

Media coverage of sidelined voices (youth, women, and persons with disabilities): Magnifying the political environment during Namibia's 2024 elections

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Abstract

The 2024 Namibian election cycle was marked by a series of intriguing dynamics that influenced the country's political landscape. Central to the 2024 electoral period is the political parties' manifestos, often regarded as the most important document in an election year. As the election date approached, the combination of delayed manifestos, unresolved party disputes, and a fragmented political landscape raised significant questions about the future of Namibia's democracy. Challenges experienced by the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) on the 27 November 2024 resulted in President Nangolo Mbumba extending the election period. The ruling delivered on 28 February 2025 is expected to shape future electoral processes in Namibia. Following a closely contested election which saw the ruling party lose its majority by a large margin, and with analysts predicting loss of power for the party in the next election, what will the party do differently to ensure electoral victory in 2029? Will it be 'business as usual', or will there be an improvement in the material conditions of the ordinary person? This paper examines Namibia's 2024 elections coverage of young people, women, and people with disabilities, by looking at how different media houses covered issues related to the three categories. These three categories, which are often under-represented, and their issues underreported in the media, arguably helped shape the 2024 election results. Further, the paper interrogates different perspectives by looking at the political environment that underpinned political activities during Namibia's 2024 elections.

Keywords: Namibia elections; media coverage; marginalized groups; youth political participation; women in politics; electoral democracy

1. Introduction

Namibia is a dominant political party system with the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) traditionally enjoying popularity among the electorates, as is evident from its two-third majority in parliament since the 1995 general election. However, Namibia's economic growth has been stagnant since 2016, which can be attributed to problems in the extractive industries, drought, a decrease in global commodity prices and the Covid-19 pandemic that caused havoc around the globe. These challenges had huge implications for the material conditions of the ordinary Namibian citizens. Lack of economic growth has seen unemployment go up to record levels. According to the 2023 labour force survey by the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), overall unemployment stands at 37%, with unemployment among young people at 45%. Indeed, some critics put unemployment above the 50% mark (Kangumine 2025).

Poverty has consequently increased, causing many Namibians to face acute food insecurity, and cases of starvation resulting in death have been reported. These issues might have influenced the election results of 27 November 2024. SWAPO's electoral dominance had already fallen drastically after the 2019 elections, with the late Hage Geingob, the party presidential candidate in that election, winning only 56% of votes cast, the party's worst results since independence (Melber 2020).

Namibia's 2024 general elections were closely contested, with the three biggest daily newspapers, The Namibian, New Era and Namibian Sun, playing a crucial role in shaping political narrative and arguably the outcome. According to McQuail and Deuze (2020) the media have an obligation to provide inclusive coverage that reflects the diversity of society. The theory suggests that the voices of minority, marginalised and vulnerable members of society – such as the youth, women, and persons with disabilities – should be amplified. However, the Namibian press tended to focus its coverage on dominant political parties, their leaders, and campaign rallies, with sidelined groups



often appearing only in peripheral discussions or as symbolic references in campaign promises. This imbalance reveals a gap between normative expectations and actual media performance.

McQuail's Democratic Participant Media Theory (McQuail and Deuze 2020) emphasises that media should create space for grassroots voices and enable marginalised communities to participate meaningfully in political debates. Yet during the 2024 elections, media coverage prioritised issues such as corruption and party conflicts while reporting less on issues affecting young people, women, and disabled people, like unemployment, gender-based violence and lack of inclusivity. Although media focus highlighted accountability and kept the nation informed, it simultaneously left the issues affecting marginalised groups unreported in an important election year.

In addition, these newspapers, especially New Era which is a state-owned publication, followed a particular narrative. Its coverage was focused on government achievements and policy promises, and highlighted issues affecting women, the youth, and people with disabilities only in the context of empowerment schemes and achievements. In a similar fashion, Namibian Sun frequently covered election manifestos but failed to provide policy analysis on issues affecting the marginalised groups.

2. Political context

Namibia's 2024 elections came at a pivotal time for the country as it grapples with several economic and societal challenges. As one of the few stable democracies in Africa since gaining independence on 21 March 1990, Namibia's electoral process has been characterised by free and fair elections under the supervision of the ECN. The ruling SWAPO party has dominated the political landscape, winning every election since independence. However, in recent years, there has been growing competition, particularly from opposition parties such as the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM), the Landless People's Movement (LPM), and new kids on the block, like Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) and Affirmative Repositioning (AR), signaling an increasingly dynamic political climate.

Societal issues, such as a high unemployment rate, healthcare challenges, inflation, and lack of serviced land and affordable housing, continue to burden the country's social fabric. While the government has made strides in addressing these challenges through policies and development programmes, many Namibians are calling for more inclusive growth and solutions to inequality. As the 2024 elections approached, these economic and social concerns were central issues, potentially influencing voter turnout and shifting electoral support. To shift the balance of power, political parties and candidates employed unique campaign strategies to effectively reach the electorate. This helped them communicate their manifestos and policy positions on key issues. In the era of digital communication, media coverage on issues affecting the electorate play a huge role in influencing voting behaviour, especially among young people, women, and people with disabilities.

2.1. Campaign preparation at party level

The preparedness of a party for the election often determines its performance in the election. Yet the period leading up to elections is often volatile for many political parties. While political parties with well-established institutions or structures tend to have a stable and consistent support base, those with high electoral volatility normally perform poorly. Therefore, during election periods in Namibia, political parties engage in strategic preparations and extensive campaigning to secure support.

The year 2024 was filled with many electoral processes at party level. This helped the various parties to be better prepared for the election and spread their message to the masses. For example, to effectively wage a successful political campaign, parties held internal elections to elect leaders, mobilised resources and strengthened their structures. Most political parties elected their parliamentary candidates at their Party Congress.

Political parties deployed various strategies to ensure that they were well prepared for the 2024 elections. Many campaigned door-to-door, presenting their policy positions on pressing issues. Newer parties, such as the AR and IPC, worked at strengthening their party's structures. For instance, during a press conference in April 2024, AR spokesperson George Kambala called on his fellow activists, supporters and sympathisers to formally join the party's Reorganisation, Institutionalisation and Formalisation (RIF) Programme, aimed at ensuring strong foundations in their pursuit of economic emancipation (Ngula 2024). The restructuring took place to better prepare the movement for its participation in the 2024 election.

2.2. *Political parties' preparations*

The process of preparing for an election often involves crafting a manifesto that outlines a party's policies, priorities, and goals. Campaign strategies typically focus on addressing issues that resonate with the electorate, such as economic development, social services, and employment. The manifesto, which is aimed at appealing to a broad voter demographic, is used to communicate the party's vision during rallies, media appearances, and community engagements. All party structures are geared towards coordinating activities, ensuring that the party's message reaches even the most remote communities.

Parties also engage in internal mobilisation, where they organise resources and set up campaign teams at the regional and local levels. At the party level, much effort is put into selecting and electing candidates who can best represent the party's interests in various constituencies. The election process often reflects internal power dynamics, with senior party leaders influencing key decisions.

Ahead of the elections, parties ramp up their activities, focusing on consolidating support in key regions. This phase often involves large rallies, door-to-door canvassing, and public engagements where candidates interact directly with constituents. The preparations are not without challenges, as parties must navigate logistical issues and manage their campaign finances effectively. Most parties, namely SWAPO, AR, UPM, RDP and LPM, expressed concern about a lack of financial muscle, with some asking the public for donations and arranging gala dinners to raise much needed funds.

2.3. *Election campaign strategies*

During the election period, political parties deploy different strategies to help them lure the electorate to their side. Each election cycle sees parties rallying their supporters by means of vigorous campaigns that utilise social media, community gatherings, and door-to-door visits, aiming at reaching a diverse population that is spread across urban and rural areas. In the era of digital communication, which is a cost-effective means of communication, political parties make use of social media to reach the electorate, especially young voters. In the last election, parties with the financial means to do so also arranged star rallies in all major towns and regions to reach a wider audience, while distributing free T-shirts and food.

At these rallies, political parties address issues that resonate with the electorate and provide a blueprint for how they propose to solve these issues once elected into power. For example, Namibia has been grappling with a high unemployment rate, healthcare, education, housing and land, and restorative justice for the Herero-Nama Genocide.

2.4. *Campaign language*

The election period is arguably the most sensitive period in any country's political landscape. It determines how a particular nation will forge ahead after the elections. An election period therefore reveals a country's level of democratic consolidation, as well as the level of maturity of the different political actors and their supporters. If not carefully managed, a country can degenerate into instability, war or division, all of which are expensive and difficult to address. It is therefore essential that peaceful interactions between rival supporters are ensured in order to maintain political stability during this time.

Language plays a critical role in Namibia's political sphere, and it can become a tool of division. In some instances, campaign rhetoric has drifted into divisive language, even bordering on hate speech, as politicians aim to consolidate their bases by appealing to specific ethnic or regional identities. While Namibian laws aim to curb hate speech, enforcement can be challenging, especially in the heat of campaigns. This tendency can fuel tribalism, racism and regionalism, where political parties capitalise on loyalty and historical grievances, sometimes at the expense of national unity. The use of divisive language not only alienates minority groups but also risks exacerbating existing identity biases, making it difficult for other groups to fully participate in the electoral process.

It is essential that all key stakeholders adhere to the code of conduct of the electoral process.

The Namibian government, through the electoral commission, plays a role in monitoring the conduct of the various political party campaigns, to ensure compliance with electoral regulations and to promote a fair and transparent election process. The Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) has a mandate to provide political parties with a code of conduct during elections, derived from the Electoral Act, 2014 (Act No. 5 of 2014). Section 154 of this Act empowers the ECN to draft, enforce, and ensure compliance with the Code of Conduct by political parties and candidates during elections. Section 154 stipulates that political parties should not engage in activities which may undermine the electoral process of the country. Such activities include violence and hate speech, amongst others. It is thus imperative for political actors, parties, or candidates to adhere to the Code of Conduct.

Most political parties officially started their campaigns in September 2024 and the Code of Conduct was signed on 8 November 2024. This meant that political parties or actors could not be held to account for events that happened earlier than that date, even though political actors participated in name-calling, with words such as ‘foreigners’, ‘traitors’ and ‘unpatriotic’ hurled at members and supporters of different political parties during this period.

Despite clear legislative frameworks guiding the conduct of political parties and stipulating how they should behave, unlawful conduct therefore still takes place. Some political leaders encourage their supporters to engage in activities which may undermine Namibia’s democracy. In May 2024, SWAPO lawmaker Veiko Nekundi, while campaigning, told supporters that he would like to see the ‘democratic’ graves of IPC and PDM leaders after the elections. Nekundi also added that it was again time for ‘Judas Iscariot’ to be dealt with and ‘put in his rightful place’, referring to those who had left the SWAPO camp (Ndeyanale 2024b).

Another example of such misconduct occurred in early 2024, when Moses Ndjene slapped a SWAPO Party coordinator from Mix Settlement, an informal settlement near Windhoek, for lies that SWAPO had allegedly been telling over the years. Namibia Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF) second in command Longinus Iipumbu thereupon announced that the party was giving Ndjene N\$1 000 for doing the “right thing”, and as “a sign of solidarity with Ndjene and a message to those who lie about development programmes” (Ndeyanale 2024a). Though denied by the NEFF, this act encourages political violence, which is against Namibia’s democratic principles and the laws of the country.

In a similar incident, a SWAPO supporter was charged with attempted murder when he allegedly drove a car into an IPC rally held in a village near Outapi (Haidula 2024). Outapi is in the Omusati region, which has been regarded as a ‘no-go area’ for opposition parties for many years. Opposition leaders have been insulted and have had rocks thrown at them over the years, with the result that many have been hesitant to hold rallies in the region.

As the campaign trail heated up, skirmishes also took place between LPM and SWAPO supporters in the Khara and Hardap regions, where both parties were competing for dominance in the election. A SWAPO campaign vehicle was vandalised, SWAPO flags removed, and SWAPO venues in Mariental booked by the opposition to prevent their star rally taking place there (Shikololo 2024). On the other hand, LPM supporters accused SWAPO supporters of provocation.

A further contentious issue is the stance some political players take towards those they consider foreigners. On this matter, they have a clear policy position, vowing to deport such people back to their home countries if their party were to win the upcoming election. In their 2024 elections manifesto, the Republican Party of Namibia (RP) vowed to “chase away” Chinese nationals from Namibia. The National Democratic Party of Namibia (NDP) also had a similar stance towards foreigners who do not transfer skills to Namibians. IPC leader Dr. Panduleni Itula was labelled a “foreigner” and “British agent” by his political opponents for allegedly staying in Britain for an extended period after Namibia gained independence. Supporters of the different political parties call each other “sell-outs”, and “unpatriotic citizens” because of choosing or aligning with a different party. This has led to tensions in the public arena, indicating a lack of political tolerance and maturity.

2.5. *Political parties’ manifesto launch*

The most important document during the election year is arguably a party manifesto. It is a policy blueprint of how a political party plans to administer the affairs of a country and lead the nation to prosperity. In Namibia, party manifestos influence voting behavior only to an extent, however. This is attributed to the fact that Namibians have a poor reading culture (Matheus 2024). Many voters therefore tend to base their choices on party loyalty, history, identity, what they see on social media, or the messages they hear at rallies. On the other hand, younger, city-dwelling, and educated voters often pay closer attention to the specific policies and details laid out in party manifestos when voting (Matheus 2024). Furthermore, the privileged few and those with an interest in policy prefer to receive party manifestos on time to be able to assess which parties best speak to their needs, as well as having the best solutions for the country’s problems.

Ahead of the watershed elections in November, political parties failed to release their manifestos on time, a move considered by some people in the public as undermining the electorate (Namibian Sun. 2024). Most of the political parties only released their policy blueprint in October 2024, with the PDM being the first political party to give a glimpse of their policy position and their plans for Namibia, in late August of the same year.

Namibia faces a host of difficult socio-political and economic issues which a new administration would have to address when taking office on 21 March 2025. The country is dealing with a housing backlog of more than 300 000 units. Second, Namibia is one of the most

unequal societies in the world. It is generally understood that the country is yet to achieve economic freedom. This can be attributed to the means of production being owned by the minority white people as well as a few politically connected individuals. Unemployment is the highest since independence with government critics saying it has surpassed the 50 % mark. Corruption allegations and acute poverty reports make the front pages of newspapers almost every day. All this makes the ground fertile for opposition parties to inflict electoral defeat on the ruling party.

However, most opposition parties' manifestos lack practicability. They include general statements on how to create employment opportunities, solve housing problems, improve healthcare and education, and resolve the land issue, without a clear plan on how they will address issues facing the ordinary person. Left-leaning opposition parties such as AR, LPM and NEFF promised to deal with the land issue radically by means of a legislative framework, which included restricting "foreigners" from owning land and restoring ancestral land to their descendants. These policy positions, however, amount to a 'negative peace' that does not address the underlying issues.

2.6. Political parties' internal disputes

It has become the norm that during the election year most if not all political parties in Namibia experience internal problems. These problems range from factionalism to leadership and legal disputes, attributed to dissatisfaction with internal party politics. Since its formation, SWAPO has experienced internal disputes for various reasons. Party members have taken the party to court, and some have left the party to form their own political parties. This trend has birthed many political parties, like the Congress of Democracy (CoD), Rally for Democracy (RDP), All Peoples Party (APP), NEFF, AR, LPM and the Independent Patriot for Change (IPC).

The formation of these political parties has undermined SWAPO's electoral dominance in recent years. The former liberation movement lost two regions in the south of the country to the LPM, and it has also lost the two major municipalities of Walvis Bay and Windhoek to opposition parties, with former members of the party playing an instrumental role in these defeats.

SWAPO leadership succession issues also led to legal disputes in 2024. It is alleged that SWAPO acted illegally within its constitution when the party failed to call for an Extraordinary Congress in terms of Article 15(9), "which provide that an extraordinary congress shall be called by the central committee within three months of the vacancy occurring, to elect a new president to complete the unexpired terms of the former president" (The Namibian 2024), following the death of the party president, Dr. Hage Geingob, in February 2024. Instead, the party postponed the Extraordinary Congress to 2025. The failure to act according to its constitution has been questioned by Reinhold Shipwikeneni and others (New Era 2024). The issue has left party members divided on the legitimacy of Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah as SWAPO presidential candidate, although reelection as Vice President of SWAPO in 2022 virtually guaranteed her candidacy.

At least seven political parties faced internal fighting in 2024 because of their alleged failure to follow or obey their own rules or alleged unconstitutional processes for electing leaders. Political parties such as SWAPO, IPC, RDP, SWANU, NUDO, PDM, RP, NEFF and Christian Democratic Voice Party (CDV), all faced leadership or legal disputes (See Figure 1 below). This led to political parties going to the polls heavily divided, which might have affected their electoral performance.

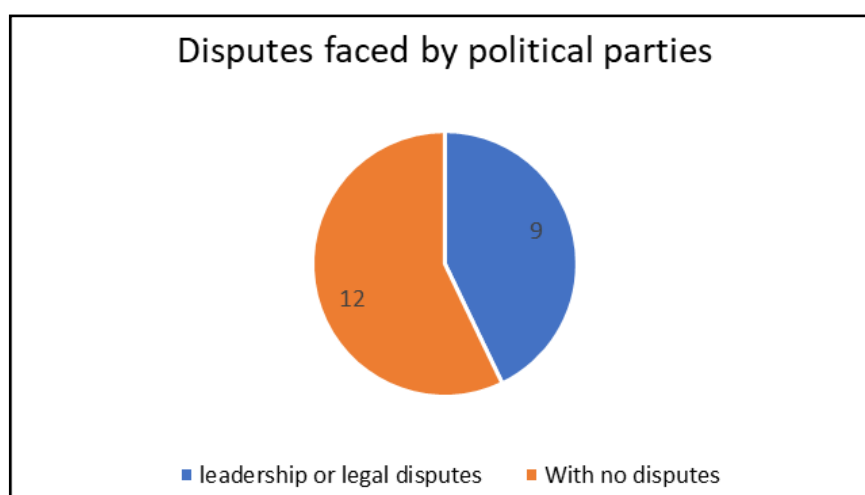


Figure 1: Disputes faced by political parties

An illustration of parties that faced internal challenges, due to issues such as congress-related disputes, legal battles, Leadership conflicts, and deregistration concerns. It highlights the prevalence and distribution of these issues among various political parties, offering insights into the dynamics and stability of Namibia's political landscape. This underscores the factors that may hamper a party from meaningfully participating in the elections to its full potential and achieve maximum support. (Source: Authors' own compilation)

In the past, delays in calling a congress have fueled internal tensions, as opposing factions accuse each other of trying to manipulate the process to retain or gain power. These internal challenges have occasionally led to the emergence of splinter groups or rival factions, which impact the party's cohesion and public image.

Opposition parties such as PDM, SWANU, the National Unity Democratic Organisation of Namibia (NUDO) and RDP also often have disputes around succession planning. Incumbent leaders may face challenges from emerging figures who advocate for a shift in policies or generational change, leading to public disagreements and factionalism. In some cases, these leadership battles result in splinter groups forming, as those who lose leadership contests choose to leave the party and form breakaway movements. Such internal conflicts can weaken parties, reduce voter confidence, and create difficulties in presenting a unified front during national elections. For instance, leading up to the 2024 elections, a faction within the NUDO, led by former sports administrator Barry Rukoro, joined forces with SWANU, a move which possibly weakened the NUDO.

3. Media analysis

The media play a critical role in informing the public about political candidates, policies, and the electoral process through effective and inclusive coverage. Media coverage on election issues influences the public's perceptions and subsequent voting behaviour because it is the link by which people learn about what is at stake. Media plays a very important role in a democratic country as it reshapes societies by spreading information to the electorate (Imran and Masood 2020). In a democratic country like Namibia, access to information is therefore a right.

In addition, media coverage serves as a watchdog, holding candidates accountable for their statements and actions. Investigative reporting can expose corruption, misconduct, or inconsistencies in a candidate's campaign, helping to maintain the integrity of the electoral process. Social media platforms have further amplified the impact of media coverage, allowing for real-time dissemination of information and wider public engagement. However, with the rise of misinformation, the media's role in fact-checking and providing accurate, unbiased content has become even more crucial to preserving the integrity of elections.

Media coverage is a powerful tool during elections, particularly for voter education and election campaign coverage, as it focuses on the parties' and candidates' manifestos. Political parties and candidates acknowledge the importance of media coverage during an election year, because it is a tool by which they sell their ideas and policies to the electorate, with the hope of being voted for in power. In 2019, the World Press Freedom Index declared Namibia to be the African country with the greatest press freedom as (Reporters Without Borders 2019, as cited by Keulder 2020). However, the question is whether the media are inclusive in their coverage on issues affecting young people, women, and people living with disabilities, especially during an important election year.

3.1. Media coverage of different political parties

The media serves as an important source of information on daily issues for most citizens (Zoizner et al. 2017, as cited by Remoortere 2023). It is the vehicle of information usually meant for particular demographics. Politicians and political parties compete with each other for votes, and their popularity translates their ideas and policies into power. While the competition for power takes place in the political arena, the media plays a big role. The media can be a tool used to shape a certain narrative, as the electorates are influenced by what they see in the media. Coverage of social issues, such as corruption, bad governance, and poor service delivery, along with the tonality of media coverage regarding political parties, affect individuals' voting preference.

In a democratic society, the elections are expected to be free and fair. This principle means all political parties should have a level playing field in terms of spreading their ideas to the public. If the ruling party receives more media attention, the elections will not be deemed to have been free and fair. According to Sheaffer (2001) and (Strömbäck (2008), as cited by Remoortere (2023), studies show that citizens tend to vote for candidates they are familiar with through media exposure, because the exposure helps politicians build a public reputation, communicate policy, and engage with the electorate. Figure 2 illustrates newspaper coverage of three of the most prominent parties in the 2024 elections.

Political parties' media visibility therefore significantly affects public opinion and, by extension, politicians' popularity. However, not all politicians receive equal attention, as the media often favour those in influential positions or with incumbency advantages. This can be attributed to the fact that some media houses get funding from the government and could be forced to promote the ruling party's policies and work. In such cases, the media no longer operate as the fourth estate in that they are not independent entities but tools of the ruling

elites and those who fund them.

The 2024 Media Ombudsman Report noted that the ruling party, SWAPO, received more media coverage than other political parties. More media coverage for the ruling party in comparison to other parties gives SWAPO more visibility and a greater platform to promote its ideas, policies, and programmes, as well as its presidential candidate (De Swert and Van Aelst 2009, as cited by Remoortere (2023). In SWAPO's case, enhanced media visibility may be due to its status as the ruling party, which accords it greater media access to and influence on public opinion compared to opposition parties. This visibility may contribute to SWAPO's sustained political support, as media exposure consistently affects voters' perceptions and reinforces political dominance.

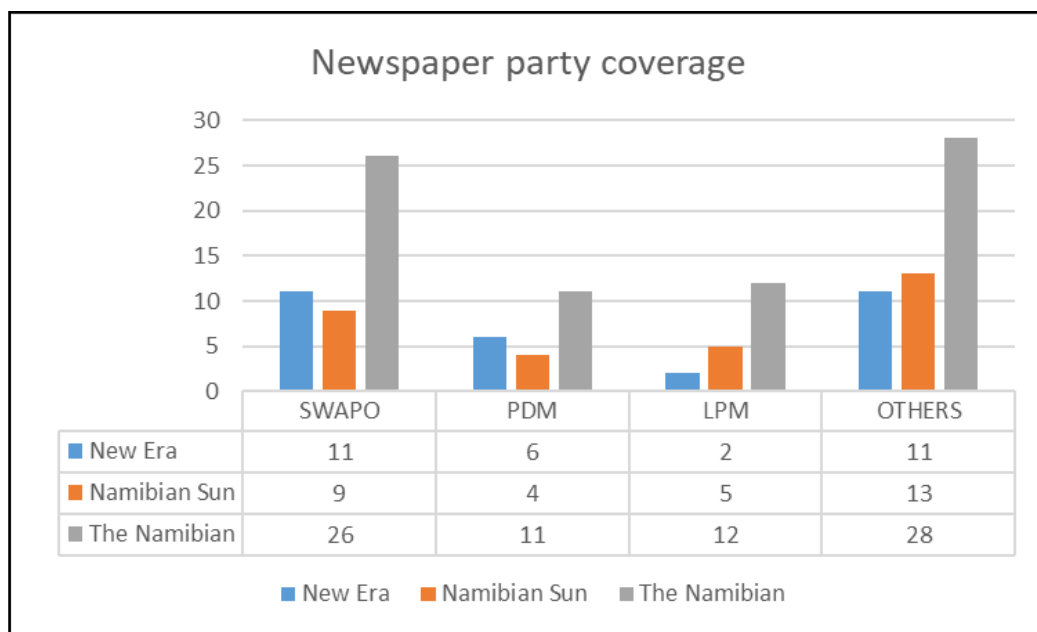


Figure 2: Newspaper party coverage

The chart shows that SWAPO got more media attention for the month of October 2024 compared to other parties.

(Source: Authors' own compilation)

3.2. Media coverage of election issues pertaining to the youth, women, and people with disabilities

The Namibian 2024 elections, which took place on 27, 29 and 30 November 2024, saw a high turnout of registered voters. The country has been experiencing socio-economic issues for several years, which might have been the catalyst for 90% of 1.6 million eligible voters to turn out. A large section of Namibian society that have particularly suffered hardship, including young people, women, and people living with disabilities, registered to vote. The distribution of registered voters among these groups is illustrated in Figure 3, and media coverage of issues pertaining to these groups is shown in Figure 4.

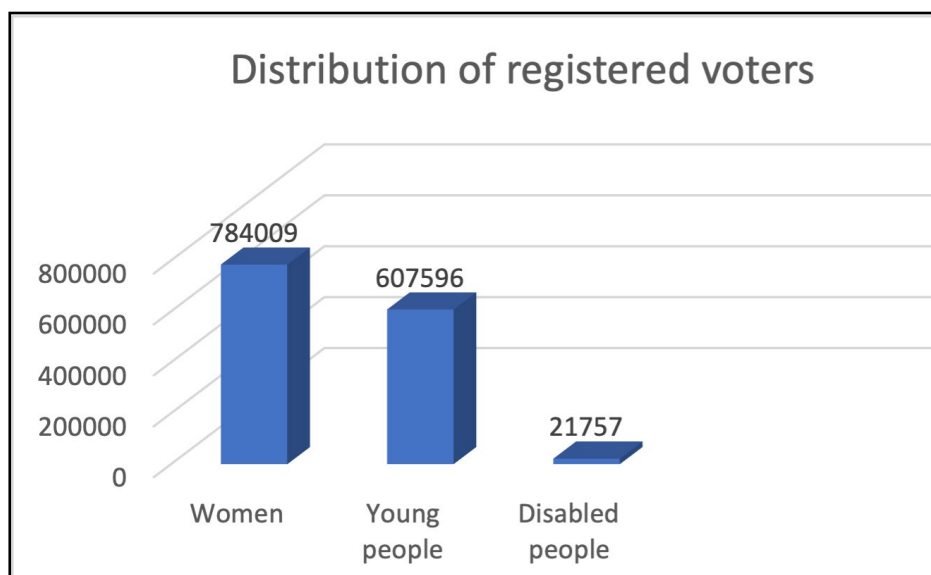


Figure 3: Distribution of registered voters

An illustration of the proportion of young people, women and people with disabilities, who are registered to vote in the upcoming elections, highlighting the engagement levels of this key demographic group in the electoral process. There is potential of double or tripling counting, as ECN did not aggregate the data accordingly. (Source: ECN social media page. Graph authors' own compilation)

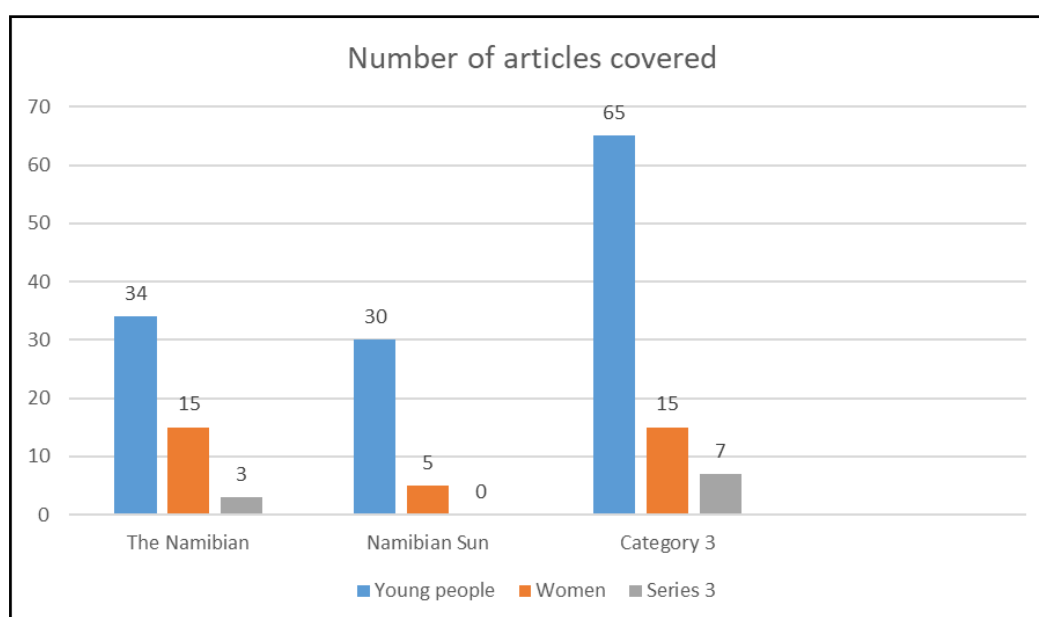


Figure 4: Number of newspaper articles covering specific categories of voters

This bar graph gives a graphical representation of how different newspapers covered issues pertaining to specific categories of voters. (Data for November not included.) (Source: Authors' own compilation).

3.3. Issues concerning young people

Recently, young people in Namibia have been at the receiving end of political incompetence and mismanagement of state resources. Politics is about numbers and young people have the numbers to single-handedly change the political trajectory of Namibia by exercising their democratic rights. An important pillar of democracy is the media, as they inform the voting-age electorate of issues the country is facing, and the policies different political parties are likely to employ in solving those issues, once given the mandate to rule.

Overall, the media outlets have covered issues affecting young people fairly. Articles printed in The Namibian, New Era and Namibian Sun focused mostly on issues such as unemployment among young people, youth empowerment, and youth involvement in politics, among other things. However, while local media outlets in Namibia do cover these issues, there is a general consensus in society that more

effort should be made to ensure that the youth are fully engaged in the electoral process, and to address the barriers they face to political participation. As a source of information, the media houses can play a big role in ensuring that young people are well informed ahead of elections, and that voter apathy among them is addressed.

3.4. *Issues concerning women*

Namibia is a patriarchal society that pushes women to the margins. However, over the years the country has made strides in addressing issues affecting women. Despite this, more effort is desired from the government to improve and elevate the position of women in society. The media coverage of women's issues mostly focuses on their leadership skills and personal attributes, which reinforce gender stereotypes rather than highlighting their political platforms and policy positions on key issues.

Discussions around gender-based violence (GBV), access to education, healthcare, and economic empowerment become secondary issues. This is despite activist groups leveraging the election period to demand policy changes and accountability from political leaders. Rural women's voices and perspectives from marginalised communities are often underrepresented, with coverage skewed towards urban narratives. Additionally, while social media have become a critical platform for amplifying women's issues, traditional media sometimes fail to adequately address systemic challenges faced by women.

Many women face challenges as heads of the home, providing for the family, and battling gender related violence. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) revealed that at least 32% of Namibian women have experienced physical violence from an intimate partner at some point in their lives (Gotlieb 2023). This social ill has the potential to undermine women's prospects and slow down government efforts to ensure an equal society. Media reporting during this period on the real impact of political decisions on women's lives would ensure more equitable and substantive discussions around these issues.

3.5. *Issues affecting people with disabilities*

People with disabilities have been ignored by society for a long time. Unsurprisingly, the media have therefore turned a blind eye, too. During the election year, the media were supposed to cover issues affecting different sections of society. However, people with disabilities have been consistently sidelined. Advocacy organisations, such as the National Federation of People with Disabilities in Namibia (NFPDN), have highlighted systematic barriers faced by persons with disabilities in accessing public institutions and in meaningfully participating in all sectors of society. While some media outlets report on commitments by political parties to address the inclusion of the disabled, coverage often lacks depth and sustained attention beyond campaign promises.

People with disabilities do not only face challenges from being excluded by the media, but political parties are also not inclusive. People with disabilities, or differently abled people, have limited resources at their disposal in making informed decisions ahead of elections. Many often must rely on secondary sources of information, as, for example, party manifestos are usually not available to people who are visually impaired, and political rallies do not take the hearing impaired into consideration. Only SWAPO went to the trouble of translating its manifesto into Braille, which "marks the first time ever in the country, that an election manifesto of any political party has been made available to people with visual impairments" (Hamalwa 2024). Other parties claimed that they did not have the funds to make their manifestos inclusive.

4. Discussion

In 2024, the political ground was very fertile for opposition parties to inflict electoral defeat on the ruling party. Several issues, such as unemployment among young people, the high cost of living, lack of service delivery (especially land and housing), limited economic opportunities, and pervasive gender-based violence (GBV), were considered likely to influence the outcome of Namibia's 2024 general elections.

However, as an information vehicle, the three major daily newspapers failed to adequately cover the issues affecting young people, women, and people with disabilities. The lack of coverage meant that this large demographic went to the polls arguably not well informed about issues facing the country. This fact likely affected meaningful democratic participation.

4.1. *Election day*

The Public Holidays Act, 1990, Section 1 (3), empowered the President to declare the day of the elections as a public holiday. President Nangolo Mbumba, Namibia's fourth president, signed a gazette and declared 27 November 2024 a public holiday for the purposes of the election of the President and Members of National Assembly under the Electoral Act, 2014 (Petersen 2024). According to the announcement, the polls were expected to open at 07h00 and close at 21h00.

On voting day, many registered voters across the country turned up to cast their votes. However, their expectations were disappointed as they were forced to endure long queues because of technical problems experienced by the ECN. Furthermore, some polling stations experienced ballot shortages despite the ECN printing extra ballot papers, and some polling stations opened late in the afternoon on the day of the elections (Ndeyanale et al. 2024). Critics accused the ECN of deliberately frustrating voters. NEFF second in command Kalimbo Ipumbu threatened "to burn down that ECN because of what he saw as a poorly organised election, adding that Namibians "cannot tolerate that nonsense" (Ndeyanale et al. 2024). The challenges experienced on 27 November 2024 resulted in President Mbumba extending the voting period to 29 and 30 November at selected polling stations, to give registered voters who did not manage to vote on 27 November a further opportunity to do so.

4.2. *Election results*

The 2024 Namibian general elections marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape. The ruling party retained power but with a significantly reduced majority, the worst electoral performance since independence. SWAPO Party presidential candidate Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah made history by becoming Namibia's first female president. Nandi-Ndaitwah secured 57.3% of the votes, slightly more than the 56% of President Hage Geingob in the 2019 elections. Despite her historic victory, SWAPO lost 12 seats in the National Assembly and secured only 51 seats overall (Shipale 2024).

The opposition underwent major transformation as well, as the PDM, which had been the second most popular party in the 2019 elections, was left licking its wounds as well. The party held 16 seats in the National Assembly but only managed to retain 5 seats after the recent (2024) elections. In contrast, IPC managed to secure 20 parliamentary seats, becoming the official opposition party (Shipale 2024). The general mood around the elections suggested an appetite for political change, with analysts predicting that if the ruling party does not change its approach to "bread and butter" issues affecting the electorate, the party could lose power in the 2029 elections.

4.3. *Legal challenge*

Following the closely contested and controversial elections of November 2024 and the decision of President Mbumba to extend the voting period, the IPC and the LPM approached the Electoral and Supreme Courts to have the National Assembly and Presidential elections nullified. The parties challenged the validity and constitutionality of President Mbumba's decision to extend voting by two days beyond the gazetted election date of 27 November 2024. In addition, the applicants claimed that technical errors, logistical issues and shortages of ballot papers led to voter suppression, violating the rights of individuals (Nashuuta 2025).

IPC President Dr. Panduleni Itula, the first applicant in the matter argued that "the election contravened Part 5 of the Electoral Act and the Namibian Constitution; it was tainted by serious illegalities; the verification tablets used were not authorised under the Act; ineligible voters were permitted to cast ballots; and Proclamation 34 of 2024 which extended the voting period was unlawful" (Namibia Superior Courts 2025).

The IPC and LPM legal challenge culminated in a Supreme Court decision to unanimously rule in favour of the defendants. A full bench of Supreme Court Judges, led by Chief Justice Peter Shivute, concluded that the presidential proclamation to extend voting was lawful as extension did not amount to establishing new polling dates and a new election, but was a continuation and completion of the election (Agence France Presse 2025).

The court ruling underscored the judiciary's role in upholding the rule of law, ensuring that the elections are conducted constitutionally. Despite the magnitude of the ruling, Namibians again lived up to their mantra of being peaceful as no confrontation or conflict was observed because of the court decision. Nevertheless, the ruling could set a precedent for future elections, should similar issues arise, as, unless there are mitigating circumstances, the same judgement will apply. The ruling could also negatively affect political parties' confidence in the judiciary system.

As a result of the ruling, several people called for the reform of Electoral Act No 5 to allow all election cases to be heard in the same court. At present, Section 168 of the Electoral Court Act of 2014 specifies that the Electoral Court hears any challenge mounted by a political party against the National Assembly elections, while, in terms of Articles 79 and 81 of the Namibian Constitution, the Supreme Court handles Presidential election challenges (NamibLII 2025). Legal analyst Yaruokekuro Ndorokaze proposes an amendment to the Electoral Act to ensure that all election-related disputes, whether presidential or parliamentary, are adjudicated in a single forum (Seibeb

2025). This is because the disputes regarding both the National Assembly election and the Presidential election were heard in separate courts despite being conducted on the same day, which can cause a ‘legal conundrum’ if the courts should pass different judgments.

To avoid this, “the Electoral Court has ordered that the Independent Patriots for Change’s legal challenge of Namibia’s 2024 National Assembly election should not proceed until the Supreme Court has decided a similar case about the 2024 presidential election” (Menges 2025). Judge Hannelie Prinsloo, judges Orben Sibeya and Esi Schimming-Chase noted “that the Supreme Court’s decision on the legality of the proclamation would provide guidance to the Electoral Court and limit issues that would need to be decided in the IPC’s National Assembly election challenge” (Menges 2025).

Namibia’s 2024 general elections were marked by a host of challenges. The logistical shortcomings that the ECN experienced have eroded public trust. It will need to prove its ability to host free and fair elections by addressing the challenges of long queues, shortages of ballot papers and technical difficulties in future. It is essential that confidence is restored in the ECN to ensure the electoral integrity of future elections.

5. Conclusion

Despite young people, women, and people with disabilities being the largest registered demographic, and also the demographic facing some of the greatest challenges, their issues are underreported in the media. The media are the voice and ear of the public and without media coverage the public will be poorly informed, and their decision-making compromised ahead of an election. When a certain section of society is systematically excluded from politics, its problems become difficult to address. The lack of representation in the media perpetuates the marginalisation of these groups and undermines efforts to achieve equitable participation in Namibia’s democratic processes.

Media houses should develop an approach of covering diverse perspectives to ensure fair coverage of marginalised groups. For example, the media should actively commit to inclusive reporting by adopting editorial guidelines that prioritise stories addressing the needs and voices of young people, women, and people with disabilities. Training journalists on gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive reporting could enhance their capacity to produce balanced coverage and reporting. Furthermore, collaboration with advocacy organisations holds the potential to provide media professionals with insights into the pressing issues these communities face.

In conclusion, the 2024 Namibian election cycle was defined by a complex interplay of factors, including the presence of a large population of young unemployed people, women, and people with disabilities. Despite the challenges facing Namibians, the elections represented an opportunity for political renewal, where both established parties and emerging opposition groups had to confront the growing dissatisfaction among voters and to find ways to unite the nation around practical solutions to its pressing problems. In 2024, Namibia stood at a crossroads, where the choices made by its political leaders determined the path forward for the nation’s future. One trusts that, in the end, politicians will consider the hopes and aspirations of the electorate, and address problems, such as the catastrophic unemployment facing young people, as well as acute poverty and high inequality, in fact, all the challenges and social ills threatening the peace and stability of the “Namibian House”. This is what the Namibian people deserve.

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