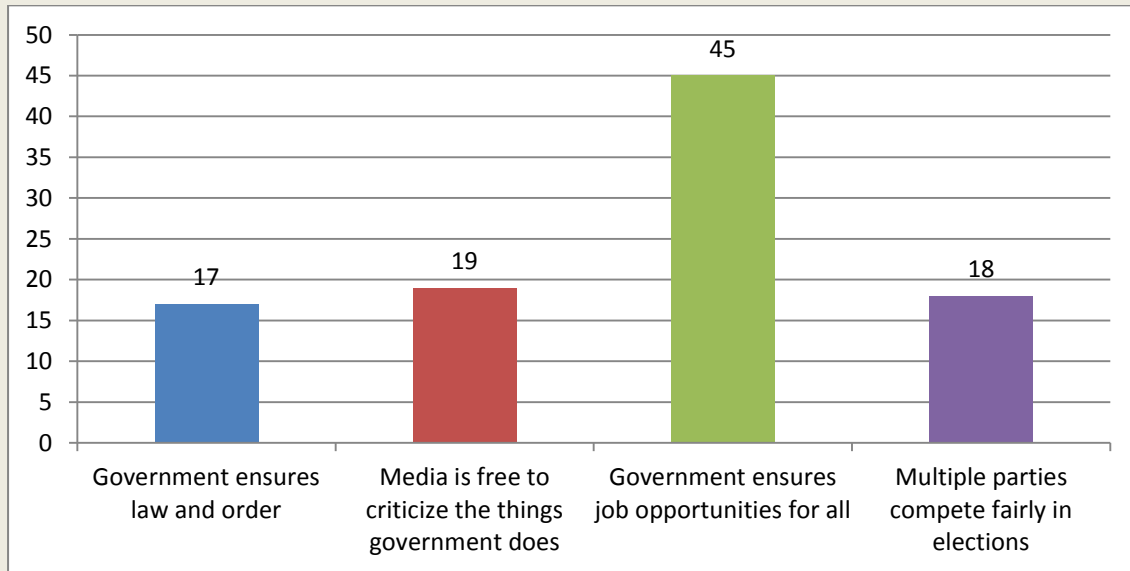
In Figure 11 above Namibia has the same strongest choice, "government ensures job opportunities for all", but at a higher level than the average for the 22 countries that completed the survey -- 45% of Namibians compared to 33% as the average for all countries. Further, 49% of rural voters in Namibia support the jobs option by compared to only 40% of city dwellers. Urban respondents favoured media freedom on this question by 23%, compared to the rural populations'15%. Unemployment, as shown in Figure 9, has become the most important problem in Namibia as it is in the overall Afrobarometer Surveys. Respondents under 29 years old also chose job opportunities, with 48% selecting it as most essential.

Figure 12 . Essential characteristics of democracy #3

Q58. Which one of these things would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?
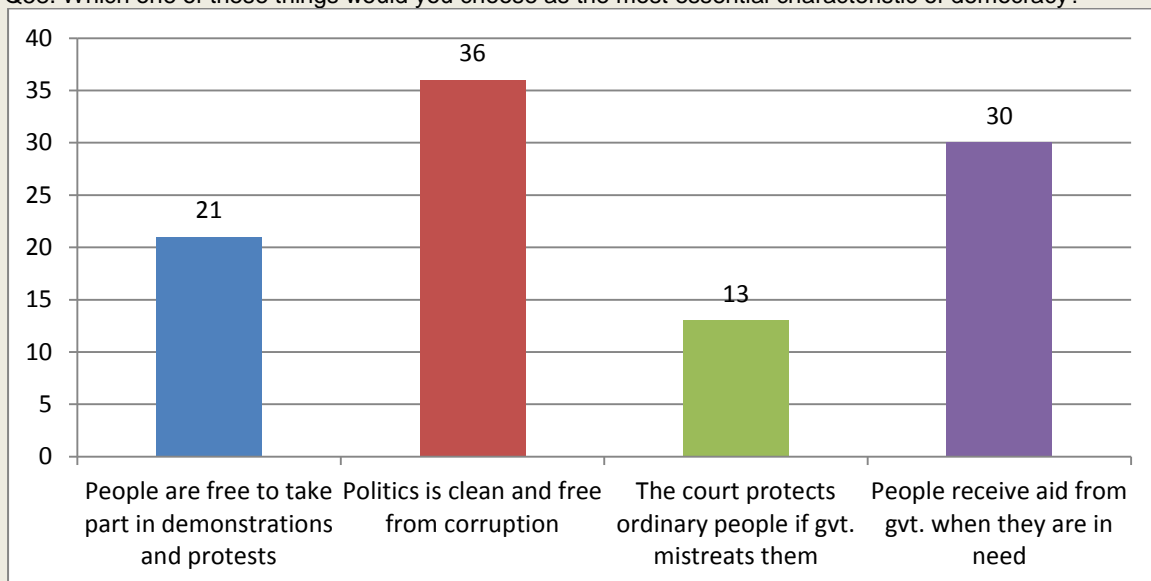
Figure 12 above shows once again that Namibians chose the same item as other countries did in this set of options, which is very close to the average for the 22 countries. In this case, urban respondents in Namibia supported the anti-corruption option by 40% compared with 33% of rural respondents, and the protest option garnered 28% of urban dwellers compared with 16% of those in rural areas. Rural interviews chose people receiving aid from government by 38% to 19% as the most essential from this grouping. Once again both political processes and material rewards rank strongly among Namibians.

Figure 13. Essential characteristics of democracy #4
Q57. Let me ask you again about the most essential characteristics of democracy. If you have to choose only one of the things … which one would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?
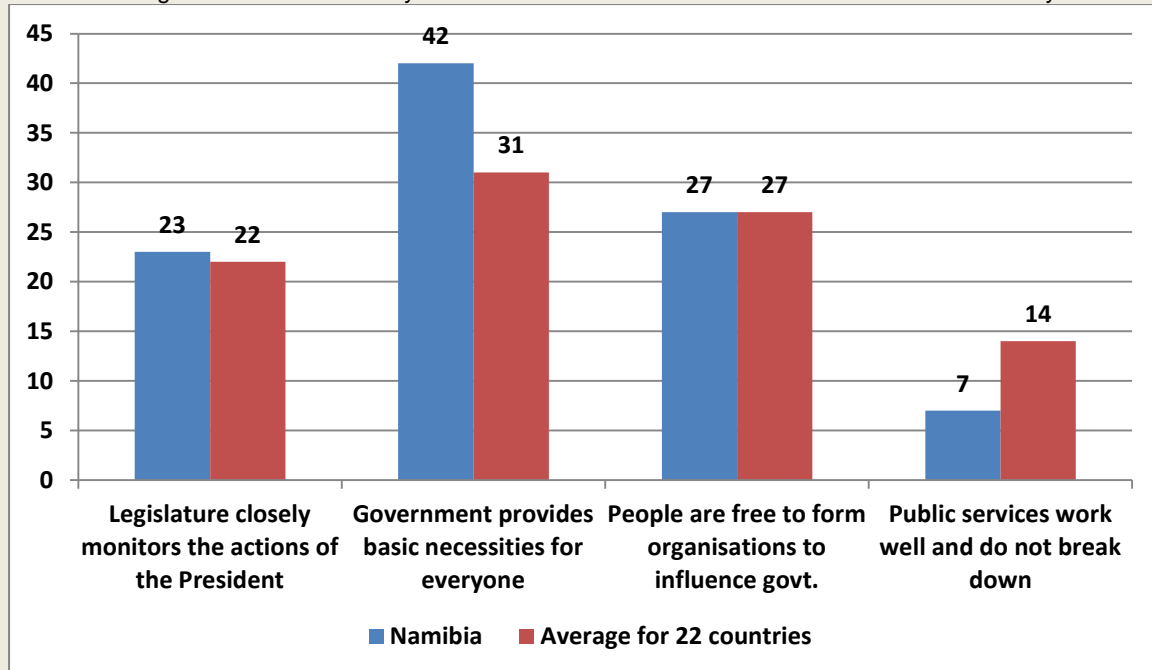
In describing the characteristics of democracy, Namibians' ratings are mostly consistent with the average among 22 Afrobarometer countries. The only exception is that more Namibians (42%) chose the government's provision of basic services as an essential component of democracy rather than any other option. In other countries only an average of 31% of participants chose that option. In Namibia, the urban respondents choose the legislature monitors president option, 29%, compared to only 19% for rural respondents. Rural respondents by contrast chose government provides basic necessities, 49% compared to 32% for urbanites.

Also, in general, urban respondents seem to be more interested in political rights and processes than rural ones. Rural respondents opted more strongly for economic dimensions of democracy. In all of the forced choice questions, Namibia parallels the modal choices of other African countries in the survey. Similar questions in Round 4 also showed both economic and rights preferences. Namibians seem satisfied with the rights and procedural aspects of the country's democracy, but the nagging aspects of economic inequity and poverty have become more important over time as the responses to these four questions on the meaning of democracy demonstrate. Results shown in Figure 9 above also reinforce employment concerns as the most important.

6. Popular Accountability and Participation

Popular accountability is an important aspect of the democratic idea of consent of the governed. Round 5 also marks an increase in the expectation of popular accountability with the increase in Namibian respondents saying that voters should be responsible for holding elected officials to account being much greater than in past surveys. Namibia was the lowest in the survey in 2008 on some accountability questions, but substantial increases are noted in the current round with voters' accountability increasing by 3-6%.(Briefing Paper #70; R4 SOR)

Figure 14 shows some of the new results. It is clear that the main checks and balances expectations of Namibian respondents should occur between the executive and the parliament. Perhaps the relatively low expectation of only 18% for voters to have the main accountability responsibility for the National Assembly can be explained by the party list election system. This compares with the 22 country average of 37%, but most African countries have constituency based electoral systems giving voters more direct control and accountability. The highest responsibility for voters, 31% for each, are the two offices – president and regional councillor – where Namibian voters directly elect the positions. These results are still well below average for Afrobarometer countries. Nonetheless, voters increasingly indicate having responsibility in a political culture otherwise deferential to authority.

Figure 14 Vertical accountability: Who should be responsible to make sure that once elected the _____does the job [The horizontal axis represents the agent responsible; columns represent offices considered.]
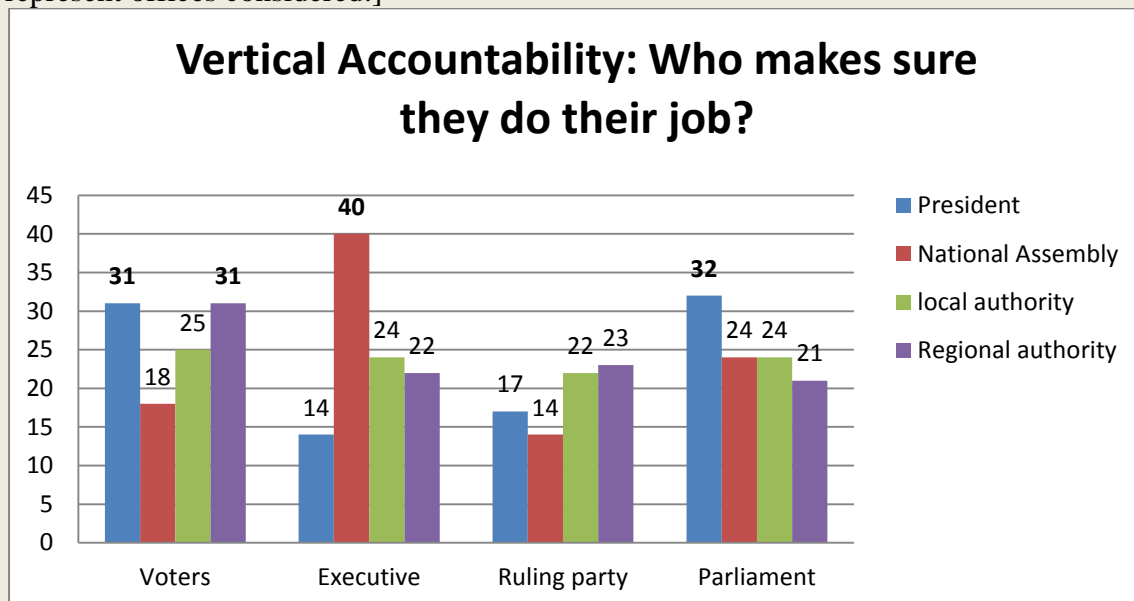
Popular participation is another part of democracy in Namibia. As indicated in Figure 15, Namibians participate in a variety of civic actions to a lesser degree than do people in other survey countries on average. Namibians are also much less likely to engage power holders. These figures are little changed from Round 4. Namibians have yet to develop a participant culture compared with their African peers.

Figure 15. Participation
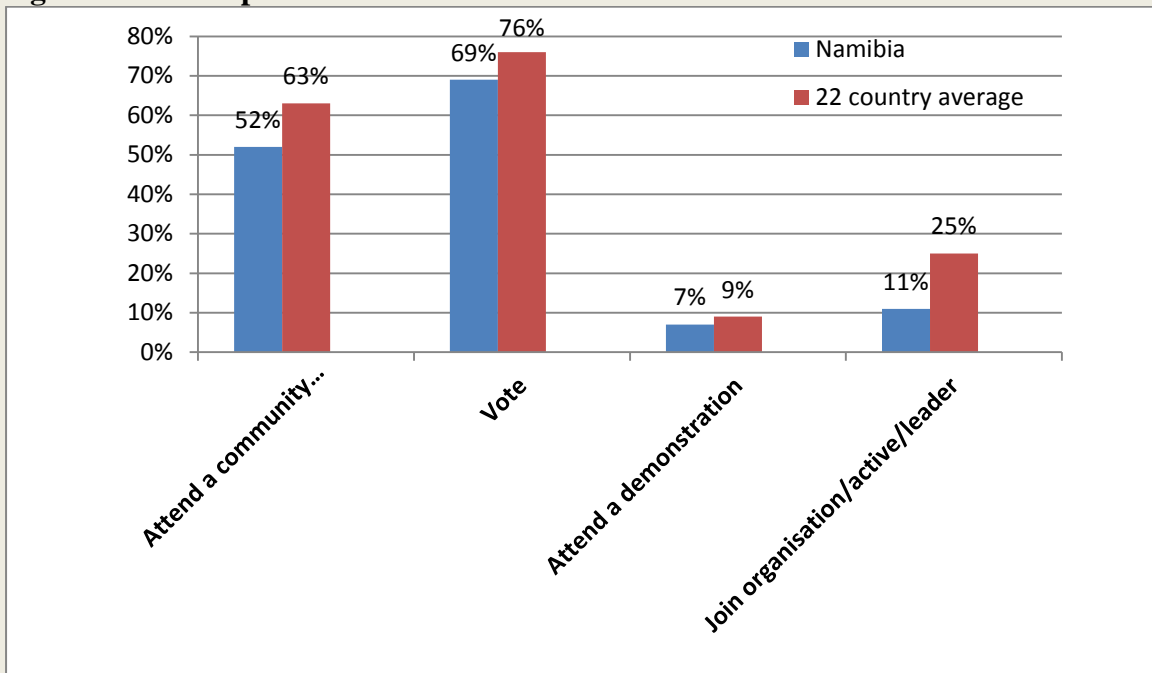
The final concern about Namibia's democratic consolidation is apathy among the born free (18-24 year olds) and other younger voters, who will be the majority in the upcoming 2014 national elections. On most democracy questions, 18-24 year olds and even 25-34 year olds often show the lowest levels of support for democracy. For example, only 62% of 18-24 year olds said "democracy is always preferable", while just 59% of 25-34 year olds agreed with the statement. This is indeed worrying with respect to the future of democracy in Namibia.

While youths are engaged with religion and are even more upbeat about their own economic futures than are participants in other age groups, they are very clearly disengaged from public-sphere issues as indicated in Figure 16. This youth political disinterest remains a challenge for both the ruling and opposition parties as well as for civil society.

Figure 16. Youth Interest in public affairs

"Somewhat or very interested in public affairs"
"Discuss politics occasionally or frequently"
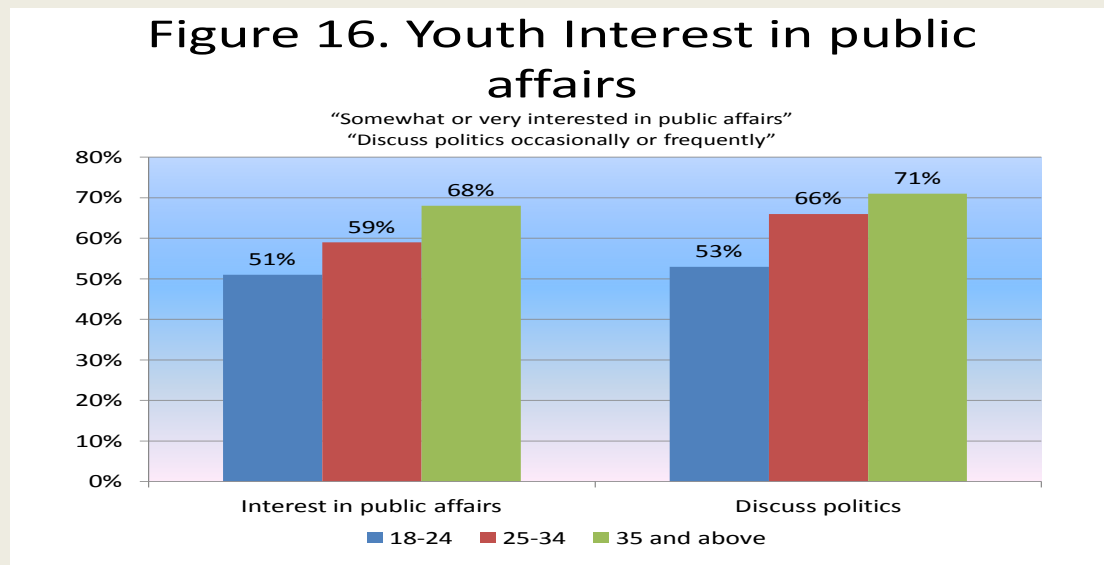
7. Conclusion

Namibia has been considered a "democracy without democrats", as an exception in the balance between the supply of democracy. This category is established through judgements about the country's level of democracy and the populations' satisfaction with it, on the one hand, and the demand for democracy (preference for democracy and rejection of alternatives) on the other. Although Namibia is not quite as much of an outlier as previously determined, a weak demand for democracy persists.

Namibians, like other Africans in Afrobarometer survey countries, see democracy in both political rights and processes terms and in material benefits terms as well. In some ways this dual value converges on the critical notion that equality of economic opportunities or gains is as important as equal rights under the law. This also reflects the strong perception among Namibian respondents that inequality and unemployment are the key problems that Namibian democracy needs to address at this time, while political results are well secured.

Although Namibian respondents in Afrobarometer's Round 5 Opinion Survey are supportive of the current independence dispensation and its democratic institutions, and they remain optimistic about the future, the country has not yet developed a participant political culture, nor are the so-called "born frees" strongly committed to democratic values. Democratic consolidation may be well established in the institutional domain, but democratic values, behaviours, and expectations are yet to catch up.

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