

Remembering Lubango? Contested Truths and Memory Politics in Namibia

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A history forgotten is a future lost? This paper examines the contested discourse in Namibia on severe violations of human rights committed by the country's former liberation movement, now ruling party, SWAPO. Engaged in guerrilla warfare against the South African apartheid regime between 1966 and 1989, SWAPO in exile was rocked by a series of inner party crises which led to numerous cases of torture, extralegal executions and enforced 'disappearances' of SWAPO cadres by the hands of the movement's security apparatus; approx. 1.000 people are still missing. A multitude of causes led to the escalation of violence, such as inner party power struggles, ethnic rivalries, anti-intellectual bias, fear of subversion, Stalinist spy hunting etc. This rather bleak episode of Namibia's struggle for independence is commonly known as *detainee issue*, or – referring to one of the main prison camps – *Lubango saga*.

While transition to democracy in neighbouring South Africa went along with the installation of a highly acclaimed Truth and Reconciliation Commission, no such measures of institutionalised 'coming to terms with the past' were taken up in Namibia. Instead the new SWAPO-led government issued blanket amnesty for all crimes committed by both sides during the armed struggle and proclaimed a Policy of National Reconciliation.

Ever since independence survivors of the SWAPO prison camps and relatives of the 'disappeared' have been organising themselves, struggling for an official recognition of their histories by SWAPO, moral rehabilitation, and – in many cases – institutionalised reconciliation. While far from being unanimous in their conceptions of truth, history, and proper juridical measures, their memories are poignant counter-narratives to the government's master narrative of the heroic struggle for liberation. Much like ZANU-PF's gospel of 'revolutionaries and sell-outs' in postcolonial Zimbabwe, so is SWAPO's discourse on the liberation struggle still dominated by a division in heroes and 'those who wavered' –constituting a policy of highly selective memory. Yet, as debates following the discovery of mass-graves in Northern Namibia in recent years and the flaring-up of politically motivated violence during the last national elections have shown: SWAPO's heroic narrative is being challenged – both from the margins and from within.

Based on six months of fieldwork conducted in 2008 and 2010 and extensive interviews with ex-detainees and government officials, I will conceptualise my findings in a framework which understands memory as a key-concept employed by relevant actors in politics and civil society in the process of re-/negotiating history, national identity, and political subjectivities.