

Many election promises but will anything change?

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Namibian, 13 November 2024

Last week, Frederico Links presented a comparison of the manifestos of 4 political parties which are likely to be the leading ones in our upcoming elections. Reading party manifestos with their repetitive slogans and flowery language is hardly exciting, but as Links pointed out this is “what we have to start with when considering who to vote for” (Namibian, 8 November 2024).

After 34 years of independence, Namibia faces a multitude of crises such as record levels of unemployment (even if the NSA does not want to release the figures), increasing levels of poverty and informal settlements as well as continued inequality. This article aims to compare the ideological orientation and some of the promises made in the manifestos of the ruling SWAPO Party, the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM), the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) and the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC). The central question is: what do the parties have to offer to tackle the crisis?

Being in power for 34 years, it is hardly surprising that the ruling SWAPO party found it difficult to make substantial promises to deal with Namibia’s burning social and economic challenges. SWAPO’s main message essentially is “we delivered in the past, trust us to deliver more”. It remains to be seen if this can convince the mostly youthful and unemployed voters who seek solutions to their plight. It is thus worthwhile to ask if any of the other parties are presenting viable alternatives?

Ideological orientation & housing

Despite the failures of a development strategy which pinned hopes on attracting private (mostly foreign) investors, neither the SWAPO nor the PDM manifestos present an analysis why this strategy did not succeed. Both do not outline the role of the state in addressing developmental challenges. Although the private sector-driven model of housing delivery has failed miserably and resulted in a backlog of about 300,000 housing units, most parties still present this as the way forward. SWAPO promises to service at least 10,000 plots per year which will hardly make a dent.

The PDM makes greater promises of providing free small plots for the urban poor over 21 years of age with earnings below N\$ 4,500 per month. It promises a massive urban housing scheme (including social housing and a housing loan guarantee scheme) to reduce the housing backlog but it remains unclear how this will be financed and implemented.

The LPM on the other hand, calls for the establishment of a developmental state to direct socio-economic development. The LPM envisages that this will be implemented predominantly by extending the budgets and powers of local authorities, for example regarding the delivery of houses. The LPM wants to disband the NHE and to forge partnerships with housing developers – a contradiction to the proclaimed developmental state approach.

The IPC fully embraces “private-sector led growth and job creation” and its pro-business approach is visible throughout its manifesto. It wants to improve the business environment, reduce corporate taxes to 22%, remove land servicing from local authorities

and introduce a competitive bidding for bulk land servicing from private companies. The IPC promises to construct at least 100,000 housing units within 4 years with tenders for private contractors – a highly questionable promise given the past experiences with the mass housing programme and the low incomes of those in need of decent housing.

Jobs and social protection?

In terms of job creation, most parties pin their hope on agriculture-led industrialisation and minerals beneficiation plus the obligatory promise to support SMEs. The PDM promises to allocate at least 10% of the national budget to agriculture while the LPM wants to introduce state-owned processing facilities and cooperative ownership models. The IPC only mentions that it wants to create conducive investment conditions but does not focus on minerals beneficiation. It promises a national youth employment guarantee scheme to provide 100 days of paid work or skills development without an indication how this will be financed.

Social protection & workers' rights

SWAPO merely calls for a strengthening of the current social protection schemes while the PDM promises a social welfare programme for unemployed Namibians from 21 – 50 years of age and a pension scheme for marginal and small farmers. The PDM wants “to reduce union militancy in the workplace and encourage better pay for better work”.

The LPM wants to increase the grant for orphans and vulnerable children, extend maternity leave, introduce paternity leave and a family care fund. The LPM also promises to extend workers' and collective bargaining rights. In contrast, workers' rights and social protection do not feature in the IPC manifesto.

Conclusion

There are similarities between the party manifestos but none seems to be willing to take bold steps to deal with the multiple crises facing Namibia today. SWAPO essentially promises continuity while the PDM promises some improvements within the same development paradigm. The LPM focuses on a greater role for local governments but does not translate the developmental state approach into its proposals. However, it promises expanded social protection and workers' rights unlike the IPC which essentially proposes a business-friendly market fundamentalism with an overriding focus on creating conducive investment conditions for the private sector to drive development. The IPC's pro-business agenda envisages social development merely as a trickle-down effect from successful private business operations.

None of the manifestos presents a coherent social justice agenda or a programme for structural economic transformation. Voters will have a tough choice to decide which party will actually be able to bring about substantial improvements for the majority of Namibians.

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