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# Democracy and the feedback mechanism in Botswana

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## ABSTRACT

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No country knows what the right policy choices are because we live in a world of uncertainty. One way to improve policy choices is to ensure a good feedback mechanism. With feedback, current policy choices might be altered to ensure a better fit with prevailing circumstances.

Botswana seems to be an interesting case study, where the deportation of a well-known academic placed a lid on its history of openness and public debate. This paper explores why a government respected for good management would choose to display such signs of autocracy, and how it is possible within the prevailing government institutions.

Keywords: Botswana, Botswana government, Democracy, Feedback mechanism, Institutions  
JEL codes: N17, N47, O38

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# Democracy and the feedback mechanism in Botswana

## INTRODUCTION

No country knows (in *real* time) what the right policy choices are because we live in a world of uncertainty (Friedman 1968; North 2005). One way to improve policy choices is to ensure the existence of a good feedback mechanism. With feedback, current policy choices could then be altered to ensure a better fit with prevailing circumstances, or respond to adverse and unintended consequences. If well-functioning feedback is part of good institutions, what will happen if the feedback mechanism is tampered with to a point where the free flow of information is hampered? How easy is it for a democratically elected government to influence the functioning of the feedback mechanism?

Botswana presents an interesting case study, with its history of openness and public debate. Traditional *kgotla*-meetings, where all<sup>3</sup> could raise their concerns, survived British rule, and after independence many serious issues have been dealt with within such meetings. Unfortunately, the deportation of a well-known academic, who was particularly critical of the government, and the expulsion of an international journalist, diminished Botswana's reputation for openness and public debate. Their criticism was levelled against the Botswana government's discrimination against minority groups and the process through which the next president will be elected, i.e. both were already included in criticism of Botswana's institutions. And if Botswana is a well-functioning democracy, such criticism should be taken seriously because no democratically elected government wants public opinion to turn against it. But the observed reaction of the Botswana government regarding these issues may be signalling bad news for the Botswana economy.

This paper explores possible reasons why a government respected for good management, displays signs of autocracy and how this behaviour is possible within the institutional framework of the country. It also ponders the question what the consequences of a greater measure of autocracy will be for this mineral rich economy.

## THE FEEDBACK MECHANISM AND DEMOCRACY

The feedback mechanism is a concept widely used in engineering, natural sciences and in economics and other behavioural sciences. Feedback in a system occurs where output information is fed back into the system. This can

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<sup>3</sup> Providing that the person was not young, female or a minority ethnic.

either be positive (where the feedback tends to increase output) or negative (where output is decreased).

Examples of feedback are diverse. A general example is the feedback managers provide their employees. If this happens on a regular basis, the employee has certainty about what is expected of him or her. In factories beepers signal a problem in the production line. In monetary economics the inflation rate can, for instance, provide either positive or negative feedback for interest rate decisions. Another example of the effect of feedback is where positive feedback leads to collective mobilization (see for instance the explanation by Biggs 2003 of waves of strikes that swept American cities in May 1886).

For the feedback mechanism to function properly, it must, however, be undistorted. If the manager is not honest about his assessment of the performance of the employee, the employee will have a false impression about his or her performance. If in the factory the beeper is muffled due to the irritation it causes and feedback stops, the quality of the product will decrease. If the inflation rate is not measured correctly, the interest rate cannot be adjusted appropriately.

In the political process there are basically two ways for the constituency to provide the government with feedback, i.e. by means of elections and through the free press. Lipset's (1959: 71) definition of democracy supports this notion of a democracy being a

political system that supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism that permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office.

The literature supporting democracy as a political system usually highlights the advantages of openness and greater efficiency resulting from the action of a feedback mechanism. Regular, free and competitive (multiparty) elections create openness, certainty and stability in an economy.

With the openness also comes greater protection for civil and economic liberties than under an autocracy. With no absolute power in the hands of a ruler, the infringement on personal property rights are less likely. De Long and Shleifer (1992) illustrate this point when they show the incompatibility of despotism and development.

According to them absolutist states are characterised by the subjection of the legal framework to the prince's will: subjects do not have rights, they merely have privileges, which endure only as long as the prince so desires.

“His incentive to extract resources is restricted only in that he has an interest in keeping the people prosperous enough for him to extract more resources in the future, and is augmented by the possibility of using taxes from his current domain to conquer other lands” (De Long and Shleifer 1992: 10). In an open democratic society a situation like this—where the ruling entity acts selfishly—is less likely to occur.

Democracy, where citizens are allowed a greater voice, seems to be a recipe for a more stable society, since the need for conflict or civil strife is reduced (Rodrik 1997). Also, democracies are less able to withhold economic rewards from the losers in political competition. It means that the losers still have an outside chance to benefit in a democracy. This increases the incentives for social groups to partake in positive cooperative behaviour, rather than partake in violent opposition (Rodrik 1997). But the more the sources of power, status and wealth are concentrated in the state, the more the political struggle tends to approach a zero-sum game in which the defeated lose all. This, in the end, makes it harder for the ruling party to abstain from its hold on power (Lipset 1994).

The competition between political parties is an important advantage of a democracy. Monitoring takes place not only within but also across political parties. Competitive political parties are in a good position to monitor any shirking. And because they can gain great advantages by providing evidence of shirking by their opponents, they provide a good monitoring device (Wittman 1989).

If an effective opposition does not exist, one loses a great deal of the advantages of a democracy. Under such conditions, the authority of officials in power will steadily increase, and popular influence on policy will be at a minimum. The one-party rule, which has been common in Africa, makes it easier for rulers to make decisions that confiscate wealth rather than add to it, because there is little cost (e.g. the cost of losing the next election) involved. To be able to benefit from a democracy, it is important to ensure that democratically sanctioned competition gets rid of growth retarding agents.

For an election to be competitive there should be more than one party to vote for, but also freedom of speech. There should be public debate between opposing parties, and citizens should also feel free to voice their

discontent with current policy choices. If an incumbent's opponents are able to bring his or her deficiencies before constituents, it will not only reduce information costs for the voter, but also reduce agency problems.

For voters to make the optimal choice at the ballot box, they have to be informed. But generally, voters have little incentive to become informed. This, of course, leaves room for political agent opportunism. With voters not well-enough informed political agents have the opportunity to shirk, take bribes, etc., without the threat of being voted out in the next election. But (on the other hand) it must be admitted that candidates do acquire reputations. If they had not kept their campaign promises in the past, they are less likely to be re-elected or elected to a higher office in the future (Lipset 1959a). In all this, the free press plays an important role in informing voters of candidates' intentions and policy stances.

The free press also has an advantage in the opposite direction: it provides government with feedback from its constituency. This means that the range of feasible economic policies is likely to be limited to the median voter's preferences due to the feedback mechanism. If there is regular feedback from the citizens the decisions government makes will produce more beneficial results.

Under an autocracy decision-makers in the executive are deprived of feedback that can be crucial both for the technical quality of policies and for the political support necessary to sustain them. In a more centralised society, more hinges on the ability of fewer individuals.

Democracy and openness make a government accountable for its decisions. Accountability means that "those who exercise power on a continuing basis are required to answer or account for their conduct to others who are entitled to judge it" (Sklar 1989 (reprinted 2002): 69). Keech (1992: 260) summarises accountability as consisting of two elements:

- political rulers are required to "explain, report, or justify", in other words, keep the citizens informed; and
- secondly, politicians are "subject to sanctions", which means that they can be removed in the case of poor performance.

Balanced media coverage of the performance of the incumbent and elections at regular intervals serve these purposes. And if a government is not accountable, the ability to credibly commit to any decision is weakened.

To summarise the importance of the feedback mechanism in the political process, it can be said that in a well-functioning democracy voters can turn their vote to another political party and politician if they are displeased with the performance of the incumbent. Between elections the free press provides the necessary feedback. This feedback between elections can bring government to make incremental changes to policy. But if the feedback is distorted or stifled, the process loses its purpose.

### **THE FEEDBACK MECHANISM AS AN INSTITUTION**

Theoretically, the feedback process is part of institutions, which North (1981) defines as "...a set of constraints on behaviour in the form of rules and regulations; a set of procedures to detect deviations from the rules and regulations; and, finally, a set of moral, ethical behavioural norms which define the contours that constrain the way in which the rules and regulations are specified and enforcement is carried out". Sjöstrand (1993: 9) defines institutions as a "human mental construct for a coherent system of shared norms that regulate individual interactions in recurrent situations". The purpose of institutions is to steer individual behaviour in a particular direction through the incentives it creates. The behaviour of a government can be influenced through the previously discussed feedback process.

Institutions can both be formal (e.g. rules, regulations, the constitution) and informal (e.g. norms, culture, codes of conduct). Apart from a free press the formal institutions that support democracy and are usually the constitution and an independent judiciary. Whether informal institutions support a democracy and free press will significantly depend on the information that was transmitted from one generation to the next. While formal institutions may be clear on what it expects of the government and its constituency, every situation both these parties encounter involves a certain amount of discretion and it is informal institutions that will determine whether the end result resembles the intention of the formal institution.

Although a major role of institutions is to provide stability and certainty to society, this does not imply that the institutions do not change over time. Changes in formal rules are much more visible than changes in informal rules. Also, formal institutions may change overnight but informal constraints embodied in customs, traditions and codes of conduct are much more resistant to deliberate short term or instant policy changes. The characteristic of informal institutions to survive changes in formal institutions, makes it a source of path dependency and causes institutional change to happen more gradually. There can be a total change in formal rules

in a society, but many aspects will stay the same because of the prevailing informal institutions. Alternatively, formal rules can stay the same and informal rules can change. The end of slavery is an example where the custom became unacceptable even before slavery was officially banned.

In Botswana democratic elections and the free press, as feedback mechanisms, are formal institutions. Both are provided for in the constitution.

The next section will highlight certain aspects of the informal institutions in Botswana to determine whether it supports the formal institutions. In order to describe the prevailing informal institutions, it is necessary to trace the historical evolution of political institutions in the country.

### **INFORMAL INSTUTIONS IN BOTSWANA**

The known history of Botswana goes back to the first millennium when a Khoisan population was present in the region, known as Botswana today. When the Europeans entered the region in the late 18th century, tribes called the 'Batswana' were the principal inhabitants. The Batswana forms one of the three major divisions of the Sotho group of Bantu peoples, and it is commonly accepted that they migrated to southern Africa at the time of the Bantu migrations from the north several centuries ago (Colclough and McCarthy 1980).

There are eight principal tribal groups in Botswana, seven of which are direct descendents of the original Sotho migrants. The Ngwato is by far the largest and makes up about 80 percent of the Batswana. In addition to the eight major tribes, a large number of smaller and related or subjected tribes have lived amongst them in the reserves and under the authority of the Tswana chiefs (Colclough and McCarthy 1980).

The Batswana lived in large villages from the time of their earliest settlements. They had to deal with regular droughts and depended solely on surface water (Colclough and McCarthy 1980). Large villages developed around waterholes and because it was not that easy to move to a new location, they had to find ways to solve differences and settle disputes in a peaceful manner. As will be shown below, these tribal capitals were the centres of political and social life of the tribe, and the place where all the important gatherings were held.

Unlike modern day democracy, the Tswana succession was through family lines, with the oldest son of the king

succeeding him after his death. These successions happened within very strong family lines, where for instance one of the great chiefs, Khama III (1837-1923) attained world-wide prominence as a zealous convert to Christianity, a fanatical prohibitionist of alcoholic liquor, and a strong supporter of British imperialism in central Southern Africa (Schapera 1940: 56).

The administrative structure of the Batswana society revolved around the chief, his councillors, the headmen, and the subjects. In theory the responsibility for the lives of his subjects rested with the chief, but in practice he depended heavily on his councillors and headmen. According to Mgadla (1998) the chief could be influenced by his headmen to alter his decisions, although it was still in his power to make the final decision.

At the centre of the chief's administration was the traditional assembly or *kgotla* where collective issues were discussed and debated and laws and resolutions were passed. According to Mgadla (1998: 4-5)

the *kgotla* was a public forum for the Batswana leaders and their subjects to announce laws and discuss matters affecting the village, and more importantly, the participants had the opportunity to air their views. This exercise could probably be regarded as some form of participatory democracy, in that an atmosphere existed where the people could exchange their views and could influence final decisions.

Schapera (1940: 72) describes it as follows:

all matters of tribal policy were dealt with finally before a general assembly of the adult men in the chief's *kgotla*. On important occasions the people of the districts are also summoned, and the tribe as a whole debates the question at issue. The decisions made are generally the same as those previously reached by the chief and his personal advisers, who as leaders of the tribe can sway public opinion; but it is not unknown for the tribal assembly to overrule the wishes of the chief. Since anybody may speak at these meetings it enables the chief to ascertain the feelings of the people generally, and provides the latter with an opportunity of stating their grievances: the chief and his advisers may be taken severely to task, for the people are seldom afraid to speak openly and frankly.

This interactive forum made it easier for the Batswana to communicate and keep their traditions alive during the time of British rule. In 1884 the British declared a protectorate over the southern parts of Batswana territory (British Bechuanaland) and in 1885 over the northern territories (Bechuanaland Protectorate) (Picard 1985). In

1895 the area south of the Limpopo, British Bechuanaland, came under the rule of Rhodes' British South African Company (BSAC). In practice this meant that British Bechuanaland was ruled from the Cape Colony. It was the British government's intention that Bechuanaland would eventually join the Cape Colony, because the cost of administering the whole area promised to be considerable. The Union of South Africa Act even provided for the eventual transfer of Bechuanaland to South Africa, but the Batswana strongly opposed the transfer. The South African government periodically raised the transfer issue, but it was always firmly opposed by the indigenous people. This allowed Botswana to survive as an entity and not to be split up between different countries. But because its mineral wealth was still unknown, Britain left as much as possible of the administration to the local people.

The absence of a direct colonial influence made it possible for the Batswana to gradually move to a system of private property ownership and a system where the rulers are chosen by the people and not by birthright. Moreover, in Botswana the changes were brought about and communicated to the people by their trusted chiefs. Seretse Khama, the Paramount chief of the biggest tribe, for instance, initiated the end of the chieftainship in Botswana and democratic voting to determine the office holders.

Botswana's formal and informal institutions therefore support openness and consultation that serves as a feedback mechanism. After the 1969 elections, Khama expressed his belief in the importance of effective criticism:

Opposition criticism is useful. It forces us to look at what we are doing to see if it is really as good as it can be. It stops us from abusing power. An opposition can prevent us from making a mess because we know that if we do make a mess, the people will not vote for us in future (quoted in Good 1993).

It is, however, unclear whether the chief or president will support public opinion if that means his family line/ political party will lose its ruling power<sup>4</sup>.

So what will happen if the formal institutions support freedom of speech and democracy, and the government starts interpreting it in a different manner? Will the informal institutions be strong enough to stop a gradual

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<sup>4</sup> An example from the past where a power upset occurred was where conflict between Chief Tshekedi Khama and his nephew Seretse Khama, who married a white woman in the late 1940s, culminated in a *kgotla* where the overwhelming majority voted in favour of Seretse while Tshekedi was their chief at that stage. Tshekedi lived in exile until their conflict was resolved and they both denounced hereditary chieftainship.

erosion of the supported formal institutions?

## **BOTSWANA SINCE INDEPENDENCE**

Since the pre-independence election of March 1965, elections have been held at five-year intervals. The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) won all these elections, and most of them with large majorities, causing the country to be named "a de facto one party state through the ballot box" (Tsie 1996: 600). The situation created stability and the impression that the constituency is satisfied with the work done by the BDP, but on the negative side it has created a situation where democracy has not yet been "tested". For a democracy to be seen as a truly mature system, it must be tested by a peaceful regime change. This has not happened in Botswana and, as previously stated, it is hard to predict whether the BDP will hand power peacefully to an opposition.

The Botswana government, in principle, accepts the idea that political rights ought to be respected. It has, however, been hesitant to show this respect too candidly in practice. Generally the BDP has also made political participation difficult. Holm (1988: 193) describes this difficulty as follows:

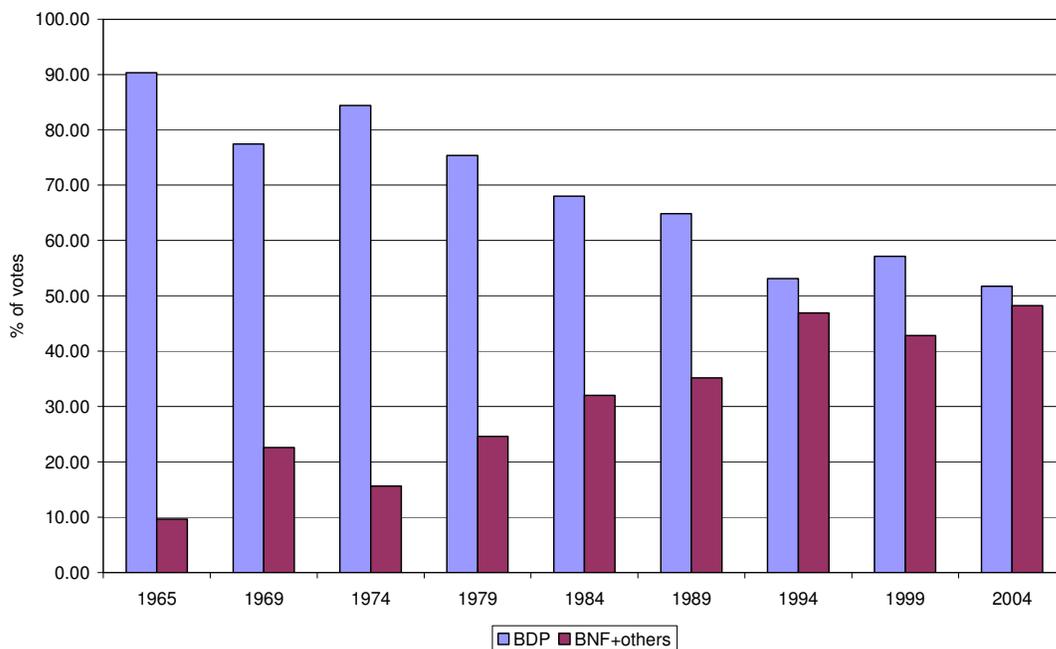
Complete democratic rights are only enjoyed by a small group that is educated and privately employed. The freedom to run for office, in theory, exists. Anyone who can raise the necessary deposit may contest a seat. There are, however, several important restrictions. Most significantly, no government employee can run for office. This includes civil servants, teachers, and employees of parastatals. They cannot even take a leave of absence during the campaign. Since this group constitutes two-thirds of the wage- and salary-earning public, this means that most who are financially able to run for office cannot do so without resigning from government, hence bearing not only the costs of the campaign, but also the risk of a career change. For society as a whole, this restriction effectively excludes most of those who are informed and articulate on policy questions.

According to Molomo and Somolekae (2000), despite being one of the oldest democracies in SSA, voters in Botswana are still relatively ill informed about their civic rights and responsibilities and their political rights.

There are also limitations within the electoral system. Botswana operates a single member constituency system. Under this "winner-takes-all" electoral system only one candidate makes it to the National Assembly. This system benefits established and politically experienced parties that enjoy the advantage of incumbency. In a situation like that of Botswana, where there are a number of opposition parties, this system benefits the ruling party.

From the figure below it seems as if the ruling party has been gradually losing its dominance over time. But due to a much divided opposition and the voting system, the BDP is still dominating the house seats. The BDP's domination started with a more than 90 percent support in 1965, and in the 1980's dropped to below 70 percent and in the 1990's to below 60 percent. The Botswana National Front started with a support of not even 10 percent in 1969, and increased this to above 20 percent in the 1980's. The rest of the voters' support is divided between three other parties. In the 2004 election the support for the parties other than the official opposition (22 percent), was almost as much as the support for the opposition itself (26 percent). If the trend continues and the opposition parties stop their infighting and form a coalition, the BDP faces serious opposition in the 2009 elections.

### Voter support in Botswana



Source: African elections database (<http://africanelections.tripod.com/bw.html>)

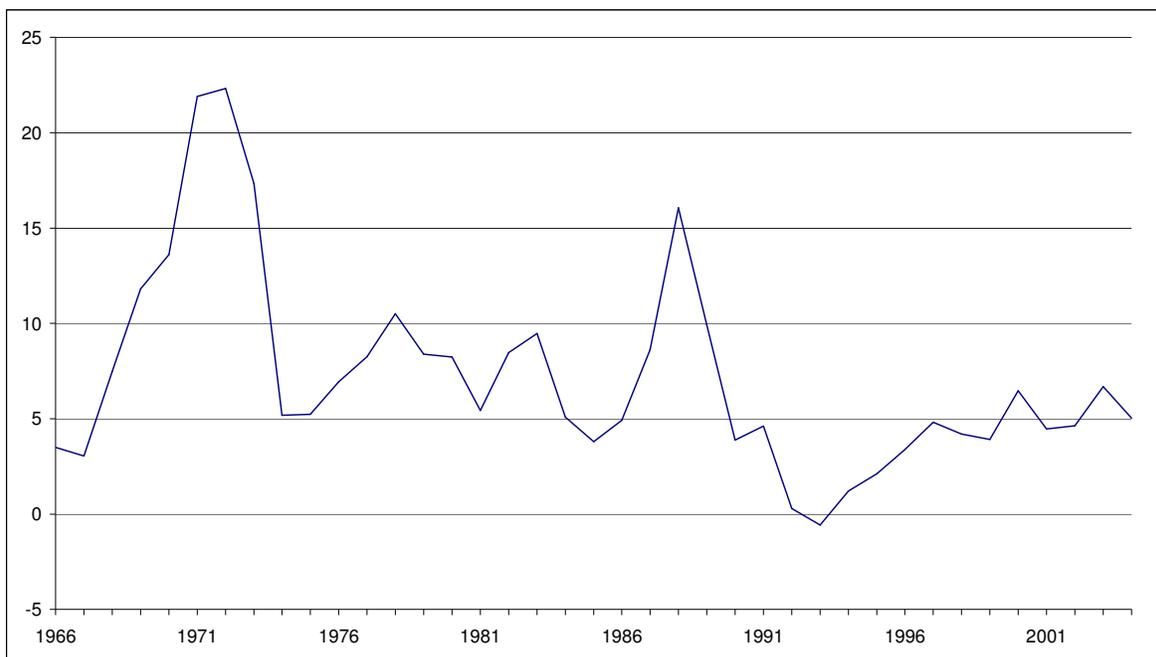
Why did this gradual deterioration of voter support come about? One possibility is that the Botswana voter is starting to mature, and moving further away from tribal politics. Especially in the first two decades after independence ethnicity has continued to play an important role in Botswana politics, with strong support for the BDP in Seretse Khama's ethnic strongholds. But rapid growth has led to diversification of old structures and disparities have arisen between rural and urban areas (Danevad 1995). At independence only 3% of the

population lived in urban areas. Over time, however, this has changed dramatically with more than 50% now urbanised. According to Poteete (2003) urban constituencies tend to select opposition MP's and this trend is also evident in council voting. For instance, in the 1994 elections the Botswana National Front got 24 out of the 25 seats in Gaborone town council, in Lobatse 10 out of 11, in Selebi Phikwe it took all 13 seats and in Jwaneng all seven (Good 1996).

In the urban areas ethnicity plays less of a role in politics and more hinges on economic and social issues. Some of the major economic and social problems that plague the ruling party, and that might influence voter support, are lower levels of economic growth, the high dependency on diamonds, the treatment of the Basarwa, and the high prevalence of HIV/Aids.

Botswana still enjoys high levels of economic growth, especially when compared to other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. With a per capita income of US\$ 3667 in 2004, it is second only to South Africa. But since 1990 the Botswana economy has been struggling to regain its previously much higher levels of economic growth, as can be seen from the figure below. This contributed to an unemployment rate of almost 20 percent in 2001 (IOL statistics).

**GDP per capita growth (annual percentage change)**



Source: World Development Indicators (2006)

The government has tried in numerous ways to diversify the economy. They tried to stimulate private sector development by means of financial incentives, but the mining industry still contributes more than 50 percent to GDP (see table below). In the first half of the 1980's two programs were initialised to stimulate industrial development, i.e. the Financial Assistance Policy and the Industrial Development Policy. By the end of the 1980's it was estimated that only half of the projected employment opportunities were created—and that most of these would have happened even without the financial support. Problems that plagued these programs were an insufficient number of entrepreneurs and skilled workers and technological weaknesses (Danevad 1995).

### Sector contribution to GDP

	1985	1995	2005
Agriculture	6.4	4.4	2.4
Industry (including manufacturing and mining)	61.2	50.9	52.3
Manufacturing	5.4	5.5	4.1
Services	32.4	44.7	45.3

*Source: World Bank 2006*

The Basarwa (San-people) remains politically and economically marginalized. They are the poorest people in present day Botswana (Good 1993). It seems as if the rise of the Tswana elite in power and wealth since independence coincided with the deprivation of property and autonomy for the Basarwa.

It seems an understatement to say that what the San lost in independence and resources, the new and increasingly dynamic Tswana elite gained; for the San seem to have been deprived of even their humanity: their new rulers gaining almost an excess of power (Good 1993: 209).

With ranches getting bigger and bigger, in a short period the hunting grounds of the Basarwa were nearly depleted. Without the traditional means to support themselves and being skilled only to support themselves from the land, the Basarwa were forced to move to settlements where they live on government food aid. Most of these people are illiterate and their traditional leaders are not recognised in the present day formal political structures. With the help of Survival International, the Basarwa won a court case in December 2006, which allows them to

move back to their ancestral hunting grounds in the Kalahari Desert.

Botswana's biggest social problem is the very high prevalence of HIV/Aids. Life expectancy at 34 now is lower than the 50 years at independence. The deaths caused by HIV/Aids targets the voting cohort of the population, with deaths per 1000 adult females at almost 800, (starting at 448 in 1960) while the same figure for infants is 84. Botswana's population has been growing at a negative rate since 2004.

It can be concluded that the Botswana government is losing support due to numerous reasons. The feedback process of voter support and media publications have told the government that they do not satisfy their constituency as effectively as in the past. What was their response?

### **RESPONSE BY THE BOTSWANA GOVERNMENT**

Between elections the free press provides the necessary feedback for the government and the constituency. There are, however, reasons for concern about this mechanism in Botswana.

In general the government respects freedom of speech and of the media, and these rights are provided for in the constitution. However the state dominates the broadcast media, particularly the nationwide radio and television stations. Due to the low level of literacy of the population, these are the main sources of information for the majority of the population. Until the mid-1980s, there existed only government media: both radio and daily newspaper.

The government controls the content of nearly all radio and television broadcasts through

- the Botswana Press Agency (BOPA), which produces the free Daily News newspaper;
- Radio Botswana, which broadcasts nationally to most of the country: it broadcasts a variety of news, educational, cultural, and entertainment programs both in English and Setswana; and
- Botswana Television (BTV).

There is one daily newspaper in Botswana, the Dikgang Tsa Gompieno (or Daily News, circulation 50,000 in 2002) published by the government in both English and Setswana. The government also publishes, in a bilingual edition, the monthly magazine Kutlwaro (circulation 24,000).

Opposition parties sometimes have difficulty to gain access to the broadcast medium, and make more use of independent daily papers. In 2002, 4 independent newspapers were published on a weekly basis, with a total circulation of over 50,000. Mmegi Wa Digmang, or The Reporter, is published daily in both Setswana and English with a circulation of 24,000 (<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Botswana-MEDIA.html>). The major political parties publish monthly journals. It was in these independent weekly periodicals that examples of government corruption were exposed.

The free press has been hampered in its role as feedback mechanism, with the state dominating the print medium, but also through the treatment of journalists who were critical of government policy. In 2005 Rodrick Mukumbira, a Zimbabwean national, was ordered to leave the country within seven days, while his work and residence permit had been revoked. Mukumbira was given no explanation for the order, but it can possibly be linked to his reporting on the government's eviction of the Basarwa from their ancestral homeland (World Press Freedom Review 2005)

In April 2007 a list of 17 journalists and researchers was published, requiring them to obtain special visas before entering Botswana. One common theme links them together: they all showed interest in the Basarwa.

Freedom of speech is also hampered in another way. In 2005 Kenneth Good, professor of Political Science at the University of Botswana, was ordered to leave the country within 48 hours. This was only a few days before he was about to deliver a public seminar on the conduct of Mogae and Vice-president Ian Khama.

These are examples of problems in the feedback mechanism in Botswana. It seems as if the government of Botswana does not look kindly at negative publicity and has reached the stage where it clamps down to prevent it. In 2006 the Intelligence and Security Bill was introduced. It claims that Botswana "faces a number of threats or potential threats to its national security, political systems and its economy, all of which may be destabilised". It is unsure which threats this refers to, but it leaves the President with great powers. It provides for imprisonment of up to 25 years regardless of public interest and encompasses all matters involving the Botswana Defence Force (BDF), trade union activities and workers' wages, and dissemination of information on the subordination of the San/Basarwa/Bushmen. Certain related powers, such as the naming and expulsion of a resident foreigner as a prohibited immigrant, devolve to the president himself and can be exercised legally with no explanation required.

This Bill led to the expulsion of foreigners, and poses a serious threat to locals. It muffles the beeper.

The president has also made statements which are normally not associated with the leader of a democratic country, but sound more like the style and voice of an autocrat. In July 2005 president Mogue told the BBC that "no matter what the court might say, I would never let him back", referring to Ken Good (quoted by the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability). He has also overruled the advice of the ombudsman that the vice-president should not fly Botswana Defense Force aircraft while trying to win voter support for the BDP just before the 2004 elections. This is undermining one of the cornerstones of democracy – the division between the legislative and judicial powers. With the president seeing himself as above the judiciary, he silences yet another important feedback mechanism in a democracy.

Mogua has also acted like the chiefs of the past in naming his successor. He calls this arrangement "permanent democracy". Taylor and Good (Mail and Guardian 11 March 2005) describe how the constitution was changed twice previously to alter it according to the will of two previous presidents. This time President Mogua did not even bother to change the constitution:

When then vice-president Ketumile Masire was twice rejected by his Kanye constituency, in 1969 and 1974, Seretse Khama abolished [in 1972] the provision for constituency election of the president and introduced the requirement that a chief had to have resigned his position for a period of five years before qualifying for Parliamentary election (Masire had been defeated by a chief). Constitutional amendments introduced by Masire in 1998 allowed for the automatic succession of the vice-president on the retirement of the president. But when Ian Khama became vice-president while remaining paramount chief of the Bamangwato, the Constitution was violated. As usual, nothing was done.

It seems as if freedom of speech and democracy as feedback mechanisms are under siege in Botswana. Will the informal institutions supporting democracy be strong enough to survive the onslaught? The fact that government is losing its voter support says something positive about the Batswana's willingness to voice their opposition regarding government policy. But according to Taylor (2003) civil society is weak and he illustrates this with an example of The Botswana Human Rights Centre, which published a survey condemning the forced removal of the Basarwa. Then after government responded to their condemnatory report, the Centre decided to change their

tune declaring: "civil society in Botswana is readily co-opted into state structures, lacks a strong grassroots base, and is prepared to work within the parameters deemed permissible by the state – and not beyond" (Taylor 2003: 81).

The history of the Batswana shows that they were willing to voice their opposition and concerns in *kgotla* meetings, but that the chief still had the final say. The role of a constitution is to limit the powers of the president, that he can still make his own decisions, but within the framework of the constitution. Only the future will tell how the modern, urbanised Batswana will react to an unpopular decision (and one not even covered for in the constitution) by the “chief”.

Good (1996) supplies one possibility when he writes about the school unrests of the early 1990's. It started small with a young girl being murdered and the police unable to find the person responsible for the horrid deed. School children started demonstrations because of the silence they encountered from the officials. As these protests were stopped by police, it just led to more protests all over Gaborone. By March 1995 there was not one school in Gaborone that had not experienced at least one strike. According to Good (1996) these strikes were against unresponsive authoritarianism. These children are now eligible voters and they have a constitutional right to voice their discontent with the government through the ballot box. If government refuses to respond to the feedback, the stability in Botswana may be under serious threat.

The Botswana government has examples to look at if they want to know how they should respond to growing unpopularity. The next section discusses three different examples.

### **EXAMPLES OF RULING PARTIES THAT LOSE THEIR SUPPORT**

One example, which should not be followed, is that of Zimbabwe. In 2000 Zimbabwe held, what was then heralded as its first real democratic election. Zimbabwe then ceased to be a one-party state, and it had a credible opposition, which was supported especially in towns and cities. The outcome of that election should have made it clear to President Mugabe that the voters were not satisfied with his rule any more. Unfortunately, Mugabe reacted to this by becoming more autocratic and aggressive towards opposition. Human rights abuses became part of everyday life.

In the parliamentary elections of 2005 there were numerous claims of vote rigging, election fraud and intimidation. In 2006 a Constitutional Amendment Bill was passed by the Zanu PF majority in parliament. This bill allows the government to seize passports of its critics, and acquire agricultural land without compensation.

There is no feedback mechanism functioning in Zimbabwe any more. Democracy does no longer exist in Zimbabwe, and the same applies to freedom of speech. With the Zimbabwean economy in utter disarray and reaching a stage where it is no longer functioning, this should definitely not be the example for Botswana to follow.

Mexico provides a good example of a country moving from autocracy to democracy, and with the ruling party losing its dominance in the process. Although Mexico suffered from much corruption, at least the party losing its dominance did not fall back into autocracy, but tried to renew itself in order to be more attractive to voters.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was Mexico's ruling party from 1929 until 2000. The party enjoyed much power, only second to that of the president, who was also the party's effective chief. Until the early 1990s opposition was unorganised and posed little threat to the PRI. This changed in the mid-1980's with opposition parties starting to challenge the PRI in all political spheres.

The PRI was formed as a loose confederation of local political bosses, military strongmen, labour unions, peasant organisations and regional political parties. The party is described as a "coalition of networks of aspiring politicians seeking not only positions of power and prestige but also the concomitant opportunity for personal enrichment" (<http://countrystudies.us/mexico/84.htm>). Corruption reached unprecedented levels during the 1970's with the discovery of new oil fields. Much of the wealth received from the oil went to PRI officials.

During the De la Madrid rule of 1982-88 the PRI started to downplay previous populism and adopted a more free-market orientation. This brought conflict from within the party ranks, with the labour unions opposing this move. In 1988 Salinas became president and this increased the divide between the two factions within the party. This step almost brought the party's dominance to an end in the 1988 elections, after which Salinas tried to improve the party's image by moving against those elements in the party and in labour that was most closely associated with corruption. Although this showed positive results in the 1991 elections, Salinas did not end all

forms of corruption, like for instance public ownership of petroleum and natural gas deposits (<http://countrystudies.us/mexico/84.htm>).

In 1995 the Mexico economy had a major setback with the almost total collapse of its private banks. This contributed to the PRI almost losing control in the freest elections in Mexico's history in 1997. The president, Zedillo, tried to increase democracy by not choosing the next PRI presidential nominee in 1999. Several months later, Mexico held its first presidential primary, which was won by former interior secretary Francisco Labastida, Zedillo's closest ally among the candidates.

The elections held in 2000 brought the PRI's presidency to an end after 71 years of one-party rule. With the new president, Vicente Fox, making little progress on his ambitious reform agenda, the PRI rebounded in 2003 (<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/a0107779.html>). In the 2006 elections the party fell to a third place on the political map in Mexico, after being defeated by an opposition party candidate. This brought a group of young PRI politicians to launch a movement that is set to reform and revolutionise the party. The future will tell whether their efforts were successful.

A somehow similar example comes from the Liberal Party of Canada. The party is sometimes referred to as "Canada's natural governing party" since it has been in power for most of the time since the Great Depression. The Liberal Party held power for more years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than did any other party in any other country. For the 39 elections held since 1867, it formed a majority government 22 times. This is an example of a party getting power in one election and losing it in the following. And as they lose the election, they reform themselves to such an extent that their policies become more acceptable to their constituency. When they are the official opposition, they play an important role in the feedback process. For example in the 1980's they held the government to account on a wide range of issues, including a series of scandals that saw the resignations of several Cabinet Minister (History of the Liberal Party).

## **CONCLUSION**

For a government to act on behalf of the majority of the voters, it should respond to the feedback mechanisms provided. At this stage it seems as if at least one form of feedback is muffled in Botswana, i.e. the freedom of speech. Government's reaction to journalists and academics are not supportive of criticism. Although the BDP

has not so far lost an election, the current president has made some rather undemocratic remarks. If the trend of the past number of elections continues, and the ruling party makes no effort in aligning itself with the wishes of its constituents (the determination of which is so much more difficult with the silencing of critical media feedback), the BDP might lose the next election. One can only hope that the president (which will probably be Ian Khama at that stage) will learn from the examples of Mexico and Canada, therefore bringing itself in line with the wishes of the voters and playing an effective role as opposition before trying to regain its power in the following elections.

If the BDP decides not to respond to the feedback mechanism of democracy, the consequences for the economy may be detrimental due to a decline in trust from the international community.

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