

# Democracy in the face of a weak opposition in Botswana

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## Abstract

*This article discusses the political space that is anchored in the liberal democratic framework, and the ability of political parties to propagate their political views, in Botswana without fear or favour. It problematises the need for opposition parties to coalesce into a united front that would emerge as a credible democratic alternative to Botswana Democratic Party rule. The thesis of this article, was somewhat weakened by the results of the 1999 elections largely due to the split in the opposition vote, is that the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system, which Botswana operates has produced a two party system with one party dominating the poll. The effective two party system has made it difficult for smaller political parties, let alone independent candidates, to develop a niche in the political environment. Yet another salient feature is the lack of internal democracy within political parties across the political plain.*

## Introduction

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (1990) concluded that Botswana was "enjoying a reputation as the most democratic nation on the African continent". A "shinning light of democracy", as Kenneth Good (1997) has recently argued, "beamed forth from Botswana over the apartheid and single party dominated region". To Good, the light is now fading, for "what was accepted as democratic within the region of apartheid and dictatorship looks different when, since 1990, more open, limited and accountable governments are established in Namibia and South Africa" (Good, 1997:3). In view of these assumptions and political developments, it has become important to re-examine Botswana's democratic practice.

This article provides a critique of Botswana's democratic practice from the specific perspective of political parties. Admittedly, competition between political parties within a liberal political environment, where free and fair elections are regularly conducted, cannot be a foolproof measure of democracy. But, where the organs of civil society are relatively weak or are in the process of being formed, as is generally true of Botswana, the activities of political parties can serve to provide insight into the practice of democracy.

Kenneth Good (1997:30-31) is correct to say that the establishment of democracies in the countries of the region provides Botswana with a yardstick with which to size itself, which is essential for the improvement of its record of democracy. However, to use Namibia and South Africa as absolute yardsticks only because they have relatively democratic constitutions, and have since put in place some structures that have the potential to promote participation by the people is not entirely useful. These are fairly new democracies, which have not yet been tested. In a move that undermined democratic practice, Namibia, for instance, has recently amended its constitution to allow President Sam Nujoma to run for a third term of office.

This article addresses the above concerns in three broad areas. First, it discusses the formation, structures and ideologies of Botswana's political parties and the extent of their differences. Second, the paper assesses the opportunities for all the parties of capturing state power from the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), which has enjoyed political dominance since 1965. Finally, we address the question of whether or not the opposition parties offer any alternative agenda to that of the BDP.

## End of Colonial Rule and Evolution of Political Parties

Political mobilization and organization came very late to the Bechuanaland Protectorate. In fact, it was not until 1959, a year before Harold Macmillan's famous "winds of change" speech, which heralded the de-colonisation of Africa, that the first political party in the country was founded. This was just a year before the elections to the first Legislative Council. In view of this coincidence of occurrence of major political developments, some scholars such as Weinstein and Grootpeter (1973:8) have argued that primarily the colonial government provided the motivation for political mobilisation in Botswana. This is in contrast to West and East Africa where the dominant players were the intelligentsia. Weinstein and Grootpeter further contend that even where there was some form of anti-colonial agitation, it was not by the intelligentsia but traditional leaders. This latter argument unfortunately fails to appreciate the very interesting relationship between the traditional leaders and the intelligentsia in pre-colonial Botswana. The sons of chiefs were the first to receive education, and by comparison with others received the best education. Sir Seretse Khama, the founder of the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and first president of the Republic of Botswana, is a good example of someone who was of royal origin, but nevertheless qualified as a member of the intelligentsia.

Nengwekhulu (1979), on the other hand, has attributed the late development of political mobilisation in Botswana, and more specifically the formation of political parties, to the fact that colonial exploitation in the country was less vicious than in other parts of Africa such as South Africa. According to him, political parties emerged in the early 1960s because of the general de-colonisation process in Africa. Botswana was not insulated from this process, because of the influx of South African refugees into the country in the aftermath of Sharville, and the return of Botswana migrant workers who had been politicised in South Africa. Nengwekhulu sustains his contention with the fact that two founding members of the first serious political party, the Bechuanaland People's Party (BPP) were political activists in South Africa. More extensive research by Jack Parson (1984), however, has cast doubt on the politicisation of Botswana migrant workers. According to Parson, hostel conditions and the fact that while back in Botswana they continued their customary rural existence militated against the formation of any political consciousness amongst migrant labourers.

The Botswana experience is even more interesting when examined in comparison to the rest of colonial Africa. While in other parts of colonial Africa the Second World War gave birth to forces that championed struggles for independence, this was not the case in Botswana. Following the close of the war, the ex-servicemen lost contact with one another because of lack of employment opportunities back home. The ex-servicemen in Botswana failed to produce protest movements that the nationalists could exploit to speed up the struggle to end colonial rule, as was the case in other parts of the continent (Killingray & Rathbone, 1986: 174).

For a variety of complex and interrelated factors, political parties in Botswana emerged in the late 1950s. Such factors included the influence of the de-colonisation processes throughout Africa, general disillusionment with British rule, dissatisfaction with the racial constitution of the proposed Legislative Council, and to a lesser extent the influence of events in South Africa. The first political party to be formed was the Federal Party of L.D. Raditladi, a member of the royal family from Serowe. This was a very poorly organised party that never attracted more than 50 followers, and was to disband soon after the formation of the BDP in 1962.

The second political party and by far the most serious was the BPP, which was formed in December 1960. The founders of the party were Motsamai Mpho, former activist of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, Philip Matante, also a former member of the ANC, and Kgalemang Motsete, a member of the intelligentsia from Serowe, who became the party's first president. This was a party that was bitterly opposed to the dictatorial disposition of *diKgosi* (chiefs), as well as the proposed constitution of the

Legislative Council, which they viewed as a design to perpetuate colonial exploitation. The party was founded as a national liberation movement to organise the Batswana and to prepare them for full participation in politics. Contrary to the popular view that the party was formed essentially to oppose the racist constitution of the Legislative Council, which allocated council seats on racial lines, the party was formed to campaign for the immediate transfer of power to the citizens of the country. The racist constitution of the Legislative Council if anything provided ready ammunition to attack the colonial government.

The popularity of the new party, especially in the urban centres of the country, worried the colonial administration and the more moderate forces. The BPP was considered too radical to champion the nationalist struggle in Botswana. It was a known fact that it drew support from the Pan-Africanist Movement and more specifically from the Convention People's Party (CPP) led by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Such fear of the BPP was to translate into the formation of the Bechuanaland Democratic Party (BDP) in 1962. Although the BDP has always denied that the colonial administration played a part in its formation, there is sufficient evidence to prove it. The BDP enjoyed a lot of support from the colonial administration, especially from the then Resident Commissioner Peter Fawcus, who saw it as promising a peaceful transfer of power. Most of the founding members of the BDP were members of the Legislative Council, including Seretse Khama who became its first president, his deputy Ketumile Masire and Moutlakgola Nwako. Right from the outset the BDP defended the right of the settler community in Botswana to participate fully in the politics of the country, a feature that was to win it international recognition when it was in power.

In 1964, Motsamai Mpho and his supporters broke away from the BPP to found the Bechuanaland Independence Party (BIP). Many commentators have explained the split of the party by ideological differences. Those who subscribe to this view such as Nengwekhulu (1979), argue that the split of the ANC, which resulted in the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), also affected the BPP, as Matante had allegedly been in the PAC. In fact, Matante saw conflict between him and Mpho as an orchestrated strategy by the ANC to dethrone him. Research, however, has shown that Matante had never been in the PAC (Bayani, 1992). It would appear that the real source of the conflict was Matante's alleged mishandling of party funds. Mpho accused him of misappropriating money donated to the party by foreign sympathisers, mainly the government of Kwame Nkrumah. As Mpho (1963) put it, "organisation funds are not leaders' pocket money. They are donated in the name of the "oppressed and exploited masses, and they must be used to strengthen the struggle and not the leaders' stomach". On several occasions, Mpho suggested that they take the matter to the national conference for them to judge, and thereby save the party from splitting, but Matante would not agree. This unfortunate split probably denied the BPP the opportunity to lead the country to independence in 1966. The BDP, BPP and BIP were therefore the three parties that went to the self-government elections in February 1965.

In October 1965, eight months after the general elections, a new political party, the Botswana National Front (BNF) was formed under the leadership of East European educated Kenneth Koma. The party was formed to reconcile warring elements in the BPP to create a progressive block to bring down the neo-colonial BDP. As the word "Front" suggests, its strategy was to bring into the party all anti-BDP elements and organisations such as trade unions, associations of civil servants, and even some chiefs. The message of the party was the immediate transfer of power. As should be obvious, right from its formation the party represented various political tendencies, mainly to the left of the BDP, and this characteristic made it prone to splits. This was to cost the party many opportunities in the future.

## **Political and Economic Context**

Following independence, Botswana developed into a true multi-party democracy with a comparatively tolerant political culture that allowed for the existence of political parties of all shades. The practice of liberal democracy during the period when many African countries were opting for one party systems and military regimes was a very powerful weapon that Botswana employed successfully to win the sympathy of foreign governments and donor agencies, at least up to the early 1990s. As stated by Stedman (1993), economically Botswana won praise as a successful model of capitalist development in Africa. Its post-independence economic success, based on diamond discoveries of the 1970s, and the way in which the ruling party managed and utilised proceeds from the economy, was to create a basis for stability which the country has enjoyed for over thirty years. The opening of the diamond mines at Orapa, Letlhakane and Jwaneng, and the coal mine at Morupule, brought vast amounts of revenue to the government. Only the copper mines in Selibe-Phikwe and soda ash at Sowa have become liabilities, frequently requiring financial bailouts from government. Government revenues were augmented by a renegotiated Southern African Customs Union in 1969, and in 1999 the government was again renegotiating the agreement to distribute the proceeds more equitably. These resources, together with donor funding, have over the years been used to finance a variety of government development projects.

Growing poverty and income inequalities, which accompanied economic success, have fortunately been mitigated by development projects that government has implemented over the years (Tsie, 1996:613). If there has been any threat to stability in recent years, it has not been due to economic failure, as elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, but emergent economic crime and corruption, as well as rift within the ruling party (Hope and Chikulo, 1999). As stated above, Botswana's economic success has been coupled with growing disparities in income and economic opportunities. Economic growth, as attested by Hope and Edge (1996), has proceeded side by side with growing poverty especially in remote rural areas, growing unemployment and problems related to urbanisation.

The fragility of the Botswana economy has at times been exacerbated by periodic droughts that threatened the livelihood of small peasant farmers and beef export (an important foreign exchange earner) to the European Union. More recently, there has been cattle lung disease in Ngamiland, which cost government millions of Pula in compensation for cattle slaughtered to eradicate the disease. It is in light of these socio-economic conditions that we need to explain political parties in Botswana.

## **Development of Political Parties in post-independence Botswana**

The post-independence period heralded the development of political parties in four very distinct ways. First, the period saw the consolidation of the BDP's hegemony, which has been described by many commentators on Botswana's political process (Holm and Molutsi, 1989; Molomo and Mokopakgosi, 1991; Stedman, 1993) as a *de facto* one party state system, operating within an environment of multi-party democracy. Second, there was a gradual but steady growth of the BNF, which eventually replaced the BPP as the main opposition, though not seriously threatening the hegemony of the BDP, at least not until 1994. Third, there was a sharp increase in the number of political parties, bringing the total to 12 in 1999. Finally, on the eve of the 1999 elections, four opposition parties (Botswana National Front, United Action Party, Botswana Peoples Party, and Independence Freedom Party) coalesced to form the Botswana Alliance Movement (BAM), designed to capture political power from the BDP. However, the BNF was the first to withdraw from BAM, followed by the Botswana Progressive Union (BPU) just before the polls.

As Table 1 below clearly shows, with the exception of the 1994 election, the BDP has won all other elections with substantial margins, while the smaller political parties have never won a single seat in parliament. The electoral strength of the BDP rested on, among

other things, the fact that it enjoyed political incumbency, which it used effectively to disadvantage the opposition political parties. For example, as a party in power, it ensured that access to the state media by the opposition parties was extremely limited, a situation that was very serious until when, in the late 1980s independent newspapers were established (Molomo and Mokopakgosi, 1991:10). The BDP effectively used the *kgotla*,<sup>1</sup> which tended to exclude other political parties. The party was also in a position to use its incumbency to reward party activists and supporters by appointing them to positions in the diplomatic and civil services, and the councils, land boards, and tribal administration. This situation contributed significantly to its internal stability when the other parties were faced with instability and splits. But more importantly, as explained in the preceding section, the party was able to design projects that by and large targeted its support base. It was this success of the ruling party in the elections that prompted researchers to contend that Botswana was truly a *de facto* one party state.

**Table 1**

Party	1965	1969	1974	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999
BDP	28	24	27	29	29	31	27	33
BPP	3	3	2	1	1	0	0	0
BIP	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
BNF	-	3	2	2	4	3	13	6
BPU	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0
BCP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
BAM	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Total	31	31	32	32	34	34	40	40

**Source:** Election Study Reports

Until 1982, when the Botswana Progressive Union (BPU) was formed, there were only four political parties in the country. The BPU was founded by Daniel Kwele, a man who had "crossed the floor" a number of times in his political career. Kwele was one of the founding members of the BNF, but he resigned after Kgosi Bathoen II was elected vice president of the party in 1979, feeling marginalised within the Front's structures. He then joined the BDP and rose to the position of assistant minister, only to be dropped later, again prompting him to resign. Upon leaving the BDP he formed the BPU. Structurally and ideologically, there was nothing that distinguished Kwele's BPU from his previous party, the BDP. The only issue that appeared to characterise the party was a serious concern with aspects of the constitution of Botswana that tended to discriminate against the non-Tswana speaking citizens of Botswana, including his people, the Bakalanga. It was probably due to this lack of an alternative programme that the party was never successful outside its region of Nkange. Even there, it never won a single parliamentary seat. However, in 1994 it won three council seats, which it subsequently lost in the 1999 election.

The BNF, on the other hand, was able to consolidate and transform itself into the main opposition party, only to be entangled in its own contradiction, notably the conception of a front. The BNF developed as an incubator of different political tendencies within some form of unitary framework. From 1984 onwards, conflicts and tensions started forming between such tendencies, causing the leadership tremendous amount of concern, and even threatening the unity of the party. It was primarily because of such concern that the party leader Dr Kenneth Koma had to explain the idea of a front at the Francistown party congress in 1988. As Koma (1989:11) explained, the front had functioned as "an undifferentiated class alliance or an alliance of undifferentiated interest groups in a unitary constitutional framework." Koma asserted that it was a misnomer to call the BNF a party, because it had always been a mass organization.

In explaining the internal turmoil that plagued the BNF since 1984, Koma (1989:11) stated that the physical and ideological growth of the party had "created a crisis of conscience, which outwardly manifested itself in a series of crisis situations." He added

that these were conflicts that in essence underlay the "contradictions inherent in any unitary class alliance in which the classes and interest groups have no organisational identity". To this end, Koma (1989:11) argued:

This state of affairs is both inevitable and desirable. It is desirable in the sense that it signifies that the BNF is going through a necessary and inevitable period of transformation. This state of affairs means that the BNF in its political evolution has reached a point where we can no longer succeed in ignoring the fact that the different classes and the different interest groups and in fact the different organisations whose members join the BNF have unique and particular interests... We need to organize the alliance so that it should be able to accommodate the articulation of the aspirations of the different interest groups and classes while striking and identifying the minimum of common interests and goals. Organisationally, it means that the unitary class alliance can no longer serve the purpose of our struggle. The implication is that we have now reached a point where the Botswana National Front party's unitary organisational form should be replaced by a multi-organisational united front form.

Koma's conception of a United Democratic Front is that of an umbrella organisation bent on coordinating the affairs of the affiliated organisations. Different classes and groups need to organise with a view to pursuing their maximum programmes and should affiliate to the front only to pursue their minimum programmes. If the front had evolved in the manner in which it was conceived, the Botswana Workers Front (BWF) (discussed below) would have evolved with a view to representing workers' interests. By the same token, the United Socialist Party (USP) (also discussed below) would have propagated socialist interest within the overall framework of a united front. With respect to the formation of BWF, Koma commented that, notwithstanding the circumstances under which it was formed (a quarrel involving Shawn Nthale and some members of the BNF), its conception was along the right lines of facilitating the establishment of a multi-dimensional united front.

Political developments within the Front, however, did not turn out this way. Instead, the conceptualisation of the Front has led to divisions and splits of the party. The first major split was in 1989 following the Francistown congress. The Southern region broke away from the party, and a mass exodus of leading members of the party followed, including L. Tlhomelang, formerly BNF Member of Parliament for Kanye constituency. In the wake of all this, a new party emerged - the Freedom Party (FP) led by Tlhomelang which registered on 30 August 1989. In an interview with M. Molomo on 26 July 1992, Tlhomelang intimated that the primary event that forced him to resign and form a party was the 1988 Francistown congress. At that congress, he said, they were told that the BNF was not a party, but a front which encompassed a broad spectrum of groups, classes and the like. Tlhomelang resigned because he had until then operated under the illusion that BNF was a political party. This split undoubtedly cost the BNF the Kanye and Ngwaketse South constituencies in the 1989 general election. These constituencies were, however, regained in 1994 and retained in 1999.

Like the BPU before it, the FP did not provide any alternative programme or ideology to those of the existing parties. For all intents and purposes, the FP, which believed in the free enterprise system towed, the same ideological position as the BDP. To differentiate it from the BDP, Tlhomelang argued that the BDP government paid lip service to investment creation. On education he argued that it should prepare people to be self-employed rather than to rely exclusively on formal employment. Nevertheless, it remains a party to the right on the ideological spectrum.

It is possible that the BNF's Social Democratic Programme (SDP) which was launched in 1994 may have won it a few friends. The programme went a long way to chart an alternative development strategy to that of the BDP. All along the BNF had propagated radical politics subscribing to a socialist ideology. With the SDP the BNF succeeded in shedding itself of the image which the BDP had projected it, "as an insidious threat to

democracy" (Picard, 1985:197–200) which was bent on rendering the country ungovernable and threatening to nationalise people's property. This image had starved the BNF of the support they could mobilise in the rural areas. Foreign investors were also wary of a BNF takeover for fear of nationalisation of their property.

Between April 1993 and the September 1994 five new political parties were formed; four of which were splinter groups from the BNF. These included the Independence Freedom Party (IFP), which was formed on 10 April 1993 in Palapye out of a merger of two political parties - Motsamai Mpho's BIP and Leach Tlhomelang's FP. Mpho was elected president and Tlhomelang Vice-President of the party. At the launch of the party, Mpho said the party was to establish a united and formidable force to unseat the BDP from power and ensure equal treatment of all tribes in Botswana.<sup>2</sup>

In May 1993, another party, the Botswana Workers Front (BWF) was formed as a result of internal conflict within the BNF but was registered four months, later in September. According to its leader Shawn Nthale, what led to the formation of the new party, was that he was being marginalised from top party positions because of his ethnic origin. The BWF emerged as a party that in addition to mobilising workers in general, was formed to articulate the interests of Bakgalagadi whom it felt were marginalised not only politically, but also economically. The BWF was also inspired by the idea of a front and thought they would affiliate with the BNF. Having initially made overtures that he would support the party, upon further reflection Koma (1993) castigated the BWF and criticised Nthale for forming a tribal party, and added that such a party could not form a government.

Lesedi La Botswana (LLB), which literally translates to Botswana's light, of Eithlopha Mosinyi was formed on 9 June 1993 as the first political party in Botswana to be led by a woman. The party has since suffered the same fate as the Botswana Liberal Party that was led by Martin Chakalisa, which was struck from the roster of political parties due to inactivity. It was based on Christian principles of reliance on God, equality, unity, democracy and development. In an interview with the authors, Mosinyi lamented the lack of a Christian basis of the government of Botswana. She recounted that on 25 December 1992 she listened to President Masire's New Year's message and to her dismay he did not thank God for having seen the nation through the year. Upon realising that the BDP government was insensitive to Christian values, she decided to form a party with a philosophy based on Christian democracy. Economically, the LLB believed in the free enterprise system. Based on Christian morality and values, the party argued that there was a need to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in society. In an LLB government, Botswana would be declared a Christian state, although other religions would be allowed to worship (Interview with Eithlopha Mosinyi, 14 August 1994).

On 24 April 1994 the United Socialist Party (USP), popularly known by its acronym PUSO, was formed. Nehemiah Modubule (who is now the BNF MP for Lobatse under the BNF's group membership) formed the party as a splinter group from the BNF. The PUSO believes in a socialist ideology whereby the state controls the means of production. Responding to the question why he resigned from the BNF, and formed PUSO, Modubule recounted events within the BNF as far back as the party's congress in Francistown in 1988. At that congress, he noted, delegates were informed that the BNF would remain a "Front" in which all organs of civil society would affiliate with a view to advancing a common agenda of mass mobilisation against the injustice and oppression of citizens by the ruling party. However, to his dismay, Modubule lamented, the BNF lost direction following the 1991 congress in Kanye where they articulated the view that they were now a party rather than a front. Regarding this, as leader of the youth wing, he concluded that the right wing had gained hegemonic influence over the front and as a result the youth that are inclined to socialism were denied a political space within which to operate. The autonomy that the youth enjoyed was circumvented; leaving them disorganised and frustrated. Modubule resigned, as he explained, to avoid being accused of impeding

progress in the party (interview with Molomo, 12 August 1994). Interestingly, in 1999 PUSO reconciled with the BNF and became part of the group membership. It would appear that the reconciliation between the PUSO and the BNF was founded on the breakaway of the 11 BNF MPs who formed the Botswana Congress Party (BCP), who espoused a more moderate ideological line. The natural affinity between the BNF and PUSO, at the ideological level, was struck once the group that formed the BCP was out of the way. Under this new marriage, much to the discomfort of some members of the BNF, Modubule won the BNF primary election for Lobatse and contested the 1999 elections on the party's ticket. Modubule was elected BNF MP for Lobatse constituency.

The last party to be formed before the 1994 general elections was the Social Democratic Party (SDP) of Mareledi Giddie in July of 1994. This was another splinter organisation from the BNF. Like other splinter groups before it, it offered nothing different from the BNF. It was formed after Giddie lost the primary elections for the Gaborone Central constituency, which he claimed were fixed to favour the then BNF vice-president Michael Dingake. James Olesitse, who had lost the Palapye primaries and other disaffected members from the BNF, later joined the UDF. Giddie and Olesitse after spending some time in political wilderness rejoined their former party, the BNF. Following their return to the BNF, Oarabile Marumo became the leader of the UDF. Giddie contested the 1999 Gaborone Central parliamentary constituency elections on the BNF ticket and lost to Margret Nasha of the BDP.

Another party to enter the political landscape is the United Action Party (UAP), also known as Bosele. The UAP was registered on 23 September 1997 with Lepetu Setshwaelo as its president. The party argues that it was formed to "address the serious loss of firm direction and all sense of strategic vision that is lacking in the current leadership, both government and opposition." Espousing principles enshrined in the Botswana National Vision 2016, Bosele committed itself to a culture of "true democracy, consultation, integrity, transparency, accountability, productivity and compassion." Among other issues, Bosele professes to be sensitive to the rights of youth, women and minorities. Bosele is comprised largely of ex-BDP members who felt left out in the jostling for senior party and government positions. The last party to be formed before the 1999 election was Botswana Alliance Movement (BAM). This party will be discussed in more detail later in the article.

As a party prone to splits, the BNF again suffered a major split in 1998. As discussed in Molomo (2000: 79-80), the causes of the split can be traced to the 1997 congress held at Ledumang in Gaborone. At that congress some of the veterans of the party lost elections for positions in the Central Committee. These veterans then coalesced into a group they called "the concerned group" and challenged the constitutionality of the conduct of the elections. At this stage it became apparent that the party was polarised into two factions: the concerned group which drew sympathy from the party president Dr Kenneth Koma and the parliamentary caucus group, the majority of whom were in the party Central Committee. After various unsuccessful attempts to mediate between the two rival camps, the Central Committee expelled the concerned group from the party. A special congress was convened in Palapye on 11 April 1998 with a view to resolve differences in the party. Unfortunately, at this time positions had hardened to the point that the congress degenerated into an open fight leaving several people injured and property damaged. Further attempts by religious leaders and others to mediate between the two camps failed to produce the desired results. In the end, positions hardened to the extent that 11 of the 13 BNF MPs resigned and formed the new party, the Botswana Congress Party (BCP).

### **Finding a Niche within Botswana's Political Environment**

Political parties are without question the central pillars of Botswana's liberal democratic process. Their role is to mobilise and educate the electorate about their ideologies and programmes of action. It is incumbent upon them, if they are to make an impact on national politics, to formulate clear and coherent policies, which define their respective



political space. As we enter the new millennium, it remains to be seen how political parties will establish for themselves their own political space. For them to survive and perform well in the elections, they have to offer alternative programmes to those of the dominant parties and find somewhere to fit in Botswana's political terrain. If the general elections of 1999 are anything to go by, Botswana has re-affirmed itself as a two party system. Except for the setbacks in the form of splits that the opposition BNF suffered, the 1994 and 1999 elections confirmed that the race was between two parties, the BDP and BNF. Granted the BCP came third with 12 percent of the popular vote, but that was a vote they had chipped off from the BNF. The BCP, with one seat in parliament, are not likely to emerge as a strong contender during the 2004 election.

A survey of political parties carried out by the authors in 14 constituencies across the country in 1992 revealed that all political parties had elaborate and almost similar structures, ranging from the very basic cell, through the ward to branch, constituency, regional, national and central committees. These structures, as the survey revealed, deal with such issues as recruitment of new members, fund-raising, voter education, and campaigns and general coordination. However, what became apparent in the study was that the further one moved away from the main population centers on the eastern belt of the country, party structures tended to exist only in name and not in form. This problem was even more pronounced for the smaller parties. In the more remote constituencies such as the Okavango, Ngami, Kgalegadi and Ghanzi, the party structures tended to be manned by poorly educated people, who quite often did not even understand the ideological positions of the parties they represented. These factors, together with the poor funding of these parties, militated against any consolidation of electoral successes. Also, most of them were established just before the elections, and did not have sufficient time to mobilise the electorate.

An analysis of party campaign strategies also helps one understand the failure of many of Botswana's political parties to establish political space. Since its inception in 1987, the Democracy Research Project (DRP) of the University of Botswana has carried out several surveys including one on political mobilisation and campaign strategies in 1989. The survey revealed that parties generally failed to target their campaign strategies to specific groups. They also tended to lack creativity in designing appropriate campaign strategies. With the possible exception of the 1999 election, political parties have failed to realise the importance of billboards and other campaign media. By and large, they tend to rely on traditional methods of house-to-house campaign and public rallies. These methods, especially public rallies, though effective to some extent, fail to reach certain segments of the population, especially professionals and the elderly. Freedom squares, as public rallies are popularly referred to, are well known for their use of abusive language, and therefore do not attract most people.

These weaknesses were revealed by opinion polls conducted by the DRP during the run-up to the 1994 and 1999 elections. These polls brought to light a number of disturbing features of Botswana's political process. They revealed that political parties not only failed to target their voters but also often entered the election campaign without real issues. Most eligible voters when asked to identify issues they would vote on were not able to do so. Worse still, some of the electorate cast votes for parties without knowing their candidate. In one of the surveys that the DRP conducted in Ngwaketse South, it was interesting to note the reasons why many of the people preferred to vote for the BNF. By and large, they said they would do so because it was the party of the area, the family party, and more interestingly, because "*ke party ya ga Ra-Kgosi*" (it's the party of Seepapitso IV's late father - Bathoen II). As is discussed by Barei in this volume, it is apparent that *bogosi* (chieftainship) still plays an important part in electoral outcomes.

However, the 1999 election was different. In this election campaign, there was affection for billboards. Cases in point were the calendars and timetables, bearing the photograph of their presidential candidate, Lepetu Setshwaelo, which were distributed to

students of the University of Botswana. Political parties also took advantage of the new private radio station, Yarona FM, which carried advertisements for them. Overall, however, such advertisement was concentrated in the urban areas with the BDP demonstrating its financial muscle in buying more airtime, posters and portraits.

### **Factionalism and the Struggle for Hegemony in the Two Leading Parties**

In recent years, serious factional fights have beset both ruling and opposition political parties. These have been motivated by personality clashes as well as struggles for strategic positions within parties. In short, they have been struggles for hegemony. The BDP and BNF have been the hardest hit in this regard. We shall first consider factionalism within the BDP and to some extent the BNF.

The BDP has since independence in 1966 been the main actor in Botswana's political life and has enjoyed hegemonic influence. This influence is manifested by the landslide victories it scored, signifying not only its moral leadership, but also its ideological control in the political arena. This hegemony has also been reinforced by the ability of the BDP government to deliver goods and services. As stated earlier, the BDP has been able to maintain such cohesion by rewarding disgruntled elements with diplomatic and other appointments. However, as the party grew and its membership diversified in ethnic and class composition, cracks began to show. It would appear that what really threatened the BDP hegemony was not so much the opposition parties, but its inability to maintain internal stability.

The BDP has since 1992 been a party polarised by factional fights. These factions manifested themselves along two major camps, popularly known as the Kwelagobe and Merafhe factions. At first the Kwelagobe-Merafhe divisions were perceived by many within the party as a healthy sign of political pluralism, wherein the contenders wanted to secure strategic and powerful positions for themselves and their camp within the party and government. But later, these factions manifested themselves in deep-seated divisions that even threatened the survival of the party. These divisions reached a high point during the primary elections for the 1994 general election when candidates were sponsored along this great divide. There was also concern that the appointment of members of the central committee and cabinet ministers was done with a view to appeasing the two factions. The most cogent example in this regard was the 1997 BDP congress that further exposed the fractures in the party, and revealed that party politics was essentially a chess game where trade-offs were made for the sake of party unity. In what President Festus Mogae said, will "forever remain an indictment to the party" (*Mmegi* 20-26 Nov, 1998) the former President, Sir Ketumile Masire is said to have brokered an agreement to fix the elections of the central committee to avert a split in the party (Molomo, 1998). According to the *Botswana Gazette* (23 July 1997:2), the Merafhe faction threatened to boycott the central committee elections because the Kwelagobe faction had reneged on an earlier deal that Kedikilwe would not challenge Merafhe for the chairmanship of the party.

The BDP entered the 1994 election more divided than ever before. The year 1994 was also characterised by rising unemployment, retrenchments, crime and corruption. What worried the BDP even more was the rampant white-collar corruption perpetrated especially by the top brass of the party. *The Kgabo Report* (1991) was the first of several to expose wrongdoings by party and government leaders. The Kgabo Land Commission was set up to investigate land allocations in the peri-urban areas of Gaborone. The Commission revealed many irregularities in land allocations in Mogoditshane. On the basis of the findings of the commission two BDP ministers, the then Vice President and Minister of Finance and Development Planning Peter Mmusi and the then Minister of Agriculture, Daniel Kwelagobe, were pressured to resign their cabinet positions. However, the report was nullified because the hearing was held in camera rather than in public. The second was the *Christie Report* (1992) that investigated the activities of the Botswana Housing Corporation (BHC). The commission chaired by Richard Christie revealed widespread

corruption, and again BDP ministers were implicated. The then Assistant Minister of Local Government, Lands and Housing, Ronald Sebege, was allegedly implicated and subsequently dropped from cabinet in a reshuffle. Another Assistant Minister, Michael Tshipinare, had to spend time in jail following allegations of bribery in the BHC and Spectra Botswana saga, before he was released after winning the case at the appeals court. There was a strong feeling among the Kwelagobe camp that the opposing faction deliberately orchestrated these reports to liquidate them politically.

Yet another scenario that was postulated to explain these factions was carried in an article in the *Midweek Sun* (1995:1), which suggested that the internal strife within the party might have ethnic sensitivities. The assertion that the factions took a north/south division defies that straightjacket characterisation because northerners were found in the so-called southern group and vice versa. The argument is that the south was comprised largely of a Tswana-speaking group who had nursed discontent and disgust for ages in the face of a concerted onslaught by a "Kalanga cabal to impose its hegemony over the party and government." The article further asserted that the northern faction was dominated by Bakalanga who "harbour a secret agenda not only to swamp the party and government, but also to facilitate the domination of their kin over major and strategic top positions inside and outside the public service, including the police, army and private sector." Plausible as that argument may seem, it is devoid of any theoretical basis. The assertion that these factions may be based on tribalism can only be supported insofar as the leaders of these factions may have drummed up support by appealing to ethnic sentiments in order to satisfy their ambitions of political power.

The above notwithstanding, it appears logical to attribute these factions to a fracture in the social formation. During the first few years after independence, the BDP was able to project itself as a monolithic entity. This was primarily because of the undifferentiated social and class structure. Cattle production was the mainstay of the economy; as a result there were no competing sectors for state support. The only competition that existed was how best to address the problems of poverty that was most prevalent. However, the discovery of minerals in the 1970's, especially diamonds, not only changed the process of capital accumulation but also expanded the resource base of the economy and opened new opportunities for Botswana. In what Parson (1983) refers to as "the consequences of new wealth in Botswana", the relatively diversified economy led to fracture in the ruling alliance. The ruling class became diversified in line with the dominant strands in the economy. It was therefore along these lines that the struggle for political power, also manifesting factionalism, ensued.

Nevertheless, in spite of internal differences the BDP maintains internal cohesion and does not lose sight of the fact that their ultimate objective is to retain state power. Besides, their differences are more of personality clashes and jostling for positions in the party, rather than ideological. While the unity of the BDP remains fragile, its leadership made every effort to contest the 1999 elections as a united party. The 1999 congress was a test of the unity and cohesion of the party. At that congress, it appeared that the two factions had buried their hatchet with a view to entering the elections a united party. The number of candidates who were returned unopposed reflected the lack of factionalism, and where voting took place it transcended divisive politics.

The BDP entered the 1999 election with the benefit of the *Schlemmer Report* (1997:13) that identified factionalism as one of the factors that affected BDP's performance in the 1994 elections. The report recommended bringing into the party ranks a person with "sufficient dynamism" and untainted by factionalism to bring the party together.<sup>3</sup> It also recommended not only the honourable retirement of the "old guard" of the party but also the infusion of new blood, especially the youth and women with a proven track record in their areas. The choice of Lieutenant-General Ian Khama Seretse Khama as Vice-President and the introduction into cabinet of more women and younger people is an indication of the seriousness with which the BDP took the report.

Factionalism was and still is not peculiar to the BDP. The BNF has had its fair share of the problem. As discussed above, the BNF experienced several splits since 1989. The splits of the BNF represented a clash of personalities and leadership styles, as well as ideological struggles. At the level of personalities, Koma was not only regarded as the "embodiment of what the BNF stands for but also the personification of the ideals of the party" (*Mmegi*, 24-29 April 1998). According to Otsweletse Moupo, a BNF activist, factors that explain Koma's personality cult are "his lack of vanity, his unshakable devotion to the party's cause, resilience and perseverance against overwhelming odds, the formidable strength of the BDP and its vicious campaign of personal slander and political intimidation against him" (*Mmegi*, 29 May-07 June 1998). Moupo continued that, despite his strong leftist theoretical grounding, Koma has failed to train politically sophisticated cadres and this has elevated him to the level of "supreme ideologist of the party". As a result, Koma has "overwhelming authority, charisma, popularity and the personality cult within the party". The personification of the party was expressed by Johnson Motshwarakgole, a party stalwart and trade union activist, an apparent contest for hegemony between the two warring factions of the BNF, the Parliamentary Caucus Group and the Concerned Group. Motshwarakgole did not mince his words when he said, "*Party ke Koma*" (Koma is the Party) (*Mmegi*, 13 Feb 1998). Party insiders observe that "no one dares differ with Koma, lest they are discredited" (*Mmegi*, 23-29 January 1998). In further display of his arrogance as the unshakable leader of the BNF, Koma told members of Central Committee of the party during its crisis to "form [their] own party if they did not want him as leader of the party" (*Mmegi* 01-07 May 1998).

The insistence of Koma on remaining the leader of the BNF despite his old age probably is explained an inherent tendency among political leaders that Robert Michels (1959:2) refers to as the "iron law of oligarchy". Just as Michels intimated, internal democracy is constrained in Botswana's political parties by these oligarchies. Koma maintained that his retirement from politics only meant changing his level of participation in it. The issue of Koma's successor is still uncertain.

Ideologically, the struggle within the BNF was between socialists and social democrats.<sup>4</sup> The ideological rupture of the BNF was probably due to the broadening of its mass base to include intellectuals who read Koma's writings with critical minds and led them to challenge views that were until then considered sacrosanct. The Ledumang Congress in 1997 was probably the watershed of BNF politics. The Central Committee members who were elected at the congress, the majority of whom were also sitting MPs, professed social democracy. At that congress most of the party veterans lost their positions in the Central Committee. Evidently, this marked an ideological shift in BNF with the socialist camp losing ground and the social democrats gaining hegemonic influence.

### **Conduct of Primary Elections in Botswana Politics**

The conduct of primary elections deserves special mention. Since their introduction to Botswana politics, they have attracted a lot of controversy. The BDP and BNF have attributed the splits and factions that have afflicted them to the conduct of primary elections. Those in defense of the system maintain that party activists are not fully schooled about their conduct and therefore challenge their outcomes. With respect to the BDP, the former President Sir Ketumile Masire noted that "primary elections were never intended to be decisive in themselves, but are important and valuable guides to the Central Committee in its selection of candidates." However, the constitutional provision empowering the Central Committee to be the final body deciding who should stand on the party ticket for a particular constituency has been questioned by some within the party as undemocratic, with the danger of imposing candidates on the electorate (6 - 12 May 1994:1 *Mmegi*).

A number of cases lend themselves as good examples to illustrate the fears raised above. In the case of the BDP, A. Mogwe and C.M.K. Batsile contested the 1989

parliamentary primary elections for Kanye. Batsile was said to have won the contest, but the Central Committee preferred Mogwe as the party candidate. This created a lot of bitterness on the part of Batsile and his supporters, but did not result in any resignations from the party, as was the case in other incidents. During the BDP Thamaga primary elections in 1994, the Central Committee preferred Gladys Kokorwe to Kabo Morwaeng in a largely publicised election. Apparently Morwaeng, who defiantly contested the primaries despite being advised not to do so by the party, won the elections with a wide margin, but the Central Committee had to stand by Kokorwe whom they had made resign her position as the Clerk of the Gaborone City Council. In protest Morwaeng left the party and later rejoined the BNF.

During the run-up to the 1999 elections, the BDP was again inundated with protests regarding the conduct of primary elections and in some cases party activists were expelled. Despite the semblance of unity, BDP primary elections have not been without incidents. The former MP for Shoshong Modibedi Robi lodged complaints with the party on what he felt were schemes and intrigues to unseat him from his constituency. He saw the plot in two ways. First, he accused the Secretary General of the BDP, Daniel Kwelagobe, of mentoring his brother-in-law Philip Makgalemele, who was also Secretary of Youth Wing in the Shoshong constituency, to snatch the constituency from him. Second, he complained about the transfer of Duke Lefhoko, a nominated councillor, from the Central District Council to the Shoshong constituency. Suspecting foul play, Robi said, "it is the first time a sitting councillor is transferred between constituencies" (*The Gazette*, 14 October 1998). Robi subsequently lost the Shoshong Constituency primaries to Lefhoko.

In Moshupa the case of T.R. Kebaswele was even more dramatic. Kebaswele felt that the incumbent MP Setlthomo Masisi gave unfair advantage to Maitlhoko Mooka, one of the contenders in the primary elections, thereby giving him an edge over the other candidates to win the primary elections. As it turned out, Mooka won the primary elections, and Kebaswele reacted by registering for the elections as an independent candidate on the grounds that the primaries were not free and fair. The BDP then expelled Kebaswele citing "indiscipline" and "disloyalty" to the party (*The Midweek Sun*, 23 June 1999). Calvin Batsile was another subject in the dispute over the conduct of primary elections. After losing the primary elections for the 1999 election for the Kanye constituency, Batsile registered also as an independent candidate amidst charges that the BDP primaries lacked "transparency" and "democracy" (*Mmegi*, 13 February 1999).

The conduct of primary elections in the BNF has been equally dramatic. During the run-up to the 1989 general elections Leach Tlhomelang contested the Kanye BNF primary elections and lost to Kingsley Mabe. Tlhomelang in an interview on 26 July 1992, as stated earlier, attributed his loss to a ploy by the party to sideline him as they argued that during his term as MP for Kanye (1984-1989) they felt he supported BDP policies to the detriment of his own party. As a result, Tlhomelang left the BNF to form the Freedom Party (FP).

From the foregoing accounts, it is evident that all is not well with the conduct of primary elections, be it in the BDP or BNF. They cast doubt about the extent of internal democracy in Botswana's political parties. In fact, there is a strong belief within political parties that primary elections are often not conducted in a democratic manner. Three observations emerge with respect to both parties. First, some of the members do not want to accept the rules of the game, especially when they have lost the elections. They take the elections as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. Second, there is the perception among the electorate that primary elections are manipulated to sideline people who are considered controversial. Some argue that "electoral colleges are hand-picked by interested parties" and people are "instructed in advance who to vote for and in the end elections were a mere formality given an appearance of fairness". And lastly, available evidence suggests that primary elections are conducted in a manner that generally undermines the development of democracy within parties (20 -26 May 1994:3 *Mmegi*).

These concerns about the conduct of primary elections have generally undermined their credibility as impartial instruments for selecting party candidates. The former President, Sir Ketumile Masire, recognising the unhappiness with the conduct of these elections, made some observations regarding their conduct. He said, "like all other things, primary elections systems and regulations may have to be reviewed to ensure that they are in step with the desires of the membership" (20 - 26 May 1994:2 *Mmegi*). This is probably a position that needs to be embraced by both the BDP and BNF, and any other party that may adopt the system in future. Consequently, the BDP reviewed the procedures of the conduct of primary election in good time for the 1999 election with a view to enhance the transparency of the system and confidence of the electorate in it.

### **Consolidation of a Two Party System**

Elsewhere (Mokopakgosi and Molomo, forthcoming 2000) we have discussed the 1994 elections with emphasis not only on the outcome, but also on the issues which led to such results. We concluded in that chapter that the 1994 elections confirmed the establishment of a two party system in Botswana. Reflecting on the outcomes of the 1999 election, we also wish to comment on political parties' effectiveness and strength.

The general elections of 1994 were undoubtedly a watershed in the electoral history of the country. For the first time the customary hegemonic influence of the BDP, which for 29 years had manifested it in landslide victories, was put to a serious test. Botswana demonstrated through the ballot box that they could entrust their future with other parties. As illustrated in Table 1, the BDP won 27 of the 40 seats contested while the BNF won the remaining 13. Needless to say, this was a decisive win for the BDP; it was also a statement on the part of the BNF that they were serious contenders for political power. This trend showed that Botswana was developing a two party system.

The thesis we are propounding in this article has been somewhat weakened by the results of the 1999 elections due to the split in the opposition. Even then, the BNF was able to win 6 seats and that is strong testimony that indeed Botswana operates a two party system. Clearly, in those two elections the tussle was between the BDP and the BNF. Broadly, analyses of the 1994 and 1999 elections have shown two interesting developments in Botswana's political process. First, they have shown a clear shift from the customary *de facto* one party state to a two party political system. The electorate seems to generally prefer to entrust their future to larger political parties with the chance of capturing state power and not small regional or splinter political organizations. The larger political parties tend to be ideologically broad based, and do not often leave sufficient political space to be exploited by the smaller organisations. No wonder that some of the splinter parties are now returning to their original parties. Besides, this structure of a two party system is promoted by the "winner-take-all" electoral system. Second, the development of a two party system also increases the opportunity for change of government.

### **Independent Candidates**

Over the years, Botswana's political terrain has illustrated that it has no space for independent candidates. In 1989 and 1994 no one stood for the parliamentary elections as an independent candidate. During the 1965 elections there were independent candidates but the Elections Report did not report the results constituency by constituency. It only reported a composite figure of independent candidates. Nevertheless, their aggregate poll was a negligible figure of 789 votes as opposed to 113 168 for the BDP, 19 964 for the BPP (Matante), 6 491 for BIP and 377 for BPP (Motsete). In all cases, such candidates only polled a handful of votes.

The most cogent example, as illustrated in Table 2, was that of the flamboyant Wellie Seboni in 1974 and 1984. In 1974 he contested the elections for the Gaborone constituency on a BDP ticket and beat Kenneth Koma of the BNF by 1 195 to 413. Lucas Kgang in the

same contest polled 22 votes as an independent candidate. Yet in 1984, after Seboni lost the BDP primaries and contested as an independent candidate, he could get only 280 votes compared to 4 645 for Peter Mmusi of the BDP and 4 523 for Kenneth Koma of the BNF.

Equally dramatic was the case of Joseph Kavindama, who polled only 270 votes as an independent candidate in 1979, and later won the Okavango Constituency in 1984 on the BNF ticket by beating Motsamai Mpho and Bailang Salepito of the BIP and BDP, respectively by comfortable margins. Similarly, though not representing a win, Peba Sethantsho, who polled 502 votes in 1984 as an independent candidate, polled 1 728 on the BNF ticket against 3 356 of J. Swarts of the BDP in 1989 in the Ghanzi constituency. In Moshupa in 1999, T. R. Kebaswele appeared to command a lot of following within the BDP, but as an independent candidate got only 909 votes. In Kanye, Calvin Batsile who after losing the BDP primaries registered as an independent candidate, got only 95 votes during the 1999 elections (see Table 2).

**Table 2: The Performance of Independent Candidates in Botswana Elections**

Year of Election	Constituency	Candidate	Party	Votes
1974	Ghanzi	H. Jankie	BDP	1 114
		<b>A. Lepono</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>181</b>
1974	Tswapong South	G. Sebeso	BDP	2 560
		<b>K.Menyatso</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>118</b>
1974	Gaborone	W.M. Seboni	BDP	1 195
		K. Koma	BNF	413
		<b>L. Kgang</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>22</b>
1979	Okavango	B. Selepito	BDP	4 099
		M. Mpho	BIP	2 431
		<b>J. Kavindama</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>270</b>
1979	Lobatse/ Barolong	D. Dichaba	BDP	4 352
		M. Phetlhu	BNF	1 983
		N.M. Mothabani	BPP	138
		<b>J.G. Mmusi</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>8</b>
1984	Ghanzi	H. Jankie	BDP	2 493
		<b>P. Sethantso</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>502</b>
		Charles Peter	BPP	324
1984	Mahalapye	G. Koma	BDP	6 258
		M. Giddie	BNF	1 133
		G.E. Morupisi	BPU	20
		<b>M. Sekgoma</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>26</b>
1984	Mochudi	G. Ruele	BDP	2 928
		D.F. Palai	BNF	1 296
		A. Lesejene	BPP	731
		<b>S. Grant</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>250</b>
1984	Gaborone South	P. Mmusi	BDP	4 645
		K. Koma	BNF	4 543
		<b>W. Seboni</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>280</b>
		V. Masole	BPP	156
1999	Kanye	O.O. Maswabi	BNF	5 331
		S. Kesupile	BDP	3 927
		K. R. Gaseitsewe	BCP	452
		L. Tlhomelang	BAM	336
		<b>C.M.K. Batsile</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>95</b>
1999	Moshupa	M.G Mooka	BDP	4 157
		B. M. Disele	BNF	2 434
		O. Mosielele	BCP	345
		G. A. Gare	BAM	178
		<b>T.R. Kebaswele</b>	<b>Ind.</b>	<b>909</b>

Source: Election Reports

The overall picture that emerges from Table 2 is that no independent candidate has ever come close to winning an election. This observation further confirms the thesis of this

article that the electorate vote political parties rather than candidates. The position that the winner-take-all electoral system produces a two party system further reinforces the view that independent candidates have no place in Botswana's political system.

### **Unity of Opposition Parties**

Although the BNF continued to gain in strength over the years, the continued stay in power of the BDP remained the biggest concern for opposition parties. In fact, more and more parties became obsessed with removing the BDP rather than conceptualising an alternative to its rule. It needs to be borne in mind that the crucial role of the opposition is to create a democratic alternative. However, attempts to unite opposition parties still fall short of creating that image.

In 1991 the opposition parties tried to create an umbrella organisation called the Peoples Progressive Front (PPF), deriving its name from a combination of the names of the parties instrumental in its formation. These were the BNF, BPP and BPU. It was envisaged that the parties would merge into one and thereby present themselves as a forceful opposition to the BDP. This, it was argued, would solve the problem of splitting the opposition vote, as had been the case in all the previous elections, and therefore of making it easy for the BDP to gain landslide victories. Unfortunately, the discussions collapsed.

During the run-up to the 1994 general elections another umbrella organisation, a collection of a few opposition parties, was formed. This was the United Democratic Front (UDF). As the name suggests, it was an umbrella organisation with a view to edging the ruling BDP out of power. The UDF was somewhat different from the defunct Peoples Progressive Front (PPF). The idea of the UDF was that political parties or civic organisations would retain their individual identity but would affiliate to the larger body. The UDF was sponsored by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) led by a BNF veteran, Mareledi Giddie, the BWF led by Shawn Nthale (both break-aways from the BNF) and the Marxist-Leninist, Engels and Stalinist Movement (MELS) led by Themba Joina. The UDF argued that the BNF in its present form was limited because it was a front of individuals rather than a front of political organisations. The UDF espoused a Marxist-Leninist ideology, according to which the workers must control the means of production. The central idea of the UDF was that opposition parties would contest the elections under one disc to avoid splitting the opposition vote. The UDF drew its inspiration from the success of a similar organization in Malawi attempting to remove Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) from power. In a similar vein, the UDF in Botswana was geared to remove the BDP from power. However, the UDF did not weaken the support base of the BNF, nor did it present a real united front against the BDP. The UDF remains a registered but ineffective umbrella for opposition parties.

Another effort of the opposition to assert itself as a credible opposition was the formation of the Botswana Alliance Movement (BAM).<sup>5</sup> BAM initially was comprised of the BNF and its group members (Labour Party (LP), United Socialist Party (USP) and Botswana Workers Front (BWF)), the Botswana Peoples Party (BPP), the Independence Freedom Party (IFP), the United Action Party (UAP) - popularly known as Bosele - and the Botswana Progressive Union (BPU). As discussed in *Mmegi* (29 January-04 February 1999), while agreeing to "retain their separate political and organisational independence and identity", the alliance partners maintained that they would "pool their resources and formulate joint strategies for the attainment of state power". The assumption was that once the opposition came together under the banner of an alliance they would "offer a credible alternative government". However, its prospects of really having an impact in the election outcomes were undermined by the fact that it was only patronised by smaller parties - BPP, UAP and IFP. The BNF, which was the originator of the idea, pulled out when they realised that their interests as a party were not satisfied under the alliance. The BAM was further weakened by the withdrawal of the BPU from the fold on the eve of the elections.



Needless to emphasize, the success of an alliance could only be achieved if built around a strong political formation. But for it to be led by the BNF, which was at the time in the middle of an internal crisis, cast a lot of doubt about its prospects. The prospects of the BAM to do well in the 1999 elections were further undermined by the fact that not all opposition parties, especially the BNF and BCP, were signatories to the alliance. As for the BNF and BCP, it would appear that the real race was for second position, and not to win the elections as such. In effect, the opposition was its own opposition. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that the combined poll of opposition parties demonstrates the value of coalition building and that a united opposition stands a greater chance of winning an election. However, what seems to beset this strategy is the unwillingness of political parties to make the right concessions that would make the numbers add up to the advantage of the opposition.

### **The 1999 Election**

The BDP was returned to power for an eighth term by a landslide victory, winning 33 of the 40 parliamentary seats, and 302 of the 405 council seats during the 1999 election. In the same election, the BNF won 6 parliamentary seats and 80 council seats. The BCP for its part won 1 parliamentary seat and 13 council seats. And the BAM won only 9 council seats. Without doubt, there are important lessons to be learned from this election.

The results of the 1999 election illustrate that Botswana operates a two party system. The winner-take-all electoral system, which Molomo discusses at great length in another article in this volume, explains the bifurcation of the political system that it tends to produce. However, this election did not only reflect a split but also a drop in the opposition vote. The total opposition poll dropped from 46 percent in 1994 down to 43 percent in 1999. The BNF poll dropped from 37.5 percent to 26 percent. In that election, the BDP reversed the gains that were made by the opposition BNF in 1994. It regained Kgatleng East, Kgatleng West, Francistown West and Selebi-Phikwe. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the BNF suffered a major setback as a result of the split of the party and the formation of the BCP in 1998, it still remains a serious contender for political power. It regained four of the constituencies (Gaborone North and West, Lobatse and Kanye) it lost in 1998 as a result of the defection of its MPs to form the BCP, and also consolidated its hold of the Kanye and Ngwaketse South constituencies. For the BNF, it is evident that Koma enjoys considerable support and cannot just be wished away from his position. However, in light of his age and his health, Koma needs to groom a successor who would take over the leadership of the party.

### **Conclusion**

This article has provided a broad analysis of the development of Botswana's political parties from 1959 to the present. It has also identified major trends and shifts in the country's liberal democratic practice. It has in addition examined the parties' structures and their effectiveness, ideologies and campaign strategies, as a way of assessing their electoral performance in the general elections. On the basis of this, it is possible to draw some directions and lessons for the future.

The global view that seems to emerge from the discussion of political parties is that the BDP enjoys hegemonic influence, and, given the lack organization of opposition parties, they are unlikely to unseat it in the short term. This is attested by the fact that the BDP polled 54 percent of the popular vote while the opposition parties were busy pulling each other down. Besides, opposition parties need to realise that the "winner-take-all" electoral system produces a two party system. Therefore, the surest way of mounting an effective opposition to the BDP is by forming a strong alliance or opposition party. In this regard, it would appear that the BAM was a move in the right direction, except that sectional interests clouded real issues. The problem with the BAM was that it was conceived late in the day and political parties did not have the time to debate the idea at

their various fora and also the electorate did not receive sufficient education for it to gain wide acceptance. Finally, it needs to be borne in mind that the electorate vote on a number of issues that, among others, involve party allegiances, family ties, personalities and status of candidates. As has been demonstrated by previous attempts, unity is an elusive phenomenon that must be carefully conceptualised and nurtured for it to succeed.

This article has demonstrated that during the 1994 and 1999 elections; the contest for political power was between the BDP and BNF. Botswana has confirmed itself to be a two party system. Despite its split in 1998 and the formation of the BCP, the BNF was able to emerge as the official opposition.

### Notes

1. In the pre-colonial times, the institution of kgotla (assembly) functioned as the venue of the customary court, and a forum where economic and political matters affecting the community were discussed. In post-colonial Botswana however, political parties are not allowed to use it for political debates. The kgotla has become the most effective mobilisation institution and forum for the dissemination of government policies, primarily because all in the community have access to it. Also, most elderly people feel comfortable in the kgotla because the discussions there are polite and not abusive like in other political gatherings. In recent years there has been disquiet in the opposition about the monopolization of the kgotla by the party in power, mainly because only development related issues can be discussed in it, and only those involved in the process of development. Therefore the BDP is said to have more access to it.

<sup>2</sup>. The Botswana Constitution provides for eight principal tribes and this is deemed to discriminate against the so-called minority tribes. Parliament has since passed a motion to amend this clause in the constitution.

<sup>3</sup>. In an interview with Molomo on 14 August 1994 in Jwaneng Shawn Nthaile, who was the BNF parliamentary candidate for Ngwaketse West during the 1994 general election, pointed out that he broke away from his former party because he was ill-treated and discriminated against by his party colleagues on account of being a Motswana of BaKgalagadi origin. As a result he formed the BWF.

4. The Concerned Group, by and large, represents the old guard of the party that was losing ground within the party as a result of the surge of social democracy as a hegemonic ideological position. This group was defeated and lost control of the Central Committee at the Ledumang Congress in 1997. They alleged that the elections were irregular and threatened a court action against the party. The Central Committee subsequently expelled them from the party. All these struggles culminated in a riotous situation at the Palapye Congress in 1998 between supporters of the Concerned Group and the Central Committee. The end result of all this was the split of the BNF and formation of the BCP.

5. In January 1999 opposition parties converged in Palapye to discuss the idea of an alliance of opposition parties. After two days of deliberation, the parties issued a joint communiqué calling for the formation of *Botswana Alliance Movement* (BAM). The communiqué stated that: We the opposition parties of Botswana have after sober and deep reflection on the current political situation in Botswana resolved to co-operate in order to take over political power and transform our society for the better... The arrogance and intolerance and insensitivity of the ruling party and its manifest unwillingness and/or inability to seriously address the socio-economic problems which beset our society such as mass poverty and unemployment necessitate an urgent change of government in this country.

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