

Namibia

Ethnicity in Namibia

Group selection

Ethnicity is relevant in Namibian politics but it is a complicated and unstable issue with constant re-groupings and changing identities (see e.g. ³⁶²⁶; ³⁶²⁷; ³⁶²⁸; ³⁶²⁹; see ³⁶³⁰ 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 (³⁶³¹). Most of the political parties in Namibia are formed around ethnic issues (see e.g. ³⁶³²; ³⁶³³).

- ³⁶²⁶ [Flint, 2003]
- ³⁶²⁷ [Fosse, 1997]
- ³⁶²⁸ [Taylor, 2009]
- ³⁶²⁹ [Kjaeret & Stokke, 2003]
- ³⁶³⁰ [Lewis, 2009]
- ³⁶³¹ [Daniels, 2003]
- ³⁶³² [Schillinger, 2005]
- ³⁶³³ [Emminghaus, 2002]

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 (³⁶³⁴, 12f; ³⁶³⁵, 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 ³⁶³⁶, 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; ³⁶³⁷). 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 ethnic groups is coded as having regional autonomy. Those groups which do not enjoy recognition could

- ³⁶³⁴ [Schillinger, 2005]
- ³⁶³⁵ [Suzman, 2002]
- ³⁶³⁶ [Suzman, 2002]
- ³⁶³⁷ [Kjaeret & Stokke, 2003]

be 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; ³⁶³⁸, 21).

The list includes the groups which can be considered as the political relevant ones today (see ³⁶³⁹; ³⁶⁴⁰; ³⁶⁴¹, 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, neither the SWAPO finds its voters 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 ³⁶⁴²). Other junior partners are the **Whites**, **Coloreds** and the different smaller groups subsumed to the **Kavangos**.

A particular situation exists 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. ³⁶⁴³; ³⁶⁴⁴; ³⁶⁴⁵). 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 ³⁶⁴⁶; ³⁶⁴⁷). Members of the two groups (which are also present in neighboring countries) claim to be the direct successors and heirs of the kingdom (³⁶⁴⁸). 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 (³⁶⁴⁹; ³⁶⁵⁰). 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 still fighting for the independence

³⁶³⁸ [Schwerdt, 2009]

³⁶³⁹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

³⁶⁴⁰ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁶⁴¹ [Hamma & Sixtensson, 2005]

³⁶⁴² [Melber, 2010]

³⁶⁴³ [Battistoni & Taylor, 2009]

³⁶⁴⁴ [Melber, 2009]

³⁶⁴⁵ [Flint, 2003]

³⁶⁴⁶ [Flint, 2003]

³⁶⁴⁷ [Fosse, 1997]

³⁶⁴⁸ [Fosse, 1997]

³⁶⁴⁹ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁶⁵⁰ [Flint, 2003]

of Caprivi, was excluded from local elections in 2006 (³⁶⁵¹, 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. ³⁶⁵², ³⁶⁵³, ³⁶⁵⁴, ³⁶⁵⁵, ³⁶⁵⁶).

While Baster and Himba enjoyed at least some positive attention by the Namibian government (see ³⁶⁵⁷), 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 (³⁶⁵⁸, ³⁶⁵⁹).

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 (³⁶⁶⁰). The US State Department (³⁶⁶¹) 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 (³⁶⁶²). 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.

2015-2021

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 (³⁶⁶³, 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

³⁶⁵¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

³⁶⁵² [Suzman, 2002]

³⁶⁵³ [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

³⁶⁵⁴ [Battistoni & Taylor, 2009]

³⁶⁵⁵ [Taylor, 2009]

³⁶⁵⁶ [Kjaeret & Stokke, 2003]

³⁶⁵⁷ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁶⁵⁸ [Suzman, 2002]

³⁶⁵⁹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2010]

³⁶⁶⁰ [U.S. State Department, 2009-2016]

³⁶⁶¹ [U.S. State Department, 2009-2016]

³⁶⁶² [BBC, 2010]

³⁶⁶³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

the office (³⁶⁶⁴). 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” (³⁶⁶⁵, 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 (³⁶⁶⁶). 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 (³⁶⁶⁷, 115; ³⁶⁶⁸). 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 (³⁶⁶⁹, 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 (³⁶⁷⁰).

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 at least since 2009 (³⁶⁷¹, 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 (³⁶⁷², 2016). According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, the Baster won one seat in parliament in 2014 (³⁶⁷³), 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.

A set of constitutional reforms in 2014 introduced a vice president and provide some ethnic balance in government as well as 50/50 gender rule in National Assembly (³⁶⁷⁴). 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

³⁶⁶⁴ [Melber, 2015]

³⁶⁶⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

³⁶⁶⁶ [Cooper, 2014]

³⁶⁶⁷ [Cooper, 2014]

³⁶⁶⁸ [Weylandt, 2015]

³⁶⁶⁹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

³⁶⁷⁰ [The Namibian, 2016]

³⁶⁷¹ [Cooper, 2014]

³⁶⁷² [U.S. State Department, 2009-2016]

³⁶⁷³ [UNPO, 2017]

³⁶⁷⁴ [National Assembly of Namibia, 2014]

2015 onwards, while the remaining groups are continuously coded as Junior Partners.

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 (³⁶⁷⁵, 16).

³⁶⁷⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007-2016]

The only major changes in central executive power during the second half of the presidential term of Hage Geingob seem to be related to a cabinet change in early 2018. These changes affected mainly deputy ministers, reducing the overall size of the cabinet (³⁶⁷⁶). These moves do not seem related to ethnic power-sharing and, if anything, are motivated by internal politics within SWAPO: “With the government under increasing pressure, President Geingob abandoned his policy of internal-party reconciliation and cooptation by dismissing his two main contenders (whom he had included as ministers in his cabinet) in early 2018 in an unceremonious way” (³⁶⁷⁷, 4). Two long-term cabinet members that were removed from their positions in this move were Pendukeni Iivula-Ithana and Jerry Ekandjo (³⁶⁷⁸), both long-term members of SWAPO and, at least in the case of Iivula-Ithana, Ovambo (Iivula-Ithana was born in Omusati region). Thus, no evidence was found that would justify changes in the the political status of ethnic groups in Namibia.

³⁶⁷⁶ [The Namibian, 2018]

³⁶⁷⁷ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

³⁶⁷⁸ [All Africa, 2018]

Elections were held in November 2019 and SWAPO’s Geingob won again. Although his vote share decreased dramatically from 87% in 2014 to 56% in 2019, Geingob renewed his presidency and SWAPO still retains a majority in the National Assembly. Corruption scandals and economic crisis might partly explain the decrease in support. Panduleni Itula, an independent opposition candidate, even though a member of SWAPO and also an Ovambo, came second in the election with 29% of the vote (³⁶⁷⁹, ³⁶⁸⁰, ³⁶⁸¹). The new cabinet was announced in March 2020 with most figures remaining the same as in the previous term, and no major changes to the ethno-political situation are expected.

³⁶⁷⁹ [The Namibian, 2019]

³⁶⁸⁰ [BBC, 2019]

³⁶⁸¹ [The Guardian, 2019]

All in all, the relevance of ethnicity, if anything, is on the rise. The latest report from Bertelsmann Stiftung states that there is growing dissatisfaction among the Nama and the Herero communities: “They question the authority of the central state agencies, which they see as advocating and representing mainly the interests of the dominant ethnic groups from the northern parts of Namibia.” It also says that “while regional-ethnic identities seem to be on the rise, Namibian identity is not fundamentally questioned. However, growing frustration means the acceptance of the nation-state is slightly less universal than it used to be” (³⁶⁸², 7). Tensions between these groups and the government have also increased because of the negotiations with the German government regarding the genocide committed in the early 1900s during the German colonial period. Following the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s report, which points to “a growing tendency to articulate particularistic, ethnic-regional identi-

³⁶⁸² [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

ties” (³⁶⁸³, 13), it could be possible that the ethno-political situation in Namibia changes in the future.

³⁶⁸³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

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

From 2015 until 2021

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

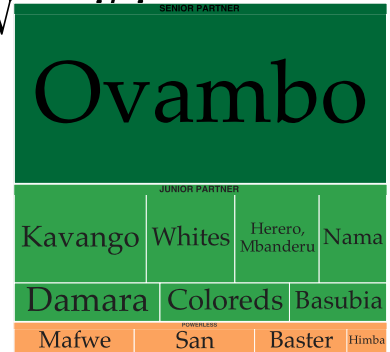


Figure 729: Political status of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-2014.

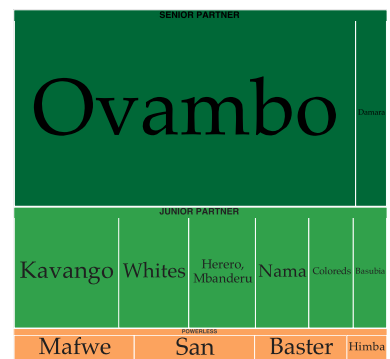


Figure 730: Political status of ethnic groups in Namibia during 2015-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Namibia

From 1990 until 1990

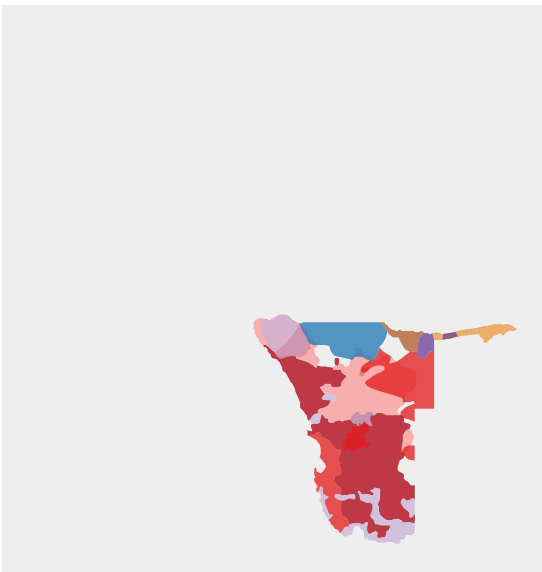


Figure 731: Map of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-1990.

Group name		Area in km ²	Type
■	Damara	284 214	Regionally based
■	Nama	284 214	Regionally based
■	Herero, Mbanderu	208 536	Regionally based
■	San	165 318	Regionally based
■	Ovambo	78 457	Regionally based
■	Whites	59 662	Regional & urban
■	Himba	49 039	Regionally based
■	Mafwe	35 585	Regionally based
■	Basubia	20 326	Regionally based
■	Baster	14 528	Regionally based
■	Kavango	12 972	Regionally based
■	Coloreds	0	Dispersed

Table 277: List of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1990-1990.

From 1991 until 2021

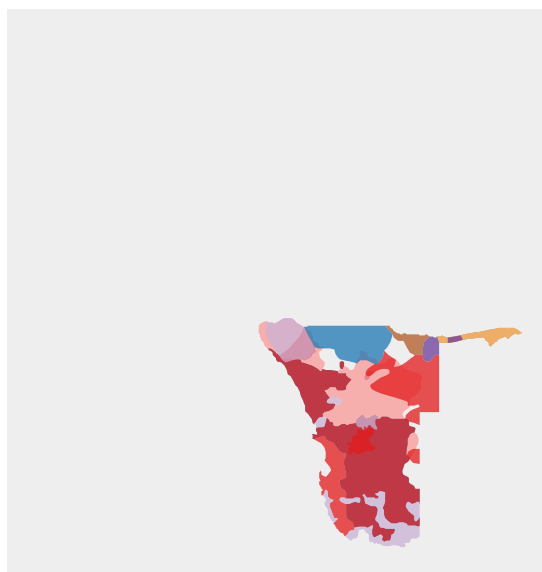


Figure 732: Map of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1991-2021.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Damara	284 214	Regionally based
■	Nama	284 214	Regionally based
■	Herero, Mbanderu	208 536	Regionally based
■	San	165 318	Regionally based
■	Ovambo	78 457	Regionally based
■	Whites	59 662	Regional & urban
■	Himba	49 039	Regionally based
■	Mafwe	35 585	Regionally based
■	Basubia	20 326	Regionally based
■	Baster	14 528	Regionally based
■	Kavango	12 972	Regionally based
■	Coloreds	0	Dispersed

Table 278: List of ethnic groups in Namibia during 1991-2021.