



Aiming high: Democratic practice in Namibia

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Remarks on the launch of the Election Watch website (www.electionwatch.org.na) April 22 2009

Namibia is entering a two-year-cycle of elections with the National Assembly and Presidential elections due to be held in November 2009 and the Regional and Local Authority elections in the latter part of 2010. This period will be a vital one for Namibia's reputation as one of Africa's most successful democracies. By the end of 2010, Namibia could have considerably enhanced its democratic credentials, having organized four separate ballots successfully in an atmosphere of peace and tolerance. Indeed, Namibia could be a model for many other emerging democracies around the world. We have a chance to showcase our professionalism when it comes to the administration of elections, our fairness when it comes to allowing ruling and opposition parties to compete on a level playing field, and our high levels of tolerance and mutual respect when it comes to enabling various parties to organize their activities without hindrance and to express their views freely.

However, as we all know there have been some dark clouds on Namibia's electoral horizon for several months now. Although such incidents are still isolated, we have had more reports of intimidation and violence than ever before in our history as an independent nation. In addition, the reform of the electoral process, in the form of an amendment bill to the Electoral Act of 1992, has been seriously delayed. This means there is now little time left to review the important changes envisaged for the Electoral Act and for a broad consensus, involving the various parties and civil society, to be reached.

These kinds of challenges mean that there is an urgent need for many actors – from both the political and civil society realms – to work together to ensure Namibia emerges from this two-year electoral cycle as a nation that is showing the way when it comes to democratic practice and political tolerance.

In it is in this context that the IPPR decided to embark on its Election Watch project. As a vehicle for voter education, electoral analysis and monitoring of electoral developments, we would like Election Watch to be an example which others in other countries would want to follow. The inspiration for Election Watch came partly from Africa, where websites and social networking have been used to highlight election flashpoints in countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe, but perhaps more significantly from the web coverage of the 2008 US presidential elections when



websites such as realclearpolitics.com and several others became virtual clearing houses for up-to-the-minute information and analysis on the election campaign.

Election Watch will appear in three different forms – as a regularly updated website, as an electronic bulletin that can be emailed, and as a printed bulletin that will appear in *The Namibian* on a monthly basis. The first printed bulletin was published last month and is available here today. The second will be published next week and will focus on the issues of political tolerance and manifesto writing.

We chose these different formats to ensure that Election Watch reaches the widest possible readership. There are an increasing number of Namibians with internet and email access. According to 2007 data, 27% of Namibians over 16 know what the Internet is and 9 percent use the Internet. With the availability of more advanced mobile phones at reasonable prices it should become much more possible for people to access websites such as Election Watch. This is the technology of the future – not just for the developed world but for us as well. However, we have to be cognizant that many still do not have internet access and therefore we also wanted to produce printed Election Watch material. At the moment, the project is limited to the English language, but we are also looking at producing the bulletin in Afrikaans and Oshiwambo. We see Election Watch as an important contribution from civil society's side to raising voter education and awareness in the coming months.

Election Watch will aim to:

- Provide a vehicle for voter education, including important announcements from the ECN
- Act as an early warning mechanism for possible problems in the electoral process
- Provide briefing information for journalists, students, civil society activists and voters in general
- Provide a platform for civil society's and citizens' views of the electoral process
- Point out positive examples and experiences within the democratic process
- Promote Namibian, African and international benchmarks on elections and democracy such as the Namibian Constitution, the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, and the SADC Principles and Guidelines

Specific issues that will be included on the website and in the bulletin are:

- Electoral Act amendments and debates
- Namibia's political system
- Freedom of association and political tolerance
- Voter registration
- Funding of political parties
- Gender-related issues such as the zebra-system for party lists
- Electoral processes including voting, counting and announcement of results
- The role of civil society in ensuring elections are free and fair
- Role of election observers
- Measures to counter fraud, rigging and other illegal activities during elections
- News emanating from party campaigns
- Party manifestos
- Media coverage including party access to state media

Election Watch will be even-handed and impartial in its approach to the various political parties. Where parties have material available in electronic form we will endeavour to post such documents on the website so that they are available for voters to review as long as the language therein complies with political code of conduct and the Constitution

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website and the printed bulletin possible. In addition, Quantum Computer Solutions should be credited for coming up with an excellent website design.

Election Watch will be interactive website. Citizens can comment on any material that appears on the website. Citizens will also be able to raise any points of concern about the electoral process and questions about the elections which the IPPR's researchers will attempt to follow up with the relevant authorities. At the time of the elections, the website will provide up to date results as released by the ECN.

We hope that the Election Watch website will become the reliable and trusted source on election-related information for Namibians and for a global audience interested in our elections. In so doing, we seek to be part of a broader effort to ensure Namibia's reputation as a democracy that holds regular free and fair elections is enhanced to point where we are an example of best practice not just for Africa but for the world. This is what we all must strive for.



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