

# Namibia

## *Ethnicity in Namibia*

### *Group selection*

Ethnicity is relevant in Namibian politics although it is - as everywhere else - a complicated and unstable issue with constant re-groupings and changing identities (see e.g. <sup>2253</sup>; <sup>2254</sup>; <sup>2255</sup>; <sup>2256</sup>; see <sup>2257</sup> for a list of the different ethnic and linguistic groups, and their relationship and overlapping). Although the constitution and the government of Namibia are strongly committed to a unified nation ("One Namibia, one nation"), there are differences regarding political representation and access to power which are to be explained by ethnic cleavages (<sup>2258</sup>). Most of the political parties in Namibia are formed around ethnic issues (see e.g. <sup>2259</sup>; <sup>2260</sup>).

<sup>2253</sup> [Flint, 2003]

<sup>2254</sup> [Fosse, 1997]

<sup>2255</sup> [Taylor, 2009]

<sup>2256</sup> [Kjaeret and Stokke, 2003]

<sup>2257</sup> [Lewis, 2009]

### *Power relations*

Since independence in 1990, there were no bigger changes within the political picture. The SWAPO is dominating the political arena. It finds its support mainly among the Ovambos, yet as well to lesser extent among people of most other groups in the country, and includes members of other ethnic groups in the government: especially Hereros and Damaras and Namas following Schillinger's and Suzman's statements, as for example the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister hail from the Damara and Nama communities, respectively (<sup>2261</sup>, 12 FN 13; <sup>2262</sup>, 16). When coming to power after independence, the SWAPO was facing the problem of building a unified nation out of an ethnically divided society inherited from the former colonizers (see <sup>2263</sup>, 7-10). To avoid tribalization or ethnicization which could threaten the integrity of the new state, the national government tried to include traditional leaders from different ethnic groups in the political decision-making (ibid., 10). The central government was to a certain extent sensitive to issues of traditional authority and former discrimination of ethnic groups during colonial times which led to a recognition of positive discrimination in the state's constitution (ibid.; 11; <sup>2264</sup>). The Traditional Authorities Act of 2001 and the Council of Traditional Leaders Act of 1997 give traditional authorities duties and rights unmatched in other African countries (ibid.: 11-12). However, these competencies do not entail "core competencies of the state" like tax collection or control over executive organs. Therefore, no regional autonomy is coded for all ethnic groups. Those groups which do not enjoy recognition could be

<sup>2261</sup> [Schillinger, 2005]

<sup>2262</sup> [Suzman, 2002]

<sup>2263</sup> [Suzman, 2002]

<sup>2264</sup> [Kjaeret and Stokke, 2003]

coded as discriminated or powerless since they had to subordinate to the recognized groups and thereby acknowledge their sovereignty. Nevertheless, despite the considerable rights and duties of traditional leaders, these recognized groups are nevertheless subordinated to state authorities and impeded to participate in formal party politics (ibid.: 12; <sup>2265</sup>, 21).

The list includes the groups which can be considered as the political relevant today (see <sup>2266</sup>; <sup>2267</sup>; <sup>2268</sup>, 36-68, passim), including the Himbas which are close to or part of the Hereros. The Ovambos "a group also made up by different sub-groups" which are the backbone of the SWAPO are certainly the senior partner in the Namibian government. Yet, as already stated, the SWAPO finds its voters not only among Ovambos nor are all the members of the cabinet and parliament exclusively Ovambos. It is a general feature in Namibia's ethnic mosaic that members of one group do not stand exclusively behind one political party. Hereros or Damaras for example vote for other parties than the SWAPO, although some of their leaders are part of the government, and also members "neglected" by the SWAPO government, or those with secessionist tendencies do not support unanimously the issues of "their" people. Damaras and Namas (which in some sources are cited as one single group) are coded as junior partners, as the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister are Damaras and Namas. Regarding junior partnership the same is true for the Hereros who are, following Schillinger, over-proportionally represented within the party and the state institutions regarding their share within SWAPO voters (2005, 12, fn. 13; also <sup>2269</sup>). Other junior partners are the Whites, Coloreds and the different smaller groups subsumed to the Kavangos.

A particular situation we find in the Caprivan region, where perennial tension led to an armed attempt for secession by the Caprivi Liberation Front (CPL) in 1999 (see e.g. <sup>2270</sup>; <sup>2271</sup>; <sup>2272</sup>). Some authors speak of Caprivians as an ethnic group. Yet, one can sustain that within the region one finds different ethnic groups with different political relevance within the national political scene. The dominant groups in the region are the Mafwe and the Basubias/Masubias, which both have their roots in the ancient Lozi Kingdom (see especially <sup>2273</sup>; <sup>2274</sup>). Members of the two groups (which are also present in neighboring countries) claim to be the direct successors and heirs of the kingdom (<sup>2275</sup>). After independence the Mafwe aligned mainly with the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), the major opposition party to the SWAPO, while the Basubias aligned with the latter, to make out their local contentions (<sup>2276</sup>; <sup>2277</sup>). Due to the national dominance of the SWAPO, the Basubias increasingly won local dominance over the Mafwe, leading some of the latter group's leaders (together with members of other groups) to take up arms against the central government. This difference in power is mirrored in the coding of junior partners (Basubias) versus powerlessness (Mafwes). (The Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2008 states even discrimination as the UDP, a political party

<sup>2265</sup> [Schwerdt, 2009]

<sup>2266</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

<sup>2267</sup> [Suzman, 2002]

<sup>2268</sup> [Hamma and Sixtensson, 2005]

<sup>2269</sup> [Melber, 2010]

<sup>2270</sup> [Battistoni and Taylor, 2009]

<sup>2271</sup> [Melber, 2009]

<sup>2272</sup> [Flint, 2003]

<sup>2273</sup> [Flint, 2003]

<sup>2274</sup> [Fosse, 1997]

still fighting for the independence of Caprivi, was excluded from local elections in 2006 (<sup>2278</sup>, 6.)

The ethnic minorities in Namibia most often cited to face discrimination or somehow neglect are the Baster, Himba and especially the San (e.g. <sup>2279</sup>; <sup>2280</sup>; <sup>2281</sup>; <sup>2282</sup>; <sup>2283</sup>).

While Baster and Himba enjoyed at least some positive attention by the Namibian government (see <sup>2284</sup>), the San are still socially discriminated as they have neither direct access to executive power nor considerable representation through recognized traditional authorities (yet as in other neighboring countries also in Namibia they are able to act on a supranational level, emphasizing their status as indigenous peoples, and thereby particularly visible as a discriminated people). However, reports indicate that there was at least one San member in parliament until 2012 who then died naturally. In contrast to earlier versions of the dataset and due to the lack of evidence for political discrimination of the San, they are coded as being powerless for the entire period. Furthermore, the Baster and Himba groups are coded as powerless since they have little political influence but are relevant as they occasionally defend their rights as an ethnic group, also acting with international support (<sup>2285</sup>; <sup>2286</sup>).

As already stated, just one single period up to the 2009 is coded, as there were no considerable changes regarding the relevance of ethnicity and the groups' access to political power in Namibia.

*2010 - 2013:* General elections were held in 2009, with the SWAPO again winning an overwhelming majority and president Pohamba, an Ovambo, being reelected. The previous powersharing patterns continued, with Hage Geingob, a Damara, becoming prime minister in 2012; the previous prime minister belongs to an ethnic minority too, although there was no information available to which one (<sup>2287</sup>). The US State Department (<sup>2288</sup>) concludes that "virtually all of the country's ethnic minorities were represented in parliament and in senior positions in the cabinet." This assessment does not change over the period and coincides with news reports, that Pohamba did no major changes in the composition of his cabinet (<sup>2289</sup>). However, no indications were found for the representation of the Mafwe, San and Himba at the executive level (based on searches on Google and NexisLexis). Furthermore, their social marginalization continues. They are therefore coded as being powerless. As the Ovambos are still overrepresented, hold the office of the president, and dominate the SWAPO, they are coded as being the senior partner. Consistent with the observed powersharing at the executive level, all remaining ethnic groups (Damara, Herero, Kavango, Nama, and Whites) are coded as being junior partners. The previous period is thus extended to 2013.

<sup>2279</sup> [Suzman, 2002]

<sup>2280</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

<sup>2281</sup> [Battistoni and Taylor, 2009]

<sup>2282</sup> [Taylor, 2009]

<sup>2283</sup> [Kjaeret and Stokke, 2003]

<sup>2284</sup> [Suzman, 2002]

<sup>2285</sup> [Suzman, 2002]

<sup>2286</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

<sup>2287</sup> [United States Government State Department, 2009]

<sup>2288</sup> [United States Government State Department, 2009]

<sup>2289</sup> [BBC, 2010]

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## *Political status of ethnic groups in Namibia*

*From 1990 until 2013*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Ovambo	0.498	SENIOR PARTNER
Kavango	0.094	JUNIOR PARTNER
Whites	0.063	JUNIOR PARTNER
Herero, Mbanderu	0.06	JUNIOR PARTNER
Nama	0.048	JUNIOR PARTNER
Damara	0.045	JUNIOR PARTNER
Coloreds	0.04	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mafwe	0.03	POWERLESS
San	0.03	POWERLESS
Basubia	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER
Baster	0.023	POWERLESS
Himba	0.01	POWERLESS

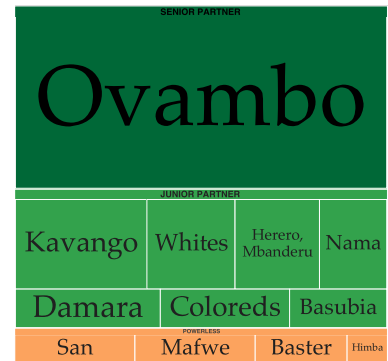


Figure 525: Political status of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-2013.



## Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Namibia

From 1990 until 2013

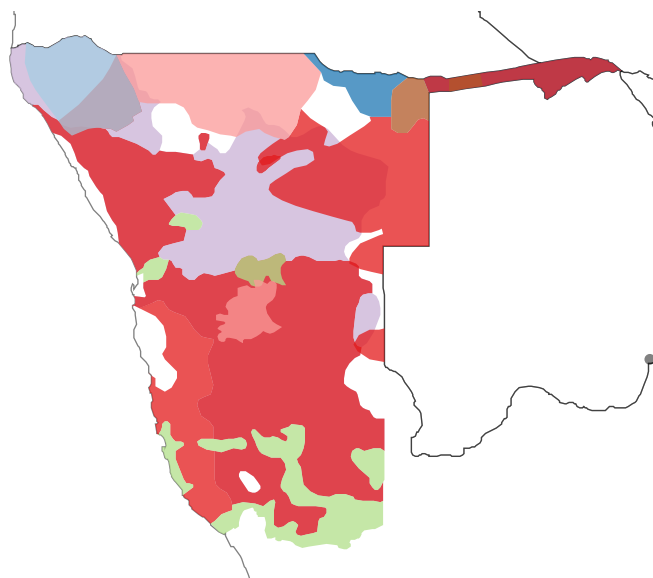


Figure 526: Map of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-2013.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
Damara	283 287	Regionally based
Nama	283 287	Regionally based
Herero, Mbanderu	207 616	Regionally based
San	165 749	Regionally based
Ovambo	78 706	Regionally based
Whites	59 788	Regional & urban
Himba	49 195	Regionally based
Mafwe	35 709	Regionally based
Basubia	20 402	Regionally based
Baster	14 562	Regionally based
Kavango	13 013	Regionally based
Coloreds		Dispersed

Table 160: List of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-2013.