

Straight Talk (31), 8-14 October 2012:

A society without ideology?

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper

In recent weeks, there was a debate in some local newspapers about the question of ideology with some writers suggesting that it is not helpful to have ideologies as they hamper finding solutions to Namibia's development challenges. However, each society (and each member of society) is shaped by values and beliefs that shape the outlook on life. In addition, vested interests strongly influence our views and ideologies and thus there is no denying that ideologies underpin all our actions. In this column, I will look at dominant ideologies in Namibia and how they have changed over time.

During the national liberation struggle, the SWAPO constitution of 1976 had a socialist orientation and stated that SWAPO will play the vanguard role by uniting, inspiring, orientating and leading "*the broad masses of the working Namibian people in the struggle for national and social liberation*". Furthermore SWAPO's political programme of 1976 was characterised by socialist rhetoric, inspired by the newly won independence of Mozambique and Angola and by the support rendered by the Soviet Union to Namibia's liberation struggle. It stated that one of SWAPO's key tasks was "*To unite all Namibian people, particularly the working class, the peasantry and progressive intellectuals, into a vanguard party capable of safeguarding national independence and of building a classless, non-exploitative society based on the ideals and principles of scientific socialism*".

However, as the crisis in the Soviet Union deepened in the 1980s, coupled with the counter-revolutionary wars in Angola and Mozambique and the refusal by the South African apartheid regime to implement UN resolution 435 which was meant to pave the way for Namibia's independence, it became clear that SWAPO regarded national independence (and not the proletarian revolution) as the primary goal of its struggle. A contributing factor to this shift was SWAPO's attempt to seek Western support for Namibia's independence by showing allegiance to market-related economic policies. This was clearly reflected in the party's policy proposals for an independent Namibia in the late 1980s as well as the election manifesto of 1989. When SWAPO's "Economic Policy Position Document" was released in November 1988, it no longer called for the nationalisation of key industries but instead promised fair and just compensation in those instances where state acquisition of assets from private hands was considered necessary for the rebuilding and restructuring of Namibia's national economy. SWAPO's secretary for economics at the time, Ben Amathila, declared that it was not SWAPO's intention to nationalise mining companies. Instead, the party envisaged using revenue from mining to diversify production in other sectors and give Namibia a better chance for development. Furthermore SWAPO assured white farmers that it recognised the land ownership at independence: "*We do not interfere with land ownership as set out at present... We foresee a mixed economy for the simple reason that the present structure of the economy is such that we may not be able to afford any*

drastic rearrangement. For change from the present state to be effective, it must be gradual”, said Amadhila. Thus the socialist rhetoric of the 1970s had been replaced by the “pragmatism” of accepting a capitalist order, enshrined later on as “mixed economy” in the constitution of independent Namibia. Revolutionary working class politics were simply dropped while the capitalist structure of the economy was maintained. This has shaped Namibia’s development since independence and neither the ruling party nor any of the current opposition parties in parliament have fundamentally challenged the country’s market-driven development strategy. Does this mean that there is no alternative or that the current approach is indeed the best one for Namibia?

The market-driven neo-liberal approach to socio-economic development has left a clear mark on independent Namibia. It has benefitted large businesses (especially multinational corporations dominating the mining, fishing, retail and finance sectors) but also our national elite in both politics and business. They have achieved high profit rates and very comfortable standards of living and defend the current order as being in the “national interest”. Vested interests of business are usually portrayed as being “neutral” while other interests such as those of workers are described as being stuck in ideological propaganda.

However, the majority of the world’s population and the vast majority of Namibians are still waiting to see any of the benefits that global capitalism has promised. Instead income gaps and unemployment are growing as more and more people are unable to meet their basic needs. Thus the question of how best countries like Namibia can achieve social justice and a decent standard of living for all has to be raised loud and clear. This touches on the economic system that exists and if capitalism cannot deliver to the majority then it has to be questioned. This will certainly not be welcomed by the local and global elites but organisations of the working class (like trade unions and others) will have to play a prominent role in not only pointing out the injustices of the current order but also in developing alternative options. This must include different ideas and values and thus the process of advancing a new social and economic order and building a different society is by its very nature also an ideological process. We should not shy away from such debates as they are essential for finding solutions to the challenges we face today.

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