

LIFTING VEILS

# Botswana unravels: unmasking Africa's democracy poster child

By Siphosami Malunga

Executive director of the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa

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Botswana's then President Ian Khama looks on during the Botswana-South Africa Bi-National Commission (BNC) in Pretoria, South Africa, November 11, 2016. REUTERS/Siphiwe Sibeko

**It seemed too good to be true. A diamond-rich, corruption-free, democratic, prosperous, and peaceful African country with a tradition of peaceful transfer of presidential power (the incumbent president voluntarily leaves office a year before the next general election). It was.**

Africa's poster child for democracy, good governance, and transparency, for many years **in the top five of the best-governed**

**[<http://www.botswanaembassy.org/in-the-news/2017-ibrahim-index-botswana-once-more-in-the-top-three-overall>] and least corrupt countries in Africa, Botswana was a good news story Africa had to hold on to. But, was it?**

## Paradoxes

On the face of it, Botswana is a thriving, open, competitive democracy. It has unfailingly held periodic transparent, credible, and peaceful elections – which the ruling party, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), has won since independence in 1965. It tolerates opposition and there is none of the systematic violence seen in countries like Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The country alternates its President after every two terms. The government appears to govern well, prudently, and accountably managing the revenues from the diamonds on which the economy depends.

**However, underlying this is a carefully crafted system, aimed at subverting – not advancing – democratic practice, manipulating control of diamond revenue for political advantage, and entrenching and preserving BDP's political hegemony.**

More recently, under former President Khama, the system has exhibited authoritarian tendencies only seen in outright dictatorships. Even more damning and paradoxical, Botswana is technically a rich country but in reality, half of its 2.4-million people live in poverty – essentially the problem of how its diamond wealth is managed and distributed.

## **Khama to Khama**

In pre-colonial times, Botswana was a collection of eight principal tribes including the BaTlokwa, BaLete, BaKwena, BaNgwaketse, BaTawana, BaKagla, BaRolong, and BaNgwato. Other smaller tribes, including the BaKalanga and Babirwa, have over time come to be lumped under BaNgwato. In 1885, fearful of the Boers, as well as expansionist Ndebele invaders to the north, in what is present-day Zimbabwe, three of the paramount chiefs (“Kgosis”), Khama III (BaNgwato), Sebele I (BaKwena), and Bathoen I (BaNgwaketse), sought British protection. The territory, known as Bechuanaland, was declared a British Protectorate in 1885, pre-empting and staving off efforts to invade the territory.

In 1951, Kgosi Khama’s son, Seretse, was stripped of his chieftainship and exiled to the United Kingdom following a spat with his uncle (and on the urging of apartheid South Africa) over his marriage to Ruth Williams, a white woman he had met while studying there. He would later return in 1960 to reclaim his chieftainship and lead the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) to victory in 1965 and the country to independence in 1966. Khama’s son, Ian would later become the country’s fourth president in 2008 – ostensibly to shore up receding rural support for BDP – serving for ten years until last year, having served the previous ten years as deputy president.

## **False changes**

Between 1966 and 1980, under Seretse Khama, the BDP dominated the political landscape, winning every election. When he died in July 1980, his deputy, Ketumile Masire, replaced him. Masire lead the BDP and the country for 19 years until he was ostensibly pushed out followed by the introduction of a two presidential term limit. Festus Mogae, a former Central Bank governor, chief secretary to the president, and deputy president, replaced Masire. Mogae would serve for two terms, giving way to Seretse Khama’s son, Ian, a year before general elections, thus complying with a choreographed presidential alternation by BDP, which essentially ensured an incumbency electoral advantage.

**Botswana's democratic credentials** were cemented by successive seemingly seamless presidential transitions from Masire to Mogae to Khama, and more recently, to Masisi creating an impression of a vibrant and self-reproducing democracy. In reality, the transitions were nothing close to democratic and the system nothing close to fair.

Khama senior ruled for 23 years and his successor for another 19. Masire had to be pushed to leave, hardly the democrat he is widely touted to have been. To be fair, Masire's successor, Mogae, set the trend of serving two terms and leaving a year before his second term ended. His successor Ian Khama also kept the tradition. The presidential succession has been an integral part of the choreography designed to maximize the benefits of incumbency by giving the stand-in president a year's head start in the following year electoral contest.

### **Skewed electoral system**

At independence, like all former British colonies, Botswana inherited the first-past-the-post electoral system also known as the winner-take-all system. In this system, the candidate or party with a simple majority of votes wins. The margins of victory and voter turnout are irrelevant. The numbers that a losing candidate garners are immaterial to the allocation of political space and power. The winner wins 100% power while the loser gets 0%, irrespective of the percentages obtained in votes.

The first-past-the-post system can help elect into power candidates or parties with very little popular support. In previous years, BDP's support was narrow, ranging between 51% and 55%. In the 2014 election, for example, the BDP won 37 out of 57 possible seats. In numbers, 37 seats translated to 320,657 votes. The opposition and independents collectively garnered 369,595 votes translating to only 20 seats. Aided by divided, single-minded, and individualistic opposition parties, unable to come together to defeat it, the BDP successfully retained power minus "popular" support.

**It seems preposterous that, with far fewer** people voting for it than they did for the opposition, the BDP not only won 17 more seats than the opposition in Parliament but also the mandate to govern. The skewed nature of the electoral system is what has kept the BDP in power. Irrespective of the allegations of vote rigging by the opposition, clearly the system is rigged. Unless it is reformed to make it more inclusive by ensuring that actual votes translate into some say in government, the BDP will continue to retain power even as the numbers of Botswana that vote for it compared to the opposition continue to dwindle.

It is not yet clear what impact the entry into opposition politics by former president Ian Khama is likely to have on the outcome of the upcoming elections in October. He has fallen out with his predecessor and formed his party, the Botswana Patriotic Front; the worst-case scenario would be to add to the already divided opposition and only increase the vote split, to the benefit of the BDP.

The best case is Khama, riding on his chieftainship, will haemorrhage BaNgwato votes from the BDP, causing it the greatest damage ever. A united opposition would be devastating and likely defeat BDP.

But Khama was not universally loved. He was said to be dictatorial, running the party and government as he did the army, which he headed before becoming president. His intelligence unit was widely feared and allegedly intimidated and abducted people.

**He attacked judicial independence** by threatening, intimidating, and even suspending judges and forcing them to apologise. He muzzled the press with the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (DCEC), arresting and detaining journalists for exposing corruption. The feared Directorate for Intelligence and Security Services (DISS) arrested and detained journalists, charging them with sedition for reporting on allegations of corruption related to R250-million purchase of train wagons by Botswana Railways.

In 2017, DISS officers again detained and threatened three journalists from the INK Centre for Investigative Journalism for investigating the construction of President's Khama's holiday home.

### **Corruption spanning presidencies**

To be sure, allegations of corruption dogged Masire's presidency, too, and implicated his deputy, Peter Mmusi, and the BDP Secretary General, Daniel Kwelagobe, in massive irregular allocations of land, which was exposed by the Kgabo Land Commission. Khama, himself, has not been spared from serious allegations of abuse of authority and enabling corruption.

**In his hard-hitting piece, "Good Khama, Bad Khama"**, investigative journalist Joel Konopo observes, "Since Khama took office in 2009, there has been a marked increase in the number of extrajudicial killings, torture and harassment of members of the public by plainclothes security agents, a security expert told Africa In Fact. Just a year into office, he established a spy agency, the Directorate on Intelligence and Security Services (DISS), but its mandate and role are unclear."

When it comes to money, the former army general's personal preference is for a lavish lifestyle. He is reported to have purchased a luxury caravan worth \$200,000 at the taxpayer's expense to entertain himself and his friends. He also has an appetite for grand, wasteful projects.

**Recently, he ordered eight second-hand Gripen model "C" and "D" fighter jets, worth \$1.7bn – spending almost half the country's annual national budget in a deal that one aviation expert in a media interview said the military did not need and could not afford.**

In December 2015, when the global commodity slump began to bite, Khama withdrew \$350m million from the Pula Fund, a stabilisation reserve created with diamond revenues, to create an economic stimulus package. But critics allege that the money was largely splashed on tenders that went to loyal Botswana Democratic Party members.”

### **The great diamond deception**

At the very centre of Botswana's democracy heist is BDP's control of its diamond wealth. South African diamond mining giant, DeBeers, began prospecting for diamonds in northern Botswana in early 1970 and opened its first mine at Orapa in 1972. In 1982, it opened what became the world richest diamond mine in Jwaneng. In 1969, the government of Botswana entered into an agreement with DeBeers to establish DEBSWANA, in which each party had a 50% stake.

DEBSWANA is a key player in Botswana's economy, employing over 5,000 public sector workers and making a significant contribution to government revenue. The partnership between the government and DeBeers has been one of the longest-running public-private partnerships in history but also one that is considered to be well managed.

**But a closer look reveals that this, too, is a myth.**

Diamonds contribute 80% of Botswana's revenue. Based on its diamond wealth measured against its population, Botswana is officially considered a middle-income country. However, there is a paradox. The country is one of the most unequal in the world with shocking levels of poverty affecting almost half of its 2.4-million citizens, residing mostly in rural areas. The problem is in how the country's revenue or wealth is distributed.

In their shocking investigative report, “Botswana’s Diamond Deception”, Khadija Sharife, Alvin Ntibinyane, and Lawrence Seretse expose the myth behind the equal and mutually beneficial relationship between DeBeers and the Government of Botswana. According to the report, in 2004, Botswana went further and acquired a 15% share in De Beers itself, an unprecedented entangling of a sovereign country with a single private company.

**However, it is the least worrisome aspect** of what is an opaque, unequal, and exploitative relationship. The report cites Bertie Lincoln, former De Beers director, under oath to a South African court stating “The Governments only role is as an auditor. The value is the price, which is in the [De Beers] Price Book. So the government valuator has got no input into the value of a diamond.”

Even more shocking are revelations in the report that for ten years preceding 2016, DeBeers failed to disclose the \$1bn it repatriated annually from the revenues totalling \$10bn.

**It is tempting to point fingers at DeBeers** taking far more than its pound of flesh from the Batswana. However, the reality is even more worrisome. DeBeers has admitted to bailing out Masire and BDP in the 1990s. The likelihood that the billions of dollars silently and illicitly repatriated may have found its way back to the ruling party is very high. After all, the government owns 15% of DeBeers.

Long before the famous capture of the South African state by the Gupta brothers, it is widely known that DeBeers was appointing ministers and senior public officials in the Botswana government.

**The relationship between the BDP government** and DeBeers may raise serious questions.

Khadija Sharife makes a damning observation “Whilst these ties provide some stability, the blurring of corporation, state, and the party may be costing the nation hundreds of millions of dollars in lost tax revenue every year and has created an opaque system that involves the country’s most critical resource – diamonds. De Beers and the BDP have knit the political and corporate structures together in such a way that they undermine accountability and regulatory systems with a culture of secrecy (framed by De Beers as ‘confidentiality’). As a private entity, De Beers’ dealings are largely protected from scrutiny. Unlike the EU and US, where governments once banned or prosecuted De Beers for price-fixing and other anti-competitive activities, Botswana’s government and its ruling party have been direct collaborators.”

## **A downward spiral**

Under Khama, the country slid into authoritarianism. Journalists were arrested and intimidated, judges threatened, and civilians intimidated by the intelligence agency. Policy decisions related to land and wildlife directly benefited Khama financially. Critics of his unfair treatment of the indigenous San – original inhabitants of the country – were intimidated if they were local and expelled if they were foreigners.

**The San themselves have been pushed off their land**, which has been appropriated for mining, allocated for large-scale agriculture or for wildlife tourism – in which Khama is believed to have personal and financial interests. Public funds have been used to build a luxurious holiday villa for Khama. The hushed whispers and grumblings were that Khama was running the country as a paternalistic feudal chief would a chieftom, or as an army general would run his army.

Although when he left office last year, Khama backed his deputy president, Mokgwetsi Masisi, to succeed him, the relationship between the two has soured.

## **Too close to call**

The jury is out on what the impact of the fallout – played out in public – between the two will be. There are many permutations. The first-past-the-post system continues to present a challenge and unless the opposition unites and presents single candidates, it is likely to favour the ruling party. A lot hangs on how BDP supporters react to Ian Khama's new party. If the majority BaNgwato follow their chief, the BDP hegemony will be dented and the first past the post system will not help BDP. It is likely that the BDP already, losing numbers, will at least lose some supporters.

**But, the politicisation of ethnicity** or the ethnicisation of politics is not a good thing. It has been the foundation of Africa's problems. However, this may not matter to Khama as the Paramount Chief of the BaNgwato. The election is too close to call. For the first time since 1965, despite having a slight edge, BDP has no guarantee of electoral victory.

The Khama factor cannot be ignored. He is loathed in the urban areas, but still popular in the rural areas, in particular in BaNgwato (Central District). But, it is not clear whether he can influence his "subjects" to turn against the BDP. The central region is huge. Of the total 57 constituencies, it has 19 constituencies.

In the past election, it won 18 of the 19. But, BDP is the incumbent, and has perfected the art of exploiting this status. It has all the resources in the world, including control of the diamond wealth (and control of the state media) to put up a bruising fight against Khama and the opposition.

### **A question of credibility**

The question for the opposition, which has aligned with Khama, will be one of credibility. Khama is seen as a spoilt-brat who, having failed to rule from the grave, has thrown all his toys out the cot. Batswana in BDP may not follow him, while those who support the opposition may desert it as punishment for its dalliance with him.

Whatever happens, the elections in October will be the most unpredictable the country has ever had.

But, beyond October, the country has no choice but to confront its triple-headed demon. It must reform its electoral system to reflect the heterogeneity of the country. A proportional representation system or a mixed-member system may be better options. Botswana must revisit its diamond agreement with DeBeers.

**The current agreement expires in March 2021**, and, according to that agreement, negotiations for a new one should be completed before September 2020 – a year from now. Negotiations started in July. BDP seems keen to renew the agreement perhaps pushing for stronger government power and involvement.

Sadly, the agreement does not appear to be a big election issue and the opposition seems unconcerned. The ruling party, on the other hand, continues the renewal negotiations in complete secrecy raising concerns of another secret deal, which may be even worse than the current one.

Before that, it must fully disclose to its citizens the detailed nature of this relationship, including the respective past and current financial benefits. For far too long, the secret deal has provided fertile ground for zero accountability on the part of the ruling elite and DeBeers.

**Bottom line:** Botswana must stop believing the myth and confront corruption. This, and the non-transparent manner in which diamond revenue is managed and shared, are the key drivers of poverty and inequality in the country.