

Article

The Political Opposition in Botswana: the politics of factionalism and fragmentation

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Introduction

In established democracies, the opposition is a government-in-waiting and an alternative to the ruling party. Indeed, alternations in power and checks on the ruling party are some of the most important aspects of democracy practised in such systems as the USA and Britain. In post-colonial Africa, however, even in spite of the resurgence in multipartyism, it has been rare for opposition parties to assume power through the electoral process. Even in Botswana, one of Africa's long-established democracies, the opposition has neither been able to replace the ruling party nor win enough seats in the national assembly effectively to check the ruling party's power since independence in 1966. This is why opposition parties are usually portrayed as weak and posing a minimal threat to the ruling parties in Botswana and in Africa in general.

Competitive multiparty systems are relatively new to most African countries but not to Botswana which has a long post-independence tradition of multipartyism. This paper seeks to analyse why the opposition has neither been able to take over governmental power in Botswana nor even pose a threat to the ruling group's national domination of the political arena. It also examines the organisational capacity of opposition parties, the nature of the relationship between the different opposition groups, their electoral strength relative to that of the ruling party, and their attempts to boost their own electoral strength.

Multiparty democracy in Botswana

A multiparty system is one of the defining elements of a democracy. It provides a competitive dimension during elections and gives the electorate a choice of party programmes and candidates (Robertson 1976). Competitive

elections accord the winning party the mandate and legitimacy to rule but also obligate it to account for its actions as a means to securing its re-election. The opposition's role is to check and balance the operations of the ruling party, prevent abuses of power and ensure, *inter alia*, that the government does not neglect the public interest.

Currently, Botswana has 12 political parties, of which the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) is the largest. The Botswana National Front (BNF) and Botswana Congress Party (BCP) are the most important opposition parties. The BCP, which split from the BNF in 1998, became the major opposition grouping in 1998 with the allegiance of 11 of the 13 parliamentary seats originally held by the BNF. However, the BNF regained its status as the official opposition party in the 1999 general elections when it won six parliamentary seats compared to one seat for the BCP (Republic of Botswana/IEC 1999). There are also a host of small opposition parties which have no seats in parliament. These are the Independence Freedom Party (IFP) – previously known as the Botswana Independence Party (BIP), the Botswana People's Party (BPP), the Botswana Progressive Union (BPU), the Botswana Labour Party (BLP), the Marxist-Leninist, Engels and Stalinist Movement (MELS), the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the United Democratic Front (UDF), the United Socialist Party (USP or PUSO), and the United Action Party (UAP), also known as Bosele. The Lesedi La Botswana (LLB), which split from the BDP in 1993, and the Botswana Liberal Party (BLP) formed in 1983, have been deregistered as political parties due to their record of inactivity (Mokopakgosi and Molomo 1996).

In spite of a long experience with multipartyism, Botswana has in reality since independence in 1966 had a dominant one-party system with the BDP winning seven successive elections. The only occasion on which something of a threat to the BDP's electoral dominance emerged was in the 1994 elections when the BNF won 13 seats with 37 per cent of the vote compared to three seats and 27 per cent of the vote in 1989, while the BDP's share of the seats dropped to 27 from 31 in 1994 (Republic of Botswana 1994, 1989). Parliament holds a total of 40 seats. In the 1999 elections the BDP scored a landslide victory winning 33 seats with 57 per cent support, an increase of 6 seats from the 1994 elections when it won 27 seats with 54 per cent support. The 33 elected members of parliament (MPs) and four specially elected MPs have given the BDP a total of 37 MPs. This means that the BDP would pass bills in parliament with relative ease, and without

much hindrance from the opposition. The BNF won only six seats, a decrease by five seats from the 1994 elections. The BCP, performed miserably, winning only one seat and losing all but one of the 11 seats it had at the time of splitting from the BNF prior to the 1999 elections.

The 1999 election results were significant in two ways. First, they confirm the weakness of opposition parties in Africa in general and the virtual impossibility of their seizing power via the ballot box in Botswana. Second, the BDP has reversed its gradual decline, both in electoral support and seats, a relatively rare phenomenon in Africa. The United National Independence Party (UNIP) in Zambia or the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), which won independence in their respective countries, continue to decline. In Senegal, however, the opposition managed to win power through the ballot box in the 2000 elections.

The inability of the opposition to wrestle power from the BDP makes an interesting study because the political system provides an environment which makes it possible for opposition parties to compete for power. First, the opposition parties in Botswana face no or little suppression of their operations by the ruling BDP. There are no restrictions on the formation, numbers or functioning of opposition parties. The opposition parties are allowed to organise meetings, rallies and campaigns without undue restrictions. Second, the political system has a long tradition of competitive multiparty system which has given the opposition sufficient time for gestation and maturity to plan strategies to challenge the ruling BDP. This observation is more applicable to the oldest opposition parties like the BPP, BIP (formed in pre-independence period), and BNF formed in 1966.

Lastly, free and fair elections make it plausible for alternation in power. The seven successive elections held since 1966 have been free and fair. The elections have been administered according to the electoral law, free from violence, intimidation and rigging, giving each party an equal opportunity to contest and win. The freeness and fairness of elections have recently been improved upon through revisions of electoral law to include an independent electoral commission to replace the elections office, reduction of the voting age to 18 years from 21, and absentee ballot for Botswana residents abroad. These revisions were used for the first time in the 1999 elections.

These three conditions make it feasible for the opposition to win elections and form an alternative government, yet no opposition party has been able to win in Botswana to date. Botswana contrasts sharply with most

multiparty systems in Africa, such as Zambia and Malawi, where there have been practices of electoral manipulation and rigging to prevent opposition parties from winning. For example, the June 1999 elections in Malawi were characterised by non-registration of voters in regions where the opposition is strong, and the use of ghost voters in regions with strong support for the ruling UDF and the incumbent president. Since the political system in Botswana does not unduly constrain the opposition from winning power, the causes of the weaknesses of the opposition should be sought from within the opposition, particularly deficiencies internal to the opposition, including organisational weaknesses. The vitality of the ruling BDP is a combination of good performance and weaknesses of the opposition, especially in relation to the 1999 election results as discussed below.

Organisational capability and competitiveness of the BDP and opposition parties

The biggest problem faced in Botswana's multiparty system is the unbalanced strength between opposition parties, individually and collectively, and the ruling BDP, which makes electoral competition most favourable to the latter. An examination of the organisational capabilities and competitiveness of both the ruling party and the opposition serves to illustrate this inequality. Elections make it necessary for parties to mobilise sufficient human and financial resources, and organise themselves to nominate candidates, launch election campaigns and mobilise voters. Such organisational capability determines the competitiveness of parties, and winners as well as losers in elections.

The ruling BDP

The BDP is organisationally and financially strong, while all opposition parties are poorly organised and funded. In terms of organisational structure, the ruling BDP has branches in all constituencies with a headquarters in the capital, Gaborone. A strong organisational capacity has been possible because of its command of sufficient resources for proper functioning of branches and headquarters, and more important, nominating candidates in all parliamentary and council constituencies, running campaigns for all its candidates, formulating a new updated election manifesto in each successive election year, and mobilisation of voters. It is its ability to get its supporters actually to vote on election day, through transportation and door-to-door appeals, which actually makes the difference in terms of getting the

winning votes. The BDP has been able to generate sufficient resources for electoral purposes from membership fees, rental of its headquarters and external funding. It was reported that the BDP received a donation of P2.4 million for the 1999 elections (*Botswana Guardian* June 4, 1999) from an unknown external donor with which it purchased vehicles for campaigns.

Election campaigns and mobilisation of voters by the BDP have also been facilitated by the government-owned media, Radio Botswana and the *Daily News*. The opposition has repeatedly criticised the government media for extensive coverage of campaigns by candidates of the ruling party and publication of the party's manifesto, with little attention paid to opposition parties. However, the private media, including the *Guardian* and *Mmegi*, formed in the 1980s, have resolved this anomaly, although they have been accused of being partial to opposition parties (*Botswana Guardian* June 4, 1999). The BDP has also utilised the *kgotla*, composed of the chiefs and subjects, as a means of mobilising the people. In addition, the party has remained cohesive without disintegration into splinter groups and fought all general elections as a united force, in spite of internal dissensions and warring factions. This is an indication of the party's resolve to manage differences amicably, primarily for the survival of the party as an organisation. Such cohesion has helped secure electoral success for the party as its efforts are directed at mobilisation of voters. The party ideology, *Kasigano*, built on four foundations of unity, peace, harmony, and sense of community (Polhemus 1983:403), is inclusive as it espouses the aspirations of all citizens. The ideology has been a guideline for formulation of election manifestos and government policies, both domestic and international.

The opposition parties – factionalism and fragmentation

A weak, divided and resource-poor opposition is no match for the BDP. Most opposition parties do not have the resources to establish branches or nominate candidates in every constituency because they do not command as many resources as the ruling BDP. Insufficient human and financial resources have prevented all opposition parties from nominating candidates in all parliamentary and council constituencies, organise effective election campaigns and mobilise voters countrywide. Only the BNF was able to nominate the highest number of candidates, 37 and 38 in the 1999 and 1994 elections, respectively. The other opposition parties nominated less than half of the required contestants in the same elections (Republic of Botswana/IEC 1999, Republic of Botswana 1994). The BCP was reported to be short

of funds and campaign vehicles to undertake a country-wide mobilisation of voters for the 1999 elections (*Mmegi* June 11-17, 1999), and has no permanent headquarters. And, although there have been allegations of external assistance for the BNF, a P3 million donation for the 1999 elections and a donation of cars in the 1994 elections (*Botswana Guardian* June 4, 1999), such support has fallen short of the requirements of the BNF.

The opposition, not the ruling party, has suffered enormously from the phenomena of factionalism and fragmentation. These are the major reasons why the opposition has remained weak relative to the ruling BDP. Factionalism and fragmentation are symbolised by splits into groups within the party, which sometimes culminate into formation of separate parties, and lack of collaboration and alignments between opposition parties. Factionalism within the party has been seen to be dysfunctional to the party as an organisation as it erodes internal cohesion, making the party weak. Unity is very crucial for any organisation to succeed politically and sustain itself, because unity increases the party's chance of winning elections (Waller and Gillespie 1995, Pridham 1995). Divisions negatively affect electoral success as a party becomes preoccupied with internal squabbles instead of unifying behind the leadership, and directing efforts of the party towards mobilisation of electoral support or recruitment of membership. Factional fights within the party, which lead to a breakaway party, tarnish the public image of the party, reduce membership drive and support, and result in loss of potential members and leaders. Therefore, any party which has survived factional strife has to reorganise itself and renew its appeal to the public to restore confidence in the party. These are tasks which the BNF has not been able to undertake.

Factors which contribute to factionalism and fragmentation are varied and include lack of political cohesion due to polarised competition within the party, failure to manage and resolve internal feuds on important issues like ideology, programmes of action and leadership; and inability of the party to adapt to changing circumstances, or reform the party accordingly (Pridham 1995). But factionalism within a party might also produce positive results because it might promote internal party pluralism and representation of different political and socio-economic interests of members of the party. Similarly, it may be a good indicator of democracy within the party (Waller and Gillespie 1995, Pridham 1995). Factionalism might also promote a democratic spirit of 'give and take' which would pave the way for consensual decision making in the party. Furthermore, splinter parties

might contribute to political development as development of a multiparty system is encouraged by adding new parties to the existing ones.

The BNF has suffered the most from factional strife between the Koma faction and other factions, which at times has given rise to splinter parties being formed. The polarisation between the two factions stems from the predominant personality of Koma within the BNF. He is one of the founding fathers, and initiator of the ideology, manifesto and policies of the party. Consequently, he and his followers find it hard to accommodate alternative ideas, principles and leadership. This is symbolised by the popular slogan which indicates that Koma is BNF and BNF is Koma. This illustrates the entrenchment of personal power and lack of institutionalised leadership which might pose problems of succession and undermine democratic practice within the party.

The BNF is notorious for internal feuds which have been caused by ideological tensions between socialists and traditionalists; leadership struggles arising from Koma's supremacy and refusal to surrender the leadership of the party thereby alienating supporters; disagreements over procedural arrangements for the conduct of primary elections for the selection of candidates; and disgruntlement by losing candidates at primary elections. The fact that the BNF is composed of diverse membership of traditionalists, socialists, workers, intellectuals and ethnic minorities makes it prone to factional strifes. Tensions within the BNF have seriously undermined cohesiveness of the party and culminated into open physical confrontation, including a stone throwing incident at the 1998 party congress at Palapye which led to the formation of a splinter party, the BCP (non-Koma faction). Legal battles after the split involving the BNF and BCP, seriously dented the images of both parties and the leadership in the eyes of the electorate, as well as diverted financial resources away from the 1999 elections.

The BNF has the unique and uncanny tendency of splitting up prior to and after general elections. Eight splinter parties have been formed from the BNF. In 1998 the BCP split from the BNF after violent fights between the Koma and non-Koma factions, a first in opposition politics. This split cost both parties seats in the 1999 elections. In 1994, two splinter groups were formed, the United Socialist Party (USP), due to ideological differences between radical youths and what was perceived to be a conservative leadership of the BNF, and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) formed by disgruntled losers due to what they perceived as unfair primary elections.

Similarly, in 1993 two groups broke away from the BNF to form the IFP, which was an amalgamation of the BFP and BIP, and the Botswana Workers Front (BWF) which was formed by the Bakgalagadi, who felt alienated from top party structure due to ethnic origin. Again in 1989, two parties were formed, BFP and BLP, as a result of splits in the BNF. The break away by the BFP made the BNF lose in the Kanye and Ngwaketse South constituencies in the 1989 general elections. In 1982, the BPU was founded after some members felt alienated from top leadership in the BNF and the BDP (Mokopagosi and Molomo 1996, East and Joseph 1993, and Polhemus 1983:429). Such breakaway parties have contributed to the split in the opposition vote in all the seven general elections, giving the ruling party an electoral advantage.

Surprisingly, in spite of splinter groups, the BNF secured the highest percentage of votes (38) and highest number of seats (13 out of 40) in 1994. This was a very impressive win for the BNF because it had initially, in 1993, opted to boycott the 1994 general elections. But it reconsidered its decision and contested. Consequently, the BNF had wasted valuable time essential for mobilisation of voters and conduct of election campaigns. However, the splits explain the BNF's decline and poor performance in the 1999 elections, losing the gains made in the 1994 elections. Splinter parties also worsen the combined position of the opposition parties as they find it difficult to contest elections because of their newness to the electoral scene, inadequate resource capacity and time to mobilise the electorate. The BCP and UAP, the newest of the parties, found themselves in this predicament, and they were unable to challenge or replace the BNF, let alone the ruling BDP.

The intra-party conflicts within the BNF have spilled over into inter-party rivalry, fomenting mutual distrust and preventing coalition building between opposition parties. The bitter BNF-BCP rivalry precluded the formation of an electoral pact to challenge the ruling BDP. Similarly, inter-party rivalry made opposition parties adopt campaign strategies meant to undermine each other. Thus they were unable to scrutinise the performance of the BDP government to identify its weaknesses and use them to their advantage, or offer tangible alternative policies to the ruling BDP.

The opposition has been weakened further by loss of their members to other opposition parties. The BNF lost all its MPs, except one, and councillors to the BCP in 1998. This sparked a debate as to the appropriateness of MPs retaining their parliamentary seats without seeking

a fresh mandate. Similarly, the BNF and BPP have lost their members, including councillors, who have crossed to the BDP. The BDP was also able to undercut support for the BPP by the Bakgatla tribe through appointment of their chief as Botswana's ambassador to the United Nations. The BDP did the same in the north by securing the support of the Batawana tribe to undercut BIP support. The opposition parties have no patronage to counteract the patronage of the BDP or reward their members because they are resource-poor (Holm 1987:139-40).

Electoral strength of the ruling and opposition parties

Preferences of the electorate have contributed to the inability of the opposition, the BNF in particular, to win power. Theoretically, the electorate is guided by rationality in choosing the party and candidates for public office. In reality, however, it is a combination of rationality, party identification and loyalty which determine voting preferences of the electorate. Roskin et al (1994:228) argue that party loyalty and identification make many voters associate themselves mentally with one party over many years. Similarly, material benefits distributed by the party, like the BDP, account for affiliation to a party by voters. Generally in Africa voters identify themselves and vote for a party not a candidate which means that a party with nationwide support is assured of a victory as opposed to a party with narrow, regional support. This helps to explain why the BDP has been returned to power in all elections while the BNF has failed to win but remains the preferred opposition party by the electorate.

The BDP commands majority support nationwide, drawn primarily from the Tswana speaking tribes, the Bamangwato and Bakwena, who make up 50 per cent of the population (Holm 1987:138). The dominance of the party by one ethnic group has been a source of cohesion, although there are allegations of divisions between Tswanas and Kalangas (Mokopakgosi and Molomo 1996). In addition, the unwavering support from the large, rural population has helped the BDP to win rural constituencies in post-independence general elections. However, the BDP has not been able to win the loyalty of majority of urban constituencies, especially in the 1990s. A combination of dissatisfaction with unemployment, poverty, corruption scandals and the government's refusal to grant workers' request for annual increase may have resulted in the BDP's loss of seats in urban areas to the BNF in the 1994 general elections.

Voter support for the BDP had progressively decreased until the 1999

elections. It received 78 per cent of votes in 1974, 75 per cent in 1979, 68 per cent in 1984, 64 per cent in 1989 and 54 per cent in 1994. However, it has remained high enough to win majority seats in parliament. The electoral system of single-member plurality or, first past the post, has helped the BDP to win with a simple majority, in spite of the decline in voter support in the past elections. The 1999 elections, however, reversed the BDP's decline in electoral support and seats.

The 1999 election results showed that the BDP (57 per cent) commands slightly more than twice the electoral support for the BNF and more than the combined support for the opposition, the BNF (26 per cent), BCP (12 per cent) and Botswana Alliance Movement (BAM) (5 per cent) (*Mmegi* October 22-28, 1999). It would require a tremendous effort by the BNF to narrow the gap and overrun the BDP, in view of continuing factionalism in the BNF. Even the anticipated support for the BNF from the first time voters, the 18 year olds, failed to materialise either because they did not register to vote or did not vote for the BNF but voted for another party, presumably the ruling BDP. The BNF's vision of an egalitarian society has helped the party maintain the support of the working class and the underprivileged, which accounts for its popularity in urban areas. Such support has not been enough to dislodge the BDP from power or to overcome the negative effects of disunity. The high support for the BDP relative to the opposition is explained by two major factors, good governance since 1966 and a remarkable record of economic growth, particularly in the 1970s. These two factors have strengthened the ruling party and contributed to a weakened opposition.

Economic performance by the BDP

The BDP government has been credited with good economic performance as a result of efficient management. The government has transformed Botswana from a poor, subsistence economy to a middle income country (UNDP 1998). Indeed the good economic performance record has assured electoral support for the BDP in the general elections. In 1994 the party lost more seats to the BNF due to increase in unemployment and poverty but the same problems had little impact on the 1999 electoral outcome for the BDP. The BDP government has tried to distribute the benefits of economic growth to society through job creation, with the government becoming the largest employer in the 1990s, and investment in social and infrastructural services which have resulted in rapid expansion of education, health facilities, water supplies, housing and roads in both rural and urban areas

(Republic of Botswana 1997a). Such distributional efforts are what is expected of a responsive democratic government.

The government's socio-economic programmes have been targeted at a wide section of the population, both supporters and non-supporters, which have helped to garner support for the party. The urban sector has benefited through employment creation and a localisation programme; the rural sector through the Remote Area Dwellers (RAD) and drought relief programmes designed to alleviate hunger; farmers through the Accelerated Rainfed Arable Programme (ARAP) and the Arable Lands Development Programme (ALDEP); prospective entrepreneurs through the Financial Assistance Programme (FAP) and other loan facilities; and the aged through the Old Age Pension scheme. Thus, the BDP has been able to use both its own and state resources for patronage which helps the party to secure wide support and deprive the opposition of support. Holm (1987) indicates that the BDP rewards party activists with patronage jobs and small construction contracts at the local councils. Likewise, the government's bail out schemes, like the Citizen Contractors Fund, worth P50 million, to prop up collapsing citizen contracting companies (*Botswana Guardian* June 25, 1999), pleased supporters, and those who prefer government assistance to Botswana enterprises. More important is the timeous distribution of public resources prior to elections. For example, the government-funded Small, Micro and Medium Entrepreneurs (SMME) credit scheme worth P150 million, to cover a three year period, started disbursement of funds on 1 June (*Mmegi* June 4-10, 1999), a few months before the 1999 elections.

Thus, the relatively high support for the BDP stems from the electorate's appreciation of the party's capitalist road to development as opposed to a socialist path which might have been preferred by the BNF. This is particularly poignant in view of the disastrous socialist experiments in Tanzania and Zambia. The BDP leadership has followed a more realistic approach to development although its distributional policies have fallen short of people's expectations given the widening inequality.

Political stance of the BDP

Another major reason for the electoral dominance of the BDP is good governance. The BDP has maintained a stable, democratic government in a continent ravaged by civil wars and characterised by dictatorships and military coups. Until 1992, the leadership of the BDP exhibited highly

moral political behaviour, and was accountable and uncorruptible. This earned the party public support and respect. In spite of the blemish of post-1992 corruption scandals, the BDP has endeared itself to the masses through its political stance of accommodation and toleration. The government has been willing to institute commissions of inquiry whenever questions are raised by the public, although it has fallen short of inflicting heavy punishment on the offenders.

The BDP presents itself as a dynamic party capable of reform by adapting to changing circumstances through rejuvenation of the party. This has been done through smooth and amicable changes in leadership, incorporation of young leaders and invoking the 'Khama spirit' to appeal and maintain electoral support. The late Sir Seretse Khama, Botswana's first president and leader of the BDP, was popular and revered by most Tswanas, especially in the Central district which is the most populous district and his original base (Wiseman and Charlton 1995:5). His son, Major Ian Khama, was incorporated into the party to revive the Khama spirit in order to help neutralise factionalism, unify the party, appeal for and maintain support. It is difficult to assess the impact of the Khama spirit on sustaining or mobilising support for the party but it was under the Mogae/Khama leadership that the party won its 1999 landslide victory. Khama has so far proved effective as the vice president and member of parliament for Serowe North through initiation of policies and programmes.

Furthermore, the relatively high support for the BDP can also be attributed to the BDP's high degree of tolerance of the opposition, which not only enhances democracy but wins the appreciation of the electorate. The BDP has been accommodating of the suggestions of the opposition, especially of the BNF. For example, the reform of electoral law, such as the independent electoral commission, reduction of voting age to 18 years and absentee ballot system for Batswana resident outside Botswana, was initiated by the BNF and implemented by the BDP. This illustrates a flexible, constructive working relationship which is mutually beneficial to both parties. This is a rarity in African democracies. Such tolerance is symbolic of an open, accommodating system which helps the BDP to preempt any dissatisfaction from the opposition thereby maintain political stability. It also enables the BNF to play its watchdog role so that the ruling party does not become complacent.

Setbacks for the BDP

Drawbacks on both the political and economic fronts in the 1990s have seriously dented the clean image of the BDP, which in the 1994 elections led to the loss of seats to the BNF. Unemployment, estimated at 21 per cent of the labour force in 1997 and up from 14 per cent in 1991 (Republic of Botswana 1997a:55), continues to blemish the good economic performance of the BDP, and makes it hard for the party to mobilise support from urban constituencies. Similarly, the BDP's reputation for competence and merit has suffered since the early 1990s due to corruption scandals involving senior government and party officials. These include the costly International Project Managers (IPM) contract for supply of school materials in 1990, the illegal land acquisition in peri-urban areas by senior government and party officials in 1991, the Botswana Housing Corporation (BHC) scandal in 1992 (Good 1994:500-6, 1997:51-52, 129-30), and allegations of bribery by Zakhem road construction company in 1999.

However, in spite of the problems of unemployment and corruption, the BDP won the 1999 elections for three main reasons. First, the government has been quick to handle such problems through commissions of inquiry and letting the courts decide on corruption cases, as in the case of the BHC scandal. This gives the public the impression of an accountable and transparent government, a government which is doing something about corruption. Second, while the government has not alleviated unemployment, it is dealing with it in an indirect way, through credit schemes to encourage self-employment. Therefore, people have the hope that the government might overcome problems of unemployment. Similarly, the economic situation has not deteriorated to the extent of attracting a no confidence vote in the BDP by the masses. The nostalgia for the good, prosperous years under three successive BDP leaderships, the transformation of Botswana from a poor country to a middle income country by the BDP, the hope that the BDP can overcome current problems, and the public's acceptance of a capitalist economic system contributed to its victory in the 1999 elections. The fact that no opposition party has any record of governance and economic performance to contest that of the BDP, and the fact that people are not aware of BNF's alternate policies, works to their disadvantage.

Third, and perhaps more important, the failure by the opposition to capitalise on problems of unemployment and corruption scandals to discredit the government also works to the advantage of the BDP. Instead, the opposition assumes that voters would automatically switch their allegiance

whenever they are disillusioned with the actions and policies of the ruling party. Some, especially in urban areas, did so, but this had not been the norm in by-elections after the 1994 elections. Whereas unemployment rates contributed to the BNF's win of 13 seats in 1994, the killing of cattle infected by lung disease in 1995 did not negatively affect by-elections results for the BDP, yet the BNF expected that the BDP would lose. But the government has managed to overcome cattle owners' antipathy towards the BDP through either 70 per cent restocking and 30 per cent cash or 100 per cent cash compensation for cattle killed (*Mmegi* July 16-22, 1999), thus ensuring support in the by-elections. The BNF won the by-election of May 3, 1997. But the BDP emerged victorious in two parliamentary by-elections and four local council by-elections of July 4 and July 25, 1998, respectively, defeating the BNF in both by-elections, and the BPP in council by-elections by considerable margins. In one of the four council by-elections, the BDP won the seat previously occupied by the BNF (Republic of Botswana 1997b, 1998).

In the 1999 elections, the BDP was handsomely rewarded while the opposition parties were severely reprimanded. The BDP not only retained its rural support but also won back the seats it lost in the 1994 elections and took the urban constituencies of Gaborone Central, Francistown East and Francistown West, which are 'traditional' BNF constituencies. The BDP's renewed mandate suggests confidence of the voters in its rule and ability to woo voters. Therefore, it is not necessarily the long duration in power by the BDP which matters most to the voters but performance to satisfy the voters' demands.

The 1999 elections could be considered as a watershed in three ways: first, it brought in a large number of new and relatively young MPs, especially for the BDP, totalling 15, with only three for the BNF (Republic of Botswana/IEC 1999, *Midweek Sun* October 20, 1999). The entry of fresh and young MPs gives the BDP some turnover in personnel and representation. It is assumed that new and relatively young MPs would bring new and innovative ideas to parliament which are likely to correspond to current concerns of the public (Roskin et al 1994). Second, the win for the BDP has widened representation for women in parliament. The 1999 elections resulted in the biggest increase in the number of elected women MPs compared to past elections. Women MPs consist of six directly elected on the BDP ticket and two especially chosen by the President. This brings the total to eight women MPs, all for the BDP and none for the opposition

parties. This is an improvement from the 1994 elections which produced only three women MPs.

Similarly, there are a number of newly appointed women in top cabinet and civil service positions as ministers (two), assistant ministers (two), permanent secretaries (three), and a Governor of the Bank of Botswana. The increased representation of women in top public positions is mostly attributed to Emang Basadi, a women's pressure group, which exerts the most effective pressure on government and political parties for increased participation of women. Third, the BDP emerged as the party for all, women, the young, the old, the rural and urban working class (urban constituencies won by the BDP), an all-inclusive party with a nationwide appeal.

Electoral decline of the opposition

Compared to the 1994 elections, when the BNF secured its highest number of votes and seats, the opposition has experienced a decline in electoral support in the general elections. This has meant fewer parliamentary seats for the opposition and the impossibility of alternation in governmental power. The combined strength of the opposition progressively declined from seven seats in 1969 to five in 1974, to three in 1979, rose to five in 1984, then dropped again to three in 1989, rose to 13 in 1994 and declined again to seven in 1999. Similarly, the combined electoral strength, in terms of total percentage of votes for the opposition, has never exceeded that of the BDP in all the seven general elections. Thus, the opposition poses no serious threat to the BDP's dominance based on its past performance at elections.

The electoral weaknesses of the opposition also stem from their narrow, regional support, drawn from minority non-Tswana ethnic groups. The North West is the stronghold for the BIP with the support of the Bayei, the North East for the BPP among the Bakalanga, and the South for the BNF with Bakgatla support. The BNF is also strong in urban areas (Wiseman and Charlton 1995:3, 5, Holm 1987:139). The UAP also draws support from the South. Similarly, voter perception of the opposition reinforces their weakened position. The electorate perceives the BNF as a good opposition because it is an effective watchdog which is protective of interests of workers and the less privileged.

The opposition parties have performed better in local government than in parliamentary elections, with the BNF in control of urban areas including

Gaborone city council where it won 24 of the 25 seats, ten out of 11 seats in Lobatse, all 13 seats in Selebi Phikwe, and all seven seats in Jwaneng, a mining town, after the 1994 elections. But overall, the BDP still came out the winner, with 243 seats, 130 for the BNF, 15 for the BPP, nine for the IFP, and four for the BPU (Republic of Botswana 1994). In the 1999 elections, the BDP also captured the majority of council seats, 320, with 80 for the BNF, 13 for the BCP, nine for BAM and none for other parties (*Mmegi* October 22-28, 1999). There is some kind of separation of power with the BDP predominant in central government. The BDP occupies most seats in local government but the opposition, the BNF in particular, retains control in urban local government. Such a set up has not soured central-local government relations, however.

Augmenting the competitiveness of the opposition

Electoral alliances are the commonest way for the opposition to bolster its power and increase the possibility of forming the government through electoral victory. Past attempts at electoral coalitions between opposition parties in Botswana failed to materialise. In October 1991, the opposition parties tried to create a supraparty organisation called the Botswana People's Progressive Front (BPPF). The BPPF was composed of the BNF, BPP and BPU, which were expected to merge into one to maximise their electoral challenge against the BDP in the 1994 elections. But the BPPF did not materialise into a functioning organisation (East and Joseph 1993). Prior to the 1994 general elections, the opposition tried once again to form a united front called the United Democratic Front (UDF) to challenge both the BNF and BDP. The UDF was a loose association of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), BWF and MELS, with each party retaining its separate identity but using one voting disc. But the UDF failed to mount a credible challenge against either the BNF or BDP (Mokopagosi and Molomo, 1996:15-16). In February 1999, the opposition seemed to have made progress towards the formation of an electoral alliance called the BAM, initiated by Koma, the leader of the BNF. BAM was registered in March 1999 (*Botswana Guardian* March 26, 1999).

BAM's conception was received with both optimism and skepticism in the local press. As an electoral force, BAM, had been long overdue and a necessary strategy to launch an effective, cohesive challenge to the ruling BDP in the 1999 elections. BAM was originally composed of five parties, the BNF as the largest and strongest partner, BPP, BPU, IFP and UAP as

the smallest partners. The choice of Koma, as the chairperson of BAM, was of strategic importance because of his stature and long experience in politics. Koma's leadership and membership of the BNF made BAM a credible political force. The strategy adopted by BAM was to unify all opposition parties under one umbrella organisation, hence avoid inter-party competition to improve the chances of electoral success in the 1999 elections. In this way, BAM would maximise its electoral strength against the BDP to win political power and possibly form a coalition government. The electoral alliance would have improved the opposition's chances of nominating a candidate in all 40 constituencies, which none of the opposition parties has been able to do so far. BAM picked a catchy slogan, 'Time for Change', to appeal to the electorate. The slogan had several implications. The most obvious was that the BDP had been in power for too long, hence the need for a new party government by BAM, which presumably would be better than the ruling BDP.

Pessimism regarding BAM centred on its viability and sustainability as an electoral alliance and the instability of a coalition government, which would have to be put in place if the alliance parties were to win the 1999 elections. From its inception, there were 'teething problems' which indicated that BAM would not survive for long. A number of factors accounted for this. First, the unequal strength of parties to the alliance proved problematic and showed the fragility of the electoral coalition. The dominant position of the BNF, given its control of the leadership, long experience, popular support, symbolised by the chanting of its slogan at BAM meetings, turned BAM into the BNF writ large. The dominance of the BNF presented a catch 22: the membership of the BNF was necessary for the electoral alliance to gain credibility, but it also made the alliance dependent on the BNF which was seen as the 'driving force' with the rest of the parties as mere passengers with little clout. Such a scenario resulted in the struggle for position within the alliance with the BNF trying to assert its dominance, and other parties resisting the presumed dominance of the BNF. This made the alliance unworkable and tenuous.

Second, the BNF versus non-BNF rivalry was replicated through personality clashes between leaders of the alliance and ideological differences between egalitarian principles of the BNF and conservatism of other parties. The leaders of the alliance also failed to reconcile their differences regarding the colour of the voting disc and the nomination of candidates in constituencies and for council seats (*Botswana Guardian*

ay 28, 1999). The inevitable power struggle, personality and ideological clashes, and other differences diverted the alliance from the most important task of identifying programmes and policies as well as formulating an alliance manifesto as alternatives to the BDP, and as tools to attract voters to the alliance. Third, the omission of other opposition parties from BAM reduced its effectiveness and meant that the opposition remained divided vis-à-vis the ruling BDP. The BCP, the then official opposition party with the largest number of seats in parliament, was not invited to join BAM because of intense BNF-BCP rivalry. Similarly, the UDF, composed of the DP, BWF and MELS, was also left out of the alliance.

It is worthwhile to note that even if the opposition had resolved personal and ideological differences, and BAM had survived in its original form, the combined electoral strength of all opposition parties would still have been sufficient to dislodge the BDP from governmental power or increase the opposition parties' parliamentary seats at the expense of the BDP. Weak electoral support, therefore, is the major reason for the impossibility of alternation in governmental office by an opposition party. Furthermore, failure to resolve internal wrangles within the alliance further weakened the opposition as the BNF withdrew from BAM in May 1999, three months after its inception, and a few months prior to the general elections. However, other original members of the BAM maintained the alliance and managed to nominate candidates, but the alliance remained an unimportant competitor to the BDP. The opposition remains divided into three warring factions, the BNF, BCP and BAM while the BDP has remained a cohesive and strong party.

The opposition parties have proved that they are not yet ready to rise above party differences to pave the way for an effective alliance against the BDP. Since the BNF is seen as the main opposition to the government, it might be perceived as having failed to provide leadership to other opposition parties, and exhibit exemplary behaviour for the opposition to emulate. Consequently, it might be seen to be most interested in maintaining its distinct and separate identity rather than augmenting the strength of the opposition relative to the ruling party.

The opposition could learn from the experience of the opposition parties in Malawi, who through political commitment and determination to win, rose above party politics to launch a combined challenge against the ruling party in the June 1999 general elections. Consequently, joining of forces by the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) and Malawi Congress Party (MCP)

secured them 95 parliamentary seats compared to 93 for the ruling UDF (Malawinet 1999). The opposition alliance also nominated one presidential candidate who lost to President Muluzi of the UDF. But the most significant lesson is the ability of the alliance to dominate in parliament so that they can challenge UDF's legislation in the national assembly whenever it is necessary. Similarly, the alliance was able to split the vote and prevent the incumbent president from securing 50 per cent of the votes of all registered voters as required by the constitution of Malawi. Since the Malawian constitution does not reject a candidate with less than 50 per cent, attempts by the alliance to use the courts to nullify the results failed. Therefore, although the president is indirectly elected by the national assembly in Botswana, an electoral alliance could still improve the chances for the opposition to elect their own president if they nominate, contest and win a majority of the 40 constituencies.

Another strategy adopted by the opposition to maximise their strength is to exert pressure on the ruling BDP to reform the political system to make it more favourable to the opposition. Most relevant is the proposition by the opposition to reform the electoral system from the current first-past-the-post, which allocates seats to candidates with the largest number of votes in each constituency, to proportional representation (PR). The PR is fairer and more equal than the single-member plurality or simple majority system as each party is allocated parliamentary seats in proportion to votes won according to some commentators (Jackson and Jackson 1993). Therefore, the PR would be advantageous to the opposition as their representation in parliament would be increased. The second proposal dealt with financial assistance by the state for all parties contesting elections. This would benefit all opposition parties the most, but not necessarily the ruling BDP, because they lack sufficient funds to run effective election campaigns and mobilise voters. These two proposals were tabled, together with other suggestions, at the May 1999 All Party Consultative Conference, an informal forum for consultation between all opposition parties and the ruling BDP. The latter rejected both of them, but these suggestions were expected to be discussed again at another All Party Consultative Conference in May 2000 (*Mmegi* June 4-10, 1999).

Conclusion

There has been no alternation in governmental power in Botswana since independence in 1966 because the opposition has not been able to win

majority support. Such electoral weakness stems from, among other factors, lack of organisational capability, inadequate financial resources and lack of intra- and inter-party cohesion. Attempts at bolstering the strength of opposition parties through an electoral alliance have not been successful. The opposition remains divided into warring factions. These, together with the tendency of opposition parties to criticise and undermine each other, rather than capitalise on errors of the BDP, have reduced the electoral strength of the opposition and lessened their chance of victory in the general elections. The BDP has been able to reverse its decline and rejuvenate itself through a landslide victory in the 1999 elections, a rare occurrence in African politics. A combination of good economic and political performance and factionalism and fragmentation within and between the opposition contributed to its success.

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