

HALF A CENTURY OF PEACE IN BOTSWANA

BY Johan Brosché, Johan.Brosche@pcr.uu.se
Department of Peace and Conflict Research
Uppsala University
ILLUSTRATION Viera Larsson



Africa is the world's most conflict-affected region, with one third of all civil and interstate conflicts since 1946 taking place on the continent. This bleak picture is not all-embracing, however. Surrounded by seven neighbours plagued by conflicts, Botswana, Malawi and Zambia constitute a 'Zone of Peace' spared from violent conflict since they gained independence over half a century ago. This article will describe the main characteristics of Botswana's peace and chart some of its causes.

STABLE BUT UNEQUAL PEACE

A core characteristic of Botswana's peace is stability. While the form of government has shifted in many neighbouring countries – for example between single- and multiparty systems – Botswana has been a multiparty democracy since independence. Notwithstanding, the same political party – Botswana Democratic Party – has been in power since independence. While the strong dominance of one party is problematic from a democratic perspective, it has contributed to stability. In fact, Botswana has not experienced any obvious critical junctures where a disturbingly more violent path was imminent.

Although Botswana has experienced stability in the political arena, the country is also characterized by severe disparity between various groups. Thus, another distinguishing facet of Botswana's peace is inequality. In fact, Botswana is one of the most unequal countries in the world according to the [Gini Index](#) and the [World Bank's poverty assessment](#) shows that about one fifth of the population in poverty (less than 2 USD/per day). In addition, some communities – the Basarwa (or San) in particular – are severely marginalized, which is emphasized by the [UNHCR](#).

THE CAUSES OF BOTSWANA'S PEACE

There are many factors that together contribute to explain Botswana's peaceful history. Within a short article like this, it is not possible to cover all of them and some of the complexity – especially how conditions change over time – will not be addressed.

Nevertheless, three dimensions outlined below have all contributed in essential ways to Botswana's peace.

A first important factor for Botswana's peace and stability is that crucial historical processes (like colonization and de-colonization) have not prompted as drastic changes of society as in many other countries. When the British established the Botswana Protectorate in 1885, they integrated much of the structures from the developed Tswana kingdoms that existed in pre-colonial times. This is in sharp contrast to many other African countries where the colonial powers disrupted existing pre-colonial structures. In addition, the level of colonial interference was less intrusive in Botswana than in most other African states; Botswana was never a full colony but a protectorate. Another important historic aspect contributing to Botswana's peace is that the country's liberation struggle was fought with non-violent peaceful means – with negotiation processes lying in the centre of the attainment of independence in 1966. A peaceful path to sovereignty is significant as conflict begets conflicts. In addition, the independent country had relatively good relations with the British, resulting in some structures from colonial times remaining in the independent Botswana.

A second important factor for Botswana's peace is that identities are generally perceived as multi-layered. The history of Botswana is closely linked to Tswana communities (illustrated by the name of the country and by the fact that Setswana is an official language) which has created a false belief that the country is ethnically homogenous. More correctly, Botswana is ethnically heterogeneous with important and longstanding ethnolinguistic, socioeco-

conomic and regional divisions. Yet, identification along such issues are perceived in a way that allows for crosscutting memberships. The absence of mutually exclusive identities reduce tensions between ethno-regional groups. Another important factor influencing regional dynamics within Botswana is that some of the most marginalized communities – like the San – are so blatantly disregarded that their opportunity to challenge the prevailing situation is severely circumvented.

A third dimension of importance for Botswana's peace relates to elite dynamics. While tensions between various elites at times have been apparent, these conflicts have not escalated into entrenched struggles that might have threatened Botswana's peace. One reason for this is the significant influence of a consensus-seeking approach to governance; a tradition with deep roots in the Tswana culture, particularly through the kgotla system, which provided members of an ethnic group, village or community with a say in matters governing the social group. This is, indeed, the foundation on which Botswana's modern democracy took off. In addition, Botswana's two most fundamental economic assets – diamonds and cattle – have been effectively integrated in the state-centred political economy. This has given Botswana's major elites strong incentives for preserving political stability and has thereby contributed to peace.

CONCLUSIONS

Botswana has had a remarkable development since independence and its ability to remain peaceful in a conflict-torn region is impressive. Yet, it is important to note that these achievements do not undo the predicaments facing Botswana. Even though civil war in Botswana is very unlikely, peace should not be taken for granted. While the country's peaceful history will remain an asset for keeping the peace, changes in the two other factors emphasized above cannot be ruled out. First, the structure of identities can change and if identification in Botswana becomes perceived as less crosscutting – for example because of intensified economic competition – it could lead to increased tensions between groups. Second, while a consensus-seeking approach has been influential for elite dynamics in Botswana, rivalry between various elites could increase. The level of democracy in Botswana is increasingly **questioned**. These two factors could reinforce each other, meaning that, if elite competition increases, it could lead to identities being perceived as more mutually exclusive. In addition, these potential problems could be aggravated by other factors like the effects of **climate change** and the fact that Botswana's economy remains **undiversified**. Hence, while Botswana should be proud over their peaceful history, they must stay alert to emerging problems.

Dumelang dear Botsfa members!

Another year is coming to an end. The biggest event of 2017 must be the filling of all dams in the country, courtesy of cyclone Dineo that hit Mozambique in February. Water restrictions are still in place but water security, desperately needed, has been restored for a few years. What a relief! Western Cape is now experiencing the same problem we had only a year ago. Let this be a reminder.

The President has started the last four months of his presidency and Vice President Masisi is already taking over some of the official duties that will await him on April 1st next year, when he takes over the highest office. Recently he was appointed the new Chancellor at the University of Botswana and a few months ago he represented Botswana at the UN General Assembly in New York. The President himself is now busy doing a farewell tour of the country.

In October I took part in a breakfast presentation at Botho University, which is starting a Challenge-driven Education model in association with the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH). This is the result of the engagement by STINT (The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education) in Botswana during the last few years. I'm really happy to see these developments. This week we were visited by a small delegation of Swedish Poets and representatives from the magazine Karavan, invited by Botswana counterparts in the Motlhaolosa Poetry Ensemble. On Wednesday we had an opening ceremony and lunch for 50 guests at our Linnaeus venue. During their stay they will be conducting workshops, performances and visits to villages and schools. Always great with positive Swedish input.

Wishing you all a happy and safe festive season with friends and family. Pula!

*Kent Nilsson
Swedish Honorary Consul*



Swedish poetry visitors with their Botswana host, Mr. Moroka Moreri (fourth right).