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## Melber, H. *Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

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Perhaps more than any other country in the world, the country of Namibia (formerly South West Africa) is a product of international concern and actions, including those of the United Nations. At one time a colony of Germany (1884-1915), South West Africa was granted to neighboring South Africa as a mandated territory by the League of Nations in 1921. South West Africa was the scene of the world's first 20<sup>th</sup> century genocide, by the Germans against the Herero and the Nama, from 1904-1907. South Africa took full possession of South West Africa in the Second World War and fought a bitter battle against liberation forces from 1960 to 1989. Since its Independence on 21 March, 1990, the government of Namibia and its ruling party, the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO), have sought to address the country's inequities, which are a product of its settler colonial and apartheid past.

Henning Melber's superb book, *Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence* is a no-holds-barred, thoughtful, and well-argued examination of Namibia from the perspective of an individual who was not only involved directly in the country's struggles in the 1970s but also in critical policy assessments in a Namibia-based think tank, the Namibia Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU) after the country's independence. The work reflects Melber's assessment that ... Of his own work, Melber says, "What follows could be read as a testimony reflecting the disappointment, if not frustration, over the erroneous belief that the anti-colonial struggle for emancipation was supposed to be mainly. . . for the benefit of the majority of the oppressed, the destitute, and the marginalized" (p. xi). Like many independence struggles, the aims of the liberation movement in Namibia were to bring about social, political, and economic self-determination, as underscored by the country's first President, Sam Nujoma, in a speech to the SWAPO Youth League on 17 August, 2007 (as quoted in *The Namibian* on 20 August, 2007).

Melber's book, which is academically sophisticated, insightful, and thoroughly documented, is divided into nine chapters, covering (1) the way to independence, (2) the mentality of the struggle as "National Gospel," (3) the consolidation of political dominance, (4) democracy "as made in Namibia" (which he characterizes at various points as "minimalist democracy," (5) land matters, (6) the economy (7) new elites and old inequalities, (8) Namibian internationalism, and (9) the future. The book ends before the election of Namibia's third president, Hage Geingob, on 21 March, 2015. Melber weighs the rhetoric of Namibia's leaders against the realities of their achievements, which have been mixed at best, especially in terms of the well-being of the majority. He points out that Namibia, although now considered by the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank to be a "middle income country," has some of the most pronounced social and economic differences between rich and poor of any country on the planet, (as do Brazil, Botswana, and the United States). Poverty-reduction, although an avowed goal of the ruling party and the government, has been achieved only to a limited extent, with two fifths of the country's population remaining below the poverty datum line (PDL) in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Melber explores contentious issues such as land reform, the initiation and implementation of a basic income grant (BIG, trickle-down economics, public participation in decision-making, the complex role of civil society agencies and faith-based institutions, decentralization, the issues revolving around Traditional Authorities, and the degree to which human rights and legal justice have been handled, focusing particularly on the case of alleged "secessionists" in the eastern Caprivi (now Zambezi) region (pp. 70-78, 169-170). Emphasizing the heterogeneity of

Namibia's population, which in 2016 consisted of groups that spoke as many as 38 languages, Melber insightfully addresses the complexity of ethnic as well as political struggles that have occurred throughout Namibia's history. As a result of such diversity, claims Melber, some groups remain in disadvantaged positions. He asserts that Namibia is "an exemplary case study of the limits to liberation under a dominant party" (p. 57). He goes on to show in detail how SWAPO has operated both politically and behind the scenes in policy formulation and implementation and how the Ovambo and their allies have managed to dominate the political and economic scenes in Namibia.

A key chapter in Melber's book is "Land Matters" (chapter 5, pp. 89-110), in which he lays out a core feature of the Namibian Independence and post-Independence struggles: equitable access to land. In Namibia, all land is state land, and according to the Namibian Constitution, everyone should have the opportunity to obtain land. However, land in Namibia was divided, during its colonial period from 1884-1989, into a number of different categories, including private or freehold land, sometimes defined as "commercial land," most of which was originally set aside in the form of some 5000 ranches or farms for the country's settler population. This land comprised 356,700 km<sup>2</sup> or 43.11% of the country's surface area. The majority of the population resided in what in the past was group land or so-called communal land (298,200 km<sup>2</sup>), covering 36.07% of the country's land. There was also land set aside for wildlife conservation, habitat protection, and national monuments (116,000 km<sup>2</sup>) or 16.03% of the country. Finally, 55,780 km<sup>2</sup> of land was designated for "other uses" such as urban areas, mines, and roads, making up some 6.75% of the country's total of 826,680 km<sup>2</sup>.

Melber shows how the National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question, held in Windhoek from 25 June - 1 July 1991, set the stage for subsequent land reform efforts. Seeing land correctly as a highly sensitive issue, the government stated at the outset that there would be no forceful take-overs of land and that all land transfers would be handled on a "willing buyer, willing seller" basis. One of the hopes of a substantial number of Namibia's landless and land-poor population was that they would be able to take advantage of the government's national program of land resettlement, but as the Legal Assistance Center's work on land, environment, and development has shown, only a small percentage of commercial properties were turned over to groups of re-settlers in the period from 1998 to 2010. Much of the land that was set aside for resettlement purposes was marginal in quality and could only support a small number of people, roughly between 100 and 200. There were few cases of direct land claims under restitution granted by the Namibian government. One result of this situation is that there has been *de facto* privatization of communal land through processes of movement into and fencing off of land for individual purposes, frequently by wealthy people and members of a new political class at the expense of the poor and vulnerable (pp. 102-103). It is therefore not surprising that Melber sees Namibian land policy as providing evidence of systematic failure (pp. 107-108).

Namibia has an advantage in that it is resource-rich, especially in terms of strategic and other kinds of minerals and wildlife and natural resources. Transnational corporations and Namibian private companies have been able to take advantage of the mineral richness of the country. The Namibian government has attempted to diversify the economy in a series of often innovative national development plans and projects, but the implementation of these programs has, as Melber put it, "left a lot to be desired" (p. 113). As he goes on to note, some of the constraints on diversification and economic growth include the rise of "new class structures" appropriating an unequal portion of public land, resources, and funds, competition with its neighbors, the difficulties posed by a highly variable natural and economic environment, its

periodic “go-it-alone” domestic policy statements of its leaders, and complex issues of shared governance and equity.

One area of the economy that Melber does not dwell very much on, though he is fully aware of it, is ecotourism—in which Namibia has become a world leader, with the establishment of some 84 communal area conservancies and 22 freehold conservancies since the passage of government legislation allowing for community management of wildlife resources in 1996. Another shortcoming of the text is Melber’s limited, though perceptive attention to the contentious topic of who can be seen as indigenous in the country... Without going into very much detail on the contested issue of “indigeneity” in Namibia, Melber points out that the most marginalized indigenous minority groups have served “as a kind of prism or mirror image for a certain pressure on communities to adapt and to explore new survival strategies” in the country (pp. 3, 91-92, 100). While Namibia has played important roles in the United Nations Security Council and in other bodies of the United Nations family of agencies, Namibia was one of a dozen African countries that raised serious questions in the United Nations about the concept of “indigenous peoples” when the draft declaration on the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) was being considered by the United Nations in November of 2006 (p. 163). Although eventually voting in favor of UNDRIP on September, 13<sup>th</sup> 2007 along with its neighboring countries, Namibia has chosen not to focus on “indigenous peoples” but rather on “historically disadvantaged minorities” and has established a department of “Marginalized Communities” in the Prime Minister’s office.

While considered one of the “last colonies” on the planet to gain independence, Namibia, despite the systemic challenges it continues to face and its limited progress on matters of serving the poor and openness to diverse political views internally, has played significant roles in Africa and at the global level in coming up with innovative strategies for dealing with desertification, environmental degradation, deforestation, and climate change. Companies in Namibia have sought to become world leaders in promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the mining industry. Namibia has also become highly competitive in the livestock industry and has replaced Botswana as a major contributor of meat to the European Union. It has sought to establish participatory forms of community-based development and natural resource management. Namibia has addressed in forthright ways the serious problems brought about by the HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and other disease-related crises. If one follows Henning Melber’s cogent and insightful arguments about the country’s many challenges—and sometimes flawed political and economic approaches—and seeks to use this book as a kind of policy document, Namibia could well become a full-fledged multiparty democracy that not only espouses but actually practices equitable policies that bring about prosperity, economic growth, human rights, dignity, well-being, and broad-based public participation for all, including those who are the most vulnerable and marginalized.

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