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'The dog that didn't bark in the night:' Namibia's missing TRC and the South African model

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These notes must serve as a kind of prolegomenon to a longer paper to be prepared in the wake of the History Workshop. Even more importantly, that paper will be prepared in the wake of a period of further research on the issues anticipated in these pages that I will be carrying out in Namibia immediately prior to the workshop itself. In this research/writing project I seek to place in comparative perspective South Africa's option for the TRC process and the prior decision in Namibia *not* to develop any such mechanism to deal with the past. Both the conditions and calculations that broadly framed these choices and the different potential implications of such choices, short- and long-term, will eventually be discussed. But the main focus will be on the reluctance of SWAPO, Namibia's chief liberation movement and now party-in-power, to encourage in Namibia any process remotely comparable to that exemplified by the TRC in South Africa. The longer paper will explore the possible importance of differences of opinion between SWAPO and the ANC regarding the most effective means of "reconciliation" to the making of such a choice. More importantly, however, I will underscore the centrality to Swapo's decision in this regard of its continuing refusal -- different from the position taken by the ANC -- to open up its own human-rights' record in exile to public scrutiny. This project thus builds on an earlier study, by myself and Colin Leys, of Swapo's own often dismal human rights record in exile (Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two Edged Sword [1994], especially chapter 3, attached) and its reluctance to speak openly about it. But it seeks to update that account by examining the way in which the crucial issues identified in that chapter have surfaced in post-liberation Namibia, despite SWAPO's best efforts to ignore them. It will also suggest the importance to the keeping alive of such issues in Namibia of an

awareness of the nature and promise of the TRC process unfolding in South Africa.

* * *

Lauren Dobell, in writing on related themes, has noted the existence of apparent differences of opinion between SWAPO and the ANC regarding the best means of dealing with questions of national reconciliation in the wake of successful liberation struggles (albeit struggles whose outcomes were defined, in their particulars, by the continued salience of contending forces sufficiently stalemated on both sides to make negotiations the necessary modality of resolution). As she observes,

> SWAPO's policy of national reconciliation, the essential contours of which were determined before independence, differs significantly from the ANC's. In confronting similar legacies of suffering, of communities and families torn apart in the war against apartheid, the Namibian and South African governments came to opposite conclusions regarding the best way to put the past behind them.[1]

Succinctly summarizing the TRC model, she then notes that, "as Namibia's ruling party, SWAPO adopted a more cautious approach to reconciliation. In the government's considered opinion, resurrecting the past would serve no constructive purpose. A successful transition, it was argued, required cooperation among former enemies. Delving into past injustices would only incite a desire for vengeance and distract a still fragile nation from the paramount tasks of reconstruction and development."

Leave aside the question of whether merely bracketing off the past in this manner was an option available to the ANC in any case, except to note that perhaps it was not, given the nature of the negotiations themselves and the centrality of the white community to sustaining the kind of overall economic strategy that the ANC was choosing for itself. After all, the alternative that many would have preferred to the project of reconciliation through the pursuit of truth rather than justice was not the kind of studied silence chosen in Namibia but rather one of dealing with the grim record of the apartheid state as the work of war-criminals, the latter to be dealt with accordingly.[2] Perhaps it was

easier for SWAPO leaders to take the line it did given the fact that the regime overthrown had been, to some significant extent, a regime of illegal occupation, now departed. Moreover, for all that the ANC won the 1994 election handily, it had to establish its credentials on a far more complex terrain of political diversity and existing cross-pressures than did SWAPO, given its apparently unshakable base in the northern part of Namibia and its consequent very substantial political hegemony in what is, in any case, a very small country.

Further study of the reasons why different in-coming regimes, not least those in South Africa and Namibia, chose their diverse routes towards (in Dobell's phrase) "knitting shattered societies together in the wake of dismantled authoritarian regimes" are required before any very confident judgments can be made regarding the wisdom and/or appropriateness of choices made. But there is one dimension of such choices, relevant perhaps to both cases, that cannot be ignored, a dimension significant enough to cast doubt on the importance to the choice made in Namibia of Dobell's suggestion that "in the government's considered opinion, resurrecting the past would serve no constructive purpose." "Considered opinion"? "No constructive purpose"? Dobell herself is too astute an observer to leave that interpretation (albeit one that it is presented, at least momentarily, as her own) without an additional gloss. As she then writes,

> An unspoken but critical sub-text for what detractors derided as a policy of national amnesia [in Namibia] was the SWAPO leadership's uncomfortable awareness of the skeletons in its own closet....In contrast to the ANC, whose Skweyiya Inquiry and Motsuenyane Commission acknowledged violations of human rights in the ANC camps, SWAPO never officially admitted to any wrongdoing.

Indeed, it is difficult not to feel, in the SWAPO case, that this consideration is a primary one, trumping many of the broader questions that might, in principle, be posed about the roots and merits of the different strategies of national reconciliation chosen. For the fact remains that the SWAPO leadership simply has too much to hide to put itself on equal footing, at least for purposes of open TRC-style proceedings, with the torturers, murderers and informants on the other

side. This is not straightforward terrain, of course. No-one would argue some simple-minded equivalence between, on the one hand, the apartheid state and its functionaries (whether operating in South Africa or in Namibia) and, and on the other, those who struggled, against enormous odds and often under the most desperate of conditions, to challenge it. It was on the grounds that just such an error had been committed in the writing of the TRC report itself that the ANC launched its own (ill-advised?) challenge to the report at the eleventh hour late last year.

Nonetheless the fact remains that the ANC did, up to a point, put itself in the dock, a key factor perhaps in allowing the TRC to make as much progress on a broad range of other fronts as it did. And this was, as Dobell mentions, not something new. For the ANC, there had already been the Skweyiya Commission and, when that was not deemed adequate, the more independent Motsuenyane Commission, both (in the early 1990s) reporting publicly -- and before that there had been the Stuart Commission Report of 1984, now in the public domain, inquiring "into recent developments in the People's Republic of Angola." Others can judge the adequacy of those prior reports and of the ANC's own response to them: in terms of disciplining perceived perpetrators of injustice, making just compensation to victims of any excesses, and/or self-critically examining the political premises (beyond the countervailing fact of the very real imperatives of war) that could have produced such problems. We know of at least one aggrieved critic of both the procedures of the TRC (which is criticized for deciding "not to call the ANC leadership to account publicly for atrocities committed in its camps outside the country") and of the approach of the ANC to elaborating upon its own record in its external camps.[3] Thus, Joe Seremane writes -- in his eloquent statement entitled "Where Lies My Brother?" -- of his fruitless pursuit of the "truth" as to the fate of his brother, Timothy "Chief" Seremane, apparently executed in exile by the ANC:

> I cannot help feeling that our TRC has betrayed a partisan inclination, accommodating so-called or adherent to the "popular party," relegating relative unknowns to the periphery of TRC experiences and services.

> How can the TRC believe that I will be satisfied by the edited report with blotted-out names purporting to the ANC response to my plea? This account merely propagates the vilification of the dead, those who can no longer tell their side of the story.
>
> Why did the TRC not subpoena my informants, the Quatro Camp survivors, to tell the other side of the story so that people could judge for themselves.

At the same time, both the ANC's initial report of the TRC ("African National Congress Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," of August 1996, especially section 6, "Did the ANC perpetrate any gross violations of human rights?") and its second, more detailed one ("Further Submissions and Responses by the ANC to Questions raised by the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. 12 May 1997), do deal with questions of abuses of power by the movement in exile in something more than a purely defensive manner. And the final report itself has some strong sections on such matters (Final Report, volume 2, chapter 4). This is, in any case, so much more than has been accomplished in Namibia along similar lines that it is small wonder aggrieved Namibians have looked to the TRC, warts and all, as a possible model for their own country.

Of course, the fact is that, whatever the negative aspects of its record at, most notably, the Morris Seabelo Rehabilitation Centre in Angola, the ANC has very much less to hide than does SWAPO as regards "gross violations of human rights in exile." Elsewhere, Colin Leys and I have documented in some detail the authoritarian political culture that developed within SWAPO from the very earliest days of its exiled existence in Tanzania, deepened dramatically in Zambia in the 1970s, and culminated in the horrors of the "spy scare" of the 1980s that filled Lubango Camp with many apparently quite innocent victims of the SWAPO torturers and executioners there.[4] Despite the best efforts of former detainees, relatives of the victims, and human-rights activists in Namibia to get the full story of those Angolan days on the table, not much happened during the early years of independence. To be sure, the story had obtained some hearing during the transition to SWAPO's electoral victory in 1990, aired thanks in part to the "disinformation" efforts of the apartheid state still present in Namibia during that

period. And yet, ironically, much of this "disinformation" was actually true, whatever the malignant purposes to which its more wide-spread distribution was sometimes put. Nonetheless, SWAPO has had some success, then as now, in wrapping itself in the mantle of patriotism and the honour of liberation to cover its tracks on the issue -- despite the best efforts of various parents' and detainees' groups to keep it alive in the public realm.

Words are weapons, however. Once again, Dobell has helped vigilantly to record the impact that the volume by Siegfreid Groth, a German cleric heretofore closely linked to the Lutheran church in Namibia and to support for SWAPO's liberation struggle, had in Namibia when it was first published there in 1995/6.[5] Dobell notes that Groth's account of events in Angola and of the questionable silence of churchpersons, then and since, regarding them, revealed little that had not been written before. But, coming from a source so close to home and hitting, in any case, so uncomfortably close to target, it evoked some dramatic responses: embarrassment on the part of some churchpersons and anger from the SWAPO hierarchy, including President Nujoma who denounced the author on television in fiery terms. Importantly, too, it reactivated the network of those who still wished to force SWAPO to finally come clean on such issues. As Dobell writes, "A Breaking the Wall of Silence (BWS) Committee was formed, comprising former detainees and their supporters, together with a number of CCN (Council of Churches of Namibia) employees, to launch the book under its own auspices, and undertook to translate from English into the more widely spoken Afrikaans and Oshivambo, the latter directly addressing SWAPO's traditional support base."[6]

The precise long-term impact of such disclosures remains to be seen. Certainly it has been the BWOS that has evoked most vigorously the TRC model as a possible bench-mark and model for future Namibian practice. Its 1997 Annual Report is full of such references to the TRC and it bears noting that it BWOS actually invited a member of the TRC. Dr. Mapule Ramashala, to address its annual General Meeting on "the relevance of the TRC exercise to the Southern African Region." She quite specifically argued that "the ANC's painstaking work of careful

investigating and documenting the dead and those who have disappeared should inspire Namibians to find a way to do likewise," concluding by seeking to speak directly to President Nujoma himself (albeit in absentia):

> President Nujoma, Sir, may I not be presumptuous, but may I suggest that there is a way out of this, that you and your people can address this issue. You were a victim also. You need to identify with the pain and suffering that is going through your land. You need to provide incentives for full disclosure, not just for you, for your Cabinet and for all other perpetrators in your country. Listen to BWS. I don't think there is any malice in this group. I believe that they are determined to move their country forward. This is an appeal to you, Sir, that you open communication and find ways with your people to heal not only those who have suffered violations, to heal your land, but most of all to heal yourself.[7]

For note that the matters the BWS seek to advance are not a matter of ancient history by any means. There is, of course, the fact that *silence keeps alive the unburied memories of relatives of the victims* and the shame that still attaches, often illegitimately, to those accused unjustly in exile of being spies. But silence also leaves unreflected upon the continuing temptations towards authoritarian tendencies inherent in any polity, in exile or at home, not least amongst those who not only, to their credit, won out over the South Africans but also have "gotten away with murder." Unfortunately, however, there has been little sign that President Nujoma has chosen to heed Dr. Ramashala's advice. Indeed, the actions Nujoma and his ruling group have taken to amend the constitution in order to enable him to stand for a hitherto unconstitutional third term as president seem very much of a piece with the high-handed role he has chosen to play within the movement (and now the country?) since its founding.

Not that such recent actions have gone uncontested in Namibia. One well-known veteran of the liberation struggle (SWAPO soldier, Robben Island graduate, pre-independence trade union activist), Mr. Ben Ulenga, actually resigned his post as Namibian High Commissioner late last year to return to Namibia to contest this development, at first within SWAPO itself, now as head of a new Congress of Democrats.[8] The fate of such an

initiative, mounted in the teeth of a still powerful SWAPO, remains murky, needless to say, as does the kind of priority this more broad-gauged political initiative might eventually give to the kind of issues that have moved the BWS to make its own contribution to the reawakening of an active and critical civil society in Namibia. It is hard not feel, however, that Namibians have been denied an important opportunity to learn from their own history, not least the history of their movement in exile, by the failure to facilitate a TRC-type process in their country. Whether other turns of the political wheel will eventually allow the full story to be told there remains to be seen.

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[1] Lauren Dobell, "Silence in Context: Truth and/or Reconciliation in Namibia", Journal of Southern African Studies, 23, #2 (June 1997).

[2] We also leave aside here other questions regarding the appropriateness of the "Truth and Reconciliation" process, both as regards its mandate and its format, for dealing with larger questions of the nature of socio-economic system that sustained apartheid and where the lay the responsibility, not just for the most obvious of crimes but for the functioning of that system as a whole. On this subject see the insightful article

[3] Wetsho-Otsile "Joe" Seremane, "Where lies my brother," in the issue on "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," of Siyaya! Elections 1999, Series No. 3 (1998).

[4] Colin Leys and John S. Saul (eds.), Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword (London and Cape Town: James Currey and David Phillip, 1995), especially ch. 3, "SWAPO in Exile"; also Leys and Saul, "Liberation without Democracy: The SWAPO Crisis of 1976," Journal of Southern African Studies, 20, # 1 (March 1994).

[5] Lauren Dobell, "Namibia's Wall of Silence," Southern Africa Report, 11, #4 (July, 1996). Groth's book is Namibia: The Wall of Silence (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1995).

[6] Ibid., p. 33.

[7] From the report of Dr. Ramashala's speech in the Breaking the Wall of Silence Movement's BWS Annual Report 1997 (Windhoek: BWS, 1997).

[8] Lauren Dobell, "The Ulenga Moment: SWAPO and Dissent," Southern Africa Report, 14, #1 (December, 1998)