

The Transition to Majority Rule in Southern Africa and the Exceptional Case of Botswana

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/22/the-transition-to-majority-rule-in-southern-africa-and-the-exceptional-case-of-botswana/>

JONATHAN PORTER, JAN 22 2012

Explain the value of studying Botswana as an exceptional case for understanding the nature and outcomes of transitions to majority rule in Southern Africa.

Botswana is an exceptional example of a Southern African country which appears to have successfully negotiated the pitfalls inherent in the perilous journey to democratic, majority rule. The failure to respect the various significant components of the 'nation' in numerous other African states has more often than not led to bloody conflict. Botswana's success is not merely a by-product of Seretse Khama or Ketumile Masire's astute leadership, but a testament to what Andrew Reynolds terms the "unusual homogeneity of the Tswana population."^[1] In other, more ethnically diverse African states, all too often consideration and representation was only given to those groups who were deemed to pose the greatest threat to a stable transition. The transitional council of Liberia collapsed in 1996 due to the Abuja agreement^[2] being brokered by international mediators with the interests of particular combatants, whilst overlooking other groups which had the potential to cause violence yet had perhaps not become major actors up to this point.^[3] Essentially Liberia^[4] shows that if there is to be a sustained, peaceful transition to majority democracy, there must be due consideration taken as to what methods of inclusion will be apparent and ensure that they are both comprehensive and complete. Botswana excelled in this regard, not by design but because there was simply not the inherent ethnic division that was apparent in many other sub-Saharan states.

Initially it must be pointed out that both European leaders and their counterparts within Africa viewed an independent Botswana with scepticism. They looked to the more developed states of Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Kenya which had inherited a much more developed infrastructure^[5] to see the possibility of success. There appeared to be a real potential for an independent Botswana to create another Bantustan of apartheid due to the apparent dominance of one ethnic group. The examination of Botswana is in Samatar's words "absolutely essential for overcoming the dominance of afro-pessimism."^[6]

While it is undeniable that Botswana's transition to democratic rule and subsequent success is unique amongst most African states, the nature of its colonial occupation is also most unusual and may provide some clues as to why the process to transition and its aftermath was both peaceful and profitable. In the words of John Holm, colonial rule in Botswana was "so mild even the term 'indirect rule' would be an exaggeration."^[7] The British 'colonial-rule' in Botswana took the form of simply regulating the European population whilst tribal authorities managed tribal affairs with little or no interference from their European overlords.^[8] There were of course some significant changes to culture and certain practices at the behest of the Europeans, but this had a negligible impact if at all, compared to the hardships endured by other colonial possessions.^[9] The British presence was so minor that they even had their colonial headquarters across the border in South Africa.^[10] This "soft" colonialism reduced the grievances Botswana nationalists had, and in some ways undermined the legitimacy of a violent struggle for independence that had happened in other neighbouring states.^[11] Indeed because British possession of Botswana had been so tentative and was more an occupation of convenience than one with any desire to exploit and control, it served to ultimately aid the British reception of the idea and terms of, an independent Botswana. Anthony Sillery, whilst writing in both the relatively immediate and optimistic post-colonial period and from a clearly pro-colonial stance nonetheless illustrates aptly the sentiment at the time when he writes "there are few British dependencies where those relations

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were easier and goodwill more lasting than in Bechuanaland.”[12] I think that one can ponder the reasons why the struggle for Botswana independence never truly evolved into the bloody violence that erupted elsewhere, but more important is to realise that there was never really any cause for violence. Demands for independence were met with very little resistance and I think that it is fundamental to acknowledge that Harold Wilson’s government could find very little justification for the effort and cost that retaining Botswana as a British protectorate would inevitably incur.[13]

When considering the question of the ‘African miracle’ it is also expedient to understand and examine the intricacies of the post-colonial democratic process. Since Botswana independence in 1966, there have been just four presidents, serving an average term of eleven years in office.[14] The BDP has dominated in every election. This is hardly an example of a competitive democracy in action. Interestingly while the BDP has won every national election since 1966, its percentage of the vote has been steadily decreasing.[15] They have managed to retain their hold on power despite this, due in the most part to the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of the opposition[16] but also because the BDP have been perceived as the party that had presided over both the transition to independence (through Seretse Khama) and the unbelievable economic growth that followed.[17] With the struggle for independence firmly in the past and Botswana having established itself on the regional and world stage,[18] coupled with both the down-turn in the economy in the 1990’s[19] and a real lack of a tangible increase in living standards compared to what could be expected with the growth of the Botswana economy,[20] the time for change is perhaps nigh. I think that it is perhaps necessary to point out that Botswana’s economic development has been linked intrinsically with the diamond mines.[21] The main problem with this is that diamond mining is capital rather than labour intensive,[22] thus not providing the employment opportunities that such a high GDP would perhaps imply. This in turn has a knock-on effect creating high levels of income inequality and aiding in the perpetuation of those already at the top of the social and economic ladder, whilst denying the social mobility necessary to both ensure a competitive democratic process and tangible increase in the standard of living.

I think that the other major disparity which can be seen when one attempts to compare Botswana with other Southern African states is that regarding Civil-Society. Some scholars have stated that Civil-Society in Botswana has been “historically absent.”[23] I would dispute this claim, instead preferring to argue that whilst suffering from the same limiting factors prevalent in most of its neighbours,[24] Civil-Society is very much present in Botswana.[25] The main difference is the lack of power which Civil-Societies currently hold. As Holm and Darnolf write; “Civil society exists [in Botswana] as an extension of the bureaucracy rather than as a set of independent actors confronting politicians and civil servants.”[26] This is further reinforced when realised that there has never been a legal strike in the country since its independence.[27] In many other places in Southern Africa, Civil-Society actors have been exceedingly powerful, from the opposition to apartheid rule in South Africa, to the formation of the MDC in Zimbabwe. The lack of such a crucial segment of society in Botswana only serves to highlight the inequality and reliance upon strong, often unopposed government that exists within the country. However, equally one could argue that it is the very lack of such institutions which have often been at the heart of civil unrest in Southern Africa that have enabled peace and prosperity to persevere.

Botswana is an exceptional case in every sense. The value of comparing it to other, perhaps less fortunate Southern African states, which experienced either a violent, turbulent transitional period, or failed to achieve such a great economic growth is perhaps minor at best. Botswana’s inherently unique factors, from it’s homogeneous ethnic make-up, mild colonial occupation and perhaps more importantly; the discovery of extremely valuable natural resources *after* the colonial period have all combined to create a unique situation in the region. As Chris Allen argues; “there are many Africas”[28] and whilst Southern Africa is (and rightfully so) often designated as a separate geo-political region, the case of Botswana has shown just how difficult it is to legitimately compare different states within what is believed to be a related area. All too often those studying the end of colonialism in Southern Africa see a myriad of cases each worse than the other. Botswana can be the contradiction to the negatives, a glimmer of light in a sea of darkness. It is only when examined deeply that one can see that the cracks are still there, merely covered up and forgotten.

There is no doubting that Botswana *is* the great ‘success story’ of Southern Africa, but it is far from perfect. There exists a very real danger that when comparing it to South Africa’s apartheid to the South and Mugabe’s Zimbabwe to the East, Botswana is seen as the pinnacle of achievement for Southern Africa. The flaws of a single party system

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and an over-reliance upon diamond mining may yet come to haunt Bechuanaland. It is in the near future with the down-turn in the world economy and a steadily decreasing percentage of the vote for the BDP, coupled with a unified, organized opposition, that the truth in the 'African miracle' will either be vindicated or refuted.

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^[1] A. Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Democratization in Southern Africa*. (Oxford, 1999) p. 270.

^[2] The peace treaty signed in 1995 in an attempt to end the Liberian civil war.

^[3] Reynolds expands further upon this. See; A. Reynolds. Op cit.

^[4] And other examples such as Angola, Rwanda and S. Africa to name but a few.

[5] A. I. Samatar, *An African Miracle*, (Portsmouth, 1999) p. 1.

[6] Lbid.

^[7] J. Holm, 'Botswana: A Paternalistic Democracy' in L. Diamond et al *Democracy in Developing Countries; Africa*. vol. 2. (Boulder, 1988) p.183.

^[8] C. Keulder, *Traditional leaders and local government in Africa: Lessons for South Africa*. (Pretoria, 1998) p. 100.

^[9] A small "hut-tax" was collected to support the local colonial administration and practices such as polygamy and slavery were curtailed. See; J. Holm, op cit. p. 183.

^[10] Bauer. G & Taylor. S, *Politics in Southern Africa; State and Society in Transition*. (London, 2005) p. 86.

^[11] It was mainly (although not exclusively) the influx of non-Botswana refugees who advocated the harshest measures to attain independence. Refugees whose experiences of a much harsher, racially charged colonialism, coloured their perceptions to the British presence in Botswana.

^[12] A. Sillery, *Botswana: A short political history*. (London, 1974) p. 192.

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^[13] Diamonds were not discovered at Orapa until 1967.

^[14] Sir Seretse Khama served 14 years, Quett Ketumile 18 years, Festus Mogae 10 years & Seretse Khama's descendant is currently in power.

^[15] In 1965 the BDP won 28 seats with 80% of the vote. In 1984 the BDP won 28 seats with 68% of the vote & in 2004 the BDP won 44 seats with just 51% of the vote. See; Bauer. G & Taylor. S, op cit. p. 94.

^[16] However, in 2004 the BNF, BAM & BPP formed an alliance known as the 'election-pact' with the express aim of opposing the BDP. An indicator perhaps of a more competitive democratic arena, one moving away from a dominant party system.

^[17] See; J. Wiseman, 'The Slow Evolution of the Party system in Botswana' in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. Vol. 33, No. 3. pp. 241-265.

^[18] Botswana has taken part in and played a leading role in the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as well as becoming an astute actor in the commonwealth (taking a leading role in the efforts to 'solve' the problems surrounding Zimbabwe), the United Nations and the European Economic Community (EEC). See; C. Alec & T. Tlou, *History of Botswana*, (Gaborone, 1984) pp. 262-265.

^[19] G. Bauer & S. Taylor, op cit. p. 97.

^[20] The Botswana economy has had the highest economic growth rate in the world (averaging 9% between 1966-1999). They have become one of the few Southern African countries to attain a GDP per capita of around \$14,300 (2007). See; <http://www.economywatch.com/world_economy/Botswana> -last accessed 02/05/2011. Despite this, Botswana still has a relatively low life expectancy (around 55 according to the World Bank. See; <http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/bwa_aag.pdf> - last accessed 02/05/2011) and a large proportion of the population is still suffering abject poverty (1/3 of the population lives below the poverty line according to Southern African Regional Poverty Network. See; <http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0003017/3-Botswana_Annual_Poverty_Report_Aug2007.pdf> -last accessed 02/05/2011)

^[21] Diamond mining accounts for over one-third of GDP and over 70% of exports. See; <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1830.htm>> -last accessed 02/05/2011.

^[22] G. Bauer & S. Taylor, op. cit. p. 102.

^[23] Lbid. p. 99.

^[24] Lack of sufficient funding, stable staff bases and membership numbers.

^[25]

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An example of several Civil-Society groups in Botswana can be seen in the Botswana Teachers Union, Botswana Civil Servants Association, the Red Cross. See G. Bauer & S. Taylor, op. cit. p. 99.

^[26] J. Holm & S. Darnolf, 'Democratizing the Administrative State in Botswana' in Y. Bradshaw & S. Ndegwa (Eds) *The Uncertain Promise of Southern Africa*. (Bloomington, 2000) p. 133.

^[27] B. Tsie, 'The Political Context of Botswana's Development Performance' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol. 22. No. 4. p. 607.

^[28] C. Allen, 'Understanding African Politics' in *Review of African Political Economy*. Vol. 22. No. 65. pp. 301-320.

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Date written: 10/2011