

Election Watch X

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MEDIA AND ELECTIONS – A QUESTION OF ACCESS



IN THE DARK ... Before and during elections the role of the media, particularly the news media, becomes especially important in informing and educating the public on political party stances on issues that affect society.

The media has long been held to play a key role in the fostering of democracy, forming a bridge between the governed and governing. So it goes without saying that during elections the role of the news media becomes especially important.

Elections are considered the expression of the will of the people in a democracy and in the run-up to elections it is the media's role to give accurate and balanced coverage and analysis of issues and political parties. This coverage allows the electorate to reach an informed decision on the stances of political parties and individual politicians before marking their ballot paper on election day.

The watchdog role of the media then is seen as important in ensuring free and fair elections.

However, with the National Assembly and Presidential elections looming in November this year, the question has to be asked whether the media is accessible to all political parties, as well as citizens and civil society organisations?

The issue of fair media coverage has already hit the headlines with DTA Secretary General McHenry Venaani accusing the national broadcaster, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), of favouring the ruling Swapo Party in its coverage, while ignoring the campaign activities of opposition parties.

In a letter written to acting NBC Director General, Matthew Gowaseb, Venaani stated: "To our dismal disappointment, your institution is busy with a clear political perpetuation of one-party dominance through everyday covering rallies of the ruling party ..."

Venaani's sentiments echo an often heard complaint, from amongst opposition and alternative political organisations, against the media in general – that the ruling party unfairly receives the bulk of media coverage, not only shortly before elections but in intervening years as well.

A Media Tenor survey of election coverage, from September 1 to November 9 2004, found that the "Swapo Party has the highest volume of coverage", receiving almost 44 percent of coverage across all major media.

More resources means greater access

Countering this claim, media organisations and journalists in general point to the fact that in the run-up to elections, as well as the years leading up to elections, the ruling party is much more active than opposition parties and that the ruling party, having more resources at its disposal, does more campaigning.

Also, they say, coverage is determined by the proportion of support for and representation of political parties, with lesser parties necessarily receiving less coverage.

Another reason mentioned by media organisations, for directing the bulk of coverage to the more prominent political organisations, is that not many media, and not even state-funded media, have the resources and staff for more extensive coverage across the political spectrum.

But while these factors might suggest or contribute to the suspicion that coverage favours the ruling party, the 2004 Media Tenor survey found that coverage of political party platforms in that election year was generally "neutral".

An international dilemma

The question of access to the media before and during elections is not limited to Namibia, though.

In a similar vein as McHenry Venaani's lambasting of the NBC, in the run-up to the South African presidential and parliamentary elections earlier this year, opposition parties accused the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) of extensively and uncritically covering the ruling African National Congress (ANC) agenda, while largely ignoring opposition parties.

For its part, the ANC loudly and continuously accused independent media of trying to publicly embarrass the party and its leader, Jacob Zuma.

And during the lengthy campaigning for the US presidency last year, the major and influential US media organisations were consistently accused of bias towards either the Democratic or Republican agenda and candidates.

Public opinion polls conducted during the US campaign found that a majority of the electorate considered media coverage of the election processes and candidates as not credible.



NEWS FROM THE AFROBAROMETER

Engaged or apathetic?

Are Namibians interested in politics? Asked how interested they were in public affairs, 59 percent of respondents to the Afrobarometer survey said they were either somewhat or very interested. The remaining 41 percent said they were not at all interested or not very interested. The fact that just over 40 percent seem to have little interest in politics appears to go against recent turnout figures for national elections with over 80 percent of the registered electorate voting in 2004.

Some 39 percent of respondents said they never discuss politics with their family and friends, while only 19 percent said they talk about political issues 'frequently'.

The lack of interest in politics is generally higher among women than men – 34 percent of men were very interested in public affairs as compared to 25 percent of women. However, people living in urban areas were slightly less interested in politics than their rural counterparts – 17 percent of urban dwellers discuss politics frequently compared to 20 percent of rural dwellers.

The lack of interest in politics does not correlate with the answers to questions about the level of political freedom in Namibia. For instance, only 11 percent of respondents said they were not at all free or not very free to join any political organisation with 66 percent saying they were completely free.

The results could indicate growing apathy about politics in Namibia, particularly among younger sections of the population. Some 33 percent of the 18-24 age group interviewed for the Afrobarometer said they were 'not at all' interested in public affairs. In view of possible apathy among younger voters it will be interesting to observe whether turnout at the forthcoming election is down or up. On the other hand, we may not know as a large part of this age group may not even bother to register to vote.

The Afrobarometer is a public opinion survey of 1,200 Namibians with a margin of error of three percent. The last survey took place in November 2008. For more on the Afrobarometer see: <http://www.ippr.org.na>
<http://www.afrobarometer.org>

ABOUT ELECTION WATCH

Election Watch is a bulletin containing electoral analysis and voter education, which will appear regularly in the run up to the 2009 National Assembly and Presidential Elections. It is produced as a PDF download and as a printed newspaper insert. Election Watch is a project of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). It is produced with the support of the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) and The Namibian newspaper. The content of Election Watch is the sole responsibility of the IPPR. Comments and feedback should be sent to the IPPR, PO Box 6566, Windhoek, Namibia. Tel: (061) 240514; fax: (061) 240516; email: info@ippr.org.na. For more on Election Watch check <http://www.electionwatch.org.na>

SETTING THE STANDARDS

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) adopted the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections at the SADC Summit in Mauritius in August 2004. The SADC Principles and Guidelines set out the following responsibilities of member states holding elections:

- Establish appropriate institutions where issues such as codes of conduct, citizenship, residency, age requirements for eligible voters and compilation of voters' registers are addressed;
- Establish impartial, all-inclusive, competent and accountable national electoral bodies staffed by qualified personnel, as well as competent legal entities including effective constitutional courts to arbitrate in the event of disputes arising from the conduct of elections;
- Safeguard the human and civil liberties of all citizens including the freedom of movement, assembly, association, expression, and campaigning as well as access to the media on the part of all stakeholders, during electoral processes;
- Take all necessary measures and precautions to prevent the perpetration of fraud, rigging or any other illegal practices throughout the whole electoral process, in order to maintain peace and security;
- Ensure the availability of adequate logistics and resources for carrying out democratic elections;
- Ensure that adequate security is provided to all parties participating in elections;
- Ensure the transparency and integrity of the entire electoral process by facilitating the deployment of representatives of political parties and individual candidates at polling and counting stations and by accrediting national and/or other observers/monitors;
- Encourage the participation of women, disabled and youth in all aspects of the electoral process in accordance with the national laws.

Election Watch will look at the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance in the next issue.

ON THE INTERNET

Election Watch's website (<http://www.electionwatch.org.na>) features an array of articles and resources that we cannot fit in to this printed bulletin. Among the features on the website are: party manifestos; party candidate lists; party histories; key documents and legislation; previous election results; and a range of political analysis on Namibian democracy, international trends and best practices.

HOW BROADCAST TIME IS ALLOCATED



The allocation of broadcast time to political parties contesting an election is a sensitive one, which needs to be carefully considered and implemented.

Because the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) is the largest broadcaster with the greatest reach, all political parties want to have their campaign messages aired by it in free-to-air party political broadcasts.

Election Watch asked the NBC to supply the IPPR with its policy on free air time, but the broadcaster did not respond to the request. In the past, it has been reported that the national broadcaster follows this formula: 60 per cent of airtime allocated for election coverage is divided amongst political parties on a proportional basis, thus by the number of seats they hold in the National Assembly. The remaining 40 per cent is equally shared amongst political parties with representation in Parliament.

Campaign events will receive coverage regardless of whether a political party is represented in Parliament or not.

In South Africa, all political parties receive a minimum allocation of broadcast time, based on the number of candidates contesting and the party's past performance in elections. The last

point brings the number of seats a party holds in Parliament and provincial legislatures into play.

Also, if it chooses, South Africa's Independent Broadcasting Authority may call for the allocation of broadcast time based on public opinion polls.

In Britain, before elections the allocation of broadcast time is reviewed by a committee of broadcasters and political parties. Airtime is then allocated on the number of candidates a political party fields in the elections – meaning, parties

fielding 50 or more candidates are allocated one free broadcast. The two main parties contesting the election receive equal airtime while the third main party receives less, and so on.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) allocates free broadcast time to the governing and official opposition parties contesting elections in the different states of the country, taking into consideration the demonstrated support of these parties. The ABC also establishes an Election Coverage Review Committee, which monitors the election coverage to make sure the broadcaster provides fair and balanced coverage to all political parties contesting an election.

Also, before each election, the ABC issues a detailed election coverage guide to all political parties which outlines the allocation of broadcast time on radio and television.

HOW OTHERS DO IT

Many countries have allocated direct access broadcasting time on the basis of equality between the different political parties or candidates. Even so, there may be certain differences in the way that these systems work. Sometimes, for example, there may be a qualification criterion or threshold of support that must be met before equality applies.

France

The formula for allocating direct access broadcast time in the French presidential elections is one of equality for all candidates, who usually number about 14. If no clear winner emerges there is a second round run-off between the two leading candidates, and again air-time is allocated equally between them.

Denmark

Denmark allocates equal time to all political parties in parliamentary elections, so long as they satisfy certain basic criteria: they must have been

registered with the Ministry of the Interior, which requires that they will have collected signatures equivalent to one in 175 of the votes cast at the last election.

Norway

In Norway, time is allocated equally, but again certain criteria must be met. Parties must have been represented in one of the last two parliaments, have a national organisation and be fielding candidates in a majority of districts. Smaller parties that do not meet this threshold nevertheless are allowed some broadcasts.

Italy

The state broadcaster, RAI, gives equal time to all competing parties in an election. However, private commercial broadcasters have no such obligation.

Armenia

Armenia gives equal access to each party, but the amount is limited to five

minutes for each candidate or party. This avoids the problem of information overload but perhaps creates another problem. Is this really enough information for the voter?

Japan

Japan has a system of equal access but with a minimum qualification threshold. In order to receive equal broadcasting time a party must field at least 12 candidates. In the Upper House, however, all candidates receive five and a half minutes of free broadcasting time.

Netherlands

The Netherlands, like Japan, has a system that is a sort of modified equality. In principle all parties have equal broadcasting time. However, the regulatory body, the Media Commissariat, may allocate extra time to parties running candidates in all electoral districts.

www.aceproject.org

WHAT IS THE IPPR?

The Institute for Public Policy Research was established in 2001 as a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to deliver, independent, analytical, critical yet constructive research on social, political and economic issues which affect development Namibia. The IPPR was established in the belief that development is best promoted through free and critical debate informed by quality research. The IPPR is independent of government, political parties, business, trade unions and other interest groups and is governed by a board of seven trustees. Anyone can receive the IPPR's research free of charge by contacting the organisation at 14 Nachtigal Street, Windhoek; PO Box 6566, Windhoek; tel: (061) 240514; fax (061) 240516; email: info@ippr.org.na. All IPPR research is available at <http://www.ippr.org.na>. Material related to Election Watch is available at <http://www.electionwatch.org.na>

WHO GETS TO SPEAK?

“There are at least four key principal roles of the media in elections – information, analysis, debate and discussion and being a watchdog.” - Professor Tawana Kupe, Head of Media Studies at Wits University.

Media coverage of elections has over the years been severely criticised for being event and personality driven and for not focussing on the issues affecting the electorate.

Too often journalists opt for easy coverage – campaign events and which politicians says what where and when – instead of holding politicians accountable for their service delivery records on the issues that affect ordinary citizens.

Politicians see this sort of ‘shallow’ coverage as a means to elevate themselves in public consciousness, knowing that whatever they say will be published or broadcast without too many serious questions being asked of their credentials and fitness to hold public office.

It goes without saying that the election period is an intense one and that the media can only do so much with the limited resources at their disposal.

However, too much of the current coverage of the Namibian election campaigns revolves around politicians making speeches at rallies and party functions, while very little reportage is actually done on the pressing social issues – poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, etc. – and the promises made to alleviate them over the years by the same politicians.

Typical media coverage consists of politicians speaking, while the voices of civil society and the public remain largely unheard.

“Of course the press is biased. The gathering, editing and publishing of news involves decisions by people who inevitably bring their own background, values and prejudices to bear on deciding what to select, emphasize and colour as news.

Bias is inevitable; it is lack of balance in the representation of a range of views that is criticised. Lack of balance may characterise not only the way politics is presented in reports, but more generally, the way women, unions, homosexuals and minorities are reported.” - Anonymous American journalist.



WHAT FOR? ... Voters queuing outside a polling station in South Africa on April 22. Media coverage of the South African elections has been described as having been “confusing” and lacking in quality for failing to address important social issues.

Namibian media are not the only ones guilty of this lack of depth in election reportage.

Following the South African presidential and parliamentary elections in April this year, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) found that South African media coverage had failed to address and “bungled” coverage of the “supreme” topics – service delivery and poverty.

“If you were to gauge what issues are of concern to South Africans through the coverage of elections, then you could be forgiven for thinking that poverty is no longer an issue for the country, and public service delivery is well on the way to meeting citizens’ expectations,” the MMA said in one of its numerous election

reports.

“If political parties are not addressing these issues in their campaigning activities, and to all indications this is the case, then it primarily falls to media to assist citizens in this way, [which is] reporting and providing analysis on election and political parties in relation to issues that are of critical importance to South Africans and the future of South Africa,” the report stated.

“We see similar trends in coverage of other issues, which we have noted is also minimal. Another reason is perhaps that there is too much focus on the campaigning as though these were American-style elections, and focus on politicians going to places to speak. The focus on the event is often detrimental to coverage of issues. I think editors should be asked this question,” MMA director William Bird was quoted saying.

The MMA findings on South African election coverage could possibly be made applicable to media coverage of the Namibian election campaigning underway at the moment, but it’s probably too early to make a call as there are still a few months left before voting day.

“We do not conspire with outsiders because we are newspaper people - not politicians, megalomaniacs or political dilettantes. We do not slant news to favour any political party because - apart from being a fraud on our readers and bad journalism - to do so is dishonest. Journalism in its purest form is simply telling the truth, so long as it is in the public interest. We do not conspire with outsiders. We do not write for politicians or parties. We write for people.” - Anonymous editor.

ELECTIONS EXPLAINED

Voter registration

Article 17(2) of the Namibian Constitution states that every Namibian citizen who has reached the age of 18 is entitled to vote. The general registration of voters takes place every ten years and the last general registration took place in 2003. In order to ensure that those who did not register previously can still register before an election, the President can declare a period of supplementary registration and this is what is taking place countrywide from September 17 to 30.

The people who should register are:

- Those who turned 18 years of age since the last registration of voters
- Those who moved from one constituency to another
- Those who have lost their voter registration cards
- Those who adopted new names e.g. through marriage

To register you need proof of identity, age, and Namibian citizenship by producing the following documents:

- New Namibian ID – (identity, age and Namibian citizenship)
- Green Valid Namibian Passport (identity, age and Namibian citizenship)
- Namibian Birth Certificate (age and Namibian citizenship)

OR

The following combinations:

- Citizenship Certificate and Old Namibian ID (if you were born outside Namibia)
 - Namibian birth certificate and Namibian driver’s licence
 - Namibian birth certificate and two deponents
- OR
- No documents and two deponents who are registered as voters

A deponent is someone who can swear on oath that you are who you say you are, you are over 18 and you are a Namibian citizen.

In the next issue, we will look at how the voters register is maintained and updated and how it can be inspected by members of the public.

ELECTIONS – NO GREATER TEST

The challenge of objectivity, impartiality and balance in journalism is faced daily by journalists, but there is no test of professionalism greater than that posed in the heat and pressure of a bitterly-fought political election.

The election is also a test of political commitment to democracy. It is a time when the impulse to manipulate media and to control information is strongest among ruling parties and political leaders running for office.

And what about voters? Journalists must also provide access to media so that citizens’ voices can be heard above the babble of political debate.

How do journalists cope with these pressures? How can they enforce professional guidelines and rules which will help them to put all sides of an argument? What laws and regulations should restrain political interest groups from exercising undue influence?



WHAT ABOUT VOTERS? Elections bring into sharp focus the need for media to provide citizens with access to all the facts, opinions and ideas being canvassed in campaigns.

In countries where media, press and broadcasting have been traditionally subject to monopoly control and undue political influence, particularly from the state, and sometimes from single-party government, adjusting to multi-party conditions is never easy.

- Aidan White, International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) General Secretary.

QUESTIONS REPORTERS SHOULD BE ASKING THEMSELVES

- Is the electoral commission organising the poll independent of the government and balanced/neutral in its composition?
- Have all parties and candidates seeking to stand been allowed to register. Does the electoral law discriminate against any individual or group?
- Does the media have unrestricted access to all candidates/parties? Any sign that government is using state-run media to attack opposition candidates or restricting their exposure on radio/TV?
- Are political parties state financed? Is there a limit to business/private donations and must parties declare them?
- Can all political rallies take place without intimidation by ruling authorities or rival groups?

- Reuters Foundation

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Q & A

This regular feature in Election Watch will answer questions received from readers about the electoral process and the Constitution. Please send questions you would like answered to info@ippr.org.na

Q: How long is the term of office for a Local Authority councillor?

A: Usually five years, but Parliament passed a bill earlier this year which extended the terms of office for Local Authority councillors from May 2009 to November 30 2010. This was because both the Local Authority and Regional Council elections are scheduled to be held on the same day towards the end of 2010. At the time the Local Authorities Amendment Bill was passed, Minister of Local Government Jerry Ekandjo said that holding local and regional elections on the same day would be more cost-effective and prevent administrative duplication. The last Local Authorities election took place in May 2004, meaning that councillors are likely to have served six-and-half years by the time the ballot is held. After next year's election the terms of office will revert to five years.

Q: Under what conditions could a state of emergency be declared in Namibia?

A: The President can declare a state of emergency in all or part of Namibia by issuing proclamation in the Government Gazette in a time of "national disaster, during a state of national defence or public emergency threatening the life of the nation or the constitutional order", according to Article 26 of the Constitution. During a State of Emergency, the President can make regulations that are necessary for the "protection of national security, public safety and the maintenance of law and order". Such regulations should be approved by the National Assembly within a certain time period. Any extension to a period of national emergency has to be approved by a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly.

To PR OR NOT TO PR?

Since the first democratic elections in 1989, Namibia has used a Proportional Representation (PR) method for electing the National Assembly with a party list system variation.

Proportional Representation is an electoral system that has a high correlation between the number of votes a political party wins in an election and the number of seats they occupy in the legislature.

One of the arguments in favour of PR is that it gives a fair chance for small parties to gain representation. PR produces a legislature that closely reflects how the population voted in an election. Since independence, Namibia has recorded a higher turnout at the polls under PR, as the electorate have come to realise that their votes are really counted.

The disadvantage of the PR system in Namibia is that members of the National Assembly are elected according to a party list, and not individually by voters.

Thus a member of the National Assembly does not represent a geographically defined constituency in which he or she is personally responsible for a particular part of the population.

In an ethnically diverse country like Namibia, the PR system can encourage the mushrooming of small parties with ethnic inclinations. These parties would use ethnicity as a political resource to secure seats in the National Assembly.

Namibia under a Swapo government

The Swapo Party manifesto, which was unveiled on September 6, adopts the theme: "Striving for Economic Independence and Prosperity for All".

In the 42-page document, Swapo opens with a statement of intent – that Swapo remains the only driving force for change in Namibia. "The party has delivered on its promises to the Namibian nation over the past 19 years and remains a tried and tested political party with the credibility and capacity to yet again deliver on its promises," President Hifikepunye Pohamba states in the foreword.

Presenting the party's policies and strategies for the next five years President Pohamba, declares "Swapo would without failure, transform its strategies into practical and implementable projects and programmes to accelerate economic growth."

The opening statement in the manifesto is followed by 10 priority policy for the next five years.

Democracy – The ruling party pledges to uphold the principles of democracy, human rights and freedom and vigorously continue safeguarding, maintaining and enhancing national unity in diversity, the rule of law, good governance, peace, security and justice through the development and strengthening of essential institutions.

Economic management – The party is quick to admit that the manifesto comes at a time of a global economic downturn, which is impacting upon the economic performance of Namibia but expresses confidence that the country is expected to withstand the crisis. Swapo says it will promote economic development based on principles of a mixed economy; attract and retain investment; maintain prudent macroeconomic policies; and emphasise growth in the following economic sectors: Agriculture, mining, fisheries and aquaculture, manufacturing, tourism, finance, information and communication technology, transport, construction and energy.

Health – The party pledges to devote sufficient resources to the combating of HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases; increase construction of hospitals, clinics and health centres; intensify national immunisation to increase coverage from the current 75 percent to 80 percent; reduce the maternity mortality rate; and improve working conditions for doctors, nurses and health personnel in rural areas.

Housing and settlement – Swapo promises to accelerate the provision of affordable housing and access to title deeds; reform communal land holding in villages and settlements; and review the resettlement policy;

Environmental management – Measures proposed include: implementing



laws and policies to ensure sustainable exploration of natural resources; putting in place measures to mitigate the effects of climate change; and strengthening the National Emergency Preparedness Strategy to mitigate the negative effects of natural calamities.

Social upliftment and empowerment – Swapo intends to revise laws, policies and programmes related to land acquisition and re-distribution and increase the amount of land acquired and transferred while accelerating the resettlement process. This is to ensure access to land by the majority of Namibians and achieve equitable land ownership patterns. On the youth, Swapo wants to earmark resources and expand the National Youth Service programme and equip recruits with the necessary skills. The party wants to prioritise the implementation of Black Economic Empowerment programmes.

Human capital development – The party continues to strongly support the implementation of the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP). Swapo wants to review and improve pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education; enhance vocational training and skills development; ensure sustainable supply of medium to high skilled labour; and expand existing vocational training centres.

Safety nets for vulnerable groups – Measures include supporting school feeding programmes; and improving social grants for orphans and vulnerable children, senior citizen, war veterans, and people with disabilities.

Promotion of gender equality and equity – Swapo promises in the next five years to improve maternity leave benefits and create child-friendly working environments. It also pledges to enforce laws prohibiting gender-based violence.

The document has a section devoted to how the party will monitor, evaluate and implement the 2009 party election manifesto, but it does not provide details on how it would measure progress. The Swapo manifesto avoids making firm pledges and setting measurable targets

on job creation, land reform, and black economic empowerment. The lack of targets and measurable data in the manifesto makes it difficult to gauge what the taxpayer will pay to finance these plans if implemented. There is no reference to budgetary targets such as debt and deficit levels.

On the whole the manifesto is a cautiously-worded document, which at times gives the impression that the ruling party is avoiding making clear commitments and promises. There is no mention of previous controversial commitments like changing the Constitution to broaden the composition of the Judicial Service Commission (in the 2004 manifesto). Some sections

are little more than vague feel-good statements such as the commitment to "build a caring society where there is growth with equity and where citizens have access to a decent quality of life."

Some topics that could become major issues in the next five years are not mentioned – such as anti-corruption strategies; uranium exploitation; carbon trading; and the development of nuclear energy in Namibia.

The manifesto comes in handbook size and has an attractive layout and design featuring pictures of Swapo and national events.

Who is the party's leader?

The party has been led by (current Head of State) Hifikepunye Pohamba since 2007. He will be the party's presidential candidate.

Does the party have a website?

Yes – <http://www.swapoparty.org>

More about the party

The Swapo Party of Namibia was formed in 1960 as the South West Africa People's Organisation. It waged an armed struggle for Namibia's independence from 1966 to 1989. Swapo has been the ruling party of Namibia since winning the United Nations-supervised transitional elections in 1989. In 1994 the party won a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. The party has increased its share of the vote at subsequent elections in 1999 and 2004. Swapo currently has 55 seats in the National Assembly.

STANDOUT POLICIES

- Urgently revise land policies to ensure equitable land ownership.
- Prioritise black economic empowerment
- Implement a community courts system
- Improve state-owned enterprise service delivery
- Review the Export Processing Zone regime