

Review: Henning Melber, *Understanding Namibia. The Trials of Independence*, London, C. Hurst & Co, 2014.

The publication of Hennig Melber's monograph *Understanding Namibia* could not have come at a better moment. Launched in October 2014, less than two months before Namibia's sixth parliamentary and presidential elections, it will certainly be of great interest to Namibia aficionados and Namibia researchers. With the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Republic of Namibia in March 2015, it was the optimal window of opportunity to publish a comprehensive review of the achievements and shortcomings of Namibia's development since 1990.

By profession, Melber is a political scientist. His monograph therefore focuses on the post-colonial transformation of Namibia from an apartheid regime to a democracy and the simultaneous metamorphosis of SWAPO from a national liberation movement to a political party. The result is a very well researched study based on a meticulous evaluation of an enormous amount of primary and secondary sources, including a large number of publications which the author had himself contributed over three decades.

The book consists of nine text chapters with a total of 187 pages, complemented by 62 (!) pages of annotations in which Melber comments on almost 600 (!) sources. Looking back at 25 years of development in Namibia the author does not shy away from calling a 'spade a spade'. Melber's evaluation is excellent from an academic point of view

and at the same time unsparing and uncompromisingly outspoken. From the first sentences of his personal foreword it is quite clear that the author did not write this book from the position of a casual bystander, but from the perspective of a committed scholar-activist who was himself directly involved in and contributed to the process he has now analysed in this book:

"Understanding Namibia might be an exploratory journey which documents the soul-searching effort of illustrating a misunderstanding. What follows could be read as a testimony reflecting the disappointment, if not frustration, over the erroneous belief that the anti-colonial struggle for emancipation was supposed to be mainly in the interest of and for the benefit of the majority of the oppressed, the destitute and the marginalised." (p. ix)

The selection and sequence of the chapters do not follow the usual structure one might expect (i.e. chronological or sectoral). Instead, Melber selects for each chapter a specific topic of particular importance.

"The Way to Independence" (Chapter 1) is a review of the time before 1990. It links Melber's book to Marion Wallace's *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*.¹ In Chapter 2 "*Struggle Mentality as National Gospel*", the author investigates why for many Namibians, the SWAPO party, the state, the government and even the nation form – at least psychologically – an indivisible entity: "The Party is the

¹ Marion Wallace with John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.

Family, the Nation and the State” (p. 35).

Chapter 3 “Consolidating Political Dominance” describes how SWAPO extended and cemented its political dominance after coming to power, a process which over the years has led to a ‘de-facto’ one-party state. Melber shows that this process is not just a result of overwhelming SWAPO dominance, but at least as much a consequence of the extremely poor performance of the opposition parties which have failed miserably in developing an alternative political option for the voters.

Chapter 4 “Democracy Made in Namibia” takes a critical look at the SWAPO’s understanding of democracy, using in particular the Namibian government’s reaction to the Caprivi Secession attempt as an example. Chapter 5 “Land Matters” reviews Namibia’s problems and achievements in implementing the country’s land reform programme by comparing the government’s original objectives after independence with the realities on the ground. Chapter 6 “Whose Economy?” presents a similar stock-taking of Namibia’s overall economic development.

Chapter 7 “New Elites – Old Inequalities” compares the originally quite ‘socialistic’ objectives of SWAPO (e.g. with regard to poverty alleviation) with the present realities on the ground. He reminds reader and government that 25 years after independence a majority of Namibians still live in bitter poverty while at the same time a new (black) elite has evolved.

In Chapter 8 “Namibian Internationalism”, the author analyses Namibia’s

role in the international community of states, with a focus on Namibia’s tolerance of and cooperation with several authoritarian countries in Africa and Asia. The ninth and last chapter “What next” summarises Melber’s overall assessment and presents the author’s view on how Namibia may (probably) develop in the coming years.

What distinguishes this book from those of other scholars and makes it special? Firstly, the author has access to a multitude of primary sources which are difficult to track down and get hold of for a normal researcher. Secondly, having himself been part of Namibia’s development for many years, the author knows the country inside out in every respect and, even more importantly, he knows SWAPO’s power structures from the inside.

Overall, Henning Melber comes to a quite critical overall assessment, in which the negative clearly outweighs the positive. Not everyone will agree with this. After all, there are also quite a number of achievements, especially when one compares Namibia to other African countries. Namibia has one of the most liberal constitutions in world, it is Africa’s No. 1 in the press freedom ranking and its citizens enjoy a freedom of speech which most other African countries can only dream of. Politically and economically the country has been remarkably stable over 25 years. And, last but not least, Namibia’s presidents – unlike most other African rulers – hand over power to a democratically elected successor, when their term of office ends.

Melber's book does give credit for these achievements. But his performance yardstick is not how the country has performed when compared to other African countries, nor what Namibia *did* achieve, but rather what the country *could have achieved* in the last 25 years. Whether this is a realistic yardstick to evaluate a young country in transition depends on the personal perspective. For a non-involved foreign observer, this may seem somewhat severe. Melber, on the other hand, spent 14 years in exile for supporting SWAPO's liberation struggle. When he eventually returned to Namibia in 1989, he came with great hopes for a better future for this country, many of which did not materialise. Hence, from the author's perspective, the failures and missed opportunities may well outweigh the country's achievements much more clearly.

However, whether one shares Melber's critical assessment or not, his *Understanding Namibia* is a milestone of political research on Namibia. Apart from the wealth of detailed inside information, Melber's book is thought-provoking and spurs the reader on to reflect on Namibia's past. *Understanding Namibia*, perhaps the most important political book on Namibia at present, should therefore be a 'must read' for all decision makers in Namibia and it certainly is essential reading for everyone who really wants to understand the country.

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