

**State: Botswana**

Nanayaa Obeng

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Professor Teesta Ghosh

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Formerly a protectorate, *Bechuanaland*, Botswana has come a long way from its time as a colony of the British Empire. It has a flourishing economy and many believe the country is on the path to becoming a high-income state in the next decade (World Bank, 2020). Since its independence in 1966, the country has been heralded as Africa's success story and an example of good governance and democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The country has never experienced a military coup, civil war, or an authoritarian leader. This is not an easy feat to accomplish as Botswana is surrounded by countries that have been troubled with civil war, conflict, and authoritarian governments. The presence of upheld and respected elections since 1965 is one aspect of the country that differentiates it from its neighbors. However, Botswana has been ruled by a singular party, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), ever since its independence. The party's stronghold on the government and political institutions seems resolute. The focus of this paper will be to analyze the extent to which Botswana is democratic by reviewing its government's party structure and the participatory rights afforded to its citizens.

The Republic of Botswana is a parliamentary republic where the President acts as both the head of government and head of state. This means that the executive branch has access to executive powers and legislative powers as there is no direct distinction between the two. According to the Constitution of Botswana, the President may not hold office for more than ten years which equates two five-year terms (Elkins et al., 2016). The current President is Mokgweetsi Eric Masisi who was indirectly elected by the National Assembly (Legislative Branch) in 2018 (CIA, 2021). He appointed Slumber Tsogwane as his vice president. Both men are members of the BDP and President Mokgweetsi Eric Masisi serves as the current party leader. The BDP has been the main political influence in Botswana since it was founded by former President Seretse Khama in 1962 as the party of independence (Botswana Democratic

Party, 2021). All the past presidents of Botswana have been BDP members, and the party wins large majorities in the parliament by dominating the general elections held every five years. This has created a system where a singular party is dominant in Botswana politics. The presence of multiple political parties is essential in democracies that strive to be truly representative of their citizens. Elections are participatory rights that people are entitled to as a means of having their preferences heard by those in power. While Botswana's elections are free, it can be argued that they are not fair to those in the opposition.

Robert Dahl identified two dimensions of a democratic government: the participation of citizens in the political process and competition among political groups for office. In Botswana's 2019 general elections, voter turnout was 83.5% among the voting age population (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019). This is a remarkable turnout for a country that does not have a compulsory voting policy. It also demonstrates that the citizens of Botswana are active participants in their country's political process. However, competition among political groups for office does not exist in the state. As discussed earlier, the Botswana Democratic Party's monopoly on governance has created a political environment where opposition parties are unable to succeed. There are several reasons for the inability of opposition parties to succeed in Botswana politics.

One, the BDP is known in Botswana as the party of independence and party of former President Seretse Khama. President Khama is viewed favorably by Botswana and his influence can still be seen in the country (Bothomilwe & Sebudubudu, 2011). As President, he oversaw the economic development of Botswana as it moved away from agriculture/livestock to an exporter of rare metals with diamonds being its biggest export (Botswana Democratic Party, 2021). He also invested in establishing strong relationships with neighboring countries and was

influential in the creation of the Southern African Development Council. Some Batswana view voting against the BDP as a vote against Khama's legacy and continue to view the BDP as a continuation of Khama's rule (Botlhomilwe & Sebudubudu, 2011).

The second reason lies in the BDP's advantage as the incumbent party in Botswana (Botlhomilwe & Sebudubudu, 2011). The incumbency advantage is most commonly associated with United States politics but can ultimately be applied elsewhere. The advantage consists of three main factors: name recognition by voters, vast amounts of money dedicated to campaigning, and a public record. During the 1980s, Botswana experienced a drought that had devastating impacts on the rural economy. In response, the BDP-led government introduced the Drought Relief Program that brought much needed aid to the people (Botlhomilwe & Sebudubudu, 2011). Such programs by the government have cemented the BDP as the provider of resources and is a part of their public record that opposition parties lack. In terms of name recognition, the BDP's party leader is the President, and he is able to travel the country and promote his fellow party members running for office. Additionally, the government-controlled media unfairly provides more coverage of the BDP's political events and activities compared to opposition parties. This further creates an unfair political environment where it is difficult for the opposition parties to make their voices heard.

Lastly, the opposition parties in Botswana are not formidable opponents against the BDP. They are disorganized, fragmented, and have no experience in governance. The opposition parties lack the financial resources to properly reach the electorate and inform them of their policies and ideology (Lotshwao, 2011). The Botswana National Front (BNF) is the largest opposition to the BDP. However, it has experienced factionalism that has caused the party to splinter and break off into several smaller parties (Lotshwao, 2011). The absence of a strong

opponent has caused the BDP to remain in power for years and is a disservice to the Batswana. Competition for political power is vital to a democracy's sustenance and it creates a more active electorate. The lack of opposition could also establish the ground for more authoritarian governance from BDP leaders. This was seen during former Presidents Festus Mogae and Ian Khama's administration where those who disagreed with them or voiced contrary opinions were barred from participating in elections (Botlhomilwe et al., 2011). In the case of journalist and professor, Kenneth Good, such actions can result in one's expulsion from Botswana and being labeled as a prohibited immigrant (Good, 2016). Good argued that Botswana's democracy was "highly elitist and authoritarian" instead of the idealistic picture painted by economists looking at economic development as a main factor of democratization (Good, 2016).

In a consolidated democracy, citizens are entitled to exercise their civic freedoms. In Botswana, citizens are able to vote in elections but recent authoritarian actions by political leaders have attempted to curtail certain participatory rights of Batswana. Botswana's Freedom House score from the 2019 report is a 72/100 with the country scoring exceptionally low when it came to political rights (Freedom House, 2019). This is due to the limited participation in Batswana politics from minority communities. Women comprise of only seven seats on the National Assembly and the number of women running for political office is low. Botswana has not ratified nor signed the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance or the Maputo Protocol (Apiko, 2019). Both documents underscore the importance of involving women in politics and essentially guarantee their political rights. By not joining such agreements, Botswana's government is essentially displaying their lack of commitment towards this issue. The exclusion of a large portion of the electorate, whether intentional or not, can be detrimental to Botswana's democracy.

Another group that has been disregarded in Botswana politics and largely marginalized is the LGBT+ community. In 2019, judges voted to overturn the anti-sodomy laws that existed in Botswana and framed it as protecting human rights (Yuhas, 2019). The invalidation of these laws expanded rights to a group in Botswana society that has been ostracized and discriminated against. If Botswana were to continue expanding the rights of marginalized people, the country's political process would become more representative of its citizens.

One major weakness in Botswana's democracy is its media apparatus. As mentioned earlier, the media in Botswana is mainly ran by the state with outside news sources being underfunded and regulated to the background. Botswana's 2008 Media Practitioners Act created an institutional body that regulates the media and requires all those who are involved in the media industry to register with the body or face a fine/prison time (Freedom House, 2019). The government has also instituted a ban that prevents private advertising from appearing on non-state media outlets. Such policies and actions serve to further infringe upon the rights of citizens to actively exercise their participatory rights. How then can Botswana be truly democratic if it continues to deny or limit certain civil liberties from its citizens.

Ultimately, I would argue that Botswana is currently acting as a plebiscitarian or as the Democracy Index Report (2020) states a "flawed democracy" (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020). Although the country has free elections, they are not fair or competitive with a single dominating party having all the political power. Additionally, the recent actions by the BDP-led government to limit the civic freedoms of citizens is alarming as such actions are usually undertaken by authoritarian leaders. I think that in order for Botswana to get back on track as a strong democracy, the electoral system will have to change. It should be made easier for opposition parties to have a say and a greater impact on election results. The recent 2019

elections gave a glimpse into what could happen if there was more competition in Batswana elections (Apiko, 2019). It would be a great disservice to democracy if Botswana were to become nondemocratic and it is up to the leaders and citizens to implement purposeful policies that expand civic freedoms in the country.

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