

11 *The 1978 Election in Namibia*

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Introduction

A generation of Namibians has participated in the democratic elections that have taken place in Namibia since 1989 to elect the President, National Assembly, Regional Councils and Local Authorities. However, it is often forgotten that the first national democratic election in Namibia took place in 1978. Up to this date some elections had taken place for political structures (such as the Legislative Assembly), but the electoral roll had been limited to whites only. A historical analysis is required to consider the reasons why a democratic, national election was held in 1978, and the continuing limitations of the electoral system that led SWAPO, the leading nationalist party, to boycott the election.

Sources covering debates of the United Nations (UN) during the 1960s indicate members of the UN were increasingly concerned that progress toward the complete emancipation of many countries and people under colonial status was too slow and should be accelerated. This concern led, for example, to the adoption of a declaration aimed at granting independence to colonial countries in September 1960. Growing international pressure prompted South Africa to rethink her colonial approach in Namibia and hence in 1963, South Africa commissioned the Odendaal Commission of Enquiry to investigate the affairs of Namibia and propose some sort of internal settlement that would prevent the emergence of nationalism so as to maintain South Africa's upper hand in running the affairs of Namibia (UNIN, 1986, p. 39).

However, despite these declarations and many other resolutions passed by the UN in an effort to end colonialism in Namibia and in many other countries of the world, the UN's intervention only became significant in the 1970s. In 1970, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) referred the Namibian issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in order to seek an 'advisory opinion' (Du Pisani, 1985, p. 186). This led to the termination of South Africa's mandate to administer Namibia in 1971. After this, the United Nations' General Assembly passed a number of resolutions demanding the transfer of power to the people of Namibia, and even went as far as threatening South Africa that failure to do so would prompt punitive measures (Mushi, 1988 p. 682).

South Africa responded by proposing talks with representatives of several population groups of Namibia in order to reach an 'internal settlement'. This new strategy eventually resulted in the Turnhalle Conference in September 1975 (Du Pisani, 1985, p. 293). The conference proposed a democratic transfer of power through national elections that were set for December 1978. The elections were held, but in a highly volatile political environment with no clear electoral procedures to ensure the free and fair conduct of the elections.