

# A FAILURE TO UNITE MEANS A FAILURE TO WIN

*The Leadership Challenge for Botswana's Opposition*

*Kaelo Molefhe and Lewis Dzimbiri*

Kaelo Molefhe is a lecturer and Dr Lewis B Dzimbiri senior lecturer in the Department of Political and Administrative Studies, University of Botswana  
P/Bag UB 00705, Gaborone, Botswana  
Tel: +267 355 5010; Fax: +267 355 2463  
e-mail:molefhek@mopipi.ub.bw • dzimbiril@mopipi.ub.bw

## ABSTRACT

*The paper argues that the failure of opposition parties to oust the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) from its firm grip on power has a great deal to do with a weak opposition leadership. Following the famous opposition victory in the Gaborone West North parliamentary by-election of 2005, where, for the first time, a united opposition won against the ruling BDP in parliamentary elections, electoral unity talks among opposition parties started in earnest, with a heightened sense that unity was the only possible way of ousting the BDP in the 2009 general election. This renewed sense of hope, however, seems to be nothing but a mirage, with signs of discontent and mistrust already showing among the parties engaged in these talks.*

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of opposition party unity has gained prominence in Botswana's political landscape in preparation for the 2009 general election. In most general elections since independence the opposition showing against a well-organised and resourced ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has not been encouraging – the party has at its disposal all the advantages of dominant-power politics (Carothers 2002). The talks adopted as a strategic move by opposition parties often induce a new sense of belief in the cooperating parties and a heightened optimism among the general public that the sustained rule of the BDP might be coming to an end. This result, however, seems to be unattainable, with signs of

discontent and mistrust emerging among the opposition parties engaged in unity talks. The talks have been characterised by the lack of a shared belief and sense of purpose and an apparent absence of leadership to drive and direct the project. The obstacle standing between the opposition parties and their goal is the failure of the cooperating parties in the last round of the current talks to agree on a model of opposition unity.

In assessing some of the attempts by the opposition parties to forge opposition cooperation as a strategic option to unseat the BDP in the general election, the paper underlines the importance to a multi-party democracy of a functioning opposition. It demonstrates the nature of opposition unity, with specific reference to the significance of leadership. The main thrust of the paper is that leadership of opposition parties is crucial to the realisation of collaboration or unity among the opposition. Furthermore, it is observed that the sustained dominance of the BDP is a result of positive and optimistic leadership that has managed to establish and maintain a particular coalition; something the opposition leadership has failed to attain.

#### THE TRAJECTORY OF OPPOSITION PARTY UNITY

Collaboration or unity among Botswana's opposition political parties is not new. It should be understood in the context of the wider regional developments that took place, particularly in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Malawi. The cause, pace and shape of these regional developments varied considerably, but they shared a need to defeat a common enemy – the white minority apartheid regime in South Africa and Zimbabwe and dictatorial rule in Malawi – in order to establish a multiparty democratic framework of governance. In the Botswana context, the desire is to oppose the dominant rule of the BDP.

The formation of the Botswana National Front (BNF) in 1965, shortly after the BDP's electoral victory over the Botswana People's Party (BPP) and the Botswana Independence Party (BIP) in the country's first general election on the eve of independence, represents the first partially successful experiment with party unity in Botswana. The party was formed to reconcile warring elements within the BPP to create a progressive block intended to bring down BDP rule.

While there was little success in reconciling elements within the BPP, the creation of a 'front' could be considered an achievement. The use of a 'front' as a strategic move was intended to bring all anti-BDP elements and organisations together, irrespective of their differing ideologies and personalities, to attain power (Molomo 2000). The front attracted influential people, including traditional leaders like Kgosi Bathoen of Bangwaketse, who would act as the founding president of the BNF.

The creation of the BNF did not succeed in reconciling the warring factions within the BPP and the failure culminated with the registration of the BNF as a political party, adding to the divisions within the opposition camp (Molomo & Molefe 2005). This seed of division was to blossom into splinter parties that have continued to undermine opposition prospects of attaining state power. More telling was that some members of the party resigned in 1989 after learning that the BNF was not a party but a front which encompassed a wide spectrum of people and groupings following different ideologies. In the process the BNF, as noted by Mokopakgosi & Molomo (2000), was able to consolidate itself as the main opposition party, only to become entangled in its own contradictions. Among the splinter parties from the BNF have been the Freedom Party (FP), United Socialist Party (USP), Botswana Workers Front (BWF), Botswana Congress Party (BCP), and the National Democratic Front (NDF).

Another notable attempt at opposition unity came with the formation of the Botswana Alliance Movement (BAM) shortly before the 1999 general election. A product of four cooperating parties, namely the BNF, the BPP, the United Action Party (UAP), and the Independence Freedom Party (IFP), the purpose was, once again, to oust the BDP. The arrangement allowed each party to preserve its individual identity but to enter election contests under a common symbol. The BAM framework encountered a setback on the eve of the 1999 elections when the main opposition BNF withdrew, effectively undermining the prospect of opposition unity in the election and, as a result, losing ground from a high of 33 per cent of parliamentary seats gained in the 1994 general election to a mere 17 per cent (Molomo & Molefe 2005). Other parties performed dismally in the election and consequently failed to gain representation in Parliament. The BAM constitutes an alternative to more established opposition parties and plays a significant role in any movement towards opposition unity.

The current collaboration effort emerged soon after yet another opposition loss, in the 2004 general election. Importantly, the results of the 2004 election confirmed the declining dominance of the BDP, with the combined opposition vote standing at almost 48 per cent against almost 52 per cent of the vote for the BDP, although, as a consequence of Botswana's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, the BDP won 44 of the 57 contested parliamentary seats. The fact that the popular vote for the BDP has declined in recent general elections (Molomo & Molefe 2005) has given opposition parties a strong belief that under the current electoral system a united opposition is the only hope of unseating it.

After BNF president Otsweletse Moupo won a parliamentary by-election in the Gaborone West North constituency against a BDP candidate, Robert Masitara, in 2005, opposition parties agreed to start working on a possible cooperation model in preparation for the 2009 general election. A Memorandum of

Understanding (MoU) was signed between the BNF, BCP, BPP and BAM, binding the signatories to unite against the BDP. In the MoU the opposition parties agreed not to contest by-elections in constituencies or wards contested by other parties to the agreement. In the wake of that arrangement the opposition won a number of by-elections at local level, culminating in a belief that the current collaboration would be more successful than previous ones.

Unlike the previous collaborations the current unity talks have been brokered by independent facilitators troubled by the weak and fragmented nature of opposition parties and hoping to assist opposition parties to reach a workable framework for cooperation, thereby enhancing the democratic process in the country. The reality has been far from encouraging.

Among the problems have been differences over how to handle the issue of defectors from the cooperating parties. The defector issue was badly managed, especially when receptions staged for defectors were high profile events. While some collaborating partners raised concerns about possible damage to the unity arrangement the receiving party found nothing wrong with the defections. Regrettably, the defector issue undermined the confidence and trust needed for collaboration initiatives.

Another serious and contentious issue has been that of a model of cooperation. The BNF failed to agree with other collaborating partners, preferring an alliance model similar to that of South Africa's tripartite alliance where there is a lead party around which cooperation arrangements are built (BNF position paper 2006). On the basis of its status as the most popular opposition party in the country the lead party would be the BNF. This did not go down well with other parties, who felt the BNF was acting as 'Big Brother', undermining the individual contributions of the others. The euphoria and optimism that marked the beginning of the current collaborative efforts have disappeared, replaced by a sense of anger and mistrust among the collaborative parties. In the eyes of the general public the saga has unfolded as another lost opportunity.

#### LEADING WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Leadership theory has evolved from the 'Great Man' period (when personality traits and characteristics were viewed as the key to political greatness) to thinking dominated by, among others, transformational and strategic leadership theories (Van Seters & Field 1990; Yukl 1989), both of which address an organisation-wide need for change. The relevance of the latter two theories cannot be overemphasised in the face of the current increased demands on and the complexities facing organisations in the changing socio-economic and political environment. The failure of the opposition to oust the BDP relates, to some extent, to levels of

responsiveness of opposition parties to changes in the wider environment. The public demand for opposition unity has been high, but it seems the leadership has failed to apply itself to addressing this demand effectively and thus perpetuating BDP rule. Importantly, leaders act as agents of change and are primarily concerned with promoting collective adaptation to social transformation (Kotter 1990) by transforming followers and organisations by creating visions of potential opportunities and instilling in constituents a commitment to change (Tichy et al 1984).

Leadership plays an important role in any organisation. In the political context leaders influence and shape the nature of the political structure (Klenke 1999) and in organisations they provide clarity, insight and vision. The current attempts at opposition collaboration have been marked by a failure by the leadership to create an inspiring vision or to provide clarity. Conflicting models of unity presented by cooperating partners and the subsequent failure to compromise on the best possible model to adopt seem to indicate a lack of insight on the part of the leadership. Without a basis for cooperation it has not been possible for the parties to find a way to work together. There is a need for the leaders to establish a sense of purpose and to be visible to support their project. The failure to manage effectively the issues of defectors undermined the project, which, in its totality, would have been more beneficial than the benefits derived from individual parties attracting defectors.

Importantly, leadership is recognised primarily by outcomes such as major changes in the culture and strategies of the organisation or social system (Bass 1985; Van Seters & Field 1990) – it is critical to mobilise an organisation to adapt its behaviour in order to remain relevant in a changing environment. In the absence of such a change, the organisation is putting its relevance, and therefore its existence, at risk. Accordingly Heifetz & Laurie (1997) observe that motivating people in organisations to adapt is a sign of effective leadership in a competitive environment.

The collaborative efforts in Botswana have shown how inflexible opposition parties can be. The failure to agree on a possible model undermined the whole process and stalled the talks. A lack of urgency on the part of the negotiating parties undermines the prospects of opposition in the 2009 election and leaders will have to instil such a sense of urgency if the opposition is to remain relevant or they will put its very existence at risk.

The type of leadership discussed above is known as ‘transformational leadership’, where a leader is a visionary, appealing to followers to move towards ‘higher and more universal needs and purposes’ to the extent where the leader is seen as an agent of change. This kind of visionary leadership is needed within the opposition if it is to provide any meaningful challenge to the dominant BDP.

By contrast, the BDP's leadership has maintained its focus on staying in power. The BDP has a depth of leadership because it has the necessary resources at its disposal to attract and recruit individuals with managerial and leadership skills. The leadership has addressed the problem of internal factionalism by acknowledging its existence, speaking openly about it, and, where necessary, imposing sanctions on the perpetrators. This is in contrast to the opposition, where internal strife has been permitted to a point where parties have split – a mark of ineffectual leadership.

### ELUSIVE OPPOSITION UNITY IN BOTSWANA

Electoral unity between opposition parties has been an important concept in the quest for new development or social progress. In Botswana the FPTP system has been identified as the culprit responsible for the bad performance of opposition parties. Sebudubudu & Osei-Hwedie (2005) observe that the FPTP system rewards winners and excludes losers, thereby entrenching the dominance of the ruling BDP party. Unity seems to be driven by strength in numbers and the thinking appears to be that if the opposition parties pool their resources they will be able to oust the BDP using the principle of FPTP – that is, that the majority wins. This opinion is affirmed by Holm & Darnolf (2000) when they argue that in the FPTP system political parties must create broad-based alliances if they are to win power from the incumbent.

As indicated above, attempts to achieve opposition party unity are not a new feature of Botswana's political landscape although the numerous moves by the BNF to attain such unity (Somolekae 2005) have met with little success and there has never been a change of governance in the country. Holm & Darnolf (2000) point out that the desire to collaborate has been particularly strong immediately after an election loss. The reactive nature of collaboration efforts is evidence of the absence of a proactive and strategic outlook on the part of the parties involved.

The current talks have become a self-defeating exercise, with the BNF and BCP castigating each other openly in the press and in the process losing sight of the fact that they stand to gain more by cooperating in their efforts to oust the BDP. They have become their own worst enemy and have lost sight of their initial intention. In the absence of strategic leadership the collaboration efforts will continue to be futile.

Why is opposition unity proving to be a hard nut to crack? Do the leaders of the opposition have a common sense of direction? Do they see unity as a common strategy for success in the political arena? Is the problem the self-centred desire of individuals to become 'the leader'?

## CONCLUSION

The paper has considered the importance of opposition parties to the consolidation of democratic governance in a one-party dominant system. The domination of the BDP in Botswana and the sustained absence of alternation of power have raised doubts about the quality of the country's democracy (Molutsi 1998; Osei-Hwedie 2001). A functioning democracy is achieved when the opposition parties participate actively and present themselves as a government-in-waiting.

In the case of Botswana, the leaders of the opposition parties have failed to effect a collaborative relationship, without which the opposition is unlikely to achieve such an aim.

## — REFERENCE —

- Bass, B M (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.
- BNF 2006. *Towards a united opposition in Botswana: The case for alliance model*. Unpublished working paper.
- Carothers, T. 2002. 'The end of the transition paradigm'. *Journal of Democracy* 13(1).
- Heifetz, R & D L Laurie. 1997. 'The Work of Leadership'. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February.
- Holm, J D & S Darnolf. 2000. 'Democratizing the administrative state in Botswana'. In Y Bradshaw & S N Ndegwa (eds). *The Uncertain Promise of Southern Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Klenke, K. 1999. 'Women leaders and managers in the global community'. *Career Development International* 4(3).
- Kotter, J P. 1990. 'What leaders really do'. *Harvard Business Review*, May-June.
- Mokopakgosi, B & M Molomo. 2000. 'Democracy in the face of weak opposition'. *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 14 (1).
- Molomo, M. 2000. 'Understanding government and opposition in Botswana'. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 38(1).
- & W Molefe. 2005. 'Voters and electoral performance of political parties in Botswana'. In Z Maundeni (ed). *40 years of Democracy in Botswana*. Gaborone: Mmegi Publishing House.
- Molutsi, P. 1998. 'Elections and Electoral Experience in Botswana'. In W A Edge & M H Lekorwe (eds). *Botswana: Politics and Society*. Pretoria: J L van Schaik.
- Osei-Hwedie, B. 2001. 'The political opposition in Botswana: the politics of factionalism and fragmentation'. *Transformation* 45.
- Sebudubudu, D & B Osei-Hwedie. 2005. *Democratic Consolidation in SADC: Botswana's 2004 Elections*. EISA.

- Somolekae, G. 2005. *Political Parties in Botswana*. EISA Research Report No 27.
- Tichy, N M & D O Ulrich. 1984. 'The leadership challenge: A call for the transformational leader'. *Sloan Management Review* 26.
- Van Seters, D A & R H G Field. 1990. 'The evolution of leadership theory'. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 3(3).
- Yukl, G. 1989. 'Managerial leadership: a review of theory and research'. *Journal of Management* 152.