

Possibility of Democratic Peace in Africa: A Lesson Drawn from Botswana

By
Godwin Gonde Amani'

Abstract

Starting with a general understanding and application of the term democracy, specifically Western Liberal Democracy, this paper uses the case of Botswana as an example of a possibility of peaceful transition of government in Africa. The paper majors on the views of Robert Dahl, particularly on what democracy is and how democratic societies and their governments should be formed and behave. The paper also sets the foundation of its arguments on what has been termed 'democratic peace'. The paper then uses this background to assess the behaviour of the state of Botswana in terms of democratic peace theory and the views of Robert Dahl to gauge out the political possibilities of peaceful transition of political power in Africa through democratic elections. The paper concludes that democracy can be a factor for peaceful transition of political power, taking lessons from Botswana's history of political stability and peaceful elections over 40 years.

Key Words: democracy, democratic peace, elections

1.0 Introduction

The demand for political inclusion has been one of the major causes of conflicts in Africa. Historically, Africa is a continent that faces almost all types of conflicts as argued by Waltz (1959). The continent has been criticized for having conflicts and wars from intrastate to interstate, most of them resulting from demands for political inclusion in general and democratic political systems in particular (Ho - Wo, 2011).

The East African Election Management Bodies have suggested that, electoral competition has become an important barometer of the health of democracy in the region. These bodies not only insist on the competition side of the elections but also such elections to be regular, free and fair as well as transparent. The bodies direct that, the transfer of power which assures the sustainability of peace

¹Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim Centre for Foreign Relations, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
(g.gamani@yahoo.com)

within the states will always be guaranteed through free and fair elections contrary to what peace spoilers within the region believe that ‘bullets change the governments far sure than ballots’ (Deng, 2008).

Deng (ibid.) continues to show that in Africa, federalism is seen as one of the means of removing biases and uniting people under one federal state. Nigeria, Ethiopia and now Kenya have been some examples on how such a system can function in taking care of intra state violence. The success of this system of government is based on the argument that the rights (and responsibilities) of minor groups should be stipulated within the constitution so that every individual will see the constitution as a mirror reflecting his/her image. Also people should be able to practice democracy as a means of choosing those whom they want to represent them in decision making.

The next section of this paper gives a short background to the concept of democracy and democratic peace by reviewing major argument for liberal democracy and mainly the views of Robert Dahl – among others. Then the paper engages the case of Botswana highlighting the nature of governance that has enabled it to experience 40 years peaceful elections and transitions of government. The paper settles its argument after appreciating a few criticisms levelled against the nature of democracy in Botswana.

1.1 Methods and Materials

This paper employs a case study research approach where Botswana is selected due to its democratic record as the leading democratic state in Africa. It is primarily a qualitative study and it involves desk review. Data were collected through online materials and a review of journal articles, media resources and other scholarly works. Thematic data analysis was used and findings were ordered into descriptive categories around which the main elements are presented.

2.0 Background to the concept of democracy

2.1 From Greece to Fukuyama’s Thesis

For a long time the concept of democracy has been a fundamental issue of discussion. With the challenges facing the sovereignties of states and legitimacies of governments all over the world, it seems that the definition of

democracy goes beyond what Abraham Lincoln (The 16th US president) termed as “Government of the people, for the people and by the people”. Since the ancient Greek idea of ‘democratia’ as the rule by the people back in the 5th Century, democracy has continued to emerge and re-emerge as a complex and disputable term and as an ideal with complicated implications. The people’s notion on democracy pitted against how they view their governments’ and states’ actions towards social and political order leave a number of unanswered questions about what democracy really is. Peter Stirk and David Weigall, (1995) when analysing democracy and popular representation, came up with a number of assumptions and even traced how different ancient societies considered the concept of democracy.

The same analysis was done by John Morrow, (2005) who viewed democracy in terms of the location of political authority in a ruling body and brought a debatable question of “Who Should Rule”. Francis Fukuyama in his famous book “The End of History and the Last Man” argued in favour of democracy when trying to prove it to be a fundamentally better system that could calm the political tensions of the world. Following the success of the West in exporting liberal democracy to other parts of the world in the 1980s, Fukuyama believed that all states of the world would be converted to democracies, (Fukuyama, 1992). Those who argued later in favour of Fukuyama’s notion of democracy agreed on the idea of *Democratic Peace Theory* which commented that, democracies rarely or never go to war with one another.

Actually, Fukuyama’s book was viewed as the continuation of Kojève’s (1969) work with the same title “End of History” though the two had different perceptions on the future of the world in terms of democracy and capitalism. The philosophical ideas of Fukuyama and Kojève on the notion of democracy are more influenced by the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Emmanuel Kant, George Wilhelm, Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx and Leo Strauss.

2.2 Robert Dahl on Democracy and Democratization

In making an in-depth discussion on the democracy and democratization, this paper uses Robert A. Dahl’s three works on democracy with a greater focus on the relationship between democracy and state which we will later discuss when we link democracy to the case of Botswana. In his three works, *Dilemmas of*

Pluralistic Democracy (1982), *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (2005), and *On Political Equality* (2006), Dahl insists on how power within the state should be shared to ensure that the aspect of democracy is not affected by the distribution of power. In *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Dahl views democracy as a process by which ordinary citizens exercise a relatively high degree of control over their leaders. For him, there is never a theory of democracy but the theories of democracy that means democracy is viewed differently by societies. He scrutinizes the element of power versus man in a democratic society and highlights the ability of power to pose as a threat to any party without power in a given society. He also points out the idea of Natural Rights as the elements of democracy within the society and insists that the state by no means should violate these rights.

On the same issue of men with power in relation to democracy, Dahl argued that, men love power and from that nature he is sure that those with power in their hands will always strive to hold it and increase it (Dahl, 2006). Democracy here has to do with equalitarianism in which case a republic government will be needed for true democracy to succeed. The republic government is the one which derives all of its powers directly from the people and is administered by persons holding their office during pleasure of the majority and for a limited period or during a period of good behaviour. Man's love for power was clearly depicted in the book *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, (1598). The idea of one man being given all power (divinely) came into domination when King James VI of England insisted on the divine rights of the kings. His ideas went further by considering that the kings are not only God's Lieutenants but also by the virtue of their authorities they are Gods. This means they possess the powers of policy makers, philosophers and Gods (Dahl, 1982).

In *The Dilemmas of Democracies*, Dahl brought the idea of autonomy versus control. On these dilemmas, he highlighted the link between Organizations and Democracy. The basic argument is that there should be organizations with autonomy and power to oversee the working of the individuals vested with power in order to avoid abuse of democracy. This is the case when a parliament, for example, has autonomy to supervise the president and his government.

In this view, democracy includes political equality in which according the role of

institutions in ensuring democracies to the people is emphasised (Dahl, 2005). Whether people participate in direct democracy as a result of small population or they are being represented in the assemblies by their representatives, his ideas remain that the peoples' will should be fully exercised. According to Dahl (2006), democracy is all about the necessary systems of fundamental rights of the people and that all adult human beings are entitled to equal treatment. He linked this concept of equality of men and their struggle for power. For him the fundamental truth about human being is that, power corrupts people and absolute power corrupts people absolutely. The voting system was therefore also a concern for Dahl when he insisted that the democratic society is the one that allows its citizens to make decisions through the votes and ensuring that each vote is counted and finally the majority prevails, (ibid).

For democracy to succeed, the legal part of the ruling institutions should be legitimate. As the major law of the land, the constitution needs to be framed in such a way that all citizens and their identities are reflected, (Francis *et al.*, 2013). The process of constitution making needs to be democratic and that all citizens need to participate fully. Democratization and Constitutionalism are mandatory in removing differences within the democratic society. Any writing of a constitution should involve all identities in a country so that all the people will have a sense of ownership of their country and their government.

2.3 Democratic Peace Theory

Democratic Peace Theory has been in the field of political science for years. It became famous during the 1960's when the Cold War period was leading the world politics. Though it was first considered as a scientific theory, this theory had its foundations from the 18th Century when scholars like Emmanuel Kant and Thomas Paine included the theory in their works. The main argument of this theory is the emphasis that liberal and republican forms of democracies are less likely to go to war with one another since they act in favour of peace. This theory argues more on the notion that, democratic states are more dovish in their interactions with other democracies, and that democratically elected leaders are more likely to resort to peaceful resolution in disputes - both when those conflicts are happening within and without the democracies. The theory insists on the need to democratize the authoritarian regimes and take all the necessary steps to ensure that the restoration of democracy is done among states in order

to ensure peace and stability in the world.

3. The case of Botswana's Democracy

Republic of Botswana is a landlocked country in the southern part of Africa which has so far enjoyed over 50 years of independence. With a population of 2.3 million people majority (75%) being of Tswana ethnic, Botswana is considered as the origin of modern human being (Maundeni, 2005). After independence, Botswana was one among the poorest countries in the world and having about 75% of its land as part of the Kalahari Desert, Botswana was seen as a country without prospects of quick economic growth.

Botswana is the oldest democratic African state with the president who is both the head of state and government and is directly accountable to the parliament which is made of the people's representatives from across the country. According to democratic index in 2021, Botswana was ranked as a stable and fast growing democratic state in Africa being the 30th out of 167 states. At that time it ranked even higher than Italy and Belgium which were considered among the best democratic states in Europe. By 2023 Botswana ranks 75th electoral democracy worldwide and according to Transparency International Botswana it is the least corrupt country in Africa.

The government of Botswana has made efforts to ensure that the parliament has total autonomy to supervise the president and his government. The government of Botswana stands as an organization that is different from many African states. When it comes to the question of power, many African governments use every opportunity to increase injustice and foster egoism and reach a point of destroy democracy completely, Dingake, (2009). These countries can have lessons to learn from Botswana.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The paper has highlighted on the views in the works of Robert Dahl who discussed at length the features of liberal democracy. On the idea of minority rule and majority rights which were argued by Robert Dahl in his works, Botswana seems to have managed to raise the voices of the minorities for the constitution of Botswana allows political competition among all classes within the state, (Mafela, 2007). Although Dahl went beyond by including issue of equality of all

classes within the state to claim democracy, the constitution of Botswana remains silent on the issue of gender considering all citizens are equal without any group to claim more favours than the other.

The constitution of Botswana guarantees fundamental rights to the minorities and protects those rights through an independent judicial body. At the risk of passing a matter which might not work in favour of the minorities, the judiciary in Botswana is the only entrusted organ to say “no” to the majorities and even to their elected representatives. This power is what Robert Dahl viewed as the necessary steps that the government will take to ensure the happiness of the majorities and the satisfaction of the minorities.

Dahl, (2005) in his work *A Preface to Democratic Theory* brought that idea of Madisonian democracy which insists on the separation of power among the branches of the state. As articulated in the previous arguments, the separation of power would allow checks and balances and ensure accountability of the elected leaders. As for Botswana, the issue of power separation is clearly jotted in the constitution which highlights the roles of the executive, legislature and judiciary. Justice Dingake O.B.K who presented his paper to the Southern African Chief Justices’ Conference in 2009 insisted that, the constitution of Botswana is the one to be adopted by most African countries which still face the problem of power struggle. For Botswana, the legislative’s main function is to enact laws while the primary and basic role of the executive part is to take charge of the conduct of the affairs of the state. For the judicial body of Botswana, the main function is to adjudicate on disputes that may arise when the organs may collide and to have the final word on the interpretation of the law (Dingake, 2009).

The book *40 Years of Democracy in Botswana* by Maundeni (2005) highlights the role the institutions in emphasizing democracy within a state. Basing on Institutionalism theory which suggests on how the states institutions help in shaping actors’ behaviours, Maundeni puts more emphasis on the transparency of the Electoral Commission of Botswana which over 40 years has managed to transfer power from one leadership to another peacefully. After dilemmas on the whole process of electing officials to an independent electoral commission, the in 1997, the Parliament of Botswana amended the constitution through Act No 18/1997 section 66 and introduced a new section which will completely deal

with the introduction of the independent electoral commission.

The commission is mandated with independent powers of conducting (at any time) a referendum, giving instructions to the candidates, and ensuring that elections are conducted efficiently, properly, freely and fairly and perform all other duties as may be enacted by an act of the parliament of Botswana, (ibid).

Similar to what Robert Dahl explained about democracy, the democratic situation in Botswana seems to be of the Madisonian type which allows an intensive check and balance among the branches of the government, (Dingake, 2009). According to Dahl (2005) the Madisonian Democracy is the form of democracy which is more majoritarian and distributes powers among other branches of the state. The Madisonian doctrine as derived from James Madison, the 4th President of the United States of America, insists on compromise methods in reaching consensus rather than other ways of decision making.

The doctrine views democracy as an effort to bring a compromise between the power of minorities and the power of majorities, between the political equality of all adult citizens and the desire to limit their sovereignty. Unlike Plato's philosophical ideas on man and power which suggested that a single-person rule would provide solutions to the problems within the society, the Madisonian type deals with the separation of power and not to invest all powers on a single person which has the highest possibilities of causing tyranny. Platos republich only needed a philosophical king to rule over men and to provide all the necessary needs of the society including freedom, liberty and equality as said by Plato, (Plato, 1970). On the contrary, Dahl's type sees the possibility of that king to be ignorant hence a room to tyranny. The fear here is that if all powers will be handled to an individual person it will prevent external checks and accountability of such individual to the people who put him in power.

5.0 Some criticism of Democracy in Botswana

Molomo (2000) has criticized the democracy of Botswana by questioning the supreme powers of the president. Tracing the changes of power in Botswana and the democratic transition in the region which witnessed the independence of Namibia in 1990, the multiparty elections in Zambia and Malawi and the historical election race in South Africa in 1994, Molomo found a need to limit the powers of the executive to avoid future possibilities of tyranny. Although he

showed how Botswana ranks high among the democracies in Africa and that it had enjoyed a stable multiparty democracy for the past 40 years, the author's fears are more based on the type of constitution. The constitution of Botswana is a Westminster parliament with 40 members who are largely dominated by the ruling party Botswana Democratic Party. The BDP dominates both the parliament and the executive and leaving much power to the office of the president.

Molomo went further by challenging the succession system developed in Botswana whereby, the vice presidents serving are more likely to succeed the presidents upon their retirement, deaths or any other reasons. History shows that, the presidency of Botswana started with Seretse Khama (1966 – 1980) and succeeded by Quett Masire after his death (Masire was the vice president during Khama's administration). Later on (1998 -2008) Botswana was led by President Festus Mogae who had also been the vice president during Masire's rule. Comrade Mogae was then succeeded by Lieutenant General Ian Seretse Khama and, as commented by Molomo, he was also the vice president of Mogae after his retirement as the Chief of Defence Forces of Botswana.

In a similar way, his last vice president Dr. Erick Mokgweetsi Masisi became the president of Botswana after the end of Ian Khama's term and he serves now as the current president of Botswana (Dingake, 2009). This is what is challenged by Professor Molomo. According to him, democracy should also consider things like the systems which channel power to people of a certain caliber. He suggests that, the proper channels should be left for everyone to have equal opportunity in leadership and things like hereditary and nepotism in leadership should be counted as out-dated, (Maundeni, 2005).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has endeavoured to show that, so far, Botswana stands as a country of example in Africa which has managed to apply the liberal democratic standards in African way and maintained the majority happiness and minority satisfactions. As a state with that clean record, Botswana's future in human rights, minorities' role in governance as well as economic growth and development is clearly predicted to be good. The main recommendation is to consider a number of factors when assessing the features of democracy and democratization process of

states. Botswana has done so far a good job in maintaining liberal features hence praised as a democratic state in the region but there is a need to improve a political condition for opposition parties to fully participate in decision making. Given this reality, other African states have lessons to learn from Botswana.

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