Namibian diplomacy before Independence

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Before a country gains its independence, it cannot have a foreign policy of its own. Under South African occupation from 1915 to March 1990, Namibia featured prominently in the foreign policy of the occupying power, South Africa, and many South African diplomats and Ministers of Foreign Affairs spent much of their time in diplomatic activity relating to the question of the future of South West Africa/Namibia. Namibia was RF (Pik) Botha's prime diplomatic preoccupation from when he became South Africa's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1977 until Namibia's Independence 13 years later.[1] At the United Nations (UN) in New York, more time was spent on the Namibian issue than on any other in the 1970s and 1980s. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is now a large volume of literature on international diplomacy concerning Namibia in those decades.[2] This chapter is not, however, concerned with either international or specifically South African diplomacy relating to Namibia, but instead with diplomacy engaged in by Namibians before the country gained its independence from South Africa. Too many of the accounts of international diplomacy on the issue of Namibia play down – if not altogether ignore – the role played by Namibians themselves.

There is a long history of such diplomacy by Namibians. People living in what is now Namibia engaged in forms of diplomacy among themselves and with others before German colonisation began in 1884,[3] and once the Germans had arrived, Hendrik Witbooi, the leader of the Nama, and others engaged them diplomatically as well as militarily.[4] Then, from soon after South African occupation, people in Namibia began engaging in international diplomacy by sending petitions to the League of Nations in Geneva, for from 1920 South West Africa was a mandate under the League and the mandatory power, South Africa, was supposed to be concerned with the interests of the indigenous people. The Rehoboth Basters in particular complained to the League about the nature of South African rule, and it has recently been argued that their petitioning had some marginal success in alleviating a few of the harsher effects of that rule.[5]

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1 See e.g. Wolvaardt et al. (2010:Ch. 14): one of the most influential South African diplomats to be stationed in Namibia was Sean Cleary, who was Chief Director in Windhoek from 1983 to 1985.

2 For example, the Western Contact Group's diplomacy in the late 1970s has been the subject of a number of books and articles, including, say, Karns (1987:93–123).

3 See e.g. Lau (1987).

4 Though the title of his classic book emphasised armed resistance, there are brilliant passages about Witbooi's diplomacy in the second chapter of Drechsler (1986).

5 Dedering (2009:785–801).

The rest of this chapter will be concerned with diplomatic activity by Namibians after the Second World War (WWII), and the focus will be on formal diplomatic activity, rather than on, say, the contacts that took place between Namibians within the country and those in exile, which, it could be argued, were a form of diplomacy for those on both sides of the divide that existed at that time.[6] The more formal diplomatic activity in which Namibians engaged in the years of the struggle for independence – the subject of this chapter – is a topic that remains under-researched. We can expect to learn much about it when the memoirs are published of one of the key figures in that diplomacy, Theo-Ben Gurirab, who was the leading diplomat for the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) at the UN from 1972 to 1986, as well as SWAPO's Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Namibia's first Minister of Foreign Affairs at Independence. This chapter sketches some aspects of pre-Independence diplomacy.[7]

From Chiefs to organised diplomacy

After WWII, it was the Herero who took the lead in petitioning the newly established UN against the territory's incorporation into South Africa. When Chief Frederick Maherero met the Reverend Michael Scott in what is now Botswana in 1947, he suggested that Scott visit Chief Hosea Kutako in South West Africa. There, Scott helped members of the Herero Chiefs' Council draft a petition to be presented to the UN, calling for the territory to become a UN trust territory.[8] A decade later, in 1957, Chief Kutako asked Mburumba Kerina, then a student at Lincoln University in the United States of America (USA), to lobby at the UN in New York for the termination of South Africa's mandate over South West Africa. Kerina duly appeared before the relevant sub-committee of the General Assembly, and towards the end of the 1950s he pressed for a case to be brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on whether South Africa was violating the spirit of the mandate through applying apartheid policies in South West Africa. Those who sent petitions to the UN in the late 1950s from the territory included Hermann (Andimba) Toivo ya Toivo, a leading figure in the Ovamboland People's Organisation, the forerunner of SWAPO. In 1958, Toivo asked the UN to terminate the mandate and take over the administration of the territory. When Kerina asked the Herero Chiefs' Council to send another representative to join him in New York, Fanuel Jariretundu Kozonguizi went; and while Kozonguizi was at the UN, he was elected President of the newly established

6 For example, the Stockholm meeting organised by Anton Lubowski in June 1988, which brought together leading white Namibians and the SWAPO leadership.

7 There is, unfortunately, no equivalent yet for Namibia of Scott Thomas's (1996) book on the diplomacy of the African National Congress in South Africa. In a sense, the book that comes closest to it is Founding President Sam Nujoma's (2001) memoir, *Where others wavered*. The present chapter draws heavily on the fullest scholarly study to date, namely Mushelenga (2008). See also Wa Nyembo (2002).

8 Saunders (2007:25–40); see also Chapter 10, "The Herero connection", in Yates & Chester (2006).

South West African National Union (SWANU). After the establishment of SWAPO the following year, its founder-President, Sam Nujoma, travelled to New York to appear before the UN, as did a number of other Namibians – members of both SWANU and SWAPO.[9]

In the early 1960s, both SWANU and SWAPO, through their diplomatic activity, "contributed to the further internationalization of the South West Africa issue".[10] Once SWAPO's provisional headquarters were established in Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), SWAPO began to place representatives in a number of other countries. In 1962, it opened a mission in Cairo, Egypt, with the Egyptian Government assisting with the costs. SWANU was then part of the South African United Front, which also opened an office in Cairo. When the Front collapsed, SWANU kept an office there on its own, also receiving funding for it from the Egyptian Government. But SWAPO took its international diplomacy more seriously than did SWANU, and gradually won out in the competition between the two for recognition by foreign governments. SWAPO was able to establish itself as the dominant Namibian nationalist organisation because SWANU did not launch an armed struggle, and began to fall apart in exile, but also because of the support that SWAPO's diplomats received at the UN and from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).[11]

SWAPO's international diplomacy

In 1964, the SWAPO leadership appointed Hage Geingob to be its Chief Representative to the Americas and the UN. Theo-Ben Gurirab, Hidipo Hamutenya and Geingob, all then studying at American universities, took time off from their studies to petition at the UN, where the informal Africa Group of ambassadors helped introduce them to the ways of the organisation. Thanks in part to the work of the Namibians, the UN General Assembly in 1966 adopted Resolution 2145 of 1966, which terminated the mandate. The General Assembly then established, in 1967, a Council for South West Africa to administer the territory and make the necessary arrangements for a transition to independence. From 1974, the UN provided SWAPO with funding for its New York office. SWAPO gained the coveted status of Permanent Observer, the first liberation movement in southern Africa to acquire it.[12] With that status, SWAPO was able to participate in key discussions at the UN, where leading members of the international community converged in September each year for the annual General Assembly sessions.

9 See Nujoma (2001:102–103, 113, 118–119).

10 Du Pisani (1985:159).

11 For two very useful accounts of the way in which support swung from SWANU to SWAPO in the international community, see Sellström (1999:262ff) and Shubin (2008:Ch. 15).

12 The Palestine Liberation Organisation led the way in this. SWAPO first gained such status from the Committee of Twenty-four in 1972 (Thomas 1996:118, 123).

SWAPO meanwhile opened offices in Algeria in 1963 and in Zambia the following year, after that country became independent. In 1965, Nickey Iyambo, then studying in Finland, was appointed SWAPO's Chief Representative to the Nordic countries. He and later representatives to those countries, such as Ben Amathila in Sweden, had some difficulty in justifying SWAPO's adoption of the armed struggle to people not sympathetic to the use of violence. But in the Nordic countries, and in Sweden in particular, Namibian representatives found widespread support for the campaign to oust South Africa from South West Africa, and they were given opportunities to speak to a wide range of people, from Prime Ministers to factory workers, about the situation in Namibia.[13] In 1968, SWAPO opened a mission in London, where Peter Katjavivi was appointed the first Chief Representative, and this became one of the organisation's most important missions: leading SWAPO personnel often passed through London and, although successive British Governments were not sympathetic to SWAPO, Britain was home to what became the largest and most effective Namibian solidarity organisation, with which a succession of SWAPO diplomats and other personnel interacted in a variety of ways.[14] After SWAPO established its Department of Foreign Affairs, more missions were opened in Africa and Europe in order to gain further support in the international community for Namibia's liberation struggle. In the context of the Cold War, SWAPO had to pull off an intricate balancing act with respect to its interactions with those in the West and in the socialist countries, and it was remarkably successful in doing so. It meant playing a skilful diplomatic game and not alienating either camp. While the SWAPO delegation that visited Beijing in June 1973 could not persuade the Chinese that SWAPO were not pro-Soviet,[15] the liberation movement was able to maintain missions in both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic at the same time. SWAPO developed close ties with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and Nujoma frequently visited Moscow; but SWAPO – perhaps to avoid alienating the USA before the Cold War began to wind down – only opened a diplomatic mission there in 1987.[16]

SWAPO also established relations with the Commonwealth, which indicated as early as 1975, at its meeting in Kingston, Jamaica, that Namibia would be welcome to join it after its independence, even though it was not a former British colony. The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1989 confirmed the invitation, when independence finally seemed imminent.[17] The Indian Government supported SWAPO

13 The definitive account of this for Sweden is to be found in two volumes by Sellström (1999, 2002).

14 These interactions were not always positive; see especially Saunders (2009:437–454).

15 Shubin (2008:209).

16 (ibid.) for details of Nujoma's visits. Oddly, Shubin does not write about the SWAPO mission.

17 Anyaoku (2004:84–85). By the time independence came, over 8,500 Namibians had been trained under Commonwealth programmes (ibid.:85). For example, in 1984, Nahas Angula went on a Commonwealth mission to India and Sri Lanka to see training facilities there; cf. "J Houston to E Reddy, 20 July 1984", *ES Reddy Papers*, University of Cape Town Library.

long before a mission was opened in New Delhi in 1982, which, three years later, was accorded full diplomatic status. This meant that SWAPO enjoyed all the privileges accorded to diplomatic missions of independent sovereign states to India, its Chief Representative was called *Ambassador*, and Nujoma was accorded an official state visit to India in May 1986.[18] By then, SWAPO's standing internationally had grown to such an extent that some regarded it as virtually a government-in-exile.

Participating actively in international organisations was an important aspect of SWAPO's diplomacy in the years in which it sought to build support in the international community for Namibian independence. In 1961, Nujoma was at the founding of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and after that he regularly attended NAM meetings. At its fourth summit in Algiers in 1973, NAM recognised SWAPO as the legitimate representative of the Namibian people.[19] SWAPO become a full member of NAM in 1978. Nujoma was present at the OAU's inaugural meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1963, and he attended many later annual OAU summits, while SWAPO was given invaluable financial and material support by the OAU's Liberation Committee.[20] Issues that SWAPO wanted to bring to the attention of the international community were often first discussed at OAU and NAM Foreign Ministers' meetings before being raised in the UN General Assembly, in order to gain the maximum possible support.

From the early 1970s, a series of international conferences was held on the question of Namibia's independence, and SWAPO personnel played key roles in most of these.[21] After SWANU's President Kozonguizi criticised African leaders as puppets of imperialist countries in 1966 at the Afro-Asian–Latin American People's Solidarity Conference,[22] the OAU withdrew its recognition of SWANU, and an OAU summit in 1972 in Rabat, Morocco, recognised SWAPO as the sole authentic representative of the people of Namibia.[23] In 1975, the OAU Council of Ministers passed a resolution reaffirming this, and the following year the UN General Assembly in turn recognised SWAPO as "the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people". This recognition for SWAPO, claims Nujoma, –[24]

18 See e.g. *SWAPO Information Bulletin*, June 1986.

19 Singham & Hune (1986:22).

20 On this, see Dube (1967) and Neidhardt [n.d.].

21 They included the International Conference on Namibia held in Brussels in May 1972 and a number of conferences held in Paris in the early and mid-1980s. One of the most important was that which commemorated a hundred years of colonial rule of Namibia: held in London in 1984, and organised by the Namibia Support Committee, it was the only conference of its kind to produce a very substantial volume of papers (Wood 1988).

22 Emmett (1999:335).

23 Mushelenga (2008:52). Only two other liberation movements received such recognition: *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO, Mozambique Liberation Front) and the *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC, African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde).

24 Nujoma (2001:257).

> … raised the status of Namibian representatives at every international conference as well as at national level.

From 1975, SWAPO worked closely with the Movimiento Popular para la Liberacão de Angola (MPLA, Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola),[25] and later in that decade, moved its headquarters from Lusaka, Zambia, to Luanda. Over the years, SWAPO forged close ties with a number of other liberation movements, including the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO, the Mozambique Liberation Front), the African National Congress (ANC), and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), drawing strength from the knowledge that others were engaged in similar struggles elsewhere.[26]

Diplomacy in the Cold War era

In 1971 and on a number of later occasions, Nujoma was invited to address the UN Security Council when the issue of Namibia came before it. In 1976, SWAPO's lobbying at the UN helped persuade the Security Council to adopt, unanimously, Resolution 385, which called for a UN presence to lead Namibia to independence. In September that year, Nujoma met Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, in New York, more than a decade before the President of the ANC had his first meeting with a Secretary of State (then George Schultz). In 1977 and 1978, Nujoma led the SWAPO diplomatic team in the negotiations with the Western Contact Group, made up of the five countries which then had seats in the UN Security Council. After SWAPO accepted the Western Plan for a transition to independence in July 1978, the Plan was embodied in UN Security Council Resolution 435 of September 1978, which provided for the establishment of a UN Transition Assistance Group for Namibia.

Nujoma attended key meetings of the Frontline States (FLS) in 1978 and, subsequently, meetings that coordinated policy against South Africa. It was the FLS that persuaded SWAPO to accept the Western Plan, despite what SWAPO saw to be its many limitations. Nujoma led the SWAPO delegation to the abortive UN 'pre-implementation' meeting in Geneva in 1981, and in 1984, he held discussions in Lusaka, Zambia, with representatives of the South African Government and leaders of internal parties in Namibia. Various internal groupings, including the Multi-party Conference and then, from 1985, the Transitional Government of National Unity, engaged in their own forms of diplomatic activity in the 1980s, almost all of it effectively fruitless, for they tried to persuade the outside world that they were not puppets of the South African Government and should receive international support. No significant support was forthcoming.[27]

25 SWAPO previously had ties to the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola).

26 The PLO Chair, Yassar Arafat, was to be a special guest at Namibia's Independence celebrations.

27 In 1984, for example, Dirk Mudge and other members of the Multi-party Conference visited

In the 1980s, SWAPO diplomats spent much of their time challenging the Reagan Administration's policy on Namibia, promoted especially by Chester Crocker, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. From 1981, the US argued that Namibian independence should be linked to the total withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Naturally, SWAPO responded that the two issues should not be linked, and that the Reagan Administration, by arguing for linkage, was in effect supporting South Africa in its desire to continue occupying the territory and refusing to allow the UN to organise an election and lead the country to independence. Crocker would never agree to meet SWAPO, but the organisation continued to increase its international support, even as some of its diplomats began to be questioned about the reports that SWAPO members had disappeared in dungeons in Angola. In February 1986, Gurirab and Hamutenya had to call a press conference to admit that 100 people had been detained under suspicion of being spies of the South African Government.[28] Though SWAPO was excluded from the 1988 negotiations – mediated by Crocker – between the Governments of Angola, Cuba and South Africa, its diplomats were active on the fringes of the negotiations.[29] By then, SWAPO had diplomatic representation in almost 30 countries, with 12 missions in Africa,[30] 14 in Europe,[31] 2 in Asia,[32] 2 in the Americas,[33] and 1 in Australia, besides its representation at the UN.

The collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in late 1989 came as a shock to SWAPO, and its personnel had to be evacuated from the German Democratic Republic, along with a number of Namibian children being educated there, and from Romania. But the overall success of SWAPO's diplomacy in the 1970s and 1980s was symbolised during the Independence ceremonies at the Windhoek Stadium on 21 March 1990, when Javier Perez de Cuellar, the UN Secretary-General, administered the presidential oath to Nujoma before a gathering of diplomats and politicians representing a large proportion of the countries of the world.[34] After Independence, the new government could build on the diplomacy of the pre-Independence period. Namibian involvement in such organisations as the UN and the NAM continued, and the newly independent country joined the Commonwealth, the Southern African Development Coordination Conference

Europe and the US to put their case to the international community; see e.g. Van Wyk (1999).

28 *The Namibian*, 21 February 1986. For the Swedish reaction, see Sellström (2002:336–337). On the so-called spy scandal, see especially Trewhela (2009).

29 See Crocker (1992).

30 In Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Congo (Brazzaville), Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

31 In the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, France, the German Democratic Republic, Romania, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and Yugoslavia.

32 In India and Iran.

33 In Cuba and the USA.

34 See e.g. Perez de Cuellar (1997:Ch. 11).

– soon to be transformed into the Southern African Development Community – and other international organisations, and extended its diplomatic activity in other new directions.

Conclusion

That diplomatic efforts by Namibians can be traced to well before the more active and formal diplomacy of the 1970s and 1980s may have had some impact on the diplomacy of those decades, but it cannot begin to explain the successes achieved. Hardly any of the Namibians active in those decades had any formal training in diplomacy,[35] but a number proved to be highly skilled at it, and were able to make significant contributions to, say, SWAPO's recognition as the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people, and obtaining Permanent Observer status at the UN. These achievements boosted SWAPO's image in the international community – and the much older and more established ANC was never able to acquire similar recognition. Some international diplomats were to remain scornful of Sam Nujoma's diplomatic skills,[36] but his tireless travelling from meeting to meeting[37] and his presence at numerous key international events put SWAPO and Namibia on the international map. He was, of course, assisted by other diplomats and members of SWAPO's Central Committee and Politburo on delegations to the UN and at the many international conferences that were held to discuss the independence of Namibia. Theo-Ben Gurirab at the UN and Peter Kaţjavivi in London both did much to boost SWAPO's credibility in international circles, for they combined shrewd intelligence with an ability to present themselves well in international diplomatic circles. Hage Geingob, the Director of the United Nations Institute for Namibia (UNIN) in Lusaka, acted in a diplomatic capacity on many occasions, meeting foreign dignitaries at UNIN and participating in international meetings. As we have noted, SWAPO was able in the 1970s and 1980s to engage both sides of the Cold War, which enabled it to acquire military training and equipment, including weapons, from socialist countries, along with humanitarian assistance and other forms of educational and training support from Scandinavian and other Western countries.

SWAPO's diplomatic activity in the 1970s and 1980s was, then, a substantial achievement. Though in part the product of skilful diplomacy, this achievement was also, of course, due to Namibia's international status and the growing consensus in the international community that South Africa should withdraw from the territory and grant Namibia its independence. Nonetheless, although SWAPO was much helped by the fact that Namibia

35 Gurirab was the only one to do advanced studies in international relations, namely at Temple University.

36 For example, in the memoirs of two UN officials, namely Brian Urquhart (Urquhart 1987) and Marrack Goulding (Goulding 2002).

37 In a few weeks in May and June 1986, for example, in one whirlwind trip, Nujoma visited Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, India, Iran, China, Korea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Congo (Brazzaville) and Gabon; *SWAPO Information Bulletin*, June 1986.

came to be seen as a UN responsibility, its diplomacy was arguably more successful than that of the ANC and at least as important as the armed struggle that SWAPO waged in the decades leading to independence.[38] The diplomatic successes of Namibians before Independence boded well for the country's foreign relations after Independence, for they could build on what had already been achieved.

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38 Nujoma (2001:282) emphasises the complementarity between the two.

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