

# Lessons from Namibia

Namibia is not a model for change inside South Africa, but it holds important lessons for understanding the process of change, nation-building and approaches to conflict resolution, says Antony Goldman, research fellow at the SA Institute for International Affairs.



Prof John Barratt and Ms Nora Chase.

**AN ATTEMPT** to draw elusive (irreconcilable?) parallels between what has passed in Namibia and what awaits the Republic failed at a conference at Wits University in April, organised by Idasa and the SAIRR.

That the task was impossible should have been clear after the opening speech of Idasa director Van Zyl Slabbert, who pointed out 11 fundamental differences between the two scenarios.

In so many ways, of course, the experience of transition in Namibia has been entirely unique. As Slabbert explained, the international community had a legitimate role to play in fostering change in the former South African colony. This manifested itself in the independence settlement, UN resolution 435, which was the result of prolonged international mediation.

The birth of independent Namibia was not, as State President F W de Klerk asserted in the last few minutes of colonial rule, "an African solution to an African problem" but the result of painstaking negotiations which involved not only African states and the UN, but a good deal of bilateral diplomacy on the part of the major Western powers, the Soviet Union and its Cuban allies.

The international community will clearly play a far less prominent role in bringing about change in South Africa. No solution will be found without the active involvement of at least the major (if not all) internal political movements.

The fact that there exist in Namibia no parties to the left of Swapo, comprises another fundamental contrast between the process of change in Namibia and that in South Africa.

Nevertheless, an understanding of the process of change and an awareness of the approaches adopted to conflict resolution in Namibia is instructive in general terms. Therefore, the process of nation-building in Namibia, examined on its own merits rather than by way of developing an insight into future changes in South Africa, holds important lessons.

Perhaps the conference's identity crisis became inevitable when only a handful of the 14 invited speakers elected to stick to their given topics.

Gerson Kajimune, a lecturer in economics at the University of Namibia, provided an erudite analysis of the nature of the Namibian economy and the distortions it inherits from its colonial past. But he failed to address the truly fundamental issue of whether the new nation's economic policy can ensure both the redistribution of wealth and economic growth.

Even in the workshop which followed, debate on this critical issue was hijacked by sterile and predictable abstracted arguments on the merits of the free-market, and little insight was forthcoming.

Mr John Ya Otto, general secretary of the National Union of Namibian Workers, speaking on the subject "How are union rights compatible with independence?", clumsily side-stepped the apparent contradictions between his stated position that his movement was truly independent, while at the same time being heavily involved in the organisation of Swapo, and identifying unequivocally with its political agenda.

Wolfgang Werner from the University of Cape Town, addressing the land question, provided a neat and keenly argued analysis of the pattern of land alienation during the colonial period.

But he admitted, with a commendable degree of frankness, that it was not yet possible to look seriously at the prospects for land reform, since Swapo did not yet have an explicit land policy or a clearly articulated statement of intention. Nor indeed were any reliable statistics available.

Andre du Pisani of the SA Institute for International Affairs provided a thoughtful paper on how the achievement of Namibian independence may alter the political landscape of Southern Africa.

He highlighted Namibia's potential role in mediating the conflict in Angola and the new dimension that would be added to regional bodies - the SADCC and the Frontline states on the one hand, and the South African Customs Union on the other.

He recalled the Namibian president's offer on independence day to assist the process of change in South Africa itself, but did not shy away from the tensions which could still arise in the region as a consequence of South Africa's stubborn occupation of Walvis Bay.

Du Pisani was followed by Jackson

Mthembu of the United Democratic Front. Speaking as "an activist", Mthembu distorted (as he later conceded during questions) the nature of Swapo's difficulties in organising its election campaign after the return of its exiled leadership, last year.

He chose to overlook entirely what was described by Namibia National Front vice-president Nora Chase as the valiant struggle waged by Swapo's internal wing and the active support of the labour movement under South African rule.

**IT WAS** not until the opening session of the second day, when Chase addressed the conference, that any speaker had been prepared to admit that with Namibia's independence only a month old, it was far too early to judge the new government's performance.

New governments, she argued, are usually given a 100-day period of grace. Perhaps, though, it was more difficult for some of the key speakers to talk freely about the process of nation-building when so many clearly had their eyes on desirable jobs under the new administration.

But the conference did have its rewarding moments. The session on "The challenges of building a single nation" was easily the most successful and inspiring of the two days. Both Chase and Keith Vermeulen of the Namibia Council of Churches spoke well, provoking some excellent questions and a lively debate.

Chase argued that the government appeared far too complacent in addressing the aspirations of those who had voted it into office last November. Many in Namibia were beginning to feel that the concept of national reconciliation was merely a euphemism for appeasing the interests of the white community, commercial farmers and international capital. The difference between "pragmatic policies" and "selling-out" was becoming increasingly difficult to recognise.

A question from the floor raised an issue relating to the constitution which had unfortunately been overlooked during Gerard Erasmus's paper the previous day: How could Swapo deliver the perceived fruits of independence when the constitution, commendable though it may be, had been superimposed on the existing colonial bu-

reaucracy?

The new government does not have full access to the state, nor its resources. As Chase agreed, a whole package of legislation will have to be passed by the National Assembly (affecting for example, military, police and intelligence services) before the fundamental changes needed to satisfy popular aspirations can be achieved.

In the meantime, much of the old status quo will have to be preserved if the government is to function at all effectively.

Vermeulen explained that the role of the churches is likely to be of critical importance, given the intensity of religious feeling, especially in the north of the country.

Nor did he shy away from the contradictions inherent in this role: the church is to play a key role in English language training, but will at the same time adopt a less hierarchical structure and will employ indigenous languages more energetically so that it may reach out to the needs of the people of the new nation.

The women of Namibia, too, must be involved actively in the process of nation-building, as was explained to the conference by Nasilongo Elago, logistics officer of the Repatriation, Resettlement and Reconstruction Committee of the Council of Churches.

Black women in Namibia had been triply oppressed under South African rule: by race, by sex and by class. They had fought side by side with their male colleagues during the guerilla war. Those who had not gone into exile had suffered greatly both physically and psychologically as a result of the fighting.

If national reconciliation was to be at all successful, the process had to begin with and actively involve the women of the new nation.

**UNFORTUNATELY**, the conference seemed less interested in the precise role that women will play in reconstructing Namibia than in indulging in a dreary abstract debate on the liberation of women in general terms, a debate which lagged some way behind current and more sophisticated trends of feminist thinking.

Perhaps the most well-received paper of the conference was delivered by Appeal Court Judge Nick McNally from Zimbabwe, who had been asked to speak about whites in transition.

Ten years of majority rule in Zimbabwe led McNally to the conclusion that there really had been no need for soul-searching or identity crises on the part of the whites in that country. It was necessary only to abandon exclusivity and racist attitudes.

Antony Goldman is visiting research fellow at the SA Institute for International Affairs.

## LETTERS

From Page 3

measurement of performance. Available statistics have proved unreliable and no form of accounting exists to conduct any sensible analysis of profitability. This of course has led to a misallocation of resources on a catastrophic scale.

I was fortunate to be in central and Eastern Europe during the last three months of 1989 and witnessed the dramatic collapse of socialism. Never shall I allow myself to be duped into believing the moral and economic claims of socialism. The Berlin Wall failed to blinker millions of people in East Germany, only an awesome security apparatus managed to suppress them. The Wall is down now and the big lie is out.

The leader article of *The Economist* (18 - 24 November 1989) entitled "The Soviet Economy" is explicit and not amenable to misinterpretation. It states: "Even if Stalin never existed, communism stands condemned as a historically unnecessary stage on the road from capitalism to capitalism. It promised the moon. It cannot even deliver a pair of jeans."

Many South Africans have chosen to insulate themselves against the significance of these events. With a perverse sort of inverse racism they say: "But African socialism is different."

There is perhaps light at the end of the tunnel. Professor Terreblanche is quoted as asking: "If nationalisation is theft, then what is apartheid?" *Touche*, Sampie, you're warm.

Keith Saffy  
Johannesburg

### Searching for a solution

From Page 5

it were to be employed, must be to make the manufacturing sector more efficient within the objectives set by the state and not to supply the state with a bundle of resources.

Erwin also had some strong words about the present privatisation and regulation policies of the government. He said the privatisation drive was merely handing over profitable state corporations to big conglomerates. His speculation was that the resultant profits would be invested in the financial sector or overseas rather than in factories which employ people.

Deregulation was "a disaster . . . which is purportedly designed to increase employment and lower costs. The evidence that it is increasing employment is contradictory to say the least. What we do know . . . is that it is creating a wide range of dangerous and exploitative employment conditions".

In his conclusion, he addressed the issue of who should lead the change in the economy. He said that the majority of people, rightly or wrongly, would be unwilling to see this role entrusted to business which was not perceived to represent their interests. He said Cosatu definitely saw itself playing a role in shaping economic policies, "through research, consultation and propositions which we are prepared to discuss with anybody."

Gary Cullen  
Regional co-ordinator

## Building bridges

**SOUTH AFRICA** is a country of racial tension where organisations are formed on an ongoing basis to address the question of reconciliation.

We in Pretoria are thankful for structures such as Idasa, where Paul Zondo has done wonderful work in bringing us closer to the white community. Other structures which assist in building bridges have meant that representatives from our organisations have had access to formerly alienated audiences. For example, *Studente vir 'n Demokratiese Samelewing* (SDS) has enabled us to take the platform at the University of Pretoria.

Experience has taught us that any effective campaign must focus on specific issues, which is why we took on the "buses for all in Pretoria" campaign. This became meaningful and workable through the assistance and mutual support of our comrades in the white suburbs.

The release of the African National Congress leadership, the unbanning of the ANC and the SACP, the South African withdrawal from Namibia, the growing economic crisis and the growing rejection of the bantustan regimes have all been momentous events. In the light of these, the UDF wishes to call for Idasa and other white structures to consolidate their contact with other whites in Pretoria, noting that this is important work for them.

The UDF will always stand on the side of the exploited and together we need to move away from the notion that freedom is a privilege. It is our right.

Siphitwe Ngwenya  
UDF Publicity Secretary, Pretoria

## Censorship rests on collaboration

**HANS** Pienaar's article on censorship in your March issue ends by asking how "to push the censorship barriers back further". The answer does not lie in articles which examine at length, along a conservative-liberal spectrum, the decisions of Directorate of Publications bureaucrats.

Publications Act censorship exists on the strength of long-term collaboration and professional failure from librarians, booksellers and those who employ them. When they adopt independent, professional standards, the system will collapse.

More important, and rarely discussed, is statutory censorship enforced by legislation which prohibits the disclosure and publication of official information covering vital aspects of South African life: the security forces and the armaments and nuclear industries, for instance.

If South Africa is to become a democracy there will have to be a constitutionally entrenched democratic right to freedom of information which underpins meaningful participative government. The debate needs to consider not the latest fashion among obscure Cape Town functionaries; but to concentrate on broad issues concerning the relationship between information and society.

Christopher Merrett  
Pietermaritzburg