

The Namibia experiment

Namibia, a vast chunk of desert three times the size of West Germany tucked away in the southwest corner of Africa, gained its independence yesterday to become the world's newest nation.

After 75 years under South African control, Namibia, formerly known as South West Africa, also became the last African nation to emerge from colonial rule — provided, of course, you don't count the last African colonial empire, Ethiopia.

Both Namibia and its neighbor, Botswana, are part of the great Kalihari Desert system that dominates arid southern Africa. Beneath the ochre, wind-swept sands of the two nations lie rich deposits of diamonds, uranium and metals.

Namibia, with only 1.3 million people, and Botswana, with just under one million, are Africa's most sparsely inhabited nations.

I have a particular soft spot for Namibia. The capital, Windhoek, still retains some of the flavor of Namibia's original pre-World War I German colonial rulers. One of the nation's many tribes, the warlike Herero, still speak a sort of local German. As in the other former German African colonies of Tanzania and Togo, the old German rulers, who were driven out during World War I by the victorious Allies, are still regarded today with affection and respect.

On my last visit to Namibia, I was up in the war zone along the Okavango River where South African and Namibian troops were hunting down SWAPO guerrillas. A group of South African officers and I took time off from the war to drop into the border town of Rundu. There I had the disorienting experience of being taken to a butcher shop filled with every known variety of Teutonic sausage and run by blond-haired, stout Germans, speaking in thick Swabian accents. This, in one of Africa's most remote spots.

Namibia's jumble of race and tribes may prove either the savior or the nemesis of the infant nation. The Ovambo tribe makes up almost 50% of the population. The rest is split between 10 other tribes, including 82,000 whites and 37,000 of the legendary Bushmen.

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SWAPO, the former guerrilla movement, is Ovambo based. Its leader, Sam Nujoma, has just become president of the new state. But so far political power remains divided because of opposition to SWAPO-Ovambo power by the other tribes. This could produce either a working system of checks and balances that will protect Namibia's democratic government or it could result in a nasty, one-party state, as happened in Zimbabwe.

Fortunately for Namibia, its economic infrastructure and economy are dominated by white South Africans. In effect, Namibia is an extension of the powerful South African economy that dominates all of southern Africa. As long as South Africa remains relatively stable, Namibia will flourish. The only real problem between the two nations may arise over Walvis Bay, the strategic deep-water port on the Namibian coast that is being retained by South Africa under the argument that it never was historically part of the South West Africa territory.

I hope Namibia will follow the example of stable, democratic and prosperous Botswana. It is an important test case for anxious white South Africans, who are now wondering if they dare entrust their fortunes and lives to black rule.

Botswana, I must add, is a rare exception in Africa, where tyrannical, thieving governments are the norm. The miserable example of those tawdry dictatorships Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania — all fawned on by Ottawa — have soured most whites to the notion of black rule.

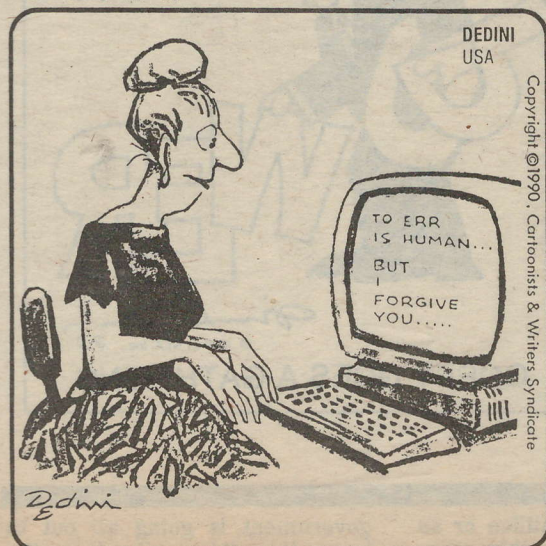
Now is Sam Nujoma's chance to show that blacks can run a prosperous, multi-racial society.

Eyes will also turn northward to see what happens in neighboring Angola, where the long war between the Marxist regime in Luanda and the anti-communist UNITA movement of Jonas Savimbia, has heated up. UNITA's stronghold of Mavinga has apparently fallen and the government is preparing an offensive against UNITA's capital at Jamba. It's likely that the new government of Namibia, an old enemy of UNITA, will cut off secret South African supplies to Jamba. This is serious business.

Now we turn to the realm of fantasy: Ottawa in wonderland. Bwana fever has again seized the confused little bureaucrats who mismanage Canada's finances and foreign affairs. The treasury may be empty but Ottawa is still dishing out money to all comers — provided, it seems, that they're black.

Canada is even going to open an embassy in Namibia which will probably cost the taxpayers \$1 million a year or so for a nation of 1.3 million people. It's outrageous and dumb.

I hope Namibia gets a more intelligent and honest government than the one in Ottawa, which should be buried up to its collective neck in the shifting sands of the Kalihari.



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