

ENHANCING INTRA-PARTY DEMOCRACY

The Case of the Botswana Democratic Party

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ABSTRACT

There can be no real democracy without political parties – the lubricant that oils the engine of democracy. However, the dichotomy between political parties and democracy remains uncertain. The same is true of the relationship between democratic theory and party organisations. The concept of intra-party democracy centres on the idea of including party members in intra-party deliberations and decision-making processes. It is true that parties that are not open and transparent are unlikely to become democratic in their policy commitment because democratic institutions produce democratic attitudes and authoritarian institutions produce authoritarian attitudes. Our thesis is that intra-party democracy is a prerequisite for a democratic state. This paper traces the development of intra-party democracy within the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and argues that a new model of intra-party democracy, which is participatory in nature, is emerging within the party, although it is still resisted by some, ostensibly on the grounds that it destabilises the party.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties are, by their very nature, not monolithic entities. They are constituted by a membership drawn from a diverse pool of individuals who are bound together by some common outlook or persuasion. Whether a party is able to maintain cohesion and support therefore depends ultimately on its ability to empower and accommodate its diverse membership in its decision-making processes. This empowerment may relate, among other things, to how party members are selected to represent the party at council and parliamentary level, and also how differences within the party are managed. In short, the internal democratic processes of the party in terms of candidate selection and dispute management are either enhanced or constricted by its internal governance and organisational structure. A party that is internally democratic is likely to be more appealing and responsive. It is also likely to minimise factional conflict by promoting a culture of tolerance and open debate and a sense of inclusion and ownership. Against this background, this paper looks at how the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has sought to promote internal democratic processes within its ranks in terms of candidate selection and promoting divergent views. The paper also considers the challenges that have confronted the process of promoting this internal democracy in the BDP.

CANDIDATE SELECTION

The recruitment and selection of party candidates is a vital part of the political process with far-reaching consequences. The quality of the candidates selected determines not only the party's profile during elections but also influence either the direction of the party or government in terms of policy choices (Scarrow 2006, p 7; Lundell 2004, p 26). A party can hardly be classified as democratic if its organisational structure lacks mechanisms for civic participation and influence (Bille 2001, p 364). Enlisting the participation of supporters in selecting party leaders is therefore crucial to giving greater impulse to a party's internal democratic processes. Candidate selection is an important activity in the life of any political party. It is the primary screening device in the process through which the party in public office is reproduced (Katz 2001, p 277). But where does the power to select candidates reside?

Generally the power may either be centralised or dispersed among the different organs of the party. According to Gallagher (1998, p 4, cited in Lundell 2004, p 29), candidates may be selected in primaries open to all eligible voters, or they can be hand picked by the party leader alone. Other possibilities include selection by all party members in the constituency, by delegates at local

conventions, by a constituency committee, by regional organisations, by national organs or by a few factional leaders (Scarrows 2006, p 7; Lundell 2004, p 29; Norris 1996, p 202). But whatever device is used, the party must decide who is eligible to participate. Thus, it may limit participation by prescribing requirements that must be met by candidates for them to be eligible.

The BDP is no different in this regard. In 2001 the party came up with a new system of internal party elections for the purpose of deciding who would be nominated as its candidates for election to Parliament. Previously the BDP had appointed candidates by means of an electoral college.

Pursuant to enabling powers in its constitution the BDP established certain regulations governing the new system. These are contained in a document titled 'Primary Elections Rules and Regulations' and were approved at the party's national congress in 2001. According to the regulations, in particular regulations 1(a)-(d); 3; 4; 8 and 12, the system of primary elections works as follows:

- When a general election is imminent an announcement is made that the central committee is inviting all aspirant candidates to submit applications.
- All prospective candidates who have submitted applications are vetted by the central committee for approval.
- Vetting is done on a consideration of the prospective candidate's integrity, personality, commitment to the BDP, ability to represent the party and the public, and all other qualifications and disqualifications under the electoral laws of Botswana.
- The central committee's decision is final.
- After vetting has taken place 'all and only approved candidates shall stand for the relevant primary election'.
- Voting is by secret ballot and takes place (save in exceptional cases) at ward level.
- Eligible voters are those who are registered members of the BDP in good standing in the particular ward and whose names appear on the ward register at the date of the announcement of the primary elections.
- All candidates are to abide by the code of conduct established for campaign purposes.
- There is to be no campaigning within a radius of 100 metres of the premises of a primary election and campaigning includes any act calculated to influence voters.
- Any person who believes he or she has been prejudiced by alleged irregularities or improper conduct has a right of appeal first to the regional committee, and from there to the central committee.

- Any decision on an appeal by the central committee is final and binding.
- Notwithstanding anything contained in the regulations, the central committee may, where necessary, nominate a candidate in any constituency where an election of any type is imminent and the *modus operandi* as laid down is unworkable for any reason whatsoever (regulation).

As is evident from the foregoing, even though nomination for party positions is open to all members in good standing who meet certain prescribed requirements, the central committee remains the final authority in matters of candidate selection.

While one may take issue with such wide powers being reposed in the central committee, the vetting process and power to screen candidates may be justifiable on a number of grounds. First, while an open policy is more inclusive, it poses certain risks. The party may be destabilised when the selection process is infiltrated by people who are either opposed to the party or who do not share its vision (Scarow 2006, p 8). Second, candidates do not only represent a party. They represent a constituency as well, so their popularity outside the party matters too. Unless they are of good standing within and outside the party, they may not be able to attract or recruit members into the party. Thus, the choice of candidate may have a bearing on the election results. Third, as noted above, the selected candidates become the face of the party, shaping its makeup and character in public office (Carty 2004, p 19). Their commissions or omissions are often mistakenly attributed to the party they represent. Self-interest, therefore, demands that candidates must not become a source of embarrassment or a liability to the party.

MOVING WITH THE TIMES

Although the BDP's current selection process is characterised by detailed, explicit and standardised rules, this was not always the case. In its formative years, particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, the selection process was more informal. Prospective candidates were identified and appointed by the party's central committee without being subjected to an internal competitive process. A number of candidates, some still serving in Parliament, were selected in this ad hoc manner. They include among others, Daniel Kwelagobe, Chapson Butale and Lesedi Mothibamele. As one informant told us, although the input of members was ignored, the party was able to get its members to support its choice of candidates because

There were very few people willing to stand as candidates and a majority buckled at the thought of being members of parliament. In any case, with 90 percent of the population being illiterate at independence, the party had to shop for the best candidates if it was to succeed in driving its policies in government.

Interview, 31 August 2006

DEVOLUTION OF POWER

Although the imposition of candidates by the party leadership was initially convenient because the party could identify and recruit candidates quickly, the process contrasted with the BDP's liberal democratic vows. However, as the party began to draw a more enlightened and educated membership, it had to become more inclusive. This required it, among other things, to allow its members the autonomy to select their own representatives through electoral colleges. These electoral colleges were a form of guided democracy in that their decisions or actions were subject to confirmation by the central committee.

Because only a few members (normally fewer than 18) or delegates were responsible for electing party candidates under the electoral college system these were prone to bias and were susceptible to manipulation by the candidates through gifts and other promises. This nurtured discontent among the less wealthy and influential party members, who felt that party elections were tradeable and manipulable. Election outcomes, therefore, did not always represent the wishes of the community. In 1994, for instance, Ester Mosinyi, who was then the sitting member of Parliament for Shoshong, lost the party's constituency elections to Modibedi Robi. The party's central committee, as the final arbiter, rejected Robi's selection. It was not until litigation was threatened that the party relented and endorsed Robi's nomination. Similarly, following the nomination of Kabo Morwaeng to replace the late Peter Mmusi in the Thamaga constituency, the central committee stepped in to impose Gladys Kokorwe, who had lost the primary election to Morwaeng, as the party's preferred candidate.

The above incidents, which largely resulted from the over centralisation of power in the central committee, led to discontent among party members. Some, such as Kabo Morwaeng, left to join the opposition in protest against what they perceived as undemocratic tendencies in their own party.

In 2001, in an attempt to address anti-party sentiment and also to help in the mobilisation process, the party, through a system known as *Bulela Ditswe* (the term means an open party election process as opposed to a closed one), opened up the selection process to all party members. *Bulela Ditswe* has given previously disenfranchised members power by allowing them to vote directly for their chosen

candidates. It has also capped the powers of the central committee. Except in exceptional circumstance the central committee can no longer impose its preferred candidates on its members.

One informant had this to say about the new system:

For the first time in a long time there is now value in being a member of the party. No longer can we be held to the dictates of the Central Committee. Not only do we now preach democracy. We now also observe it in substance.

Interview, 1 September 2006

NOT ALL AS IT SEEMS

Although the *Bulela Ditswe* primary election system was introduced to promote transparency and participation and to open up competition for candidates wishing to stand for Parliament or in council elections, it has also brought into the party tensions and disagreements that have hitherto been absent.

The reason is mainly that it is essentially a two-pronged process involving, firstly, lobbying and canvassing for votes. This process, particularly when campaign rallies are attended by a large number of people, may create an impression or perception that one candidate has more support in a given area than the other. When this impression is not confirmed by the second phase of the process, which is an election by secret ballot, more often than not, losing candidates refuse to accept the result. This has led to a perception by some that the BDP's new primary elections regulations have caused more trouble for the party than previous party election procedures (*The Botswana Gazette* 31 March 2004). For instance, just before the 2004 general election supporters loyal to the loser in the BDP primary elections in the Francistown South Constituency, Wynter Mmolotsi, vowed that they would rather support an opposition candidate than the winner, Khumongwana Maoto. Undoubtedly, this could only increase rivalry between the two candidates and in the process threaten the stability of the party in this particular constituency. Mmolotsi believed he had a large following in the area and wondered how he had lost the primary elections (*Mmegi* 8 October 2004).

The other factor which has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of *Bulela Ditswe* is the existence of the party caucus with the power to determine who in the various BDP-controlled constituencies can stand for which position. As recently as 2005 three BDP councillors in the South East District Council were expelled for allegedly defying the party caucus decision to elect a nominated councillor, Matshidiso Fologang, as chair and Molefe Seitshiro as deputy chair. We submit that the existence in the party's organisational structure of a caucus

with such far-reaching powers negates the spirit of participatory democracy envisioned by *Bulela Ditswe* primary elections regulations.

MANAGING CONFLICT AND DISSENT

Although party supporters and members have generally endorsed *Bulela Ditswe* as enhancing their freedom to choose the leaders they want, it has also bred resentment and factionalism in the party. As an informant told us:

Elections are just one aspect of intra-party democracy. Tolerance, freedom of expression, and accommodation of different views are other aspects. We in the BDP have not been benevolent and magnanimous in managing the process. Because we are intolerant and unaccommodative, we now transact on the basis of our differences rather than our core values.

Interview, 1 September 2006

Another informant said:

Where party members are muzzled and threatened with expulsion or disciplinary action for presenting different viewpoints that invariably decreases the index of participation and directly bears on the quality of outcomes. Intra-party democracy for me is also about being accommodative and managing differences so that they do not snowball into uncontrollable factions and factional fighting.

Interview, 3 September 2006

What can be discerned from the above statements is that no matter how democratic a process is dissent must be tolerated. Those who lose party elections must not be shed or ignored, they, too, have a role to play. Unless they are accommodated, they may derail the party from its course through factional fighting. Although factions can be viewed as integrative and democratising in that they bring together individuals across 'separate and distinct element of the organization' (Carty 2004, p 15), who are able to engage with the other group on pertinent party issues, their destructive tendency outweighs their integrative function.

They are, in reality, a source of division and conflict and so possess the capacity to split parties (Carty 2004, p 16). In fact, politicians who seek to establish some dominance or control within their party often find that factional activity provides them with an important means of achieving their ends (Carty 2004, p15).

However, with respect to the BDP an emerging question is probably whether there is empirical evidence linking factionalism and deepening internal democracy in the party. Conclusions about this question are murky. But the following can be said: Despite its potential to democratise, factionalism in the BDP seems to conflict with two central values the party seems to cherish. These observable values, which are not publicly stated, are, compromise and party unity (Maundeni, Sebudubudu, Kebonang & Makhawa 2006, p 17).

There is a shared understanding between factions in the party that both these values are central. However, there are also second order values that are still contested. For instance, automatic succession of the vice-president to the presidency is a new constitutional requirement which may be regarded as a second order value. While it is cherished by the dominant faction, it is opposed by the rival faction. On the other hand, internal elections and primary elections may be regarded as second order values as both factions are willing to set them aside to actualise the first order values (Maundeni et al 2006, p 17).

In support of the thesis that the party has first order values, it has, over the years, entered into numerous compromise deals, and cancelled internal elections in order to promote party unity. However, in avoiding internal elections democratisation was constrained as the party failed to establish which faction was electorally weak or strong for the purpose of distributing political influence.

One of the major deals that led to the cancellation of internal elections occurred during Sir Ketumile Masire's presidency in 1997. At the time, the party was polarised between the so-called Kwelagobe and Merafhe factions. It was alleged that the Merafhe camp threatened to boycott the elections, ostensibly in protest because the Kwelagobe camp had reneged on an earlier deal not to challenge Festus Mogae for the chairmanship of the party (Molomo 2003, p 306). This was clear evidence that Mogae had close attachments to the Merafhe/Nkate faction. When Kedikilwe refused to compromise in 1997 and stood against Vice-President Mogae for party chairmanship, the latter withdrew his candidacy and internal party elections were cancelled. It was during that time that President Masire initiated a compromise in which the election was set aside and the leaders of the two factions agreed to share the executive positions in the party. This allowed Kedikilwe to be chairman of the party until 2003, when he finally lost to Vice-President Lt Gen Ian Khama (Maundeni et al 2006, p 18).

This deal had also allowed Kwelagobe to be secretary general until 2005, when he was unsuccessfully challenged by Margaret Nasha of the Merafhe/Nkate faction, who had refused to compromise. Between 1997 and 2003 the party virtually suspended internal elections, a move that had a negative impact on democratisation as it prevented the possibility of alternation between the factions.

In 2001 the factions entered into another big deal when Vice-President Khama

was successfully persuaded by party elders not to challenge Kedikilwe for the party chairmanship. Khama reluctantly agreed to withdraw his candidature at the last minute. The terms of the covert deal were that Kedikilwe would retire from the chairmanship by 2003 so that Khama could become chairman. But when the 2003 Gantsi congress approached Kedikilwe betrayed the terms of the deal and announced his readiness to defend his position. Khama also announced his intention to stand, and received support from President Mogae, who publicly expressed his preferences, sparking strong criticism from the rival faction who wished the president to stay neutral or pretend to do so (Maundeni et al 2006, p 18).

Thus, compromise politics was put aside in 2003 and central committee elections were held in Gantsi. It appeared at first to those who hoped for democracy within the party that the entry of Khama into BDP factional politics would lead to a revival of such internal democracy, which had been compromised on many occasions. The disappointing performance of Kedikilwe against Khama for the BDP chairmanship at the Gantsi Congress in 2003 destroyed his presidential ambitions. Kedikilwe embarrassingly lost the chairmanship to Khama. He also lost the additional membership elections and was overlooked by President Mogae in his appointment of five more members. Thus, after 2003, Kedikilwe had no important position in the party or in government, except leadership of his faction (Maundeni et al 2006, p 19).

CONCLUSION

Opening up party processes to members not only fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging but also establishes the necessary links between the party leadership and its members. But inclusion and a sense of belonging do not only end with the right to select party candidates they extend to the other spheres of party management. To be truly democratic, internal differences and conflict must be tolerated and given a platform lest they erupt into full-scale dispute. Although the BDP has sought to move with the times the existence of factions within it has seriously undermined the effectiveness of *Bulela Ditswe*.

Factions which have emerged have become polarised, especially because those who have lost party elections have not been accommodated in key party and government positions. However, compromises by the party based on a consensus list of candidates can only serve to undermine and stifle the growth of intra-party democracy in the BDP. Ultimately though, for *Bulela Ditswe* to take root and promote the practice of internal democracy it must permeate all the party's organisational structures. But this will require the political will and commitment from the party leadership not only to promote the party ethos but also to be magnanimous.

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