

Quett Ketumile Joni Masire, (edited by Stephen R Lewis, Jr), *Very Brave or Very Foolish?: Memoirs of an African Democrat*.

Gaborone: Macmillan, 2006, 333 pages. ISBN: 9-9912-4043-8

Although I am not an easily pleased critic I am a little thrilled by former President Sir Ketumile Masire's memoirs. The book appears at a time when there is a very lively debate on political and economic issues on the country's political scene. Masire opens the book by providing an interesting account of his childhood and upbringing in a traditional setting, and his experiences as a student at the famed Tigerkloof College in South Africa. This is followed by another interesting story of his post-Tigerkloof life when he became one of the founding teachers at Kanye Junior Secondary School. He tells us that interference in education matters by his chief, Kgosi Bathoen II, and his (Masire's) growing interest in farming made him quit his teaching job in order to liberate his potential in farming.

He informs the reader about how he also became a journalist and a newspaper editor which enabled him to get into contact with a number of people around the country who later become his colleagues in the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and government. On numerous occasions he provides relevant historical background to some of the themes he raises and this is a commendable approach, indeed.

Masire is very uncompromising on chieftainship which he feels promoted autocracy. So strong are his views that at one point he discouraged Sir Seretse Khama (Botswana's first President) from recruiting Kgosi Bathoen into the BDP. One of Seretse's greatest assets as a statesman was his propensity to humble his detractors and turn them into supporters. This was a very different approach to the counter-productive approach extensively used by the current administration whereby opponents (even within the BDP) are either marginalised or humiliated which only serve to harden feelings on both sides.

Masire focuses on a particularly important theme of talent selection in governance. What is interesting here is that during the early years of the Seretse era government did a great deal of 'improvisation' yet the civil service was quite efficient. For instance, Masire informs us that the BDP government recruited well known opposition activists or sympathizers such as Klaas Motshidisi. He goes on to say that as commissioner of labour Klaas Motshidisi was 'very good'.

However, the post-Seretse era witnessed the institutionalisation of inefficiency in the public service. Masire candidly acknowledges this and attributes it to a number of reasons although they are partially convincing. Recent independent research shows that inefficiency in the post-Seretse era is mainly due to patronage and the politicisation of the public service. To a large extent talent and merit have ceased to matter as affiliation to the ruling party and social connections became the criteria for appointment and promotion to important positions in the government service. Hence, inefficiency and even corruption.

Masire enlivens the story with snippets about Seretse's sparkling sense of humour. Quite understandably he devotes a significant part of the book to the country's economic development and points out that the BDP government relied on pragmatism as opposed to commitment to ideological approach.

However, the theme on 'Unions and Labour' (p.233-234) is too inadequate. One feels that it should have been treated as a separate chapter. Labour issues have been quite contentious in Botswana and until a few months ago civil servants were barred from unionising. Government has been seen as taking far too long to ratify crucial International Labour Organisation's conventions or even refusing in some instances. This should have been touched on in the memoirs.

The chapter dealing with relations with apartheid South Africa and its homeland of Bophuthatswana is one of the most interesting and insightful in the book.

Although Masire writes that while he had intended to voluntarily retire in the early 1990s he had to stay on owing to the emergence of disturbing factionalism in the ruling BDP which threatened to split it the

party. However, he avoids telling us that his eventual retirement in 1998 was a result of worsening factional fighting in the BDP. While he had initially resisted calls by some members of the BDP youth wing to retire, he eventually heeded recommendation by the party's consultant who advised that he should retire and pave the way for someone who had not been associated with factional strife in the party.

After retirement Masire played a key role of bringing about peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda following the latter country's genocide of 1994. He shows that these were extremely difficult assignments owing to lack of commitment and inadequate support from major Western powers.

The most disappointing part of the memoirs is Masire's views on the opposition parties. Here he fails to rise above propaganda and rhetoric. For instance, he dismisses the opposition parties as having had no alternative programmes to those of the BDP without making a rebuttal of their manifestos and the social democratic programme documents.

He also portrays opposition leaders as desperate and irresponsible. This is despite the fact that it has been argued in some quarters that the perceived desperation, irresponsibility and disorganisation of the opposition could be a result of its severe marginalisation at the hands of the country's constitutional arrangement, and the electoral system which massively favour the ruling party while overwhelmingly disadvantaging the opposition. For instance, this is a recurring theme in Professor Kenneth Good's writings. By the time the book was published a significant group within the ruling BDP emphatically articulated the same position and even implied that the country's constitution and electoral system were meant to ensure no change of government. They also argued that if the then incumbent president, Festus Mogae, did not redress this imbalance he would leave a hollow legacy when he retired in 2008.

Surprisingly, Masire does not attribute any idea on development to the opposition. Even well known opposition ideas which the BDP government eventually implemented after initially dismissing them as non-viable are attributed to the BDP by Masire. These include free secondary school education, old age pension, labour friendly laws, and diamond beneficiation. Furthermore, Masire has no good word to say about the Botswana Peoples Party's (BPP) late president and Member of Parliament, Philip Matante. He says Matante made no meaningful contribution in Parliament but slogans. He credits the BDP government for ideas behind the existence of the University of Botswana, Botswana Defence Force and the introduction of the Pula currency. However, the BPP occasionally informs us that the university, the army and the country's own currency were Matante's ideas.

He writes 'There have been some BNF proposals for a direct election of the president separate from the elections of members of Parliament. This has been a relatively recent development, and it has received support from some of the lecturers at the university who are associated with the BNF' (p.141). This is despite the fact that some of these lecturers are expatriates who are interested in Botswana's democracy in general and are not associated with the BNF. Moreover, as indicated above even some notable BDP members have recently argued for direct presidential election and so were some civil society leaders such as church ministers.

Although the flaws in Sir Ketumile Masire's memoirs spoil an otherwise scintillating narration, the book is without doubt a significant contribution to the history of Botswana and it is recommended to policy makers, scholars, students and the general reader.

Reviewed by Christian John Makgala

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