

BOTSWANA AFTER SERETSE KHAMA

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Although what has been termed 'Botswanaphilia' is not unanimous (see for example, Picard, forthcoming; Parsons, 1983; Makgetla, 1982), it is widespread. This landlocked country of fewer than one million inhabitants, surrounded by South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe (and touched upon by Zambia) is widely hailed as an African success story: a place where liberal representative democracy works unmarred by coups or rumours of coups; a country with no political prisoners and no political exiles; a haven for refugees from less pleasant Southern African states; a multi-racial 'good example' to the apartheid regime next door; a favourite of western aid agencies impressed by its efficiency and relative absence of corruption; a state which has adeptly walked the tightrope of respectability in its relations with South Africa, with which it is highly integrated functionally but whose policies it abhors.

Much of the Botswana success story is attributable to the leadership of Sir Seretse Khama, founder in 1963 of the Botswana (originally Bechuanaland) Democratic Party (BDP), and President of the Republic of Botswana from independence in 1966 until his death in July 1980 at the age of 59. Seretse Khama, legitimate heir to the paramount chieftaincy of the Bamangwato but barred from assuming the chieftaincy through British deference to South African objections to his having married a white woman, offered a unique combination of traditional and modern qualifications for leadership. As Lawrence Frank observes in a Weberian analysis, while enjoying 'a degree of access to both traditional and charismatic support, Khama explicitly rejected both these bases of power and justified his rule on legal-rational grounds'. (Frank, 1981). It is perhaps noteworthy that as of 1985 the tide of revisionism which overwhelms many departed leaders has not turned against Khama and that his reputation seems likely to survive the forthcoming biography by Q.N. Parsons.

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The leadership of Seretse Khama was obviously not the only factor in the Botswana success story, which was aided considerably by the discovery and development of diamond deposits and the securing of favourable marketing arrangements for Botswana's cattle through the EEC. Nonetheless, his death in 1980 does mark something of a turning point. Seretse Khama was succeeded as President of both the party and the Republic by Dr. Quett Masire (Dr. by virtue of an honorary degree from Williams), who had previously served as vice president of the party and Vice President and Minister for Finance and Development Planning in the Government.

The succession was almost, but not entirely, automatic and the transition was accomplished smoothly, with Masire pledging continuity in policies and there being continuity in personnel. Nonetheless, Khama was a hard act to follow. Masire, an able technocrat and successful farmer, lacks both traditional and charismatic claims to leadership equivalent to those of the late president. Moreover, and possibly more importantly, during Masire's presidency a number of external and internal factors largely beyond government's control have combined to make life more difficult for Botswana and Batswana - four years of serious drought, depression in the diamond market, imported inflation, rapid population growth and urbanisation, increasing urban and rural un- and under-employment, spillovers from rising levels of turmoil in South Africa and, to a lesser extent, Zimbabwe, etc. Botswana continues to be regarded as what one United Nations official early in 1985 referred to as a 'model for development in Africa'. Nonetheless, the success story is under threat from various quarters, several, by no means all, of which are considered in this essay.

In December, 1984 the World Bank, an institution not noted for encomia to African regimes, issued a working paper praising 'public sector management in Botswana' which it saw as resting on 'two pillars; democracy and pragmatism'.

The democratic nature of the Government of Botswana and the country's practice of openness of discussion and of encouraging dialogue at all levels pervades the policy-making process. Pragmatism is the other quality of political life. Pragmatism must not be confused with opportunism; it is a dedication to a profound, yet basically simple, principle that ends should be dictated by realistic means and not by ideological fervor. (World Bank, 1984).

Pragmatism has been the policy of the BDP and democracy in Botswana has been the process which has returned the BDP to power in each of the five national elections which have been held within the constitutionally prescribed intervals beginning before independence, in 1965. The comfortable dimensions of the BDP majority in each election and the gentlemanly manner in which elections were conducted while Seretse Khama lived contributed other themes to the Botswana success story, namely peace and stability in addition to democracy and pragmatism.



By independence there were three parties in opposition to the BDP. Longest established, predating the BDP itself, was the Botswana Peoples Party (BPP), centred in Francistown and offering a somewhat superficial socialist rhetoric as an alternative to the liberalism and free enterprise pragmatism of the BDP. Emerging from a split in the BPP and based in Maun was the Botswana Independence Party (BIP) which took issue not so much with the substance of BDP policy as with government's record in carrying it out. Born between the 1965 election and independence was the Botswana National Front, established by Dr. Kenneth Koma (the Dr. being derived from a PhD in political science from Patrice Lumumba Friendship University) with the intention of uniting opposition to the 'neo-colonialist' BDP ('much more reactionary than the classical colonial administration which preceded it') and to bring Botswana into the 'mainstream of the African revolution'. (BNF, 1965). Dr. Koma writes in a Marxist vein, rejects African socialism, and argues that ultimately every African country will have to choose between scientific socialism and capitalism. To the extent to which these views are shared by the rest of the party he founded, the BNF comes the closest to offering an ideological alternative to the BDP. However, the BNF is a curious alliance of 'traditionalist' and 'progressive' elements and owed its initial and major electoral success not to any appeal of Marxist rhetoric but rather to a chief who had become disaffected from the BDP.

These three parties, the BPP, the BIP and the BNF, constituted the complete roster of opposition parties which contested the 1969, 1974 and 1979 elections. They were permitted to function freely and were only rarely subjected to particular harassments. Allegations to the contrary notwithstanding, the elections were free and fair and Botswana earned its reputation for democracy, within the practical limits imposed by any functioning as contrasted to purely abstract democratic system. (Polhemus, 1984; Holm, 1984). Although there were periodic talks of electoral pacts, these came to nothing and the opposition remained fragmented and disorganised. Such popular support as the opposition parties were able to muster was either widely dispersed or highly localised and, as the figures in Table 1 suggest, the opposition never presented a serious challenge to the BDP.

1984 saw the first national election after the death of Seretse Khama. As the constitutional deadline for the election approached, politics in Botswana, which had previously been relatively low-key, assumed what the executive secretary of the BDP calls a new 'vigour'. The opposition were highly optimistic of winning or at least greatly reducing the BDP majority. Particular importance was attached to the fact that the BDP was now led by a commoner rather than a chief or a son of a chief. Beyond this, it could be hoped that the odium of office would finally catch up with the BDP and that it would have to pay the price of being in government during drought and other conditions which compelled austerity moves. So ripe did the potential for political change seem that new parties emerged for the first time since 1965. Although at least five new parties were mooted, only two were registered. The Botswana Progressive Union (BPU), founded in July



Table 1 Aggregate Botswana National Election Statistics

	1965	1969	1974	1979	1984
Registered voters	188,950	156,533	236,848	243,483	293,571
Registered voters in contested constituencies		140,428	205,050	230,321	293,571
Votes cast in contested constituencies	140,789	76,858	64,011	134,496	227,756
Percentage poll in contested constituencies		54.9	31.2	58.4	77.6
Total votes cast to:					
BDP	113,168	52,518	49,047	101,098	154,863
BPP	19,964	9,329	4,199	9,983	14,961
BIP	6,491	4,601	3,086	5,813	7,288
BNF	-	10,410	7,358	17,324	46,550
BPU	-	-	-	-	3,036
Independents	1,166	-	321	278	1,058
Percentage votes cast to:					
BDP	80.4	68.3	76.6	75.2	68
BPP	14.2	12.1	6.6	7.4	6.6
BIP	4.6	6.0	4.8	4.3	3.1
BNF	-	13.5	11.5	12.9	20.4
BPU	-	-	-	-	1.3
Independents	.6	0	.5	.2	.5
Seats contested by:					
BDP	31	31	32	32	34
BPP	26	15	8	14	13
BIP	24	9	6	5	4
BNF	-	21	14	16	27
BPU	-	-	-	-	4
Independents	1	0	3	2	4
Seats won by:					
BDP	28	24	27	29	29
BPP	3	3	2	1	1
BIP	0	1	1	0	0
BNF	-	3	2	2	4
BPU	-	-	-	-	0
Independents	0	-	0	0	0
Percentage of seats won by:					
BDP	90	77	84	91	85
BPP	10	10	6	3	3
BIP	0	3	3	0	0
BNF	-	10	6	6	12
BPU	-	-	-	-	0
Independents	0	0	0	0	0





1982 by an individual who had earlier defected from the BNF, been co-opted by the BDP, served for a period as a specially-nominated member of parliament and assistant minister and then been dismissed from the cabinet, attacked particularly the system of education under the BDP and engaged in rhetoric against 'neo-colonialism'. The Botswana Liberal Party was registered in September 1983. Its constitutional documents show it to be wholly consistent with the values of the BDP and in the event, unlike the BPU, it fielded no candidates in the 1984 elections.

Although never openly admitting to alarm, the BDP took the 1984 elections seriously. For the first time the BDP used a party primary to select national and local government candidates, a device which had among its several virtues creating interest in the election and ensuring that the candidate put forward had at least a degree of popularity. President Masire used his constitutional powers to set the date of the election and, within limits, to control the length of the campaign period to call the election marginally earlier than the opposition expected and provide for the minimum time between the issue of electoral writs and the holding of the election. Each of these devices worked to the advantage of the comparatively well-organised and well-financed BDP and to the disadvantage of the opposition parties which, although they should not have been, were caught off guard.

The 1984 results are revealed in the appropriate column in Table 1. The heightened 'vigour' of 1984 is attested to by both the substantial increase in the number registered to vote and the jump in the percentage poll. Beyond this, the aggregate results were probably a disappointment to all concerned. The BPU performed poorly. The BIP again failed to win a single seat and for the third time saw its share of the popular vote decline. The BPP was again limited to a single seat and also saw its share of the vote reduced. The sole opposition party to make a respectable showing was the BNF, but it too failed to win seats which it had expected. The BDP, while it could congratulate itself for having done better than some observers had predicted, was still deeply disturbed by the inroads of the BNF. It is noteworthy that in the aftermath of the elections the BDP for the first time joined the opposition in crying foul and urging reform of Botswana's electoral legislation (although it should also be noted that a close investigation, while detecting a few minor irregularities, failed to reveal any evidence of systematic electoral cheating on a scale which would have tipped any contest in the favour of any party. Polhemus 1985 a and b.

Two of the BNF seats were in Ngwaketse areas regularly delivered to the party by ex-Chief Bathoen, the disaffected traditional ruler referred to previously. One of the seats won by the BNF was Okavango, in the far north-west of the country, a result which came as a surprise to most observers (including the University of Botswana Election Study project, which had not included Okavango among the 12 constituencies targetted as being of particular interest or significance). The Okavango result is explicable by a series of things, including the campaign run by the candidate who had captured a few hundred votes as an independent in 1979 and immediately begun campaigning for 1984, being co-opted by the BNF



along the way. He made a particular issue of unemployment, a theme which struck a responsive chord in an area severely effected by the winding down of recruitment for the South African mines in recent years. He also benefitted fortuitously from changes in constituency boundaries resulting from the 1982 delimitation exercise. Most disturbing to the BDP, however, were BNF gains in urban areas. A BNF candidate won in Gaborone North, one of two constituencies into which the capital had been divided prior to the election, and Dr. Koma came within a few hundred votes of capturing Gaborone South from Vice President Peter Mmusi. Beyond this, the BNF won control of the town council in Gaborone and made substantial gains in both the national and local elections in the new mining town of Selebi-Pikwe. Furthermore, the BPP won control of the town council in Francistown.

For a period of time after the elections there were opposition fears that the BDP government would, as it had done before, take advantage of provisions in the local government legislation to appoint BDP members to the town councils in such numbers as to outvote the elected opposition members, thereby regaining control. In the end the BDP eschewed this possibility for several reasons. One was that to have acted in this manner, although it could have been done legally, would have had the appearance of blatant manipulation, something which would run counter to both the BDP's image of itself and the image it projects to the world. Beyond this, there was a decision to give the opposition parties, heretofore enjoying the luxury of criticism without responsibility, sufficient scope to discredit themselves.

BDP satisfaction with the 1984 outcome, as well as Botswana's reputation for well - and fairly conducted elections, received a further blow on 12 October 1984, more than a month after the election results had been announced, when it was revealed that an unopened ballot box for the National Assembly constituency of Gaborone South had been discovered in the National Archives. This contributed to a BNF challenge of the electoral outcome and resulted in a High Court decision declaring the election in that constituency null and void and requiring a re-election. After a hard-fought contest, the re-election was won by the BNF's Dr. Koma, over-turning the previous result.

Precisely how what perhaps inevitably came to be referred to as 'ballotgate' occurred has not yet emerged. Fraud has been alleged, although it would appear that a more likely explanation is that advanced by an individual who has been involved in the administration of several of Botswana's elections who suggested that the 1984 supervisor of elections should have paid more heed to the advice of a previous supervisor to the effect that those 'who are known to be chronic alcoholics or notoriously incompetent at organising anything' should not be made election officials (Republic of Botswana, 1979). Whatever the explanation, President Masire was right in referring to the incident as a 'black moment in Botswana's democratic history', although on Botswana's behalf it can at least be said that the system was able to redeem itself after a major flaw.



Whether the election of one of the opposition parties would spell the end to the Botswana success story depends on point of view. It would in any event spell an end to the predictability and stability which have characterised de facto one party rule by the BDP. Botswana's strong public service would doubtless ensure a high degree of continuity. However, the most likely contender to replace the BDP is the BNF and the 'scientific socialist' policies espoused by that party in opposition do not appear to have been closely associated with conspicuous success stories elsewhere in Africa.

Be that as it may, there is little in the 1984 election results that suggests the BDP government is in immediate danger of being swept from office by constitutional means. However, the polarisation of opposition support in the relatively radical BNF and in urban areas, with the increasing marginalisation of the other opposition parties, has caused the BDP to devote considerable attention to future election tactics for dealing with urban problems such as unemployment, especially among the young. What success the BDP will have in dealing with such intractable problems remains to be seen, but there are other ways in which the increased 'vigour' of politics in Botswana may tarnish the country's liberal democratic image. Thus far the BDP has not found itself seriously threatened, but if opposition becomes stronger or threatens, as the BNF has on occasion hinted, to behave in illegal or extraconstitutional ways the hand of government in dealing with it will be less benign. The day could come when Botswana has political prisoners or, at least, political exiles.

A notable feature of political life in Botswana during the past several years has been the emergence for the first time on any significant scale of local mass media independent of government. Electronic media remain a government monopoly, with no privately owned domestic alternative to Radio Botswana (Botswana has no local television, but BOP TV from Bophutatswana and South African television are avidly watched in Gaborone). Until 1982 the government owned and operated Daily News had been the only local paper of any duration (although South African and, to a lesser extent, Zimbabwean papers had a large readership). Although the Daily News has never been as fulsome in its praise of the governing party or as one-sided in its reporting as some state-owned papers, it would still be fair to say that a close reading of the Daily News through the years, while it might reveal little or nothing but the truth, would also not reveal the whole truth about Botswana. Because it has always been distributed free, the Daily News has not found it necessary to engage in sensationalism to boost circulation. Although it has occasionally irritated other branches of the government and been forced to print retractions, it has not gone out of its way to draw attention to warts on the body politic. The opposition parties have complained for years, with some justification, of denial of access to the state-owned media, including the Daily News.



Government de facto monopoly on the print media was effectively broken with the establishment of the Examiner by a group of Botswana citizens in August-September 1982. The Examiner hewed to no particular party line, but declared itself to be 'patriotic', committed to the interests of Botswana, and 'ruthless and remorseless in publishing all the news it can get'. In the process of being 'ruthless and remorseless' the Examiner published stories which would not have appeared in the Daily News ranging from the relatively minor ('Permanent Secretary fined for Drunken Driving') to the highly sensitive, such as a series of articles probing the delicate issues of Botswana's refugee policy and its relations with Bophutatswana. In so doing it occasionally got in hot water with the government. In April 1983 the editor of the Examiner was engaged in litigation with the police in an unsuccessful attempt to regain copies of a privately published report ('The Threat to Botswana's Food Security' by Robin Rothfield) allegedly based on unauthorised use of confidential documents in the Ministry of Agriculture, which the government sought to repress. In May 1983 the Examiner, which had suffered severely from under-capitalisation from the beginning, published its last issue. In the meantime, however the Guardian, with links with the Mafeking Mail, commenced publication. The Guardian, still being published in 1985, like the Examiner identifies with no particular party but publishes stories intended to boost circulation. Shortly before the 1984 elections the ranks of Botswana papers were joined by a third, the Reporter, affiliated with the Brigades Movement in Serowe. Although not a BNF organ, the Reporter tends towards sympathy with the BNF point of view. In February 1985 another weekly, The Business Gazette, a private venture, began publication in Gaborone.

To the extent that government tolerates the activities of an independent press, the image of the BDP and the Botswana success story may perhaps be burnished. However, there are several ways in which an independent press is likely to have an opposite effect. Much of the country's reputation, both external and internal, is based on what people hear on the radio or read in the press. An examination of much past published writing on Botswana, for example, will reveal a heavy reliance on the Daily News or interpolation from the Daily News. By not powdering over the government's warts and by occasionally taking government to task the independent press will tarnish the government's image. The existence of an independent press prepared to find fault with the government assists the opposition parties, doing some of their work for them even when the individual papers favour no particular party. The independent papers have also shown themselves prepared to devote more space to the opposition than has the Daily News. Finally, by picking at rather than ignoring the government's warts and by seeming to sympathize with the opposition the independent papers may provoke the government into measures anti-thetical to its liberal democratic image, for example the seizure of the Rothfield report from the editor of the Examiner.





Compared to the kleptocracies further north, Botswana has been, and remains notably non-corrupt. Nevertheless, there are impressionistic indications that this may be changing at both the grand and petty levels. The New York politician George Washington Plunkitt once distinguished between 'honest graft and dishonest graft', summing up the former in the saying 'I seen my opportunities and I took 'em'. What Plunkitt might term dishonest graft, for example the acceptance of bribes in connection with the award of government contracts, continues to be extremely rare or absent on a grand scale in Botswana, but an increasing number of individuals seem to be seeing their opportunities and taking them. At the same time, there appears to be an increase in petty corruption at the lower levels of bureaucracy, although it would appear to remain rare and the appearance of an increase may be due in large measure to the fact that with the independent papers for the first time there is regular reporting of court proceedings.

Threats to the Botswana success story have not been purely domestic. In recent years, indeed in recent months, Botswana's international situation has deteriorated on several fronts.

In 1980 when Seretse Khama died Zimbabwe had recently achieved internationally recognised independence after a long period of sanctions and civil war. There were high hopes that with Zimbabwe independent the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), which Botswana and Seretse Khama in particular had been instrumental in founding in 1979, would make rapid progress towards developing the infrastructure, particularly alternative rail routes to the sea, which would enable Botswana to reduce its functional and economic dependence on South Africa. By 1985, although a number of conferences had been held, plans adopted, and aid donors lined up, SADCC could point to very little by way of concrete accomplishments. In particular, no identifiable progress had been made in loosening Botswana's ties to South Africa through SADCC.

At the same time, relations between Zimbabwe and Botswana had revealed a number of sources of friction. On the political level, Botswana's granting of assylum to several thousand refugees from the activities of the Zimbabwe Army's Fifth Brigade in Matabele-land produced what one Zimbabwean diplomat referred to as an 'ongoing conflict' between the two countries, a conflict which included exchanges of fire and border incursions. On the economic level Zimbabwe moved to block imports of textiles from Botswana, claiming, with some justification, that the burgeoning textile industry in Botswana was based on manufacturers who had fled the minimum wage and other new labour conditions in independent Zimbabwe. Botswana, on the other hand, had found it necessary to take measures to stop the dumping of Zimbabwean construction materials (presumably by Zimbabwean manufacturers who were seeking to build up external holdings of the Botswana pula, a relatively hard and freely convertible currency compared to the Zimbabwe dollar) and Botswana was casting about for other means of bringing economic pressure to bear on Zimbabwe. At a popular level the Zimbabwe press were drumming up resentment against Botswana, while in Botswana people



were coming to resent what was perceived as Zimbabwe's lack of gratitude for Botswana's support during the liberation war. Although the two governments have made repeated efforts to resolve their differences, including an exchange of high commissioners, all of this tended to make mockery of any spirit of SADCC at a time when the changing situation in South Africa made SADCC of greater than ever potential importance to Botswana.

Since before independence Botswana's policy with regard to South Africa, reiterated often by both President Masire and his predecessor, has been that while it will accept South African refugees for humanitarian reasons, it will not under any circumstances allow its territory to be used as a springboard for violence directed against the South African government. At the same time Botswana has recognised, while trying to reduce, the degree of its functional and economic dependence on South Africa. Thus, for example, while it cooperates with South Africa in the Southern African Customs Union Agreement, accepts South African investment, carries out the great majority of its import and export traffic with or through South Africa, recruits labour for South Africa, etc., it has at the same time refused to exchange diplomatic representatives and has in general kept South Africa at the greatest distance possible. (Botswana's relations with South Africa are explored in some detail in Polhemus, 1983).

Through the years South Africa has generally tolerated the distance which Botswana has insisted on maintaining in relations between the two. At the same time South Africa has frequently cast doubts on the sincerity of or the ability of Botswana to enforce the non-spring board policy, and the acceptance of refugees from South Africa has been a continual source of friction (see Polhemus 1985 c). In June 1985 Botswana's charmed co-existence with South Africa came to an end as, for the first time, it was subjected to the kind of murderous raid South Africa had previously inflicted on most of its neighbours.

The South African raid on Gaborone, during which eleven refugees or occupants of houses formerly occupied by refugees, were killed, was the culmination of a campaign of more than a year's duration by South Africa to bring pressure on the Botswana government. Beginning in February 1984, South Africa, impressed by the temporary diplomatic success of the Nkomati Agreement with Mozambique (which, according to Botswana sources, originated from a Mozambiquan initiative) sought a similar agreement with Botswana. Botswana's response was to deny the need for any sort of non-aggression pact, pointing to the non-spring board policy.

In a series of at least five ministerial level meetings, some of them less than cordial, between February 1984 and February 1985 South Africa continued to pressure Botswana to sign an agreement. The usual South African carrot and stick techniques were applied. The carrot was the prospect of South African cooperation in the development of the Sua Pan soda ash deposits, a project of longstanding importance to Botswana which requires the South African market if it is to be economically viable. The threatened sticks were various. Rumours in Gaborone that Pik Botha has a switch



marked 'Botswana' on his desk which can be used to turn off the supply of electricity from ESCOM to Botswana are doubtless apocryphal, but there were threats of incursions and economic pressures, such as sending home Botswana miners working in the South African mines.

In February 1985 a Botswana delegation to South Africa was told, to its great surprise, that South Africa no longer required Botswana to sign an Nkomati-type agreement and that discussions of the Sua Pan project could proceed. This seeming about face on the part of South Africa is attributable to a combination of factors, including: the skillful diplomacy of Botswana; behind the scenes cooperation between Botswana and South Africa in 'moving on' particular refugees whose presence in Botswana South Africa found particularly objectionable; pressures on South Africa from the United States, West Germany and other states sympathetic to Botswana; and a growing realisation of the irrelevance of the original Nkomati agreement itself. However, that South Africa had not abandoned its pressure on Botswana was demonstrated shortly after the return of the ministerial level delegation, when a house occupied by a South African refugee in Jinja, an area of Gaborone, was flattened by a bomb explosion. This, in the phraseology of one ambassador accredited to Gaborone, left the Botswana government in the position of waiting for the other shoe to drop. It dropped in June 1985, with a preliminary tremor in May when a South African refugee presumed to have been on the list of those to move on was killed in a car bomb explosion in Gaborone.

The events of June 1985 dramatically point to what is the greatest threat to the Botswana success story, which stems not from domestic developments but from Botswana's inevitable involvement in the future of South Africa. The rising level of violence in South Africa will spill-over into Botswana, through refugee pressures and physical incursions by the South Africa Defense Force or its proxy, the Bophutatswana Defense Force. Given Botswana's undiminished, and perhaps increased, economic relations with South Africa, and South Africa's determination to use the states around it as hostages, any economic sanctions directed against South Africa, to the extent that they become effective, will hit Botswana harder and sooner than South Africa itself. SADCC offers little short or medium term prospect of alternatives and although the recently opened new international airport in Gaborone was built with sanctions against South Africa in mind, politicians and others posturing at a distance seem unlikely to stage the equivalent of a Berlin airlift for the benefit of Botswana.



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