

The Elections in Shoshong, 2024: The Consequences of Defection

Jeremy Seekings* 

Abstract

The 2024 elections in Shoshong offer an opportunity to examine how the defection of an elected member of Parliament (MP) from an opposition to the ruling party affects the local political landscape. Shoshong was a long-standing ruling party stronghold until 2019, when the parliamentary seat and a majority of the district council wards were won for the first time by the opposition coalition, the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC). Less than three years later, the MP defected from the opposition to the ruling party, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). None of the senior UDC office-holders or elected councillors in the constituency followed him. This appears to have accentuated the usual conflicts within parties (especially the ruling BDP) over candidate selection – and then who supported who in the run-up to the subsequent elections. In the 2024 elections, the UDC maintained its domination of the constituency by winning seven out of nine council seats as well as the parliamentary seat, thereby ousting the defector. But the UDC's share of the council vote in 2024 was marginally lower than in 2019 and its share of the parliamentary vote was lower. Whilst the poor performance of the BDP was in large part due to factors exogenous to the constituency, particularly the countrywide resurgence of the UDC and the expansion of the BPF, it seems unlikely that the defector took many supporters with him. In this constituency, in these elections, party proved more important than the individual candidate.

Keywords: Botswana Patriotic Front, Botswana Democratic Party, Umbrella for Democratic Change, election campaign, candidate selection

Introduction

'Floor-crossing' – i.e. the defection of elected representatives from one party to another – occurs often in Botswana, as in other countries in

* Jeremy Seekings, University of Cape Town and Botswana Election Research Network. Email: jeremy.seekings@gmail.com

Southern Africa with first-past-the-post elections for parliamentary constituencies (as well as District Council wards). Of the 57 members of Parliament (MPs) elected in 2019, nine had shifted to other parties by the time of the 2024 elections. Four of these had unambiguously defected: Two MPs had defected from opposition parties to the ruling party¹ and two had defected in the opposite direction.² The other five had been suspended or expelled from their parties: One ruling party MP contested the 2024 elections as an independent candidate³ whilst four opposition MPs were suspended from their party after their party left the opposition coalition but the MPs chose to remain in the coalition (and proceeded to contest the 2024 elections as independent members of that coalition).⁴

The literature on floor-crossing in Africa focuses primarily on the negative consequences for the institutionalisation of political parties and hence democracy (e.g. Goeke and Hartmann 2011). A secondary concern in the literature is with the motivations of defectors, i.e. whether they are pursuing their own individual self-interest or whether they have broader developmental or principled motivations (Rakner and Svåsand 2005;

¹ The case of the MP for Shoshong, Aubrey Lesaso, is considered in this paper. The other defector was the MP for Tonota (Pono Moatlhodi), who defected to the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) in 2022. Moatlhodi had originally been a three-term BDP MP (from 1999 to 2014) before losing the BDP primary in his constituency in 2014, whereupon he defected to the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC), and was defeated in the 2014 elections but stood again for the UDC in 2019, this time successfully. His defection in 2022 was a case of returning to his original party (who rewarded him by appointing him as the deputy speaker of Parliament). Moatlhodi announced his retirement and did not contest any primary in 2024.

² Ignatius Moswaane (Francistown West) defected from the BDP to the Botswana Peoples Party (part of the UDC) and Mephato Reatile (Jwaneng-Mabutsane) defected to the Botswana Patriotic Front. A third MP, Unity Dow, defected to the Botswana Congress Party (BCP), but she was a nominated MP, not an elected MP. All three stood for re-election under their new parties in 2024. Moswaane and Dow were elected (the latter narrowly); Reatile suffered a massive defeat.

³ Edwin Dikoloti, an incumbent BDP MP (and Assistant Minister), stood successfully as an independent candidate in Good Hope-Mmathethe after the BDP nominated another candidate despite Dikoloti having won the party's primary elections overwhelmingly.

⁴ Four BCP MPs were suspended by the party: Dithapelo Keorapetse (Selebi-Phikwe West), David Tshere (Mahalapye West), Never Tshabang (Nkange) and Onneetse Ramogapi (Palapye). All four contested the 2024 elections for the UDC without having joined any of the parties within the coalition. Tshere and Ramogapi were re-elected; Keorapetse and Tshabang were defeated by candidates from their former party, the BCP.

Sishuwa 2024). Less attention has been paid to the consequences of defection for the individual defector (but see Agboga 2023, 2024) and the political landscape in his or her constituency or ward. One of the puzzles around defections is why some (or perhaps many) defectors fail to survive re-election. Of the nine MPs elected in Botswana in 2019 who had defected by 2024, only four were re-elected. All four were candidates of (or were linked to) the main opposition coalition that won (to general surprise) an outright majority and proceeded to form a government. This paper examines the local consequences of defection in order to understand how and why defectors often lose the subsequent elections. How does defection reshape the political landscape at the local level? How does a defector rebuild his local support base and campaign for re-election? How do local political activists aligned with the defector's former party respond? How do local political activists aligned with the defector's new party respond? And, crucially, how do voters respond?

The paper focuses on the case of Shoshong, a constituency in central Botswana. The MP elected for Shoshong in 2019 won comfortably on the ticket of the opposition Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC). He later defected to the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). In 2024, as the incumbent MP, he won the BDP's primary elections but proceeded to lose the general election by a wide margin. On the face of it, the MP was punished severely for his defection. His defeat was, however, part of a countrywide decimation of BDP candidates at the hands of the UDC (which won an outright parliamentary majority, albeit on only 37% of the aggregate vote) and other opposition parties. Separating out local from countrywide effects is not straightforward. Moreover, the details of the vote in Shoshong present a somewhat complicated picture.

The choice of Shoshong as a case-study was hardly planned. The initial research was part of a project on the performance of the breakaway Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF) across what was (until 2022) Central District (see Seekings 2025). Shoshong was the only constituency in Central District where an incumbent MP had unambiguously defected after 2019 and contested his new party's primaries in mid-2024. In three other constituencies in the former Central District (as well as one of the Selebi-Phikwe constituencies), incumbent UDC MPs stayed in the UDC but parted ways with their former party, the Botswana Congress Party (BCP). Shoshong was therefore an obvious location for studying the consequences of defection. Given that the circumstances of defections vary, there is no reason to believe that the case of defection in Shoshong is in any sense typical of defections generally, in Botswana or more widely. What is likely, however, is that the issues raised clearly in this case are widely relevant.

Specifically, how does a defecting MP rebuild the local organisation and networks that are essential to successful primary or general election campaigns?

This paper also provides a constituency-level study of the 2024 primary and general election campaigns and their outcomes. Botswana does not have a history of constituency-level election studies (excepting Wiseman, 1978, on Mochudi). Whilst national surveys are the primary source for understanding voters and their motivations, constituency-level studies are indispensable for documenting and assessing the importance of candidates' campaigns from their preparations prior to primary elections, through the primary elections themselves, and on to the general election. Whilst one should be cautious about generalising on the basis of a single constituency-study, many of the issues raised in a single such study are relevant in other constituencies also.

This paper first describes the constituency before examining local electoral politics up to and including the UDC's victory in 2019. It then considers the new MP's defection and examines how the BDP and opposition parties reconstituted themselves at the local level between 2022 and 2024. The paper explores divisions not only between opposition parties but also divisions within both the UDC and BDP, which were reflected in fractious primary elections in 2024 and subsequently complicated patterns of support. The paper considers the candidates' ground operations during the campaigns, which culminated in rallies in the days prior to the elections. After considering the results of the elections, the paper concludes with an assessment of the consequences of defection in this particular case and the more general lessons.

For sources this paper draws primarily on interviews and discussions with parliamentary and district council ward candidates and party officials from all three political parties in Shoshong, both before and after the elections. My twenty-one interviewees included all three parties' parliamentary candidates, eight ward candidates from all three parties and six campaign managers or party officials from all three parties. Given the nature of the material, it is inappropriate to attribute specific facts to individual informants.

Geography and Historical Background of Shoshong

Shoshong is a sprawling constituency approximately one hundred miles north-west of Gaborone, on the southern edge of the former Central District. It comprises Shoshong village itself together with a series of small outlying villages. Shoshong village is 30 km west of Mahalapye and the country's main A1 Highway. The constituency covers more than 10,000

square kilometres, with some of the outlying villages an hour or more's drive from Shoshong village. The village of Dibete, on the country's main A1 Highway, lies 120 km by road (or 90 minutes' drive) to the south-east of Shoshong village. The village of Poloka is a further 30 minutes' drive west from Dibete. The village of Kodibeleng lies 40 km to the south-west of Shoshong village and the village of Otse lies another 40 km further south, both on the road to Molepolole. Some of the villages that are geographically close to Shoshong village are hard to reach because there are no direct roads. Bonwapitse, Mmutlane, and Kalamare lie on the north side of a line of rocky hills, whilst Shoshong village is on the south side (See Map 1). Whilst the walk from Shoshong to Mmutlane is less than 5 km over the hills, the drive entails a 50 km loop around the hills and takes almost an hour. Kalamare is even further from Shoshong. Otse, Poloka and Dibete are not shown on the map because they are much further to the south.



Map 1: Shoshong and its environs

Source: Google Maps.

The constituency has a population of just over 30,000 (Republic of Botswana 2022). In 2019, a total of almost 13,000 votes were cast, of which fewer than 5,000 were in Shoshong village itself (Independent Electoral Commission, IEC, 2019). In 2024, there were about 16,500 registered voters. Just over 13,000 cast valid votes (IEC 2024). The sizes of the population and electorate were very close to the averages for parliamentary constituencies in Botswana.

Shoshong is historically important as the one-time site of the Bangwato chief (*kgosi*) Sekgoma and an important centre of missionary

activity. The Bangwato arrived, under Sekgoma, in the 1840s, subordinated the resident Baphaleng and Bakaa people, and displaced the Bakaa away from Pitsane Hill to what became Shoshong. Soon after, European traders and missionaries passed through the area. David Livingstone counted almost 1,000 huts from one viewpoint. In 1859, a German Lutheran missionary opened a school in Shoshong. The following year, he baptised Sekgoma's son Khama. The Bangwato moved from Pitsane to Shoshong. London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries arrived, the Lutherans left, and the LMS took over – and expanded – the school. Shoshong was on the 'missionary road' north from the missions of Kuruman, Kanye, and Molepolole. The village grew into an important trading centre, with a population put at about 30,000 people (including more than sixty Europeans) in the late 1860s, which made it the largest settlement in the 'interior' of Southern Africa, comparable in size even to Cape Town at that time. Shoshong was briefly very prosperous, fuelled as it was by revenues from the export of ivory (75 tons from 12,000 elephants in one year) and supporting seven trading stores. After various struggles within the chiefly family, Khama became *kgosi* in 1875 (Fosbrooke 1971; Knight 2014).

From the 1870s, however, Shoshong declined, in part because of the decimation of the elephant population, although Shoshong continued to be an important stop on the primary route to the north (Parsons 1973, 1977). Its population had fallen to only 10,000–15,000 by 1879. In 1889, Khama decided to move his people to ('old') Palapye, to the east.⁵ After repeated entreaties from Khama, the British declared a 'protectorate' over what they called Bechuanaland, in order to preserve a corridor north that was under threat from Afrikaner Boer expansion westwards and German expansion eastwards. The Bangwato no longer needed a fortress site, and Shoshong's water supply was insufficient during drought years. Shoshong was reoccupied by Baphaleng and Bakaa people. When a railway was constructed in 1896–1897, it bypassed both Shoshong and Old Palapye (as well as the mission towns of Kanye and Molepolole). Shoshong was soon overshadowed by the new town of Mahalapye on the railway line (Knight 2014). Its population was put at less than 1,000 people in 1911. The population grew steadily in the twentieth century with the return of some Baphaleng (from Old Palapye) and the migration of some Bakaa (from Molepolole) and some Batalaote (from Serowe). A survey in 1969–1971 put the population of Shoshong village at over 6,000 people with more than

⁵ Old Palapye proved a poor choice; in 1902, Khama relocated his people to Serowe.

4,000 people living in the smaller villages of Kalamare, Mmutlane, Mosolotshane, and Ikongwe. Most people were either Bakaa or Baphaleng (Syson 1972).

Development came slowly to Shoshong. In 1970, less than half of all children aged between six and fifteen were attending school. Boys were more likely to be herding cattle than attending school. The approximately 1,400 households had almost 70,000 cows and 45,000 sheep and goats (Fosbrooke 1971). There was very little formal employment in the area. A large proportion of working-age men were absent, working mostly in Mahalapye or Gaborone (with a minority in South Africa). Almost every household depended on farming. The *Ipelegeng* workfare programme providing some support for local women (Syson 1972). The road from Mahalapye was only tarred in 1993 and mains electricity only arrived in 2000. A branch of Choppies supermarket chain opened in 2013. By the 2020s, however, Shoshong was connected by good tarred roads to Molepolole (south) and Serowe (north) as well as (most importantly) Mahalapye to the east. The clinic in Shoshong village is now open 24/7. Shoshong's proximity to Mahalapye means that there are few formal shops other than a Choppies supermarket in Shoshong village. Most of the local employment is in the public sector. An iron mine at Ikongwe (south of Shoshong village) closed in mid-2023, only two years after opening.

The division between Bakaa and Baphaleng was for many decades politically salient. Knight (2014) reports that Shoshong village was divided between Bakaa wards and Baphaleng wards, with each group having their own *kgosi* or *kgosana*, who alternated in presiding over the single customary court. In the 2024 elections, Baphaleng predominated in the Shoshong North and Shoshong South-West wards, with Bakaa predominating in the Shoshong South-East ward. This ethnic cleavage appears to have become less salient over time, however, not least because growing numbers of people had parents from each ethnic group. One prominent local political activist nonetheless describes voters in the constituency as 'tribalistic' in that voters prefer to vote for one of 'their own'. Voters in Kalamare prefer to vote for a Mokaa candidate. Many of the voters in the villages to the west and south-west of the constituency – i.e. Mosolotshane, Moralane, Ikongwe, Kodibeleng, and Otse – are 'Bakgalagadi'. Mmutlane was historically home to Batalaote. Voters in Shoshong village reportedly prefer to vote for a candidate from Shoshong village, whether a Mokaa or a Mophaleng, and are distrustful of candidates from the outer villages. Until 2019, every MP representing the constituency was a Mokaa (and the MP from 2019 to 2024 had a Mokaa grandmother).

Past Political Representation

Shoshong, on the southern edge of Central District, was for decades a BDP stronghold. Its first MP (for five terms, 1965–1989) was Goareng Mosinyi. Mosinyi (1915–2012) was a member of both the Bakaa and Bangwato royal families, educated at Tiger Kloof (the LMS school for Batswana, near Vryburg in what became South Africa in 1910), was close to his cousin Seretse Khama (who himself was schooled at Tiger Kloof and was the uncrowned *kgosi* of the Bangwato), and was one of the founders of the BDP (that supported Khama, who became the first president of Botswana). Mosinyi was succeeded as the Shoshong MP by his wife Esther for one term (1989–1994). In these elections, the BDP regularly won almost every vote. In 1974, for example, Mosinyi won 95 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections (see Figure 1), the BDP candidate in the Kalamare district council ward (who was Mosinyi’s nephew) was elected unopposed, and the BDP candidate in the Shoshong ward won 92 per cent of the vote (Republic of Botswana 1974). After six terms under either Goareng or Esther Mosinyi, Shoshong was represented for one term by Modibedi Robe and two terms by Duke Lefhoko.

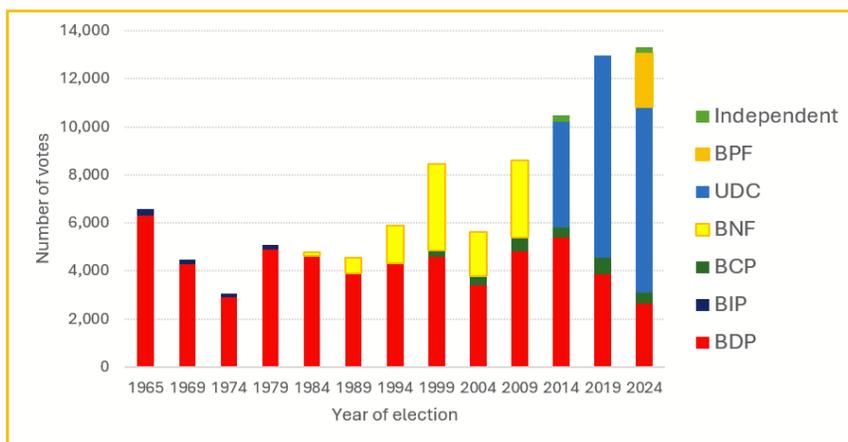


Figure 1: Votes in Shoshong constituency, 1965–2024

Source: Drawn using data from the IEC.

In 2009, Philip Makgalemele defeated the incumbent Lefhoko in the BDP primaries and was then elected as the constituency’s fifth MP. Makgalemele was a former national football player, a club coach, and a president of the national football association. He also had a long history in the cooperative movement. His family were deeply embedded within the

BDP. His father had chaired the BDP constituency branch and had twice been elected as the Central District councillor for Shoshong. After his father's death, Makgalemele was brought up by his brother-in-law, the BDP's long-standing secretary-general and MP for Molepolole, Daniel Kwelagobe.⁶ Makgalemele briefly defected to the new Botswana Movement for Democracy, which was established by members of Kwelagobe's faction in 2010, but quickly returned to the BDP fold. In the 2014 elections, he retained the seat for the BDP, but with only half of the vote, by winning just over five thousand out of the just over ten thousand votes.

The UDC's candidate in the 2009 and 2014 elections was Aubrey Lesaso. Born in 1964, in Mahalapye, Lesaso's grandmother was a Mookaa and his grandfather a Scottish immigrant who was expanding his family's trading stores to Shoshong. Lesaso studied civil engineering at the University of Botswana, then in Britain and the USA. Returning to Botswana, he built a successful engineering firm which secured a series of the government contracts that often constitute the route to success in business in Botswana. In 2003, he unsuccessfully contested the BDP's first ever primary elections for a council seat in Gaborone. He then moved to the Botswana National Front (BNF), became the chair of the BNF in Shoshong, contested the 2009 parliamentary elections, and won more than one-third of the vote (as had the BNF candidates in the previous two elections, see Figure 1). Lesaso proceeded to rebuild the BNF in Shoshong. When the UDC was formed, with the BNF as its premier participant, he became its first national treasurer. In the 2014 elections in Shoshong, he won more than 4,000 votes for the UDC, taking 41 per cent of the total valid votes and reducing the majority for Makgalemele to less than 1,000 votes.

Five years later, in 2019, Makgalemele (for the BDP) and Lesaso (for the UDC) contested for the third time. Lesaso comfortably defeated Makgalemele, winning 65 per cent of the valid votes against 30 per cent for Makgalemele (and 5% for the candidate of the Alliance for Progressives, AP, which was then not part of the UDC). Makgalemele's share of the vote dropped by more than 20 percentage points. Makgalemele attributes his defeat to the endorsement of his UDC rival by Ian Khama, the former president who had broken with his successor and the BDP, and had sponsored a new breakaway party, the BPF, before the 2019 elections.

⁶ Kwelagobe was MP for Molepolole from 1969 until 2014 and secretary-general of the BDP from 1980 until 2007 (Makgala 2006; Ntuanane 2018). Philip Makgalemele was the younger brother of Kwelagobe's wife Queen.

Candidates endorsed by Khama performed strongly in many of the constituencies in then Central District (Seekings 2025). BNF/UDC activists in Shoshong, however, point to their careful building of the BNF in the constituency. By 2019, the UDC constituency secretary recalls, they had more than 4,000 members. Lesaso's successful business also generated resources that he could spend on his campaign (despite the BDP government reportedly delaying on several substantial payments on government contracts until after the election). UDC leaders (and Makgalemele's critics within the BDP) also attribute Makgalemele's defeat to his alleged absence from and neglect of the constituency (which is a common criticism of ministers or assistant ministers). Lesaso, although in many respects an outsider to the constituency, promised to be much more attentive to his constituents. A final factor in Makgalemele's defeat was factional divisions within the BDP. Makgalemele reportedly declined to support some of the BDP's council candidates, and instead backed a BPF candidate in one ward and an independent candidate in another. Some of the BDP ward candidates – and their factional allies – reportedly declined to support Makgalemele in the parliamentary elections. BDP and UDC activists concur that the BDP's structures in the constituency were weakened. Some BDP members may have voted for Lesaso.

The swing in the Shoshong parliamentary elections was reflected, although less emphatically, in the District Council elections. Of the (then) seven District Council wards, BDP candidates won only two and the UDC won four. The seventh was initially tied between the UDC candidate and an independent candidate. The independent candidate won the rerun (and subsequently joined the UDC). Overall, in the seven Shoshong wards, UDC candidates won 46 per cent of the vote to the BDP candidates' aggregate 33 per cent share. The newly formed BPF won 7 per cent of the aggregate vote despite running candidates in only five wards.⁷ AP candidates won 6 per cent of the aggregate vote, almost entirely due to a strong candidate from Moralane who was narrowly defeated in the composite Mosolotshane-Moralane ward. The other 9 per cent of the vote went to three independent candidates.⁸ The fact that Lesaso won almost 20 percentage points more support than the UDC's district council candidates

⁷ The BPF candidates included one incumbent councillor (in Kalamare) who had defected from the BDP, as well as an unsuccessful candidate in the previous elections (in Otse-Kodibileng). The incumbent BDP councillor for Shoshong North lost the BDP primary in 2018, and defected to the BPF (becoming its constituency chair), but did not contest the 2019 elections.

⁸ Calculated from IEC (2024).

suggests that he won with strong support from voters who voted in the ward for BPF, independent, and even BDP ward candidates.

The Defection of the MP from UDC to BDP in 2021

At the beginning of 2021, little over one year after his election, Lesaso defected from the BNF/UDC to the BDP. In his account, he had become increasingly frustrated with the divisions within the UDC nationally – that, inter alia, led to the departure of the BCP – and the challenges of delivering to or developing his constituency if he remained an MP from the fractious and ineffective opposition. These are precisely the kinds of arguments that defectors make elsewhere (including in Zambia, see Sishuwa 2024). Sceptics – including some of Lesaso’s former colleagues in the BNF/UDC – unsurprisingly denounced him for having sold out, literally, to the ruling party.

There is no doubt that an MP for the ruling party is in a much stronger position to secure development for his or her constituency. As an opposition MP, the only resources available to Lesaso were (he relates) the P10 million p.a. through the Constituency Development Fund. Whilst Lesaso proudly lists his achievements in using these resources, his defection to the ruling party opened up additional resources for the constituency, including an estimated P50 million for brick-paved roads within Shoshong village. Five health clinics were being built or expanded in villages. By the time of the 2024 elections, one clinic was complete (in Kodibeleng) and four were under construction. Lesaso also pointed to his procurement of three ambulances (and three more had been requested from the government) as well as chairs, tables, photocopiers, etc. for schools, and laptops for school principals. Vehicles had been provided for the senior and junior secondary school, the chief, and the social welfare officer. Construction of a new 53-bed hospital in Shoshong and of a new five-million-litre water tank was supposed to have begun in 2024, and a new police post was to be built in Mosolotshane. Three villages – including Mosolotshane – were electrified.

It is also true that, as a recruit to the BDP, Lesaso was likely to benefit personally. Lesaso was rewarded with appointment as an assistant minister, with status, perks, and an increased salary. His fellow defector, the MP for Tonota, was rewarded with appointment as deputy speaker of Parliament. It is alleged that Lesaso also benefited in terms of the award of government engineering contracts to his firm.

The BDP – and perhaps other parties also – have acquired some experience in recruiting defectors from other parties. BDP regional party structures have ‘recruitment committees’ tasked with identifying and

recruiting supporters or members of opposition parties. Defectors are paraded at events to demonstrate the BDP's vitality. During election campaigns, these recruitment committees also try to persuade local leaders who have lost opposition primaries, and even elected councillors, to endorse BDP candidates, either overtly or covertly. Recruiting opposition MPs is a more serious matter altogether. Such recruitments are likely to be directed from the party leader's office, because it is the party leader who controls the ministerial or diplomatic appointments that may be the reward for defection. This may happen without the involvement or even knowledge of local party leaders.

In Lesaso's case, rumours first circulated in mid-2020 that he was being courted by the BPF; the press reported that his defection was imminent (*WeekendPost-Insightful* 2020). He apparently denied these rumours. Then, at the end of 2020, rumours circulated about his defection to the BDP. Some BDP leaders reportedly bragged to UDC leaders that Lesaso had defected. At the beginning of January 2021, on his return from vacation, Lesaso reportedly called a meeting of the UDC leadership. The meeting, in Mahalapye, was reportedly attended by Lesaso himself, all five UDC councillors, the BNF constituency chairperson and secretary, and one ex-councillor, i.e. a total of 9 people.⁹ Before meeting with Lesaso, the UDC leaders reportedly caucused in an effort to intimidate anyone who was thinking of following Lesaso to the BDP. The others say that, when Lesaso announced his defection, they were not surprised, but they did feel betrayed. The next day, Lesaso formally submitted in writing his resignation from the UDC. The UDC councillors and BNF officials met with a larger number of party activists in Shoshong the next day and then held a public meeting to inform their members of the situation (and, presumably, to reassure them about the continued health of the UDC).

Whilst Lesaso himself reportedly made no attempt to persuade any of the senior UDC leaders to follow him into the BDP constituency (and he himself denies that he expected any of them to do so), the BDP itself did court some of the local UDC leaders. One of the UDC councillors reports that he was approached by a BDP MP (and was also phoned by several other BDP MPs, including the BDP national chairperson who was also the vice president of Botswana). He reportedly told the BDP that, if the BDP had actually delivered in the constituency, he might have joined the party, but he was not going to do so on the basis of vague promises. Another UDC councillor is said to have been offered a substantial financial inducement. At least three of the five UDC councillors were approached.

⁹ The meeting was reportedly on 4 January 2021, at the Distinction Hotel.

None defected (although one reportedly continued to flirt with the BDP). After his defection, Lesaso allegedly cut his ties with the UDC councillors. According to one anonymous councillor:

Since he defected to BDP the MP no longer works with us, nor engage us as he previously did. So since he has seemingly cut working relations with opposition councillors, we also have declared him non-existent because he no longer works with us as he used to. We cannot keep on following someone who is shunning us. We have a mandate to serve the people and protect UDC. So we will not force the MP to work with us while he has taken a deliberate decision to cut ties with us (*Botswana Gazette* 2021).

Whilst it may have been easy to change parties, it appeared to be harder to remove online traces of Lesaso's previous affiliation. Facebook pages and other websites remained replete with pictures of Lesaso in his blue UDC colours, including pictures of him with UDC leader Duma Boko. Even during the 2024 election campaign, Lesaso had several defunct Facebook pages showing him in his UDC colours as well as one (apparently photoshopped) with him dressed in BDP red. His personal WhatsApp profile picture still showed him wearing blue!

Switching parties was also no guarantee of a warm welcome in the new party, given the enduring factionalism within the BDP. President Masisi and other BDP leaders acknowledged this implicitly when they visited Shoshong in January 2023 for a rally to welcome Lesaso into the party. Masisi began by praising his predecessors as presidents of Botswana, presumably to establish his legitimacy as the heir to the party that was founded by Seretse Khama and then led by a series of anointed successors. Masisi then turned to Shoshong, noting that Lesaso had won the 2019 elections by a wide margin:

It means we have a lot of work to do. Those Democrats [i.e. BDP supporters] who sold votes [to Lesaso in the previous elections], we should talk to them politely, explain to them ... Democrats, in politics you don't buy voters, you give them reasons to vote for you.¹⁰

Masisi also urged the local BDP to 'recruit all our members who had gone to opposition parties. They need to come back home and we

¹⁰ Speech by Masisi in Shoshong, January 2023, translated by Leaname Busang.

should openly welcome them back to the party. Let us forgive each other and reconcile'. He also urged party members to work well with Lesaso and to end their internal fights. BDP Central Committee member Neo Kealotswe (who oversaw the Shoma-Mahalapye or 'SHOMA' region) added that the BDP could

retain this constituency as long as some members do not betray us. The problem that I observed is that we have some members who support opposition parties once they lose party primary elections. For us to win it back, we need loyal members who are able to defend the party whether it is hard or not. If members could keep on working hard and stop de-campaigning others then we will be able to be voted with high numbers (Basimanebotlhe 2023).

These warnings were to be prophetic as the BDP headed towards the 2024 elections. Masisi and Kealotswe presumably knew all too well that the BDP in Shoshong was deeply factionalised and Lesaso faced considerable opposition from within his new party.

Candidate Selection and Political Realignment

The defection opened up the question of who would stand for what party in the elections scheduled for late 2024. In the run-up to the elections, most of the parties made it clear that they would select candidates through primary elections. Primaries were introduced into Botswana by the ruling BDP before the 2004 elections as part of a set of reforms intended to modernise the party. Warren (2022) shows that, following the introduction of primaries, the turnover of incumbent MPs increased (although ministers were – at that time – less vulnerable to deselection than other MPs). There does not appear to be any similar analysis of the effects of either other parties' parliamentary primaries or any of the parties' primaries for district council elections.

By the time the parties began to select their candidates for the 2024 elections, a series of reforms had altered the political geography of much of the country. Firstly, the former Central District was broken up, with Shoshong now falling under the new Mahalapye District Council. Secondly, constituency boundaries were reviewed by a Delimitation Commission, chaired by a judge, Mokwadi Gabanagae. Shoshong was hardly affected by this. Some sparsely-populated areas far from Shoshong were incorporated into neighbouring constituencies. But the number of wards within the constituency was increased, with the addition of two new wards, which took the total from seven to nine. Boundaries were redrawn.

The BNF/UDC Primaries

The UDC delayed its primaries until July 2024, in part because the partners in the UDC had to agree on the allocation of seats between them. The BPF left the UDC in April following disagreements over the allocations. The Shoshong parliamentary candidacy was allocated to the BNF, although the AP – one of the junior partners in the UDC – claimed that it had been awarded some of the District Council ward candidacies.

The BNF appears to have held primary elections in Shoshong for the first time in 2019. Because Lesaso had been unopposed then, there was no primary for the parliamentary candidacy. But there had been primaries in some of the wards. When Lesaso defected, local BNF leaders began to position themselves to take his place in the next elections. The frontrunner was the BNF/UDC councillor for Shoshong North, Moneedi Bagaisamang. Bagaisamang had joined the BNF in 2002. He had been a party officer at ward level, then at the constituency level, and became the constituency secretary in 2020. He had managed Lesaso's election campaign in 2009 and again played a role in it in 2014. He had been elected to the District Council in 2019. Bagaisamang was widely acknowledged to have moved strategically, first to consolidate his support in Shoshong North and Shoshong South-West and then to build support in some of the outlying villages (including Kodibeleng, Otse, and Mosolotshane).

Bagaisamang's path to the BNF nomination faced two challenges. Firstly, another incumbent councillor began to mobilise support. Then interest was shown by a lawyer based in Gaborone (Mothoothata Lesole), prompting the other councillor to withdraw. When the BNF ran its primary elections in early May 2024, Bagaisamang won more than 1,000 votes compared to less than 800 for Lesole (with a third candidate winning about 100 votes). Turnout was not high, given that the BNF claimed to have more than six thousand members who had registered to vote. The loser complained about irregularities and the party scheduled a rerun, but later postponed and then cancelled the rerun.

The BNF also held primary elections in four of the now nine wards, with candidates in the other five wards standing unopposed. Incumbent councillors would stand again in three wards. Two other ward candidates had contested the previous (2019) elections unsuccessfully. The other four UDC candidates were political novices. One ward (Mosolotshane) was controversial because the AP believed that this ward had been allocated to them. But the AP's strength had been in the village of Moralane, which had now been moved into a different constituency. Indeed, the former councillor (Mogalakwe Mogalakwe) contested the new Kodibeleng-Moralane ward for the UDC. When an AP activist proposed to contest the

elections, he was opposed by a younger BNF member, who made it clear that she would contest the elections as an independent if necessary. At the last minute, the UDC anointed her as the UDC candidate (although the disgruntled AP activist went on to undermine her in the actual elections). She was the only female UDC council candidate in nine wards.

The UDC thus approached the general election with a team with considerable experience. Moreover, recognising their common interest in winning the elections decisively, the factions in the UDC appeared to have come together.

The BDP Primaries

The BDP delayed its primaries (*bulela ditswe*) until 20 July 2024, perhaps because of general disarray within the party's head office, perhaps because Masisi was trying to control the process. Lesaso, like almost every incumbent BDP MP, was challenged in the primary elections for the parliamentary candidacy. His primary challenger was Tshepo Makgalemele, the nephew of former MP Philip Makgalemele (who himself contested but lost a BDP primary in one of the Gaborone constituencies) and chairperson of the BDP's Shoshong branch committee. It is unclear whether Lesaso was ever welcomed by the existing BDP leadership in the constituency, but, at some point following his defection to the BDP, relations between him and Makgalemele soured. The predominant faction within the constituency aligned behind Makgalemele (who had to resign as constituency chair in order to contest the primary). From one perspective, Lesaso alienated the faction by being uncooperative; in an alternative perspective, the faction was self-serving and disloyal. Neither Lesaso nor (more surprisingly) Makgalemele had experienced campaign managers.

The BDP also ran primary elections in all nine wards. A total of 23 candidates contested the primaries. They included the BDP's two incumbent councillors (in Kalamare and Mosolotshane), a former nominated councillor, and an unsuccessful candidate in the 2019 elections. As elsewhere, the contenders for the parliamentary candidacy sought to get their supporters into ward candidacies. Of the 23 candidates, ten were seen as aligned with Lesaso, ten with Makgalemele, and three aligned with neither.

In the parliamentary primary, Lesaso won 1,338 votes against 1,067 for Tshepo Makgalemele and 533 for a third candidate. Compared to the BDP vote of less than 4,000 votes in the 2019 elections, the turnout in the 2024 primary looked solid – and was better than in the BNF/UDC's primary. But compared to Lesaso's more than 8,000 votes in 2019, his primary vote and margin of victory were underwhelming. He himself says

that most of his votes came from the rural areas: ‘I expected many more but there was confusion; voting opened late’. In the ward primaries, both incumbent BDP councillors were defeated. Six of the successful candidates were seen as aligned with Lesaso, whilst two had been aligned with Makgalemele and one with neither. In aggregate, the Lesaso-aligned candidates and the Makgalemele-aligned candidates won almost the same number of votes.

The BDP entered the general election campaign with some clear weaknesses. The party’s structures were divided, with a powerful faction feeling less than enthusiastic about the party’s parliamentary candidate and some of its ward candidates. Lesaso’s primary campaign manager – who was also the BDP branch deputy secretary – left the party to join the BPF, thus compelling Lesaso to find a new campaign manager for the general election. Most of the BDP’s council candidates appeared inexperienced with weak local networks. One ward candidate (in Mosolotshane) had been a nominated (i.e. unelected) councillor and had managed Philip Makgalamele’s successful 2014 campaign. Only one candidate had prior experience of contesting a ward election. Two of the nine BDP candidates were women.

The BPF Primaries

The BPF had established a minor presence in Shoshong in 2019, when it contested five wards but not the parliamentary elections. By 2023 it had established a solid party structure in the area. In September 2023, the BPF resolved to participate in the UDC, which would mean compromising over which party would be allocated which seats. When the UDC announced the allocation of constituencies to its constituent parties in January 2024, Shoshong was one of the seats allocated to the BNF. Some local BPF activists in Shoshong were unhappy over this – as were BPF activists in a number of other constituencies. In April 2024, the BPF chose to contest the elections outside of the UDC. It therefore prepared to select candidates in Shoshong.

The BPF primaries were held in July 2024. The parliamentary primary was won comfortably by Baisetswe Gontlafetse, who had been born and attended primary school in Kalamare before leaving to establish an engineering business based in the mining towns of Jwaneng and Lethlakane. Primaries were also held in six out of the nine new District Council wards. Almost 2,000 votes were cast in the primaries, perhaps because voters did not need to be registered members of the BPF: ‘Anyone could vote’, I was told, ‘there were no restrictions other than you should be on the voters roll’.

Costs and Consequences of the Primary Elections

Contesting a primary election requires candidates to dig deep into their own pockets. Primary election campaigns do not involve posters, T-shirts, or rallies, but they do require a campaign team, headed by a campaign manager, with people on the ground in each village. Campaign workers require an honorarium (typically about P300 per week) as well as money for food and transport. UDC activists put the cost of a parliamentary primary campaign in Shoshong at about P100,000. The cost of a primary campaign for the BPF parliamentary candidacy cost much less than this. But BDP activists put the cost of a parliamentary primary campaign at considerably more than this, at about P300,000.

Ward primary campaigns clearly cost a fraction of this, in part because the parliamentary candidates shoulder much of the cost of ground operations. Expenditure on a ward primary campaign is unlikely to be much higher than P10,000.

Expenditure matters but it is far from being a guarantee of strength. Lesaso spent much more on his primary election campaign and won more votes (in the BDP primary) than Bagaisamang (in the UDC primary). But Bagaisamang emerged from the primaries in a much stronger position than Lesaso. UDC structures on the ground were broadly united behind their parliamentary and ward candidates. The BDP, by contrast, was beset by disunity. The losers in the BDP's primaries – and their factional allies – were at best lukewarm about the party's candidates, and in some cases prepared to 'decampaign' them (as we shall see). Whilst factionalism was a widespread problem within the BDP in 2024, the fact that the party's parliamentary candidate in Shoshong had defected from the UDC exacerbated the problem in this area. The BPF emerged from its primaries in a mixed position: Its overall turnout was encouraging, but the loser in its parliamentary primary proceeded to stand as an independent candidate (competing against the BPF's own ward candidate) in his ward (Shoshong South-West).

The General Election Campaigns

The general election campaigns in Shoshong, as elsewhere in Botswana, involved three major elements. Firstly, candidates had to recruit a campaign manager and team, and access vehicles in order to go house-to-house or to contact voters by phone, to solicit their support and – on the day of the election – to assist them in voting or to cajole them into voting. Secondly, candidates may be given or choose to pay for posters, billboards, T-shirts, or other merchandise that increases their visibility. Some

candidates also have their own Facebook pages and many use WhatsApp. Thirdly, candidates organise rallies or other public events to legitimate and strengthen their candidacies and to energise their supporters. All of this requires resources, including both financial resources and connections or networks. In 2024, as in previous elections, candidates for the ruling BDP had privileged access to resources through the party. The other parties were able to contribute much less. All candidates – including BDP candidates – had to dive into their own pockets to finance some or most of their campaigns.

In Shoshong, the BDP and UDC parliamentary election campaigns may have cost as much as P400,000, although the BPF spent less on its campaign. Ward election campaigns might cost as much as P40,000. Candidates with their own resources (such as a car, cattle, or cash) are hugely advantaged. One UDC council candidate received a donation of 300 T-shirts from a regional party leader but otherwise had to rely on his own efforts. Another received 300 T-shirts from the party. The BDP, by contrast, provided a vehicle for each constituency, posters and billboards, and T-shirts and other merchandise (so much so that some candidates were unable to distribute it all before the elections). One BDP ward candidate received 400 T-shirts, and complained that other BDP candidates had received more from the MP and party. Shoshong had a few posters and a massive billboard for Lesaso but almost none for the UDC. The BPF parliamentary candidate received only 100 T-shirts and the successful BPF council candidate received only 50 T-shirts from their party, which prompted them to complain that – at least in comparison to the other parties – they received ‘no support’ from their party and therefore ‘were struggling’.

Most of the expense was the campaign team. In addition to honoraria, campaign teams needed transport, fuel, and food. Expenses could be cut if a candidate relied on ‘committed people’ going door-to-door, who did not need to be paid and needed little transport. The BPF claimed that ‘we were the party who did the most, we knocked on every door, even at the cattle posts’ (which did require transport). The BPF had one advantage in that it appealed primarily to older, more traditional voters who said that they would ‘follow’ their *kgosikgolo* (Ian Khama) ‘wherever he goes’.

BDP candidates faced particular challenges, given Lesaso’s history and his reliance on a campaign team that had little local experience. After the BDP’s defeat in the elections, one BDP candidate told me:

Our MP picked the wrong people to be on his side. They only said 'yes'. They didn't give him a true picture of what is happening on the ground. At one certain point, they were here. I told the MP and the campaign manager that the team they had brought would not win the constituency. They are just little boys and girls'.

Whilst their parties' branding was an asset to UDC and BPF candidates (for different reasons and different voters), the BDP brand had modest benefits for its candidates. Door-to-door canvassing might be more impactful if the canvassers displayed their partisan identities boldly – and enabled voters to do this also. 'Merchandise plays a huge part in campaigning', I was told repeatedly. The BDP's rivals were quick to point out that the 'BDP has everything, even blankets ... Even in the cattle posts, they are all wearing red' (red being the BDP colour). But voters were not always bought. Candidates say that voters will be less than honest in soliciting material benefits from the elections. According to one BPF ward candidate:

Politics is a dirty business ... When you approach elections, you must be tactful. The people of Botswana, they might not tell you the truth, they will say they will vote for you. If you are not mature enough to scrutinise, then you will not know if that 'yes' is really a 'yes'.

People take one candidate's merchandise and then vote for a different candidate. Some candidates report that they told their supporters to 'take their [opponents'] T-shirts but vote for me, you do not have to be enticed by money'. Even if a voter's transport was paid for by one candidate, the voter might easily vote for a rival candidate. Candidates face apparently endless demands: 'Some people will beg' for material assistance, 'they will keep on begging'.

Rallies in the wards to launch a candidate comprised another significant expense. Tents (i.e. marquees) could be hired locally. Even hiring a small tent might cost about P1,000. Hiring a larger tent might cost P3,000 and hiring a tent with a stage as much as P4,000 or P5,000. Candidates needed vehicles to transport participants from other villages. A DJ and sound system were required. The biggest cost was food afterwards: At the launch of one UDC ward candidate, the candidate had to provide a cow and two goats plus other food. Another provided two cows at his launch. The cost of food at a launch easily reached between P10,000 and P15,000. If a candidate lacked this kind of cash, he or she could not hold a

launch event. If a ward comprised more than one village, then a candidate would need to hold multiple events or provide loads of transport.

Both the UDC and BDP launched their candidates through events in most of the nine wards. The UDC launched its candidates in Shoshong South-East, Shoshong North, Shoshong South-West, Kalamare, Otse-Mokgenene, and Mosolotshane. The BDP launched its candidates in Mosolotshane, Otse, Dibete, Shoshong South-West, and Shoshong North. The BPF did not hold any similar events.

These launches appear to have followed a standard script. Activists (from the ward and from neighbouring wards) might spend the morning in the area, going door-to-door, in what is sometimes called a 'mass campaign'. A motorcade of about half-a-dozen cars would drive around the ward prior to the rally, advertising the rally through loudspeakers and displaying the party's virility. The actual rally would start in the afternoon, as soon as it had begun to cool down (since the election campaign was in the hot month of October), in an open space where a marquee had been put up for the platform party. There might be additional tents for the audience. If not, then people would cluster in the shade of any trees. Some people would sensibly bring comfortable folding chairs, cold drinks, or water. Almost everyone would be wearing clothes in the party's colours (blue for the UDC, red for the BDP, yellow for the BPF), including T-shirts (many with the face of the party leader), caps or hats, some overalls, skirts and dresses, and even shoes and socks. The audiences comprised primarily party activists, including activists from neighbouring constituencies. A public address system was rigged up, playing loud music as people arrived. When the ward candidate arrived, he (or she) was escorted to the marquee by an entourage of singing and dancing supporters. Whilst the event was to launch the ward candidate, it was also an opportunity to present the party's slate in the entire constituency: The party's candidates in other wards would speak first, for about ten minutes each, then the party's parliamentary candidate would speak, then a visiting dignitary (perhaps a local MP or prominent parliamentary candidate or a senior member of the party's regional structure) would speak. Finally, the ward candidate would speak. After three or so hours, the event would close with a prayer. Then everyone would move off to eat the food that was paid for by the candidate.

The purpose of these launches was not primarily to appeal to voters, or at least not to do so directly. The audiences comprised primarily party activists or loyalists. But (edited) videos of the events would be circulated more widely, through social media. The rallies were theatrical, a display of action, with the goals of energising activists and projecting strength. The rallies also served to represent individual candidates as members of

(colour-coded) partisan teams, thereby imposing some discipline on them in case they were considering representing themselves as independent individuals. Some ward candidates chose not to have a launch; according to one, he made this choice precisely because he did not want to identify himself too closely with his party or his party's parliamentary candidate. 'A launch can be a disadvantage', he explained, because it discourages supporters of the ward candidate who are inclined to vote for a different party in the parliamentary elections. 'I didn't want anybody to spoil my ward'. He had supporters who 'were not supporting our candidate for MP'. He feared that 'people' (including speakers) 'from outside might say something and spoil something for me'. For the same reason, this candidate did not want his party (as opposed to his own team) to campaign too openly in his ward.

The UDC and BDP concluded their campaigns with mass rallies shortly before the elections, ostensibly to launch their parliamentary candidates. The scheduled line-up of speakers reflected the perceived importance of the constituency. The BDP's final rally – four days before the elections – was advertised as featuring the president, Masisi. Not only did Masisi not attend, but no other senior BDP leaders took his place. It was rumoured that they stayed away because they were tired of hearing about tensions and divisions within the BDP in Shoshong. The rally was also advertised as starting at 10am. But the day proved to be another very hot day and organisers decided to delay and to compress proceedings. By 2pm the three large public tents were already packed. The candidates, visiting dignitaries, and senior activists waited in a nearby hall, chatting and then lunching. Only at 5pm, as the sun began to set and the temperature moderated slightly, did the activists proceed to the VIP tent and the rally began. By then perhaps six or seven hundred people were in attendance, most wearing red T-shirts or other paraphernalia. Car- and busloads of supporters had come from the wards outside of Shoshong village itself.

After the singing of the national and BDP anthems, a prayer and the introduction of visiting dignitaries, the keynote speaker stepped forward. Pono Moatlhodi, the outgoing (four-term) MP for Tonota, deputy speaker in the previous parliament, and fellow defector from the UDC to the BDP, energised the crowd with his customary antics of rolling on the ground, concluding with a powerful exhortation to vote for the BDP candidates. Moatlhodi underscored Lesaso's narrative that he was motivated by the need to deliver to his constituents and had done so as an MP. Moatlhodi was followed, more briefly, by the nominated MP (and formerly elected MP for Tswapong South), Dorcas Makgatho, who defended – very defensively – the government's fiscal conservatism in the face of calls from

opposition parties for ‘unaffordable’ increases in minimum wages and public expenditure. Her address echoed recent speeches by President Masisi, warning that the opposition’s promises would ‘collapse the economy’ (Tlhankane 2024). Makgatho was followed by the candidate for the neighbouring parliamentary constituency of Mahalapye West. Finally, Lesaso formally accepted nomination. The BDP council ward candidates were introduced but did not speak. After Lesaso spoke, it was almost dark and the formal proceedings gave way to entertainment, with dancers and music. The size of the crowd and the energy were impressive.

The UDC countered with its rally two days later. Initially, UDC leader Duma Boko and deputy leader Gaolathe Ndaba had been scheduled to speak. This was then revised, with Boko alone scheduled to speak at 7pm. Boko was travelling from Maun, via a rally in Letlhakane. By late afternoon, as people gathered, most in the shade of the tents, it was clear that Boko would be delayed (not unusually). In the absence of any other notable visitors, the local organisers moved into a holding operation that was quite impressive under the circumstances. Starting as it grew dark, before 7pm, each of the council ward candidates spoke, as well as one or two councillors or candidates from neighbouring constituencies. Speeches were punctuated by singing and dancing. There were countless calls of ‘viva UDC viva’ and ‘viva Umbrella viva’. Around 8pm, one of the UDC’s double-decker campaign buses arrived. Just as the crowd – apparently smaller than the BDP’s – was clearly becoming restless, after 9pm, Boko finally arrived, which prompted great excitement. Boko spoke and endorsed the candidates. After he left, the music continued for a while.

The BPF did not hold any comparable mass rally. It did host its patron (and *kgosikgolo* of the Bangwato) Ian Khama for a meet-and-greet event as part of his parade around constituencies in the former Central District (see Seekings 2025). At most such events, Khama concentrated on denouncing Masisi and said little about local candidates. In Shoshong, Khama attacked Lesaso. It would not be surprising if Khama felt that Lesaso had betrayed him by defecting to the BDP after Khama had encouraged his supporters to vote for Lesaso in 2019. Khama said that Lesaso had been bought, and urged voters to ‘show him the door, say to him “sir, go and mend yourself because you don’t have our vote”’.¹¹ Khama only spoke at one event in Shoshong and at this one event he did not commend the BPF’s parliamentary candidate to the audience. It was left to BPF president Reatile to launch the party’s candidate. Local BPF

¹¹ Khama, speech in Shoshong, 1 October 2024, posted on Khama’s Facebook page, translated by Leaname Busang.

activists assessed that Khama's objective of defeating the BDP meant that he envisaged that the UDC would win in Shoshong and the role of the BPF was to take votes away from the BDP.

As the elections approached, the UDC was quietly confident of retaining all of its wards, winning some from the BDP, and winning back the parliamentary seat. On the eve of the elections, the UDC's double-decker election bus accompanied supporters through the constituency, including even Kalamare, to rally supporters. The BDP rather optimistically assessed that it had a chance of winning in about half of the nine wards – if they could get their supporters to voting stations. It was already evident that the UDC held a strong advantage in most of Shoshong village whilst the BPF was ahead in Mosolotshane. The BDP organised drive-throughs in at least some of the wards. On election day itself, the parties and candidates tried to contact their presumed supporters, either at home or by phone, to encourage them to vote and to offer transport if necessary.

The parties promising change were clearly in a dominant position. In Shoshong, as nationally, the parties offered voters a clear choice. The BDP parliamentary candidate pointed to what he had already delivered to his constituency and promised to continue to deliver (albeit within the fiscal constraints resulting from the slow-down in economic growth). The UDC promised change: Its candidates in Shoshong emphasised the party's national promises of higher minimum wages and social grants, job creation, and so on. The UDC parliamentary candidate pointed to the mineral resources in the constituency that could be developed and create jobs. He also promised to build the promised hospital and additional classrooms, and to tar the appalling roads between Otse and Dibete, Kalamare and Moiyabana, and to Moralane. Tarring these roads would benefit local businesses as well as create jobs (paying a living wage not less than P4,000 per month).¹² The BDP denounced these promises as reckless, but voters appeared to be hungry for change. UDC's candidates tended to be younger than BDP candidates and this trend matched the UDC's promise of change, in contrast to the BDP's promise of stability. The BPF offered its own distinctive version of change: It would promote agriculture and tradition, through growing herds, ploughing more extensively, and drilling more boreholes.

On the eve of the elections and on election day itself, transport was a major expense. The campaign teams sought to mobilise their supporters to vote. One candidate recalls that his budget proved 'far too conservative:

¹² See Bagaisamang's Facebook page, for example posts on 9 October.

People were coming to me saying “I have thirty people in Mahalapye, I have people in Francistown, I need money, I need money for transport”. The successful ward candidate in Mosolotshane says that he did not spend much on transport:

Deliberately, I wanted people who are genuinely here. I only organised transport on election day for elderly and disabled people and those who live on small farms around Mosolotshane.

This was unusual. Most candidates forked out significant sums for transport. It was more important, however, to mobilise voters on the ground. BDP campaigners soon found that, when they called their presumed supporters, those supporters would not take their calls, or would explain that they were away. By the time the polls closed, most BDP candidates were very nervous whilst most UDC candidates were quietly optimistic.

The Election Results

The elections were held peacefully on Wednesday 30 October 2024. Across most of the constituency, the voting stations were quiet through the afternoon although, in some wards, voting continued after 7 pm to accommodate late arrivals. Ballot boxes were transported to a central counting station in each ward. Verification and counting was delayed in at least one ward because the UDC had put their own padlocks on ballot boxes and had mislaid the keys (prompting a search for bolt-cutters or hacksaws). In most wards, verification began around 9pm and counting began before or around midnight. It was soon evident that the UDC was ahead in most wards. The first wards were announced in the early hours of the morning. It was clear that, in Shoshong and nationally, the BDP was going down to an emphatic defeat. By late morning, when the counting of the parliamentary vote began in the Shoshong secondary school, it was evident that the UDC candidate would win.

The UDC candidates were understandably elated. Bagaisamang won the parliamentary seat comfortably, with 58 per cent of the vote against 20 per cent for Lesaso and a little less for the BPF’s Gontlafetse. Bagaisamang’s share of the vote and his total number of votes were both less than Lesaso’s in 2019 (when there had been no BPF candidate). Lesaso’s own share of the vote in 2024 was lower than Makgalemele’s in 2019 and was less than one-third of his own share in 2019.

UDC candidates won seven of the nine district council wards. In Mosolotshane, the BPF candidate was victorious. Kodibeleng was won by

the BDP candidate who had run almost as an independent. All nine wards were won by men. In total, the UDC candidates won 44 per cent of the vote, against 26 per cent for the BDP candidates, 20 per cent for the BPF candidates and 10 per cent for the minor parties and independent candidates. None of the eight independent candidates came close to winning. UDC candidates won four wards with an absolute majority, but the other three were won with 40 per cent of the vote or less. The aggregate vote shares of UDC and BDP candidates were lower than in 2019, when the BPF had not contested the ward elections. Two of the three UDC incumbents were re-elected with reduced vote shares (whilst the third, elected as an independent in 2019, won a massive 73 per cent of the vote in his ward). Bagaisamang's share of the vote was significantly higher than the UDC council candidates' share, whilst Lesaso's share was lower than the BDP council candidates' share, which suggests that some voters who had voted for the BDP (or for independents or minor parties) at the ward level had voted for Bagaisamang at the parliamentary level. None of the three women candidates who stood for any of the three major parties was elected. In Mosolotshane, the male BPF candidate defeated female candidates for both the BDP and UDC. These results point to the difficulties facing women in ward elections in Botswana.

The results were hugely disappointing for the BDP. The inability of BDP candidates to mobilise their supposed supporters was in clear contrast to the ability of candidates from the UDC and BPF. Lesaso won fewer votes in the general election than the total number of votes in the BDP's parliamentary primary election. Similarly, the BDP's ward candidates won fewer votes in the general election than the total number of votes in the party's ward primary elections. By contrast, Bagaisamang won four times as many votes in the general election as had been cast in total in the BNF's parliamentary primary election (see Table 1). BDP candidates suspected that they were the victims of 'decampaigning' by the losers of their primary elections or rival factions within the party. Whereas the UDC was largely (although not entirely) united around its candidates, BDP candidates suffered from either the indifference or active opposition from other members of their own party. The fact that more voters voted for BDP council candidates than for the parliamentary candidate (Lesaso) suggests that factionalism within the BDP weakened him especially. It is also likely that some former BDP supporters voted for the UDC or BPF at every level, as was clearly the case nationally.

Table 1: Votes in general and primary elections, Shoshong

Party	2019 general election		2024 primary elections				2024 general election	
	MP	Councillors	MP winner	MP total	Councillors: winners	Councillors: total	MP	Councillors
BDP	3,843	4,167	1,338	2,938	Missing data	3,545	2,633	3,338
	30%	33%	36%	43%			20%	26%
BNF/UDC	8,437	5,771	>1,000	<i>c1,900</i>			7,745	5,730
	65%	46%	27%	28%			58%	44%
BPF	-	876	1,327	1,933			2,260	2,565
	-	7%	36%	28%			17%	20%
Other	697	1,858	-	-			664	1,325
	5%	15%	-	-			5%	10%
Total	12,977	12,672	3,700+	<i>c6,800</i>	13,302	12,958		
	100%	101%	99%	99%	100%	100%		

Note: The figures in italics are approximate.

Source: IEC (2019, 2024); information collection from political parties.

The election results in Shoshong may have reflected local factors but were surely also shaped – or even overdetermined – by the national context. The Shoshong BDP candidates’ experience of their defeat was softened by the fact that the BDP was routed nationally. Across Botswana as a whole, the BDP’s aggregate vote share in parliamentary elections dropped from 53 per cent in 2019 to just over 30 per cent in 2024, i.e. a drop of almost half of its 2019 vote share. Compared to its countrywide collapse in support, the BDP’s performance in Shoshong appears to have been better than average: The BDP parliamentary candidate’s vote share fell only by one third (from 30% to 20%), whilst the BDP district council candidates’ aggregate vote share dropped by less than one quarter (from 33% to 26%).

Across the country, the UDC may have benefited from a surge in support in the final days of the election campaigns. As the UDC appeared to have become the frontrunner, votes for it ceased to be ‘wasted’ votes. This may have been particularly significant among younger voters. In a constituency like Shoshong, a late swing to the UDC and a high turnout among UDC voters appears to have combined with a low turnout among BDP voters (due to both decampaigning by primary losers and general indifference). In Shoshong, overall turnout was slightly lower than it had been in 2019.

Shoshong was one of ten parliamentary constituencies in Central District where the BDP had won between 25 per cent and 40 per cent of the vote in 2019. On average, across these ten constituencies, the BDP’s vote share fell by 14 percentage points between 2019 and 2024. In Shoshong, the BDP’s vote share fell by 10 percentage points. In proportion to the 2019 vote share, however, Shoshong was close to the average. Whilst this is not a large difference, it certainly does not suggest that the BDP was (overall) punished for running a defector in the 2024 elections. Decampaigning might have eroded support for Lesaso, but not markedly more than in other constituencies in the area.

Another way of assessing Lesaso’s performance is to compare it to that of defectors in other constituencies or elections. MPs who contested the 2024 elections for a different party than in 2019 had very varied experiences (see Table 2). Two were spectacularly successful. Ignatius Moswaane won the Francistown West seat for the BDP in 2019 with 53 per cent of the vote and held the seat in 2024, standing for the UDC, with 58 per cent of the vote. David Tshere, who had left the BCP in order to remain within the UDC, retained his Mahalapye West seat with the largest share of the vote in the country. Edwin Dikoloti, formerly BDP, retained his redesigned seat as an independent with 45 per cent of the vote. One

defector was lucky: Unity Dow, who had been a nominated BDP MP, won the Kgatleng West seat for the BCP with 33 per cent of the vote. Onneetse Ramogapi, who had also left the BCP and remained in the UDC, was also re-elected, in Palapye. Others – like Lesaso – floundered. Reatile had won the Jwaneng seat for the BDP in 2019 with 56 per cent of the vote; five years later, for the BPF, he won only 12 per cent. The BCP’s Dithapelo Keorapetse won the Selebi Pikwe West seat for the BCP under the UDC in 2019 with 59 per cent of the vote; in 2024 he won only 37 per cent of the vote, standing for the UDC. Never Tshabang similarly lost in Nkange.

Table 2: Defections among MPs, 2019–2024

Candidate	Constituency	2019 affiliation	2019 performance	Defection	2024 performance
Reatile	Jwaneng	BDP	Won (56%)	BPF	Lost (12%)
Moswaane	Francistown West	BDP	Won (53%)	BPP/UDC	Won (58%)
Lesaso	Shoshong	BNF/UDC	Won (65%)	BDP	Lost (20%)
Moatlhodi	Tonota	UDC	Won (54%)	BDP	Did not contest
Dikoloti	Goodhope-Mmathethe (2024)	BDP	Won (69%)	Independent	Won (45%); changed constituency
Keorapetse	Selebi Phikwe West	BCP/UDC	Won (59%)	UDC	Lost (37%)
Tshere	Mahalapye West	BCP/UDC	Won (52%)	UDC	Won (73%)
Tshabang	Nkange	BCP/UDC	Won (48%)	UDC	Lost (31%)
Ramogapi	Palapye	BCP/UDC	Won (40%)	UDC	Won (47%)
Dow	Kgatlang West (2024)	BDP	Did not contest; nominated	BCP	Won (33%)
Maele	Tswapong North	Independent (previously BDP)	Lost (36%)	UDC (via BPF)	Won (37% of the vote)

Source: IEC (2019, 2024).

Conclusion

Overall, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Lesaso was defeated decisively largely because of exogenous factors – including the countrywide disaffection from the BDP and Masisi (fuelled by Khama), the UDC’s strong championing of change, and the lacklustre national election campaign by the BDP – combined with the superior (and prior) strength of the UDC in the constituency, and the continuing factionalism within the BDP locally. Lesaso’s defection clearly left him without strong grassroots organisation, because his defection had not resulted in any significant change in party structures in the constituency. Lesaso thus defected at the wrong time and in the wrong place. It is possible that voters in Shoshong sought to punish him for defecting (as happens in Nigeria, according to Agboga 2023, 2024), but the evidence for this is weak. In general, it seems that it is difficult for an individual defector to be re-elected unless he or she is an individually popular incumbent *and* retains a strong grassroots election machine *and* defects to a more popular party – as was the case of Moswaane in Francistown West or Tshere in Mahalapye West. The elections in Shoshong underscore the enduring importance of the party in Botswana, notwithstanding its electoral system.

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