

'So Far So Good'?: An Appraisal of Dr. Ng'ombe's 1998 Prophecy on the Fate of the BNF

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Abstract

This essay challenges received wisdom that the problems facing the Botswana National Front (BNF) began in 1984 when a number of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) members began defecting to the BNF, by tracing the BNF predicament to 1969. At the height of the BNF's growth in the mid 1990s there was optimism in some quarters that it was poised to take power from the BDP in the 1999 general elections. Amidst this optimism in 1998 a Zambian prophet, Doctor Francis Ng'ombe, predicted that no opposition party would attain power for the next 15 years. The prediction was heavily condemned by opposition activists. Interestingly, since 1998 the BNF has been plagued by factional fighting and splits. Though there is still about a decade to go, Ngo'mbe's prediction seems not far off the mark. The paper also addresses the views of civil society on the BNF tragedy. It concludes by arguing that the movement of people from the opposition to the BDP being currently experienced could in the long run work against the BDP, putting it in a situation similar to the one that has paralysed the BNF.

Introduction

The BNF was formed in 1965 by the East-European-trained Dr Kenneth Koma. This was shortly after the BDP, formed in 1962, had won the country's first democratic elections. The BDP was formed by Seretse Khama, the hugely popular but uncrowned Kgosi (Chief) of the Bangwato *morafe* (tribe). The BDP's overwhelming victory was facilitated by the 1963 split in the Pan Africanist Botswana Peoples Party (BPP), a party formed in 1960. The formation of the socialist BNF was meant to unite the BPP splinter groups and other elements opposed to the BDP government, which they perceived as neo-colonial. Since the late 1970s the BNF registered gradual growth as a leading opposition party in the country and by the mid 1990s it was even seen as strong enough to replace the ruling BDP. In particular, the mid 1980s saw a number of notable activists quitting the BDP and joining the BNF. However, the BNF consistently experienced debilitating fissures resulting from claims of indiscipline and intolerance.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the BNF's woes did not begin in 1984 as people believe, but are traceable to 1969. Since 1984, Koma built himself a formidable personality cult marked by personal rule and its attendant sycophancy in the BNF.

During the 1994 general elections, the BNF won 13 parliamentary seats out of 40 contested, an unprecedented number, which raised the hope that it was poised to take over power from the BDP in the 1999 general elections. Amidst this expectation in 1998, Dr Francis Ng'ombe, a famous Zambian medical practitioner/sangoma and prophet, predicted that the BDP was going to win the 1999 elections with ease, and that there will be no change of government for the next 15 years, implying that the BNF had a long time to wait to attain power. Before dealing with Ng'ombe's

prediction, it is worthwhile exploring the incapacitating factionalism and accusation of opportunism that have plagued the BNF over the years.

Contextual Framework

Supernatural phenomena are very difficult to subject to conceptual analysis. However, in this essay, a historical context of power politics within the BNF is utilized to demonstrate how Ng'ombe might have extrapolated his divine conclusions. Within this historical context, we add the phenomenon of politics of recognition in Botswana. The latter refers to the struggle by the so-called minority ethnic groups in Botswana for constitutional recognition. It has been argued that Sections 77, 78 and 79 of the Constitution of Botswana recognize the existence of only eight Tswana speaking *merafe* (tribes) and completely ignore the existence of the many 'minority' *merafe* (cf. Mazonde 2002; Makgala 2002). This development has been linked with charges of tribalism or political mobilisation of ethnicity (cultural identity) as well as the 'opportunism syndrome'. This configuration accounts for some of the crippling factionalism that has characterised the BNF since 1969.

As Maundeni (1998:379) very aptly puts it, factionalism can either 'enhance internal party democracy by encouraging self-criticism, self renewal, reform and constant debate,' or 'it can destroy political parties if it combines with intolerance, factional fighting and factional suppression.' Unfortunately, in the politics of Botswana, positive factionalism has not been given enough room to thrive. Even in the relatively stable BDP, the differences of opinion initially thought to be a welcome development, polarized the Party into two belligerent factions and adversely affected the party's fortunes in the mid 1990s. 'BDP leaders are "like ducks in a pond: calm on the surface but peddling furiously underneath"' (Molomo 2000a:79). Unlike the opposition parties, the BDP maintained unity by relying on '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' (Mokopagosi and Molomo 2000:7).

The abusive term 'opportunist' has been used in the BNF over the years without a clear definition. The danger, according to Maundeni, is that 'each [faction] will interpret...[opportunism] in its own favour and have legitimate expectations to be protected by the party constitution' (Maundeni 1998:386). Indeed, over the decades, vague reference to 'opportunism' has been employed by old BNF members to contain perceived threats by new members. For instance, in 1970, the outgoing BNF President Daniel Kwele, stated that an opportunist was someone who suddenly appeared onto the scene to harvest where they never laboured.¹ In 1988 O.K. Menyatso, a member of the BNF Central Committee, defined opportunists as 'Elements who from the very onset joined the party not because they were convinced of the justice of the cause it pursues, but simply because they find it hard to continue to stand on its way lest they be swept aside by the impact of its blows' (Menyatso 1988). Since the 1990s, the designation 'opportunist' has been so abused in the BNF that it has come to mean a dissenter or a rival or a member of a different faction. Nowadays it is not enough for a BNF member to badmouth his/her rival without referring to him/her as an opportunist. The word 'opportunist' as used/abused in the BNF has lost its dictionary meaning of 'someone who uses every chance to gain power or unfair advantage over others'.² Unlike in the BNF where the 'opportunism syndrome' dates back to 1969, in the BDP

the reckless smearing of party activists as 'opportunists' by colleagues is a recent development.

The Leadership of the BNF, 1965-1977

Ray Molomo became 'interim President' of the BNF upon its formation. In mid 1967 Daniel Kwele (of the Kalanga ethnic group) was nominated President while George Kgakge was elected Vice President. Koma himself preferred to serve as Secretary, Organiser and Publicist. From early on Kwele attacked the BDP government for constitutional marginalization of the country's ethnic 'minorities', particularly his Kalanga people.³ In 1969, Kgosi Bathoen Gaseitsiwe II of the Bangwaketse tribe resigned his position as *Kgosi* and joined the BNF. Bathoen II was disgruntled with the BDP government's relentless curtailment of the traditional powers of the *Dikgosi*. Although the socialist Koma did not appreciate chieftainship, as he saw it as conservative and regressive, he welcomed Bathoen into the BNF for strategic purposes. That is, Bathoen's chiefly background would attract his people into the BNF.

In October 1969 'Bathoen... was presented by the BNF as the candidate for election to the office of President'.⁴ 'But', declared Kwele and A. Tlhoiwe (BNF Secretary General), 'if the Party wins the election the candidate for the election to the office of President, Mr Gaseitsiwe, becomes the ceremonial Head of State, while the leader of the BNF [Kwele] becomes leader of the government (Prime Minister)'.⁵ This marriage of convenience between socialist BNF and traditionalist Bathoen resulted in the BNF securing three parliamentary seats in Bathoen's tribal territory.

Bathoen had ruled his people with a heavy hand since 1928 (Malete 1990; Ramsay 1987). His autocratic rule seems not to have changed even after he joined the BNF. He dominated the Party to a point where this irked a number of BNF members who then resigned from the Party. For instance, in December 1969, following the general elections, the sole BNF Councillor elected to the Kweneng District Council, Miss Miriam Hirschfeldt, resigned to join the BDP. She claimed that she did not know who the real leader of the BNF was.⁶ Shortly afterwards, Councillor J. Dube of the Gaborone Town Council also resigned to join the BDP, stating that 'only fools would deny the truth of what Miss Hirschfeldt has said'.⁷ To Dube, Bathoen's nomination as presidential candidate was nothing but tribalism.

The most significant resignation was that of BNF President Kwele in January 1970. Although Kwele was party to the nomination of Bathoen for presidential candidature, later he felt that Bathoen's position was determined by tribalism and not by merit. Furthermore, Kwele cited opportunism, 'political immaturity and dishonesty' in the BNF.⁸ Responding to Kwele's resignation, the BPP President and Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, Philip Matante, condemned the BNF leaders as 'nothing but opportunists...[and opportunism] was destroying the political essence in Botswana'.⁹

Although Koma and other BNF officials lightly dismissed Kwele's resignation, it later led to more resignations. In justifying Kwele's departure, Koma rhetorically stated a position which to this day has proved counter-productive to the BNF: 'if the B.N.F. is to advance and in order that it should advance, a few more chaps will have to quit.... Their right place is either in the Democratic Party or in the B.P.P'.¹⁰

1970 Kanye Congress and its Aftermath.

While initially the 1970 BNF Congress was expected to be held in Mahalapye, Koma's hometown and base, the venue was changed to Kanye (Bathoen's tribal capital), without consulting some party functionaries. This plus other grievances led to four delegates from Gaborone resigning from the BNF just before the Congress in April 1970. The delegates claimed that Bathoen had unilaterally altered the Party manifesto and also changed the venue for the Congress.¹¹ At the Kanye Congress, Bathoen II was elected new President of the BNF and Koma was elected his Deputy.

In mid April, F. Lebengwa, the Gaborone official of the BNF Organising Committee and the Party's Youth League Commissioner, resigned from the party in solidarity with Kwele and others. Lebengwa complained that 'Political immaturity and dishonesty are so pronounced in that Party to the extent where even those who claim to be capable of providing intellectual leadership are finding themselves providing the opposite. In short, intellectual leadership has degenerated into intellectual dictatorship and gossip'.¹² He went on to suggest that Dr Koma himself was tribalistic: 'If at all Dr. Koma hated tribalism could he have the nerve to be a Vice President to someone who is the symbol of tribalism and feudalism. If at all he understood the BNF Constitution and the policies therein, could he give his support to someone who is defacing and altering the policies of the Party alone?' Lebengwa concluded his broadside by stating that 'I one hundred percent support the statement made by Mr. Kwele and Mr. Obuseng, and that the BNF we have now is entirely different from the one we had, both in outlook and political philosophy'. Similar claims would follow almost every major BNF Congress right up to the Kanye Congress in November 2001 when Koma 'retired'.

In what would become typical of the BNF leadership, soon after the controversial 1970 Congress, Koma responded to Lebengwa's grievances by claiming that, 'There is no split in the BNF and there will not be any split'.¹³ He reiterated what he had said following Kwele's resignation: 'A few chaps will be compelled to resign but these are the necessary casualties in the process of growth and development. The BNF is an alliance of two main groups, the traditional nationalists and the progressive nationalists. These main groups will gradually assume distinct structural configurations'.¹⁴ As far as Koma was concerned, 'this would strengthen and certainly not weaken the united front'. 'Those who regard the Front as a monolithic entity have never understood the BNF and they will be disappointed when one or other tendency predominates at a period'.¹⁵ However, the domination of the so-called right wing bourgeois in the BNF since the mid 1980s has been strongly opposed by Koma and the Party 'left-wingers', thus rendering the BNF prone to factional fighting and splits.

Lebengwa's departure triggered the resignation of five BNF members in the Kalanga area of the Central District. 'In a statement signed by Mr. Moseki (Regional Secretary), it is alleged that the members have resigned because the BNF has become a "tribal front"'.¹⁶ In the BaNgwaketse area Drake Siele, councillor for Mmathethe area, and councillor Phineus Sebolao of Lobatse, also resigned from the BNF and joined the BDP,¹⁷ citing Bathoen's autocratic leadership as the cause of their resignation. In December 1976, former BNF President, Ray Molomo, resigned and joined the BDP, blaming the BNF's loss of direction.¹⁸ For its part, the BNF 'labelled its former members as opportunists' (Maundeni 1998:381). To this day, 'opportunism syndrome'

has become the tar with which dissenters, and sometimes, new members, in the BNF are smeared. Many capable activists have resigned, and others have been suspended or even expelled from the BNF owing to allegations of opportunism.

In April 1977, the BNF held a Congress in Tlokweng and tried to change its image by electing Koma as President. Bathoen II became his Deputy while Mareledi Giddie was elected Secretary General. The latter then 'arrogantly responded to Molomo's allegations and claimed that "every serious political party strengthened itself by occasional purge". The party regarded this process as "purification by elimination"' (Maudeni 1998: 382).

The '1984 Thesis': Koma's Personality Cult and 'Accelerated Recruitment of Opportunists'

Prior to 1984, there was a largely one-way traffic of people from the BNF to the BDP. In 1984, this trend was reversed as more and more people turned their backs on the BDP and joined the BNF. 1984 also ushered in interesting political developments, as Koma became an MP for the Gaborone South constituency following a bye-election. 'At the 1984 election celebrations, none other than Secretary-General, Mareledi Giddie, was to recognise Dr Koma for his genius: "You only get one of his kind every 100 years.... A legacy was set"' (Molefhe, 26 June 2002). 'Fame surrounded KK [Kenneth Koma] and his ingress into Parliament was hailed almost like the arrival of a messiah by his followers.... KK became an "infallible" people's leader.... He became a legend and built himself a personality cult to which dissent was tantamount to disrespect. He became a demi-god who was elected President unanimously at every Party Congress, unquestionably' (Raditladi, 2-8 June 2002).

Before becoming an MP, Koma, by virtue of being one of the few educated citizens, was offered a number of lucrative jobs by the government but he declined the offers.¹⁹ For this he became extremely popular with the BNF grassroots followers who saw him as a selfless man. In the 1984 general elections, the BNF won five of the 32 seats in parliament, a feat no opposition party had ever attained before. Again in the 1984 general elections the BNF won an overwhelming majority of council seats in the capital, Gaborone, and has held the city's mayorship ever since.

Before the elections, some disenchanted BDP members had joined the BNF. For instance, in January 1984, 'two prominent members of the Bangwato royal family [an ultra pro-BDP tribe], Messrs Petle Sekgoma and Keaboka Kgamane, joined the BNF because they said they had lost confidence in the BDP'.²⁰ This trend continued even after the elections. Civil servants dissatisfied with working conditions threw in their lot with the BNF. Furthermore, some key BDP activists also joined the BNF. These included Leach Tlhomelang, former BDP Youth League leader, and Joseph Kavindama, MP for Okavango. Again, in the mid 1980s, some former prominent civil servants - Paul Rantao, Klaas Motshidisi and Peba Sethantsho, joined the BNF. In January 1985, Willie Seboni, the charismatic former Cabinet Minister and the BDP chief whip, joined the BNF. Botshabelo Bagwasi, former BDP Mayor for Gaborone, also joined the BNF in the mid 1980s. Industrial and social problems in the urban areas led to residents shifting their allegiance from the BDP to the BNF.

The recruitment or defection of former BDP members into the BNF led to some serious problems though. These recruits came to be viewed as Right-wing opportunists or BDP operatives who joined the BNF for purposes of creaming off

Parliamentary and Council seats on the BNF ticket, with the intention of subsequently crossing the floor back to the BDP. This brought about friction and factionalism between the so-called 'new Right' on the one hand, and the 'old Left' on the other. Over the years, the composition of the two camps changed. Usually after the election of a new Central Committee, the defeated from both camps banded together and blamed their misfortune on the winners whom they lumped together and branded Right-wing opportunists hell-bent on derailing the Party from its original socialist orientation.

As shown below, intolerance has been very much part of power politics in the BNF. Consequently, some members resigned and joined the BDP or formed their own splinter groups. Others were suspended and expulsions were also common. Usually, Koma sided with the Central Committee of the BNF. This scenario continued until 1997 and 2001 when he supported those suspended or expelled from the party by the Central Committee.

Although the BNF's woes and claims of derailment by the so-called 'Right-wing opportunists' date back to 1970, some BNF veterans pitifully look to 1984 as the beginning of indiscriminate and 'accelerated recruitment of opportunists'.²¹ These veterans give the impression that the pre-1984 period was a blissful one in the BNF. The election of some new members into the Central Committee during the Congress held in Mahalapye in 1985 is bitterly resented by some sections of the BNF's 'old guard' to this day. It is said that Koma particularly wanted Willie Seboni to serve as the BNF Vice President after Bathoen II relinquished the position in 1985.²² However, this move by Koma (used to party members uncritically endorsing his preferred nominees) was strongly and successfully rejected by the youth lobby.²³

The BNF's major problem seems to emanate from its nature as a 'Front', which makes it a gamut of disparate individuals and organisations whose only common ground is that they feel hard done by the BDP government's policies. 'From 1984 onwards, conflicts and tensions increased between such tendencies, causing the leadership tremendous concern, and even threatening the unity of the party' (Mokopakgosi and Molomo 2000:7). In 1989 Koma explained that 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 has always been a mass organisation' (Mokopakgosi and Molomo 2000:7). However, recently, with Koma's personality cult tearing the organization asunder and annoying many in it, his erstwhile followers argued that the BNF 'has never really been a "front" only "an alliance between individuals of good standing to Dr Koma"' (Moore, 7-13 June 2002).

1988 Francistown Congress and its Aftermath

By the time the next BNF Congress was held in July 1988 in Francistown some members had already resigned. In 1987, Lenyeletse Koma, Dr Koma's cousin and former Member of the Central Committee, was 'expelled because he had alleged among other things that, he wrote speeches for the party's president, Dr Kenneth Koma'.²⁴

In the run-up to the 1988 Congress, there were 'reports in some quarters that there's some dissent among the party radicals [in Ngwaketse region and Lobatse] about purported influence wielded by the "petty-bourgeois" members in the party'.²⁵ It

was said that dissenters were requested to present their case to the party but failed to do so. During the Congress, some elements associated with them tried to cause trouble but were contained. 'One of those people it is believed wanted to be chosen president of the Botswana National Front'.²⁶

Eventually the five dissidents, including two women, from the Ngwaketse region, were expelled and three others suspended from the BNF for allegedly not cooperating in an attempt to address their grievances. However, some of them continued convening political rallies in the name of the BNF. The BNF appealed to the Attorney-General Moleleki Mokama, to order the police not to grant political rally permits to the defiant dissidents.²⁷ Similar developments followed the 1994, 1997 and 2001 Congresses.

After the retirement of Bathoen II from politics in 1986, the former BDP Youth Wing's lynchpin, Leach Tlhomelang, replaced Bathoen as the MP for Kanye, following a bye-election. However, in the 1989 primary elections, Tlhomelang lost, quit the BNF, and formed the Freedom Party in August 1989. *Inter alia*, he complained that the BNF leadership had labelled him a 'political prostitute', a 'traitor', an 'opportunist' and a 'BDP plant'.²⁸ The problems faced by the BNF as a result of the 1987 to 1989 resignations, suspensions, and expulsions reduced its parliamentary seats from five to three in the 1989 general elections.

1993 Mahalapye Congress and its Aftermath

In 1993 the BNF held its Congress in Mahalapye for the election of a new Central Committee. At the Congress, Michael Dingake was elected the Vice President, ending almost nine years of lack of a Deputy for Koma. Dingake was a former African National Congress (ANC) political prisoner in South Africa (Dingake, 1987). Koma had supported Dingake's candidature. Some members of the Party were not pleased with the way the Mahalapye Congress was conducted. As had become customary, some disgruntled elements left the BNF. For example, in September 1993 Shawn Nthaile formed the Botswana Workers Front (BWF). His reason was 'that he was being marginalised from top party positions because of his ethnic origin' (Mokopakgosi and Molomo, 2000:9). He therefore sought to advance the rights and interests of the workers and his Bakgalagadi tribe.

Koma had indicated in 1989, that he would retire from the BNF presidency and from parliament in 1994 in order to devote his time to writing. Consequently, Mareledi Giddie left his Mahalapye constituency (a BDP stronghold) for the 'soon to be vacant' and safe Gaborone South constituency. However, in 1993, 'after consultations with his colleagues...[Koma] decided against stepping down and said he would retire when the "time is politically opportune"'.²⁹ When Dingake became active in the BNF, it was speculated that owing to Koma's failing health, Koma was grooming him for the party presidency.³⁰ However, Koma did not retire in 1994 and continued to stand for the Gaborone South constituency. 'Fortunately', Gaborone was further divided into four constituencies, resulting in two new ones. Giddie decided to run for the newly created Gaborone Central constituency, and faced the lesser-known Dingake in the primary elections.

With support from Koma however, Dingake triumphed over Giddie and went on to win the parliamentary elections in the October 1994 general elections. Koma had actually postponed the BNF primary elections for Gaborone Central at the eleventh

hour, in order to accord Dingake more time to canvass for support, since Giddie appeared poised to win. Koma's action was autocratic and did not fall within the constitutional provision of the BNF. Giddie sorrowfully disputed the election results, but in vain.

Around the same time there were mayoral elections in the Gaborone City Council. It appears that Giddie mobilized some veteran BNF councillors against the pro-Dingake Mayor Paul Rantao. Giddie's faction colluded with the minority BDP to unseat Rantao. Councillor Ginger Ernest (loyal to Giddie) became Mayor but was later expelled from the BNF, amidst accusations of wanton opportunism. The frustrated Giddie later resigned and formed the Social Democratic Party in July 1994, before the general elections.

Meanwhile, Nehemiah Modubule, BNF youth leader, accused the party leadership of opportunism after it back-paddled on its former position of boycotting the 1994 general elections. He also complained about the BNF's change from being a 'Front' into a party. His lack of cooperation with the Central Committee in his Lobatse base led to him being suspended from the organization, and later he resigned. For its part, the BNF leadership argued that it decided to turn the institution into a monolithic political party, since wayward elements hid behind the notion of a 'Front' for perpetuation of their indiscipline. Modubule went on to form his own splinter party called United Socialist Party (popularly called PUSO). All these splinter groups unsuccessfully contested the 1994 general elections.

Nevertheless, the resignations, suspensions, expulsions and formation of splinter groups did not adversely affect the BNF chances in the 1994 elections. It won thirteen parliamentary seats, a historic feat. The BDP retained some of its traditional strongholds by the skin of its teeth. 'We are very optimistic of taking power in 1999. All we have to do is defend our constituencies and then capture the marginal seats', said Dingake in December 1997.³¹

1997 Ledumang Congress and its Aftermath

Before the 1997 BNF Congress held at Ledumang in Gaborone, the party was polarized into two hostile factions, one perceived as progressive and led by Dingake, and the other seen as conservative and led by Secretary General of the BNF, Klaas Motshidisi. As previously, the two camps accused each other of opportunism. However, this time factionalism proved disastrous for the BNF. The anticipated victory in 1999 proved a bad omen to the party. In the absence of a shadow cabinet, this popular expectation led to rumour that the BNF MPs were aggressively positioning themselves for cabinet posts in the anticipated new government (Guyana, 7 March 1997). The Dingake faction won overwhelmingly whereas the Motshidisi group secured only one position in the Central Committee (CC). The Dingake faction also grabbed the 30% quota contested by women.

Just two weeks after the 1997 Congress, the vanquished, composed mostly of the party's old guard - including Giddie who had rejoined the BNF, protested. Their argument was premised on the claim that the new CC had rigged the elections in order to rid the party of the left-wing elements. The group also threatened a court action if their demands for the annulment of the CC elections and re-election of a new one were not met.

Initially Koma appeared 'neutral' while the new CC lightly dismissed the concerns of the disenchanted group which called itself the 'Concerned Group' (CG). Otsweletse Moupo wrote that, in addition to their 'extreme opportunism' the CG members never made any complaints about allegations of irregularities during the Congress (Moupo, 22-28 May 1998). He further charged that the CG 'embraces within itself some erstwhile left elements and rabid right wing elements who only started falsely claiming a left wing mantle after the July Congress'.

O.K. Menyatso, a founder member of the BNF and member of the CG, argued that:

Things took a different turn for the worse when the party lost direction in 1984 and lot (sic) of problems started to crop up manifesting themselves in confusion and disorderliness. Gossips and ill-feelings, suspicions and mistrust of each other, at times even conspiracies against fellow comrades which were before unknown became an order of the day (Menyatso, 25-31 July 1997).

This lament was soon enshrined in a CG document chronicled by Motshidisi, called *Sese Tsentseng Tlhobaelo* ('Source of Concern'). It seems Koma's neutrality ended when the CG convinced him that Dingake was licking his lips for the presidency of the BNF.

Dr Ng'ombe's Prophecy and Reaction to it

In January 1998, Dr Francis Ng'ombe surprised many in Botswana when he predicted that the BDP was going to win the 1999 general elections and would be in power for the next 15 years. Since 1991, the BDP had been engaged in fierce factional skirmishes, which also threatened to tear it apart. The private media had created the impression that, the BNF internecine squabbles were not that serious compared to the BDP. It was under these circumstances that Ng'ombe came to the BDP's 'rescue'. Previously, Ng'ombe had accurately predicted change of regimes in other countries. 'Without any hesitation, I see the ruling party continuing to rule for the next 15 years. Some people, including those who are influential and prominent, but without necessarily being politicians, in society, will join the party', he declared in January 1998.³²

With the perceived BNF victory in 1999 looming large, the BDP had in 1997 engaged a consultancy service, which 'recommended bringing into the party ranks a person with "sufficient dynamism" and untainted by factionalism to bring the party together' (Mokopakgosi and Molomo 2000:13). President Sir Ketumile Masire also announced that he would be retiring from the BDP and the country's presidency after about 17 years in that position. It was planned that Vice President Festus Mogae would become President on 1 April 1998.

On becoming president, Mogae appointed as his vice president former Commander of the Botswana Defence Force, Ian Khama. The latter is the son of the BDP's founding president, Sir Seretse Khama, who was the president of Botswana from 1966 to 1980 when he died. Ian Khama is also the Chief of the 'politically significant' Bangwato tribe. Indeed, Ian Khama's appointment ensured that the BDP entered the 1999 general elections as a united entity (see Mokopakgosi and Molomo 2000).

The opposition parties brutally dismissed Ng'ombe's prediction as 'mere wishful thinking'.³³ A more ferocious reprobation of Ng'ombe's prophecy came from Log Radithhokwa, a then pro-BNF political observer, who accused Ng'ombe of opportunism (Radithhokwa, 11 March 1998). He also turned his polemical sledgehammer on a planned visit to Botswana by President Bill Clinton of the United States of America, which coincided with Masire's retirement. To Radithhokwa, the visits by Clinton and Ng'ombe were a ploy by the BDP government and its imperialist sponsors to boost the BDP's chances ahead of the 1999 general elections. He also alleged that the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) knew about Masire and Ian Khama's planned retirement long before official announcement in Botswana. However, Radithhokwa also raised an important point when he accused Ng'ombe of encouraging voter apathy, which was already a serious cause for concern in Botswana (Radithhokwa, 11 March 1998).

In a rebuttal to Radithhokwa's argument, a BDP follower stated: 'The BNF is very divided in the sense that we will soon witness a mass resignation of its members' (Dingwa, 30 Jan. 1998). This charge was an amazingly accurate prediction of what befell the BNF five months later.

The 'Battle of Palapye' and the Formation of the BCP

In late 1997 Lemogang Ntime was suspended for six months by the CC. In January 1998, Motshidisi, Giddie and three other members of the CG were expelled by the CC without according them an opportunity to defend themselves. This development led to both the CC and CG members addressing separate rallies all over the country, each side besmirching the other. During a meeting addressed by Koma in Gaborone, in mid February 1998, the chairman of the proceedings, Johnson Motshwarakgole, stated: 'Koma is the Party'.³⁴

Again in February some BNF sympathizers and religious leaders met with Koma and Dingake to resolve the impasse. The meeting brought about a short-lived semblance of peace in the Party. Before long the two factions resumed their altercations. The climax came during the Easter weekend at the BNF special Congress held in Palapye. Lack of cooperation between the two camps led to a violent clash in which about 30 people were reported injured and property destroyed. This mayhem was called the 'Battle of Palapye' by the private media. Immediately after the Palapye fracas, the CC suspended Koma from the presidency of the BNF. Koma himself countered this move by dissolving the CC. A later High Court ruling stated that the CC was in the wrong and confirmed Koma's supremacy in the BNF. The dissolution of the CC left the BNF in a very awkward position, as its structures collapsed throughout the country.

With no reconciliation in sight in June 1998, the members of the dissolved CC formed the Botswana Congress Party (BCP), with Dingake as president. The BCP included 11 former BNF MPs and 68 councillors. In the run up to the 1999 general elections, the BNF and BCP spent most of their time and resources vilifying each other. In the elections, the BNF won only six parliamentary seats, whereas the BCP retained only one. The BDP became the beneficiary of the BNF tragedy as it raked in 34 seats. Voter apathy also played a role.

2001 Kanye Congress and its Aftermath

Koma's planned retirement in November 2001 led to the emergence of two belligerent factions in the BNF. The reformist faction consisted mainly of former CG members and some people continued calling it the CG, and its conservative enemy went by the name 'Party Line'. Koma openly backed the latter. Like the dissolved CC, the new CG was against what it saw as Koma's ineffectual and lousy leadership.

It seems the Party Line, like the old CG, remained complacent, banking on Koma's support, whereas the CG 'spent sleepless nights' canvassing for support 'in an attempt to dislodge "Goliath"' (BNF Central Committee, 17 Aug. 2002) in the November 2001 Congress planned for Kanye. The main contenders for the presidency were Otsweletse Moupo of the CG and Peter Woto of the Party Line.

During the elections, Moupo's faction swept the board. This was totally unexpected. Woto and the Party Line later protested that the elections were rigged (Party Line Secretariat, September 2002:1-2). Koma rallied behind them. The new CC, which included Giddie and Motshidisi, invited the Party Line to a discussion on the resolution of the impasse, but this overture was cold shouldered by the latter. The two camps could not agree on who would chair the proceedings (Party Line Secretariat, September 2002:4). Continued disregard for the olive branch from the CC by the Party Line led to it being threatened with disciplinary action by the new BNF Secretary General, Akanyang Magama. The Party Line was also accused of leaking confidential party information to the public. Moreover, it was accused of insubordination by the CC and of addressing the supposedly retired Koma as the BNF President. As in previous factional disputes, both groups accused one another of opportunism. However, unlike before this time, Koma faced waning support and ridicule from erstwhile loyalists and the private press.

The Party Line also took the war to the enemy. It uncompromisingly defended itself against threats of disciplinary action by Magama, and accused the CC (still calling it CG and a faction) of being dictatorial, of having cheated its way into office, of opportunism, campaigning through newspapers, disrespecting Koma, and hypocrisy. It vowed to fire on all cylinders in retaliation (Tshenyo, 15-21 Jan. 2002). At one point in Gaborone a Party Liner, David Mhiemang, physically assaulted a reporter of the *Mmegi* newspaper, allegedly because of the paper's perceived pro-CC stance.³⁵

With no end in sight to the quagmire, the CC expelled Peter Woto and a number of others seen as ringleaders. Koma and others were suspended for six months. Like in previous expulsions, those shown the door continued regarding themselves as full BNF activists, and continued addressing rallies in the name of the Party. Koma became their rallying figure. Hence the Party Liners were castigated by pro-CC elements as incorrigible henchmen and saboteurs.

The Party Line did not relent in the face of malicious propaganda levelled against it. Some Party Liners stepped up their glorification of Koma. For example, in June 2002 at one of their political rallies in Molepolole, Ntime nonchalantly told all and sundry that 'Koma is the BNF', and also reminded them of Koma's 'heroic' refusal to accept lucrative job offers from the government in the past, whereas Moupo had worked for the BDP government.³⁶ Given Koma's intellectual and spiritual domination of the BNF over the years, in the mid 1980s, the BDP activists had stated that he was the BNF. This was a charge Koma quickly dismissed, declaring instead

that the people themselves were the BNF.³⁷ Interestingly, in 1998 and 2002, when Johnson Motshwarakgole and Ntime respectively equated him with the party, he kept quiet.

Meanwhile, the tirades against Koma's designs and the CC's perceived lenient punishment meted out to him continued unabated: 'As a power monger he never envisaged that the BNF engine can tick without him. He never even prepared himself for life after BNF presidency and that is why he cannot let off the reigns of power' (Mathokwane, 14 June 2002). After his suspension, Koma began a call for peace and reconciliation between the CC and the Party Line. This was after he had ignored, on about six occasions, similar overtures from the CC prior to his suspension. Hence the CC dismissed his new approach as a sham (Magama, 7 June 2002).

In June, the CC instituted legal proceedings before the High Court, requesting that the suspended and expelled Party Liners be prevented from addressing rallies in the name of the BNF. The resultant litigation led to a stalemate between the warring camps, between which there seemed to be a rough parity, with each having three MPs and running parallel structures within the party. However, by January 2003 Koma and the Party Line were reported to be in the process of registering a new political party.

Civil Society on the BNF Tribulation

As already mentioned, some civil society leaders brokered a fragile ceasefire between the CG and the CC in 1998. Nevertheless, three BDP card carrying Pastors - Reverend Hambira, Reverend Dumi Mmualefhe and Reverend Mpho Moruakgomo - who mediated between the hostile BNF factions in February 1998, angered some elements in the BDP.³⁸ Hardliners demanded the expulsion of these servants of God from the party. Ironically, the BDP had over the decades loudly bragged about being a peaceful and tolerant entity.

Following the Battle of Palapye, some civil society notables got concerned with the fissures in the BNF. The split, according to the Co-ordinator of the Democracy Project of the University of Botswana, Gloria Somolekae, is both 'pitiful and shameful', a development that can only lead to voter apathy as people lose confidence in the political organisations. According to her, 'This is going to weaken our democracy', (Mothibi, 17-23 April 1998). Reverend Rupert Hambira of The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) 'Assuring the [BNF] membership of a "prayerful support"... called on the BNF membership to "commit itself to the process of searching for peace and the normalisation of the relationships and structures of the party"'.³⁹ Gorata Dingalo, Executive Secretary of the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions (BFTU), 'said what is happening in the BNF is pathetic and indeed a national crisis'.⁴⁰ However, the BDP's Executive Secretary, Botsalo Ntuane, condemned these patriotic concerns as unwarranted sympathy for the BNF. An open secret is that the BDP, like ruling parties in other multi-party societies, prefers a divided and feeble opposition as this ensures the ruling party's longevity in power.

Defections from the Opposition: Good or Bad Omen for the BDP?

As Dr Ng'ombe predicted more and more BNF and other opposition activists are decamping for the BDP. Kabo Morweng, former BDP defector to the BNF, rejoined the BDP in early 2002. In October 2002 in Francistown, the BDP welcomed a number

of new members, 13 of whom were alleged to have been members of the opposition. Many others were welcomed into the BDP in various parts of the country. This development has forced a paradigm shift by Log Raditlhokwa, the BCP sympathiser who in 1998 had strongly condemned Dr Ng'ombe's prediction. He argued that 'the BDP is sure of an overwhelming victory in 2004. The implication of this eventuality is that Batswana will remain trapped in the rule of a de facto one Party State for many years to come' (Raditlhokwa, 16 Oct. 2002).

Although the BDP gleefully welcomes activists defecting from the opposition parties, in the long run this could prove counter-productive to the BDP. Just as the BDP defectors to the BNF since the mid 1980s are believed to have sown the seeds of factionalism and splits in the BNF, the same may happen to the BDP. The signs and examples are many. There have been defections from the BNF to the BDP since the 1994 general elections, even before the Battle of Palapye in 1998. In 1996, Councillor Isaac David of the Kgatleng East Constituency left the BNF in 1996, amidst factional fighting and joined the BDP. He went on to become the BDP MP for the constituency in the 1999 general elections. Since then he has been engaged in a long running and acrimonious factional tussle with Sidney Pilane, another BDP member who had shown interest in the same constituency. Here, former BNF members in the BDP have been stigmatised and labelled 'closet Maforanta', meaning 'covert BNF members'.⁴¹

Frictions are also evident in Francistown, between the incumbent MP Tshelang Masisi and the BPP defector and Mayor of Francistown, Peter Ngoma, whose open ambition is to dislodge Masisi. Tribalism was alleged to be the central issue. Masisi has been viewed as a carpetbagger who is meddling in a predominantly Kalanga area. This development flies in the face of latest research, which has suggested that economic factors as opposed to tribal sensitivities, determine voter behaviour in contemporary Botswana (Matsheka and Bothomilwe 2000). In Molepolole, a rift is reported between the returning defector, Kabo Morwaeng, and the incumbent MP, Daniel Kwelagobe. The situation is likely to deteriorate before and after the primary elections leading to the 2004 general elections. It should be pointed out that there is more at stake contesting elections on the ticket of the ruling and affluent BDP, than the precarious BNF. Therefore, with time BNF/opposition defectors in the BDP are likely to be seen by the BDP 'veterans' as 'Left-wing opportunists' bringing into the BDP the 'BNF/opposition culture' of factional fighting, intolerance, indiscipline, tribalism and opportunism.

Interestingly, the 'opportunism virus' appears to be no longer subterranean in the BDP. In mid-2000, the Vice President Ian Khama declared that 'the political leadership in Botswana is motivated by "self-interest", "lust for power" and described them as "vultures" who are out to loot the country's coffers' (Molomo 2000b: 104). This was after the BDP MPs demanded a pay raise. Very recently, at one of the BDP's 40 years anniversary celebrations, he called some unnamed BDP members opportunists.⁴² President Mogae and other BDP leaders have also been cautioning party members against opportunism. Curiously, this development coincides with the defection of opposition functionaries to the BDP. The future may well be one of factionalism and opportunism, as politicians explore various ways of serving their individual, regional and tribal interests.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, since 1965 the BDP has been able to retain power largely owing to the fissiparous tendency of the opposition parties. Charges of tribalism, opportunism, indiscipline and splits have contributed significantly to the BNF tragedy, which has made history very much on the side of Ng'ombe. But Botswana is to have a viable opposition, it is hardly the issue simply to dismiss Ng'ombe's prophecy as wishful thinking, or to label differences 'opportunism' and 'tribalism'. They must seek to answer two questions: if opportunism and tribalism are the problem, what is it in party political structures, ideology and action that militate in favour of such tendencies? And what must be done, democratically, to mitigate these tendencies? These questions are as relevant to the BNF and the rest of the opposition, as they are to the ruling BDP. At the end of the day, democracy and party politics mean very little if the individuals and communities involved do not get the recognition and representation they seek. To be sensitive to these concerns both in rhetoric and in action would be to make the art of prediction less easy for prophets such as Dr. Ng'ombe.

Notes

¹ *Daily News*, 16 January 1970.

² *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1995:995.

³ *Daily News*, 12 July 1967.

⁴ *Daily News*, 14 October 1969.

⁵ *Daily News*, 14 October 1969.

⁶ *Daily News*, 18 December 1969.

⁷ *Daily News*, 24 December 1969.

⁸ *Daily News*, 16 January 1970.

⁹ *Daily News*, 19 January 1970.

¹⁰ *Daily News*, 21 January 1970.

¹¹ *Daily News*, 1 April 1970.

¹² *Daily News*, 16 April 1970.

¹³ *Daily News*, 16 April 1970.

¹⁴ *Daily News*, 16 April 1970.

¹⁵ *Daily News*, 16 April 1970.

¹⁶ *Daily News*, 29 May 1970.

¹⁷ *Daily News*, 29 May 1970.

¹⁸ *Daily News*, 30 December 1976.

¹⁹ *Daily News*, 9 and 14 Nov. 1984.

²⁰ *Daily News*, 11 January 1984.

²¹ *Mmegi*, 23-29 January 1998.

²² *Mmegi*, 23-29 January 1998.

²³ *Mmegi*, 23-29 January 1998.

²⁴ *The Botswana Guardian*, 9 September 1988, (Hereafter *Guardian*).

²⁵ *Guardian*, 11 July 1988.

²⁶ *Guardian*, 11 July 1988.

²⁷ *Guardian*, 23 December 1988.

²⁸ *Mmegi*, 15-21 July 1994.

²⁹ *The Botswana Gazette*, 26 May 1993, (hereafter *Gazette*).

- ³⁰ *Gazette*, 26 May 1993.
³¹ *Gazette*, 24 December 1997.
³² *The Midweek Sun*, 14 January 1998, (hereafter *Midweek Sun*).
³³ *Midweek Sun*, 21 January 1998.
³⁴ *Mmegi*, 13-19 February 1998.
³⁵ *Mmegi*, 24-30 May 2002.
³⁶ *Midweek Sun*, 12 June 2002.
³⁷ *Mmegi*, 27 April 1985.
³⁸ *Gazette*, 18 March 1998.
³⁹ *Mmegi*, 8-14 May 1998.
⁴⁰ *Guardian*, 8 May 1998.
⁴¹ *Mmegi*, 18-24 October 2002.
⁴² *The Mirror*, 9-15 October 2002.

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