

## PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS IN NAMIBIA: ASKING, ANSWERING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Every Thursday when the National Assembly of Namibia is in session, Ministers rise from their seats to respond to questions posed by other Members of Parliament (MPs). By practicing this ritual of parliamentary questions, the Namibian Parliament draws on a long history. The first parliamentary question was recorded in the United Kingdom's House of Lords in 1721.<sup>i</sup> The practice is also widespread, “a feature of almost all national legislatures,”<sup>ii</sup> and research provides insights from places as varied as Denmark, Israel, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.<sup>iii</sup>

Parliamentary questions are supposed to act as an important accountability mechanism, and one of the ways in which Parliamentarians can exert control over the executive branch of government. The extent to which parliamentary questions serve a useful function has been contested,<sup>i</sup> but there is no denying that they occupy a prominent role in the National Assembly's functioning. Usually the National Assembly sits on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. As most time on Thursdays is devoted to parliamentary questions, the practice takes up almost a third of the National Assembly's time.

In this paper, we examine the parliamentary question sessions of 2017. After explaining how the process works in Namibia, we provide insight into some key issues around parliamentary questions, drawing on a dataset compiled over the last 18 months. We consider which parties and individuals were the most active, which issues received the most attention, which Ministries were asked the most questions, and how quickly they responded. Given the high proportion of women MPs in this Parliament, we also look at the extent to which women MPs participate, and the extent to which questions address gender issues. Finally, we consider how well parliamentary questions work as an accountability mechanism in Namibia.



## A Quick Note on Methodology

As explained below, MPs give notice of written questions at least the day before (but often up to a week before) they formally pose the question. Each Thursday, Parliament publishes and makes available a list of all the questions that are slated to be answered, numbered in the order in which they were submitted. We collected these question papers to obtain the full list of questions asked in 2017 – 159 in total.

Using these question papers, we entered data about questions into a database: who asked questions, when they asked them, and towards whom they directed the question. Using minutes of the National Assembly, we could establish the dates on which questions were answered. Unfortunately, we could not collect the full set of information on all questions. While we attempted to obtain a full set of minutes (including two visits to the Parliament library), we could not establish the answering dates for 30 of the questions. This means that we only know when 127 of questions – or 80 percent of the total – were answered.

We read all of the questions and tagged them with up to four topics addressed within – such as environment, health, corruption, or international issues. Analysis of the data was carried out in excel and SPSS, and the dataset is available on our website.

## The Process

During parliamentary questions, any ‘Private Member’ (i.e. a Member of Parliament who is not part of a government body) may address a question to a Minister relating to a matter for which the Minister is responsible. In other words, opposition MPs and ruling party backbenchers (those who are not Ministers or deputies) ask questions, and Ministers answer. A question can only be presented if notice has been given, unless it relates directly to the business of the day or is urgent.<sup>vii</sup> The latter questions often deal with hot-button political issues and news of the day. Note that this report only deals with written questions, i.e. those asked with prior notice, as urgent questions are not recorded in the same way that written questions are.

There are a number of rules governing what can be included in questions. According to the National Assembly’s rules, names and facts are only permitted in the body of the question if they are integral to understanding the question and if they can be authenticated. The question is not supposed to include arguments or hypothetical language. Upon receiving the notice, the relevant Minister must prepare a response to present at a later date. The Speaker is the sole judge and interpreter of these questions and they are either permitted or rejected at the Speaker’s discretion. However, if the Speaker does not think a question is fit, it can be amended.

The Standing Rules and Orders also specify the process for the actual asking and answering of questions on the day – which is usually Thursday (though the National Assembly has a tradition of pausing the question and answer sessions while the budget is being discussed, and sometimes handles questions on other weekdays to clear a backlog). On the day of asking, questions are handled in the order they were submitted. The asking member will rise in their place and once again read out the question. The Minister in question must then read their response if they have one prepared. If they are not ready they may request permission from the house to postpone their answer. At the discretion of the Speaker, after the answer to a question is given, supplementary questions may be asked if clarity is needed. Where a question is not answered, it will remain on the order paper until such a time that a response is presented in the National Assembly. Alongside this more formal, planned question session, short oral questions may also be directed to Ministers after the prepared questions have been exhausted. These do not require notice, and have to be answered immediately. However, they seldom occur in reality, as the slow pace of answers to written questions means that MPs are usually answering a backlog of questions, and so almost never finish with all the written questions on a given day.

## Why Ask?

MPs can ask questions for a number of reasons.<sup>viii</sup> The most straightforward reason for asking a question in any context is to find out a piece of information; this applies to parliamentary questions as well. Ministers are often the best-placed individuals to give information about the areas which their Ministries

oversee, especially given how little information about government is regularly published. In 2017, MPs often used question time to gather information: for example, Nico Smit of the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM) asked the Minister of Urban and Rural Development, “of the 200,000 erven that were supposed to be serviced under the Massive Urban Land Servicing Project, how many have already been serviced? Please specify the quantity per town” (Question 45). Apius Auchab of the United Democratic Front (UDF) asked the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation “whether Namibia is part of China’s 1 trillion ‘one belt, one road’ initiative” (Question 26).

As questioners can introduce the context of their question before posing a specific query, they can also get the attention of a Minister on a certain issue. This is one way for opposition parties (and ruling party backbenchers) to act on behalf of their constituents. For example, Jennifer van den Heever of the PDM notified the House of water disconnections in Rehoboth before asking what would be done to address the issue (Question 31). Salmon Fleermuys of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) explained that, as he had found out on a recent trip, the Karas region did not have foster homes, and asked where children without guardians would be taken care of (Question 12).

Similarly, MPs can use questions as a way to put pressure on Ministers to act on an issue. As Rozenberg and Martin write, “In most legislatures question time operates less to obtain hidden and concrete information than to criticise or praise ministers.”<sup>x</sup> Depending on the tone of the question, it can be a simple request or an attempt to use the public forum to shame Ministers into action. Take, for example, this question, posed by the PDM’s Jennifer van den Heever to the Minister of Urban and Rural Development (emphasis added):

I am sure you are as tired of hearing me ask questions on the affairs of Rehoboth Council, as I too am tired of asking these questions... I will merely repeat the questions that I asked you in this House on the 2nd of March 2017, to which there has once again been no response or suitable action taken.

During November 2016, the Minister attended a public meeting in Rehoboth. During this meeting, you gave notice that the Ministry has launched an investigation into the affairs of the Rehoboth Town Council and that the findings of that report would be communicated to the residents within 60 days.

Minister, we are now in June 2017 so it goes without saying that 60 days have long elapsed... By when, as promised, may the residents of Rehoboth expect the Minister to publicly disclose the findings of this report? By when does the Ministry expect to act on the findings of the report and take suitable remedial action? (Question 59)

Mike Kavekatora of the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) also used the platform to pressurise the Minister of Education, Arts and Culture, while asking about a reduction in school subsidies:

During my contribution on the 2017/2018 Appropriation Bill debate, I urged you to go back to the parents, apologize and request them to once again dig deeper into their largely empty pockets to fund the deficit; Did you engage the parents to inform them about this painful development? (Question 52).

The stated aim of question time – indeed of Parliament as a whole – is to hold the executive branch of government accountable. Many questions reflect this purpose. Asser Mbai of the National Unity Democratic Organization (NUDO) asked the Minister of Agriculture to account for the budget that had been allocated to assist farmers with the drought (Question 9).

Finally, it must not be forgotten that Parliament is a political body, and so MPs use question time – like any other parliamentary procedure – for political ends, to criticise their opponents and enhance their own image. Arguably, an example of this could be seen in early June 2017, when McHenry Venaani of the PDM challenged the Minister of Presidential Affairs about remarks President Geingob made in his state of the nation address. Geingob had promised that “heads would roll” in connection with a controversial oil storage deal, prompting Venaani to ask:

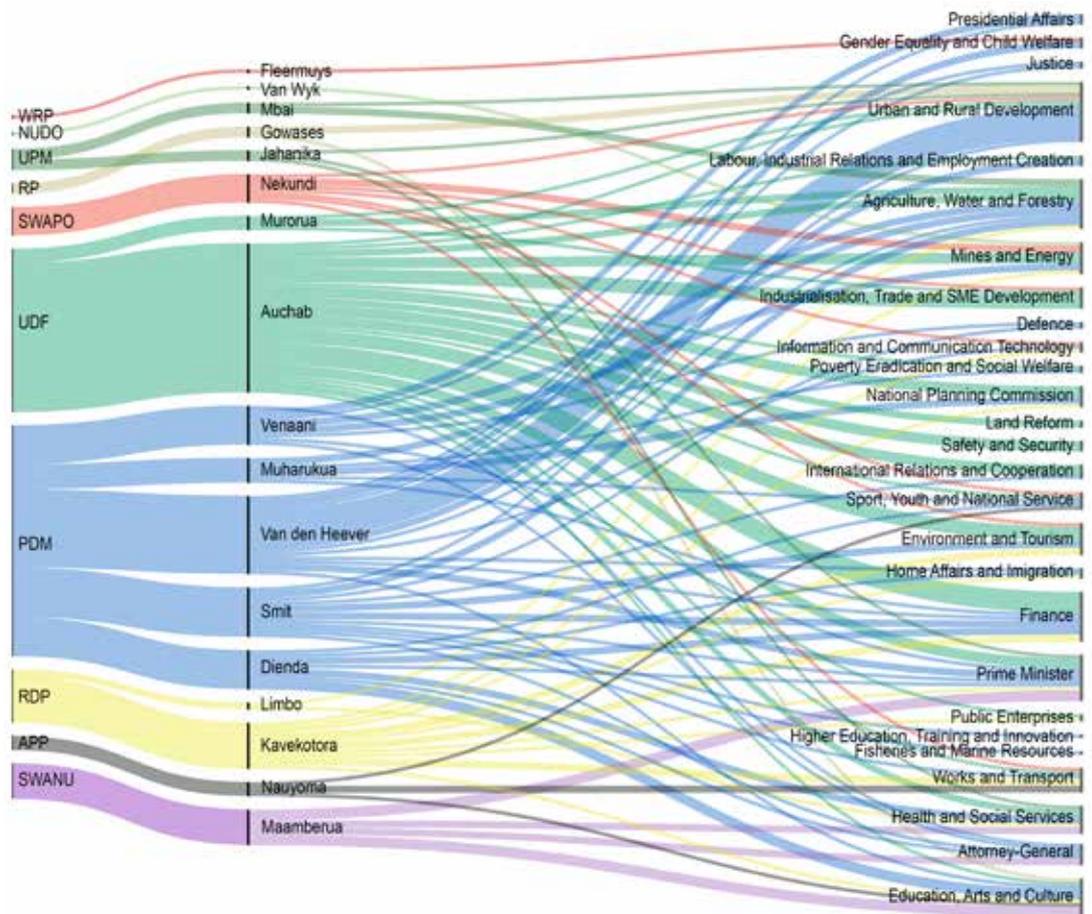
Which heads have rolled on this matter of national importance? Were the remarks only made to save the President’s face or is there a genuine investigation? (Question 4).

Another member of the PDM, Vipuakuje Muharukua, used his question to criticise the Minister of Agricul-

ture, Water and Forestry for forbidding “the quarantining of small livestock for the purpose of transporting it south of the Red Line,” asking: “what was the reason for this catastrophic decision that drives northern farmers further into poverty?” (Question 56).

Usutuaije Maamberua of the South West Africa National Union (SWANU) used questions to point to his party’s ostensible achievements. For example, while asking a question about the Presidential Commission of Enquiry into the status of healthcare, he took the opportunity to point out that “SWANU [as] the only political party that had made submission to the commission was delighted to note that its ideas, inputs and recommendations had been taken on board and had formed part of the recommendations that resulted” (Question 63).

**Figure 1: All questions from 2017 visualised**



## Who’s asking?

Every single party in the National Assembly posed a question at least once. The most questions in 2017 came from the official opposition (65), while the fewest came from the Workers Revolutionary Party and the United People’s Movement (UPM) (1 each). It is hardly surprising that SWAPO MPs contributed very few official questions: in a national parliament, “opposition parties use all available means, including parliamentary questions, to attack and criticise the executive.”<sup>xi</sup> Most SWAPO MPs (62 of 85 MPs in 2017) are members of Cabinet themselves, and therefore on the receiving end of questions as stipulated by the rules. The remaining Swapo MPs, the so-called backbenchers, have party-internal channels through which they can get information from their colleagues – and are presumably worried about the way in which questioning a cabinet member in public suggests confrontation, given the emphasis Namibian parties tend to place on party discipline. Opposition MPs, on the other hand, face a completely different set of incentives: they want to highlight themselves in contrast to the ruling party, which means they are more likely to embrace the oppositional nature of parliamentary questions.

**Table 1: Individual and party question totals, 2017**

<b>APP (2 seats)</b>	<b>4</b>
Nauyoma	4
<b>NUDO (2)</b>	<b>6</b>
Jahanika	3
Mbai	3
<b>PDM (5)</b>	<b>65</b>
Van den Heever	22
Smit	14
Dienda	11
Venaani	11
Muharukua	7
<b>RDP (3)</b>	<b>15</b>
Kavekatora	13
Limbo	2
<b>RP (1)</b>	<b>3</b>
Gowases	3
<b>SWANU (1)</b>	<b>10</b>
Maamberua	10
<b>SWAPO (23)*</b>	<b>8</b>
Nekundi	8
<b>UDF (2)</b>	<b>46</b>
Auchab	42
Murorua	4
<b>UPM (1)</b>	<b>1</b>
Van Wyk	1
<b>WRP (1)</b>	<b>1</b>
Fleermuys	1

\* We are only counting Swapo's backbenchers, as only they can ask questions.

A look at individuals is also revealing. Overall, only 17 MPs asked a question in the National Assembly last year. In other words, questions and answers are driven by a small minority of MPs (the National Assembly has 104 Members). Even allowing for the fact that 62 of Swapo's 85 MPs were members of Cabinet, and thus answering rather than asking questions, the proportion of MPs who actually did ask questions is very low. This is not unusual in the international context.<sup>xii</sup>

Still, the ritual of asking questions occupies almost a third of Parliament's time, which suggests that those who do get involved are contributing a fair amount of effort. Apius Auchab of the UDF leads the pack by far with 42 questions posed during the year – which means that he single-handedly asked a quarter of all questions posed in the National Assembly in 2017. Next on the list with 22 questions is Jennifer van den Heever of the PDM, followed by her fellow party member Nico Smit.

One interesting question concerns how many people in each party actually ask questions. Are the party totals driven by an individual doing all the work – or is the work of asking questions spread evenly among members of the Party? First, we can move past the parties that only have one MP (the Republican Party, SWANU, and UPM), where the sole MP asks all the questions. We can then look at a simple participation rate: what share of any given party's MPs asked questions at all? However, this simple measure is not very useful: only 3 opposition MPs asked no questions (one each from the APP, RDP, and WRP), all other opposition parties had a participation rate of 100%, and Swapo's stood at 4 percent as only Veikko Nekundi asked a question. In addition, this would hide imbalances in who does the work. Both of the UDF's parliamentarians asked questions, which means the party had a 100 percent participation rate. But a closer inspection of the numbers (or figure 1 on page 4) shows that Apius Auchab asked 42 of the party's 46 questions, while his colleague Dudu Murorua asked only 4.

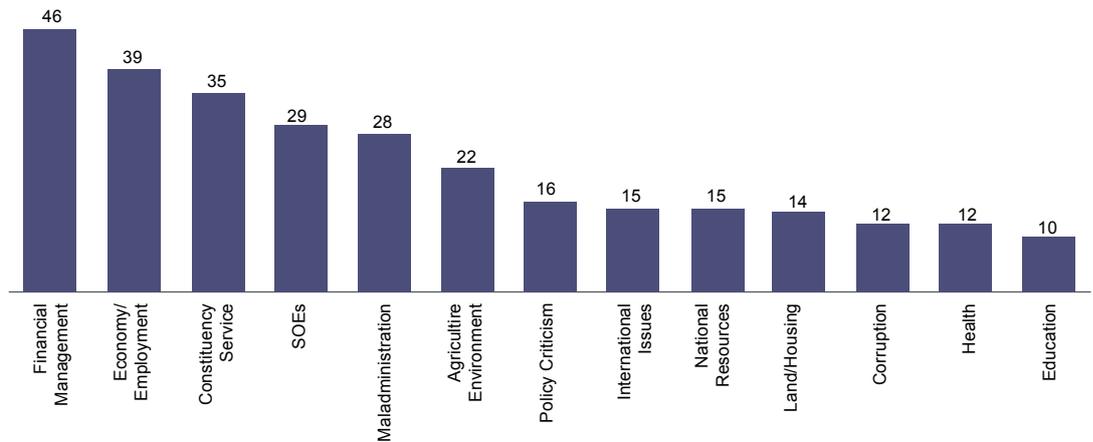
It makes more sense to ask whether MPs split the question-asking work equitably. To compare how parties differed in this regard, we developed a crude measure of how far any given party’s MPs were from an equal share of the questions.<sup>1</sup> SWAPO was the most imbalanced: one MP asking all of the questions while 23 of his colleagues stayed silent meant that Nekundi’s share of questions (100%) was 96 percentage points higher than one would have expected (4%). NUDO’s two MPs perfectly split their questions, but the PDM has to be noted especially: their five MPs all contributed to the party’s high tally of questions (65, more than any other party), and the average deviation from an equal share in questioning amounted to only 6 percentage points – an impressively equal share of work.

**Table 2: Deviation from equal work share by party 2017**

Party	Average difference from equal share (% points)
SWAPO	96%
APP	50%
WRP	50%
UDF	41%
RDP	37%
PDM	6%
NUDO	0%

## What do people ask about?

**Figure 2: Most common topics**



As noted above, we associated each question with up to four tags, depending on the issues that were raised within. Looking at the aggregate numbers, a clear picture emerges. 46 out of 159 questions addressed alleged financial mismanagement, and 28 raised issues of alleged maladministration in government’s performance. Clearly, MPs are using question time to critique government performance as intended.

2017 was a historically bad year for Namibia’s economy. This was reflected in the questions: the second most popular topic concerned the economy and employment. In general, the questions seem to reflect major topics of discussion in Namibian society. State-Owned Enterprises – which have come under sustained critique for underperformance and wastefulness<sup>xiii</sup> – were referenced 29 times. Land or Housing issues received 14 mentions, a large number for such a specific topic.

<sup>1</sup> More detail on our calculation: first, we divided the total number of questions by the number of seats to see how many questions every MP would answer if the questions were perfectly split. Then, we calculated how much the real percentage of questions an MP asked differed from this hypothetical equal share. Finally, we averaged the differences for all MPs of a given party so see how far away, on average, MPs were from the number of questions they would ask if the questions were split equally. Of course, this measure is imperfect – by averaging, we lose information on variance. Still, this measure offers us some insights. Take for example UDF. The party asked a total of 46 questions, and has two MPs – so we would expect them each to ask 50% of the questions, or 23. In fact, Auchab asked 42 questions – 19 more than an equal share would suggest, or 1.8 times as many as we would expect.

International issues were raised on a number of occasions, too. In terms of specific countries, China or Chinese citizens were mentioned most. One question referred to India, while a number of questions on the genocide negotiations implicate the German government (see also below).

An earlier section of this paper discussed the different reasons why MPs may ask a question. The topics broached last year show that MPs pursued various goals. There was plenty of criticism of government, as frequent questions about financial mismanagement and corruption show. The third-most common tag in our database, “constituency service” is also telling. This is how we coded any question where the questioner was referring to problems faced by specific communities – often in various rural areas and smaller towns, but also in specific areas in Windhoek. In a large number of questions (35), MPs were trying to directly address the problems of a specific group of people they represent.

**Table 3: All topics tagged**

Financial Mismanagement	46
Economy/Employment	39
Constituency Service	35
SOE	29
Maladministration	28
Agriculture/Environment	22
Policy Reform/Criticism	16
International	15
National Resources	15
Land/Housing	14
Corruption	12
Health	12
Education	10
Youth	9
Genocide	8
HPP	7
Social welfare	7
China	6
Tourism	5
Security	3
Women/GBV	3
Disability	1

Are there differences in emphasis depending on who is asking? Note that it is difficult, with some parties, to disentangle the individual from the collective. For example, Apus Auchab’s dominance in the questions of the UDF makes it difficult to differentiate between his interests and that of his party. The same goes for the RDP, and the five parties that had only one questioner (many of whom only have one representative in Parliament). Considering that MPs are supposed to act on behalf of their parties, this section focuses on parties rather than individuals.

Both parties that only asked one question each, WRP and UDF, used their question to address an issue faced by regional constituents – foster care in Keetmanshoop and the environmental impacts of a mine near Rehoboth, respectively. The RP and APP did not show any particular focus in their questions. NUDO focused somewhat on raising constituent issues, with half of the party’s questions referring to the needs of specific constituents. Half of Veikko Nekundi’s (i.e. SWAPO’s) questions focused on State-Owned Enterprises and/or economic issues.

SWANU was particularly focused: out of the ten questions from the party recorded last year, seven dealt with the German genocide on the Herero and Nama populations in the early 20th century. (However, it should be noted that SWANU asked several of these questions more than once).

The RDP showed the greatest focus on financial mismanagement: more than half of the party’s ques-

tions addressed alleged misdeeds, while 6 of 15 addressed State-Owned Enterprises. It also showed a particular interest in corruption: while the RDP asked 9 percent of all questions overall, the party asked a third of the question addressing corruption-related matters. This set of interests was driven by the expertise of its MP Mike Kavekatora, who submitted 13 of the party’s 15 questions and heads Parliament’s Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

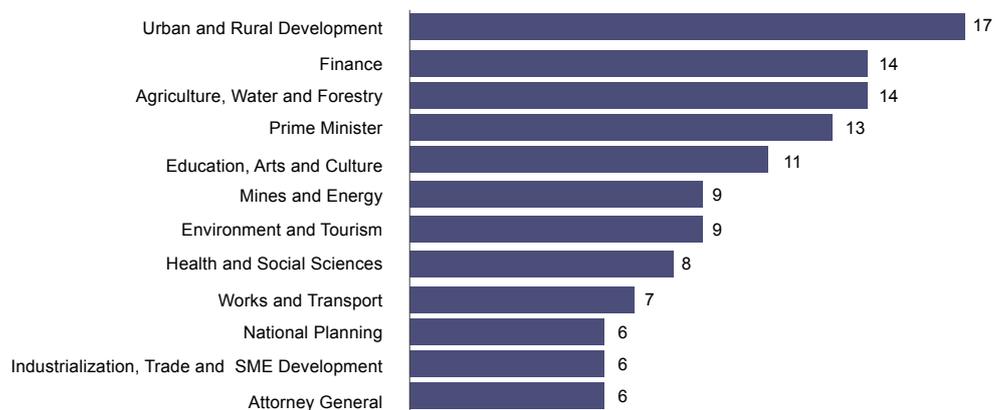
Turning to the two most prolific parties, the PDM showed a wide range of interests. The party did concentrate on financial mismanagement somewhat, while addressing specific regional issues a quarter of the time. The party asked ten questions on land or housing issues – or 70 percent of questions on the topic. It also asked two of the three questions that touched on gender issues, with the UDF asking the third. More than half of the UDF’s questions focused on the economy, with a significant number of questions addressing international issues and financial mismanagement. The UDF asked four questions on China (with the RDP supplying another 2).

### Who Answers?

Given the varying importance of different portfolios – and the focus of questioners, as seen above – we should assume that not all ministries receive the same amount of attention. This is what happened in 2017; while every Ministry answered at least one question, there was a clear split between those who were called on only occasionally and those who had to regularly explain themselves. Five Ministries accounted for over 40% of the questions answered; the top half of Ministries (the 13 receiving 5 or more questions) accounted for almost 80% of all questions.

The Ministry of Urban and Rural Development fielded the most questions and the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry ranked second – no surprise given the practice of MPs highlighting issues from their regional constituents. Finance answered the second-most questions together with Agriculture and the Prime Minister’s office was fourth – again, no surprise, given that the Prime Minister acts as the representative of government in Parliament and would therefore be asked to account for a wide range of issues. The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture closed out the top five. One notable entry is the Ministry of Works, which received many queries related to State-Owned Enterprises. In the absence of an enabling act transferring control of these Enterprises to the Minister of Public Enterprises, Works held on to control of some of the country’s biggest – and most controversial – SOEs such as Air Namibia and TransNamib. This explains the discrepancy in ranking between the two Ministries.

**Figure 3: Ministries receiving the most questions**



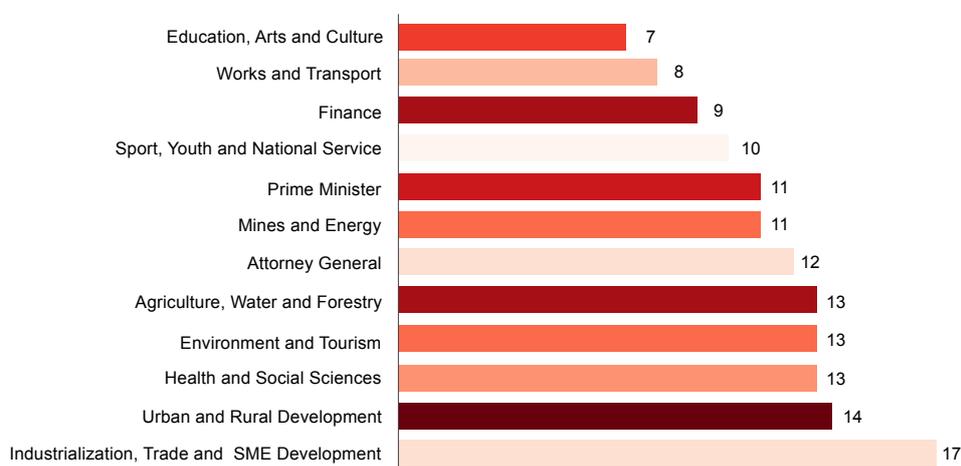
Sport, Youth and National Service	5
International Relations and Cooperation	4
Home Affairs and Immigration, Information and Communication Technology, Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment Creation, Presidential Affairs, Safety and Security	3
Defence; Justice; Land Reform; Public Enterprises; Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare	2
Fisheries and Marine Resources; Higher Education, Training and Innovation	1

How did the different Ministries deal with this workload? Were they able to provide answers in a reasonable time frame? To investigate this, we calculated the average time each Ministry took to respond to questions. There are a few caveats attached to this data. Firstly, as discussed above, we could not find the response date for every single question. Therefore, our data here is based on 127 out of the total 159 questions. The 32 questions not covered in these calculations were fairly evenly split among the Ministries, with 14 Ministries represented and a particular focus on Agriculture, Education, Finance and Health. Still, it is possible that the inclusion of those dates would shift these calculations somewhat and so our findings should be approached with caution. Secondly, we are only presenting here the average response time for Ministries for which we have the response dates for at least five questions. Thirdly, it bears noting that the National Assembly went on lengthy recesses on two occasions last year. These gaps in the calendar can significantly affect the time taken to respond to a question, if a question asked before break is only answered after.

This is why we calculated the response rate a second time, this time only counting days on which Parliament had been in session. If a question was asked just before break, a Ministry may have had an answer ready quickly, yet had to wait for recess to end before delivering it. On the other hand, this could also give them unfair credit – after all, to those who need the information, working days are an abstraction; they need it as soon as possible. In the end, considering only days where the NA was in session did not make a substantive change to the results. The only difference in the second calculation was that the Attorney-General fell by two spots, behind the Ministry of Mines and Energy.

Keeping these caveats in mind, we can see a range of response times. Education, Arts and Culture was fastest to respond on average, taking only 15 days to respond to queries – especially impressive seeing as it answered the fourth-highest number of questions in the dataset we considered for this section. Works and Transport was next, followed by The Ministry of Works and Finance (17 days) and the Ministry of Finance (24 days). On the other side of the scale, the Ministry of Industrialization, Trade and SME Development took over five weeks on average to respond to queries. The Ministry of Urban and Rural Development was the second-slowest Ministry.

**Figure 4: Average response time (calendar days)**

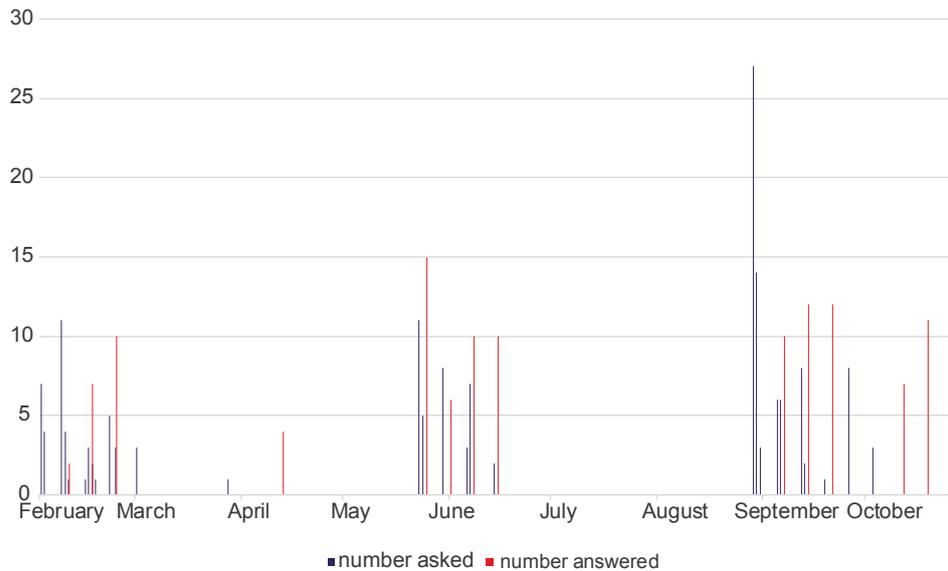


There does not seem to be a straight-forward relationship between workload and speediness. We colour-coded the bars in figure 4 and 5 by the number of questions a ministry received – the darker the red, the more questions a ministry had to answer. Some of the Ministries that received the most questions (such as Education and Finance) were among the fastest Ministries, whereas others (Urban and Rural Development) were among the slowest. Meanwhile the Ministry of Industrialisation, Trade and SME development received the third-least questions and still took long – clearly the workload was not the issue here.

There was also a variation across time in the intensity of the question and answer sessions. Figure 5 below shows the number of questions asked and answered on each day of the year. Of course, none were asked in May, late July and August, during the weeks when the National Assembly was in recess. The graph also illustrates the traditional moratorium on questions during discussions on the national budget, as seen in the low number of questions in April. As the chart indicates, there was often a build-up of questions before Ministers answered a large number of questions at once. This has to do with the way

the Speaker runs the house – when the backlog is very large, the Speaker will often make a concerted effort to guide the house through an extended session that often takes members up to or even slightly past the normal closing time of the National Assembly at 17:45 (on many days, the sitting ends before that time). There was also a large spike of questions in September, as MPs returned from recess with a lot of material to question – a pattern that was also visible, though less pronounced, at the start of the year and after the first break.

**Figure 5: Temporal spread of questions**



## What about Gender?

After the 2014 election, the National Assembly saw an influx of women MPs, mostly due to Swapo’s 50-50 gender policy, which meant that the party nominated equivalent numbers of men and women. In 2017, women held 47 of 104 seats of the National Assembly, or 45 percent.<sup>2</sup> 49 percent of SWAPO MPs were women, while the opposition percentage stood at 20 percent.

In terms of questions, 38 out of 159 (24%) were asked by women.<sup>3</sup> Only 4 of the 17 questioners – or 23 percent – were women. In other words, those women that do ask questions are just as prolific as men. However, a significantly smaller number of women are submitting questions to what could be a beneficial platform - why is this?

It turns out that the underrepresentation of women’s voices is a result of SWAPO MPs’ apparent reluctance to ask questions. The women MPs of opposition parties are fully represented: each woman MP from the opposition asked at least one question in 2017 (for a total of 38, as noted above). As SWAPO MPs do not really engage in the process of asking questions, the low percentage of women questioners mirrors the percentage of women MPs among the opposition. None of SWAPO’s 21 women backbenchers asked a question in 2017.

Women’s issues were underrepresented in the questions asked. Only 3 out of the 159 questions in 2017 focused on women’s issues. It is worth noting that written questions are not the only way Parliament debates issues – oral questions and motions, which are not studied here, may have seen a more prominent focus on gender issues. In terms of formal questions, however, gender was a marginal issue.

<sup>2</sup> In August, the number rose to 48, as Paula Kooper replaced Bernadus Swartbooi, who had been recalled from Parliament after clashing with party leadership

<sup>3</sup> This is arguably skewed, like much else of the data, by Apilus Auchab’s prolific question-asking. If we removed his 42 questions, women would have a much healthier share of 33 percent – though still below their level of representation in the National Assembly.

**Table 4: All questions on gender submitted in 2017**

No.	Asker	Question Topic (paraphrased)
24	Van den Heever (PDM)	Gender-Based Violence: after reports of abuse, do police or social workers do follow-ups? Apart from formal complaints are there other ways for social workers or police to intervene?
53	Van den Heever (PDM)	Child Marriage: What the Gender Ministry's stance on cultural practices which promote marriages, and particularly girls as young as 8 years old being 'promised' to much older men? Has the ministry researched the frequency of child marriages and other cultural practices that could be harmful?
117	Auchab (UDF)	Breast-feeding: What is the Health Ministry doing to make the proportion of children under the age of six that are exclusively breastfed reach 50 percent by 2025? How far is the Ministry with the drafting of the breastfeeding policy? How often is it communicating with health workers and women about breastfeeding?

The lack of focus on women's issues is disappointing, but Namibia is not unique in this regard. In 1997, the number of women MPs in the British Parliament doubled.<sup>xv</sup> Still, in a study of parliamentary questions in the 1997/98 session of that Parliament, Bird finds that "only 1 per cent [of questions] included the terms "women", "men", and/or "gender."<sup>xvi</sup> 27 percent of MPs did submit a question including the above terms, but their submissions paled in comparison with those on other topics.<sup>xvii</sup>

Both in the UK and in Namibia, women MPs asked more questions on women's or gender issues than their male counterparts. However, as most women MPs are members of the question-averse SWAPO, the total number of questions dealing with gender issues remained very low. The implication, at least in terms of questions, is that an increase in women in Parliament does not necessarily mean that women's issues are discussed more – at least, not to the degree one might expect.

While this could be considered troubling, Parliament should not depend on women MPs to adequately address gender issues. It is often expected that an increase in women will result in a greater emphasis on women's issues, but it is counterproductive to the project of gender equality to expect only women to address gender, letting men off the hook and limiting women's political participation to gender-related issues. Instead, in 2017 the women MPs in the National Assembly raised issues spanning a broad range of topics, including the land resettlement scheme, illicit capital outflows, and tax evasion. This suggests that women in Parliament are not just addressing areas that are traditionally seen as 'softer' and associated with femininity, such as education, arts, and health.

The question-asking mechanism can be considered an example of gender entryism, a term for when women are inserted into spaces (in this case, Namibia's legislature), without said spaces necessarily transforming in other ways. Gender entryism in this case assumes that women MPs have the same level of social and political mobility as their male counterparts, and will therefore participate equally. This entryist approach is referred to by feminist academic Amina Mama as developmental feminism, which views gender in development as an almost apolitical, statistic driven agenda, and assumes that as long as there is descriptive representation, the interests of women are secured.<sup>xviii</sup> However, as discussed above, descriptive representation does not necessarily translate into substantive representation. Has Namibia made any meaningful progress if women are now instated through measures such as SWAPO's 50/50 mandate, but do not agitate for the interests of the national community of women in processes like the question session? A Parliament that better represents the interests of women will require a broader shift in discourse and attitude, in addition to a larger number of women MPs.

## Does Question Time Promote Accountability?

Studies from a variety of countries suggest that parliamentary questions are "somewhat useful for holding the government to account."<sup>xix</sup> Does this assertion hold in the Namibian context? When analysing the content of questions posed by MPs, and the answers provided by the executive, some of the limitations of this parliamentary accountability strategy quickly become apparent.

Firstly, the quality of evidence on both sides of the questioning process is sometimes cause for concern. Often, those posing questions provide only unspecific sources such as 'the media' or make use of anecdotal examples. More importantly, questions are often phrased in a way that is ambiguous, allowing the respondent to evade the issue in question. For example, Apus Auchab asked about State-Owned Enterprises:

“Can the Minister share with this August house the concern of the Government over a combined staff complement of ±14,500 and the decision of the Government to move ahead with plans to make parastatals more viable?” (Question 37)

That sort of vagueness allows the respondent to answer in whatever way they want, undermining the effectiveness of parliamentary questions. When Veikko Nekundi of SWAPO asked the Minister of Mines and Energy “Is this how Nored think [sic] it has stood by its Mission?” – presumably implying that the electricity supplier had violated its mission – this was an opportunity for the Minister to reply “The mission of Nored is to supply and distribute quality as well as affordable electricity through best practices, innovation and technology” (Question 19). When Apius Auchab asked the Prime Minister whether “the target of creating a minimum of 1000 jobs by December 2016 has been met,” she responded that investment commitments, “together with the promotion of inclusive growth will translate into creation of decent job opportunities for our citizens” (responding to question 116).<sup>xxi</sup>

To an extent, poorly written questions reflect the capacity constraints faced by MPs more generally, who are struggling with a lack of research and other support staff. In European parliaments, where MPs can draw upon much larger institutional resources, they also tend to ask more questions than in Namibia. For example, between 2005 and 2010, 50 British backbench MPs tabled over 16,000 questions.

Meanwhile, Ministerial responses sometimes showcase an impatience with questions they are asked. Minister of Mines and Energy, Obeth Kandjoze, responding to questions about state-owned diamond marketer NAMDIA, bemoaned the “figment of the imagination of very creative writers of fiction,” and complained that “nefarious elements are deliberately taking advantage of the ignorance of the public... to peddle malicious lies and fabrications” (responding to Question 51 posed by Mike Kavekatora).

A key problem with parliamentary questions is that Ministers can avoid actually answering questions, while those posing questions have no power to compel a full response. Firstly, Ministers can easily postpone answering a question. This means that important issues are often not addressed at all for many weeks. When it comes to their actual answers, Ministers can easily get away with saying very little of actual substance. Take for example an evasive answer given by Minister of Finance Calle Schlettwein, on the topic of financial mismanagement over the Public Service Employee Medical Aid Scheme (PSEMAS). When asked whether the use of funds for purposes other than what is intended would amount to theft or fraud, Schlettwein simply reiterated that PSEMAS uses its 5 percent member contribution as intended. Once a question has been tabled and a careful response is issued by the relevant Ministry, there exists no channel for furthering the topic or debating the validity of data presented. Supplementary questions are subject to the discretion of the Speaker, which means the only ‘follow-up’ mechanism remains to simply re-ask a question at a later date. Other countries’ experience mirrors Namibia in that the quality of answers can vary. In a study on the European Parliament, Raunio notes that “often the Commission fails to do its homework properly, leading to vague and imprecise answers.”<sup>xxii</sup>

If parliamentary questions are ultimately flawed as an accountability mechanism, however, this is because of a more profound structural issue: namely, the dominance of SWAPO in the National Assembly. As discussed above, the vast majority of MPs are SWAPO members, and the majority of SWAPO MPs are members of the executive. Of course parliamentary questions “can also be asked by majority MPs in order to control the government and, in some cases, to voice dissent.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In Namibia, however, as discussed above, a mere 8 questions of 159 were asked by SWAPO. With SWAPO asking only 5 percent of questions, and with all of Namibia’s Ministers and Deputy Ministers in the National Assembly belonging to SWAPO, the questioning process is almost always of a cross-party nature. It is therefore an attempt at a cross-party accountability measure rather than a legislative-executive one.

## Should Parliamentary Questions Make for Good TV?

The act of asking questions is almost inherently confrontational. As we have seen, questions are usually asked by opposition MPs, and often with the aim of confronting Ministers about sub-par delivery. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that discussions during question time can sometimes become heated. MPs unsatisfied with the answers provided will sometimes complain and follow-up, and sometimes discussion will escalate to the degree that the speaker intervenes to guide (and sometimes end) the discussion. This happens in other places too, often even more raucously. The House of Commons in the UK has become notorious for its “Prime Minister’s Question Time,” a boisterous session every Wednesday

in which the opposition and ruling party backbenchers question the Prime Minister, often with large amounts of heckling from both sides, and which is broadcast live on television. In a widely-shared clip from 2011, the Speaker of the House can be heard shouting “order” eight times over a loud tangle of voices before admonishing the Children’s Minister to “try to calm down and behave like an adult” or else leave.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Question time in the National Assembly is also broadcast live, as are other days in Parliament, by NBC2. However, it usually makes for somewhat less riveting television as the discussions are not nearly as spectacular as those in the UK. One of the reasons for this difference is that the rules in the UK are a lot looser than in Namibia: while MPs have to submit their primary questions, the Prime Minister “does not know the topics of the topics of the supplementary questions – and indeed can gain no clue from the content of the primary questions.” In Namibia, the rules governing questions are a lot stricter, and the Speaker would not ordinarily permit a follow-up question on another topic.<sup>4</sup>

There are varying opinions on which style is better. Some would argue that dramatising politics cheapens democracy, while some people who have seen the Namibian Parliament in action already come away disappointed with what they perceive as a poor level of debate. As Rob Salmond puts it, “the type of political debate frequently seen in [question time] – deliberately simplistic, overtly combative, *ad hominem* – is sometimes decried as a perversion of democracy and an indication of how it has fallen victim to shrinking attention spans and shallow populism.” Would allowing more confrontational and contentious debate turn people away from Parliament and reduce its esteem in the view of Namibians?

Probably not. Around the world, and in Namibia too, people are already sceptical of politics. A robust question-and answer session is unlikely to change many opinions. Instead, sessions with “open, accessible debate should help induce citizens to engage with politics by providing them with an information-laden spectacle.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Salmond finds that countries with open question sessions tend to have citizens with higher levels of political knowledge and electoral turnout.<sup>xxix</sup> If leaders engage in “jargon-free debate,” he writes, it can help citizens stay engaged with politics between elections.<sup>xxx</sup>

After all, not a lot of people think that elections, with their festival-like rallies and colourful speeches devalue politics. Why not keep the spectacle alive between elections? The key point, of course, is that while question time might feature spectacle, at its core there is an exchange of information. Namibia’s question time – and parliament more broadly – might be criticised for its level of discourse, but conduct is not the problem.

In reality, Parliamentary questions exemplify the best and the worst of Namibian democracy. They offer a forum where government can be held to account, a regular opportunity for Members of Parliament – who represent citizens, after all – to ask for information and demand services in the name of their constituents. As a regular ritual of accountability, parliamentary questions have normalised the practice of questioning government officials’ performance – or at least one way of doing so, in one particular place. The importance of this should not be understated. At the same time, parliamentary questions also illustrate the gap between theory and practice when it comes to democratic practices. Questions are still dominated by men, even after an influx of women Members of Parliament in 2014. Several opposition parties focus on narrow interests, with only one or two parties trying to cover a lot of thematic growth. A lack of resources and skills leads to sometimes ineffective questions, while Ministers can find ways to skirt accountability when they do not want to address the issue raised head on. Much like other facets of our democracy, parliamentary questions are an imperfect instrument – but one that shows its latent promise nonetheless.

<sup>4</sup> Namibia’s rules are on the stricter end of the spectrum. France and Switzerland do not allow surprise questions either, and in Belgium Ministers do not have to answer surprise questions. In Denmark, Spain, and Canada, for example, more open rules also resemble the open British style (see Salmond).

## References

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- <sup>ii</sup> Martin, “Parliamentary Questions, the Behaviour of Legislators, and the Function of Legislatures,” 259.
- <sup>iii</sup> see Martin, 261 for some examples.
- <sup>iv</sup> Martin, 259.
- <sup>v</sup> [http://ippr.org.na/?post\\_type=publication&p=3981&preview=true](http://ippr.org.na/?post_type=publication&p=3981&preview=true)
- <sup>vi</sup> National Assembly of Namibia, “Standing Rules and Orders” (2005), 10.
- <sup>vii</sup> Standing Rules and Orders of the National Assembly 2005, 50.
- <sup>viii</sup> See also Raunio, “Parliamentary Questions in the European Parliament,” 357–58.
- <sup>ix</sup> see for example Frederico Links, Ndeshi Fikameni, and Michael Hasheela, “Access Denied: Access to Information in Namibia.”
- <sup>x</sup> Rozenberg and Martin, “Questioning Parliamentary Questions,” 396.
- <sup>xi</sup> Raunio, “Parliamentary Questions in the European Parliament,” 365.
- <sup>xii</sup> Raunio, 377.
- <sup>xiii</sup> see Maximilian Weylandt, “SOE Governance in Namibia: Will a Hybrid System Work?”
- <sup>xiv</sup> see also Maximilian Weylandt, “Public Enterprise Governance in Namibia: An Updated Situation Analysis” (Institute for Public Policy Research, September 2017), <http://www.ippr.org.na/publication/public-enterprise-governance-namibia-updated-situation-analysis/>.
- <sup>xv</sup> Bird, “Gendering Parliamentary Questions,” 353.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Bird, 355.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bird, 355.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Amina Mama, “Demythologising Gender in Development: Feminist Studies in African Contexts,” *IDS Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2004.tb00165.x>.
- <sup>xix</sup> See Saalfeld, “Parliamentary Questions as Instruments of Substantive Representation” for a discussion of this issue in regards to racial minorities in the UK’s House of Commons.
- <sup>xx</sup> Martin, “Parliamentary Questions, the Behaviour of Legislators, and the Function of Legislatures,” 261.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Saalfeld, “Parliamentary Questions as Instruments of Substantive Representation.”
- <sup>xxii</sup> Raunio, “Parliamentary Questions in the European Parliament,” 363.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Rozenberg and Martin, “Questioning Parliamentary Questions,” 400.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Staff Reporter, “Order? How Speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow Fails to Keep Control of ‘the Children.’”
- <sup>xxv</sup> Salmond, “Parliamentary Question Times,” 323.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Salmond, 338.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Salmond, 321.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Salmond, “Parliamentary Question Times.”
- <sup>xxx</sup> Salmond, 322.



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## About Democracy Report

Democracy Report is a project of the IPPR which analyses and disseminates information relating to the legislative agenda of Namibia's Parliament. The project aims to promote public participation in debates concerning the work of Parliament by publishing regular analyses of legislation and other issues before the National Assembly and the National Council. Democracy Report is funded by the Embassy of Finland.

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The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) is a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to deliver independent, analytical, critical yet constructive research on social, political and economic issues that affect development in Namibia. The IPPR was established in the belief that development is best promoted through free and critical debate informed by quality research.



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