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**Title:** Political Parties in Botswana - Some Observations

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**No.** 006

University of Manchester
Department of Government

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# POLITICAL PARTIES IN BOTSWANA - SOME OBSERVATIONS

by John A. Wiseman

Perhaps I could begin by stressing the tentative nature of the paper which I shall be presenting to this seminar. In the main this is due to the inadequacy of source material, relating to Botswana, available in Britain. The country is small (in terms of population) and poor, a situation which does not encourage the generation of much in the way of primary material, especially outside the governmental sector. With one or two exceptions the secondary material concerning Botswana seems to be based on the premise that the most important factor concerning the country is its relationship with the rest of Southern Africa. Thus it is regarded as a rather small pawn in the wider struggle with usually little more than a cursory glance at its internal politics. I am at the moment planning a trip to Botswana for the purposes of field work later in the year, but for the present I acknowledge that there are serious gaps in the paper I shall put before you. In most cases I shall attempt to point to the omissions myself. In spite of this I believe that the paper may be of interest, not only to those few who have a particular interest in Botswana, but to the much wider number who accept that the study of new states is of vital relevance to our understanding of politics.

This account rejects the notion of any "single explanation" of the party system in Botswana: it rejects single variable determinism or even dominancy as a core explanatory factor. Thus it regards as simplistic any attempt to use one variable (e.g. tribe, class, region etc.) as a sensible method of understanding the nature of political parties or their interactions, analytically positioned as "party system". What is more, this account argues that the same method cannot be used to explain all the parties, even after allowance has been made for different content variables. The Botswana Democratic Party is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from the

opposition parties. The B.D.P. is and always has been since independence a governing party, and in the context of Botswana governing party and opposition party are two entirely different social entities (this, of course, is not to argue that this should or will always be the case - in dealing with a state like Botswana the brevity of the time scale represents an inescapable problem and limitation). I wish to explain support for opposition by regarding B.D.P. support as a behavioural norm for Botswana. Thus support for opposition parties can be seen as deviancy from a given norm. I then wish to argue that in the case of each individual opposition party, the basis of support, and hence of deviancy from the posited behavioural norm, is due to a single fairly coherent set of grievances against the B.D.P. government performance in which I include the subjective expectations regarding future performance. Furthermore, it is crucial to see that in each opposition party the set of grievances is quite different from the set of grievances in any of the others and that the only common factor in these "sets" is dissatisfaction with the B.D.P. Hence no single common variable exists for opposition parties in Botswana other than the tautological one that they oppose the B.D.P. government.

Although we are explaining opposition parties by reference to the Democratic Party, this does not mean that the B.D.P. is regarded solely as an independent variable. The relationship between the B.D.P. and the opposition parties is two way and the latter affect the former's structure, policies and so on. Also we need to relate all parties to factors in the environment (in a systemic sense). It is in this sort of cross-referential examination that some understanding of process can emerge (to add depth to this form of analysis we need to view parties as Apter suggests, as intervening, independent and dependent variables within the political system - see David Apter 'The Politics of Modernization').

However, having qualified my overall explanation in this way, it is necessary to point out that the relationship between the B.D.P. and the opposition is causally asymmetrical. That is to say the B.D.P. determines the nature of the opposition parties more than vice versa. Of course the B.D.P. does not "control" the overall political situation and must react to stimuli in the physical and social environment. Of course these stimuli in the sense of inputs of demands may contradict one another and it is the inability or unwillingness of the B.D.P. to

respond to certain stimuli in the desired way which is posited as the "cause" of the opposition. The B.D.P., of course, have since independence had a major say in the constitutional rules under which party conflict is conducted. At a higher level the B.D.P. exercise a pivotal influence in defining the political struggle. If I may be polemical, I wish to argue that for Botswana to continue as a nation in anything resembling its present form the B.D.P. must continue to rule at least in the near future. I am seriously suggesting that if the B.D.P. were removed from the political scene in Botswana, the nation state would cease to exist such is the weakness of the forces of fusion and the strength of the forces of fission outside the B.D.P. The Democratic Party leaders are aware of this. Thus it is not rhetoric, or at least it is not only rhetoric for the B.D.P. Manifesto to state, "above all, it is for the people to judge whether any other political grouping can be entrusted with Botswana's destiny at this critical moment in our history." (Botswana Democratic Party: Election Manifesto 1969, printed by Botswana Press (Pty) Ltd., Industrial Township Mafeking). (Before I am accused to value prejudices in favour of a system maintenance, I should add that I make no judgement as to whether or not the B.D.P. or Botswana ought to continue in anything resembling their present states.)

Thus in the 1969 Election the choice in any individual constituency was between B.D.P. and B.N.F. or B.P.P. or B.I.P. (in no constituency did the B.D.P. fall below second place), but at the national level the choice was B.D.P. or nothing in the sense that it was extremely doubtful that any other party could have formed a workable government. Nor would any other party have the power to maintain national unity by the use of coercion.

Of course up to this point we have treated the B.D.P. as a homogeneous unit which intuitively we know it not to be. It has, however, been free, so far, from any major factional splits and defections which since independence have always been from opposition parties to the Democratic Party. Also the B.D.P. makes a real attempt (and a fairly successful one) to appeal to all sections of political opinion in Botswana as opposed to being based on a single set of grievances. One might even say that the B.D.P. attempts to respond to the aspirations of the different groups in the population

and crucially to shape and channel those aspirations. Certainly it is aware as a governing party that there is some need to strive for some unattainable equilibrium of forces. In practice these aspirations may contradict one another so that the ruling party cannot respond positively to both. It can then try to mediate, suggest compromise or persuade the actors that the contradiction does not exist, but in the long run it will be necessary to come down on one side (for the cynic "the art of leadership lies in judging whose hand may be safely slapped when it reaches for the pork barrel so that there will be enough to satisfy those whom it is not safe to exclude" - in F.G. Bailey, "Strategems and Spoils"). This will normally be legitimised as being "in the national interest". The "truth content" of this legitimisation will vary from case to case. However, when Bentley argued that "the national interest is rather a form of argument used by party members than a characteristic of party tendency" he was probably betraying the weakness of a group theory which can recognise only sectional interests (A.F. Bentley, "The Process of Government"). From one perspective of course the Democratic Party can be seen as an existential collection of groups, interests, grievances, aspirations, prejudices, beliefs and so on, but from another it can be seen as a national party in a way that as yet the opposition parties cannot. Central to this is that the B.D.P. define the arena of possible political conflict as the nation and force opposition to place the emphasis of polemic in the conceptual boundaries of nation state. A brief example of this can be the struggle with the chiefs, although this will be dealt with in far more detail in the paper. We may say that there exists a variety of sets of values and procedures which we may label "traditional systems" providing we recognise at least some element of dynamism. Before independence we can see these as being largely self-contained. Although there was some contact at the elite level, these systems existed in and for a defined parochial environment. However the existence of the B.D.P. government and its actions and intentions concerning the relationship between the traditional systems and national ideals has forced these traditional ideas to be made manifest on a national scale and thus has defined the overall framework for conflict. The House of Chiefs provides a constitutional channel for this to take place, although individual

chiefs who find this method unacceptable can resort to other means. The most notable example was of course the resignation of Chief Bathoen of the Bangwaketse, but it is crucial to note that Bathoen was forced to enter the national party political arena to continue the struggle. Thus the Democratic Party can be said to have forced the chiefs to argue their case at a national level and have thus defined the acceptable political arena as the nation state.

In the paper I shall discuss the four political parties individually, although at all times the stress will be on the interactions both with each other and with the wider political environment. One of the problems of listening to a paper which deals with an unfamiliar country is that the listener often becomes confused by the multitude of people and organisations which are mentioned. In the case of my own paper I feel this would especially apply to those members who are relatively unfamiliar with Setswana names. I shall therefore conclude with a short list of the main participants etc. which I hope may enable people to follow more clearly what I have to say.

The country is Botswana
The people are Batswana
An individual is a Motswana
The language is Setswana

Parties

B.D.P. - Botswana Democratic Party
B.P.P. - Botswana Peoples Party
B.N.F. - Botswana National Front
B.I.P. - Botswana Independence Party

Important Individuals

Seretse Khama - President and leader of the B.D.P.
Quett Masire - Vice-President
Motsamai Mpho - Leader of B.I.P.
Bathoen Gaseitsiwe - Formerly Chief Bathoen of the Bangwaketse now leader of the B.N.F.
M. Yane - B.N.F. M.P. for Kanye North
P. Tshane - B.N.F. M.P. for Ngwaketse-Kgalagadi
Kenneth Koma - Important B.N.F. figure (not to be confused with G. Koma B.D.P. M.P. for Mahalapye)
Daniel Kwele - One-time leader of B.N.F.
Philip Matante - Leader of B.P.P.
T.W. Motlhagodi - B.P.P. M.P. for Mochudi
K.M. Nkhwa - B.P.P. M.P. for Tati West
Chief Linchwe of the Bakgatla - One-time opponent of the government

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