Botswana: the Road to Independence

By Thomas Tlou

Botswana obtained its independence largely through the agitation of mass political parties, while Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe achieved independence through armed struggle against determined white-minority regimes. Compared to its neighbours, Botswana had relatively few white settlers settled largely in the eastern part of the country, where most Batswana lived. Traders, farmers, missionaries, and a few government officials constituted most of the white population. In addition, the perception that Botswana offered little return for foreign investment kept economic development at a low level. Differences in the nature of colonial experience help to explain why the decolonisation process in Botswana differed significantly from that of its neighbours. The relative lack of ethnic conflict, due largely to the dominance of Tswana political organisation and culture, reduced internal rivalries during the nationalist period.

Britain originally established the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885 (renamed Botswana at independence) to protect British strategic and economic interests in Southern Africa, and to prevent possible German and Boer/Afrikaner expansion into the territory of the Batswana (people of Botswana) from South West Africa and from the South African Republic (Transvaal) respectively. Such expansion would have blocked British penetration into the interior.

Once German and Afrikaner interests had been contained, Britain neglected the development of the Protectorate, which it considered an unproductive country. British attempts to hand Bechuanaland over first to Southern Rhodesia and later to the Union of South Africa precipitated a long period of resistance by the traditional Tswana rulers (dikgosi). Khama III, Sebele I and Bathoen I, who ruled the most powerful Tswana states, led the resistance. They used diplomatic and political methods to petition the British government to keep their territories directly under the British crown, rather than annex them to the neighbouring white-ruled countries. They believed that a Protectorate administration would be milder than a typical settler colony government. In fact, Britain relied on these rulers to govern Bechuanaland. Essentially, these rulers and the British dominated the administration of the Protectorate until independence.

In a real sense this early resistance laid the foundation for independent Botswana by preserving its territorial integrity.

**Early Nationalism: The Reformist Phase and the Growth of Civil Society (1920s-1950s)**

The reformist phase of Tswana nationalism was launched by the growing number of Christian mission educated elite, such as teachers, civil servants, and evangelists, who
urged the Protectorate government to reduce the dominance of the traditional rulers and royal families in internal affairs, thus allowing both commoners and the new elite to participate in government.

Partly as a result of opposition from the reformist educated elite in the 1920s, the colonial government introduced a system of separate Advisory Councils for Europeans and Africans. Opposition to this racially based system led to the formation of the Joint Advisory Council (JAC), embracing both white and blacks.

Colonial officials and Tswana royals continued to dominate these structures, but a small number of non-royals sat in these Councils as well. So the new elite were beginning to have a voice in Protectorate affairs and the administration benefited from the Councils’ inputs in making proclamations (laws) that governed the country.

A persistent theme in the African Advisory Council discussions was the opposition to the proposed incorporation of Bechuanaland into the Union of South Africa. The traditional rulers continued to wield greater power than the reformists until independence, however, when the new government drastically curtailed their power.

Other voices of opposition came from Batswana living outside the country who encountered new ideas and new forms of organisation. In South Africa, they formed such organisations as the Sons of Bechuanaland. In Southern Rhodesia, they formed the Bechuanaland Cultural Club. In 1954, Leetile Raditladi, a reformist, formed the Francistown African Cultural Organisation, which was succeeded by the Tatitown Cultural Organisation, that discussed politics openly.

Throughout Bechuanaland other voices of opposition surfaced in organizations that were not explicitly political, such as sporting clubs and student cultural groups that discussed political issues among other things. Members of the educated elite also formed such professional groups as the African Civil Service Association (1949) and the Bechuanaland African Teachers’ Association (1937). Nascent trade unionism also emerged (1949).

Members of these reformist movements learned how to work together and how to organise, skills that would later be useful in the formation of political parties. They developed the beginnings of national consciousness, which would play a part in the emergence of the anticolonial nationalism of later years.

Struggles over the Role of the Legislative Council in the 1950s

The post-World War II era saw Africans demand freedom and independence throughout the continent. By the late 1960s most African colonies were independent, with the exception of settler colonies where protracted liberation wars were fought.
In the British colonial empire, the formation of legislative councils (LEGCO) was a necessary transitional step that allowed the colonised to participate in making laws for the country. These councils would help prepare the colony’s people for self-government and then independence.

Despite the demands by Batswana both within and outside the Advisory Councils for a LEGCO, the British resisted such a move, citing lack of funds. The real reason for the delay was to appease South Africa, which until the early 1960s still entertained the hope of annexing the Protectorate.

Eventually Britain decided that a LEGCO would be established in 1960. Elections to the LEGCO would be racially or communally based and the colonial officials, the white settlers, and traditional rulers and other royals would dominate this body as they had the Joint Advisory Council.

This decision spurred Leetile Raditladi to attempt to form a protectorate-wide political party in 1959 called the Bechuanaland Protectorate Federal Party (BPFP). The aim was to influence the composition of the LEGCO, because he and fellow reformists feared, quite rightly, that like the JAC, this body would also be dominated by a coalition of whites and traditional rulers.

Some prominent political activists and members of the educated elite joined the BPFP and were later instrumental in forming the mass political parties that strove for independence. The BPFP soon collapsed. It had not agitated for independence but for reform of the colonial structures.

**The Emergence of Mass Political Parties and Efforts To Block Them**

By the late 1950s and early 1960s Botswana political activists decided to launch mass political parties. Britain had accepted that its African colonies would be granted independence. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s “wind of change” speech to the South African Parliament gave impetus to the march toward independence in Botswana and elsewhere.

Some leading traditional rulers and a number of whites urged the Protectorate government to join the Central African Federation of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland formed in 1953 in an attempt to hinder African efforts to achieve independence. The Federation was meant to forestall nationalism in those territories. Some traditional rulers and the whites saw the Federation as an opportunity to preserve their own status, which was threatened by the new nationalism.

These feeble efforts, however, collapsed.

**The Botswana Peoples Party (BPP), 1960**
The Botswana People’s Party was the first mass political party to be formed. Credit for its formation largely belongs to Motsamai Mpho. Deported from South Africa in 1960 for his activities in the African National Congress, he took the lead in drafting the BPP constitution, and the party was launched in 1960 with K. T. Motsete (an educationalist) as President, Philip Matante (a lay preacher, and veteran of World War II) as Vice President, and Motsamai Mpho as Secretary General. The party grew in strength, especially in the trading town of Francistown and in the north east of the country, where there was much discontent against land alienation by the Tati Company. It appealed to the emerging urban workers and the landless peasants.

The BPP aggressively called for national self-determination, an end to white racism, and the scrapping of communal representation in the JAC and LEGCO. It called for independence through “one man / one vote” elections immediately.

The party was not able to mobilise support throughout the country, remaining essentially a regional party. Eventually the BPP was split by internal feuds among its leaders. Matante emerged as the leader of the dominant faction.

The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), 1962

The BDP was the party that led Botswana to independence. Seretse Khama, founder of the BDP, had watched the operation of the BPP and was worried by its radicalism, which could limit the chances to build a united nation embracing all people of Botswana, regardless of race. In November 1961, he urged the African members of the LEGCO to form a new political party to oppose the BPP. Like Matante, he wanted independence through “one man / one vote” elections. Whereas Matante wanted immediate independence, however, Seretse wanted an orderly transition to independence through a negotiated constitution.

Seretse Khama and Quett Masire (a former journalist, and farmer) led a committee that wrote the BDP constitution and the party was launched in 1962. Seretse Khama became its President, with Tsolebebe (a former trade unionist) as Vice President and Masire as General Secretary. Most members of the National Executive Committee were men who had served on the Advisory Councils and the LEGCO. This helped them to run a united and well-organised party, with membership throughout the country. The BDP stressed the need for multiracialism and multiparty democracy, calling for constitutional progress towards independence through elections based on “one man / one vote”. The party took advantage of the splits in the BPP to occupy the political high ground.

The move towards independence began in earnest when Peter Fawcus, a forward-looking Resident Commissioner, began multilateral consultations with representatives of all political parties, the traditional rulers, and the white settler community in 1963. Fawcus planned to introduce internal self-government, not through the LEGCO as originally planned, but through a new democratic constitution. He agreed to a fully elected, nonracial legislature.
Only a few Europeans opposed these reforms, but were easily eclipsed. The “Fawcus Plan” changed the nature of the political struggle, placing Botswana’s future in the hands of whichever nationalist politicians won the upcoming elections.

In 1964 the BDP launched a massive countrywide campaign to publicise both itself and the new dispensation embraced in the “Fawcus Plan.” The party also launched a monthly newspaper, *Therisanyo* (consultation), which was published between 1964 and 1967. As General Secretary, Masire travelled widely throughout the country to spread the party message and recruit members. Khama’s stature and huge charisma enhanced the BDP.

In early 1964 the government announced that the Protectorate’s first “one man / one vote” elections would be held in March 1965. The BDP was well prepared for the elections, fielding candidates in all 31 constituencies, and with the other parties seriously weakened, it won a landslide victory with 28 of the 31 seats. The remaining three went to Matante’s BPP. This sent Motsete to oblivion, his lasting contribution being the composition of the national anthem.

In 1965 self-government was launched with Seretse Khama as Prime Minister. Botswana became independent on 30 September 1966, with Seretse Khama as the founding President and Quett Masire as Vice President. The BDP has ruled the country since then, holding elections every five years. The leader of the BPP, Philip Matante, became leader of the opposition in Parliament.

Under the leadership of Seretse Khama and his successors, Botswana became one of the most prosperous and stable nations on the continent, with a high rate of economic growth and an increasingly vibrant civil society. In addition, once it had achieved its independence, Botswana became an important centre for anti- *apartheid* activity related to South Africa. It also served as a critical transit point for activists fleeing Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa and became, for some, a place of refuge.

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