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A Monumental Relationship: North Korea and Namibia

By Tycho van der Hoog

Visitors to Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia, will quickly learn a remarkable fact that is well-known among the local population—much of the capital’s architectural landscape is designed and constructed by North Korea. In recent years, North Korean nationals have built the official residence of the president of Namibia, the State House; the national cemetery for the fallen heroes of the liberation struggle, the National Heroes’ Acre; the national history museum, the Independence Memorial Museum; the Ministry of Defense headquarters and other buildings. The Namibian government thus uses North Korean aesthetics for some of the most important aspects of its power: the president, the history, and the army. This analysis explores the relationship between Namibia and North Korea by providing historical and political context to the aforementioned buildings.

Tycho van der Hoog, PhD student at the African Studies Centre Leiden, explains that in Namibia, "much of the capital’s architectural landscape is designed and constructed by North Korea" and explores the relationship between Namibia and North Korea by providing historical and political context for this connection

Today, Namibia often has the reputation of a quaint and sometimes sleepy destination, tucked away in the southwestern corner of the African continent. Yet, Namibia was at the center of geopolitical tensions for most of the twentieth century. The complicated decolonization process of Namibia, or “the Namibian question,” as it became known in the corridors of the United Nations (UN), had its roots in the aftermath of three decades of German occupation between 1884 and 1915. German South West Africa, the area that became modern Namibia, was transferred to South Africa as a League of Nations mandate territory and renamed “South West Africa.” South Africa viewed the territory as an unofficial fifth province and introduced brutal apartheid legislation. Internal opposition against the South African regime resulted in the formation of nationalist organizations, of which the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) became the most prominent.

SWAPO engaged in an armed struggle against South Africa from 1966 onwards. While the United Nations recognized SWAPO as Namibia’s legitimate representative since 1972, the war for independence became prolonged because of political developments in neighboring countries, most prominently the presence of Cuban troops in Angola. As a result, it was only in 1990 that the first democratic and independent elections were held in Namibia. During the tumultuous years in between, SWAPO operated partly in exile and was dependent on foreign sponsors. This was the moment when North Korea became an important ally. These pre-independence connections are the foundation for the contemporary dealings between both regimes. In that sense, it is better to view ongoing cooperation through the lens of North Korea-SWAPO ties as opposed to North Korea-Namibia ties.

In the difficult days of exile, SWAPO needed political support, training for its cadres, and equipment for its guerrilla warfare. North Korea was able to provide all of this, as it invested heavily in liberation movements and political organizations around the world. Incentivized by competition with South Korea for international recognition, Kim Il Sung supported African liberation movements in their fight for independence. SWAPO officials were invited to Pyongyang in the 1980s and were given strong promises of aid. The future president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, met Kim Il Sung several times before the first independent elections were held in Namibia, and both men seemed at ease with each other. In exchange for North Korea’s help, the SWAPO leadership publicly supported Kim Il Sung’s plans for the reunification of the Korean peninsula.

In recent years, Namibia has come under international scrutiny for continuing relations with North Korea, despite the introduction of United Nations sanctions against Pyongyang. In addition to the construction of civilian buildings, the Namibian affiliate of the North Korean art studio Mansudae Overseas Projects has been involved in several military projects. This includes construction work for a military academy, a munitions factory, and military bases. A military museum has been constructed in Okahandja, a town close to Windhoek, but it is not open to the public and remains the topic of much speculation. Mansudae was also implicated in a scheme to move bulk cash from Namibia to Pyongyang, a known North Korean tactic to bypass the formal financial system. Additionally, the art studio operated as a front company for KOMID, a North Korean arms company that supplied material to the Namibian Defense Force.

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The operations of Mansudae and KOMID in Namibia resulted in condemnation from the United Nations because their activities constituted violations of multilateral sanctions against North Korea. Media attention and international pressure resulted in the decision of the Namibian government to terminate ongoing contracts with both companies. In 2017, 242 North Korean nationals that resided in Namibia were repatriated back home, and the vehicles and equipment of Mansudae were privately auctioned. Whether this spells the end of the decades-long friendship between SWAPO and the North Korean government remains to be seen, but in any case, the monuments that adorn Windhoek's city center will stand firm for a long time to come. These buildings not only signify an overlooked form of Afro-Asian solidarity, they also perform an important function as visible reminders of the enduring nature of SWAPO's rule in Namibia. Especially with regard to the latter, it is telling that a distinct form of Namibian political nationalism is conveyed through North Korean aesthetics.

The Namibian case study has relevance for the wider southern African region for two distinct reasons. Firstly, it highlights the transnational nature of North Korean operations in Africa. For instance, Mansudae's Namibia office was also active in Angola, Botswana, and Mozambique. A similar regional purview is at work in the activities of the North Korean embassy in South Africa, which also came under scrutiny from the United Nations in recent years. Secondly, it highlights the important historical support of North Korea in this region. In addition to Namibia, several other countries in southern Africa are also ruled by former liberation movements that benefitted from North Korean aid during the era of decolonization. North Korea has thus developed similar relationships with ruling regimes in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. In short, contemporary North Korean involvement in southern Africa can be partly explained by the tumultuous history of the twentieth century.

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