



Hifikepunye Pohamba and Henning Melber have met many times. The first time was in Dar-es-Salaam in 1975, when they were both SWAPO-activists in exile, and the last time was in May 2006 when Pohamba as President of Namibia came to visit the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala.

Is being a decent president enough for a prestigious prize?

By Henrik Alfredsson

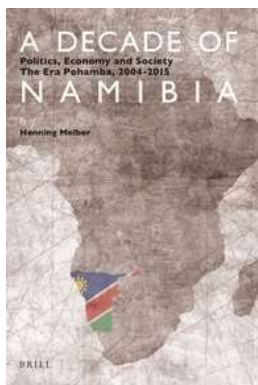
When it was announced in March 2015 that Namibia's president Pohamba had been awarded the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Good Governance, a wave of patriotism swept the country with such force that even his former critics turned into fans. But Henning Melber refuses to align himself with the applauding crowd. In a new book he analyzes the era of Pohamba's presidency.

"Good governance? - Good riddance!" With those words, in an opinion article in Namibia's largest daily newspaper, *The Namibian*, in March 2015, Henning Melber commented the news that Pohamba had been awarded the prestigious Mo Ibrahim Prize for Good Governance.

"Pohamba is a decent and likable person. But this fact alone should not motivate such a prestigious award. The Mo Ibrahim Prize risks to be devaluated if the qualification requirements are so low that a president can get it merely on the merits of not having violated his duties. Pohamba was a weak leader who didn't succeed in the two tasks he spoke of as most important – reducing corruption and poverty", Henning Melber says.

Melber has a long history of political commitment in Namibia. As a son of German immigrants he was exiled since 1975 because he had joined the liberation movement SWAPO. He returned to Namibia after Independence as Director of the Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit in Windhoek. In 2000 he became Research Director of the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala/Sweden, where from 2006 to 2012 he was Executive Director of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. He remains affiliated to both institutions as Senior Advisor and is Extraordinary Professor at the University of Pretoria and the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein. Having followed Namibian politics since Independence, the enthusiastic reactions over the news of the Mo Ibrahim Prize surprised him.

“Even a normally balanced newspaper like the Windhoek Observer, which just a few months before the prize was awarded, had called Pohamba ‘our lame duck president’ in a massively critical editorial, suddenly started to praise him. As for my critical views, I was (not for the first time) insulted and portrayed by many as an unpatriotic traitor.”



In his new book *A Decade of Namibia*, Henning Melber draws on the twelve years of analyses as co-editor and author of the Namibia chapter of Brill’s prize awarded Africa Yearbook. Analyzing the politics, economy and society year by year from 2004 to 2015, he collects the puzzle pieces of the era Pohamba.

“One of the most important pieces is corruption. In his election campaign, Pohamba said that the struggle against corruption was the country’s most important challenge. Soon after his inauguration he created an anti-corruption commission. But then little happened. Namibia is just as corrupt today as it was in 2004, if not more. Even Pohamba himself has been accused of nepotism. One of his daughters secured a multi-million dollar public housing tender and other lucrative state contracts in the construction sector with no tender-related qualifications. Another daughter was controversially awarded a generous scholarship by China through a bursary scheme, which was originally declared for students from families of lesser means”, Melber says.

Namibian foreign policy during the Pohamba era also left behind its fair share of exclamation marks. Pohamba has continued his predecessor Sam Nujoma’s warm relations to Zimbabwe’s dictator Mugabe. Even more disturbing is the close connection to North Korea, which is likely to hold some kind of world record in being banned and sanctioned by the UN. As one of Namibia’s bilateral partners, “North Korean contractors built monumental state projects, while being also involved in setting up an ammunition factory”, Melber says.

Melber has little more than salt to offer when summing up Pohamba’s decade in power, but a pinch of sugar can be found in some of his conclusions: “Pohamba was a man of political reconciliation. He worked hard to build bridges between his own political party, SWAPO, and the many opposition parties. In a country with 16 political parties, of which ten have representatives in the parliament, it is of course a good thing to have a leader that is not antagonistic”, Melber says.

Henning Melber, *A Decade of Namibia. Politics, Economy and Society. The Era Pohamba, 2004-2015*. Leiden: Brill 2016, 180 pp. (The book is distributed locally in Namibia by the Namibia Scientific Society)