

BEYOND THE STATE

Botswana's Democracy and the Global Perspective

Patrick Molutsi

Patrick Molutsi is executive secretary of the Tertiary Education Council
P / Bag BR 108 Gaborone, Botswana
Tel: +267 390 557 / 71813848; Fax: +267 390 1481
e-mail: pmolutsi@tec.org.bw

ABSTRACT

The success of democracy is determined both by the extent to which the citizens of a democratic country enjoy rights, freedoms, and a high quality of life and the extent to which the foreign policy of a democratic country articulates its democratic culture and principles abroad. The Western so-called mature democracies have described democracy as their way of life and anyone who is seen to threaten this way of life as their enemy. This particular stand has been clearly brought to the fore by post-September 11 political developments and the USA and UK invasion of Iraq in 2003. The question this paper raises is who has the right to promote democracy? Can democracy success cases such as Botswana be promoters of democracy as well? Does democracy promotion bring any benefits to the promoter? I argue that indeed Botswana has been successful in establishing her democracy at home against all odds. I conclude, however, that Botswana has been a reluctant promoter of democracy abroad. As a result the country's potential democratic leadership mantle has been taken over by new democracies such as post-apartheid South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is an all-round culture and practice of a state and its citizens. Once developed it should become integral to the behavioural pattern of the state beyond its borders. It is in this context that the United States of America and the countries of Western Europe spend billions of US dollars each year promoting democracy in 'less democratic or non-democratic societies'. The countries concerned see this activity as one of the necessary tools for the promotion of 'peace and stability' around the world.

Although these so-called mature democracies are often at pains to assure the rest of the world that they are not exporting democracy and claim that democracy is the choice of an individual country and cannot be exported from one country to another, research shows that almost all of them are, in fact, doing so (IDEA 2003). Each year millions of dollars are spent on democracy promotion abroad; supporting elections, parliaments, civil society groups, media and political parties (Carothers 1999). The focus is very clear and one-sided. The promoters come from both the USA and the European Union countries (the original 25) and from the recipient countries of Africa, Asia, the former Soviet Union region, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

In justifying the invasion of Iraq in 2003 the Bush Administration and its allies, for instance, have constantly used the concept of 'regime change', maintaining that the people of Iraq desired to be liberated from what was said to be the grip of a cruel dictatorship. However, despite the new constitution and subsequent elections, which ushered in a new regime in Iraq, there has been no peace and no democracy. Nevertheless the Bush Administration claims the people of Iraq are better off now than they were before the invasion.

When can a country export democracy? Which countries are able to claim the authority to promote democracy? This paper examines the extent to which Botswana, as one of Africa's proclaimed democracy success stories, has been able to support and consciously promote democracy beyond its borders. We ask the questions, has Botswana been too conservative? Would promoting democracy beyond the state have helped Botswana to be better known abroad than it is now?

In order to arrive at the answers the paper attempts to analyse Botswana's historical role and its contribution to different regional and international organisations such as the Frontline states, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)/African Union (AU), the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the United Nations (UN).

I define democracy promotion broadly to include support for elections, parliaments, civil society, media, participation in regional and global peace-keeping efforts, election monitoring and observation, and other related activities, including signing important regional and global resolutions and conventions such as those concerning the rights of women, minority groups, children, exchange of criminals, and related activities.

DEMOCRACY AT HOME: BOTSWANA'S SUCCESS STORY

The paper addresses the subject of Botswana's use of democracy as a tool of her international relations. Nevertheless, it is important to establish whether or not

Botswana can indeed be defined as a democracy. On 30 September 2006 the country celebrated 40 years of independence. They are also 40 years of political stability and relative economic success. We isolate some of the key features that seem to guarantee the sustainability of the current liberal democratic system.

Constitutional Protection

At independence in 1966 Botswana adopted a liberal democratic constitutional dispensation with the protection of basic rights and freedoms. Since then the Constitution has remained relatively intact, with a few minor modifications. This is not, however, to say that the Constitution covers every aspect of the social and political rights of all persons and/or groups to their satisfaction. The ethnic minorities have continued to express dissatisfaction with the fact that their chiefs do not seem to have equal status with the chiefs from so-called majority groups. This, they say, is because they are either not represented or their representation is limited to four rotational places in the House of Chiefs, which is an advisory house of Parliament. Similarly, trade unions, women and some hunter-gatherer Basarwa are dissatisfied with certain aspects of the Constitution or other legislation.

The Rule of Law

The Constitution on its own is not adequate if the culture of the rule of law is not entrenched. Botswana's success has, therefore, been the state's ability to recognise and adhere to the principle of the supremacy of the rule of law and the Constitution (Masire 2006). This has been evident in cases such as *BNF vs Government*, which dealt with the 1984 Gaborone South Constituency election dispute, and in *Attorney General of Botswana vs Unity Dow* 1998 and several such cases where the state was defeated in the courts.¹ The private media too have won cases against the state on a number of occasions.

Again this is not to suggest that the state has complied with every judgement and has not used the rule of law to its advantage. Many civil society groups and trade unions have complaints about the non-compliance of the government with international conventions and declarations. Botswana took an inordinately long time to ratify, for example, the International Labour Organisation Conventions and even the Convention on the Equality of Women against Discrimination (CEDAW).

¹ In this regard it will be interesting to see how the government will respond to the court's decision favouring the application in *Roy Sesana and Others vs the Attorney General*.

Multiparty Elections

Botswana is widely recognised as one of Africa's democracy success stories. By 2004 it had held nine successive elections. Although in every election the ruling Botswana Democratic Party has been returned with a comfortable majority the elections have been multiparty in nature, with some broad representation of the different sections of the population. The other tenets of liberal democracy have evolved over time. For example, while state-controlled media are still predominant, private media enjoy some degree of freedom; civil society organisations, including the trade unions, have been able to organise; and political opposition has grown in strength. However, the opposition parties and private media have expressed constant dissatisfaction with the role of the state media and their domination by the government, sometimes to the latter's political advantage.

Watchdog Institutions

In the past one-and-a-half decades Botswana has introduced a new layer of institutions, known as watchdog institutions, whose main function is to safeguard democracy, promote transparency and guard against corruption. Among these are the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the Ombudsman, and the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (DCEC). These have made a difference to the way citizens perceive the protection of their rights and freedoms. The IEC, for instance, has significantly reduced the number of post-election disputes and conflicts and there are fewer post-election court cases than in the past. Parties are involved much earlier in election preparations and the Commission is seen as relatively autonomous compared to the Office of the President, from which the elections were initially administered. Although generally perceived as lacking the power to take firm action against the culprits, both the Ombudsman and the DCEC are considered useful confidence-building institutions.

Economic Infrastructure for Development

Democracy without development is limping and fragile. Botswana inherited a classic case of underdevelopment (Colclough and MaCarthy, 1980). However, according to World Bank rankings, the discovery of minerals, especially diamonds, in the second part of the 1960s transformed the country's economic situation from one of the poorest to that of a middle-income country. The government has used its mineral revenue to improve its legitimacy and promote internal

democracy. For example, Botswana has steadily built an impressive physical infrastructure in the form of a roads network, airports/air strips, and communication in the form of telephones, postal services, radio stations, television, internet and newspapers; institutional infrastructure in the form of schools – primary and secondary; colleges, institutes and universities and financial institutions of different types also exist and are generally well kept. These now form the basis of sustained development and democracy.

The issues of the spread of this infrastructure as well as its maintenance remains quite daunting for the future. As a safeguard, however, Botswana keeps some US \$6.2 billion in foreign reserves (Government of Botswana 2006).

Poverty Reduction

Botswana has managed, through employment, self-employment, and state support for weak and disadvantaged groups, to reduce the level of poverty from well over 70 per cent at independence to some 37 per cent of households in the early 2000s.

In March 2005, for instance, about 298 000 people were in formal sector employment and unemployment was estimated at about 24 per cent. In the same year government supplied food rations to more than 60 000 vulnerable individuals across the country. Using diamond revenue Botswana has created a fairly comprehensive social welfare system in which 90 per cent of primary-school age children are at school, 70 per cent have access to basic junior secondary education, 62 per cent have access to senior secondary education and roughly 12 per cent to post-secondary education. More than 70 per cent of households have access to clean drinking water; some 60 per cent have hygienic sanitary disposal of waste and the level of literacy has increased from less than 20 per cent at independence to the current 81 per cent (CSO 2001).

In summary, in the past four decades Botswana has managed to develop a fairly stable and legitimate liberal democratic state which appears to be sustainable both politically and economically. By meeting the intrinsic needs of democracy – protection of rights and freedoms (Sen 1999) and instrumental needs – social welfare, the country appears to have entrenched a democratic culture. There are challenges ahead relating, for example, to growing inequality; persistent unemployment even of the educated youth; persistent poverty and over reliance on the state by large sections of the population; continued dependence on mineral revenue and the hazards of HIV / AIDS. These, however, are problems that face many economies around the world, especially the developing world, and emerging ones such as China and the post-socialist economies of Eastern and Central Europe. In this context we can argue that Botswana has a commodity in

the form of democracy to promote and share with the rest of the world. The question is, has Botswana realised this and acted accordingly? It is to this that we now turn.

COMMITMENT TO THE PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY IN THE REGION

When Botswana gained its independence the external environment was hostile. The white minority regimes in neighbouring South Africa and Namibia; in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Angola, were directly opposed to the multiracial democratic experiment the country established at independence. Like Lesotho and Swaziland, Botswana was totally reliant on South Africa for external communication, imports, and even the meagre government revenue from the Common Customs Union with South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland. At this early stage Botswana was actively looking to the international community for support. The envoys were sent in different directions, including to the UN, the OAU, the Commonwealth, and the NAM. Initially, mainly out of a lack of understanding of the circumstances of the country, such representations were rebuffed, for instance, at the OAU (Carter1980). According to Carter, Botswana was seen as a Bantustan, or a satellite state of the apartheid regime in South Africa. It was only after several visits by some leading African statesmen of the time such as the then Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda, and Vice-President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya in the late 1960s that external appreciation of Botswana's situation began to emerge.

Botswana's democratic identity was shaped by its first post-independence election in 1969, an election that was critical for the country's democracy in more ways than one. First, it confirmed the countrywide support for the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). The BDP had faced a stiff competition, especially in the southern region where one of the leading chiefs, Chief Bathoen, resigned and sided with the opposition Botswana National Front (BNF). Chief Bathoen was not only a threat to the BDP but, more specifically, to the then vice-president, Ketumile Masire. Masire, who hails from the southern region, was pitted against Chief Bathoen and lost his constituency to the chief. Two other BDP candidates and incumbent members of Parliament in the southern region also lost their seats to the BNF.

The fact that the BDP was able to resist the BNF's encroachment elsewhere in the country and used the window of specially elected member to bring Masire back to Parliament as well as re-appointing him vice-president showed the party's commitment to democracy. Acceptance of Bathoen was also an interesting test case of the government's ability to accommodate serious opposition. On the other hand, Bathoen's move from chieftaincy to politics demonstrated the BDP's success

in silencing the chiefs' opposition to the democratisation process. Chief Bathoen, a senior and experienced chief, had been a thorn in the body politic of the immediate post-independence era and his departure marked his failure to mobilise his fellow chiefs against the government. Thus, the 1969 election, difficult as it was, also left the BDP much more confident and legitimate in its democratisation mandate.

The second important outcome of the 1969 election was the news of the discovery of a significant diamond deposit in the Orapa-Letlhakane area (the region from which the then president, Sir Seretse Khama, originated). The news was timely in the face of the rising expectations of the population. However, the great achievement of the time was the now famous Uppsala Speech by President Khama in 1970. In that speech Botswana marketed its democracy and appealed to the Scandinavian countries for support. The message was simple – we are an island of democracy in a racially troubled region; our success is critical not only for us but for global political change.

Pitched at this global level to a highly receptive audience the President's speech was a great success. The mid-1970s saw the flow of a significant amount of foreign aid from different sources in support of Botswana's democratic development. Clearly this first effort to use democracy as a tool for mobilising resources from the international community was a major success for Botswana. Thereafter, variations on the speech were presented at the OAU, the Commonwealth, NAM and the UN General Assembly.

The third election, in 1974, was not as ground breaking as the second. Although the BDP was once again returned with a large majority, the voter turnout was the lowest in the electoral history of Botswana. The general mood was subdued and events in the region were more politically sensitive as the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique were in the process of gaining independence as a result of the collapse of the military regime in Lisbon. The white regimes in both South Africa and Rhodesia were feeling threatened by the presence of independent black states in Zambia and Tanzania in the north, who were supporting the liberation movements.

Under these conditions Botswana found itself in a tight corner, having to choose between association with independent African states and the international community against the minority white government on the one hand, or neutrality on the other. It was a difficult choice for a fragile state, but Botswana's leaders opted for democracy. This was not without cost. In 1976 Botswana paramilitary police were ambushed and ten of them killed by the Rhodesian armed forces. South Africa launched several raids on Botswana, killing both political refugees and Botswana citizens. Botswana was determined to be part of the democratic struggle in the region and the world and, in 1977, joined Lesotho, Tanzania, Zambia

and Mozambique to form the 'Frontline states', again using the country's democratic credentials to support the democratisation of Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

The position of Botswana among the Frontline states was, however, weakened by both its inability to accommodate freedom fighters and its stand against socialism, with which almost all main liberation movements identified. Within SADC Botswana's direct contribution to restoring democracy was through the joint military intervention, with South Africa and Zimbabwe, in Lesotho in 1998.

PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY IN THE OAU/AU AND NAM

By the late 1970s Botswana had managed to make friends in the OAU and the NAM, among them Zambia and Kenya and, later, Zaire and Tanzania. Bilateral commissions and embassies were established with each of these countries. In the NAM friendship was established with India, Cuba, and the Caribbean islands of Jamaica and Guyana, among others. However, one aspect of the politics of the time, which formed the rhetoric of these inter-governmental organisations, was the need to express a stand on the subjects of capitalism and socialism. As far as possible Botswana avoided the association with socialism that characterised her independent neighbours in the north. The ability to distance herself from socialist leanings allowed Botswana to continue to enjoy British government support and open new relations with the USA. Clearly this anti-racist stand and non-socialist affiliation placed Botswana on a platform of relative neutrality in the context of the Cold War politics of the time. The Non-Aligned Movement was, in many ways, a useful forum in which to air this position.

PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY IN THE COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth has, in many respects, been a problematic organisation for Botswana and other post-colonial states, such as Zimbabwe. Its value has been in the provision of material support in the form of education, cultural exchange, and only limited development assistance, mainly flowing from the 'white' membership – the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada and New Zealand – to immediate post-independence countries such as Botswana. Politically, however, the Commonwealth was always going to be a problem as it often pitted the latter against the former as has been illustrated most recently in the case of Zimbabwe. The sour relations that developed between the UK and Zimbabwe in the late 1990s over the land issue dispute between the white farmers and the Government of Zimbabwe put many countries, especially those in Southern Africa, in the

unenviable position of having to differ with the UK in support of Zimbabwe. At the time Botswana was one of the members of an inner committee dealing with the Zimbabwean issue. The UK and its closest allies on the committee felt that Zimbabwe should be expelled from the Commonwealth because of its undemocratic practices. This posed a problem for Botswana, whose stance on Zimbabwe, its neighbour, would be perceived as a test of its own democratic credentials. This, indeed, was the conclusion of the most influential members of the Commonwealth when Botswana, together with other developing countries in the Commonwealth, chose to position herself on the side of Zimbabwe, a stance that disappointed the UK and Australia.

The Zimbabwe case study shows that Botswana's ability to lead by example has been circumscribed by the country's regional political affiliation to bodies such as SADC and the African Union.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

Given Botswana's democratic practice in the past three-and-a-half decades, it was well placed to be a regional and international promoter of democracy. A combination of a stable democracy and a successful economy placed it in a strategic position, given the general state of both the economy and politics in the region and Africa as a whole during the 1970s and 1980s.

Indeed, as detailed above, in the early years Botswana worked hard to lead the anti-apartheid and decolonisation movements that culminated in the establishment in 1980 of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), transformed into SADC in 1992. However, apart from the Stockholm-based International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), in which Botswana joined like-minded countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Mauritius, Namibia, Costa Rica, Chile, Mexico, and others, the country has been invisible in international fora. IDEA promotes democracy in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the former Soviet Union. Through IDEA Botswana has shown what a democratic country can do in collaboration with others to help democracy to develop in other countries.

However, on the whole, Botswana has remained a reluctant player in global democracy promotion. This reluctance was also evident in the length of time Botswana took to sign many of the international conventions. It has also not hosted any major AU, Commonwealth or UN meetings and has not displayed the type of leadership currently shown by South Africa in initiating peace processes in Burundi, Rwanda or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). When Botswana's Sir Ketumile Masire participated in the Coalition for Africa forum and the DRC peace brokering he did so as a retired leader. Those who appointed him were

recognising him as an individual rather than Botswana as a country with an excellent democratic record. From this perspective it could be argued that Botswana has failed to use its political capital to promote itself internationally. With regard to the UN the country has been an invisible player. Apart from sending the army to participate in the UN Peace Keeping Forces in Somalia and Mozambique in the 1990s, Botswana has not taken part in conflict resolution in countries like Angola.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed the characteristics, performance and quality of Botswana's democracy since it gained its independence in 1966. Overall, the electoral process in the country has been free and fair, attracting the sustained participation of both political parties and the electorate. The election management has improved both organisationally and in terms of autonomy from government control. A democratic culture characterised by a multiparty system and regular elections is established and has evolved. In the past 15 years the political system has shown a capacity to reform, with the independence of the electoral body established, the voting age lowered from 21 to 18 years and the presidential term of office limited to two terms of five years.

However, despite its relative longevity Botswana's democracy does not stand out as more progressive or comprehensively developed than those of the other countries in the region. Several weaknesses found in the region and beyond are also found in Botswana. Indeed, in a number of areas, Botswana performs worse than countries like Namibia, South Africa and Mauritius.

Though over all Botswana has done well in the area which, in the context of this paper, we have described as an intrinsic dimension of democracy, continuous reform at this level will be important to sustain public confidence in the system in the years to come. This need to maintain the achievements of the past decades is high on the agenda of Botswana's democracy as it is on those of other, poorer countries in the region. Poverty remains persistent as unemployment, the impact of HIV/AIDS, slow economic growth and inequality grow. The challenge of sustainability has led in the case of Botswana to some reversal of the mini-welfare system. These measures are bound to generate considerable political debate and a possible backlash for the ruling BDP.

Finally, the paper has indicated that Botswana has been a reluctant and slow player in SADC and in the world. In this regard we have argued that it has failed to take the opportunity to be a democratic leader promoting democracy worldwide. This lost opportunity has now been taken up aggressively by newly democratic South Africa, which is reaping the dividends of its democratic

leadership. We argue in this paper that democracy is a process best demonstrated at home and promoted abroad. Perhaps Botswana can still play a more proactive role in promoting democracy in Southern Africa and in the world. Many countries look up to it for leadership, but do not often get it.

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