

Namibians lack confidence in economy, express rising dissatisfaction with government

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 636 | Darren Janz

Summary

From independence in 1990 until 2015, Namibia experienced a period of strong and stable economic growth, with its gross domestic product (GDP) rising by an average of nearly 5% annually amid high levels of domestic and foreign investment (World Bank, 2022a). The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), which has governed Namibia since it gained independence from South Africa, dominated Namibian electoral politics, with its presidential candidate, Hage Geingob, winning an all-time high of more than 86% of votes cast in the 2014 election (Weylandt, 2015).

From 2016 onward, however, economic growth halted, with stagnant or negative GDP growth every year from 2016 and 2020 amid difficulties in the construction and mining industries, widespread drought, and decreasing demand for Namibian exports. The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 devastated international trade and the domestic retail and tourism industries, causing a record 8% annual decrease in GDP, which was only partly reversed by 2.7% growth in 2021 (African Development Bank Group, 2021; World Bank, 2022b).

Namibia's economic struggles have had a material impact on its citizens. The country's unemployment rate, for example, rose from 16.8% in 2012 to 23.4% in 2016 (its highest rate since 1997), and after a dip from 2016 to 2018 climbed by nearly 2 percentage points back to 21.3% in 2021 (World Bank, 2022c). The proportion of Namibians experiencing a high level of lived poverty, which considers families' access to food, clean water, medical treatment, cooking fuel, and a cash income, likewise increased from a low of 5% in 2014 to 22% in 2021 (Survey Warehouse, 2022). SWAPO's electoral dominance has simultaneously fallen drastically, with Geingob winning only 56% of votes cast in his 2019 re-election, the party's worst results since independence (Melber, 2020).

This dispatch examines Namibians' changing views on the country's economic trajectory alongside evolving public support for its ruling party. Since 2017 – and especially since 2019 – Namibians have expressed significantly more pessimistic views on the country's general direction and economic condition as well as their personal living conditions. Unemployment remains by far the most salient issue to Namibian voters. Meanwhile, popular evaluations of government performance have become significantly more negative, and approval of, closeness to, trust in, and support for SWAPO and its national leadership have plummeted.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been conducted since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer national partner in Namibia, Survey Warehouse, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Namibians between 31 October and 16 November 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Namibia in 1999, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

Key findings

- Three-fourths (76%) of Namibians see their country as going in the wrong direction, a three-fold increase since 2014.
- Two-thirds (67%) of citizens describe their country's economic condition as "fairly bad" or "very bad," while more than half (52%) say the same about their personal living conditions.
- Optimism that things will improve during the coming year has declined sharply, to 38%.
- Unemployment ranks highest among the most important problems that Namibians want their government to address (61%), followed water supply (22%) and corruption (20%).
- Approval of the job performance of the president and prime minister has declined sharply, to 54% and 47%, respectively.
- Similarly, assessments of the government's performance on key economic issues have declined significantly over the past eight years.
- The proportion of Namibians who trust SWAPO "a lot" has dropped by more than half since 2014, from 42% to 17%. The same is true for strong trust in the president (from 56% to 26%) and the prime minister (from 50% to 18%).
- The share of Namibians who say they feel close to SWAPO has decreased in every survey round from 2014 to 2021, falling from more than half (53%) to fewer than one-third (30%).

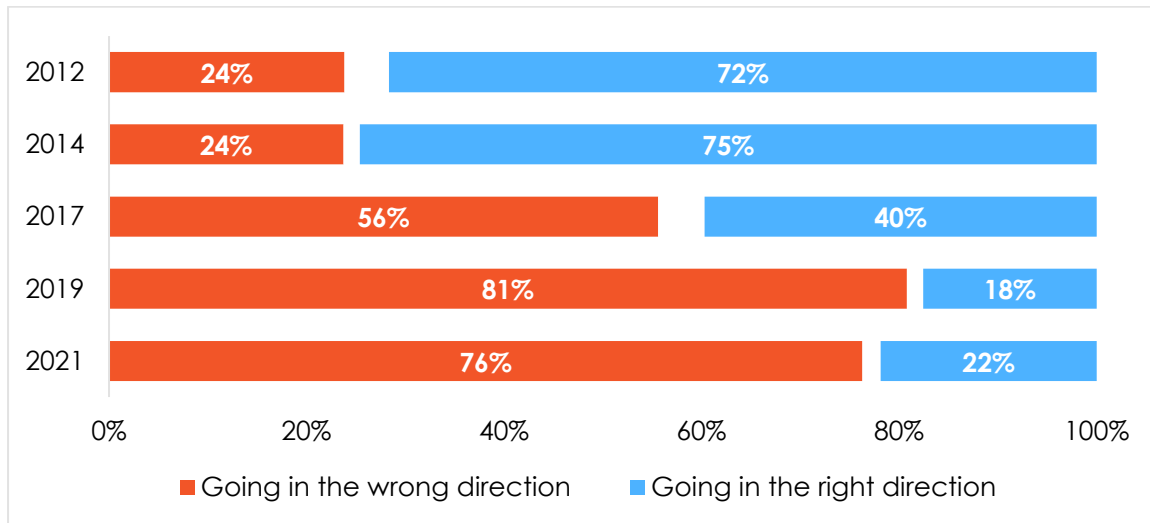
Satisfaction with living and economic conditions

As of late 2021, three-fourths (76%) of Namibians say the country is going in the wrong direction. This is a slight improvement from 81% in 2019, but triple the proportion who saw the country as headed in the wrong direction in 2012 and 2014 (24%) (Figure 1).

The proportion of Namibians who say the country is going in the wrong direction is highest among urban residents (79%), respondents between the ages of 26 and 35 (81%), those with a post-secondary education (80%), and poor citizens¹ (85%) (Figure 2).

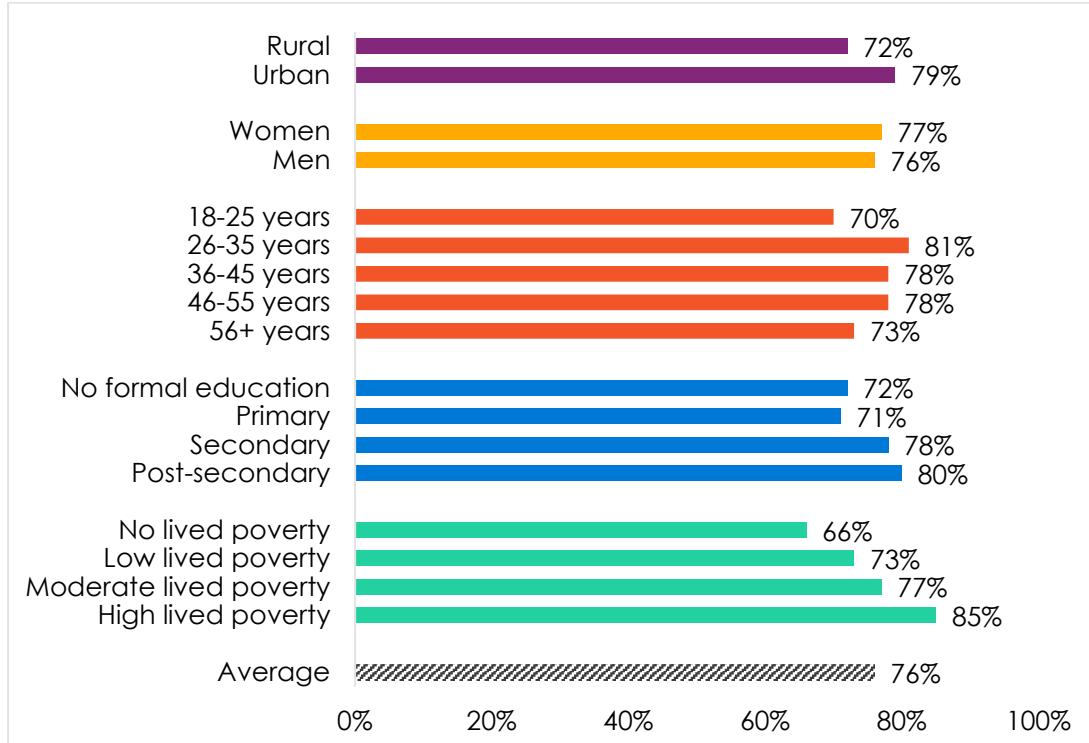
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

Figure 1: Overall direction of country | Namibia | 2012-2021



Respondents were asked: Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So, let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Figure 2: Country going in the wrong direction | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021

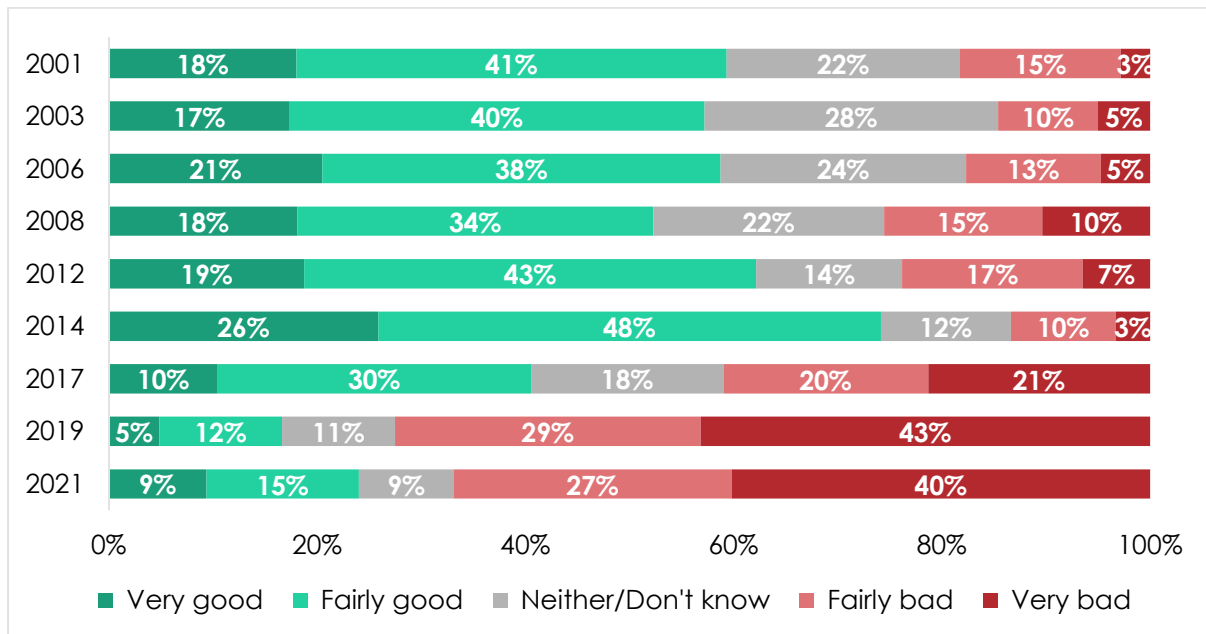


Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who say "going in the wrong direction")

When asked to describe the economic condition of Namibia, two-thirds (67%) of respondents say it is "very bad" (40%) or "fairly bad" (27%) (Figure 3). Again, this is a slight improvement

compared to 2019, when 72% described the economy as bad, but a far more negative assessment than in earlier surveys. In every survey conducted before 2017, a majority of citizens indicated that the country's economic condition was good.

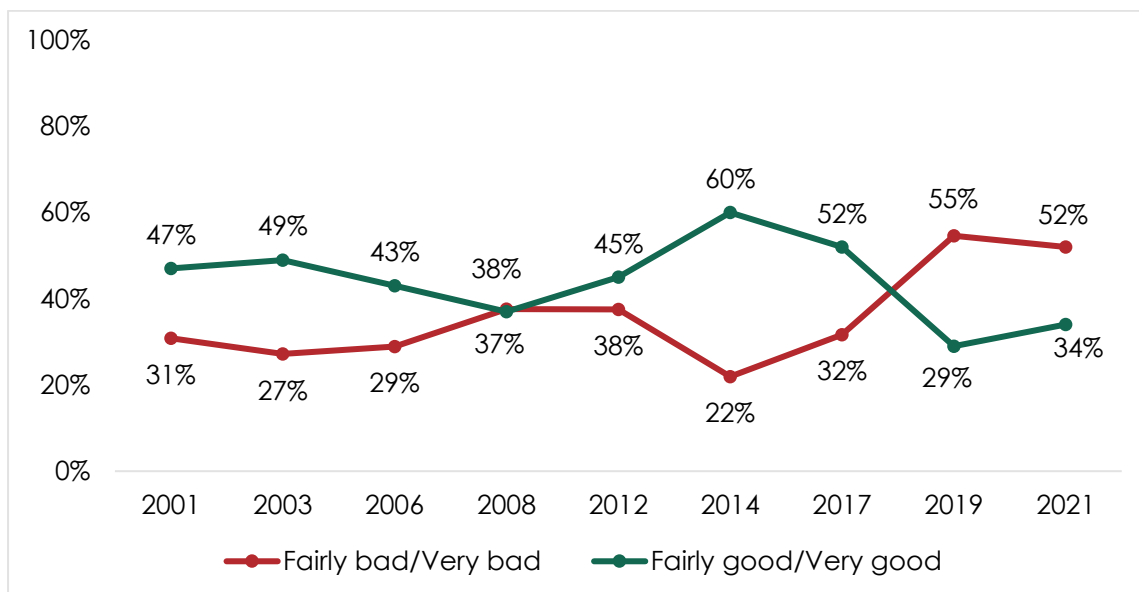
Figure 3: Country's economic condition | Namibia | 2001-2021



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

We see a similar trend when Namibians are asked to describe their personal living conditions: More than half (52%) say they are “very bad” (33%) or “fairly bad” (19%). Only one-third (34%) say their living conditions are good, down from 60% in 2014 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Personal living conditions | Namibia | 2001-2021

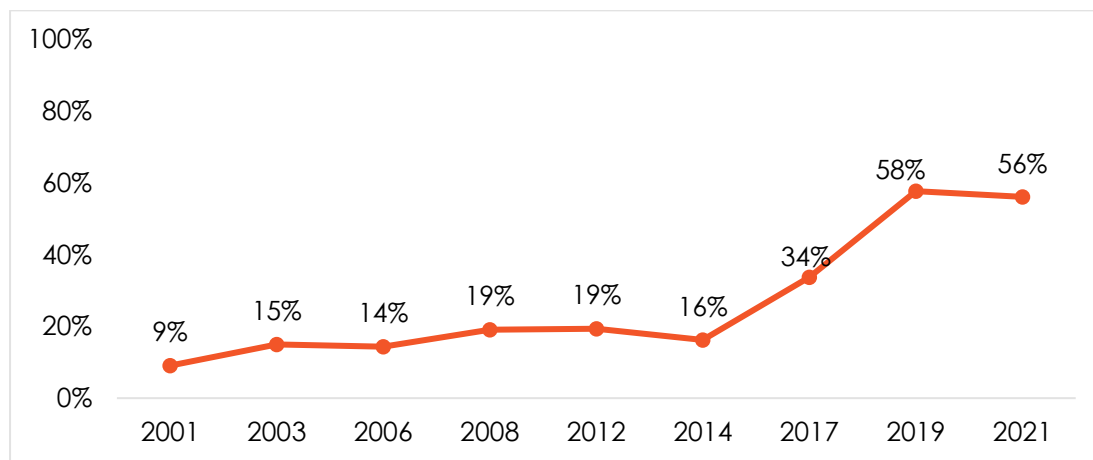


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

A majority (56%) of Namibians say the economic situation has gotten “worse” (31%) or “much worse” (25%) over the past 12 months (Figure 5). While similar to the 2019 finding, this assessment is three to six times more negative than assessments recorded from 2001 to 2014, when between 9% and 19% of citizens said things had worsened during the previous year.

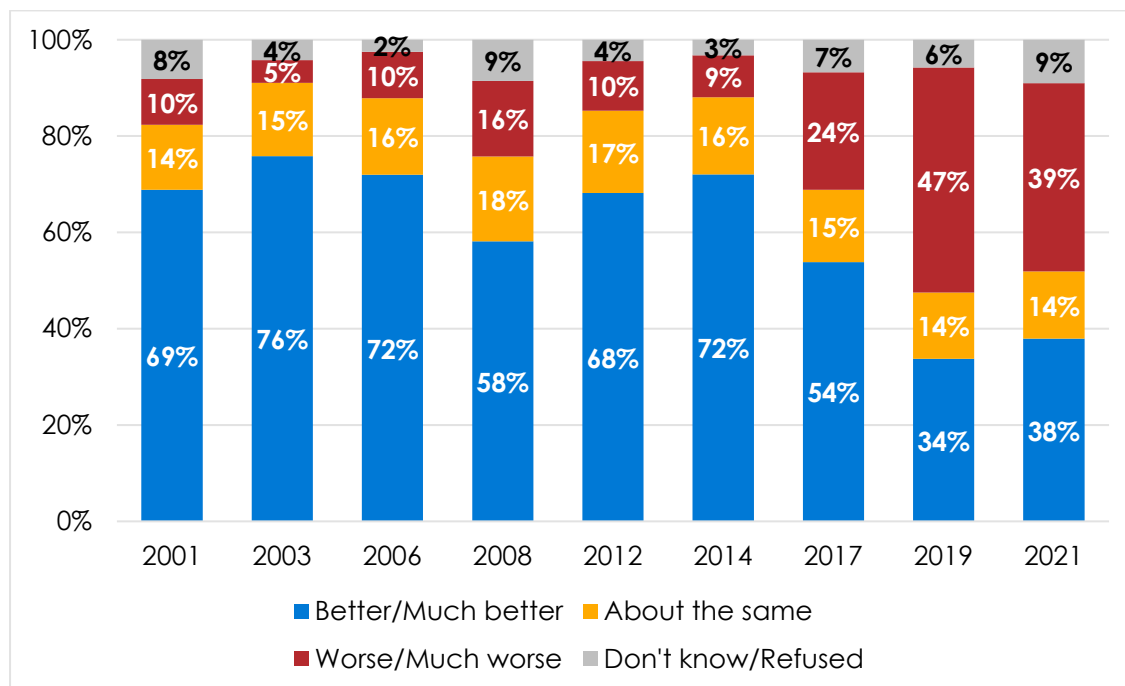
Moreover, optimism about improvements in the near future has declined sharply (Figure 6). Fewer than four in 10 Namibians (38%) think economic conditions will be “better” or “much better” in 12 months’ time, while just as many (39%) think they will be worse. Again, that’s a slight improvement from 2019, but dramatically more pessimistic than in earlier surveys.

Figure 5: Country’s economic conditions worse than 12 months ago | Namibia | 2001-2021



Respondents were asked: Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?

Figure 6: Country’s economic conditions in 12 months’ time | Namibia | 2001-2021

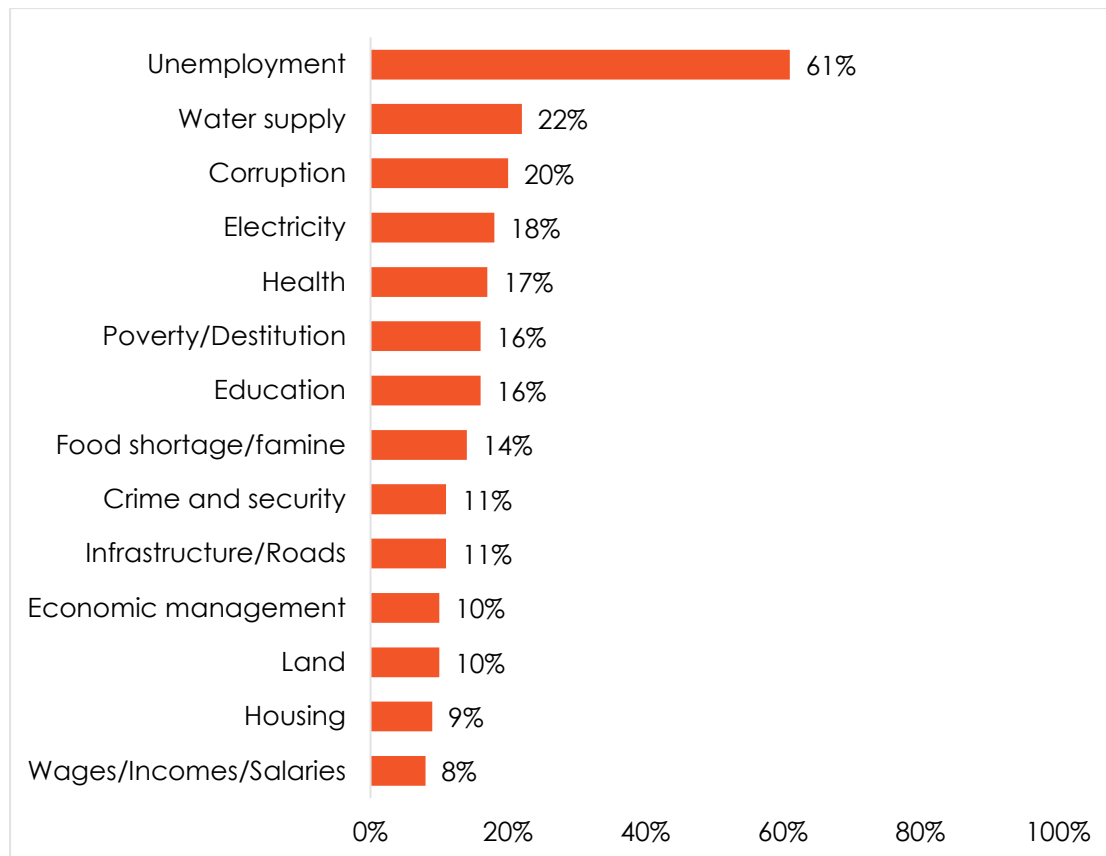


Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months’ time?

Most important problems facing Namibia

When asked what they consider the most important problems facing the country that the government should address, Namibians most frequently cite unemployment (61%), followed by water supply (22%), corruption (20%), electricity (18%), and health (17%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Most important problems | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person. Figure shows the percentage of respondents who cite each problem as one of their three priorities.)*

Government performance and popular trust

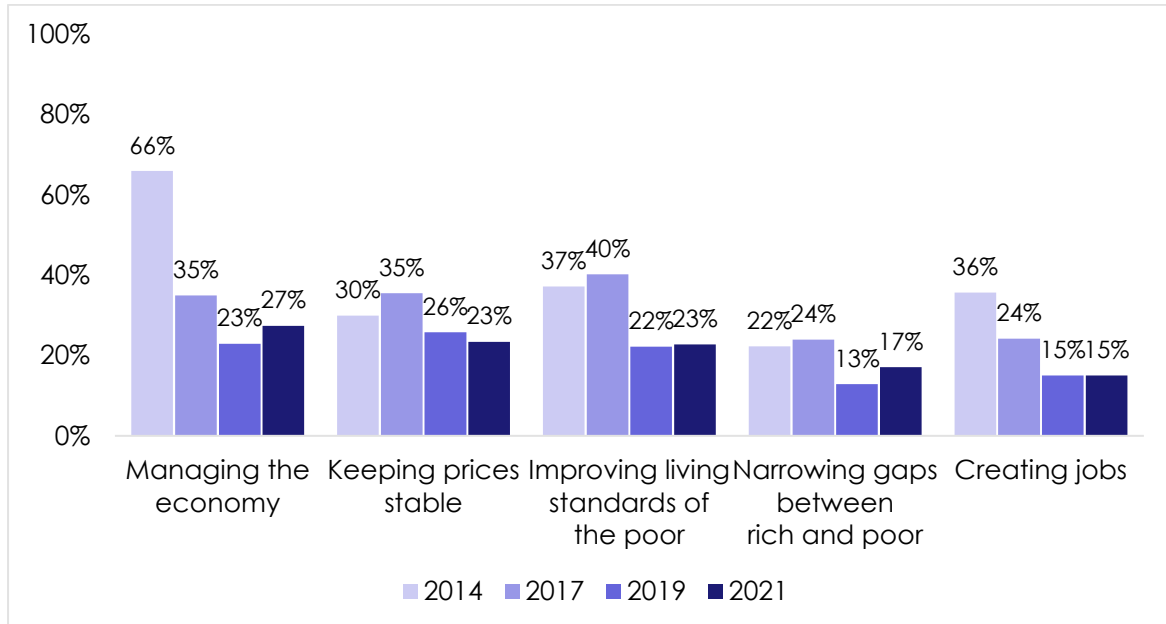
Considering their largely negative assessments of economic conditions, it may not come as a surprise that few Namibians give their government high performance ratings on key economic issues (Figure 8). Only 27% say the government is handling economic management “fairly well” or “very well,” down from 66% recorded in the 2014 survey, which was conducted before the recession began.

Even fewer approve of the government's performance on keeping prices stable (23%), improving living standards of the poor (23%), narrowing gaps between rich and poor (17%), and creating jobs (15%) – all down sharply from assessments in 2014.

Similarly, performance ratings for the president and prime minister have declined dramatically over the past eight years. A slim majority (54%) of citizens still say President Geingob is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job, but this proportion has been decreasing consistently since 2014, which was the last survey conducted before Geingob succeeded Hifikepunye Pohamba (Figure 9).

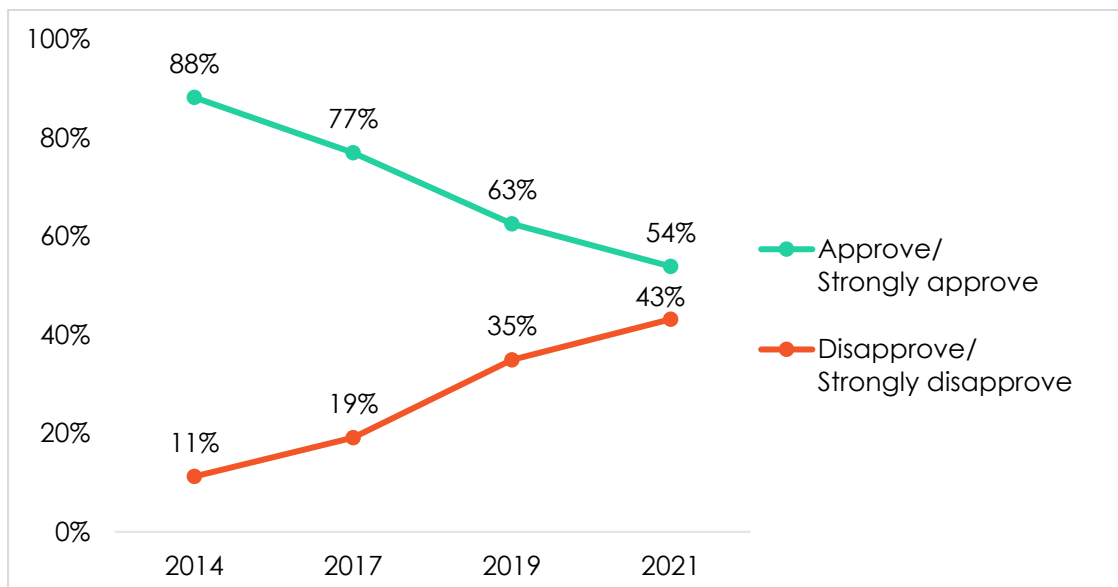
And fewer than half (47%) approve of Saara Kuugongelwa's performance as prime minister, again a steep and consistent decline from 88% in 2014, the last survey conducted before Kuugongelwa succeeded then-Prime Minister Geingob (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Government performance on key economic issues | Namibia | 2014-2021



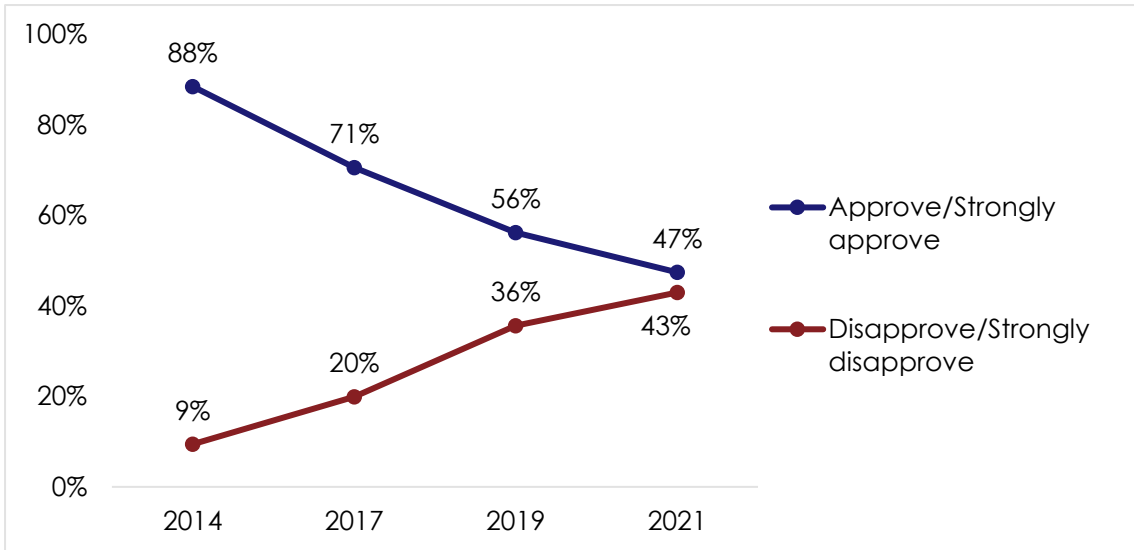
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 9: Performance of the president | Namibia | 2014-2021



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President [Hifikepunye Pohamba in 2014; Hage Geingob in 2017, 2019, and 2021]?

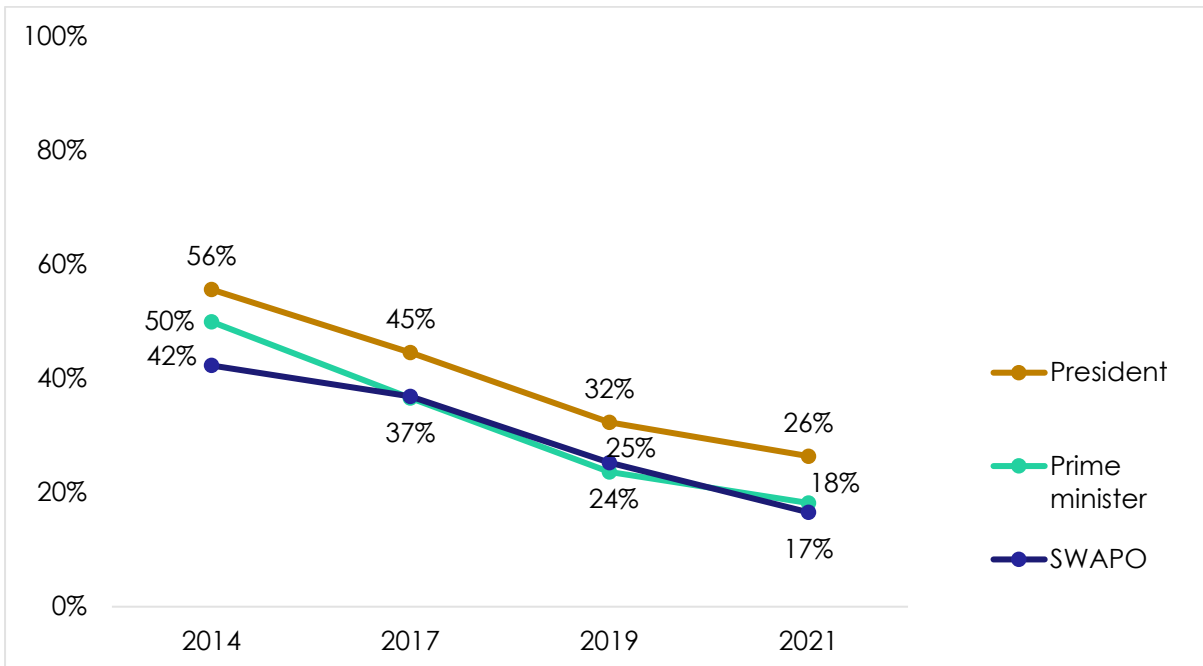
Figure 10: Performance of the prime minister | Namibia | 2014-2021



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Prime Minister [Hage Geingob in 2014; Saara Kuugongelwa in 2017, 2019, and 2021]?

Over the same time period, popular trust in the president, the prime minister, and ruling party has likewise weakened markedly (Figure 11). The proportion of Namibians who express “a lot” of trust in the president has dropped by half since 2014, from 56% to 26%. Strong trust in the prime minister has followed the same trend, from 50% to 18%, as has strong trust in SWAPO, from 42% in 2014 to 17% in 2021.

Figure 11: Trust president, prime minister, and SWAPO ‘a lot’ | Namibia | 2014-2021

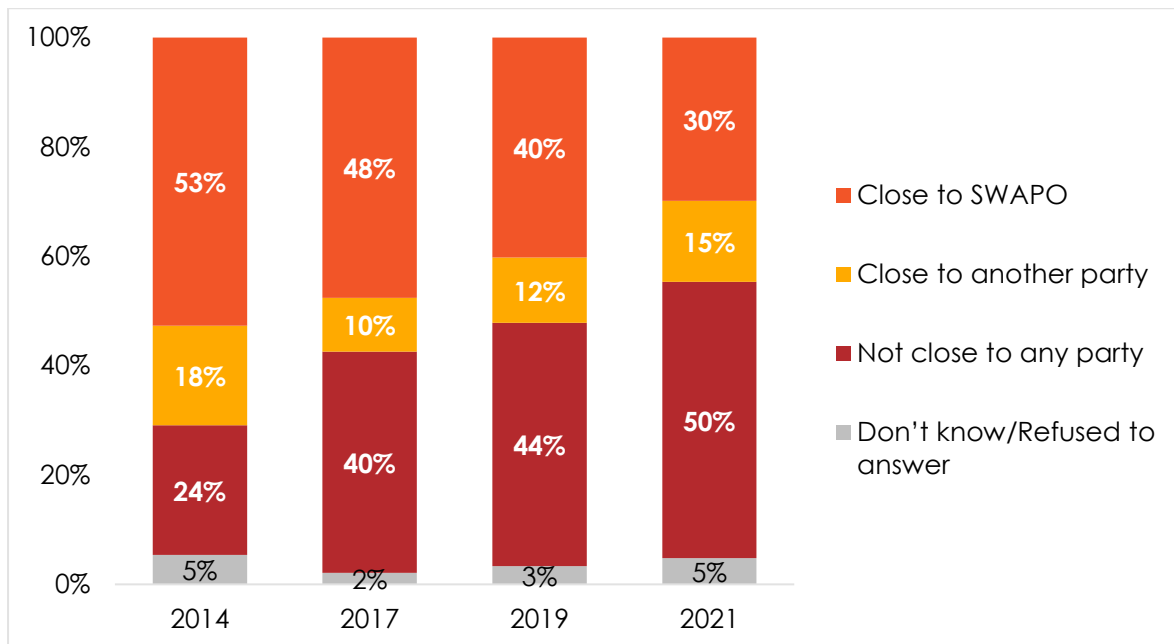


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Closeness to the ruling party

Alongside worsening assessments of economic conditions and government performance, the proportion of Namibians who report feeling close to the ruling party, SWAPO, has decreased steadily as well, from 53% in 2014 to 30% in 2021 (Figure 12). Meanwhile, the share of Namibians who report not feeling close to any party has increased steadily, doubling from 24% in 2014 to 50% in 2021. The proportion who report feeling close to a political party other than SWAPO has remained fairly consistent, at between 10% and 18%, over the period.

Figure 12: Close to which political party | Namibia | 2014-2021



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If "yes":] Which party is that?

Conclusion

Namibians' confidence in their country's economy has been shaken by a protracted recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the most recent Afrobarometer surveys, record numbers of citizens report that their country is going in the wrong direction, that the economy and their personal living conditions are bad, and that things will continue to get worse. Unemployment is far and away their most urgent priority for government action.

As economic prospects have worsened, so, too, have public evaluations of government performance, while trust in the government and affiliation with the ruling party have weakened.

With the country scheduled for another round of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024, the Namibian public and the international community alike will be watching closely as SWAPO aims for its eighth consecutive mandate to lead the Namibian government and a chance to revitalise the country's economic condition.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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