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National reconciliation and the land question in Namibia

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Dear Peter:

Post-war reconciliation in Namibia -- and its opposite -- can fleetingly appear in small, almost unnoticeable interactions on the streets of Namibia's capital city of Windhoek. These seemingly insignificant actions reveal a great deal about the mixed progress in changing basic attitudes that underlie relations between 85,000 whites and 1.3 million blacks in a country fostered under the apartheid racism of South Africa.

Some of the spontaneous reactions of Namibia's people encourage me. A yellow Opel Kadette stalls on Independence Avenue, the city's busiest street, during the lunch-hour rush. A young white man leaps off the curb to help the black driver push his disabled vehicle into a parking spot a few yards away.

In the bustle outside a large office building a few blocks down the avenue, a gray-haired, pale-skinned matron in a long green dress and pearls pauses as she walks past a black beggar sitting on the pavement. The miserable man stretches out his hand clutching a cup. He hopefully rattles it, but she quickly disappears into a "take-away" food shop a few doors down. Both his hand and head fall back into a despondent huddle. The woman is back moments later with a yellow plastic bag full of food. The asking, offering and taking are performed without a word spoken, but I notice both people look each other in the eye.

I can also see the gritty sediment of Namibia's racist history from the city's street corners. On a rainy afternoon, I spot a bedraggled black man sitting in the bed of a passing pickup, clutching at the vehicle's wet metal during a sharp turn. A white driver sits alone and dry inside the cab.

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Another day, while walking to the grocery store, I hear tires screeching around a corner in this quiet, upper-class neighborhood. Some high-school-aged white boys are showing off. Several black pedestrians -- probably maids and gardeners for these kids' parents -- must step back onto the curb to avoid getting hit. One intended accident victim wears a look of weariness as he stares after the speeding truck.

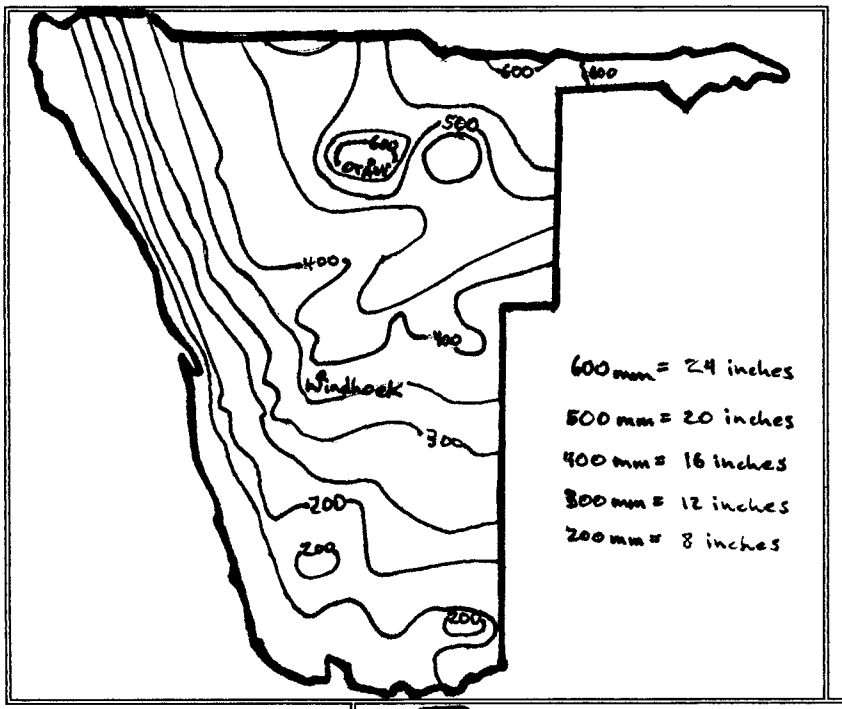
For nearly two months, I have probed almost everyone I've met for their feelings about reconciliation between different races, different classes, different sides in the 23-year war that led up to independence. Reconciliation is a major theme for Namibia set out in the preamble of the newly independent nation's constitution: "We the people of Namibia ... will strive to achieve national reconciliation and to foster peace, unity and a common loyalty to a single state."

Most black people here tell me that reconciliation has unraveled since the 1990 elections installed the South West Africa People's Organization -- the liberation movement representing the black majority -- in power. Those free and fair elections stopped the bullets from flying and allowed a negotiated settlement to establish a peaceful working relationship between blacks and whites.

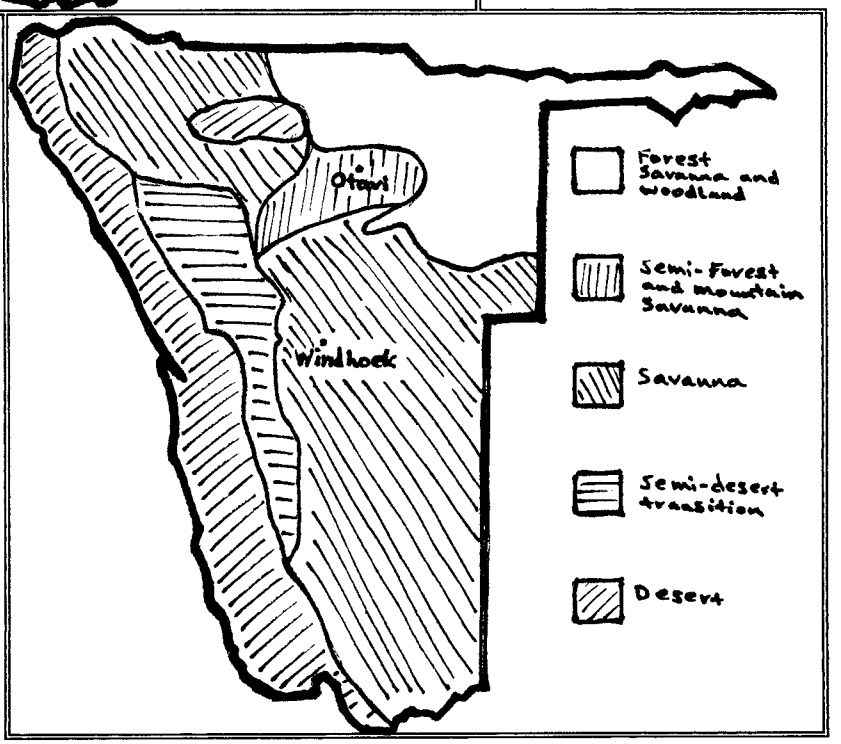
The high expectations of black Namibians have given way to rising frustration and anger, while some (but not all) white citizens have retained their callous bigotry in a business-as-usual climate. Most white Namibians say the political circumstances are better than what they expected at independence two years ago, although many also believe reconciliation really means "black vengeance deferred" until the economy deteriorates. The worst drought to hit Southern Africa since 1911 adds additional stress on Namibia's divided society. The government is hard-pressed to satisfy both groups. In the end, however, the fortunes of the black majority must somehow change for the better or racial hatred will tear this country apart once more. And the best barometer of social change, economic development and reconciliation is one of the country's most volatile problems: land ownership.

The hunger for land stems from one of the most unequal land distribution patterns in the world. More than 50 percent of usable agricultural land is owned by two percent of the population. Namibia's 4,200 predominantly white commercial farm owners are located in areas with the most rainfall and surface water, while blacks have been consigned to "reserves" or communal areas with poor or non-existent groundwater and little rainfall. Now when I use the term "farm owners," one can't think of Old McDonald standing next to rows of corn and fields of wheat like those found in the temperate climate of the Mid-West. Namibia is a semi-arid country best suited to raising goats, sheep and

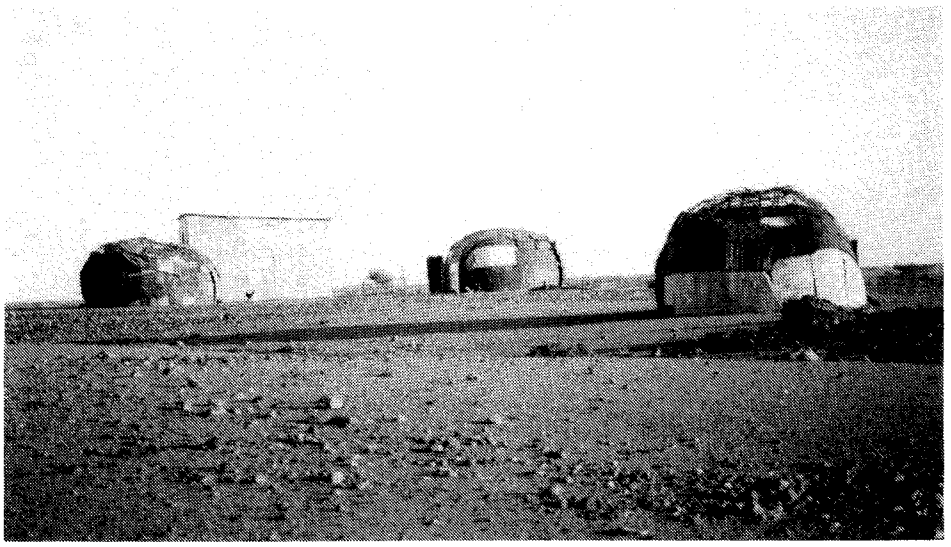
cattle. Only in the north does enough rain fall (about 20-24 inches annually, which experts say is the bare minimum needed to grow grains) for farmers to grow sorghum, millet or corn.



A map of rainfall (left) and a map of vegetation show the limited potential of Namibia's land.



The new government's technical dilemma in land reform lies in the nature of Namibian agriculture. Livestock ranching, the mainstay of the country's farming sector, can often require tens of thousands of acres to be a viable business. The Kalahari Desert bounds Namibia's eastern border, while on the west the Namib Desert stretches along the entire coast, restricting the amount of arable land to a small strip in the country's center.



Much of the landscape of Southern Namibia resembles an abandoned gravel parking lot.

Some dry and dusty figures explain a lot about why the black nationalist movement was based, in part, on "taking back the stolen land." The average plot of land held by 70 percent of the population, which is located in the northern communal areas of Ovambo and Kavango, is estimated at less than two acres per family. In the more arid southern communal areas like Namaland or Damaraland, the average inhabitant has 116 acres available to him or her. The average white commercial farmer in the north of Namibia, on the other hand, owns about 17,300 acres upon which to graze beef cattle. His compatriot in the harsher environmental conditions to the south, who mainly grazes sheep, owns an average of 29,650 acres. Looking at those figures alone, one admits blacks own some amount of land, albeit in a minuscule proportion to whites. But in Namibia, cattle or sheep farms of less than 5,000 acres are too small to be economically viable. And in the Ovambo communal area, a 1990 UNICEF study on household food security found a typical family of five could produce only 40 percent of their grain consumption requirements on the land available to them. Survival depends upon money sent home by family men laboring elsewhere.

Now, I may be a wet blanket at the "Death of Marxism" celebration, but I believe a Marxist-derived analysis describes a lot about Namibia's economy. Far from trying to transform the traditional sector, white colonial capitalism preserved and marginalized subsistence agriculture as a structural necessity to

create migrant laborers to work in mining and on white settler farms. Namibia falls into a region called the "Africa of the labor reserves" in the terminology of Samir Amin, a Marxist historian based in Dakar. One of my professors at the University of California - Berkeley, a political economist with an elegant French accent, defined this situation as "functional dualism." When peasants provide cheap food and labor, Alain de Janvry said in those long-ago lectures, Third World countries can export cheap raw materials and capitalists can maintain high rates of profit. A concept that once appeared abstruse now seems obvious.

The political digression above is prompted not just by the Western countries' loudly-trumpeted glee following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also by my steadfast belief in the old aphorism that individuals always have two reasons for doing anything - a good reason and the real reason. Marxist analysis, I've always thought, can ferret out a basic motivating force underlying major events in any society: conflict over profits. While lack of action on land reform can be in the interest of a national reconciliation that avoids alienating white farmers and promotes the confidence of the white-dominated business sector, continuing the status quo also benefits an elite class of black Namibians who now formulate state policy. I'm not the only one making that observation. An open-to-all national forum held last year on land reform rekindled hope of resettlement for many desperate black Namibians. The conference ended with several resolutions calling for mild land reforms. Authorities were tardy, however, in setting up a technical committee to draft laws based on these resolutions. And the results of that committee are now two months overdue. Public doubt and cynicism have grown in the face of the government's delay and silence on the issue.

There is also a legal obstacle to reform in land ownership. In the 1990 elections, when SWAPO was denied a two-thirds majority in the parliament, negotiations between Namibia's political parties resulted in a very liberal constitution that entrenched many existing colonial privileges along with basic rights. The protection of property guaranteed under the constitution's section on "Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms" effectively prevents a sweeping land redistribution. All persons have the right to acquire, own and dispose of property, states Article 16, while the government can only expropriate property in the public interest by paying just compensation. The fair market value of most white commercial farmland is far beyond what most Namibians -- black or white -- could afford. As one successful farmer says, even if he gave away the land for free, no one could pay for the value of the property improvements like boreholes, houses and barbed-wire fences.

The government also faces a financial dilemma when trying to solve the land question, since Namibia inherited a US $192 million debt at independence. Extra state funds don't exist to

buy up vast amounts of white commercial farms to resettle black communal farmers. And additional spending money won't be found soon. The economic picture looks gloomy in the short-term future, according to economists. The unemployment rate has neared 50 percent, while inflation jumped to a 10-year high of 18 percent from last year. Any job creation efforts in Namibia have been offset by a depression in the mining industry. Rossing Corporation already laid off many workers from their uranium-mining operations and plans even further cutbacks, while copper and lead mines in Tsumeb will shut down in the next 18 months.

Namibia's task is to dismantle an economic and social system based on a South African-administered white settler hegemony that began in the 1920s, while a dissatisfied majority who live in abject poverty see the gap between themselves and the rich more explicitly every day. The gap hasn't grown larger since colonial days, but they see it more clearly after promises appear broken.

I got my first impression of the white community's feeling about reconciliation in a barn at Otto Gupner's cattle farm outside of the conservative white farming town of Otavi. About 70 white commercial farmers filled the building at the weekend meeting. Many had gray hair. A few wore the Afrikaner "uniform": tan shirts and tan shorts and grey knee socks. A minister of the local Dutch Reformed Church began the meeting with a bible reading from Leviticus about pain and suffering and eventual reward. The subsequent discussion ranged from pension plans and bush encroachment of rangeland to talk of forming a new meat marketing cooperative because the black government is soon expected to wrest control of the old purchasing board that favored whites. The whole affair seemed rather dull.

During a tea break, however, events took a turn for the weird. The minister looked like he wanted to spit out what he had just sipped in when I asked him about reconciliation. "There's even more oppressive racism coming up now, much worse than apartheid," he said. "The blacks are trying in many subtle ways to tear down the white farmers. Of course, we try to walk down this reconciliation road but the blacks just want to have full charge, not divided power."

The chairman of the meeting, George Thomas, frowned when he heard the minister's words. During the war a few years ago, he worked on his cattle ranch with a rifle on his shoulder, while his wife packed a pistol on her hip even while cooking lunch at home. But nowadays times have changed and people should change, too. "Forty years ago, a black couldn't sit in my house but, in the long term, changes happen and now it's not uncommon for me to bring my workers in," Thomas explained. This good-natured farmer builds his workers brick houses equipped with running water, allows them to keep goats and sheep of their own, drives their children to and from school in Otavi each day, and sells them

groceries at wholesale prices. His motto at the farm is: "If you expect good service from anyone, treat him right, and if you expect good treatment from an employer, serve him well." He admitted his attitude is rare among the white community. If the SWAPO government passes a proposed law establishing a minimum wage for farm laborers, however, Thomas said he will fire many employees because he can't pay the higher salaries. Can't, or won't, I wondered to myself.

"You want to know what our biggest threat is?" asked Thomas in a conspiratorial tone. Hot damn, I thought as I leaned closer, now the farmer gets down to the rich dirt. Thomas glanced around the patio outside the barn before continuing his disclosure. "Acacia trees; bush encroachment," he intoned solemnly. "We used to get a defoliant called 'Thunor' from the United States, but there were big problems with the stuff in Vietnam and the Americans won't sell it to us anymore. That's the only thing that will get rid of the bush. The only thing. Do you know where to buy it? Can you help me get some?"

This guy wanted Agent Orange! And being an obliging idiot, I told him Agent Orange was banned for export but another defoliant called Paraquat might still be found. For some years, I said, our U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration sprayed the stuff on Mexican marijuana and ended up poisoning thousands of dope-smoking United States teenagers. But I didn't think it was taken off the market and... I broke off mid-sentence when I abruptly thought of a Namibian farm worker waving a flag to direct a crop-dusting plane to spray the ground on which he stood with yet another lethal American chemical. "Sorry," I said, "I can't help you."

In essence, bush encroachment can be defined as the gradual replacement of "good" grasses for grazing with those inedible to cows and sheep. In a competition for available water, the "bad" bush may consume up to 12 inches of any rainfall before enough moisture is available for grass to grow. They're also better at withstanding drought than annual grass species, so gradually the carrying capacity of the land diminishes. Where one cow survived on 10 acres of range a few years ago, the carrying capacity has deteriorated to 1:15 or even 1:30. The dense shrubbery has invaded millions of acres in Namibia over the last thirty or forty years. Don't think, however, that this is a natural problem of ecological competition. It's a man-made disaster.

In a semi-arid land, dividing the veld into small paddocks is too inflexible a system. Traditionally, mobile African pastoralists practiced the best cattle management by moving across wide, unfenced areas to follow the variable and unreliable rainfall patterns. Some experts will say African peasants are ignorant and ecologically destructive, but most commercial farmers haven't much more schooling than their black counterparts. Some 30 percent have the equivalent of a high

school diploma while 42 percent lack even that much education. If one judges who is a good farmer by the long-term trend, black communal farmers couldn't do much worse. I believe most peasant farms aren't very productive not for the lack of aptitude or capability, but because of the circumstances of colonial neglect and exclusion from markets.

After the white farmers ended their all-day meeting and the braai barbecue was lit to grill beef steaks and sausages, I gathered with them in our host's living room to watch the evening news on television. The situation became weird again. South African President F.W. De Klerk declared victory in a whites-only referendum on negotiating political change with the African National Congress. Most of the farmers in the room looked happy, since a rejection of the peace talks would have meant Namibian sanctions that would cut off Namibian beef exports to Cape Town. But then the news show presented an in-studio interview with a Namibian cabinet minister. As he related the government's official reaction on the referendum, a farmer got down on his knees in front of the television to shake a fist in the face of the black man on the screen. Others hooted comments in Afrikaans, then stamped out of the room in a fit of pique.

This scene of pandemonium confirmed the claims of a government labor relations officer who estimated that 60 per cent of the farmers in this region are against reconciliation. The official says he handles hundreds of complaints involving dismissals without pay and unfair treatment. Most employees report their white bosses are very insulting about Namibian President Sam Nujoma. When the labor officer telephones an employer to mediate the dispute, most hang up on him, he said.

In talking to white Namibians, I also found that both white rural farmers and urban white-collar workers told me the same common-wisdom, an attempt to justify their own wealth. The rationalization always started like this: There are many rich black men living in Ovamboland, who have become fabulously wealthy from smuggling diamonds out of the country.... That a black African could work hard and work smart to accumulate money seemed impossible to them. So I set out to find these successful black farmers or prosperous businessmen to talk with about reconciliation. It was difficult, though not because such people didn't exist. Instead, few people helped me search.

Driving through the unmarked mud streets of Oshakati, some 217 miles north of Otavi in the former homeland of Ovambo, I had trouble finding **anyone** who would talk to me. Most people -- children and adults -- stopped what they were doing to gawk at the unfamiliar sight of a white motorist circling through the streets of the township. But when I paused to ask a question, the person would uncomfortably gaze away and mumble something before walking away. Thinking that I needed personal contact with people

to build trust, I'd park and get out to ask directions. They'd bolt. After finding the Ministry of Agriculture bureau to ask for suggestions of successful farmers, I spent all day looking for a black businessman and commercial farmer named Malakia Lucas. After two or three false trails, I arrived at a gas station he supposedly owned. At first, the attendants exchanged sidelong looks and decided to deny knowing Lucas. After convincing them I wasn't South African, they pointed me the way to a wholesale warehouse, another business Lucas runs.

I found an older man and a younger man on the loading dock, looking over invoice slips. "I'm looking for Mr. Lucas," I announced as they finished talking business on some delivery. Again, after a sideways glance at his older companion, the young man denied any knowledge of Lucas. The older man demanded to know who I was and why did I want to talk to the boss? I went through another long explanation that the man cut short with a preemptory wave of his hand. Without stopping to see if I followed, he trudged up some wooden steps to a tiny windowless office, calling to the young man to join us. "He will translate, since I don't speak English good," said the older man, who was now ready to admit he was Malakia Lucas. "What do you want to know?"

When I asked him how independence has changed his life, Lucas leaned forward in his office chair and snapped open a briefcase. He pulled out two Polaroid snapshots: one of his palatial home in Ovambo near Ruacana Falls on Namibia's northern border with Angola, the other of his summer home in the coastal resort town of Swakopmund. The question answered, he tilted his office chair back once more and resumed shifting through his business mail.

If any black Namibian has risen above apartheid's legacy, surely Lucas has. He owns a profitable fishing company based in Windhoek, a wholesale warehouse and a gas station in Ovambo's capital city of Oshakati, and two commercial cattle farms totaling 26,000 acres outside the predominantly white farming town of Otjiwarongo. But Lucas knows he is a member of a small, upwardly mobile black elite in a country where 90 percent of black Namibians earn an average of US$85 a year. One out of 20 black children born today will be dead by his or her first birthday, while one out of 10 will die before the age of five.

"There is still apartheid here: It still continues in Namibia," Lucas growled. "If I am black and if I have money, then I can work with the whites. But if I am poor I am nothing to them. We can't even greet each other."

I repeated Lucas' criticism about apartheid's continued existence, along with other similar comments, to Prime Minister Hage Geingob. When we met on a Friday afternoon at his office, he looked weary. Geingob looked even more tired after my challenge,

but began to rebut any inference that his government is moving too slowly to transform the political economy of Namibia. Both roads and reconciliation take time to build, he argues, so the people must give the government a chance to act. A baby takes nine months to be born, so after six months' time people don't blame a pregnant mother for failing to give birth. "Ok, it means there are some whites who are still practicing apartheid," he admitted finally. "Are you saying all the whites? You see I don't believe that -- I took logic too. If you are saying whites then you are saying all whites and I say that's not true. Now, there are a certain number of whites who have changed; others have not accepted the change."

I expected our interview to be formal, with a permanent secretary monitoring the conversation as the politician repeated slogans from behind his desk. Instead, Geingob was alone when he plopped down in an easy chair next to the sofa where I sat. He broke the ice by chatting amicably about the days he lived in exile in Harlem. The prime minister was a marvelous conversationalist with a booming laugh, a habit of turning a question around and a relaxed slump that eventually left his feet sticking straight out and his head resting on the chair's arm.

Political reconciliation at independence, after an election administered by the United Nations, brought peace to a country ravaged by war, said Geingob in a professorial tone of voice, all business now. Not only had whites fought against blacks, but within black families some fathers, sons and siblings were in SWAPO while others supported the apartheid-installed government. So at independence, a truce reigned not only between blacks and whites but among blacks who fought on both sides of the struggle.

But it doesn't end there, he added quickly. Economic reconciliation must also be achieved. While the whites have lost power, he said, the economic status quo still remains. "We must move on because people are angry, they think nothing has changed but of course some are lacking education so they had wrong expectations of independence. That is why I am educating them as I travel around. They tell me nothing has changed and I say what do you mean? They say the whites are still controlling. I say: 'Is Sam Nujoma a white person, am I a white person, are all the ministers white?' When you counter it people see it. Then they say the whites are still living in the same houses and they're still living in the same house. They wanted to swap. That's not reconciliation, that's not independence, that's a misunderstanding, so we have to educate them."

Geingob may be charming, but it's too convenient to blame the Namibian people for misunderstanding what independence means. The government's present credibility crisis stems from a dramatic about-face in his party's policy. SWAPO compromised and toned down its revolutionary rhetoric after creating hopes among the

country's rural impoverished of a top-to-bottom transformation in post-liberation Namibia. For many years, SWAPO staunchly affirmed the goal of socialist development, by promising nationalization of land and the creation of a state that would direct massive changes in the economy. A major departure from that agenda occured at a very important 1988 conference between the liberation party and future donors and investors in New York City. At a time when an on-again, off-again independence finally appeared inevitable, Geingob issued reassurances to the United States and other involved countries that SWAPO would not nationalize land and would promote a "mixed" capitalist-socialist economy similar to many European nations.

At the same time, SWAPO's 1990 election manifesto still promised: "... land reform in order to redress the imbalance created by the colonial policies of land allocation on a racial basis. The objective of the new policy will be to transfer some of the land from the few with too much of it to the landless majority." Geingob, as the head of the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Zambia, oversaw the drafting of proposals for a variety of new models of land tenure involving state farms and cooperatives working alongside commercial and peasant family farmers. So he, above anyone else, should know who misled the people to anticipate the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, jobs aplenty and fields of land outside every backdoor.

Before our interview, Geingob had returned to Windhoek after traveling some 11,000 miles throughout Namibia to educate his people on the government's evolving vision of the future, talking to youth groups in the larger towns and aged headmen in their remote cattle kraals. At every stop he said he tried to explain to the frustrated masses about the problems his government faces in creating some equity in the nation's economy. "Land obviously is what people think should come back to them but land is controversial, it's emotional and there is also a constitution here that protects property rights," the prime minister said, eyes glowing as he became more animated. His charisma, which has won him respect among the foreign diplomats in Windhoek, lies in his candid and direct delivery. Jerking upright in his armchair and waving his long arms dramatically, Geingob projected an almost radioactive honesty as he propelled his words at me with muscular sincerity.

"Now if a [white] person usurped the land of indigenous people, there is a title deed and that person is protected by the constitution. He legally owns that land. It's very simple. Now if people are willing to sell the land, you can buy the land. It can't be just a question of giving the land to the people - to do what with it? They must also have the skills to make the land profitable. You must have some skills to develop that land and not just to sit on it because that would be useless. The war was fought because of land, but we want to combine political

Prime Minister Hage Geingob

reconciliation [with] the issue of land in economic reconciliation. ...I can't tell you a lie that we're all going to be equal in this country. But you have to empower people. The government is there to empower them, to see there are no limits put in their way."

Empowering people means providing education and infrastructure, such as rural electrification and good roads. Empowerment, in Geingob's definition, also means changing the mentality of Namibians, who have been "brain-washed" by colonialism to not think for themselves but to rely on outside assistance. While on his whistle-stop tour of Namibia, Geingob said he paraphrased Kennedy's famous quote: "Ask not what your country can do for you..." In Geingob's version, he tells his peasant audience: "Ask not what the government can do for you, but ask how the government can help you in what you are doing."
I wonder if Geingob, as a young social revolutionary a decade ago, would have been on speaking terms with his present-day self.

The leap from fighting a liberation struggle defined by the clear and simple goal of independence to defending a tactical accommodation as the ruling government has left many SWAPO officials ideologically off-balance. This was clearly true in the case of Wolfgang Werner, a white Namibian who is the director of lands in the government's ministry of lands and resettlement. When I visited Werner in his office to ask him about the connection between racial reconciliation and land redistribution, the German-Namibian paused for an uncomfortably long time to meditate on his answer. To gain thinking time, he laboriously wiped clean his circular spectacles. I thought the action was symbolic, as if this land reform expert really didn't want to see the present situation he has to administer. Reconciliation, he began tentatively, mirrors the situation in land reform.

"I think one of the negative things of reconciliation is that it blunts the contradictions of our society," he continued, now blinking at me owlishly through his spotless lenses. "The same is true for the land question: In the name of reconciliation

the government may not want to rock the boat, but [instead only] manage the contradictions that exist."

Werner was a difficult person to figure out. After sounding like a Marxist in talking about "contradictions," he would contradict that image with other opinions that sounded more like a conservative supply-side economist of the Chicago School. The effort of helping to create a mixed economy of capitalism and socialism has divided his soul in two.

"The state treasury is not benefitting from agriculture and actually spends US $112 million to subsidize this sector," Werner said. "Farmers pay little or no tax, then get extension services, price supports, below-cost inputs. Sure, I think it would be better to chase off the peasants to the factories, but it's a very rough process. I don't see the feasibility of industrialization, and while agriculture's contribution to the GNP is little, it employs a lot of people." This is not the kind of rhetoric I expected from an officer in a populist government.

Only a few minutes later, though, he used class analysis to describe opportunistic wealthy farmers in the communal areas who have unscrupulously fenced in community pasturage. The "kulaks" or nascent petite bourgeois are now pressuring the government to grant land titles to their ill-gotten gains obtained under the infamous tribal government instituted under apartheid. It's those rich ones, Werner said, who lobby the state house or become politicians themselves. "In fact," he said, "there are bourgeois elements in SWAPO, with many permanent secretaries having fenced farms in the communal areas. We will be lucky to travel another road than Zimbabwe, where cabinet ministers bought up huge tracts of land after liberation. It will be a great leap forward for Africa if we avoid Zimbabwe's problems." Werner echoed the sentiments of the most radical revolutionaries in Zimbabwe, who condemn the state politicians for exploiting their positions at the expense of the masses.

As our discussion drew to a close, Werner continued to speak his mind -- both halves -- about Namibia's future. "If we could give a person a decent industrial job with food, shelter, employment security and health benefits, it's a damn sight better than a person in the countryside who doesn't know when the rains might come or when the borehole will dry up. But we have no hope of a major industrial revolution, so we're doing the best we can by condemning them to a substandard life as peasants."

Turning in his chair to look at a national map of soil types on the wall behind him, Werner tapped his finger on the former Ovambo homeland. "I realize that without money, jobs, investment, we don't have a hope in hell. SWAPO members -- and I did, too -- picked up a sense that capitalism was bad and socialism was good. Before coming to power, we could talk about western countries and

the capitalist system as our enemy. But now, we're in a position where we have to govern. The former edifice [of the Soviet Bloc countries] has crumbled. It's gone. Now we need to attract capital investment from overseas and all the things we despised. We all have the feeling that it's what we need but it's bad. I think all top government people feel this way. It's how we were trained, but we need to generate a productive base to have money to do good things like land reform."

I wondered exactly why Werner has done so little at his post to promote land reform. So far, the government's record has been unimpressive at building that productive base out of the rural poverty in Namibia. After two years, the government has managed to purchase only 10 farms, for a total of 123,550 acres for resettling only a small fraction of the landless and destitute people. But Werner explained that money has been slow in arriving for purchasing and resettling black Namibians. About 3,000 people have been officially moved onto new land, although authorities admit privately that some beneficiaries have left their new homes in the country to search for a city job.

The SWAPO government faces a number of other dilemmas in implementing whatever limited type of land reform is possible. International donors are skeptical about the usefulness of purchasing land to resettle peasants out of overcrowded communal lands. And even if foreign assistance would help Namibia's financially-strapped state buy hundreds of thousands of acres for resettlement, such a massive scheme wouldn't solve the unemployment problem. There isn't enough land. Even if three or four times the number of farm owners could be accommodated on economically viable cattle farms, their numbers would still be a drop in the bucket. Say the state creates even five times more farms than the 4,000 commercial units existing today, for a total of 20,000, that still would not satisfy an estimated 150,000 people who suffer from land shortages in Namibia. And the thousands of black laborers on those white commercial farms to be purchased would have to find jobs elsewhere.

Another problem lies in appearances. A land redistribution program that appears to favor peasants at the expense of the commercial agriculture sector will discourage foreign investment in the country. If private property can be taken away, even at fair market value, many companies will be wary of building factories here. According to a senior American diplomat (I could quote him by name, but I've always wanted to use that expression), investors are waiting to see what the government's declared policy will be on foreign land ownership before seriously considering investing capital in Namibia.

If Werner sounds like an old Marxist dog trying to learn new capitalist tricks, Dirk Mudge appears to be an old running-dog capitalist who is reconciling himself to a new political order.

Mudge leads the Democratic Turnhall Alliance, the major opposition group that holds 21 seats in parliament to SWAPO's 41 seats. (Out of the 72 seats in the constituent assembly, four tiny political parties account for nine other seats.)

Perhaps I shouldn't be so flippant in calling Mudge a "running-dog capitalist," since he deserves some respect. As a white member of parliament in this country for 31 years, Mudge helped prepare the people of South West Africa to accept the idea of black majority rule, although few people today acknowledge that he fought for liberal reforms in the political system. Mudge was the first white politician in power to advocate a black majority government under universal franchise and racial integration of all schools. During his tenure as the head of the South-African sponsored administration in the 1960s, Mudge supervised the restructuring of the civil service to replace South Africans with local white, colored and black Namibians. He promoted the idea of equal pay for equal work and worked to abolish formal apartheid laws, such as the Group Areas Act that restricted blacks to living only in ramshackle townships. He wasn't a humanitarian per se. He wanted equality, but the kind of equality where everyone can make money even if society leaves others exploited and uneducated. Mudge wanted the richest and influential blacks to "sell out" and "buy in" to the system.

On the other side of the coin, as a former head of a state run under the principles of apartheid, Mudge was responsible for assisting wealthier blacks in the communal areas to exploit communal lands to the detriment of everyone else. Pastures had never been fenced before in the history of the Ovambo tribe. Suddenly miles of the barbed wire subdivided black communal lands in the 1980s. Mudge's DTA party provided fencing in the last years before the 1990 election. Poorer farmers who depended on land collectively used for centuries suddenly couldn't have access to grazing for their cows. Since the fences were planned and surveyed by the old government, they pose a legal problem for the new government. Although the cabinet decided last year that all such fences must come down, they have since backed off from enforcing such a decree against the rural black elite.

The fences were an element in Mudge's strategy to create a black middle class which would be committed to preserving Namibia's skewed economy and -- in the process -- secure the white position after independence. Mudge admitted in a 1980 budget speech that few black Namibians had a stake in "free" enterprise: "We shall have to help such people to also share in the benefits of private land ownership, be this in the farming areas or in the urban area and by so doing give them something to live for or, if necessary, to die for."

Under his direction, the pre-independence state also bought land from whites outright for well-off black Namibians to lease

on heavily subsidized terms. The former government's Land Bank funneled money to other favored individuals, while bantustan authorities used money from state coffers to purchase dozens of white farms in promoting a well-to-do class of black land owners who often turned out to be themselves.

Mudge's father came to Namibia when South Africa was encouraging white settlers with offers of free land after World War I. Mudge grew wealthy raising cattle on 12,355 acres of family land that is supplemented by his wife's 11,600 acres. Mudge says he remains a farmer more than a politician at heart. His principle concern is to preserve developed farmland, Mudge says, so **land utilization** and not **land redistribution** is the crux of the land question. Interestingly enough, Prime Minister Hage Geingob used exactly the same phrase. As political elite responsible for managing national policy, the philosophy of Mudge and Geingob appear closer than their skin color would suggest.

"In other countries, like Zambia or Zimbabwe, poverty was in fact redistributed, not wealth," Mudge said in his strong Afrikaans accent. Our conversation began as we walked through his home in the exclusive Eros Park suburb of Windhoek. The veteran politician sighed as he eased himself behind his desk, under pictures of his prize cows and a shelf full of agricultural fair trophies. After our interview, Mudge said he planned to pursue his hobby of diesel mechanics by tearing down a tractor engine.

"SWAPO's election manifesto was 'There's no freedom without economic freedom,' but how do you do it?" asked Mudge, who is a member of the Namibian parliament. "You cannot distribute wealth without creating wealth. I say you can either feed the cow, so she produces more milk and everybody has some, or you can slaughter the cow and have a hell of a feast but after awhile have nothing left." Mudge admits many blacks feel they don't own a stake in this country, and that many have a reason to be very angry. But he said they must understand that not everyone can own land. About 70 percent of the white population doesn't own a farm, so he says that blacks must accept that only a black elite will own farmland.

Mudge favors land reform, but in a very different form than mass land redistribution. Taking a productive farming unit and giving it to an inexperienced, poor black settler is a recipe for disaster, he said. "If you buy a farm and put a thousand people there it's no longer a farm, it's a squatter camp. Forget about resettlement and think about creating opportunities for farmers. We must get the more wealthy, successful farmers and help them with loans to get farms, but they must be selected on merit. The government must be ready to subsidize the right man to farm."

In Mudge's definition of reconciliation, old enemies must become color blind. "SWAPO sees it as reconciling with a puppet

party, but they need to practice what they preach and politically reconcile. They're not that bad. They're nice guys and some of them are very, very responsible. But they can't admit to being realistic because they have to pretend things are going to change dramatically."

Opposition leader Dirk Mudge

The spirit of national reconciliation grew strongest during that June 1991 conference on land reform. The meeting brought together more than 500 delegates -- whites and blacks, landowners and landless, right-wing conservatives and the militant ultra-left -- to take their turns at the microphone during a week-long discussion. Subsistence farmers from the communal lands and homeless farm laborers had equal standing with white interest groups, like the Namibian Agricultural Union and the Chamber of Commerce and Industries. Some of the delegates were illiterate, so informative videos portraying issues and interviews with pertinent people across the country were shown during the conference. The government of Zimbabwe donated its simultaneous translation equipment to assist those who spoke no English or Afrikaans. There was euphoria during this amazing exercise in democracy as Namibia's antagonistic elements met face-to-face to talk with each other. By the end of the encounter, former adversaries were reconciled enough to admit that the other camp had the right to hold an opposing point of view, a notoriously rare attitude on the African continent. People in the United States take for granted the freedom of expression, while elsewhere in the world the freedom to dissent is not recognized. In this light, Namibia's reconciliation is the first and most important step in creating a workable, authentic democracy.

Demonstrators outside the conference held up placards speaking clearly about their expectations for the conference: "No reconciliation without land," "To hell with the willing buyer, willing seller," and "We want our land back." The white commercial farmers battled against discussing any kind of substantial land redistribution. In fact, the conference ended in a contradictory fashion. The first resolution passed by the majority of participants concluded that "there was injustice concerning the acquisition of land in the past and something must

be done about it as practically as possible." The second resolution, however, found that "given the complexities in redressing ancestral land claims, restitution of such claims in full is impossible." Both sides left the meeting with the semblance, but not the substance, of what they wanted. Diplomatically, I guess, the conference was a success.

In the months that have followed, the goodwill created by the conference soured into uneasy association between the races. One of the conference participants, Vekuii Rukoro, now says that the meeting's concluding consensus document dashed the black majority's hopes for an equitable dispensation on the land issue and continues to be the source of bitterness that could lead to another political struggle.

"Resolution 2 on ancestral rights represents the degree to which those who were historically dispossessed of their land were prepared to go in the spirit of national reconciliation," according to Rukoro, who acts as deputy minister of justice as well as leads the Namibia National Front opposition political party. "By this resolution the dispossessed communities -- to all intents and purposes -- gave away their otherwise perfectly legitimate and actionable land claims. The questions is, what did the blacks receive in return for giving up their ancestral rights to land? Nothing! To me the adoption of Resolution 2, in the absence of an undertaking concerning some kind of counter performance by our white fellow citizens, constitutes one-sided reconciliation. It's an unacceptable imbalance which carries with it the seeds of dangerous future instability."

Other resolutions were also adopted, calling for the reallocation of under-utilized land, the expropriation of land owned by foreign absentee landlords, the abolition of fences on communal lands, the prohibition of "very large" commercial farms by ownership of several land tracts by one individual, and the adoption of a labor code protecting farm workers.

The Namibian Agricultural Union, dominated by white commercial farmers, continues to argue strongly against any policy that smacks of expropriation. In a position paper responding to those final conference resolutions, the NAU contends that low grazing capacity is the reason for under-utilized land while abuse of land by the overstocking of animals under the black traditional farming system poses a greater danger than under-utilization. Likewise, the Union believes a farmer may own five farms of 2,500 acres each in order to have an economically viable unit. As for expropriation of foreign absentee owners: "The spinoffs of such a step could only have a negative influence on the small and fragile Namibian economy."

The World Bank also weighed in this month with a final version of its country report, which was more than two years in

the making. Many knowledgeable people saw the report's release as timed to make an impact on the continuing government deliberations about land reform. I concur with those suspicions, since I had an opportunity to see a confidential draft of the same report written more than a year earlier. Most of the text of the final report about land was taken word-for-word from the draft, with one significant change. "Although access to land is of considerable importance, **equal access to land** may not be the most efficient way to redress past inequities," the earlier draft states. In the finalized version, the "equal access to land" is amended to "**an administered land reform.**" The World Bank document continues: "Efficient land use and environmental protection are probably incompatible with a radical redistribution of land from large-scale to smallholder farmers. Breaking up large holdings into smaller ones to relocate a large number of farmers is likely to carry considerable short-run costs in terms of reduced output and more intense range utilization, with attendant medium-term ecological damage."

All the resolutions from the land conference constituted the starting point for a government-appointed Technical Committee on Commercial Farmland to formulate land reform legislation. The NAU, the World Bank and other interested parties all supplied their recommendations to the committee, then waited with impatience for laws to be proposed. The public expected some results by the end of last year, then by the next officially announced target date of March. By the end of April, more than 10 months after the conference, the public is still waiting on the results of the committee. Bob Kandetu, deputy minister of information, shrugged his shoulders at the latest "meet the press" briefing I attended. "You can appreciate this is a complex and sensitive issue, so they're taking their time." Many people are skeptical anything substantial will ever be announced. So far, the parliament has only provided an "affirmative action" loan for full-time communal farmers who own a minimum of 150 cows or 800 goats and sheep to buy land in the commercial farming areas. Critics say the new scheme, despite its low entry levels, still favors rich farmers over middle-level or poor farmers.

Two men who squared off at the long-ago land conference symbolize how Namibia's future will be determined. Each have well-thought-out scenarios for what must be accomplished to reconcile the nation and reform the distribution of land. One man is a university-educated commercial maize farmer who uses a computer to predict rainfall patterns on his vast land holdings, while the other is a 74-year-old German-born Lutheran pastor who has lived among black Namibians for decades and eventually married a woman in the Ovambo community. Despite their disparate backgrounds and viewpoints, their ideas agree astonishingly well.

Headed for Jan Engelbrecht's farm on the back roads near Otavi, I drove down a dusty road through a small valley called

"Tigerkloof." On either side, I saw thousands of rows of yellow rustling stalks of corn destroyed by the drought. Most of the corn had grown a yard high before the sky had hardened into a cloudless blue void for several months. Some wide swaths through the fields showed where the farmers desperately mulched the dead cropland to gain fodder for starving cattle. Passing through this scene of natural disaster, I arrived at the high white walls of Engelbrecht's mansion on the 17,300 acres he owns. A thick green lawn led to a sliding glass door where Engelbrecht welcomed me.

Although Engelbrecht didn't vote for the SWAPO government, he is working closely with new state authorities. "Once you start talking to people, in a give-and-take situation, you can get things sorted out," he said. As the country's top maize producer, usually growing 15 percent of the national corn crop on 5,000 acres, Engelbrecht is in a position to talk as well as listen to the government. What he's telling officials is that Namibia's greatest need is farm management skill to increase productivity. "Farming is a very risky, very tricky business and Namibians are not professional or well trained." Engelbrecht studied agriculture at universities in South Africa and Holland, but he couldn't avoid getting hurt by the drought devastating Southern Africa. He will harvest only 15 percent of what he planted and lose an investment of US $2.8 million this year. The threat of famine makes the answer to the land question all that more urgent, he said. "Now we're independent, but the big thing is economic growth: When 60 percent of the population is hungry, you need to get moving. The parliament must set its priorities. The train is off but we're still on the platform."

Perhaps his position at the pinnacle of the white farming sector makes Engelbrecht more insulated from the fears of those recalcitrant white farmers I met at the Otavi Farmers' Union meeting. Engelbrecht is in favor of land reform that favors the richest (in his eyes, the best) communal farmers. Over the long term, he adds, communal land must be privatized. "When 70 percent of everything created here is exported and 70 percent of everything consumed is imported, you can say that we're very much a part of the international economy. It's very important for us to compete or we're going down and out. What we need most is investment capital and skill, so if you start nationalizing private property forget about overseas investment."

Pastor Peter Pauley lives in the village of Elim, several sandy miles off the main road. After pushing my Toyota Corolla through one sand trap and into another, I left the car behind to trudge to the Lutheran Mission. Garbage littered the pastor's yard and unwashed pots and stacks of books inside his home complimented the chaos outside. He wore a dirty pair of jeans and a thread-bare sweater, but beneath the shock of gray hair his bright blue eyes examined me closely.

Pastors in the Ovambo Lutheran Church cannot smoke or drink, but the sharp old man doesn't like to follow the rules. He ground his tobacco between his thumb and forefinger before tamping it into his pipe. Pauley caught me looking around at the house with apprehension and explained his wife of six years died several months ago. He tugged unconsciously at two gold wedding bands on his little finger. His first wife, a European, also died many years earlier. This missionary has had a hard life.

Pauley was born in the Danzig Corridor carved out of East Prussia by the Versailles Treaty that ended World War I. He had to flee Nazi Germany in 1936 after he innocently admitted some Jewish ancestry on his mother's side. After studying in the German colony of Tanganyika (now Tanzania), he received his degree in animal husbandry and veterinary hygiene just before the British occupied that country. Declared a prisoner of war, Pauley was interned in South Africa for several years. When he tried to settle in Zimbabwe then-known as Rhodesia, the authorities expelled him because he was German-born. "When they finally repatriated me in 1947," Pauley remembered with a wry smile, "I didn't know what my patria was: Poland or Prussia?" After acting as a tour guide for the occupation forces, he immigrated to Namibia in 1951. Sympathetic to black Africans who were uprooted by colonialism in their own country, Pauley won few friends among the whites in Namibia. His parish pensioned him early, so he settled in Ovamboland just as the guerilla war intensified. Now that independence has been won, Pauley is adamant that life for his adopted people must improve.

"If reconciliation means pushing things under the carpet and no real change, it is not true reconciliation. Religiously speaking, I'm supposed to be for forgiveness between white and black, but whites didn't do anything for reconciliation. In politics, it doesn't work because it's not practiced." As we talked together for several hours, Pauley wandered off on tangents. He described how the war-like Donga sub-tribe of the Ovambo people differed from the Kuwambe farmers. He explained the veterinary practices of the traditional healers, the church politics of land ownership, and the ecological disaster that followed the influx of thousands of Angolans with their cattle. And occasionally he would let me get in a question designed to bring him back on track. Then Pauley would veer off again, about how Ovambo people ask a question at the end of an hourlong conversation out of politeness. When dusk fell with an almost audible slamming of a black lid on the last red rays of sunset, I finally gave up and folded up my notebook, signaling my intention to leave. I had many sandy miles in which to get stuck that night. Pauley quickly enumerated five recommendations for land reform upon which he had ruminated for some time. I reopened my notebook and the lonely old man smiled, delighted to recapture his audience. He ticked his points off on his fingers.

First of all, Pauley said, living conditions must be bettered on the farm, with water and light so the younger generation will stop migrating to the cities. Agriculture as presently practiced in Ovambo is the occupation of grandfathers. Second, both communal and commercial farmers should pay for the land per hectare they till, for the grazing pastures per animal and for the water their cattle drink. In that way, those white farmers who own three or four farms will be forced to realize the value of the thousands of acres they underutilize and be financially forced to get rid of their surplus property. Third, a national soil survey should be conducted so land can be accurately valued according to climate and fertility because fifty acres of land in northern Ovamboland is better than 2,500 acres of southern Namibian wasteland. Fourth, subsidies to white farmers should be diverted to black farmers, who Pauley claimed could easily out-produce the white commercial farmers.

Finally, methods of farming should not be regionalized, so commercial farmers could buy land in Ovamboland and communal farmers could start traditional free-ranging cattle herding in the commercial block. "Either you continue apartheid or you make a big change and let every farmer go where he wants," Pauley said. "What is wrong with having white commercial farmers buying land here? It would be better, because locals would see how white farmers farm. Why don't they? Because they're afraid of blacks. All this talk about reconciliation and building a nation: How can you build a nation when everyone sticks to his own area and looks into his own plot and never sees other people."

The odd thing is that these two older men who live isolated in tiny farming districts formulated much of the World Bank prescription for poverty alleviation with sustainable growth. The World Bank emphasizes productivity growth through education and training, while advocating user fees for land and water. And government insiders say the most important piece of land reform legislation to come before parliament could be a proposal for progressive taxation of commercial farmland held in excess of what is determined to be an "economic unit." The size of such a unit would vary according to climate and rainfall, from small parcels in the north to huge tracts in the south. A land tax will limit land holding and make overly large farms unprofitable.

Regardless of all the informed opinions, official surveys, conference resolutions and cabinet decisions, the government's policy of reconciliation and its unknown plan for land reform will mean nothing if SWAPO is unable to give the people what they want. If unemployment remains high and the international economic situation curtails the government's financial resources to buy land, drastic measures may be taken. After 10 years of independence in Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe has attempted to buy back some political support from the country's disaffected populace by proposing to expropriate white commercial farming

land. Farmers there, he proposed, would not have the right to refuse the sale of their land to the state and would be forced to accept the price fixed by the government. Similarly in Namibia, a member of SWAPO's central committee told me that land could be redistributed over white objections if the party wins a two-thirds majority in Namibia's 1995 elections. The possibility of a national referendum to overturn the constitution's protection of private property seems far-fetched now, but will be conceivable if the simmering emotions of disillusioned and desperate black Namibians explode.

After talking with so many people and reading reams of reports, I found myself lacking an optimistic conclusion about reconciliation or land reform. Reconciliation, at first impression, seemed to be a remarkable display of political tolerance without parallel in the world. Not only were the swords beaten into plowshares, but the warriors worked together to forge the new implements of peace. And while land reform did seem stymied, surely a government responsive to all segments of the population would work out a compromise solution. I reflected on all the words I'd gathered and tried to envision a happy ending to this essay. But I've learned that often there is no easy solution to many of the repugnant circumstances I've witnessed in life. Throughout my life, I've been fortunate to meet clear-sighted, outspoken people who have dispelled such illusions. A few days ago, while struggling to avoid ending this essay in a pessimistic tone, a strong-willed woman gave me a blunt and stern lecture on the facts of Namibian life.

To Ottilie Abrahams, who has spent her life fighting for Namibian independence, there will never be a true land reform to benefit the majority black population **because of reconciliation.** From her perspective, reconciliation has taken place between the white and black elites at the expense of the black masses. "I don't know why people say reconciliation hasn't taken place, because the SWAPO elite is getting along fine, among themselves and with their former enemies," said Abrahams, who was the first black woman college graduate in her country. "We have an elite here that has nothing to be ashamed of, since our black elite has done as much as any elite in land acquisition. But if you're trying to pretend land is to be shared out, you're deluding the people." I agreed, the death knell for a positive conclusion at the end of this letter.

Abrahams' credentials as a patriot cannot be dismissed as easily as other SWAPO critics, like Mudge. She started her political career when she attended school in Cape Town in the early 1950s, because coloreds could not get a quality education in Namibia, then known as South West Africa. There she joined a militant student group agitating for Namibian independence. She was twelve years old. By the age of 22, Abrahams was caught and detained for smuggling firearms in support of the guerilla war

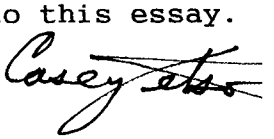
against South Africa. After spending another five years seeking political asylum in other African countries, Abrahams and her husband became refugees in Sweden. They returned to Namibia 15 years ago in 1978 to form their own political party, their own development assistance group and a training school in Windhoek's black township of Katatura.

I found Abrahams holding a teaching staff meeting at a remedial school for both children and adults -- the Jacob Morengo Tutorial College -- that stands across from the slums of the former singles quarters on the edge of Katutura. Behind the thick-lenses of her glasses, her eyes rolled ironically as she spoke of her search for funds to create the school. Dragging me by the hand, the forceful school marm pulled me outside to a rock-strewn, barren plot of land where she wanted to start a school garden. Then leading me further with a brisk stride and a gentle tug, she pointed out where the outdoor latrine was located in this section of the black township: right next to a marketplace with open-air food kitchens. Amid her rapid-fire recital of crusades and tirades, Abrahams injected a humorous cynicism seasoned with a practical experience of running high-minded philanthropies on shoe-string budgets.

"If we pretend apartheid is over in this country, then I not only want the white man's money but I want the black man's money, too," says Abrahams. "Why should people have three cars and live in palaces? Nothing makes the masses more restless than seeing this conspicuous consumption." Her words make sense to me. Reconciliation, in legislating harmony between former colonial oppressors and subjected populace, may block development of a true racial equality in economics and land ownership because such a policy allows only a few to enjoy the fruits of independence. But people like Abrahams, and others less educated, have the right to publically criticize the government. If there's anything hopeful in Namibia's search for a middle ground in all matters, it's that vigorous assertion of the right to speak one's mind.

In other parts of Africa, I never saw such forthright demands asserted by poor people and equally-insistent rebuttals by the rich. Dialogue in this society has become an all-important feature in any issue, great or small. The discussion in Namibia will be long and angry and unproductive at times, but the talking will continue until everyone has been heard. Although Geingob and other SWAPO politicians continue to publicly warn the white population that concessions for a more equitable society must be made or violence will reign, I think it's a rhetorical threat. I believe that as long as free expression continues, there will be no more war for Namibia. Once people have tasted the liberty to speak their minds, they will be patient enough to reject violence in favor of negotiations for a better future. That seems to be the Namibian way, and that's the positive ending to this essay.

Sincerely,



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