

Parallel Policy Structures in Botswana: From Devolution to Centralisation Under Ian Khama's Administration, 2008-2018

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Abstract

Policy development and development planning in Botswana have been executed through a consultative process involving all relevant structures since the country's independence from British colonial rule in 1966. However, during Ian Khama's administration (2008-2018) this practice was abrogated in favour of a more domineering control by the country's presidency. The high office has done this in a manner that seemed to side-line existing governing structures and establishing parallel ones to serve the same purpose without annulling the former. Policies and programmes bearing the name of the President operated in seemingly the same space and mandate that existing structures were known to function in. The paper discuss the centralisation of power and the 'big men' syndrome that came with Ian Khama's administration. Using case studies, it demonstrates the 'big men' syndrome exhibited by the Ian Khama administration and the pitfalls of such governance.

Introduction

When Ian Khama assumed Botswana's presidential office on 1 April 2008 he declared his democratic credentials to allay fears of those sceptical of his rule. He declared that 'I am a democrat. I have always believed in democratic ideals, and joined the military to defend this democracy. I consider myself an integral part of this system of governance that has become entrenched in the life of Batswana' (Khama 2008:3). Despite the declared good intentions by Khama, the policy making process experienced a marked shift from a process informed by public debate and bureaucratic management to one that seemed to largely depend on the personal preferences of the President. A number of policy initiatives came to the fore bearing the name and direct backing of President Ian Khama. Among these are the Alcohol Policy, Presidential Housing Appeal, Sports Constituency Leagues, and Backyard Gardens and Poverty Eradication initiative.

Prior to the Khama administration, the culture of public policy making in Botswana has been that of policies being developed by institutions of the state with responsibility for such matters. This was in spite of the fact that constitutionally, the state president as the ultimate accounting officer has executive powers (Good and Taylor 2004) and could pronounce on matters of policy. The Khama administration created pet parallel structures that gave him the space to have more control in policy formulation and development planning. The approach reversed the gains of devolutions attained over the past years by his predecessors. The result has been near paralysis of institutions as they no longer had the space to discharge on their customary mandates without checking first with head offices if their actions would be deemed appropriate. Using the presidential housing appeal and backyard gardens and poverty eradication as examples, the paper assesses how their existence has affected mandates of formal institutions responsible for similar portfolio.

The introductory part of the paper that the state President, by virtue of his position and influence, provides overall guidance to government. The next section discusses presidentialism in Africa and the 'big men' syndrome that often accompanies the presidency in Africa. This is followed by the Botswana policy making context. A brief reference to the administrations prior to Ian Khama's rule in Botswana follows. Case studies of backyard gardens and poverty eradication initiative and the Presidential Housing

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Appeal provide illustrative accounts of Ian Khama's hand in policy making. The concluding part offers lessons derived from this discussion.

Presidentialism in Africa

A number of African countries run a hybrid system of governance where the separation of powers between the executive and the legislature is in practice skewed towards the executive (van Cranenburgh 2009). The major issue with systems of governance where power is tilted in favour of the executive is accountability to citizens. That is, to what extent do leaders consult and account to citizens? Whereas the president is often the ultimate accounting authority, a degree of horizontal authority would from time to time be necessary to legitimize the authority and power of the president (O'Donnell 1998).

In Africa, there has never been a shortage of 'big men' who shoved their might on their followers (Russell, 1999). The notable features of such leaders has been their penchant for strong personality showing, little regard to human rights and whittling of economies of their countries or territories under their control. Their tenure is often shrouded with some mystique around their capabilities, and some form of reverence from those they led. They also often use state media to sing their praises as benevolent leaders countries could hardly tick without. Over time, such leaders had found a way of coming up with what sounded optimistic to the people they led. Mantras as diverse as 'structural adjustment' in the eighties, to democracy and a thaw of world tensions in the nineties, to renaissance as in the approach of Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, are a few of the catchy ones they used to woe and subdue their followers. Through all these phases, the strong leaders re-invented themselves and survived over time. Whenever there has been fault lines in governance, such leaders were never prepared to accept that they had limitations or that they erred. Someone else must be pointed at for their failure and for quiet sometime, colonialism had been the excuse for many wrongs in Africa.

Most 'big men' through one way or the other acquired legitimacy to occupy their leadership roles. They would often have been either elected to their positions or through some acceptable route ascended to their positions. Once there, personal preferences take precedence and they pursue their own interests and not of the people who escalated them to such positions. In certain cases, they pursue narrow group interests at the exclusion of the majority of the people they are in charge of. It will seem, in Africa, cultism by leaders is easily formed, even in cases where leaders exit from politics, new ones can quickly and perhaps easily form.

In Botswana, the culture of 'big men' was extremely limited because of the consultative process had somehow spared the country such a vice. However, when Ian Khama took the cue of mantras and styled his own in the form of several pet projects and the periodic impromptu visits to citizens and villages around the country, the country had to brace itself for a change. His approach endeared him heavily with ordinary people who regarded him as a caring President concerned with their plight. Khama had the wits to know when to embrace populism and profit from it. He would present his country wide visits as a way of consulting citizens yet would stoutly refuse to meet those willing to raise issues of national importance with him. He refused to meet labour movements during the critical time of the 2011 public service strike preferring to offer rebukes at traditional *Kgotla* meetings in some small peripheral villages such as Natale (Makgala and Malila, 2014). His task was ably assisted by the character of the nation that so timidly surrender to the whims of its leaders. Among other ways Khama would from time to time invoke the chieftainship to subdue people to his authority by reminding people in *kgotla* meetings across the central district that he is their chief. His reference to traditional leadership often being when such reference profits from it.

Where a personality cult prevails, development policy revolves around the image of the big man

and a few of his administrative courtiers. The leader's image may begin to haunt state institutions. Since Ian Khama assumed office, his administration has managed in a manner that enfeebles state institutions and propped up his personal image. This has promoted a personality-oriented development policy making where policies are styled in his name and not in that of the state. Institutions of the state or the state itself are relegated to an inferior position in the governance framework. In effect, Khama is propped up to be synonymous with the development process. Several policy decisions, such as the Presidential Housing Appeal, Sports Constituency Leagues, and Poverty Eradication and Backyard Gardens among others, bear his image, perhaps to make it clear that they are his brainchild or have been cleared by him personally. In consequence, Botswana's democratic process weakened as presidential powers expanded.

Botswana Policy Making Context

Policy generally refers to a statement of intent which guide and frame decision making before such decisions can be made. Through policy, institutions determine consequences of their actions and choose action that will give the desired outcome. In so far as it applies to governmental operations, a policy is what institutions or governments choose to do or not do (Dye 1976). A policy is intended to promote the welfare of society or organizations and should never be a matter of individual concern or preferences (Tsie 1998). In policy formulation, some interests are forgone for the sake of reaching the minimum collective good. To this end, it can be argued that the policy making process is an arena of competing interests between different groups in a society (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). This proposition brings us to the concept of development policy which refers to deliberate action by public institutions to promote growth and progress in any sphere of society they may from to time be so deemed to need such (Addison 2004).

In democratic societies, the state, through its various institutions, has the responsibility for policy development. This is meant to ensure that sectarian interest do not take precedence over the collective good of citizens who may hold varying view points and interests. The state is assumed to be in a better position to accommodate competing interests of citizens. As such the state or its institutions are better placed to serve citizens as doing so also serves to cement the legitimacy of its institutions. Thus, policy making should be consistent with institutional customs in spite of the reality that Presidential Executive Orders are a form of policy, especially in Botswana where the president has constitutionally entrusted powers.

When Botswana attained independence from Britain in 1966, the country's political leadership was content to leave the day to day running of the country to the administrative cadre of the civil service (Picard 1987). Following this approach, the government of Botswana has always been committed to careful planning to ensure that finance, manpower and national resources are used effectively and in accordance with national priorities. Thus, the progress much referenced about Botswana being a model for Africa are to a large extent a result of carefully planned government action under the stewardship of capable state institutions (Republic of Botswana 1989). It is, however, to be noted that the same acclaimed progress is seen to be economistic (Good and Taylor 2006) and not well entrenched as it happens in an undiversified economy, in an environment of weak civil society (Holm 1989) and where one party has monopoly of power (Selolwane 2002).

Efficient planning based on realistic assessment of what needs to be done together with government's ability to achieve set objectives has been the norm since independence. This is in contrast to instant pronouncements or Presidential Directives whose rationality may not always be clear. In particular, institutions of the state were equipped with the capability to formulate and implement policies. Given the space to flourish, the civil service developed and formulated largely progressive policies through cyclic five yearly planning since independence. Although development goals were driven by the ruling party, technocrats remained the nerve-centre for policy formulation and execution (Harvey and Lewis 1990).

This mutual arrangement and understanding allowed technocrats to operate with less interference from the political leadership. Furthermore, the mutual existence ensured trust between technocrats and the political leadership and by extension legitimized their spheres of operations and insulated state institutions from undue political interference and bullying. It is stated that ‘Unlike the majority of African governments, the Botswana government took expert advice. It also concentrated efficient power and autonomy in key ministries... so that development policy formulation and implementation were not easily compromised by special interests in civil society’ (Tsie 1998:2).

Botswana has developed institutions necessary and capable to handle development, and these institutions have operated with relatively little political interference or executive bullying. At independence in 1966 Botswana adopted a mixed form of government, combining elements of both Westminster and the presidential system. This hybrid system of governance placed all the executive powers within the Office of the President, who in executing his/her duties and responsibilities operated through cabinet, civil service, local government and public enterprises (Mfundisi 1998). Within the central government there are various ministries, departments and other lower administrative structures. Local government comprises statutory bodies as agencies of devolution and deconcentration (rural and urban councils and district administration). Local authorities fall under four types; district and urban councils, land boards, tribal administration, and district administration, all of which are coordinated by Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development within the central government.

Around 2009 under Ian Khama’s administration, centralisation ensued which resulted with reduced authority and power of local authorities. A number of local authorities’ portfolio responsibilities reverted to central government such as health, infrastructure, water and other social services. The responsiveness of central government to local issues became cumbersome and slow. With weakened local authorities, the customary channel of addressing issues and voicing concerns was almost closed out. This reversed the nomenclature where institutions were more privileged than personality and this was ensured through transparent cycle of planning that gave predictability to how public institutions function (Masire 2006). The state, through its varied institutions, would execute a set of planned activities to effect change in whatever would have been identified as a challenge to people’s everyday life situations (Gulbrandsen 2012).

Previous Administrations

Botswana, in effect, runs a system with an executive presidency and the president enjoys some wide sweeping powers, in spite of the parliamentary system in place. Molomo (2012) and Sebudubudu, Maripe, Botlhomilwe, and Malila (2013) present persuasive arguments of how Parliament is feeble in its discharge of duties in Botswana. Past presidents have, however, not been over imposing despite the constitutionally assured powers, save for President Ian Khama. This, however, does not mean their personal imprint in policy matters and governance in general was totally absent. A brief discussion of previous administrations (below) gives a glimpse of instances where their personal imprints were asserted and felt. It could however, be argued that even that was generally for the good of the country.

In a biography of Seretse Khama, the first president of Botswana and Ian Khama’s father, Parsons *et al.* (1995) note that Seretse Khama was never being really happy with constituency politics and parliamentary debate. He caused change in 1972 to accommodate indirect election of president, a move thought to be akin to autocracy (Parsons *et al.* 1995:299). He also sponsored a requirement that chiefs must resign from the chieftaincy for five years before they can qualify for parliamentary election. The reforms were seemingly designed to knock out Kgosi Bathoen from participating as opposition party candidate as Masire would have had no chance against him. At the time, Ketumile Masire had lost to Kgosi Bathoen of Bangwaketse twice in the general elections. Due to these losses, Seretse Khama had a problem of having

his vice president failing to make it to parliament, and hence dropping him from the vice presidency, a scenario he was apparently not ready to accept.

Masire's personal contribution without consultation was the unilateral decision of lowering the voting age, creation of the Independent Electoral Commission (*The Botswana Gazette* 19 April 1995) and automatic succession of vice president in case of presidential vacancy (Good and Taylor 2006). As commendable as some of these reforms were, they were without consultation. The worrisome reform was the automatic succession of the vice president to the presidency in case of vacancy. This stems from the fact that under the current arrangement, the president is not popularly elected and he enjoys the prerogative to choose and name his vice president and request parliament to approve his choice.

A notable personal decision President Festus Mogae (1998-2008) took without consulting, that had consequences to the nation, was the unprecedented 'sabbatical leave' to his Vice President Ian Khama within a very short time of his appointment. Also a favour he extended to Khama to pilot Botswana Defence Force (BDF) aircrafts even against the advice of the Ombudsman. Mogae had previously threatened Parliament with dissolution if they were to reject his nomination of Vice President, also taking a risky route of attesting that Khama had no authoritarian tendencies. The threat to dissolve parliament never actualized, it had the effect of disciplining legislators to embrace the president's choice.

Policy Making Under the Ian Khama Administration

It is important to start a discussion of Khama's administration by giving a brief description of the man himself. Ian Khama is the first born son of Botswana's founding President, Seretse Khama. He is also *Kgosi* (Chief) of the most influential Bangwato. Khama's educational journey is not in the public domain save to say he attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in Britain. Upon completion of his training he served in the BDF where he was Brigadier and second in command of the army at 24 years of age during the presidency of his father (Henk 2004). He served as commander of the army from 1989 to 1998 when he quickly retired to be appointed Vice President by Mogae. It is often said that Mogae brought him into politics to help revive the conflict riddled ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). Good (2010:318) summarizes Ian Khama's professional life in three areas, 'the military; chieftaincy and dynastic politics, and state power, briefly at the highest level'. As a leader he has both fame and infamy, and despite being popular, he has been described as divisive by some observers (Lucas 2011). In his leadership, he is a front man who is seen as forthright and decisive by some observers (Henk 2004) and as 'authoritarian', 'autocratic', 'dictatorial' by others (Good 2010).

In his inauguration speech on 1 April 2008 President Ian Khama remarked that 'in the course of the incoming administration you may detect a change in style and special emphasis on a number of issues. This should not cause any alarm or uncertainty. After all, changes should be seen in the context that no two people are the same' (Khama 2008:1). When a leader gives an inauguration speech the idea is often to set the tone or road map of their leadership style. It may be an opportunity by the leader to woo the audience to buy into his leadership vision and afford them the opportunity to know the direction the leader wants to take them. Inaugural speeches, as is the case with other speeches, have life and power as they serve to communicate and persuade the nation (Agbogun 2011). In his inauguration speech Khama gave a hint of an unexpected and unfamiliar leadership style. The vision he laid out for the nation was marked by principles of Democracy, Development, Dignity and Discipline (Khama 2008:3). The first two principles of Democracy and Development have been around for a while and did not attract as much attention as the latter two. Surprisingly not much reference to the principles was made throughout President Khama's rule and it has been difficult to decipher what the principles really entailed. It is, however, noticeable that Khama's leadership style exhibited differences from his predecessors (Botlhomilwe *et al.* 2011; Sebudubudu *et al.* 2012; and Malila and Molebatsi 2014). Whilst his predecessors were comparatively

seen as consultative, his leadership style appeared to be more forceful and more of a one man show. Good (2010) reminds us that Ian Khama entered government as Vice President of the Republic of Botswana on his own terms, bringing with him his personal assistants from the BDF and also his own conditions into politics. In Botswana, *Dikgosi* (Chiefs), of which Khama is, are expected to renounce their positions for them to enter into politics. As for Ian Khama, he is quoted as to have made it clear that, 'I am a *kgosi*. If you want me into politics, then do not ask me to follow Bathoen's example of abdicating [my chieftaincy]' (Good 2010).

In the face of a Constitution giving him immense powers, Khama could not restrain himself in a manner his predecessors did. Although his predecessors served under the same Constitution, they did not exercise their powers with the same intensity as Khama. His role in policy making and day to day governance ensured that he became more powerful than any of his predecessors. Any existing control mechanisms, counter-veiling forces and political institutions seemed completely feeble and inefficient to contain the presidential powers (Molomo 2012 and Sebudubudu *et al.*, 2013) the force of which is due to the personality of the incumbent. As a result, the influence and power of President Khama was such that he became law unto himself. In the past when opposition parties and independent observers questioned the vast powers of the President, ruling party legislators dismissed it arguing that the President would never abuse power, only for them to agree that there might be potential abuse at a time the intelligence security bill was debated in parliament (Masokola, 2018). Little did they realize that when he uses such powers, it would not be abuse as he would be acting within the law.

During Khama's presidency, friends and family occupied central positions (Mogalakwe and Nyamnjoh 2017). Key positions were given to those he served within the army and some to family members. Competence, merit and experience did not matter. For as long as one was the preferred choice they would easily get an appointment over those qualifying for the position. What was apparently necessary was the ability of the candidate to venerate Khama. This resulted in situations where officers mainly served Khama and not government. It did not surprise much when then then minister in the Office of the President, Mokgweetsi Masisi, infamously declared at a *kgotla* meeting in Moshupa that he is a *lelope* (bootlicker/sacophant) and was subsequently elevated to vice presidency. Public officers become servants of Khama devoid of a sense of responsibility to the state. On this note, Botswana tend to respond in ways that show discomfort with such unfamiliar governance. For instance, the Afrobarometer Survey states that 'Popular dislike for rule by one man was strong climbing from 86% in 1992 to 92% in 2008' (Afrobarometer 2014). The same survey also noted that 'perceptions on rule by the military [in Botswana] had grown since April 2008 [when Khama became President]'. This is a clear indication that unhappiness has been soaring since Khama assumed office.

The President's Housing Appeal

As is the case with others of what the private media called Khama's pet schemes (*Sunday Standard* 5 September 2010), the President's Housing Appeal was also fashioned by Khama. Before this appeal, housing mandate was the responsibility of the Ministry of Lands and Housing and its associated parastatals such as the Botswana Housing Cooperation (BHC) and local councils through the Self Help Housing Agency (SHHA). Civic organisations have also played a major role in encouraging and supporting home ownership as typified by Habitat Botswana. And of course the private sector has played a role for those who could afford to buy houses. The President's Housing Appeal was reportedly designed to provide shelter to members of the community who could not benefit from existing formal structures of housing (*Botswana Daily News* 16 March 2015). According to the government-owned print media, the housing appeal was 'a noble mission' and one to 'close the gap between the haves and have-nots' (*Daily News* 16 March 2015). The project was housed at the Office of the President and coordinated by the Private Secretary to

the President. Through this appeal, Khama was presented as 'caring and compassionate' leader keen to embrace all. Talking about the scheme, Khama's Private Secretary was reported to have said that 'the fund was named the President's Housing Appeal so that any sitting good hearted President can carry on with the good spirit' (*Daily News* 16 March 2015).

Most noticeable in this project was that Khama was presented ahead of government as far as housing appeal is concerned. He presented solutions where government was found lacking which meant that he got divorced from government failure. The housing appeal, however, did not give the intensity of the problem it addresses and whether there could be alternative ways of addressing such and other related concerns as follows:

- Have existing housing provision channels failed to provide housing for the targeted population and even those outside the remit of the new scheme?
- What was the cause of the sluggishness in addressing housing needs, if any?
- Could this approach be sustainable?
- Were house recipients consulted in the design and building of what was to be not only their house but also their home?

Khama became the darling of many in the society simply because of the distribution of perks or promise of them. When he visited villages throughout the country it was not uncommon for him to receive pleas for consideration into his housing appeal by impoverished citizens. Citizens, or at least those courting him, saw him as a solution to their woeful needy situations and believed that once enrolled in his scheme, their plight would be immediately changed, hopefully for good. He was perceived as a philanthropic figure whose 'magic' could end dire situations and bring relief to many lives. As beneficiaries lined up for perks, one wondered whether they worried about why they were in needy situations to a point of putting hope on an encounter with Khama to redeem their plight. Was it also immaterial to beneficiaries that in addressing their plight, Khama used resources obtained from other citizens and the business sector who were also competing for the President's attention so that that would be considered favourably for big government projects? In a government-driven economy of Botswana, companies may find it critical to carry favour with the country's political leadership with the hope of being favourably considered in the award of government tenders.

To push the agenda, the housing appeal was masked under the veneer of the country's 'Vision 2016' pillar of 'A Just and Caring Nation', yet it was obvious that self-serving motives were in operation. A number of observers raised issue with televising people's needy situation and argued that it further stripped them of the dignity, contravening the very dignity Khama claimed to promote.

Backyard Gardens and Poverty Eradication

The backyard gardens initiative was devised to deal with poverty 'eradication'. Previously, policy initiatives relating to poverty and welfare of Botswana focused on poverty alleviation. Poverty alleviation has always been there as government policy and addressed through a number of programmes. The Ipelegeng programme has in the past been implemented whenever the year was declared a drought year. Backyard gardening and poverty eradication was a redesigned variant of the former *Ipelegeng*. The core principle of the original *Ipelegeng* was to mobilise communities through labour intensive projects that supposedly benefitted communities by building schools, community halls and roads among others in such communities. Communities would identify their needy area and developmental ways of addressing it.

When Khama assumed office, the scheme was rearranged by among others adding the backyard

gardens to it and styling it after himself by calling it the 'Presidential Backyard Gardens and Poverty Eradication'. The backyard gardening part became a standalone entity from the usual poverty alleviation programme popularly known as *namola Leuba*. Even the 'traditional' *namola Leuba* was rebranded as *Ipelegeng*, ostensibly to set it apart from the hitherto existing one under the previous administrations. The new *Ipelegeng* was to be a continuous year to year programme as opposed to the former *namola leuba* that was in operation during drought periods only.

Reference to the scheme by officials and ministers of government would clearly allude to the President as the initiator and not government. For instance, Nonofu Molefhi (then Minister for Transport and Communications), while officiating at a handover ceremony of a house built under the Appeal, enjoined Batswana to help needy members of the society, further commenting that, 'by so doing... Batswana would be responding to President... Khama's call to uproot poverty' (*Daily News* 10 March 2013). The reference to Khama and not government policy relating to poverty alleviation demonstrates how Khama's ministers stooped to praise singing the president. The challenge here is that campaigns to 'eradicate' poverty in Botswana were personalised rather than institutionalised. Their relevance after the departure of President Khama could not be guaranteed given that they were fashioned in his name and image.

The prevalence of personalised policies and programmes shows a basic feature of patron-clientele politics in which Khama acts as a compassionate benefactor to needy members of the society. Perhaps, this showed that only Khama could personally rescue the country from poverty. Personalised operations present Khama as a generous patron dispensing favours to citizens (since the state had failed). His package of gifts included: Holy Bibles, food hampers (include serving lunch among others), blankets, radios, shirts and sweets. This served to create spontaneous admiration of Khama by the recipients and propped up his image at the expense of the seemingly failing state.

Conclusion

With Ian Khama's presidency (2008-2018), a clear shift was noticeable where some unrestrained powers conferred on the presidency by the national Constitution came to prominence in policy making. This introduced a sharp departure from Botswana's erstwhile management of public affairs. Changes that centralised or overcentralised power in the presidency to ensure absolute control of every aspect of government became more visible.

The new image had to be fed through populist pet projects which seemed to exploit some needy situations. The effect has been to alienate institutions of the state from overall governance and to nurture a personality cult of the leader. This ultimately bred 'personal rule' which in the long term meant that economic and political prosperity are dependent on the benevolent leader. With a benevolent leader, followers became passive and could not demand accountability from the 'big man' who was also strongly intolerant of critical comment of his leadership particularly by the country's private media and labour movement among others. Similar to other 'big men' around the world, Khama's tenure exhibited strong personality showing, questionable respect for civil liberties and serious dent on the country's economy.

The initiatives he introduced were at best parallel structures of expediency, whose value cannot be demonstrated. They served to side-line existing structures with same mandates and to prop up Khama's image. The paper calls for a restoration of a devolved national planning where institutions such as Parliament, the public service and other relevant stakeholders had a say in policy making. The turnaround will restore the governance pedigree Botswana is known for.

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