

# **ONE-MAN ONE-VOTE IN NAMIBIA — WHAT IT MEANS**

**by Peter Mackintosh**

The Vorster regime has decreed that Namibia shall receive its "independence" by December 31, 1978, and that this will be preceded by the election of a constituent assembly to draw up a new constitution for Namibia. If possible it wants to stage this election by agreement with the five Western powers with whom it has been conducting negotiations, and by implication with the agreement also of the United Nations and SWAPO. But if it cannot obtain such agreement, it intends to stage the elections on its own and reach an 'internal settlement' in Namibia on the same lines as Smith is attempting in Zimbabwe.

In proposing elections, South Africa pretends to be placing the whole issue of Namibian independence before the arbitration of the inhabitants of the territory. But the conditions which it is laying down for the holding of any elections make it clear that what South Africa is aiming for is the installation in Namibia of a regime which will be amenable to dictation from Pretoria.

The history of decolonisation since the last war has demonstrated that by themselves elections are not a mechanism for the transfer of power. In most colonies, elections have been held *before* independence because this gave the imperial power the ability to ensure that whatever government ensued would pursue policies acceptable to it. The South African Government is in a hurry to stage elections in Namibia while it is still in a position to determine the outcome. The longer the delay, the more power will slip out of the hands of the white majority, whose unity has already been fractured by the events of the last year.

South Africa's record of consultation of the peoples of Namibia since it was first entrusted with the mandate after the first world war is not an impressive one. For the most part the views of the black majority were ignored on the grounds that they were too backward to take political decisions. At the time when the fate of the former German colonies was first under discussion at the League of Nations, Smuts stated in a memorandum that South West Africa (as it was then called) was "inhabited by barbarians, who not only cannot possibly govern themselves, but to whom it would be impracticable to apply any ideas of political self-determination in the European sense". His plea for incorporation of the territory in South Africa, rejected at that time, was repeated when the United Nations discussed the future of the mandate in 1946, Smuts declaring again that the people of the territory were so backward that he could not envisage South West African self-government at any time in the future.

Smuts not only defended the record of South Africa's administration of its mandate (frequently criticised by the Mandates Commission), but also claimed that all sections of the population of South West Africa were in favour of incorporation. As far as the whites were concerned, he said, they had always voted for incorporation. And he went on to say (ignoring his previous declaration that the blacks were incapable of forming political opinions and taking political decisions) that the blacks were also in favour of incorporation. Denied the vote, how had they expressed this opinion?

A Government White Paper explained:

"The consultation of the Non-Europeans necessarily presented certain difficulties. It was therefore decided to entrust consultation to officials who had the necessary experience in Native Affairs . . . . Having regard to Native custom and susceptibilities, it was arranged to consult the different tribes as units and not as individuals".

In other words, the chief of the tribe, appointed and paid by the government, cast his vote on behalf of all the members of the tribe and signed a memorial as follows:

"We and our people wish the following matters to be made known to the peoples of the world:

"(1) That our people have been happy and have prospered under the rule of the Government of the Union of South Africa and that we should like that Government to continue to rule us;

"(2) That we do not wish any other government or people to rule us; and

"(3) That we would like our people to become part of the Union of South Africa".

The result of the 1946 referendum was given as follows:

For	208,850
Against	33,520
Not consulted	56,790

The White Paper explained that this number of 56,790 not consulted was due to the fact that "they are scattered on farms over the whole territory and because of the absence of authorised tribal headmen".

The very form of the questions makes it clear that the alternative of United Nations trusteeship was never even presented to the people. The Memorial spoke of "any other government or people", but under UN trusteeship there was no question of another power or people ruling in Namibia. Other passages from the White Paper indicate that tribes were led to believe that the alternative proposed for them would be similar to the brutal German colonial administration. Under the circumstances, those who voted "yes" opted for what they regarded as the lesser of two evils.

Realising that the world had not been impressed by this referendum, the Government conducted another one in 1947 and in September announced the results.

For incorporation	193,400
Against	31,800
Undecided	33,700
Not consulted	77,600 (including 10,000 temporary workers from Angola)

That made a total of 111,300 (in addition to the 31,800 definitely against) who could not be claimed as supporters of incorporation. The Government statement, however, blatantly claimed that "a large number of these are known to favour incorporation", and said they included 11,000 inhabitants of the Eastern Caprivi Zipfel "who, when originally consulted, expressed themselves unanimously in favour of incorporation". Those tribes voting against incorporation were conceded by the Government to be "in favour of some form of trusteeship".

### **Vote-rigging**

Throughout the period of 'consultation', it was impossible for independent observers from South Africa or elsewhere to enter the reserves and check what was happening. But in the police zone, where the white population is congregated, it was clear the overwhelming majority of Africans were against incorporation. A special correspondent of the *Cape Times* who went as far as Windhoek wrote:

"It is generally conceded now that the consultations carried out among the tribes before UNO met were rather hasty. Although an honest attempt was made to sound Native opinion and the tribes were encouraged freely to express their own feelings, it is now realised, months afterwards, that thousands of tribesmen were still bewildered about the choice put to them".

And who can wonder at this when chiefs, who are little better than civil servants, are allowed to vote "unanimously" for their people; and when referendums are conducted by Native Affairs Department officials who can hardly be described as impartial scrutineers before whom it would have been prudent for a chief to express his opposition to the South African Government. Under Proclamation No. 15 of 1928 it was possible for the administration to remove and

deport a chief without any right of appeal, and the South African Government has never shown reluctance to use these powers when it needs to.

If this was the contempt for African opinion shown by the Smuts Government, how much worse was the situation under the Nationalist Government that succeeded it. But as SWAPO stepped up the armed struggle for liberation, the Vorster regime has been forced to go through the motions of consulting African opinion — but of course always on tribal lines and often by way of ethnic elections.

Typical has been the experience of Owambo, so-called “homeland” of the Ovambo people who comprise 60% of the African population. In terms of Proclamation R107 of 27 April, 1973, Owambo was declared a “self-governing” area and provision was made for the election of a legislative council comprising 35 appointed and 21 elected members. The election was scheduled to take place on August 1 and 2.

Owambo at the time was experiencing a reign of terror as a result of the operation of Proclamation R17 which had been promulgated the previous year. This emergency law provided for indefinite detention without trial, a ban on all meetings unless authorised in writing by a Native Commissioner, and the banning of individuals. It was also made an offence to make an intimidating statement, to boycott a meeting called by an official, chief or headman and to fail to obey any lawful order given by a chief or headman or to treat him with disrespect.

Proclamation R17 was introduced in February 1972, and by April over 200 people had been detained. During the whole of 1972 a total of 303 persons were detained for periods ranging from 2 to 111 days. Of these 114 were charged with various offences under the regulations and found guilty, 28 were charged and acquitted and 161 were released without any charge having been laid. The chiefs were making the best of their powers by indulging in an orgy of public flogging of their opponents, men and women, on a scale which outraged public opinion throughout the world. SWAPO leaders and supporters were the main victims of Proclamation R17.

One would have thought that these powers were enough to ensure the victory of the government’s puppets in the elections, but just to

make certain, the Legislative Council decided on May 7 that political parties would be allowed in the territory only with the permission of the government. The Owambo government declared itself to be the Owamboland Independence Party (OIP), but no other parties were recognised or allowed to hold meetings. To screen events in the territory from public scrutiny, the Commissioner-General announced on July 27 — a few days before the election was due to take place — that no pressmen would be admitted to the territory except approved members of the South African Press Association.

### **SWAPO Boycott**

Under the circumstances, SWAPO declared a boycott of the elections, maintaining that with all the restrictions in force it was impossible to approach the people freely and without fear. The OIP nominated its full quota of candidates, but they were opposed only in two of the seven tribal areas. Of 50,000 eligible voters from the two areas, only 1,300 went to the polls, the percentage poll being 2.5. Independent candidates gained three seats and the OIP three. All in all, it was a tremendous victory for SWAPO and a defeat for the government. The Commissioner-General of South West Africa, Mr Jannie de Wet, however, said that the low percentage poll, far from proving that the Government's policy was rejected by the people, demonstrated "that a modern election was completely foreign to the Ovambos". Nevertheless, the Government made preparations to repair the damage. A new constitution was promulgated in 1974, again providing for 35 nominated members, but doubling the number of elected members from 21 to 42. Elections were scheduled for 1975 and the Commissioner General (not the Owambo government, note) said that SWAPO would be able to campaign in the elections and that political parties would not have to apply to the Owambo government for the approval of their constitutions.

Proclamation R17, however, remained in force, and under its provisions the government and the chiefs launched a ferocious assault on the people to ensure a better turn-out in the elections. In many areas, tribal chiefs prohibited all political meetings, and SWAPO once again decided that it would not take part in the farce.

The elections were spread over five days, with tribal officials and police in attendance at the polls, allegedly to prevent intimidation, but in fact to exercise intimidation and drag on people to vote.

Through these tactics, the government was able to announce that this time 55% of the electorate had gone to the polls. However, a notable feature was that in the tribal areas, where the chiefs were able to exercise their tyrannical powers unobserved by pressmen or other outsiders, 76% of 85,000 potential voters went to the polls, whereas in the police zone only 4% of 40,000 potential voters went to the polls. The Commissioner General, nevertheless, was apparently satisfied that elections were no longer "foreign" to the Ovambos, and declared at the opening of the new session that, as elected members were now in the majority, there could be no doubt that the Council was constituted on democratic lines and was representative of the people.

This underlying contempt of the Nationalist Party for the democratic process was again displayed in the so-called Turnhalle talks which opened in Windhoek on September 1, 1975. The talks were designed to draw up a new constitution for Namibia which the government hoped would turn aside the wrath of the UN and the international community in general. The very composition of the delegations who attended the Turnhalle talks was a measure of Nationalist insincerity. Delegations were admitted only on an ethnic basis, and those who attended were, in the case of the whites, members of the ruling Nationalist Party, and in the case of the blacks, Government-approved nominees of the various ethnic groups. Political parties like SWAPO which cut across ethnic lines and aimed at a unitary state based on universal suffrage without distinction of tribe or colour were excluded from the proceedings. It is worth noting that when the Turnhalle talks were first proposed, they were rejected by Chief Clemens Kapuuo as undemocratic, though he was later persuaded to change his mind.

Although the proceedings of the Turnhalle conference were held in camera, nothing could hide its true character from the people: it was a charade and a mockery, and could in no way represent the will of the Namibian people, who had never been consulted about it by way of election or referendum. When eventually the Turnhalle conference drew up a complicated plan of government on three tiers

(national, ethnic and local) which entrenched ethnic division and left political and economic power firmly in white hands, the whites quickly registered their approval through a referendum and the proceedings were called off while the black delegates were still arguing about the details.

The Vorster regime had been given to understand quite plainly that the world would not accept the Turnhalle farce, and in July, 1977, appointed Mr Justice Marthinus Steyn as Administrator-General of the territory with instructions to hold elections for a constituent assembly so that Namibia could be proclaimed "independent" on December 31, 1978. To win confidence for his administration, Steyn introduced a few cosmetic reforms. The Mixed Marriages and Immorality Acts were repealed; a uniform education syllabus was proclaimed; Africans were allowed to own land in African townships; the pass laws were abolished, though Africans still required a permit to seek work in urban areas; Proclamation R17 was repealed, though not in areas adjacent to the Angolan border.

These superficial reforms were designed to win confidence from the international community that the conditions for free and fair elections had been brought into being. But for most whites and black in Namibia life continued very much as usual. The relations of property and power remained unchanged. And just how meaningless the reforms were was demonstrated when Administrator Steyn reintroduced emergency rule, with the power to arrest and detain indefinitely, after the assassination of Chief Kapuuo. By the end of April, 1978, most of SWAPO's internal leaders were in detention.

### **Nationalist Dilemma**

The Nationalists in Namibia today are on the horns of a dilemma. They had been forced to change their tactics because of the ever-growing resistance to their policies of the Namibian people, led by SWAPO. Yet in the very process of trying to preserve its monopoly of power, the Nationalist Party found itself split. Almost half of its members in the Legislative Assembly, where it had won a clean sweep of all 18 seats in the last elections, followed Mudge to form his new Republican Party which, though its membership was from the



outset restricted to whites, decided to co-operate with ethnically-minded blacks in the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance. Just as Smith had been forced to work with Muzorewa and Sithole in attempting to bring about an internal settlement in Zimbabwe, so Mudge, as the nominee of the Nationalist Party, realised that he needed black co-operation of some sort if an internal settlement was to be achieved in Namibia.

Addressing a gathering of 500 Potchefstroom University students at the beginning of May, Mudge stressed that there was no need to worry about the planned one-man one-vote election in Namibia because if the DTA came to power it would take steps to ensure that no more one-man one-vote elections were held in the territory.

"After this election every group will have its own representatives to stand in a future election", he said. "They will then form part of the central government. There wouldn't be the need for a one-man one-vote election again because the people would already have agreed in principle to the constitution of the DTA". (*Star* May 2, 1978).

And the DTA constitution is based on ethnic division and Bantustans. So if the racists have their way, Namibia's first one-man one-vote election would also be its last.

Events in Zimbabwe and Namibia make it clear that one-man one-vote elections as planned by the racists and imperialists are not a device for transferring power but for consolidating the power of the ruling class. SWAPO's past experience of racist vote-rigging in elections and referendums has made it sceptical of the possibilities of any free election being held so long as the racists control the administration and police and Namibia is under occupation by South African troops. It has also become clear that the tactic of the ruling racist clique has been to exacerbate tribal antagonisms according to the old imperialist principle of "divide and rule". The aim of the racists is to isolate and destroy SWAPO, whose members and supporters have come under increasing harassment and attack in the reign of terror which has been launched against them in recent months.

SWAPO has also seen through the aims of the western powers in their attempts to negotiate a neo-colonial solution in Namibia. In its political programme adopted at a Central Committee meeting in Lusaka in 1976, SWAPO has boldly proclaimed that "the economic

reconstruction in a free, democratic and united Namibia will have, as its motive force, the establishment of a classless society. The social justice and progress for all is the governing idea behind every SWAPO policy decision. The government of a truly liberated Namibia will, therefore, be called upon to take the following measures:

“(1) Wage the struggle towards the abolition of all forms of exploitation of man by man and the destructive spirit of individualism and aggrandisement of wealth and power by individuals, groups or classes.

“(2) Ensure that all the major means of production and exchange of the country are in the ownership of the people”.

It is clear that the freedom and independence of Namibia can never come from the hands of those who profit from the exploitation of its human and material resources, the owners of Tsumeb and Rossing and the house of De Beers.

SWAPO in Namibia, like the Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe, is determined to continue the armed struggle, not because it is cussed or combative, but because history has demonstrated that the holding of free and fair elections can only follow, not precede the ending of colonialism and the establishment of people's power. The old apparatus of repression and racism must be destroyed before free expression can be given to the popular will.