

Ke Nako? The Modest Success of the Botswana Patriotic Front in the (Former) Central District of Botswana, 2019–2024

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Abstract

One factor in the collapse of support for the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) was the challenge posed by the breakaway Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF) in the former Central District. The BPF had been formed by the *kgosikgolo* of the Bamangwato and the former president of Botswana, Ian Khama, in 2019, just prior to that year's elections. This article reviews the performance of the BPF from its formation in 2019 through to the 2024 elections. In the 2019 elections, the newly formed BPF had performed strongly in the Khama heartland of Serowe, but, in most other Central District constituencies, Khama and the BPF supported candidates from other opposition parties against the BDP. In the 2024 election, the BPF ran more and generally stronger candidates but made only limited progress by winning only five parliamentary seats (two more than in 2019) and forty district council seats (23 more than in 2019). The BPF's share of the vote across the (from 2022, former) Central District was smaller than those of the Umbrella for Democratic Change, the BDP and the Botswana Congress Party. The BPF relied heavily on Khama's legitimacy and aggressive campaigning. The party lacked strong organisation on the ground. The BPF's decision to compete against other opposition parties might have weakened the BDP, but it limited the BPF's own gains. In many constituencies, voters who were unhappy with the BDP supported the other opposition parties rather than the BPF.

Keywords: Ian Khama, Botswana Democratic Party, Bamangwato, election campaign, candidate selection, Serowe

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Introduction

The heartland of the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) was Central District, the former (colonial) ‘Bamangwato Reserve’ or Gammangwato chiefly ruled by the Khama family. As recently as 2014, when the BDP won less than half of the national vote, it nevertheless held all seventeen parliamentary constituencies in Central District¹ and won 117 of the 140 seats on the Central District Council (Independent Electoral Commission, IEC, 2014: 83). Serowe, the base of the Khama family and capital of Central District, was the largest urban settlement in Botswana through the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Serowe was home not only to Seretse Khama (founder of the BDP and president of Botswana from Independence in 1966 until his death in 1980) but also to Festus Mogae (Botswana’s third president, president from 1998 to 2008)² and to Ian Khama (son of Seretse, Botswana’s fourth president, president from 2008 to 2018). Vice presidents Lenyeletse Seretse (1980–1983), Festus Mogae (1992–1998), Ian Khama (1998–2008), and Mompoti Merafhe (2008–2012) came from Serowe. Vice President Ponatshego Kedikilwe (2012–2014) came from elsewhere (Sefophe) in Central District. The long-serving leader of the opposition Botswana National Front (BNF), Kenneth Koma, came from Serowe via Mahalapye (also in Central District).³ His successors Otsweletse Moupou and Duma Boko also came from Central District (from Radisele and Mahalapye respectively). The Serowe and surrounding parliamentary constituencies were the safest BDP seats in the country.

In 2018–2019 the close relationship between the Khama family, Central District, and the BDP was fractured. Ian Khama fell out with his successor as president, Mokgweetsi Masisi, and sponsored the formation of a breakaway party, the Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF), which contested the 2019 elections. Although the BPF won only three parliamentary seats (around Serowe), Khama’s endorsement of the opposition Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) and individual candidates appears to have helped the UDC to win eight more seats across Central District, leaving the

¹ The BDP lost one of the two parliamentary seats in Selebi-Phikwe, which had been excised from Central District.

² Mogae was a Mokalaote, not a Mongwato. But the Bakalaote had become largely assimilated into the Bangwato.

³ Koma was the BNF leader until 2003. Koma was accused of ‘Ngwatoism’ (see Makgala *et al.* 2020: 220–221). Duma Boko – who was president of the BNF from 2010, of the UDC from 2012, and of Botswana following the 2024 elections – also comes from Mahalapye (although he is of Xhosa descent, not Ngwato descent).

BDP with only six out of seventeen seats in its former heartland.⁴ The relationship between Khama and Masisi worsened further after the election, with Khama fleeing into exile in late 2021. Shortly before the 2024 elections, Khama returned to campaign aggressively against Masisi and the BDP. In 2024, however, unlike in 2019, more BPF candidates were running against UDC incumbents than were running against BDP incumbents. The BPF won two more seats (from the BDP) but continued to have fewer seats than the UDC and fewer votes than the UDC, the BDP, or the Botswana Congress Party (BCP) had.

This paper examines the BPF's campaigns and performance in the October 2019 and October 2024 elections across what was (until 2022) Central District, and focuses primarily on the 2024 elections. Neither the BPF as a party nor the Central District has been studied carefully before, although Serowe has been the subject of both historical (Head 1981; Makgala 2002) and fictional writing (including Moeng 2024).⁵ Brown, in his analysis of the 2019 election, examines the formation of the BPF (Brown 2021), but without much attention to developments at the local level. This paper combines analyses of the BPF from above and below, showing how national-level dynamics interacted with dynamics at the local level, with each constraining and enabling the other.

This paper does not provide a comprehensive analysis of politics in the (former) Central District. Its focus is on the BPF – not the BDP, UDC, or BCP – and on those parts of the district where the BPF had some presence. The evolution of political contestation, i.e. the rise of the UDC and BCP, in the towns and villages along the A1 highway (Mahalapye, Palapye, and Tonota) and in the villages to its east require further research. The paper also does not discuss the BPF's very limited presence outside of Central District.

This paper draws on newspaper reports (especially in *Mmegi Online*), more than twenty interviews with candidates and officials from the BPF and other parties in both 2019 (prior to the elections, primarily in Serowe) and 2024–2025 (prior to and after the elections, in both Serowe and the surrounding constituencies from Shashe West in the north to Shoshong in the south), survey data (from Afrobarometer), and official election results. I interviewed Kgosi Ian Khama, four BPF members of Parliament (MPs), eight BPF councillors, several party officials and

⁴ In other parts of the country, the UDC's relationship with Khama cost the UDC support, and resulted in the defeat of many of the UDC's incumbent members of Parliament (Brown 2021; Seabo and Nyenhuis 2021).

⁵ John Wiseman included a mini-study of Serowe in his 1976 doctoral thesis on politics in newly-independent Botswana.

unsuccessful BPF candidates, and four senior BDP leaders who did not join the BPF. For obvious reasons, most information from interviews is not ascribed to any individual informant.

What Kind of a Party Was (and Is) the BPF?

This study of the BPF contributes to the acknowledgement of the diversity of political parties across Africa and points to shifts in the party system in Botswana. Elischer (2013) identified five types of political party across Africa: mono-ethnic, ethnic alliance, catch-all, programmatic, and personalistic. Using data from 1999 to 2009, he classified Botswana as a non-ethnic party system (along with Ghana and Senegal) and the two dominant parties (the BDP and BNF) as non-ethnic, ‘catch-all’ parties (*ibid*: 197–199). His classification, however, rested on treating the Botswana as a single ethnic group. If ethnicity were measured in terms of second-level ethnic groupings (Scarritt and Mozaffar 1999), such as the Bangwato, Bakgatla, and Bakwena, then the political parties in Botswana would look less widely inclusive. Moreover, even Elischer’s data suggest that the BDP became less of a catch-all party in the early 2000s and Elischer explicitly notes that the BDP became more personalistic under Ian Khama.

The BPF and Khama have been widely accused of ‘tribalism’. Makgala *et al.* (2020) identify a series of occasions when political leaders employed ethnic discourses, generally in criticism of the ruling BDP (and often prompting rebukes from the BDP). Both as president and after stepping down in 2018, Ian Khama was criticised for perpetuating Ngwato dominance. But, as Makgala *et al.* (2020) report, he was also criticised for being ‘de-culturalised’, i.e. insufficiently rooted in Ngwato (or more generally Tswana) culture (see also Makgala *et al.* 2025).

Makgala *et al.* (2020) sit on the fence in terms of assessing the role of tribalism for either Ian Khama himself or his supporters, but their reticence is revealing of the difficulties of making any such assessment. The BPF has a clear ethnic or regional base. Its claim to being a countrywide party is much weaker than any of the other major parties in Botswana (i.e. the BDP, BCP, or the BNF, which is the dominant party within the UDC) or many of the major parties in neighbouring countries. In 2019, Central District accounted for all three of the BPF’s elected MPs, all 17 of its elected ward councillors, and 84 per cent of its total countrywide vote. In 2024, it accounted for all five of its elected MPs, 40 of its 42 elected ward councillors, and 74 per cent of its total countrywide vote. Whilst in 2024 the party had begun to attract votes, it had very limited prospects of electoral success outside of the (former) Central District.

The BPF draws heavily on the legitimacy of tribalised tradition, as personified in the institution of chieftaincy and the person of Ian Khama. It is, in most respects, conservative, with personalistic and ethnic elements. Yet it does not flaunt ethnic nationalism in the explicit and strident manner of the Inkatha Freedom Party or Jacob Zuma’s uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party in South Africa, for instance. Insofar as the BPF was not an ethnic party, it was not because it had its origins in a nationalist liberation movement or in non-partisan organisations in civil society (such as trade unions or churches), as was the case in some other African countries. It was because it was born out of – and claimed the mantle of – the BDP, which was from its birth a conservative nationalist party committed to modernisation and nation-building.

Table 1: Election results, 2019, in Central District

Election		BPF	BDP	UDC	AP	Other	Total
Parliamentary	Votes	28,668	91,572	87,024	6,855	7,786	221,905
	Vote share	13%	41%	39%	3%	4%	100%
	MPs	3	6	8	0	0	17
District Council	Votes	29,200	88,965	75,022	10,458	12,118	215,763
	Vote share	14%	41%	35%	5%	6%	100%
	Councillors	17	75	45	1	2	140

Source: My calculations using IEC (2019).

Table 2: Election results, 2024, in former Central District

Election		BPF	BDP	UDC	BCP	Other	Total
Parliamentary	Votes	51,064	61,175	79,522	53,853	5,426	251,040
	Vote share	20%	24%	32%	22%	2%	100%
	MPs	5	0	9	3	0	17
District Council	Votes	44,806	65,309	65,625	50,760	16,943	243,443
	Vote share	18%	27%	27%	21%	7%	100%
	Councillors	40	26	66	36	6	174

Source: My calculations using results provided to me by the IEC.

The case of the BPF in Central District also points to the importance of understanding the local party system in order to understand any single party. Across Central District, the BPF competed for votes against not one but two major parties or coalitions. In both 2019 and 2024, the Central District vote was highly fragmented (see Tables 1 and 2). In 2019, BPF parliamentary candidates won 13 per cent of the vote, against 39 per cent for the UDC and 41 per cent for the BDP. In 2024, BPF parliamentary candidates won 20 per cent of the vote, against 32 per cent for the UDC, 24 per cent for the BDP and 21 per cent for the BCP (which had been part of the UDC five years previously). In 2024, the winning parliamentary

candidate won significantly more than half of the vote in only four constituencies. In the District Council elections, BPF candidates won 18 per cent of the vote (winning 40 seats), against the UDC (66 seats, 27% of the vote), BDP (26 seats, 27%), and BCP (36 seats, 21%). In most constituencies and wards, the BPF had to face in two directions: It was publicly committed to challenging the nationally incumbent BDP but was also running against the UDC (and, in 2024, the BCP).

The BDP is best understood as a catch-all but primarily centre-right party. The UDC and BCP present themselves as being on the centre-left, but are also essentially catch-all parties (in terms of Elischer's categories). Moreover, whilst the BDP might have been the incumbent party of national government in both elections, almost half of the Central District constituencies were represented in the 2019–2024 parliament by the UDC, which had thus become 'semi-incumbent' across parts of Central District.

The Formation of the BPF, 2018–2019

The BPF was formed in the aftermath of bitter enmity between Ian Khama and Mokgweetsi Masisi, who succeeded Khama as president of Botswana on 1 April 2018. Whatever the reasons for the enmity, tensions escalated rapidly (Ookeditse 2021; Brown 2021). Khama was said to have wanted to remain as BDP president, but Masisi also ousted Khama from this position when Masisi became president of Botswana. In December 2018, Khama's close ally (from Serowe) and foreign minister Pelonomi Venson-Moitoi informed Masisi that she would challenge him for the presidency of the BDP at the party's congress in Kang the following April. Masisi promptly sacked Venson-Moitoi from his cabinet. Venson-Moitoi began to mobilise support, with Khama's assistance. Although Venson-Moitoi pulled out of the contest just before the congress and Masisi was elected, the rift between Khama and Masisi now appeared irreparable. Khama appeared determined to challenge the BDP in the elections. He was pressed by some of his supporters to establish a new party rather than have challengers stand as independent candidates. In early May, Khama convened a meeting in Serowe, ostensibly to consult with the *dikgosi* (chiefs and headmen) on how to proceed given that (Khama said) BDP leaders had deviated from the party's original principles. At the end of May, in a second meeting at the Serowe showgrounds, Khama announced that he was 'cutting ties with the BDP as I do not recognise this party anymore'. He said that it had been 'a mistake to choose Masisi' as his successor and he would 'now work with the opposition to make sure that the BDP loses power in October' (Fabricius 2019; Mayalo 2020). Soon after, in June, the BPF was registered. In early July, it held its first press conference in Gaborone and

then met in Kanye to elect leaders and launch publicly. Its choice of Gaborone and Kanye was presumably intended in part to counter criticisms that the party was merely a vehicle for Central District or Ngwato dominance.

Mass defection from the BDP was not unprecedented. In 2010, members of the '*Barata-Phathi*' ('those who love the party') faction within the BDP defected to form the Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD), which later joined the UDC. The faction was critical of then President Khama's authoritarian leadership. Seven BDP MPs defected, with an eighth following later. They were joined by one MP elected as an independent and several other senior BDP members, including former BDP secretary-general Gomolemo Motswaledi, who had been prevented from standing as a candidate in Serowe North in the 2009 elections (Lotshwao and Suping 2013). However, the veteran leaders of the Barata-Phathi faction (Daniel Kwelagobe and Ponatshego Kedikilwe) did not defect. Five of the defecting MPs later returned to the BDP. The rump of the BMD subsequently split, with its most prominent members forming a new party, the Alliance for Progressives (AP). The formation of the BMD represented a setback for the BDP, and contributed to the BDP's poor electoral performance in 2014, but did not prevent the BDP's subsequent recovery.

The BPF in 2019 differed from the BMD in 2010 in three important respects. Firstly, the BPF had a very high-profile patron (Khama) who was both the former BDP president and the former national president, and who also retained significant legitimacy as the rightful *kgosikgolo* in Central District. Secondly, the BMD's support base (or prospective support base) had been primarily in urban areas, especially around Gaborone and Francistown, i.e. in constituencies where the BDP was already facing a growing challenge from other opposition parties. The BPF, by contrast, enjoyed a core support base in Serowe and surrounding villages where none of the other opposition parties had any significant presence. The formation of the BPF threatened the BDP in the latter's remaining historic strongholds where it had never previously faced competition. The BDP appeared to have lost most of the towns to opposition parties; would it now lose the countryside also? Thirdly, in contrast to the BMD, the BPF did not originate in a group of elected MPs who might take with them supportive structures and networks on the ground. Whereas the BMD had (metaphorically) been a party of lieutenants without a general, the BPF was born with its general but few lieutenants.

How the formation of the BPF would change the political landscape depended largely on who defected from the BDP and how it would relate to the existing opposition parties. In 2014, the opposition parties had for

the first time reduced the BDP's share of the vote to below 50 per cent. Leading up the 2019 elections, the BNF and BCP united for the first time within the coalition UDC. In June 2019, Khama reportedly met with UDC leaders Boko (BNF) and Saleshando (BCP) in Gaborone to discuss the division of Central District constituencies. Khama did not have an obviously strong hand, in that it was not immediately clear who would be defecting from the BDP to the BPF and what kind of party structure the BPF could build outside the Serowe area before the elections due in October. The UDC, by contrast, could build on obvious strengths, including in Shoshong, Mahalapye, Palapye, Tonota, Boteti West, Bobonong, and Tswapong (as well as Selebi-Pikwe, which was an urban enclave surrounded by Central District). Apart from in Serowe, there were few constituencies where the UDC's prospects were sufficiently poor for the UDC to consider standing aside for the new BPF.

The BPF was yet to muster a compelling set of candidates. Almost no senior politicians defected from the BDP. The BDP had already held its primary elections (*'bulela ditswe'*). Few of the successful primary contestants at either parliamentary or District Council ward levels were willing to take the risk of defecting to a new and unknown party. The most senior politician who might have left the BDP was Venson-Motoi (MP for Serowe South and former Foreign Affairs Minister), who had mounted an abortive challenge to Masisi earlier in the year. Khama's close allies approached her. But she announced that she would not be seeking re-election to Parliament and appeared to distance herself from Khama.⁶ It was later alleged (by Guma Moyo) that Khama himself had blocked Venson-Moitoi from becoming leader of the BPF (*Mmegi Online* 2023).

Nor did retired BDP leaders endorse the BPF. Khama appears to have alienated most of the veteran BDP leaders. Neither former President Mogae nor any of the former vice presidents endorsed the BPF. Mogae – himself from Serowe – explicitly endorsed Masisi, noting that Masisi's father had been one of the founders of the BDP (Tiro 2019).

Very few leaders in BDP structures joined the BPF. It appears that only a handful of the chairs and secretaries of the BDP's four regional committees or 17 constituency committees in Central District defected to the BPF.⁷

⁶ Interview with Venson-Moitoi (Serowe Hotel, 14 August 2019). Venson-Moitoi's husband Prince Moitoi proceeded to contest Serowe South for the BMD.

⁷ The four BDP regions were Letswapo, Bomase (which included Selebi-Phikwe also), Shoma, and Central. I have incomplete data on defections among the eight regional and 34 constituency chairs or secretaries. Identified defectors include Lazarus Lekgoanyane (secretary of the Shoma region), Malebogo Phutego (chair

It was reported that the BPF was struggling to identify candidates in the Central District constituencies: ‘Sources within the party have revealed that most people who were expected to join the party and contest the 2019 [elections] are now developing cold feet’, one journalist wrote, adding that people were confused by the relationship between the BPF and UDC (*The Patriot on Sunday* 2019a). Khama’s brother Tshekedi (‘TK’, MP for Serowe West) was unsurprisingly expected to join the BPF. The BPF courted several other BDP MPs from Central District, including Prince Maele (the incumbent MP for Lerala-Maunatlala, later Tswapong North), Philip Makgalemele (Shoshong), Moiseraele Goya (Palapye), and Edwin Batshu (Nkange), as well as Guma Moyo from Tati East (just outside of Central District). Moyo, who had won the BDP primary in his constituency, joined the BPF but decided not to contest the 2019 elections. Batshu, who had been police commissioner and minister under Khama before being dropped from the cabinet by Masisi, had not contested the BDP’s primary in 2018, did not stand for election in 2019, and denied ‘de-campaigning’ the (unsuccessful) BDP candidate in Nkange in 2019 (Mmolawa 2019).

Besides TK, the most likely recruits to the BPF were Maele, Makgalemele, and Goya. Maele had defeated his rival Sethabelo Modukanele in the BDP primary elections in 2018. He had criticised Masisi in a *kgotla* meeting, declaring that he stood with the *kgosikgolo* (‘*Ke eme tsii le Kgosikgolo*’). He helped to manage Venson-Moitoi’s abortive campaign for the BDP presidency. When the BDP suspended him, he unsuccessfully appealed and reportedly tried to appease Masisi. He reportedly declined to join the BPF and proceeded to contest the elections (unsuccessfully) as an independent candidate (Mmeso 2019b; Gabathuse 2019a; Kaelo 2022). Maele did subsequently join the BPF, but later left the party and contested the 2024 elections (successfully) as the UDC candidate. Makgalemele and Goya – who were close friends – had both won the BDP primaries in their constituencies. The BPF courted them (*The Patriot on Sunday* 2019c). According to a senior member of the BDP, the party prepared for the defection of Makgalemele and Goya by completing nomination papers for alternative candidates in the event that, at the last minute, they filed as BPF candidates. Neither Makgalemele nor Goya did so. The BPF did not contest either Shoshong or Palapye, but Khama proceeded to endorse the UDC candidates, thus contributing to Makgalemele’s and Goya’s defeats. TK, who defected to the BPF at the last possible moment (long after Serowe was adorned with posters

of the Letswapo region, after the 2019 elections – before returning to the BDP) and Mathoothe (chair of Serowe North constituency committee).

advertising him as the BDP candidate – see Figure 1 – and perhaps after some indecision; Odubeng 2019; Mokwena 2019), was the only incumbent MP (out of 17) in Central District who ran for the BPF in 2019.



Figure 1: BDP election billboard, Serowe West, August 2019, prior to TK’s defection to the BPF

Source: Author.

The BPF was left fielding candidates who had lost BDP primaries. Biggie Butale, the incumbent MP for Tati West (just outside of Central District), joined the BPF after losing the BDP primary elections. Butale became the BPF’s interim organising secretary and then its president. In the 2019 elections, Butale contested the Tati West seat but trailed far behind the BDP and UDC candidates. Boteti East was contested by Oboetswe Gabotlale, who had lost the BDP primaries before becoming the BPF’s national chairperson. The UDC candidate did not withdraw and the BDP retained the seat in the elections. Former Permanent Secretary Kolaatamo Malefho, who had lost the BDP primary in Serowe South and then failed to secure the BPF nomination in that constituency, stood unsuccessfully for the BPF in Palapye (losing to the UDC). Outside Central District, former Francistown mayor James Kgalajwe also joined the BPF after losing the BDP primary (Mosikare 2019).

Serowe was (and remains) the heartland of the Khama family and hence of the BPF. There, a minority of the incumbent councillors defected to the BPF (Gabathuse 2019b). But of the three MPs, only TK (Serowe

West) joined (belatedly) and stood for the BPF. Venson-Moitoi (Serowe South) retired from politics. The MP for Serowe North (Kgotla Autlwetse) remained in the BDP. It appeared that the BPF hoped that Khama's cousin, Ramadeluka (Ndelu) Seretse would stand in Serowe North. But Seretse told the press that he had not (yet) joined the BPF and would be standing as an independent candidate (*Botswana Guardian* 2019). As a result, the BPF's candidates in the three Serowe parliamentary constituencies comprised TK and two new candidates: Leepetswe Lesedi, an incumbent councillor who had lost the BDP primary elections, in Serowe South; and Baratiwa Mathoothe, a former two-term councillor and constituency BDP chairperson, in Serowe North. Like Lesedi, Mathoothe had reportedly lost in the BDP primaries.

When nominations closed in late September, the BPF had fielded candidates in only ten of the Central District's seventeen constituencies. It also fielded candidates in four constituencies in or around Francistown and six elsewhere in the country. In total, therefore, the BPF fielded candidates in 20 out of 57 parliamentary constituencies. Only two of the BPF's parliamentary candidates were incumbent MPs (Butale and TK) and only one (TK) had won the BDP primary before defecting to the BPF. The BPF contested a similar proportion of the Central District Council wards (85 out of 140 wards;⁸ IEC 2019), but only 16 of these 85 BPF ward candidates were incumbent councillors (of whom only four were successfully re-elected in 2019).

In several parliamentary constituencies, therefore, Khama had no choice but to endorse the UDC's candidate in order to defeat the BDP. In Kgalagadi South (not in Central District), for example, Khama endorsed the UDC candidate (who, ironically, he had fired from public service when he was president), saying:

I have worked with this man while still at government ... when he was still permanent secretary, he is a man that can help to bringing in ideas to advise on government projects and initiatives, also he is a hardworking man ... The BDP's time to rule this country is over because it looks like they do not want to take care of the people like I am used to, they are tired let them rest (*The Parrot Online* 2019).

Khama endorsed UDC candidates in (and the BPF did not contest) several constituencies where he clearly sought to exact revenge on BDP leaders who (he believed) had betrayed him. His primary targets were Vice President Slumber Tsogwane (MP for Boteti West), cabinet minister

⁸ The BPF contested 197 out of 490 wards countrywide.

Dorcas Makgato (MP for Sefhare-Ramokgonami), and Francisco Kgoboko (parliamentary candidate in Bobonong) – all in Central District. Khama and the BPF supported strongly the UDC's candidates in these constituencies (Sam Digwa, Kesitegile Gobotswang, and Taolo Lucas respectively; Mmeso 2019a). Makgato – who had been recruited into politics and appointed as a minister by Khama – hit back at Khama, accusing him of lying and being disrespectful, and for abusing his position as *kgosi*. She disparaged Khama's practice of distributing alms to people:

In my constituency people want land and water, important developments. We don't want soup, *dikobo* [blankets], *diphaphata* [bread]. We need grazing land or pastures for our people. We plead with Khama and his rich friends to avail land locked away in ranches. He should free water sources he has turned into personal property. Khama likes white foreigners and elephants more than citizens who are suffering the brunt of elephants and other problem animals (*The Patriot on Sunday* 2019b).⁹

The BDP also deployed their national campaign coordinator Tebelelo Seretse – a former MP (for Serowe), minister and ambassador – to criticise Khama, by focusing on his conflation of the roles of chief and politician. (This was hypocritical of the BDP, which had, of course, benefited from this in the past).

The BPF's 2019 campaign seemed to revolve around Khama holding 'meet-and-greet' events in villages around Central District (and west, in the Kgalagadi). His message was simple: 'The party of the founding father of the republic is no more, it is dead', so people should vote for the BPF or UDC. He endorsed Duma Boko as president (Agence France-Press 2019).

It was unclear what, precisely, the BPF stood for apart from hostility to Masisi. BPF spokesman Justice Motlhabani described the BPF (and UDC) as 'social democratic' (*Sunday Standard* 2019b). Motlhabani also published a piece in *Mmegi* in which he described the BPF in rather different terms, as 'a peasant revolutionary Front along the lines of the Chinese and Cuban revolution', supported primarily by 'ordinary rural villagers'. According to Motlhabani, Khama had – like Mao, Castro, and Guevara – initiated a revolution in the countryside, not the town. Khama's 'revolutionary guerrilla warfare tactics will leave the BDP in spasms of shock come October 2019 elections' (Motlhabani 2019). Whilst most of the BPF's support was indeed in villages, not large towns (excepting

⁹ See also *Sunday Standard* 2019a.

Serowe itself), no other BPF leaders appeared to have shared this revolutionary perspective. BPF candidates were more likely to emphasise their Christian than their Maoist credentials.¹⁰

Whilst it had been widely expected that the BPF would pose a major challenge to the BDP in its Central District heartland, the 2019 election results exposed the limits of the newly-formed BPF. BPF candidates won the three Serowe parliamentary constituencies, almost all of the district council wards in Serowe village itself and some of the wards in the surrounding villages. Outside of Serowe, however, the BPF performed poorly. The BPF contested seven of the other fourteen constituencies, and won 17 per cent of the vote in these constituencies (and thus helped to reduce the BDP's share to 43 per cent, with 36 per cent going to the UDC). The BPF candidates in Boteti East (Oboetswe Gabotlale) and Nata-Gweta (Joel Linga) performed strongly (winning 28% and 34% of the vote respectively) but did not prevent the BDP from retaining these constituencies. The BPF did not contest Boteti West or Sefare-Ramokgonami, and instead supported the UDC candidates Sam Digwa (who came very close to defeating Tsogwane, see Figure 2) and Kesitegile Gobotswang (who comfortably defeated Makgato). BPF candidates in Mahalapye East, Mahalapye West, and Palapye lost to the UDC (but perhaps drew votes away from the BDP). BDP candidates performed poorly in Mmadinare and Shashe West.



Figure 2: Ian Khama and the BPF endorse UDC candidate Sam Digwa, Boteti West, 2019

¹⁰ It is unclear what happened to Motlhabani. He may have been appointed to a position in the public service that precluded political office-holding. By 2021 he had been replaced by Lawrence Ookeditse.

Source: Facebook.

BPF candidates won 13 per cent of the parliamentary vote in 2019 across Central District as a whole, against 41 per cent for the BDP and 39 per cent for the UDC (see Table 1). The BPF lagged behind the UDC as well as the BDP, even in the ten constituencies that it contested (winning an aggregate 25% of the vote, against 40% for the BDP and 30% for the UDC). Of the seventeen Central District constituencies, the UDC won eight and the BDP retained six, against three for the BPF. The BDP suffered an unprecedented hammering in Central District, but it was primarily the UDC that benefited. Nationally, the BPF won only 4 per cent of the vote. Almost all of its District Council candidates performed very poorly, with many coming last in their wards. Only seventeen were elected: 12 in or around Serowe and five elsewhere in Central District. Of the party's 20 parliamentary candidates, eight lost their deposits (getting less than 5% of the vote). Of the party's 85 council candidates, 69 lost their deposits.

The BPF's very modest performance in 2019 was not surprising in light of the party's organisational weakness, lack of incumbent or strong candidates, and failure to persuade the UDC to stand down its candidates (outside of Serowe). The BPF's failure to lure significant numbers of the BDP's incumbent MPs, councillors, and regional or constituency leaders meant that, outside of Serowe, it lacked the structures on the ground that were crucial to winning elections. Khama's legitimacy and authority as *kgosikgolo* (and former president) were insufficient.

The poor performance of the BPF (and the relative success of the UDC in Central District) constituted a small part of the story of the 2019 elections. The much bigger part of the story only indirectly involved the BPF. In the towns of the south-east – including Mochudi, Molepelole, Kanye, and Gaborone – the BDP seized back many of the parliamentary seats it had lost in 2014. Analysing survey data, Seabo and Nyenhuis (2021) argue that the 2019 elections was a referendum on Khama. He was so unpopular in the major urban areas that Masisi and the BDP were able to win votes on the basis that they were the 'change' candidates. Embracing Khama was a strategic blunder on the UDC's part (Brown 2021). If Khama and the BPF were to make more of a mark on politics in Botswana, they would need to change voters' perceptions of Khama himself, to build stronger organisational structures on the ground, and to recruit more effective candidates. The party had five years to do these before the 2024 elections.

The Shifting Political Context, 2019–2024

Having won the elections, comfortably, Masisi escalated his fight with Khama. First, he immediately pushed back against the BPF's success in Serowe. Masisi provocatively appointed the BDP's defeated candidate in Serowe South in the 2019 elections, Autlwetse, not only as a nominated MP but also as the assistant minister of Local Government. Relations between Autlwetse and Ian Khama were not good. Then Masisi ensured that the BPF did not take control of the Serowe Administrative Authority and Sub-District Council (which fell under the Central District Council). The Serowe Sub-District Council comprised 18 elected and six nominated members. In the 2019 elections, the BPF won 11 of the elected seats against seven for the BDP. The minister of Local Government proceeded to appoint six BDP people as nominated members (as allowed under the *Local Government Act*), giving the BDP a majority and thus control. Later, one BDP elected councillor defected to the BPF, giving the BPF and BDP the same number of councillors. But the BDP retained control because the (BDP) council chairperson had an additional, casting vote (*Sunday Standard* 2021).

In another move which appeared to be designed in part to weaken Khama's influence, the BDP government broke up Central District and elevated the former sub-district authorities into new districts.¹¹ Central District was thus divided into seven new districts: Mahalapye (including Shoshong and Tswapong South), Palapye (including Tswapong North), Bobirwa (i.e. around Bobonong), Tonata, Tutume, Boteti, and Serowe itself. It has been suggested that Masisi sought to encourage voters to prioritise local ethnic identities (such as Batswapong) and resist the regional hegemony of the Bangwato.¹² There may have been some accompanying reorganisation of the reporting lines of *bagosi* (chiefs). This was followed by minor changes to the boundaries of some parliamentary constituencies in the former Central District in 2023.

In 2021, Khama's house was raided and he was charged with (inter alia) the possession of illegal firearms (as were others). In November 2021, Khama went into exile, and was later joined there by his brother TK. In 2022, a court in Botswana issued an arrest warrant for Khama. Tensions escalated further. In May 2022, the government suspended Sediegeng Kgamane as regent (i.e. acting chief) of Gammangwato after he failed to

¹¹ The official reason was to improve service delivery. Some other districts were also divided, including in the west and south of the country.

¹² Afrobarometer survey data from 2022 suggest that a minority of residents of Central District self-identify as Bangwato, with substantial numbers self-identifying as Kalanga, Batswapong, or any one of several other local identities.

heed the government's instruction not to allow discussion of Ian Khama in the *kgotla* in Serowe. Masisi, as president, appointed a more compliant replacement, who proceeded to deny the Khamas and the local (BPF) MPs the use of the *kgotla* (Selathwa 2023d). Khama challenged the government in court over the appointment of the regent. The conflict was deepened because it involved Autlwetse, who had been promoted by Masisi to minister of Local Government from January 2022 (Selathwa 2024d; Mokwena 2024). In court papers, Autlwetse disputed Khama's claim to be the designated *kgosi*.

TK Khama's prolonged absence from Parliament meant that his seat was declared vacant and a by-election was held in July 2023. The BPF's final rally, following a massive motorcade through Serowe, provided an impressive demonstration of opposition-party unity. The crowd was multicoloured, with supporters of the BPF, the UDC, and even the BCP (despite the BCP running its own candidate), all in their respective colours. Khama spoke via a video link. UDC president Duma Boko and Alliance of Progressives president Gaolathe Ndaba spoke in support of the BPF candidate.¹³ The result was a landslide victory for the BPF candidate. This was the only parliamentary by-election between the 2019 and 2024 general elections, but there were numerous by-elections for district council seats, including several in Central District. In four by-elections in Central District in December 2021, the UDC retained two wards but lost one (Tumasera-Seleka, in Tswapong South) to the BDP, whilst the BPF took one ward (Tamasane, in Mmadinare) off the BDP. The UDC comfortably won a by-election in June 2023 in Mmaphula East ward (Palapye), where the BCP pushed the BDP into third place. Of these five by-elections, the BPF contested only one (Tamasane), which it won.

Survey data are consistent with the picture from the by-elections: Support for the BPF was not growing fast. Afrobarometer's surveys in mid-2022 and mid-2024 suggested that disaffection was growing and support for the BDP was shrinking in Central District, as across the country as a whole. The beneficiaries, in Central District as elsewhere, were the UDC and BCP far more than the BPF. Few voters said that they identified with the BPF.

The BPF's limited impact in the early 2020s – limited, that is, to retaining the Serowe West parliamentary seat and winning one District Council seat – was surely in part the result of its internal chaos and conflict, as well as a result of Khama's absence. Firstly, the party's secretary-general, Roseline Panzirah-Motshome, died in December 2020. TK was appointed as secretary-general. Then, very publicly, the party president

¹³ I attended the BPF rally.

(Butale) clashed with the Khamas as well as other members of the BPF's National Executive Committee. The struggle for control between Butale and Khama loyalists repeatedly landed in court. Eventually, in 2023, Mephato Reatile was appointed as vice president of the party and then elected (at an extraordinary party congress) as president. Reatile – the incumbent MP for Jwaneng (outside of Central District) – had joined the BPF after being suspended by the BDP (Selatlhwa 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Mouwane 2023). The BPF recruited ten more district councillors from the BDP, bringing the total number of BPF councillors to 28, all in Central District.¹⁴ The BPF appeared to be in a much stronger position in Nata-Gweta, where it now had four district councillors. In April 2023, the BPF had resolved to join the UDC, which paved the way for the alliance that was evident during the Serowe West by-elections. Just as the BPF appeared to have regained some stability, however, it descended into internal division again. Some BPF activists were unhappy with the party joining the UDC and specifically with the proposed allocation of seats between the parties within the UDC. In early 2024, the BPF decided to leave the UDC (see below) and instead form a vague 'pact' with it. This decision was challenged by the national organising secretary and the publicity secretary (*The Patriot on Sunday* 2024). Once again, the BPF appeared to be a party beset by chaos and division. Moreover, the Khamas remained in exile in South Africa.

This surely impaired the BPF's ability to attract high-quality candidates in the run-up to the 2024 elections. Remarkably, given the deepening unpopularity of the BDP, no BDP ministers or backbench MPs appeared to consider defection to the BPF.¹⁵ It was revealing that Maele, who had joined the BPF after losing his parliamentary seat in the 2019 elections, proceeded to negotiate a new home with the UDC, under whose banner he was re-elected to Parliament in 2024. One of the incumbent councillors who had defected from the BDP in 2022 recalled (in an interview) that 'the other councillors thought that I was crazy' to cross over to the BPF.

¹⁴ The recruited district councillors in Central District, nine from BDP and one from UDC, comprised two in each of Serowe, Nata-Gweta, and Palapye, and one in each of Bononong, Mmadinare, Shashe West, and Lerala-Maunatlala. The BPF picked up one other ward in a by-election.

¹⁵ A constitutional amendment in 2020 provided for by-elections if an elected MP or councillor chose to resign from his or her party. It did not preclude their considering or planning for defection for the coming elections.

Candidate Selection in the BPF in 2024

In 2023–2024 the major parties selected most of their candidates for the parliamentary and council elections through primary elections. Unlike in previous elections, most parties delayed their primaries until July 2024. The BDP appears to have delayed because of chaos in its leadership (and perhaps because the leadership sought to select their preferred candidates without opposition). The BPF and UDC appear to have delayed also because of uncertainty over whether the BPF was inside or outside of the UDC coalition and hence which party would be allocated which seats. When the UDC announced its initial allocation of seats in January 2024, the BPF was allocated the Central District parliamentary constituencies of Mmadinare, Nata-Gweta, and Tswapong South (formerly Sefare-Ramokgonami), in addition to its three seats in Serowe. Outside of Central District it was allocated Selebi-Phikwe East and the two new Okavango constituencies, but none of the Francistown area seats (Mpoloka 2023). This seat allocation generated widespread dissent within the party. The BPF wanted four additional parliamentary seats: Shoshong and Tonota (both allocated to the BNF, which had won both seats in 2019 under the UDC before the MPs defected to the BDP), Shashe West (allocated to the Botswana People's Party) and Francistown East (unallocated). The BPF was reported to also want the 'lion's share' of district council wards in the Palapye, Mahalapye, Shoshong, and Bobirwa districts (Kanono 2024). The other parties within the UDC also demanded additional seats. It was reportedly the BNF's request that Mmadinare be reallocated to them that prompted the BPF to withdraw from the UDC in April 2024 (Chida 2024). Reatile told the press that he had to withdraw the BPF from the UDC in order to prevent the party collapsing, as BPF members threatened to contest elections for other parties or as independents (Basimanebotlhe 2024b).

The BPF had little chance in eight Central District constituencies. In five, the BPF faced an incumbent MP from one of the other opposition parties. Three other constituencies had been won by the UDC in 2019, but the UDC candidate was not the incumbent (in two of these, the MP had defected to the BDP). Given the national context, the BPF had little chance in these constituencies. Both Reatile and Khama said that the BPF would revert to its 2019 'pact' with the UDC, implying that it would support UDC candidates in wards where there was a realistic prospect of defeating the BDP (Chida 2024). In practice, however, the BPF desisted from contesting very few constituencies and wards in Central District. It stood candidates in seven of the eight BDP-held parliamentary constituencies, excepting only Boteti West where the BPF again supported strongly the UDC candidate (Digwa) against the BDP's Tsogwane. The BPF also contested

154 out of 174 district council wards across the former Central District. Ten of the twenty wards that it did not contest were in Boteti West. Across much of the district, the only rationale for contesting elections was to draw votes away from the BDP and facilitate victory for UDC or BCP candidates. It was only in the six parliamentary constituencies won by the BDP in 2019 that the BPF had any significant prospect of victory itself.

The BPF primaries were initially scheduled for May, but most were held only at the end of July. There had already been some controversy over exemptions from primary elections. In 2019, the BPF leadership told incumbent councillors that they would not face primary elections in 2024 if they defected to the BPF. At least 13 of the BPF's 28 incumbent councillors were directly affected (Basimanebotlhe 2024a). This caused some discontent among BPF activists who wanted to challenge these incumbents, especially if they had served for two terms already. In March 2024, the BPF reiterated that it would honour its undertaking (Basimanebotlhe 2024a). Despite this, when primaries were held on the last weekend of July, most of these incumbent councillors faced challenges; some, including several of the original defectors to the BPF, were defeated.

In some areas, especially areas where the BPF enjoyed strong support, primaries were fiercely competitive. In Serowe's mostly 'safe' parliamentary and district council seats, candidate selection was plagued by the divisive intra-party politics evident in the BDP. Irregularities were alleged, disciplinary action initiated, and reruns announced. BPF president Reatile described the mess as a 'very serious matter' that had 'greatly affected our planning towards the elections'. Some of the promised reruns were held, others cancelled. None of the incumbent MPs but six incumbent councillors were displaced, including three of the first councillors to join the BPF prior to the 2019 elections. Some of the disgruntled losers defected to other parties (Selatlhwa 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Tlhankane 2024; *The Patriot on Sunday* 2024). For a party with few elected representatives, this rejection of incumbent councillors was quite extraordinary. It appears that, in some cases, at least, MPs encouraged and aided their supporters to challenge incumbent councillors, perhaps to reward their loyalty, perhaps to undermine or even to remove experienced local politicians who might challenge the MPs themselves in future, perhaps to ensure a more pliant council. In some wards, the three contestants in the parliamentary primary each backed a different candidate. The primary system encourages this kind of factionalism. Whilst the reasons for displacement might be opaque, the consequences were clear. Some of the losers defected to other parties.

The primary battlegrounds between parties in the former Central District were the six parliamentary constituencies won by the BDP in 2019:

Boteti East and West, Nata-Gweta and Shashe West, Tswapong North, and Mmadinare. In 2019, the BPF had mounted a strong challenge in Boteti East and Nata-Gweta and had performed somewhat well in Mmadinare. The BPF contested five of these constituencies in 2024. Only in Boteti West did the BPF not stand a candidate, presumably because Khama was highly motivated to oust the incumbent Tsogwane, who was being challenged again by the UDC's Digwa (whom Khama had endorsed in 2019). In Nata-Gweta, the BPF candidate was its secretary-general Ookeditse, who had unsuccessfully contested the BDP's parliamentary primary in 2018, and who defeated a BPF councillor and Tutume District Council chairperson in the BPF's primary in July 2024 (Dube 2024a, 2024b; *WeekendPost-Insightful* 2024). In Mmadinare, the BPF selected Jacob Mosimanyana, a former mine manager in Selebi-Phikwe and then hotel manager. In Boteti East, the candidate was Lebonaamang Mokalake, who had been MP for Boteti South from 2004 to 2014, when he narrowly lost the BDP primary; he had also been the minister of Lands and Housing and, after leaving Parliament, served as high commissioner to Zambia. In Shashe West, an incumbent two-term councillor, Jeremiah Frenzel, had defected from the BDP to the BPF (*Botswana Guardian* 2024). The Tswapong North seat was contested by Pinny Morupisi, an elected councillor (and wife of the former permanent secretary in the Office of the President under Khama).¹⁶ The BPF's final set of parliamentary candidates in Central District constituted a much stronger line-up than in 2019: three incumbent MPs, a former MP and minister, two incumbent councillors, prominent sports officials and businessmen, and the party's secretary-general. Outside of Serowe, however, it was not clear that the BPF (and its parliamentary candidates) had strong structures and networks on the ground. Moreover, its leader remained in exile in South Africa and, in his absence, the party appeared to lack a campaign strategy.

Khama's Return and the BPF's Election Campaign

On Friday 13 September 2024, Khama unexpectedly returned after three years of self-imposed exile and appeared in court in Gaborone. In a carefully choreographed itinerary, announced and recorded on his Facebook page (although a lot of his posts appear to have been deleted subsequently), Khama returned to Serowe on 20 September, to be greeted by a large crowd of supporters. The following day he laid a wreath on his parents' graves in Serowe (Khama 2024). Two weeks later, Khama

¹⁶ Pinny Morupisi replaced her husband, Carter. He faced legal troubles and was later jailed for corruption.

proceeded on a whirlwind tour of (and then beyond) the former Central District in support of the BPF and the defeat of Masisi and the BDP. The BPF's election campaign in the former Central District revolved around Khama and the slogan *Ke Nako* ('Now Is the Time'). Five years earlier, he had been unpopular, but Masisi's actions against him were widely seen as persecution. This, combined with Masisi's apparently poor performance as president, appears to have changed public opinion on Khama.

Khama and the BPF's public campaign kicked off on 5 October with a rally in Serowe to launch the party's manifesto and introduce its parliamentary candidates for Serowe. The following day he embarked on a ten-day grand tour around the former Central District,¹⁷ starting with 'meet-and-greet' events in villages north-west and north-east of Serowe. Then he ventured south and east to Shoshong, Palapye, and Mahalapye, and spoke at multiple villages in each constituency. From there Khama turned north-east, to Bobonong and Francistown, then west, passing through Tutume, Nata, and Gweta. In total, Khama spoke at more than 40 events over 10 days. At each event he spoke for between 10 and 20 minutes (see Figure 3). Khama then campaigned beyond the former Central District before returning to Central District for further events at the end of October. The BPF campaign culminated in a rally in and massive motorcade around Serowe on the eve of the elections (see Figure 4).



Figure 3: Ian Khama and Lawrence Ookeditse at a campaign event, October 2024

Source: Facebook.

¹⁷ These are documented on Khama's Facebook page, with videos.



Figure 4: Part of BPF motorcade, Serowe, 29 October 2024

Source: Author.

The itinerary was determined by several factors. Khama and the BPF leadership received many more requests for events than they could accommodate (despite the fact that local candidates footed the bill for hiring tents, refreshments, and other local expenses). The itinerary reflected strategic considerations, with a lower priority accorded to constituencies (such as Shoshong) where the party leadership believed that the UDC was best placed to defeat the BDP. In the targeted constituencies (such as Shashe West), meet-and-greet events were held in villages where support for the BPF appeared weaker rather than in its strongholds. In early October it seemed unnecessary for Khama to hold events in individual wards in Serowe itself, but at the end of the month the BPF did hold mini-rallies in some of the Serowe wards, including where BPF candidates faced significant opposition from former councillors who had lost the primaries and stood as independents or for other parties. Logistics (of transport and accommodation) also shaped the itinerary.

These events were billed as either meet-and-greet events or candidate launch rallies. Meet-and-greet events typically involved Khama delivering a short and largely standard speech, in which he berated Masisi and the BDP (which, he said, was no longer the party that Seretse Khama had founded). The rallies were larger, and involved a series of speakers. The message remained the same, however: Kick out Masisi and the BDP. Khama barely attempted to rouse support for the BPF and its candidates. His message was negative (oust Masisi) rather than positive (vote for the

BPF). He told audiences that Masisi and the BDP had failed the country, but he said little or nothing about what the BPF would do differently if it was to govern Botswana.

It is not clear what effect the Khama tour had on voters. An important function of rallies for the BDP in 2024 (at both ward and constituency levels) served the interests of the party – in terms of imposing some discipline on its candidates – more than the interests of individual candidates, who were often ‘decampaigned’ in the general election by the losers of their own party’s primaries (Seekings 2025). The BPF’s rallies served a different purpose: to harness the authority and legitimacy of the *kgosikgolo* (and former president). The problem for the BPF was that the authority and legitimacy of the *kgosikgolo* were not uniform across Central District. In some areas where the BPF performed strongly in the election, including Shashe West, Khama is credited with mobilising voters to support the BPF candidates. In other areas where BPF candidates were less successful, either Khama’s events are dismissed as irrelevant to local voters or Khama is criticised for not holding more local events.

Results and Consequences

The BPF made modest gains in the 2024 elections (see Table 2). Its parliamentary candidates won 20 per cent of the vote across the former Central District, behind the UDC and (narrowly) the BDP and BCP also. It won in five constituencies, against nine won by the UDC (which also dominated Francistown and North-East District), three by the BCP (which also won both Selebi-Phikwe seats), and none by the BDP. In the District Council elections, the BPF won 40 out of 174 seats, against 66 for the UDC, 36 for the BCP, and a meagre 26 for the BDP. Compared to 2019 (see Table 1), its parliamentary vote share went up (by 7 percentage points) and it returned an additional two MPs and 23 councillors. These results entailed gains, but modest ones.

Table 3 reports results in 2019 and 2024 by three categories of constituency: the three Serowe constituencies won by the BPF in 2019; the six constituencies won by the BDP in 2019; and the eight constituencies won by the UDC in 2019 (including Tonota and Shoshong, whose MPs later defected to the BDP).

The BPF easily retained the three Serowe constituencies, by increasing its share of the vote and securing full control of the Serowe District Council (the BPF saw off challenges even from former BPF councillors who stood for other parties or as independents). In Serowe as a whole, the BPF parliamentary candidates won 57 per cent of the vote

(although its ward candidates won only 42% of the total district council vote).

Table 3: Election results by category of constituency

Constituency category		Elections	BPF	BDP	UDC	BCP	Other	Total
Won by BPF in 2019 (n=3)	Parliamentary vote share	2019	44%	34%	15%		7%	100%
		2024	57%	22%	0%	10%	11%	100%
	Elected MPs	2019	3	0	0		0	3
		2024	3	0	0	0	0	3
	District council vote share	2019	38%	35%	15%		12%	100%
		2024	42%	23%	14%	8%	12%	100%
Elected District Councillors	2019	12	8	2		0	22	
	2024	19	2	1	0	1	23	
Won by BDP in 2019 (n=6)	Parliamentary vote share	2019	12%	48%	31%		10%	100%
		2024	25%	25%	31%	18%	1%	100%
	Elected MPs	2019	0	6	0		0	6
		2024	2	0	4	0	0	6
	District council vote share	2019	11%	45%	34%		9%	100%
		2024	19%	28%	27%	20%	6%	100%
Elected District Councillors	2019	4	28	17		1	50	
	2024	4	14	35	12	2	67	
Won by UDC in 2019 (n=8)	Parliamentary vote share	2019	5%	39%	52%		4%	100%
		2024	8%	25%	40%	27%	1%	100%
	Elected MPs	2019	0	0	8		0	2
		2024	0	0	5	3	0	2
	District council vote share	2019	8%	40%	41%		11%	100%
		2024	12%	27%	31%	25%	6%	100%
Elected District Councillors	2019	1	39	26		2	68	
	2024	9	10	41	20	4	84	
The categories comprised: (1) the three Serowe constituencies; (2) Boteti East and West, Nata-Gweta, Shashe West, Mmadinare, and Tswapong North; (3) Palapye, Bobonong, Mahalapye East and West, Tswapong South, Nkange, Tonota, and Shoshong. NB: The BCP contested the 2019 elections as part of the UDC. 'Other' includes AP in 2019, and independents and minor parties in both 2019 and 2024.								

Source: IEC (2019, 2024).

The BPF won two of the six constituencies that the BDP had won five years previously: Nata-Gweta and Shashe West were won by Ookeditse and Frenzel respectively, with each winning 53 per cent of the vote. The BPF's performance was uneven in the other four constituencies won in 2019 by the BDP. All four were won by the UDC. In one (Boteti

West), the BPF again stood aside, and supported the UDC candidate who defeated the BDP's Tsogwane. BPF candidates performed reasonably strongly in Boteti East and Tswapong North but less well in Mmadinare. Overall, in these six constituencies, the BPF's share of the parliamentary vote doubled from 12 per cent to 25 per cent, which was the same share as the BDP but less than the UDC's share in these constituencies. In one of these constituencies (Tswapong North), the successful candidate (Prince Maele) won for the UDC after defecting from the BPF to the UDC. In Tswapong North and Mmadinare, the BPF might have helped the UDC to win these seats by pulling votes away from the BDP. In the other constituencies, the UDC or BCP candidates did not need any assistance from the BPF. The BPF and Khama might have assisted the UDC even more indirectly by contributing to the delegitimation of the BDP.

The eight constituencies won by the UDC in 2019 were easily won by either the UDC or the BCP (which was part of the UDC in 2019 but not in 2024). In some of these (including Palapye and both Mahalapye constituencies), the BPF's share of the parliamentary vote actually fell between 2019 and 2024. BPF candidates did win six seats in the Palapye District Council but only won one seat in the Mahalapye District Council. Overall, the BPF's share of the parliamentary vote in these eight constituencies rose only from 5 per cent to 8 per cent (and its share of the district council vote from 8% to 12%).

Following the elections, the BPF controlled outright only one of the seven new District Councils formed out of the Central District, i.e. the Serowe District Council. It was the junior partner to the UDC in three other district councils (Tonota, Palapye, and Tutume). In each case, a BPF councillor was elected as deputy chairperson of the council. Two district councils (Boteti and Mahalapye) were controlled by the UDC on its own, and the seventh district council (Bobirwa) was run by an opposition coalition comprising the BCP and BDP. Controlling only one of the seven new District Councils, the BPF lacks access to patronage. Moreover, if the UDC administration fails to deliver, the BPC – and perhaps even the BDP – appears to be better placed than the BPF to take advantage of the opportunity.

The results suggest that the BPF's regional base covered only one part of the former Central District. The BPF might have had the best slogan – '*Ke Nako*' – but it was the UDC (and, to a lesser extent, the BCP) that more widely harnessed the enthusiasm for change among voters in the towns and villages of the former Central District, particularly those along the A1 highway and to its east.

One constraint on the BPF was the lack of clarity as to what it stood for. For Khama himself, the BPF appeared to be little more than a vehicle

for ousting Masisi from the presidency (Brown 2021). In 2024, some of its candidates projected the party as Christian (or, more precisely, Pentecostal Christian). Others emphasised their commitment to agriculture, which appealed to older voters in villages. Its manifesto presented a centrist message that aligned broadly with the UDC's own message, but its relationship with the UDC was not clear. Across large parts of Central District, the BPF was burdened with its 'tribalist' reputation. This constraint was linked to another: The BPF lacked strong leaders. Khama, the de facto leader, returned to Botswana shortly before the elections, and he announced his retirement from politics (to take up the position of *kgosikgolo*) soon after the elections. Butale had been a disaster. Reatile was not much better (and was duly replaced as party president by Ookeditse in 2025).

Conclusions

Ian Khama formed the BPF with the primary objective of unseating his successor as president of Botswana and leader of the BDP, Mokgweetsi Masisi. The BPF was established in the run-up to the 2019 elections, but very few BDP leaders defected to the BPF: Only one of the BDP's parliamentary candidates (Khama's own brother) and very few of its District Council ward candidates defected and contested the elections for the BPF. Only a handful of the BDP's regional or district officers defected. In the 2019 elections, the BPF won only three parliamentary and 17 council seats, all in Central District and most in and around Serowe. Even in Serowe, it was denied control of the Sub-District Council (later District Council) through the BDP's appointment of unelected councillors. The BPF might have helped other opposition parties to win seats in Central District, but it remained very much the junior opposition party even in its own backyard.

The BPF languished in disarray between 2020 and 2023. It did expand, modestly, by recruiting a fourth MP (not in Central District) and another ten district councillors (all in Central District). But several high-profile political leaders either declined to join the BPF or, having joined, then left the party. The BPF did select a slightly stronger slate of candidates for the 2024 elections, and contested all but one of the parliamentary constituencies in the now-former Central District. But its election campaign in 2024 appeared to lack both purpose and energy until Khama returned and hit the campaign trail with enormous energy. His message remained much the same as in 2019: Oust Masisi and the BDP.

In the elections, the BPF made modest gains: It retained its three parliamentary seats around Serowe and won two additional seats from the

BDP in Central District (although, to no one's surprise, it lost its seat in Jwaneng, outside Central District). Its share of the parliamentary vote in the former Central District rose from 13 per cent (in 2019) to 20 per cent. The BPF also won 40 district council seats across the former Central District with 18 per cent of the vote (and finally secured control of the Serowe Council). Even in the former Central District, however, the BPF's share of the vote was lower than the shares of the UDC, the BDP, and the BCP. Whilst Khama achieved his goal of ousting Masisi and the BDP, the BPF expanded its authority over only one part of the former Central District.

The constrained performance of the BPF was reminiscent of the performance of previous breakaway parties in Botswana. The BCP (which broke away from the BNF) and the BMD (which broke away from the BDP) both struggled in the polls. In other countries across Southern Africa, breakaway parties have performed most strongly when they have clear and distinct regional bases. In South Africa, for example, Jacob Zuma's MK Party rapidly established a strong base in KwaZulu-Natal. In Botswana, the BPF's base was clearly concentrated regionally, in the western part of Central District. The 2024 elections suggested that the BCP and UDC (through its constituent parties) also had regionally concentrated support (including across the eastern part of Central District). The BDP had countrywide support but was unable to convert votes into parliamentary seats precisely because its support was spread out across Botswana. The 2024 elections might thus suggest that party politics in Botswana has become regionalised.

In terms of Elischer's typology, the BPF was not, and has not become, either an ethnic alliance or a programmatic party. It had personalistic elements, due to the central role of Ian Khama. After the elections, Khama formally assumed the role of *kgosikgolo* and declared that he would play a less overt political role. At its Congress in November 2025, Ookeditse and his allies secured control of the party, with Ookeditse as president, Mathoothe as chairperson, and Malefho as secretary-general. It appears that the party was becoming less personalistic but remained solidly ethnic or regional in terms of its leadership.

This paper has argued that understanding the modest progress of the BPF in the former Central District requires understanding the ways that dynamics from above interact with dynamics from below. The BPF's continued weaknesses on the ground across much of the former Central District hampered its overall growth, but these weaknesses were in turn in part the consequence of the circumstances of the BPF's formation. The broader lesson is that the performance of a party cannot simply be read off

its character at a national level. Local leaders and structures can be crucial in mobilising support.

Further research is required to examine why the UDC (and BCP) was more successful than the BPF in the constituencies along the A1 and to its east. To what extent was this the consequence of urbanisation and the growth of towns that are socially and economically very different to the villages of the past? To what extent did it reflect ethnic fragmentation within the multi-ethnic Gammangwato or Central District, with (for example) Batswapong showing reduced allegiance to the Ngwato *kgosikgolo* in Serowe?

Does the progress of the BPF from 2019 through 2024 suggest how the party is likely to evolve in future? Two points seem clear. Firstly, the BPF has grown to a size that its MPs and councillors have a vested interest in the party continuing. Secondly, the further expansion of the BPF is constrained by the strength of the UDC and the BCP. There are no more BDF-held constituencies and few BDP-held wards to be won. If the BPF is to gain strength, it can only be at the expense of the UDC or BCP. As of 2025, both the UDC and BCP appeared reasonably entrenched. If the BPF does not enter into an alliance with one or other of the major parties, then there are only a couple of constituencies – Tswapong North and Boteti East – where the BPF might be able to win over discontented BDP and UDC voters and mount a significant challenge to the UDC incumbents. Elsewhere it would appear that there are few opportunities for expansion without entering into some kind of pact or alliance with another major party.

What is very unclear is whether and with whom the BPF might enter into some kind of a pact. It is currently participating in the UDC-led national government and is in coalition with the UDC controlling the Tonota, Palapye, and Tutume District Councils. It is also in collective opposition with the UDC against a governing BCP/BDF coalition in the Bobirwa District Council. But a pact with the UDC would presumably prevent the BPF from challenging UDC MPs and councillors. An alliance with the BDP might offer the BPF a path forward. The two parties combined won 44 per cent of the vote in Central District in 2024. If the votes for the BDP and BPF parliamentary candidates in 2024 had been pooled behind a single candidate, then this alliance would have won three additional seats (Tswapong North, Boteti East, and Mmadinare). If such an alliance could win back some voters from the UDC, then Nkange and Tonota would also become competitive. Even a seamless BPF/BDP alliance would fall far short of the hegemony that the BDP enjoyed in Central District as recently as 2014. But is the BPF able to form an alliance with the party that it was formed to oust? And would a combined BPF/BDP

be able to win in urban or non-Ngwato constituencies? Given the fluidity of party alliances (and splits) in Botswana, it would be rash to predict how parties will align in future.

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