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## **The Perils and Complexity of Democratic Values in Namibia**

*By Bill Lindeke*

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### **1. Introduction**

Namibia has been unique in its transition to democracy. This is illustrated in the formal role of the international community during the transition and in the expression of democratic values and practices measured by international indices including the Afrobarometer surveys. Looking specifically at the Afrobarometer data, the values of Namibians revealed in the surveys generally correspond to those of other surveyed countries. However, Namibia is an “outlier”, with responses on certain key questions differing greatly from the responses of other countries. Based on the 2012 Afrobarometer survey, Namibians perceive a significant extent of democracy in the country and have expressed a high satisfaction with the democracy they experience. Yet, Namibians appear to have a weak demand for democracy. In 2002 this uniqueness led Keulder and Wiese (2005) to proclaim Namibia a “democracy without democrats” because the supply of democracy by the government and the ruling party far exceeded the demand for democracy expressed by Namibians.

In subsequent Afrobarometer surveys over the past decade, Namibia has regressed somewhat toward the mean results of survey countries, as satisfaction with democracy has declined, while demand has increased from the 2003 low-point. Nonetheless, Namibia continues to be at, or near, the bottom when it comes to citizens’ preference for democracy, especially when compared to other high performing African democracies. The low levels of support for democracy in Namibia continue to be surprising given the country’s stable multi-party system and high democratic ranking. Once again in Round 5 of the Afrobarometer survey (2012), the Namibian political system seems to deliver more democracy than the population seems to demand. This continuing puzzle requires deeper analysis. The following explores the greater complexity of Namibians’ democratic values and democratic practices evidenced in the latest Afrobarometer survey.

### **2. Afrobarometer Surveys**

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, evaluations of the quality of governance, and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The Afrobarometer’s main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa, while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research and research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as four rounds of surveys have been held from 1999 to 2008, and Round 5 is currently being completed.

During Round 5, Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in 35 African countries using a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries over time. The methodology was based on a national probability sample of 1200 adult Namibians selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a sampling margin of error of +/- 3% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions, gender as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Namibian citizen had an equal and transparent chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Namibia was conducted by Survey Warehouse and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), between 19 November 2012 and 18 December 2012.

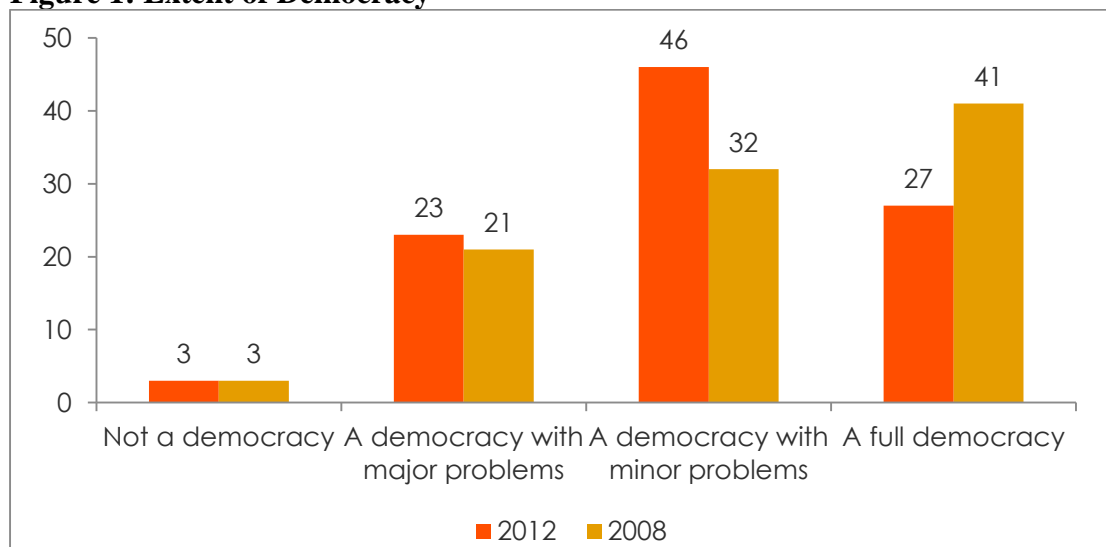
### 3. View of Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is primarily signified by a high level of supply and demand for democracy in any given country. The supply side of democracy is measured by responses to questions on the extent of democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and the quality of elections. Namibia ranks high among the Afrobarometer countries on these questions, as it does in other surveys and indices.

On the supply side of democracy, Namibians continue to feel they are well served under the current dispensation:

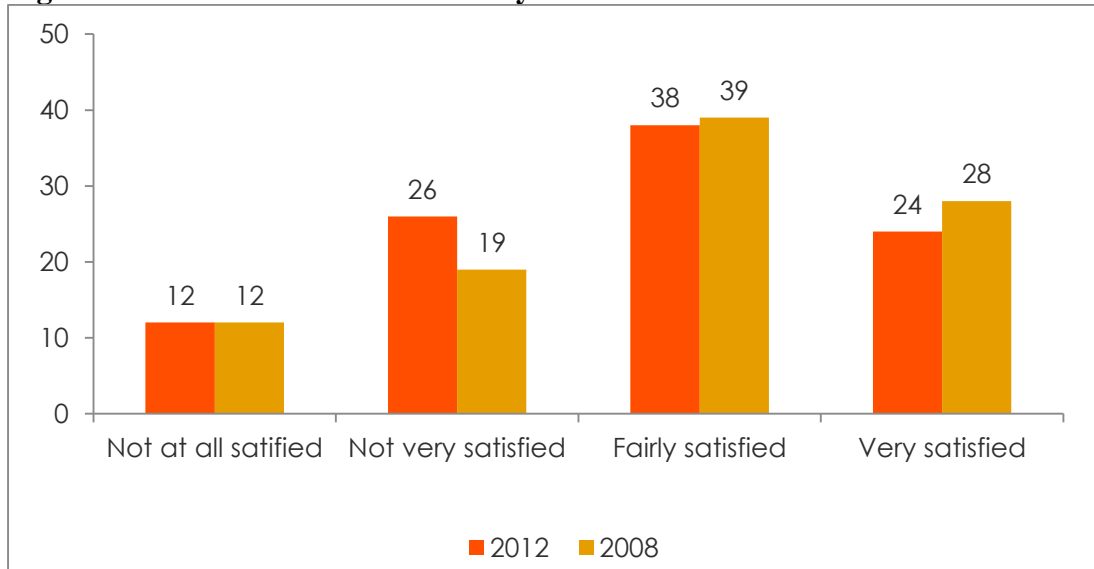
- 73% of respondents think that Namibia is a “full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems” (Figure 1). This is equal to results from the 2008 survey, but the proportion of Namibians who believe that the country is a full democracy has declined 14%.
- 62% say they are “fairly” or “very” satisfied with Namibia’s democracy (Figure 2). In 2008, the same response category registered a slightly higher rating at 67%.
- 75% of respondents report that the 2009 elections were completely free and fair or free and fair with minor problems (Figure 3).
- 71% say the country is moving in the right direction.

**Figure 1: Extent of Democracy**



*Question: In your opinion how much of a democracy is Namibia today?*

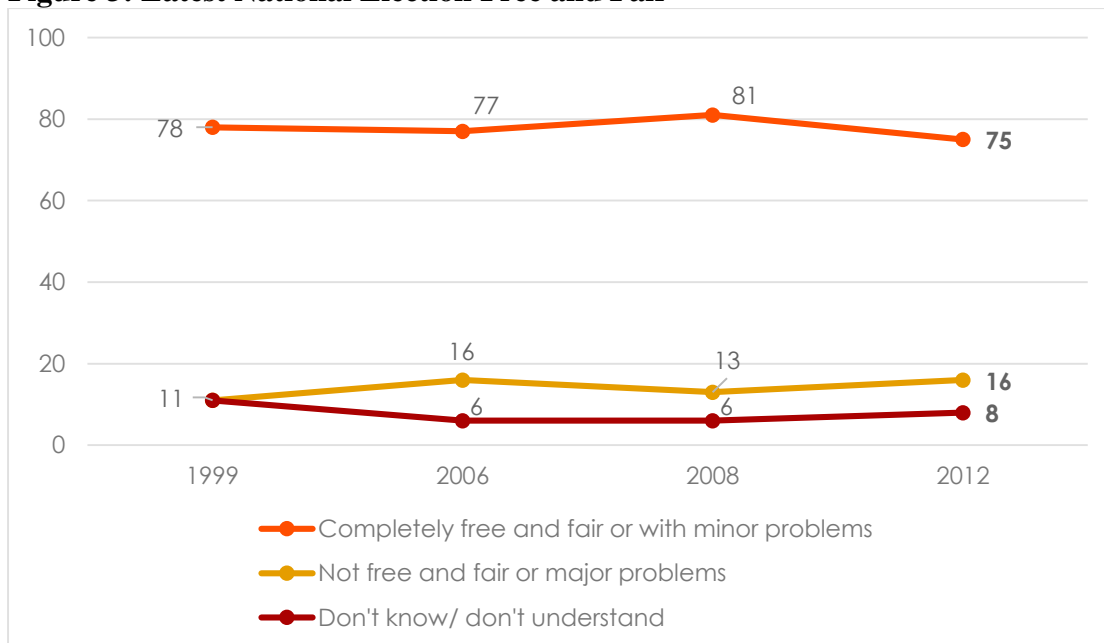
**Figure 2: Satisfaction with Democracy**



*Question: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Namibia?*

An important measure of the supply of democracy, according to political scientists, is regular elections which are and are perceived as a free and fair reflection of the wishes of the voters. Continuity in such elections over time helps in the consolidation of democratic values and practices. The public’s expectations that their consent is necessary for government legitimacy becomes reinforced. Namibians value elections as an essential part of democracy since the 1989 independence elections and have seen their elections as being free and fair in all the Afrobarometer surveys as shown in Figure 3. Some dissatisfaction and a court challenge to the 2009 national elections was reflected in the slight decline in the election judgment by respondents; however, the perception of good election quality remains intact. The supply of electoral democracy is well established in the public’s view.

**Figure 3: Latest National Election Free and Fair**

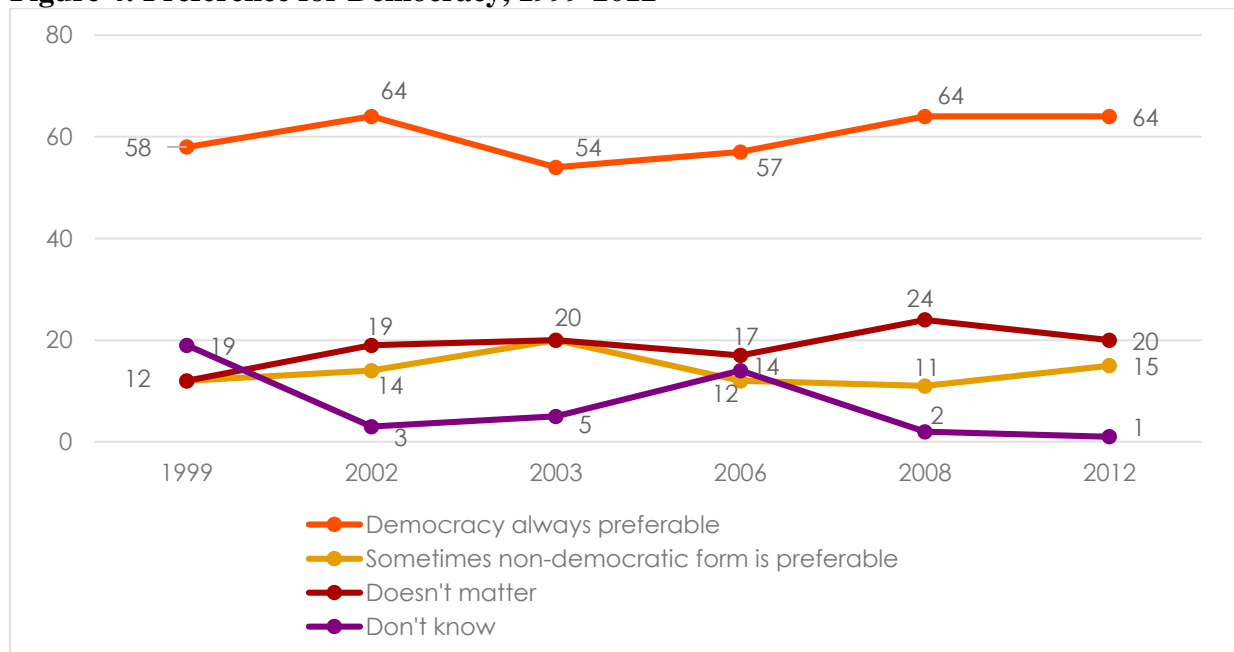


*Question: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election?*

The responses to demand side questions are the most puzzling in Namibia. The decisive question on the Afrobarometer survey asks if democracy is “always preferable” for governing Namibia. A fairly consistent majority (54%-64%) have agreed with this statement over the past decade. However, a sizable minority of Namibians say that it does not make any difference or sometimes an alternative to democracy might be needed. In 2012, as Figure 4 shows, 64% of the respondents “always prefer democracy” as the desired political system. Relatively few (15%) reported that sometimes non-democratic government can be preferable and 20% said it does not matter. These numbers are little changed from the 2008 survey and show a fairly consistent level since 1999.

Compared to respondents in other survey countries, Namibians do not have a strong preference for democracy registered on this question. Although the majority favours democracy, Namibia's preference rates have always been among the lowest in Afrobarometer countries. Namibia places 19<sup>th</sup> among the first 22 countries out of the 35 to complete their reporting. This is not the expected placement of a country that usually is found at the top tier of African governance indexes.

**Figure 4: Preference for Democracy, 1999-2012**



*Question: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?*

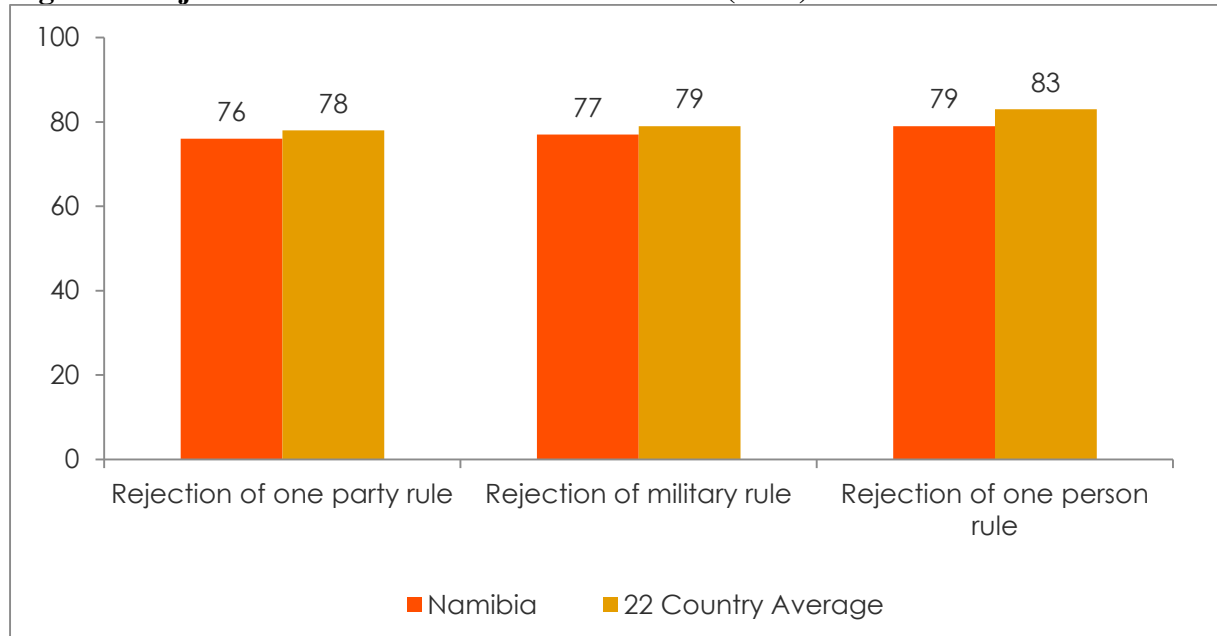
*Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.*

*Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.*

*Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.*

In addition to queries on citizens' preference for democracy, respondents were asked about the common alternatives to democracy in Africa. The main alternatives are a one-party state, military rule, and personal rule. Namibians in past surveys rejected these alternatives, but in smaller proportion than other countries in the Afrobarometer survey. In 2012, Namibian citizens increased their rejection of these non-democratic forms up to or above the twenty country average level (70%) in 2008. Figure 5 shows the proportion of Namibians that rejects three non-democratic types of government in 2012. Each of these results is higher than in past surveys, and maintains Namibia's trend toward the mean for survey countries. It also records the highest rejection of authoritarianism.

**Figure 5: Rejection of Non-Democratic Alternatives (2012)**



*Question: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: (1) Only one party is allowed to stand for election and hold office? (2) The army comes in to govern the country? (3) Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything? (% who say they “strongly disapprove” or “disapprove”)*

Namibia has similar levels of rejection for non-democratic alternatives as most of its peers among the top democratic performers and among the 22 countries that have released Round 5 results.

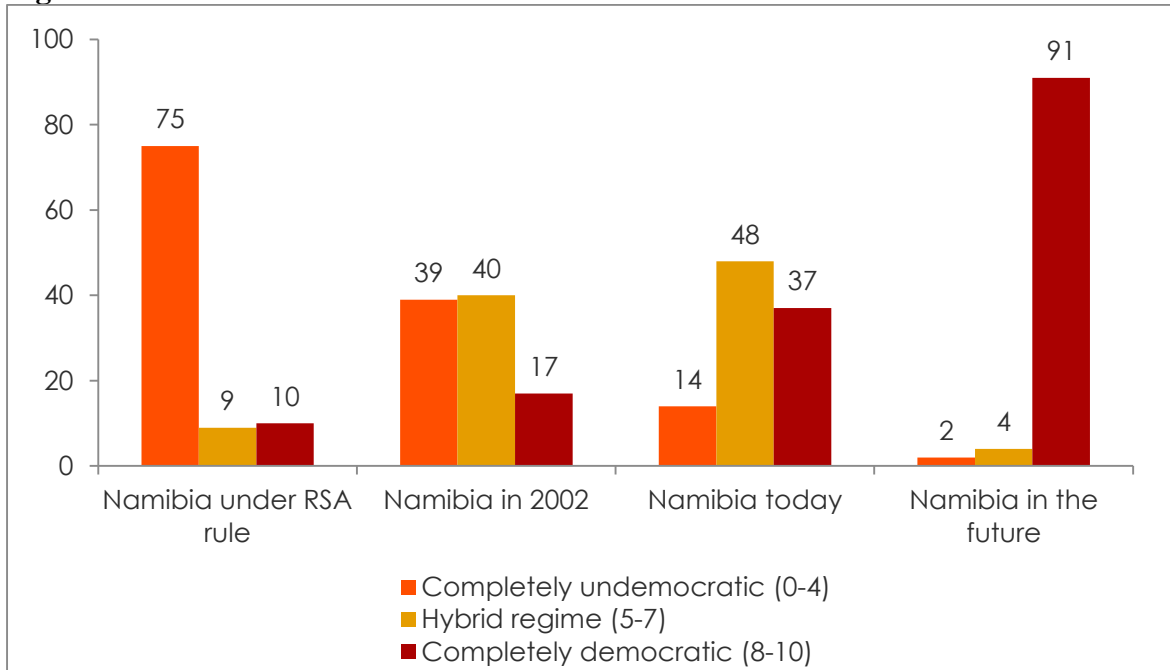
In sum, the demand for democracy, according to the preference question, remains fairly low for Namibia, but a closer examination of democratic values and expectations might add depth to the analysis.

#### **4. Namibians’ Belief in Democracy**

While demand for democracy remains relatively weak, when it comes to future projections, Namibians have repeatedly indicated support for a democratic future. In Round 3 (2006), 63% of Namibian respondents indicated that it was “likely” or “very likely” that the country would remain democratic, which is a higher figure than that of Botswana. Again in Round 5 (2012), the Afrobarometer survey asked respondents to rate levels of democracy in their countries and others. Figure 6 shows Namibians’ measure of their democracy over time on a ten point scale (0 low and 10 high). It exemplifies a strong expectation for Namibia’s democracy to strengthen in the future and also indicates an optimistic view of current democratic conditions compared to those of the past.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This reflects the orderly transition from the founding president to his successors in government and in the ruling party.

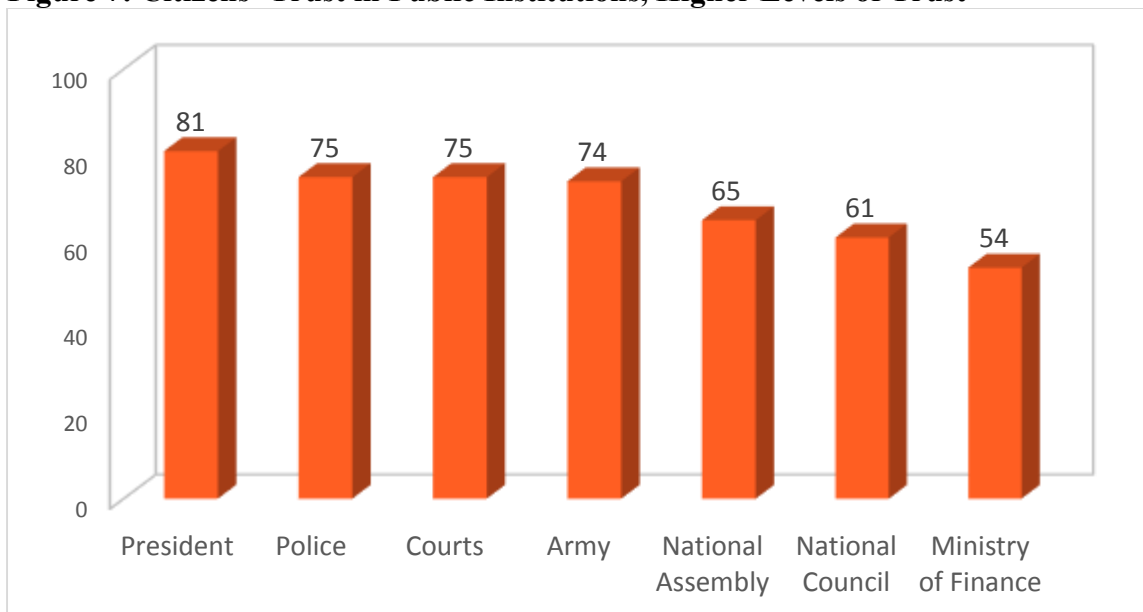
**Figure 6: How Democratic is Namibia?**



*Question: On a scale between 0 and 10, where 0 means completely undemocratic and 10 means completely democratic, where would you place each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Categories are grouped and noted on the figure.)*

In addition to elections being seen as free and fair and an optimistic view of the country's supply of democracy, a large part of the democratic legitimacy in Namibia is underscored by the strong trust and performance evaluations of the major political and governmental bodies. Namibia often has been at or near the top of the tables when it comes to institutional evaluations, with both trust in and performance of national institutions at high levels. Figure 7 illustrates the 2012 results for trust in major national institutions.

**Figure 7: Citizens' Trust in Public Institutions, Higher Levels of Trust**



*Question: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" and "a lot")*

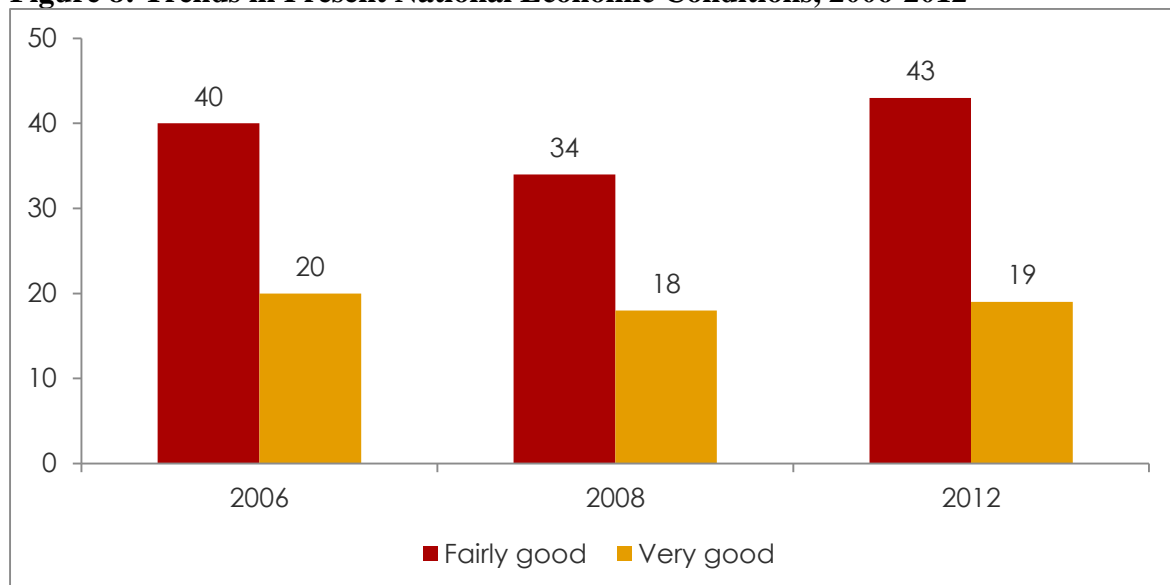
Beyond the national institutions, Namibians also support multi-party elections and the ruling political party (SWAPO):

- 79% say leaders should be chosen through regular, open and honest elections. This figure is up sharply from 57% in 2008.
- 72% of Namibians say that many parties are needed to give Namibians real choices. This figure is up sharply from 59% in 2008.
- 67% trust the ruling party (64% in 2008) and 32% trust the opposition parties (38% in 2008) “somewhat” or a “lot.”

It is clear from these results that the key electoral element of democratic, multi-party competition receives solid support, even as the ruling SWAPO Party entrenches a one-party dominant result in elections. Elections do matter to Namibians, but they are not the sole criterion for democracy.

Effective governance also enhances trust and consolidation of democracy over time.<sup>2</sup> The capacity of government to “deliver the goods” in terms of economic or material rewards often entrenches democratic values. While Namibians hold critical views of government’s efforts to deal with poverty, inequality, and unemployment, the percentages that approve of the government’s overall economic management are among the highest for any country in the Afrobarometer surveys completed thus far. This positive outlook on economic performance helps to reinforce the important instrumental side of democratic values in generating material benefits. Figure 8 shows the last three survey results, where Namibia consistently receives high positive responses.

**Figure 8: Trends in Present National Economic Conditions, 2006-2012**



*Question: In general, how would you describe the present economic conditions of this country?*

Confidence in elections and government performance are powerful support for democratic consolidation in Namibia. Namibians’ survey responses reinforce a strong sense of good government performance and optimism for a better future.

<sup>2</sup> Afrobarometer. “Namibians’ Trust and Approval of Performance in their National Government Remains Generally High.” Afrobarometer Press Release. 10 April 2013.

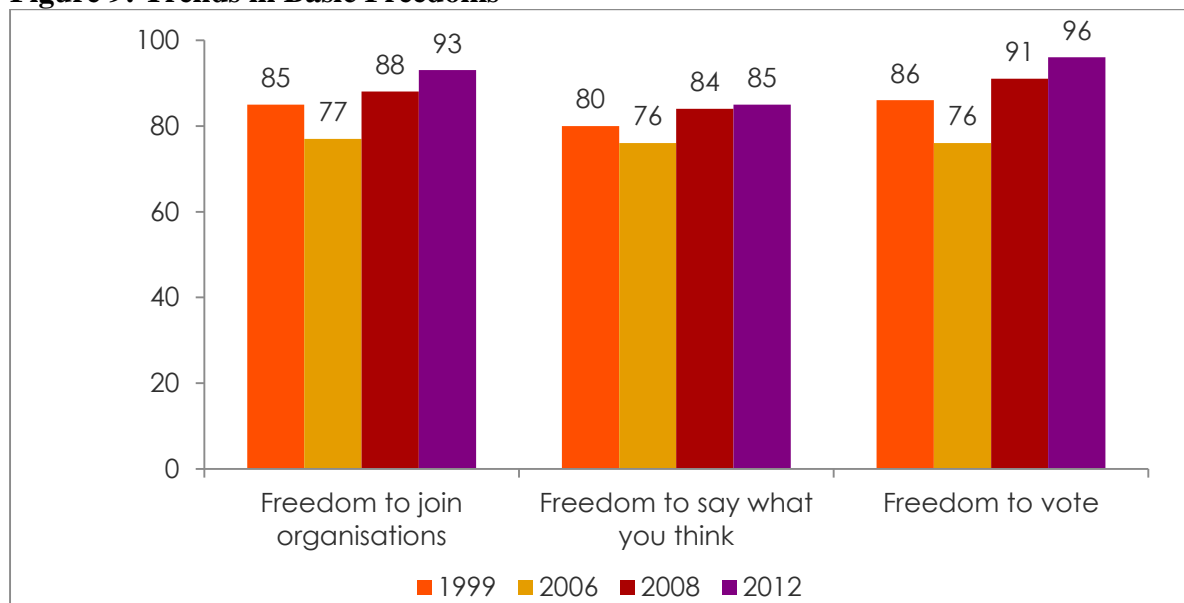
## 5. What Do Namibians Mean By “Democracy”?

Two different conceptions of democracy have been expressed by Namibians in the Afrobarometer surveys over the past twelve years. On the one hand, early rounds featured a “free choice” preference for civil liberties definitions, emphasising basic personal freedoms (speech, information and organisation). In 2000, 42% of respondents gave civil liberties as their first choice (compared to the Afrobarometer average of 30%) and again in 2006, 31% gave that answer (compared to the 29% Afrobarometer average). Personal and civil liberties are important values for Namibians as a basis of democratic life, and they do not seem to be at risk in Namibia twenty-three years after independence.

The second conception of democracy revolves around more instrumental elements of democracy in terms of material benefits such as employment and government assistance for those in need. As civil liberties have become more secure over time, the priority of economic goods becomes more important in the views of Namibians.

In earlier rounds of the Afrobarometer, civil liberties and personal freedoms were the most common responses to the “free choice” question of what democracy means. By 2012 such freedoms were well secured in the views of the vast majority of Namibians. Figure 9 shows the array of personal freedom responses strengthening over time, and Figure 10 shows the main problems facing the country with respect to political rights. Importantly, unemployment is clearly the country’s most important problem, while democratic rights do not feature at all as problems in Namibia. Personal freedoms of speech, group membership, and voting are seen as well secured by very large majorities in Namibia.

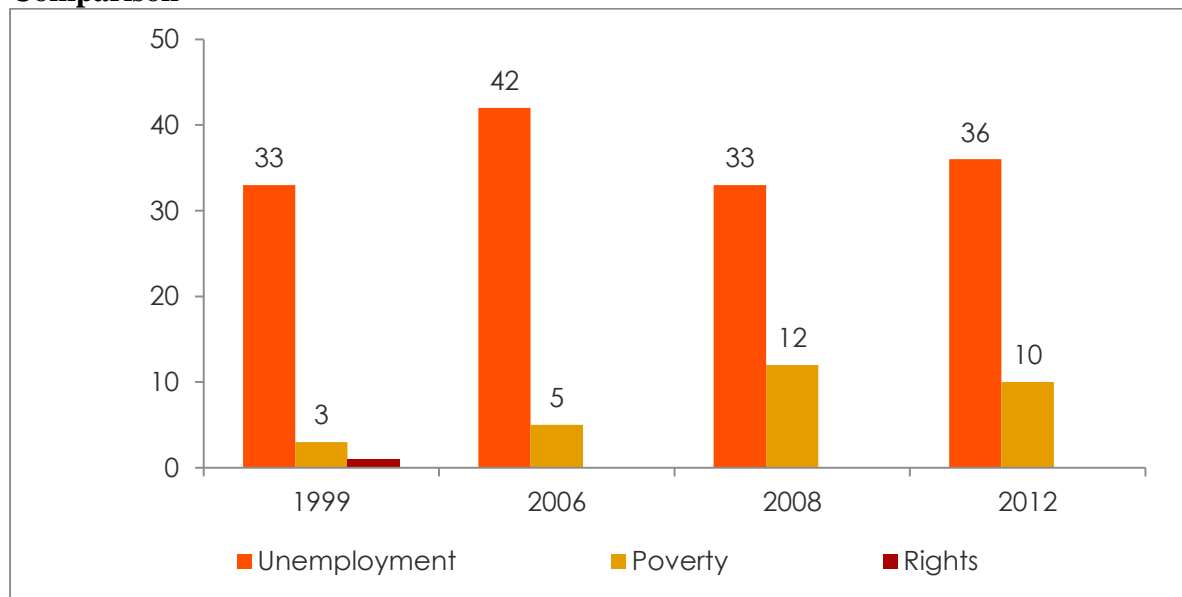
**Figure 9: Trends in Basic Freedoms**



*Question: In this country, how free are you: (1) to say what you think; (2) to join any political organization you want; (3) to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% who say “somewhat free” or “completely free.”)*



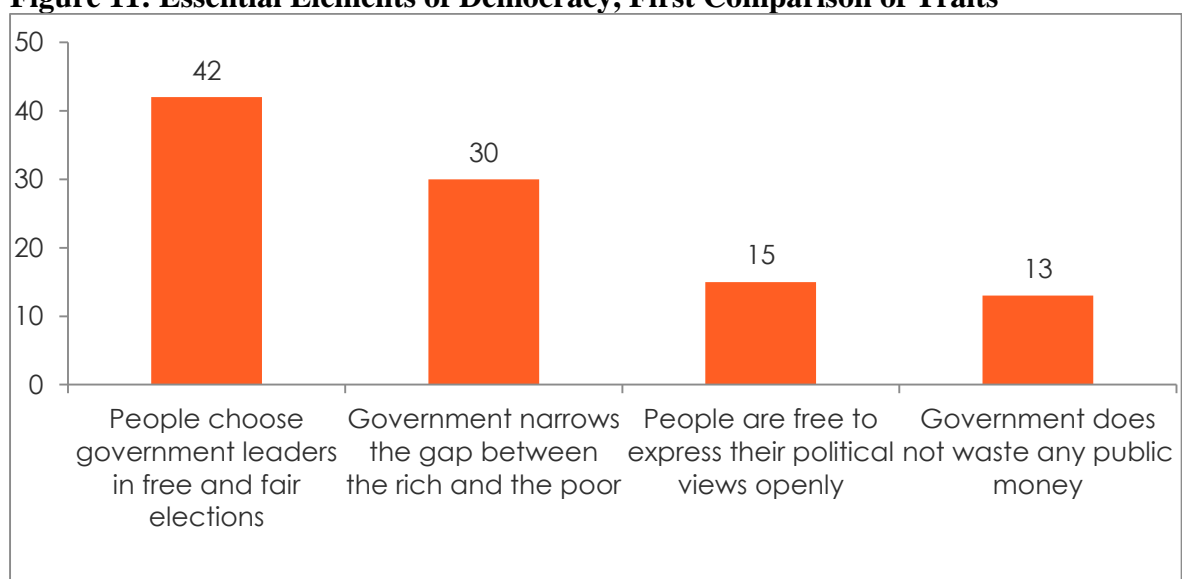
**Figure 10: Trends in Basic Freedoms as an Important Problem, First Response Comparison**



*Question: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (% who say that the problem is their first choice.)*

In 2012, as shown in Figures 11-14, the responses to four “forced choice” questions showed a generally stronger preference for instrumental dimensions of democracy than for procedural ones. In other words, Namibians identified delivering the goods – jobs and economic support for the population – as essential for democracy. However, political procedural issues such as elections also ranked highly among respondents as did anti-corruption. Differences between males and females were negligible and very few said they didn’t know, or indicated none of the choices. In other words, Namibians had opinions on these choices of essential characteristics of democracy. The following discusses the results for the comparison of potential democratic elements as expressed in four separate Afrobarometer questions.

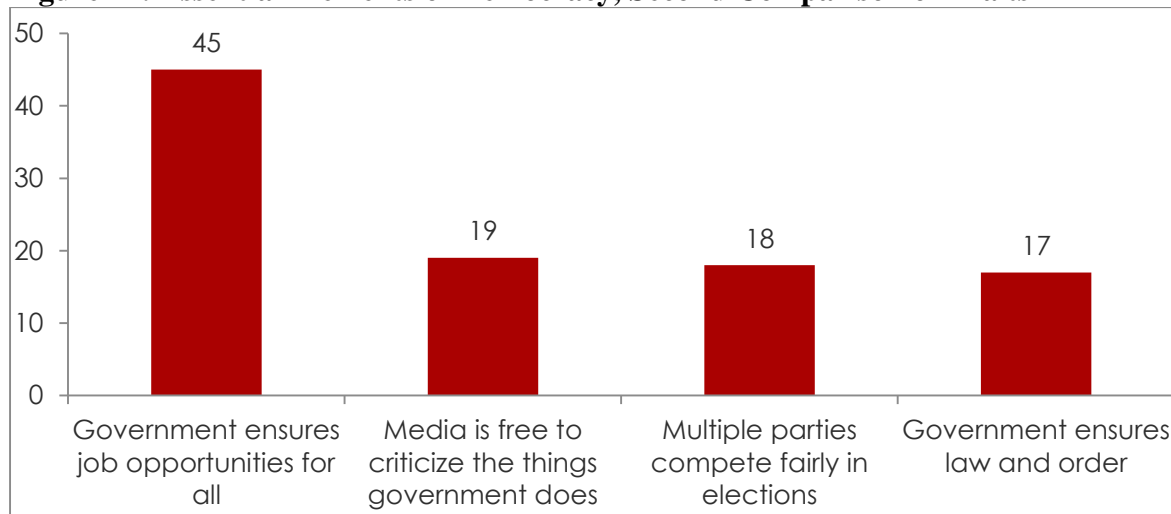
**Figure 11: Essential Elements of Democracy, First Comparison of Traits**



*Question: Many things may be desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. If you have to choose only one of the things that I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?*

In the first comparison of traits, 42% of Namibians believe that free and fair elections are essential for democracy (Figure 11). In addition to gender similarities, no particular differences were detected between urban and rural respondents' views.

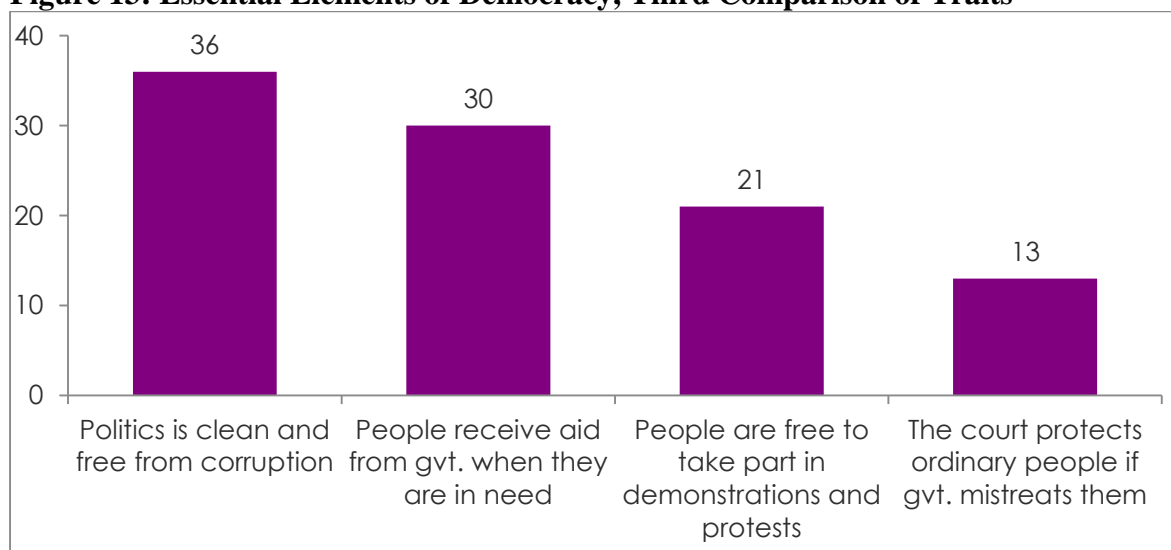
**Figure 12: Essential Elements of Democracy, Second Comparison of Traits**



*Question: And here is another list. Which one of these things would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?*

In the second comparison of traits, Namibia has the same strongest choice, “government ensures job opportunities for all”, but at a higher level than the average for the 22 countries that completed the Afrobarometer survey -- 45% of Namibians compared to 33% as the 22-country average. Further, 49% of rural voters in Namibia support the job opportunities option compared to only 40% of city dwellers. Urban respondents favoured media freedom on this question at 23% compared to the rural populations at 15%. Unemployment, as shown in Figure 10, has become the most important problem in Namibia, and this is generally similar to other Afrobarometer survey countries. In particular, respondents under 29 years old chose job opportunities as an essential characteristic of democracy, with 48% selecting it as most essential.

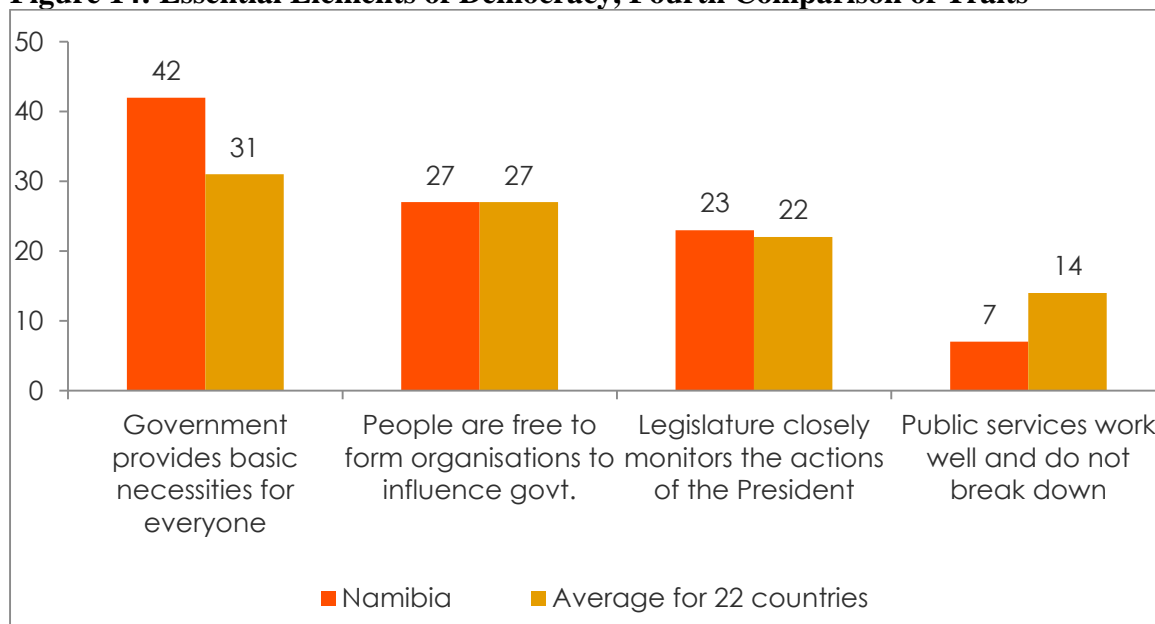
**Figure 13: Essential Elements of Democracy, Third Comparison of Traits**



*Question: And here is another list. Which one of these things would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?*

In the third comparison of traits, Figure 13 shows that Namibians emphasized democracy's association with fighting corruption. In this case, urban respondents in Namibia supported the anti-corruption option by 40% compared with 33% of rural respondents, and the protest option garnered 28% of urban dwellers compared with 16% of those in rural areas. A higher proportional of rural dwellers emphasized receiving aid from government (38%) compared to urban dwellers (19%). Once again both political processes and material rewards rank strongly among Namibians.

**Figure 14: Essential Elements of Democracy, Fourth Comparison of Traits**



*Question: Let me ask you again about the most essential characteristics of democracy. If you have to choose only one of the things that I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential characteristic of democracy?*

In the fourth comparison of traits, Namibians' ratings are mostly consistent with the average among 22 Afrobarometer countries. The only exception is that more Namibians (42%) chose the government's provision of basic services as an essential component of democracy. In other countries only an average of 31% of participants chose this option. In Namibia, 29% of the urban respondents choose the legislature monitors president option compared to only 19% for rural respondents. By contrast, 49% of rural respondents chose government provides basic necessities compared to 32% for urbanites.

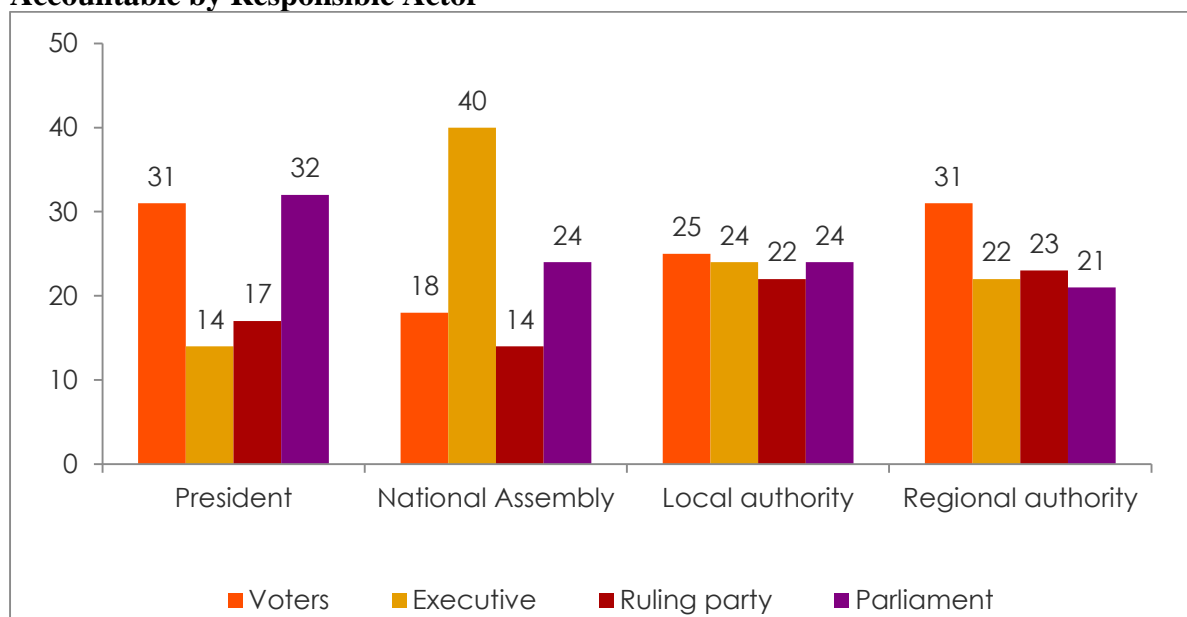
Also, in general, urban respondents seem to be more interested in political rights and processes than rural dwellers. Rural respondents opted more strongly for economic dimensions of democracy. In all of the forced choice questions, Namibia parallels the modal choices of the first 22 Afrobarometer to release Round 5 results. Similar questions in Round 4 (2008) also showed both economic and rights preferences. Namibians seem satisfied with the rights and procedural aspects of the country's democracy, but the nagging aspects of economic inequity and poverty have become more important over time as the responses to these four questions on the meaning of democracy illustrate. Results shown in Figure 10 above also reinforce employment concerns as very important to Namibians.

## 6. Popular Accountability and Participation

Popular accountability is an important aspect of the democratic idea of consent of the governed. Compared to past Afrobarometer survey results, there is an increase in the expectation of popular accountability, with Namibians saying that voters should be responsible for holding elected officials accountable. In 2008, Namibia registered some of the lowest levels on some accountability questions, but substantial increases are noted in the current round with voters' accountability increasing by between 3% and 6% (see Gyimah-Boadi & Armah-Attoh 2009).

Figure 15 shows some of the new results. It is clear that the main checks and balances expectations of Namibian respondents should occur between the executive and the parliament. Perhaps the relatively low expectation of only 18% for voters to have the primary responsibility for National Assembly accountability can be explained by the party list election system. This figure compares with the 22 country average of 37%. Many African countries have constituency based electoral systems giving voters more direct control and accountability. The highest responsibility for voters (at 31%) are the president and regional councillors. Namibian voters directly elect these positions. Nevertheless, these results are still well below the 22 country average. That being said, Namibians increasingly indicate that voters have the responsibility in a political culture to hold political leaders accountable.

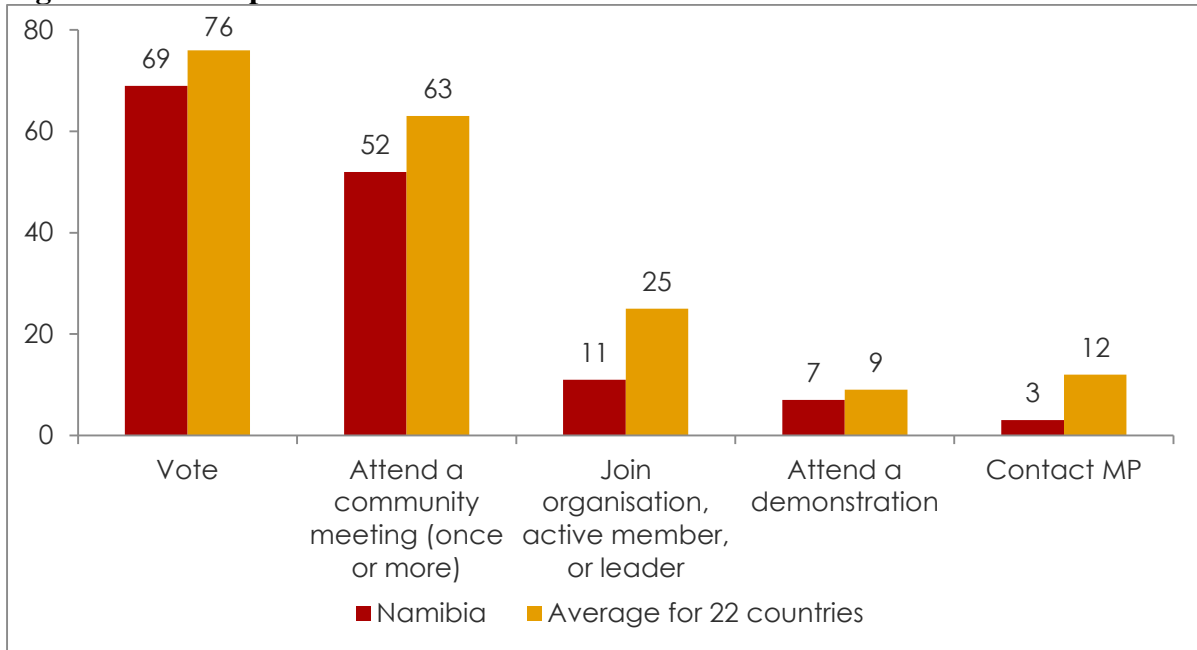
**Figure 15: Vertical Accountability: Responsibility for Holding Elected Leaders Accountable by Responsible Actor**



*Question: Who should be responsible for: (1) Making sure that, once elected, Representatives to the National Assembly do their jobs; (2) Making sure that, once elected, Local Authority Councilors do their jobs; (3) Making sure, that once elected, Regional Councillors do their jobs; (4) Making sure that, once elected, the president does his job?*

Popular participation is another part of democracy in Namibia. As indicated in Figure 16, Namibians participate in a variety of civic actions to a lesser degree than do people in other survey countries on average. For instance, Namibians are also much less likely to engage power holders. These figures are little changed from 2008. Namibians have yet to develop a participatory culture compared with their African peers.

**Figure 16: Participation in Political Activities**

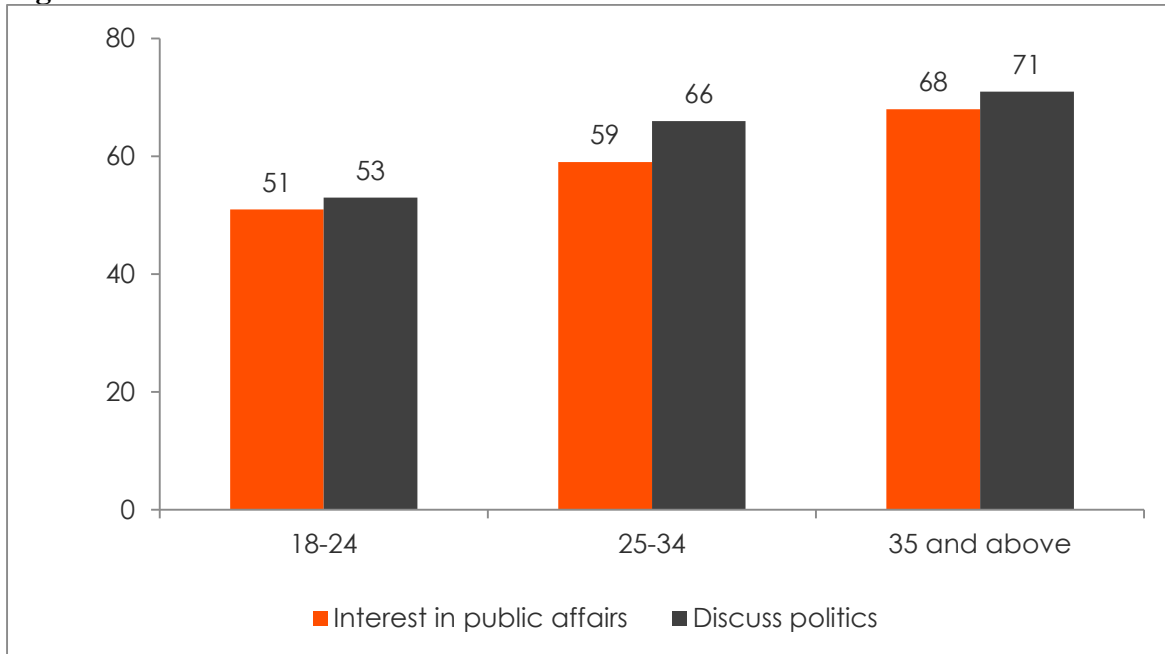


*Question: For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. (% who say “once or twice”/ “only once” or “several times”/ “a few times” or “often”)*

The final concern about Namibia’s democratic consolidation is apathy among the born free generation (18-24 year olds) and other younger voters, who will be the majority in the upcoming 2014 national elections. On most democracy questions, 18-24 year olds and even 25-34 year olds often show the lowest levels of support for democracy. For example, only 62% of 18-24 year olds said “democracy is always preferable”, while just 59% of 25-34 year olds agreed with the statement. This is indeed worrying with respect to the future of democracy in Namibia.

While youths are engaged with religion and are even more upbeat about their own economic futures than are participants in other age groups, they are very clearly disengaged from issues in the public sphere as indicated in Figure 17. This youth political disinterest remains a challenge for both the ruling and opposition parties as well as for civil society.

**Figure 17: Youth Interest in Public Affairs**



*Question: When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters? (% who say “occasionally” or “frequently”)*

*Question: How interested would you say you are in public affairs? (% who say “somewhat” or “very” interested)*

## **7. Conclusion**

Namibia has been considered a “democracy without democrats” due to the incongruence between the supply and demand of democracy. The supply of democracy is established by citizens’ judgements about the country’s level of democracy and the populations’ satisfaction with it, on the one hand, and the demand for democracy established by the preference for democracy and rejection of alternatives on the other. Although Namibia is not quite as much of an outlier as previously determined, a weak demand for democracy persists.

Namibians, like other Africans in Afrobarometer survey countries, see democracy in both political rights and processes terms and in material benefits terms as well. In some ways this dual value converges on the critical notion that equality of economic opportunities or gains is as important as equal rights under the law. This also reflects the strong perception among Namibians that inequality and unemployment are the key problems that Namibian democracy needs to address at this time, while political results are well secured.

Although Namibians are supportive of the current independence dispensation, its democratic institutions, and remain optimistic about the future, the country has not yet developed a participatory political culture, nor are the so-called “born frees” strongly committed to democratic values. Democratic consolidation may be well established in the institutional domain, but democratic values, behaviours, and expectations are yet to catch up.

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This Briefing Paper was prepared by Prof. Bill Lindeke, Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). [blindeke@ippr.org.na](mailto:blindeke@ippr.org.na)

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