

Botswana: Progressive Island in Ocean of Repression

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Gaborone, Botswana

The Great Kalahari, southern Africa's bush-desert, rolls for mile on countless mile over sterile turf and stony sand. Only the diminutive Bushmen live in the Kalahari, foraging for insects and lizards, hunting desert birds, communicating in their strange "language" of clicks and clacks, a kind of linguistic Morse-code; living the lives of their pre-historic forbears, they hide from the world in the vast wastes of the Kalahari, which is the heart of Botswana.

Only the land on the desert edge, a fifty-mile wide arc which sweeps along the border of Rhodesia and South Africa, is really inhabitable. White South African colonizers took the choicer land to the south and east which are part of present day Rhodesia and South Africa, pushing black African tribes onto the doorstep of the Kalahari.

Though little known, in the decade since it gained independence from England, Botswana has become one of the developing world's most successful parliamentary democracies and constitutional governments.

Not many people haven't heard about the depredations of Idi Amin, or the secessionist wars in Ethiopia, or the race riots in Soweto, South Africa.

But how many have heard of the African nation which conducts periodic, free elections, even letting Communist and other antigovernment parties compete? A multi-racial state in Africa whose black president is married to a white Englishwoman? A nation which not only rejects violence as an instrument of state policy but which until just this year had no army at all? Ladies and gentlemen, Botswana.

Seretse Khama, dubbed Sir Seretse Khama by the Queen of England, is the President of Botswana. Khama occupies the position as "chief" of the largest, historically dominant, tribe in Botswana. As the leader of its anticolonial movement and its first president, Khama is the "Father of Botswana" as well.

The roots of Botswana democracy extend into the soil of its tribal traditions. The decision making apparatus of the tribes resembles the New England town meeting. A council of elders, chaired by the chief, submits propositions to the tribe. The tribe then votes to accept or reject the proposals. If rejected they are returned to the council for further deliberation.

Khama leads the Botswana Democratic Party, the governing party. No other party comes close to the BDP, which holds twenty-seven seats in the thirty-two seat parliament. The Botswana Peoples Party holds two seats and the Botswana National Front, two.

Every day President Khama stops by parliament for four o'clock tea and to answer questions from MP's.

The BDP's constituency is almost wholly rural. Gaborone, Botswana's capitol and one of its two "cities",

resembles a frontier town in the American West more than a modern metropolis. Gaborone consists of a mall three blocks long lined by food and clothing stores filled with Western imports; a single government office building; a public library; and the thirty-acre University of Botswana. Except for a few industrial shanties, the hatched roof hut is still the most common kind of housing in Botswana.

Subsistence farming is the norm, too, although most families own at least a cow or two. Cattle raising has become Botswana's largest, most productive industry. Cattle from Botswana find their way to markets in Europe, the Middle East, and Japan. The single largest slaughterhouse in the world is in Botswana.

Cattle and precious mineral exports have given Botswana a favorable balance of payments. Laissez-faire economic policies, combined with an educational system oriented toward vocational training, have made Botswana a prime investment target. International aid agencies predict steady growth, given continued foreign aid and investment.

Ceterus parabus -- all things remaining the same -- Botswana's future looks bright indeed. But is it not more likely that all things will stay the same for Botswana than it is for any of the other countries in crisis-torn southern Africa.

Like many developing countries Botswana's accomplishments rest on a fragile foundation. Any one of the region's several crises involving race, ideology, or great power competition could undermine that progress.

Botswana is simultaneously a member of the Southern African Customs Union with South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland; and the association of the five "front-line" states of southern Africa, which includes Angola, Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania.

Botswana is economically dependent of white southern Africa. Yet as one of the "five," Botswana supports the armed struggle of the Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and SWAPO in Namibia; it harbors refugees from South Africa's race riots as well.

Of course Botswana's economic ties to white southern Africa are based on more than goodwill, but escalating tensions will put them to severe tests. For example, Bophutoswana, South Africa's newest black "homeland" borders Botswana on its south-east corner.

Unfortunately for Botswana its single railway, the lifeline of its economy, passes through the territory of the Bophutoswana homeland. Officials in Gaborone worry that South Africa will permit nominally independent Bophutoswana to demand "recognition" from Botswana. Bophutoswana may refuse to allow Botswana's goods to pass through to South Africa's ports unless they meet this condition.

Botswana would be left without a route to the sea, or it would be forced to become the first black African nation to recognize a South African homeland.

Refugees crossing into Botswana from South Africa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Namibia (South West Africa) are also straining Botswana's relations with white southern Africa, in addition to stretching its meagre resources to the limit. A refugee camp on the outskirts of Francistown, designed to accommodate two hundred, today holds over two thousand refugees.

Many of the refugees, especially the ones from Rhodesia and Namibia, are quickly recruited by the Patriotic Front or SWAPO to fight in their guerrilla armies. They are then flown to training camps in Zambia, Mozambique or Tanzania. Only a relatively few refugees from South Africa, mostly educated youth from Soweto and other South African townships, have shown any desire to "pick up the gun and go into the bush."

Most of them want to complete their education, but Botswana lacks the facilities to meet their needs. The government recently issued an international appeal for help, absorbing these refugees through the United Nations High Commission on Refugees.

In any case, the flow of refugees into Botswana has caused the government considerable concern. Whether the refugees end up on the streets of Gaborone, as many have, or in the educational system (already they constitute ten percent of the student body of the University of Botswana), the South Africans tend to be more radical, more politicized, and less patient with the pace of change in southern Africa. Recent demonstrations at the University were blamed by the press and public on refugee agitation.

The government is in a dilemma. By making Botswana unattractive to South African refugees the government risks the charge from other black African states that they are playing South Africa's game, showing too little sympathy for the cause of majority rule. But the alternative is future instability.

For over a decade Botswana refused to create an army, preferring instead to rely on its neighbors

presumed interest in preserving Botswana's sovereignty and integrity. Recent Rhodesian and South African armed sorties into Botswana, and the use by black guerrillas of Botswana's territory for sanctuary and as staging areas has called that assumption into question. In March this year the government capitulated to pressure to establish a one-thousand man army.

Some believe that it may prove to be President Khama's biggest mistake. Opponents of the army say it represents a sell-out to factions which want to move Botswana in to the mainstream of contemporary African nationalism; the attributes of which include a politicized armed forces, a planned economy and "nonaligned" ideology.

Khama still hopes, however, to steer a middle course between complacency of the past and the ubiquitous radicalization of politics in the region.

The BOP holds an overwhelming majority in parliament and commands the support of the rural population. To counter headway made by the Communist and Socialist Parties in the cities and among the youth, President Khama this year established a youth wing of the party.

Vocational work-study programs designed to bring unskilled urban youth into the economy and mobilize manpower for rural development programs are also getting more attention from the government.

Botswana still remains America's firm friend in southern Africa. American diplomacy, however, faces a challenge similar to the one facing the government of Botswana: can the United States overcome its complacency toward southern Africa without furthering those forces which would destroy democracy in Botswana?