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Namibia Becomes a Nation: Could It Be a Model?

by Robert I. Rotberg

Namibia's independence on March 21 ends more than a century of white rule (three decades as a German colony, and governance by South Africa since World War I), 24 years of domestic military conflict, and an astonishingly brief 11 months of electoral campaigning and constitutional planning. As Africa's last colony becomes the continent's 52nd nation and whites transfer power to blacks, Namibia could become a new model for cross-color cooperation in southern Africa.

Sam Nujoma, who will be sworn in as Namibia's first president by UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, led the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in its long guerrilla war against South African rule. Although his government will be dominated by SWAPO adherents, it will include several distinguished whites and a few non-SWAPO Africans.

SWAPO's New Image

SWAPO's record since the early November 1989 constitutional assembly elections has been both responsive to the national mood and responsible. The election results confirmed SWAPO's widespread popularity but denied it overwhelming dominance. By winning 57 percent of the seats in the constituent assembly, or 41 of 72, it defeated the white-led Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), four smaller black parties, and one white party. The DTA accumulated 21 seats, the United Democratic Front (UDF) 4, the white Action Christian National 3, the Namibia National Front (NNF) 1, the National Patriotic Front 1, and the Federal Convention of Namibia 1.

During the debates in the constituent assembly, which met from late November until mid-February, SWAPO and Nujoma dropped many of their revolutionary tenets (radical restructuring of the economy, draconian security regulations, detention without trial, and single-party rule) and quickly agreed to a compromise constitution acceptable to the minority parties. Because ratification of a constitution required a two-thirds vote of the members of the assembly, and SWAPO had fallen short of controlling that number, SWAPO's leadership moved promptly and with minimal rancor to work with the other groups in arriving at a consensus. "For the sake of national unity on the broadest possible basis, we were prepared to make far-reaching concessions," said Dr. Ernest Tjiriange, SWAPO's designated minister of justice.

The Constitution

The constitution that emerged from the negotiations and was approved by the

constituent assembly on February 9 establishes a multiparty system, guarantees fundamental human rights, mandates an independent judiciary, limits the president to two five-year terms, abolishes the death penalty, forbids discrimination, and enshrines the private ownership of property. Article 97 states that the "principles of a mixed economy with the objective of securing economic growth" shall be the economic order of Namibia. Article 98 encourages foreign investment, subject to an investment code. A 72-member National Assembly (which, it was agreed, will initially be comprised of all the persons who won seats in the constituent assembly, thus avoiding a second election before independence) will be elected by proportional representation every five years. An upper House of Review is to be composed of delegates from cities, towns, and regions. Schooling is compulsory and free for children 16 and under, and labor of children under 14 is forbidden. Maternity benefits are stipulated.

The president is empowered to declare a state of emergency only for a 14-day period, after which the National Assembly must ratify its continued existence. The president can only proclaim martial law in the event of an external conflict. The president can be impeached and removed from office by a two-thirds vote of the Assembly.

As a written and ratified document, Namibia's constitution is the most liberally democratic in Africa. Nujoma, looking over his shoulder toward South Africa, suggested in February that it might serve as a model for "other countries who are presently involved in the process of reordering their societies." They might find, he continued, "some positive examples from our humble democratic beginning."

The Body Politic

Whereas neighboring South Africa includes nearly 40 million people, of whom about 31 million are of African descent and 5 million are white, Namibia's population of 1.3 million is comprised of 1.1 million blacks, 100,000 persons of mixed race, and only 75,000 whites (two-thirds of whom are Afrikaners, the remainder German- and English-speaking). Even so, many of Namibia's Afrikaners fought a bitter rear-guard battle against giving political concessions to representatives of the black and brown majority, a battle closely linked to and affirmed by the National Party under P.W. Botha's leadership. Today the right-wing core of these antagonists to Namibian independence are allied to the Conservative Party of South Africa, which vociferously opposes the radical reforms being introduced by President F.W. de Klerk.

Namibia is and will be dominated by northerners, preeminently the Ovambo, now numbering approximately 800,000. Linked to the Ovambo by geography and ecology, and increasingly by language, are 110,000 Kavango. Also in the north, living south of the Zambezi River in the eastern edge of the Caprivi Strip, are 47,000 Caprivians.

Farther south are 80,000 Herero and 90,000 Damara, occupying roughly the same areas as whites, 40,000 Coloureds, 9,000 Tswana, and 35,000 San (Bushmen). In Namibia's deep south are the brown-skinned Nama (about 45,000) and the so-called Basters (29,000).

The Ovambo occupy a well-watered, palm-dotted triangle of savannah within 60 miles of Namibia's northern border with Angola. This is the only section of the country that enjoys sufficient rainfall to have significant agricultural potential. The Ovambo since World War II have also provided the labor on which the nation's diamond, uranium, and copper mines, its railways and harbors, and its light industry have depended.

The Ovambo are less a single ethnic group than a loose association of seven peoples who share a common language and culture and who fought among each other during the nineteenth century. The Kwanyama straddle the northern Namibian border and are the largest population group among the Ovambo, about a third of the total. They are linguistically and culturally close to the Ovimbundu of Angola. The Ndonga, the second most numerous group, also comprise about a third of the total. English and Finnish missionaries helped socialize the Ndonga, who remain more "modern" and more acculturated than the Kwanyama or the other five, smaller Ovambo peoples—the Njera, Kwambo, Kaluudhi, Mbalantu, and Kolonkadhi.

Of Namibia's 318,261 square miles (equal to Texas and Louisiana combined, two Californias, two-thirds of South Africa, four United Kingdoms, or nine Netherlands), only the lands of the Ovambo, Kavango, and Caprivi receive as much as 24 inches of rain a year. Most of it falls in the summer, when evaporation rates are high, and in short, concentrated bursts. The Herero lands, to the south and east, average between 16 and 20 inches of rain a year, Windhoek and its neighborhood average 12 to 16 inches. The remainder of the country to the south and

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west receives hardly any rain at all. About a fifth of Namibia is desert and another two-fifths semidesert.

The Period From 1915 to 1976

When white soldiers from across the border ousted the Germans in 1915 from this vast underpopulated thirstland, the objective was to incorporate the former German colony (and its diamonds) directly into what was then the Union of South Africa. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States protested. As a result, South West Africa (as the region was then known) instead was assigned to South Africa in 1920 by the League of Nations as a "Class C mandate," to be administered subject to pledges to protect the interests of the indigenous population.

Disregarding the responsibilities of trusteeship, South Africa largely ignored the League and administered South West Africa as if it had been annexed. (Although 969 square kilometers containing the deep-water port of Walvis Bay and environs was annexed by Britain in 1878 and incorporated into what is now South Africa's Cape Province in 1884, the enclave was treated in practice after 1922 as if it were a part of South West Africa.)

During the mandate era, South Africa encouraged the immigration of whites into the territory, accorded the white community limited local self-government, and failed by design to advance the welfare of the indigenous population. African grazing lands were given to whites, social and economic barriers to black advancement were erected, and the full press of South African segregationist legislation was applied. In 1922, when some of the Nama attempted to protest, South African forces bombed and strafed the hapless herders from the air. In 1925 the Basters were also repressed militarily.

After World War II, South Africa refused to recognize that its administrative authority over Namibia had lapsed when the League of Nations was succeeded by the United Nations. Pretoria rejected the authority of the UN Trusteeship Council and, from the late 1940s to 1977, fought a running, ultimately acrimonious, and juridically complicated battle to prevent the UN from taking control of Namibia. A special UN Council for Namibia was established in 1967 to serve as a formal administrative authority in exile, but South Africa ignored the existence of the Council as well as every resolution pertaining to Namibia passed by the General Assembly or the Security Council.

Although it was not until 1969 that Pretoria formalized Namibia's status as a virtual fifth province of the Republic, de facto provincial status had been in force for almost two decades. Following the victory of the National Party in the elections of 1948, the region was absorbed into the Republic. Whites in Namibia voted for representatives to both houses of the South African parliament. Laws made in Pretoria were automatically applied to Namibia. By 1970, Namibia was even administered directly from Pretoria rather than Windhoek, and most of the important positions in the territorial civil service were filled by South Africans.

By 1976, South Africa had determined to thwart world opinion and the United Nations by transferring power to a collection of representatives of the territory's 11 main ethnic groups. Under white leadership, these spokesmen met in a converted German assembly hall, called the Turnhalle, to devise a constitution and future government in which each ethnic group, whatever its population, would have equal say. Dirk Mudge, now the leader of the DTA (the heir and successor to the exercise of the late 1970s), emerged from the discussions as the future head of what was intended to be a white-dominated, antimajoritarian form of territorial authority. The Turnhalle delegates agreed to a complicated constitution that would have forestalled true indigenous rule.

The Recent Past, 1977 to 1989

The rush toward a South African solution to the Namibian question was abruptly aborted in May 1977. After lengthy discussions with U.S. Ambassadors to the United Nations Andrew Young and Donald McHenry, Prime Minister B. Johannes Vorster suddenly annulled the Turnhalle agreement and, for the first time, acknowledged the role of the United Nations in Namibia's future.

This was a major breakthrough, but with qualifications. Although Pretoria was at last prepared to bargain (perhaps as a result of a threat of U.S. sanctions), the military assault on the guerrilla forces of SWAPO was meanwhile stepped up. UN Security Council Resolution 435, adopted in September 1978, approved a plan for an internationally recognized Namibian independence that eventually became the basis for the process now being concluded.

From 1977 to 1989, when the UN Transition Assistance Group took over, South Africa administered Namibia by fiat. It also extended the war against SWAPO across the Kunene River into Angola. For a number of years during the 1980s, South Africa occupied a large swath of southern Angola (where considerable support was given after 1978 to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA forces) and added new roads and airfields in northern Namibia.

Although SWAPO's war against South Africa probably peaked in effectiveness in the late 1970s, white South Africans began to think seriously about withdrawal only in the late 1980s. The loss of white lives and the escalating cost of the border war came at a time when South Africa was also experiencing an economic decline. Mikhail Gorbachev and Fidel Castro also decided that they were no longer excited about playing major destabilizing roles in southern Africa.

As a result, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker, who for eight long years had attempted to extricate Namibia from South Africa, finally was able to broker a successful cease-fire. In the negotiations that led to the signature of the historic Angola-Cuba-South Africa accords of December 1988, Crocker (with the critical support of his Soviet counterpart) worked with the contending parties to devise a framework for the implementation of Resolution 435. (For details, see the following issues of *CSIS Africa Notes* by Gillian Gunn: "A Guide to the Intricacies of the Angola-Namibia

Negotiations," issue no. 90, September 1988, and "Keeping Namibian Independence on Track: The Cuban Factor," issue no. 103, October 1989.) The United Nations supervised the transition in 1989 and early 1990 and monitored the crucial elections of November 1989.

Namibian Nationalism

The struggle by Namibians for the territory's independence began in the 1950s, when Nama and Herero chiefs and their white missionary allies presented petitions to the United Nations in attempts to prevent the administrative integration of Namibia into South Africa. The chiefs were assisted by Namibian student groups, especially those at Fort Hare University College, and by Namibians associated with the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa.

In Cape Town, Andimba Toivo ja Toivo was the leader. An Ndonga who had been educated by Finnish Lutherans, Toivo had served in the South African Native Military Corps during World War II. He subsequently resumed his profession as a schoolteacher; worked briefly as a railway policeman, as a clerk at a manganese mine, and as a gold miner; and then moved to Cape Town and found employment in a furniture factory. There he was joined by Andreas Shipanga, also an Ndonga and a product of Finnish missionary training who had taught primary school, clerked, visited Zimbabwe to talk to its early nationalist leaders, and worked in Johannesburg.

In 1958, Toivo, Shipanga, and a number of other Ovambo in Cape Town established the Ovambo People's Organization (OPO) to oppose migratory labor, petition the United Nations, and think about home rule. Shortly thereafter, Toivo was deported home, subsequently placed under house arrest, jailed in 1966, tried for terrorism, and sentenced to 20 years on Robben Island.

Among the several younger Namibians who were aroused to political action by Toivo's deportation was Sam Nujoma, an Njera, who had also been trained in Ovamboland by Finnish missionaries. The son of farm workers who had lived in Ongandjera, Nujoma left school early to live with relatives in Walvis Bay. After World War II he moved to Windhoek, where he learned English from Anglican missionaries. He worked on the South African railways in Namibia until 1957, first as a sweeper and then as a clerk. Later he was a clerk for the city government of Windhoek, and was employed in a wholesale store.

Nujoma vaulted to political prominence in 1959 during a protest against the mass removal of Namibians from a residential township within Windhoek (the Windhoek Old Location) to the new segregated township of Katutura on the outskirts of the city. After a boycott of buses, beer halls, and cinemas, there was a clash with the police in which 11 Namibians were killed.

In mid-1960, Nujoma fled Namibia for the United Nations, where he petitioned for self-rule and also helped other Namibians in exile transform the Ovambo People's Organization into SWAPO. Two years later he assumed control after ousting Mburumba Kerina, of mixed Herero and German parentage. In 1966, with Soviet backing, SWAPO launched its first attacks on South Africans in Namibia. Two years later it was recognized as Namibia's authentic liberation movement by the Organization of African Unity, and in 1973 by the UN General Assembly.

Throughout this period, Nujoma consolidated his control over SWAPO, forged tighter links with the Soviet Union, and transformed a fledgling and tentative guerrilla exercise into a military force that numbered as many as 5,000 by 1978. Although never as formidable a fighting force as the ANC or the Zimbabwe African National Union, SWAPO's army compelled South Africa to engage militarily to maintain its position in northern Namibia.

Future Variables

Politically and socially, the new constitution provides a framework for Namibia. What it cannot prescribe, however, is the kind of relations Namibia will have with South Africa and whether Namibia's hitherto domineering neighbor will facilitate or hinder the economic development of the newly independent state.

During much of this century, the Namibian economy has been a minor appendage to South Africa. Because only 1 percent of the country is suitable for continuous dry-land cropping and another 30 percent for grazing, Namibia must import most of its food from South Africa. The two nations share a common currency, legal system, and customs structure. For much of the past decade, South Africa has provided about 25 percent of Namibia's budgetary support and as much as 90 percent of its capital account costs. Imports and exports traverse South African-controlled harbors, rail lines, and air services.

Fortunately, the producers of Namibian mineral exports (the territory's main taxpayers) have long ago put down local roots. The diamond mining firm CDM (Proprietary) Ltd., a subsidiary of De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd., intends to continue its historic role as Namibia's largest private employer of labor. Although the diamonds come from vast alluvial deposits near Oranjemund in the arid extreme southwest of the country, CDM has established a sorting center in Windhoek. CDM's diamonds contribute about 13 percent of all tax revenues and about 30 percent of all export earnings. At Rössing, near Swakopmund, a subsidiary of the British company RTZ digs uranium oxide out of one of the largest deposits in the world. With the price of uranium having fallen as low as $7 per pound (from $43) on the world market, however, uranium will probably never prove to be Namibia's bonanza.

Copper, lead, cadmium, zinc, vanadium, and tin have all been important to Namibia's economy in the past. For the foreseeable future, the benefits from these once touted resources, or from deposits of coal in the south, will depend on a rise in world prices from present and predicted levels.

Namibia's Atlantic Coast was rich with pelagic fish in the 1970s, but overfishing and changes in water temperature appear to have ended what had been a major employer and an economic mainstay. Of the country's agricultural exports, only karakul pelts remain significant, but a fall in (mostly European) demand raises questions

about the future of this grazing sector.

At a time when Namibia's economic prospects are less rich than envisaged in the 1970s, the new government also faces pent-up developmental demands after the decades of South African controls. The tax base is relatively small, and the likely termination of South African budgetary support further complicates the economic outlook.

President Nujoma and his SWAPO colleagues will be fully tested by these economic realities. They now appear personally and constitutionally committed to a mixed rather than a Marxist-type economy, and Nujoma's appointment of Dr. Otto Herrigel, a German-speaking economist and businessman, as his first minister of finance seems to confirm the orthodox intentions of the new government.

Herrigel is a realist as well as a longtime supporter of SWAPO. He is well suited by training and a detailed knowledge of Namibia's economy to reject overly optimistic or inflated answers to real questions about how Namibia can build upon and yet not be undone by its South African heritage and also deal with its contemporary resource weaknesses.

Nujoma's first cabinet will include three other whites, including Hartmut Ruppel, a German-speaking human rights campaigner who has been named attorney general. The director-general of the National Planning Commission will be Dr. Zedekia Ngavirue, a member of one of the black parties opposing SWAPO. But most of the critical ministries are in the hands of longtime SWAPO adherents.

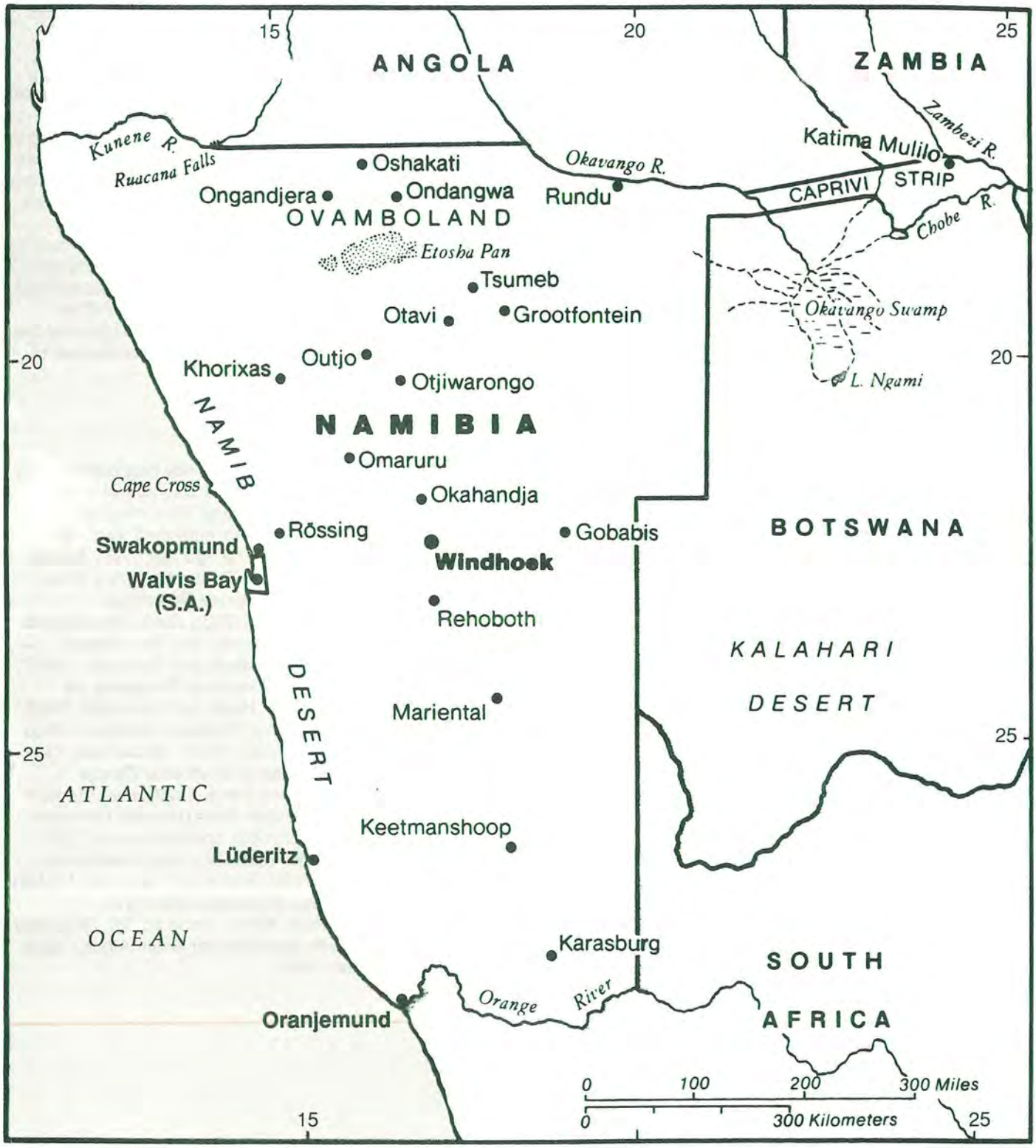
Theo-Ben Gurirab, a Damara who headed the SWAPO office at the United Nations for many years, becomes foreign minister. Peter Mueshihange, an Ovambo and the commander of SWAPO's guerrilla army, is minister of defense. Hidipo Hamutenya, a Kwanyama who is among the more powerful members of SWAPO, takes control over information and broadcasting. Hage Geingob, a Damara who headed the Namibian Institute in Zambia and organized the 1989 election, will be in charge of the public service; he is also the likely prime minister, or second in command. Toivo will be in charge of mines and energy. Hendrik Witbooi, a Nama chief, will be the minister of labor, public service, and manpower development.

What Nujoma and his government do in their initial months regarding the economy, the South African connection, and the integration of education and the provision of schooling and hospitals will be crucial for Namibia, and also as a model for a fully reformed South Africa.

Ironically, the destiny of Walvis Bay will be among the first tests of the emerging relationship between the two countries. Namibia wants it; South Africa legally controls it and may want to hold it hostage for good Namibian behavior.

How Nujoma, whose heady revolutionary rhetoric of past decades has recently been replaced by a canny pragmatism, decides to deal with this issue will also test the fledgling government's operational capabilities. Respect for the new president's leadership potential has risen sharply as a result of the constructive manner in which a consensus constitution and governing structure were achieved in a mere 80 days.

Robert I. Rotberg is academic vice president of Tufts University. For many years he was professor of political science and history at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His published works on southern Africa include *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power* (Oxford University Press, 1988); *Africa in the 1990s and Beyond*, ed. (Reference Publications, 1988); *South Africa and Its Neighbors: Regional Security and Self-Interest* (Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, 1985); *Namibia: Political and Economic Prospects*, ed. (Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, 1983); *Suffer the Future: Policy Choices in Southern Africa* (Harvard University Press, 1980); *Black Heart: Gore-Browne and the Politics of Multiracial Zambia* (University of California Press, 1978); and *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* (Harvard University Press, 1965). His previous contributions to *CSIS Africa Notes* include "Namibia's Independence: A Political and Diplomatic Impasse?," issue no. 13, May 1983; "The Process of Decision-Making in Contemporary South Africa," issue no. 22, December 1983; and "Seven Scenarios for South Africa," issue no. 48, October 1985.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