

Johnson Motshwarakgole: A Portrait of the Kingpin of the Labour Movement in Botswana

*Ditiro Motlhabane**



When he retires Johnson Motshwarakgole would have left an indelible mark on the labour front and opposition politics. His contribution cannot be equalled to any other. Meeting Johnson Pekenene Motshwarakgole –the Godfather of Botswana’s labour movement and the man who has dedicated his entire life to fighting for the workers welfare –is a labourious task. Traffic of Chief Executives, political leaders and ordinary people from all walks of life form a bee line in front of his spacious office at the upmarket Central Business District, Gaborone –the official address for National Amalgamated Local and Central Government and Parastatal Workers Union (commonly known as the Manual Workers).

Like a typical Mokwena tribesman, Motshwarakgole refers all those younger than him as ‘*mosimane yo*’ or ‘*ngwanyana yo*’ irrespective of age. To him, everybody around him is a comrade or ‘*mokaulengwe*’ in the vernacular. Those who have listened to Motshwarakgole speak often credit him with immense oratory skills, with the ability to memsmerise crowds and hold his listeners spellbound with the gift of the garb and mastery of the language, enhanced by his ability to make loaded statements using kind words. His speech is slow and calculated, punctuated with intermittent outbursts and outright rupture of song and dance. His sharp memory keeps him ahead of the rest of the crowd in narration of things from years gone by. A metaphorical raging bull by any measure Johnson Motshwarakgole never retreats in the face of the enemy, and pompously brags that ‘we do not leave anything to chance. We enjoy fighting for what is right. We have suffered too long to forget the fight and back down. Any fight against injustices visited on the workers and the poor is our fight and we will not hesitate to support the cause’.

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Motshwarakgole was born in ga-Masilwana ward in Molepolole, some 64 years ago, as a third child in a family of six. Barely into elementary school, he had to be withdrawn and forced to find a job to fend for his family, which was ravaged by poverty, as he puts it. But he speaks the Queens language with ease. He would join the Ministry of Agriculture as an underage casual labourer (Field Assistant) in the early 1970's and made friends with the likes of the then self-appointed labour leaders Klaas Motshidisi, Rex Ndzingo, Frank Marumo, Dickson Gabonewe and one Mosimakoko. These were Botswana National Front (BNF) foot soldiers who regularly conducted free lessons in meetings by a boulder commonly referred to as '*Letlapa la babebereki*' in Bontleng township, Gaborone central.

Due to the close relationship between workers' struggle and the social programme teachings of the BNF he immediately fell in love with the latter and was often given the podium to address rallies at a tender age. To date he credits the late BNF leader Dr Kenneth Koma for teaching them well to fight for emancipation of the people of Botswana. He later worked for Central Medical Stores where he met and befriended his 'partner-in-crime' Samuel Molaodi. To date the two remain inseparable.

Motshwarakgole, a tee-to-taller and non-smoker, has been married to Martha for 32 years and have been blessed with two daughters –Tshepo and Lorato –who are adults now. 'I have no spare time for family. I live for trade unions. I am also a God fearing man and I always listen to gospel music on TV. Fortunately, my wife also likes trade unions and knows a lot about them', said the man who normally relaxes with a cup of Cappacino in the company of Daniel Kwelagobe and Moreri Gabakgore –his uncle. Once in while he goes to his farm in Mosi where he undertakes subsistence farming.

Credited with the success of the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) project in 2014, Motshwarakgole popularised the term '*moonoo*', which made serious inroads into the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) turf ahead of the 2014 general elections, threatening to reduce the ruling party into an opposition party by 2019. So popular was the *moonoo* theme that the UDC president Duma Boko later named his newborn child Moonoo, while at government enclave senior civil servants barred their juniors from using the word in official meetings.

Without flinching Motshwarakgole said they Botswana Federation of Public Service Unions (BOFEPUSU) were happy and support developments in growing opposition cooperation because a ruling party that is not kept in check soon gets derailed. However, he was quick to declare, together with his right hand man Molaodi, that they have no ambition of taking workers into any political party. He accuses his detractors of trying to mislead people simply because he is a member of the BNF. He said they are interested only in national issues. Asked if he will seek a position in government should the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) take over government in 2019 he said 'No. We (trade unions) are already governing this country. We do not need to sit in public offices to ensure that things are done right for Batswana. We will never allow anyone who assumes power to do as they please, hence the current battles. Those that will come after us will be fortunate as we will be too old to fight on'.

As he bows out Motshwarakgole must be rueing the day he met Boko. The UDC is teetering on the brink of collapse, dragging with it the hope of regime change and opposition unity while its architects –BOFEPUSU –watch helplessly from the sidelines. Long before Sidney Pilane and his supporters wrestled the BMD from the Ndaba Gaolathe camp at a bloody congress in Bobonong, Motshwarakgole was and remains openly sympathetic to the latter. His latest public comment about the UDC is that its leadership '*ba hemile*' (demented or they have lost the plot).

Vilified, insulted and ridiculed for his rustic background Motshwarakgole has remained steadfast in his resolve to see that those in government are held accountable. And he is not apologetic about it. He is ruthless in pursuit of set goals, and takes no prisoners. He planned and executed the downfall of his cousin –former BDP strongman/Chairman Daniel 'DK' Kwelagobe and his compatriot Utlwang Matlhabaphiri in Molepolole South and North respectively. DK's major undoing was belonging to the wrong party in

Motshwarakgole's books and failing to cross to the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) when the Barata Phathi faction he led at Domkrag escaped the then President Ian Khama's persecution to form the Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD). But Motshwarakgole remains a close companion of DK, as they are frequently seen together enjoying coffee at an upmarket address along the Western Bypass in Gaborone, or attending social functions. 'Before the elections I warned him that we were going to take him down. *Ga se sephiri* [it is not a secret]', Motshwarakgole declares before pausing momentarily to peep at a ringing Samsung smartphone on top of his desk and giggling '*ke ene yo*' ('it's him calling').

Motshwarakgole lights up when the current crisis in the judiciary is raised and refuses to sit when told that he is poking his nose where it does not belong. He argues that it is common cause that as trade unions they have a lot of disputes with the employer which always ends up in court. Therefore, they want to protect the integrity and independence of the judiciary from the Executive, as the constitution envisaged. He said they are not looking for favours from judges but want constitutionally appointed judges to take the bench. 'It is unusual for the Executive to honour another arm of government –the judiciary. This transaction compromises the separation of powers. Since independence only judges Dibotelo, Lesetedi and Kirby have been honoured by the President. Can you make the connection?' he asks rhetorically, without necessarily looking for an answer.

He finds it strange that the issue of overpayment of housing allowance has raised a storm that has reached State House, insisting that the issue could easily be revoked by provisions of Statutory Deductions at Section 80 of the Employment Act. He said many public servants including Ian Khama as the BDF commander, Dibotelo, MPs, Permanent Secretaries, drivers and cleaners may have experienced the same. 'Their records should all be checked with the same scrutiny. Otherwise it is an issue of personalities where the Executive does not like decisions by some judges which were against government, for example the ARVs case, Inheritance case, and Essential services case', he roars.

Asked if he will ever make peace with President Ian Khama, Motshwarakgole ponders the question and confesses that he is doubtful of them ever meeting after the former refused to see union leaders four times since the historic BOFEPUSU strike of 2011. He proposes that a working Collective Labour Agreement (MoU) is the only one needed to regulate the relationship between the employer and the employee. He warned that the current government is antagonising workers to its own peril as nobody can win against over 120 000 work force. On what they would be asking for should they emerge triumphant that the appointment of Court of Appeal Judges is unconstitutional he blurts out, 'reinstatement for the over 2000 workers dismissed in 2011'.

Outside trade unions, Motshwarakgole has found allies in two young lawyers, half his age barely out of their 30s. One of them, who is quickly gaining reputation as a reputable labour lawyer, is Tshiamo Rantao. Rantao said although he has long known Motshwarakgole from a distance since he was a young boy, even at the time he was a public figure, they first met around 2007 when he started doing a lot of legal work for many trade unions. Motshwarakgole, Samuel Molaodi, Elsinah Botsalano, and Bina Tsalaila, all of them officials of Manual Workers Union, and their colleagues began to make frequent visits to the lawyer's office for their many court battles. 'Since then, we have become inseparable', he said.

Motshwarakgole always describes himself as a mere labourer. He is an exceptional one. Insofar as labour law is concerned, there is no doubt that even the union's legal advisors, have learnt and continue to learn, a lot from him. Rantao waxes lyrical about the colossus of a man. 'Him and his companion, Molaodi, are historians and memory banks of our labour laws. As a lawyer, you can tell him what the position of the law is currently, but expect him to shower you with rays, and the genesis of the provision you are reading out to him. He would advise you of the mischief that they intended to address when they, as the labour movement, and no doubt him at the helm over the years, caused Parliament to promulgate a particular law. That is vintage him. The labour educationist client', said Rantao, admiration for his client's legal prowess written all over his face.

What more, Motshwarakgole is also a ‘difficult’ client, according to lawyers he has interacted or crossed paths with. As a lawyer, when a client seeks your advice, and you advise them that they have no prospects of success and so they must forget about pursuing the case, you normally expect them to immediately understand. Motshwarakgole is not in that league. He does not easily accept a lawyer’s advice that the union does not have a case. ‘He makes you work harder before telling him that they don’t have a case. He cross-examines you in a bid to show that you are mistaken. However, once you have convinced him, and that would have been after a long struggle, he would whole-heartedly accept your advice. Once he has accepted your advice, he would fight for the position which is based on your advice as if it is the end of the universe. Even if he hated a position or resolution which was taken in the room, he would religiously fight for it outside without blinking. That is how democratic the man is. The living giant’, said Rantao, in a melodramatic demeanour, showering Motshwarakgole with praise equal to eulogy of a departed head of state.

The contribution of colleagues in the labour movement in building the giant that is Johnson has not gone unnoticed. He himself refuses to step up to the podium and take credit for the bare knuckled fight he is taking to government. He is quick to name other union leaders within and without the Manual Workers Union as deserving of the accomplishments by workers in Botswana. He has stuck with Botsalano for over 30 years, Mosala Phokontsi for 28 years and Molaodi for 27 years in the administration of NALCGPWU. As if reading Motshwarakgole’s mind, Rantao says: ‘I have no doubt that Motshwarakgole has also been made stronger over the years by other trade union leaders who have worked with him at BOFEPUSU, particularly during the largest ever public sector strike in the history of the country in 2011 and in the following tumultuous years. I can obviously think of the likes of Andrew Motsamai, Shandukani Hlabano, Pelotshweu Baeng, Moses Noga, Ibo Kenosi, Tobokani Rari, Ketlhalefile Motshegwa, Masego Mogwera, Johaness Tshukudu and other trade union leaders. With these leaders, he has had the best and worst moments, and this is in the nature of trade unionism’.

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