

Chapter 3

The Campaign and the News Media

Against the background of the turbulence of the 1989 campaign and the exuberance of what was then in effect a 'liberation' election, we detected some continuing concern on the part of those we met about the possibility of violence and intimidation in the final days of the campaign and during the poll itself.

These fears did not materialise. We concluded that the entire campaign period, notwithstanding isolated incidents, had been characterised by a calm and peaceful atmosphere, even in areas dominated by one political party or the other. Planned political party rallies in most parts of the country had been properly supervised and orderly, even though there were attempts at disruption in some instances.

It was put to us that this general state of affairs could be attributed to relatively modest levels of activity in comparison with 1989, and certainly a number of parties complained to us that shortages of campaign funds had been a major constraint in getting their messages across to the people of Namibia. It was also suggested that the country-wide regional and municipal authority elections of late 1992 and local elections in August 1994 in Walvis Bay, had promoted greater familiarity with elections and electioneering and that, in any case, the fundamentally peaceful nature of the Namibian people had guaranteed the climate of calm which prevailed at the time of the 1994 Presidential and National Assembly Elections. Predictions of voter apathy were not borne out by the very good turnout during the poll.

Our own assessment is that the sustained efforts over the past five years by the Government, political parties, and the community to promote a spirit of national reconciliation and social harmony have made great strides. Political maturity, tolerance and a culture of democratic practice, appear to have flowered in a very short space of time.

The Issues

Given the financial constraints on the political parties, both large and small, which we were told had in varying degrees limited their capacity to campaign, it was not surprising for us to learn that the matter of state funding of political parties had become a contentious issue, and had been discussed in the National Assembly. Throughout the Commonwealth, there is no uniform practice on this matter, and for those Commonwealth countries which make provision for state funding, a range of formulae is to be found. We were given the impression that virtually all political parties support the principle, but that opinions vary as to how it should be implemented. In the meantime, until this is resolved, the political parties will continue to fund their activities and election campaigns in other ways.

It would be appropriate to mention in this context that under the Electoral Act 1992, political parties are permitted to receive financial or material assistance from outside Namibia provided such assistance is disclosed for public scrutiny. Failure to comply with this provision renders the political party concerned liable to have its registration cancelled by the Director of Elections. This situation has not been affected by the recent amendment to the Electoral Act.

In this general context the alleged exclusive use of state resources for party political purposes was raised with us by several of the representatives of opposition political parties, and had featured in their campaigns.

For their part, representatives of the ruling party, SWAPO, contended that such allegations were unfair, as opposition parties themselves had access to state resources in the form of office space in government premises. In cases where SWAPO had used state resources, the party had been properly billed by the Government and accounts would be paid. They acknowledged the difficulty sometimes of differentiating between government and the ruling party, and the sometimes blurred distinction between the activities of the President as Head of State and his responsibilities as leader of SWAPO. This is a perennial challenge for many

multi-party democracies. We are encouraged, however, by SWAPO's recognition of the distinction between the state and government, on the one hand, and the party in power, on the other.

On what might generally be regarded as more traditional campaign issues such as management of the economy, land reform, living standards and unemployment, health, housing and social services, education and crime, both the governing party and opposition parties campaigned essentially on SWAPO's record in government. SWAPO for its part emphasised the success of its economic policies, and improvements in standards of living over the past five years. It promised to make job creation a top priority for the next five years.

The DTA and smaller opposition parties for their part sought to persuade the electorate that the government in power had not done enough and, increasingly, as the elections approached, to question the integrity of the Government and its commitment on certain issues.

The News Media

The right to freedom of expression has become well established in the five years since independence. Namibia today has a small but vigorous news media sector representing public, private and party political interests. From our observations, it takes its role as a watchdog of the public interest seriously.

The public service broadcasting system, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation, is the most important medium for news, with a mandate to provide an unbiased and objective information service to the electorate. It broadcasts an English-only television service, but this can only be received by around a third of the population. Its radio broadcasts are more important. NBC radio broadcasts in nine languages to 95 per cent of the population on FM and is therefore perhaps the most important media entity in the country, with unparalleled reach. Both main political parties told us that they especially appreciated the NBC's language services which, in the north for instance, enabled them to get their messages across to a much wider audience. NBC has studios throughout the country.

In consultation with the political parties and the Directorate of Elections, NBC developed a set of rules and guidelines for fair political coverage before and during the 1994 elections. Under these, a strict procedure was agreed regarding coverage of individual candidates and a Code of Conduct was distributed to NBC staff stressing the importance of objective and balanced election coverage. NBC decided not only to comply with the law, which prevents it from transmitting broadcasts using language which incites violence, but went further by deciding to refrain from broadcasting personal attacks by party candidates. NBC maintained contact with political parties throughout the run-up to the elections by means of weekly 'forum' meetings.

During the election campaign NBC organised three party political panel discussions and broadcast voter education programmes on both TV and radio. Paid political advertisements were not allowed but each party and the two Presidential candidates were allocated free airtime, with television and radio broadcasts of approximately the same duration whatever the size and strength of the party concerned. Agreement was also reached with the political parties concerning balanced coverage of political rallies.

Polling day reporting was deliberately restricted to information about the elections, such as turnout, location of polling stations and voting procedures. However, news reporters were allowed to refer to problems that were encountered – and the prospects for their resolution. No references to election issues were allowed. There was a comprehensive results service, announcing only those results certified by the Electoral Commission.

There are other broadcasting organisations. Katutura Community Radio, for instance, provides a service to a heavily populated part of Windhoek. But NBC remains the most important national source of political news.

Newspapers have a limited reach, especially in rural areas, since less than 40 per cent of the population is estimated to be literate. Nevertheless, they still provide an important source of news and comment.

The main newspapers are *The Namibian*, *Die Republikein*, *Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Tempo*, *The Windhoek Advertiser*, *The Windhoek Observer*, *The Namib Times* and *New Era*. *The Namibian*, which acquired an impressive reputation during the pre-independence period, is independent and sometimes fiercely critical of the Government but inclined towards SWAPO. *Die Republikein*, *Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Tempo* are all right of centre and support the opposition. *New Era* is a government newspaper. There is a national news agency, the Namibian Press Agency.