

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. ³⁰⁰²; ³⁰⁰³; ³⁰⁰⁴; ³⁰⁰⁵; see ³⁰⁰⁶ 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 (³⁰⁰⁷). Most of the political parties in Namibia are formed around ethnic issues (see e.g. ³⁰⁰⁸; ³⁰⁰⁹).

³⁰⁰² [Flint, 2003]

³⁰⁰³ [Fosse, 1997]

³⁰⁰⁴ [Taylor, 2009]

³⁰⁰⁵ [Kjaeret Stokke, 2003]

³⁰⁰⁶ [Lewis, 2009]

Power relations

1990-2014

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 (³⁰¹⁰, 12f; ³⁰¹¹, 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 ³⁰¹², 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; ³⁰¹³). 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

³⁰¹⁰ [Schillinger, 2005]

³⁰¹¹ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁰¹² [Suzman, 2002]

³⁰¹³ [Kjaeret 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; ³⁰¹⁴, 21).

The list includes the groups which can be considered as the political relevant today (see ³⁰¹⁵; ³⁰¹⁶; ³⁰¹⁷, 36-68, passim), including the **Himba**, 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 ³⁰¹⁸). 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. ³⁰¹⁹; ³⁰²⁰; ³⁰²¹). 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 **Ba-subias/Masubias**, which both have their roots in the ancient Lozi Kingdom (see especially ³⁰²²; ³⁰²³). Members of the two groups (which are also present in neighboring countries) claim to be the direct successors and heirs of the kingdom (³⁰²⁴). After independence the Mafwe aligned mainly with the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), the major opposition party to the SWAPO, while the Ba-subias aligned with the latter, to make out their local contentions (³⁰²⁵; ³⁰²⁶). Due to the national dominance of the SWAPO, the Ba-subias 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

³⁰¹⁴ [Schwerdt, 2009]

³⁰¹⁵ [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

³⁰¹⁶ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁰¹⁷ [Hamma Sixtensson, 2005]

³⁰¹⁸ [Melber, 2010]

³⁰¹⁹ [Battistoni Taylor, 2009]

³⁰²⁰ [Melber, 2009]

³⁰²¹ [Flint, 2003]

³⁰²² [Flint, 2003]

³⁰²³ [Fosse, 1997]

still fighting for the independence of Caprivi, was excluded from local elections in 2006 (³⁰²⁷, 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. ³⁰²⁸; ³⁰²⁹; ³⁰³⁰; ³⁰³¹; ³⁰³²).

While Baster and Himba enjoyed at least some positive attention by the Namibian government (see ³⁰³³), 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 (³⁰³⁴; ³⁰³⁵).

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 (³⁰³⁶). The US State Department (³⁰³⁷) 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 (³⁰³⁸). 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 continued. 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.

³⁰²⁸ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁰²⁹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

³⁰³⁰ [Battistoni Taylor, 2009]

³⁰³¹ [Taylor, 2009]

³⁰³² [Kjaeret Stokke, 2003]

³⁰³³ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁰³⁴ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁰³⁵ [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

³⁰³⁶ [U.S. State Department, 2009-2016]

³⁰³⁷ [U.S. State Department, 2009-2016]

³⁰³⁸ [BBC, 2010]

2015-2017

General elections were held in 2014 and led to a renewed overwhelming majority of the SWAPO. The elections thus showed that the dominant party system is formally well established, although the party does not fully exploit its strong position but follows the democratic rules and procedures carefully (³⁰³⁹, 2016). Hage Geingob, a Damara and former vice-president of the party, was elected president, which meant that for the first time a non-Ovambo occupied the office (³⁰⁴⁰). The SWAPO thus continues its trend of dissociation from claims of ethnic bias and aggregating the societal interests of the majority of the people. However also in the ruling party, voting behaviour is still highly characterised by ethnic support, as the SWAPO gained again more than 90% of the vote in traditional “Ovambo regions” (³⁰⁴¹, 2016: 13). The SWAPO’s increased efforts to pursue a multi-ethnic approach do not translate into a decline in the significance of ethnicity in the realm of Namibian politics. Opposition parties are, as a consequence, increasingly mobilising electoral support around appeals to ethnic minority identity, which results in an increased proliferation of mono-ethnic parties and resurgence of ethno-nationalist sentiments (³⁰⁴²). The NUDO, and DTA have made explicit appeals to Herero, RP, MAG, CoD and RDP to Whites, APP to Kavango and NDMC and UDF to Damara identity (³⁰⁴³, 115; ³⁰⁴⁴). Ethnic tensions still play a role under the surface of political correctness and socio-political integration and appear to be growing rather than diminishing. The Bertelsmann Stiftung, for example, mentions that competition for jobs is exacerbated by ethnic tensions, thereby symbolising conflict over prosperity between different groups in Namibian society (³⁰⁴⁵, 30). And the Namibian, Namibia’s biggest newspaper, reported strikingly high tensions between different ethnic factions within the SWAPO, particularly between the Mafwe and Masubia/Basubia in the region of Zambezi/Caprivi but also between a high number of other groups (³⁰⁴⁶).

Ethnic participation in parliament is broad. The dominant SWAPO has MPs from a wide range of ethnic groups: Owambo, Damara, Herero, Nama, Caprivian, Coloured, Kavango, Whites and San since latest 2009 (³⁰⁴⁷, 115). The US Human Rights Reports state that virtually all ethnic groups had representatives in parliament and in senior positions in the cabinet, however continued economic and educational disadvantages limit participation in politics of the San and Himba minorities (³⁰⁴⁸, 2016). According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, the Baster won one seat in parliament in 2014 (³⁰⁴⁹), however, they are not represented in the government. The DTA was elected the second strongest party in parliament, which hints towards Mafwe participation in the national assembly. However no evidence has been found of their representation in government. Consequently and as coded previously, all ethnic groups except for the San, Himba, Baster and Mafwe are coded as sharing power in the government.

³⁰³⁹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

³⁰⁴⁰ [Melber, 2015]

³⁰⁴¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

³⁰⁴² [Cooper, 2014]

³⁰⁴³ [Cooper, 2014]

³⁰⁴⁷ [Cooper, 2014]

³⁰⁴⁸ [U.S. State Department, 2009-2016]

³⁰⁴⁹ [UNPO, 2017]

A set of constitutional reforms in 2014 introduced a vice president and to all the ministers to provide some ethnic balance in government as well as 50/50 gender rule in National Assembly (³⁰⁵⁰). While President Geingob is, as mentioned, Damara, the Vice President, Nickey Iyambo as well as Prime Minister Saara Kuugongelwa and Vice Prime Minister Netumbo Nandi-Ndaltwah are from the Ovambo group. Since the President has considerable agency and authority in Namibian politics and at the same time the SWAPO is still seen as a majority-Ovambo party, both Damara and Ovambo are coded as Senior Partners from 2015 onwards, while the remaining groups are continuously coded as Junior Partners.

³⁰⁵⁰ [National Assembly of Namibia, 2014]

In terms of regional dynamics, coding remains unchanged. Traditional authorities are reported to have great influence, especially on a large part of the rural population, but they generally support state institutions and some of them actually occupy positions of political leadership (³⁰⁵¹, 16).

³⁰⁵¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Namibia

From 1990 until 2014

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
Basubia	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mafwe	0.03	POWERLESS
San	0.03	POWERLESS
Baster	0.023	POWERLESS
Himba	0.01	POWERLESS



Figure 625: Political status of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-2014.

From 2015 until 2017

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	SENIOR PARTNER
Coloreds	0.04	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mafwe	0.03	POWERLESS
Basubia	0.03	JUNIOR PARTNER
San	0.03	POWERLESS
Baster	0.023	POWERLESS
Himba	0.01	POWERLESS

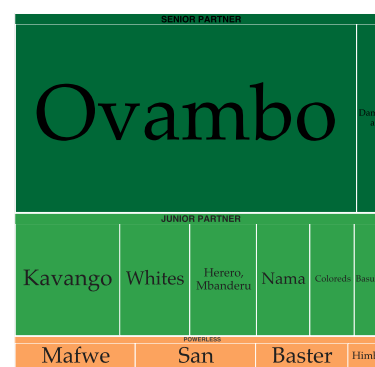


Figure 626: Political status of ethnic groups in Namibia during 2015-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Namibia

From 1990 until 2017

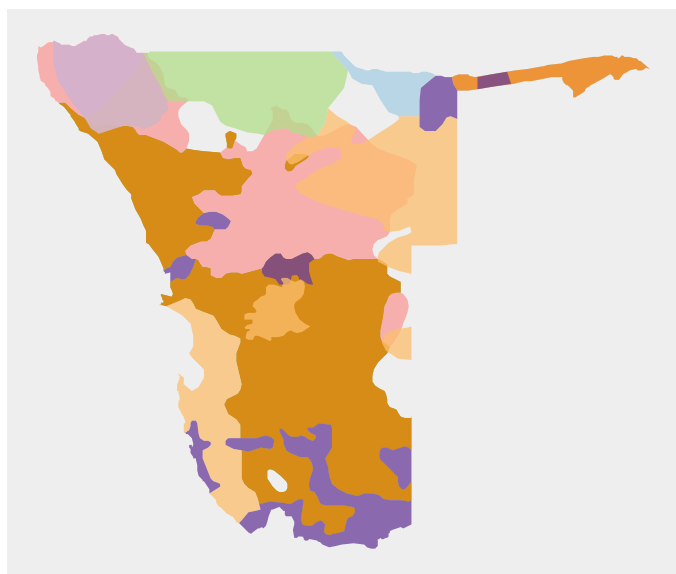


Figure 627: Map of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-2017.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Damara	283 287	Regionally based
■ Nama	283 287	Regionally based
■ Herero, Mbanderu	207 608	Regionally based
■ San	165 749	Regionally based
■ Ovambo	78 706	Regionally based
■ Whites	59 769	Regional & urban
■ Himba	49 195	Regionally based
■ Mafwe	35 699	Regionally based
■ Basubia	20 392	Regionally based
■ Baster	14 562	Regionally based
■ Kavango	13 013	Regionally based
Coloreds		Dispersed

Table 222: List of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-2017.