

Affirmative Action for Women in Local Government in Namibia: The 1998 Local Government Elections (1998)

This paper is a follow-up to a previous research report of the Gender Research Project of the LAC. The first report examined the results of Namibia's first local government elections, which incorporated an affirmative action provision for women. This report is an analysis of the second local government elections, which applied even stronger affirmative action requirements. It attempts to analyse the impact of the affirmative action requirements on the second election, and to compare the performance of women in the 1998 local elections against the outcome of the previous local election. As in the case of the previous study, the present report is based on statistical analysis supplemented by information from Parliamentary debates and on interviews with party officials, members of community associations, candidates and officials from the Electoral Commission. The LAC intends to complete its series of studies of affirmative action for women in local government with a report on the third local government elections (which will probably take place in 2003), to compare how women fare under the ward system without affirmative action. The overall objective of this series of reports is to shed some light on the practical effectiveness of affirmative action for women.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1. **Extension of party list system:** The second local government elections were originally intended to take place in terms of a ward system, without any affirmative action for women. But the party list system was extended to the second local elections by an amendment which also strengthened affirmative action for women in respect of these elections. In terms of the amended provision, party lists for councils with 10 or fewer members must include at least 3 women, while lists for larger councils must include 5 women.
2. **Parliamentary debate on affirmative action:** There was considerable opposition to the extension of the affirmative action provision in Parliament, on the grounds that women would be elected on merit under the ward system. SWAPO members asserted that continued affirmative action was necessary to cement the concept of gender equality, while opposition members argued that the strengthened affirmative action provision was merely 'window-dressing' for a bill primarily motivated by SWAPO's belief that it would win more support under a party list system.
3. **Number of local authorities:** The 1998 local elections involved 45 local authorities: 17 municipalities, 13 towns and 15 villages. This is fewer than in the first local elections, which ultimately involved 52 local authorities: 16 municipalities (including Walvis Bay), 12 towns and 24 villages.
4. **Number of seats:** All 45 local authority councils involved in the 1998 elections consisted of 7 seats, with three exceptions: Windhoek – 15 seats; Swakopmund – 10 seats; and Walvis Bay – 10 seats.
5. **Postponement of elections:** The second local government elections were initially scheduled for 2 December 1997. Technical flaws were discovered in the process for submitting party lists after SWAPO challenged the Electoral Commission's decision not to accept its list of candidates for Rundu after the official deadline had passed. As a result, the second local elections were postponed to 17 February 1998. The extra time period led to the registration of 11 590 additional voters and 4 additional political parties/associations. Opinions concerning the impact of the postponement on the performance of particular parties were mixed.
6. **Contenders:** A total of 6 political parties and 8 associations participated in the 1998 elections, for a total of 14 contenders. In comparison, the first local elections (including Walvis Bay) involved 6 political parties and 4 associations, for a total of 10 contenders. The increase in participation by associations can arguably be seen as a reflection of the 'de-politicisation' of local politics.
7. **Distribution of party participation:** The only parties that participated in the local elections on a national basis were the DTA and SWAPO. The UDF fielded candidates in about half of the local authority areas (22 out of 45). The DCN and SWANU registered in only a few locations, and the WRP and all eight local associations fielded candidates in only a single local authority. Thus, the majority of local contests were either two-way contests between DTA and SWAPO, or three-way contests between DTA, SWAPO and UDF.
8. **Preparation of party lists:** All of the political parties seemed to perceive tensions between the desire to encourage affirmative action and the desire to allow unrestricted democratic selection of candidates for party lists at the local level. Efforts to allow local supporters to choose candidates for the party lists mitigated against the systematic inclusion of women candidates.

9. **Number of women candidates on party lists:** A total of 462 women were put forward, out of 978 candidates. This is equal to 47%, which represents a significant improvement over the 38% figure for the first local authority elections. It is also striking that virtually every party came close to the ideal of 50% representation of women on its party list, with SWANU slightly exceeding 50%. Only a few party lists had to be returned to parties for failure to comply with the strengthened affirmative action provision, and no major difficulties with compliance were reported.
10. **Position of women candidates on party lists:** Despite the stated commitments of the major parties to give special attention to the placement of women candidates, the proportion of women at positions 1 and 2 was actually smaller than in the first local elections, with an increase in the proportion of women at position 4 and at the bottom of the smaller lists.
11. **'Zebra' lists:** Both SWAPO and DTA made a public commitment to 'zebra' lists of alternating male and female candidates. About 42% of SWAPO's party lists substantially followed the 'zebra' format, as compared to a compliance rating of about 20% for the DTA. It appears that neither party insisted that local party structures follow the stated goal of the head offices on this point, although SWAPO was far more successful than the DTA in putting its 'zebra'-list policy into practice. A comparison of DTA and SWAPO results shows how a greater adherence to the 'zebra'-style approach might have helped women. There were 7 councils where no women took seats amongst the DTA representatives, with 5 of these involving at least 2 seats (Maltahöhe, Mariental, Otjiwarongo, Katima Mulilo and Okahandja). In contrast, there was only 1 council on which SWAPO won more than 1 seat without placing a woman (Koës).
12. **Voter turn-out:** The turn-out for the 1998 elections was much lower than that in 1992, with only about 33% of registered voters taking part, as compared to 82% of registered voters in 1992. Reasons put forward for the low turn-out included disillusionment stemming from persistent social problems such as unemployment and disaffection with both major political parties and their leaders. Some voters may have been turned away because of confusion concerning the virtually identical local and regional voter registration cards, or because of their failure to re-register after moving from one local authority to another, although no statistics were kept on these problems. Some people suggested that the postponement of the ward system might have been a factor, speculating that more direct accountability of councillors to voters will reawaken political interest. Increased powers for local councils following on the expected decentralisation of government may also inspire greater interest in future.
13. **Election results:** SWAPO won majorities in 25 councils, the DTA in 9, the UDF in 1, and residents' associations in 2. There were 8 split councils in which no party controls a majority of the seats. As a point of comparison, after the first local elections (including Walvis Bay), SWAPO controlled 33 councils, the DTA 11 and the UDF 2. There were 6 split councils. Keeping in mind the fact that 9 local authorities were de-proclaimed after the first elections (4 of which were controlled by the DTA and 5 by SWAPO), the comparative levels of SWAPO and DTA support remained fairly constant.
14. **Impact of residents' associations:** Every residents association that participated in the elections won at least one seat. Nationwide, residents associations won 16 out of 328 seats (about 5%), and 5 167 out of 62 888 votes counted (just over 8%). They appear to have drawn support from both SWAPO and the DTA, although SWAPO suffered more heavily, losing control of three councils because of the influence of residents associations as compared to the loss of one council on this basis by the DTA.
15. **Performance of women candidates:** A total of 136 women were among the 329 persons who actually took seats in the 1998 local elections, which constitutes about 41,3% as compared to the showing of 32% in the first local elections (including Walvis Bay). SWAPO seated the highest percentage of women (47,3%), followed by the DTA at 35,7% and the UDF at 32%. Despite the strong performance of the residents associations in gaining seats, they did not succeed in placing many women on local councils. Of the 16 seats won nationwide by residents associations, only 4 (25%) of them were filled by women.
16. **Women on local authority councils:** There are now 11 local authorities in which women hold a majority of seats, as compared to only 4 after the first elections. There is no local authority council without any women among its members. There are 2 councils with only 1 woman out of 7 members, and 2 councils with only 2 women out of 7 members. The performance of women does not seem to fall into any patterns on the basis of region or on the basis of the size of the local authority.
17. **Women re-elected:** A total of only 18 women on 11 councils are serving their second term of office. This is a low proportion, constituting only some 13% of the total number of women councillors. Thus, the affirmative action provisions have not served to help individual women get political experience –

although it is possible that women who were local authority councillors in the past have moved on to other posts where their political experience is relevant.

18. **Comparison with women in other key government positions:** The number of women in local authority councils continues to outweigh women's participation in other key government posts by far. The percentage of women in regional councils (where second elections have not yet been held) remains at 3 women out of 95 regional council seats (3%), and women have not made many strides in penetrating Parliament, Cabinet or the judiciary.
19. **Attitudes about affirmative action:** Interviews conducted for this study indicate that the goal of achieving gender balance in political bodies is widely accepted and acknowledged. Disagreement centres primarily on whether or not women are able to make their way into local government without the assistance of affirmative action provisions.
20. **'De-politicisation' of local politics:** It is difficult to assess voter attitudes about women at the local level, since campaigns centred around political groups rather than individual candidates – a factor which may change in future with the introduction of the ward system. The future decentralisation of government may also contribute to changing attitudes about local politics. The impact of local associations is likely to continue to be significant at the local level, in view of their increased participation and positive performance in 1998. These developments may help women to increase their involvement outside of male-dominated political party structures, and may encourage those who believe that women are not suited for 'politics' to support women at the local level under the ward system.