

Contested Continuities: The Interplay of Violence and Human Rights in Namibian Policing

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This paper examines Namibian policing as a case that illustrates constitutive tensions in Namibian state formation in the context of the country's transition to independence and human rights reforms. Executive discretion and use of force were important in the maintenance of colonial power in Namibia (as elsewhere). Likewise, organised violence played an important role in Namibia's protracted struggle for independence and is celebrated in the liberationist founding myth of the nation. The legacies of authoritarian policing and war-time violence, combined with perceived threats of crime and social disorder have led into a constant, relatively high degree of 'human rights violations' by the police. However, through the rhetoric of transition and human rights reform, police violence is explained to belong in the past and its current instances to be anomalous, not institutionalised. The current political order wishes to set itself apart from the repressive pre-independence regime through a democratic political framework, liberal constitutional principles and rule of law and there is a concomitant need to reform and reinvent the police. The paper examines the coexistence of police violence and its containment and proposes that the situation highlights a duality. On the one hand, there is a need to break with the past and demonstrate that the new order is just and democratic, in other words, to imagine a unitary, modern nation and reframe the terms of citizenship. On the one hand, there is a need for the continual (re)founding of sovereignty and projection of state power by violent means, in other words, a continuum of violence as a fundamental part of how the colonial and postcolonial state is structured. This results in delegating the power of decision down the line to frontline officers and might prevent a successful engagement with the issue of police violence. The paper is based on short-term, intensive fieldwork in early 2009, complemented by the author's long-term involvement and accumulated research materials from Namibia.