



## **Botswana's Experimentation with 'Ethical Foreign Policy'**

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### **Abstract**

When President Ian Khama assumed office in 2008 there was an apparent shift in Botswana's foreign policy away from a policy informed by *realpolitik* to one that is more aggressively condemnatory of undemocratic practices and human rights abuses abroad. Since then Botswana has regularly been amongst the first countries, and sometimes the only African country, to denounce 'rogue states' or call for censure of some governments and political leaders that stand accused of human rights abuses and undemocratic conduct. It is one of the most ardent supporters of the International Criminal Court (ICC) despite growing skepticism about the court amongst African countries. This is an unusual stance for an African country to take, particularly one as small and as vulnerable as Botswana. African countries generally eschew any foreign policy posture that might be seen as encouraging interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This article examines Botswana's attempt in the past five years or so since Khama's ascendance to the presidency to follow an ethical foreign policy, the role leadership orientation of the President may have had in shaping it, as well as its consequences.

### **Introduction**

Following Khama's ascendance to the presidency in 2008, Botswana's foreign policy seemed to change from a cautious and pragmatic approach based on *realpolitik* that had been the hallmark of the country's engagement with the world for most of its history (Zaffiro 1989, 1992, 1993; Taylor 1998), to a loud and decidedly abrasive approach ostensibly informed by concerns about human rights and civil liberties (Government of Botswana 2010; Keorapetse 2013). Botswana is regularly amongst the first countries, and sometimes the only African country, to denounce 'rogue states' or call for censure of governments and political leaders that stand accused of human rights abuses and anti-democratic conduct. Recently it broke ranks with the rest of the African Union (AU) members over an AU resolution aimed at forcing the International Criminal Court (ICC) to drop charges against the newly elected president of Kenya and his deputy for post-election violence in 2007-2008 (Ontebetse 2013). Immediately after the Zimbabwean elections of 2013, Botswana found itself isolated and alone again when it called for the elections

to be audited following reports that president Robert Mugabe and his party may have cheated in those elections, a position which it quickly abandoned after a Southern African Development Community (SADC) leaders' summit in Zambia. More recently, during the general debate of the 68th session of the United Nations General Assembly, the country's Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation called for "punitive action in whatever form" to be taken against the Syrian government over the continuing war in that country. In his statement the Minister condemned actions of some members of the Security Council which he believed were frustrating efforts to find a lasting solution in Syria, a pointed criticism of Russia and China. He could only have been referring to these countries because he had on a previous occasion summoned the Chinese and Russian ambassadors in Botswana to chide them over their countries' use of veto powers in relation to Syria (UN News Centre 2014).

This is an unusual stance for an African country to take, particularly one as small and a vulnerable as Botswana. African countries generally eschew any foreign policy posture that might be seen as encouraging interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Instead, they prefer to put emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This might explain in part why African regional organizations as well as the AU tend to react slowly to serious and cataclysmic events which often turn out to have serious long term implications for the security and stability of the continent. Western countries are much less reticent. Even so, in recent times, the idea that a country's foreign policy should be explicitly guided by ethical considerations (re)surfaced among leading western nations in the 1990s after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe (Chandler 2003). Hammer has suggested that "ethical foreign policy" maybe conceived in broad terms as a "policy which defines the principles and practices of international relations based on the respect for human rights, international obligations, transparency and accountability" (Hammer 2007:6). Ethical concerns supposedly informed interventions in a number of countries including Yugoslavia, Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone. Post-liberation South Africa appeared to be attracted to the idea, albeit for a very brief spell, in the 1990s. Flushed with success after a near miraculous transition from a brutal and repressive order to a democracy, South Africa initially sought to spread the gospel of good governance, and for a while under Mandela, tried to pursue a foreign policy that was arguably informed by ethical considerations (Alden et al 2004). But the country soon found itself isolated and was as a result forced to reconsider its approach to foreign relations.

It is against this background that the shift in emphasis in Botswana's foreign policy towards a policy informed by ethical concerns came as a surprise to many observers and commentators. This new approach to international relations attracted controversy at home and abroad (Dingake 2011; Badza 2009; Afrik-News 2008). But initially, it seemed to have broad support amongst observers and commentators in the media, who believed that as one of the leading democracies in Africa, Botswana should have a foreign policy that reflects its values and democratic traditions (Mmegi 2008). Such sentiments were echoed beyond Botswana's borders. Writing barely a year after the shift in policy one West African blogger, Kofi Thompson, urged Ghana to

“emulate Botswana’s ethical foreign policy” (Thompson, K 2009). At the same time the shift in policy has attracted fierce criticism at home and in neighboring Zimbabwe which was the original target of the policy. Some critics have ridiculed the policy and described it rather unflatteringly as ‘megaphone diplomacy’ while others see the country’s animated response to international issues as little more than futile theatrics (Dingake 2011; Ntibinyane 2013). Many observers doubt the sincerity of President Khama who is regarded as the instigator of the policy shift based on his record at home (Dingake 2011b). It appears that the number of skeptics has been growing. Many contend that at best the new policy is naïve and at worst detrimental to the national interest. It is against this background that the present paper examines Botswana’s attempt in the past five years to follow an ethical foreign policy, the role the leadership orientation of President Khama may have had in shaping it, as well as its consequences.

### **Botswana: Decision-making norms and the constitutional structure**

Most foreign policy decision models link foreign policy decisions to the architecture of state institutions as well as the distribution and dynamics of power amongst them. However, Herman cautions that “premature connection of particular types of decision units and processes with specific kinds of countries or political systems can lead to distortions in our explanations of their foreign policies” (Herman 2001: 51). This is not to suggest that the organizational structure of government is not important. An innovative approach developed by Herman and Herman known as the decision unit approach posits that certain conditions such as the structure of the constitution and institutional norms make it more likely that one decision unit or the other will emerge as the authoritative unit for a given occasion (Herman and Herman 1989). However, it is less deterministic than earlier approaches (Harman 2001). Below we briefly consider the constitutional structure and power matrix in Botswana as well as norms that have developed around decision-making processes in government.

Despite its reputation as the longest running democracy in Africa and much talked about exceptionality, the constitutional structure and power matrix in Botswana is not different from that of most other African countries (Molomo 1998; Sebudubudu et al. 2011; Good 1992; Mogalakwe 2009; Hatchard et al. 2004). Botswana’s political system is dominated by the presidency which is invested with immense powers by the Constitution (Sebudubudu et al. 2013). This is a common pattern across Africa regardless of regime type (Cranenburgh 2009). A number of scholars have observed that despite changes wrought by democratic revolutions that swept across the continent in the 1990s, the distribution of power in many African countries remains highly skewed in favor of the presidency which generally overshadows other institutions (Bratton et al. 1994; Hatchard et al. 2004). Thus existing institutional structures and practices in Africa do not generally encourage diffusion of power and participatory decision-making. This has resulted in the marginalization of institutions which should be at the center of policy-making, such as parliament. It has been suggested that, save for one or two exceptions, African parliaments are dominated by the executive (Hatchard et al. 2004: 96; Cranenburgh 2009). We

may safely conclude from this that compared to their counterparts in the developed world, African parliaments generally have very little say in the formulation of foreign policy.

Turning to policy-making in Botswana, it has been suggested that the bureaucracy has dominated the policy-making arena for much of the country's post-independence history (Molomo 1989; Nieman 1993) though it is also clear that the political leadership has shaped the broad outlines of and provided rhetorical framing for these policies (Masire 2006). Niemann argues that any analysis of shifts in Botswana foreign policy towards southern Africa must of necessity take into account the changing nature and role of the bureaucracy (Niemann 1993: 39). It is also evident that from the earliest days of independence the presidency not only took a close interest in foreign policy but also controlled its development (Zaffiro 1993). Perhaps, it is for this reason that the foreign policy bureaucrats were based in the Office of the President for quite a spell after independence. Even after the creation of a position of Ministry of External affairs it was understood that the president would "remain the top diplomat and manager of external relations" (Zaffiro 1993: 41). This is not entirely surprising because foreign relations have been an extremely sensitive matter for much of Botswana history because of its geo-political situation. In addition, the nature of the constitutional structure is such that every leader, even the most cautious, is bound to leave a personal imprint on foreign policy. It seems that the presidency, together with and through top bureaucrats, were responsible for formulation of foreign policy and making critical decisions. However, it has been argued that the government sought to create the impression of a broader consensus over foreign policy especially as the country lived under the shadow of military threat from racist minority regimes that virtually surrounded it for the majority of its post-independence existence. According to (Zaffiro 1993: 42), in the 1980s President Masire and Chiepe, the Minister of External Affairs, repeatedly emphasized "the importance of collective responsibility and regular inter-party consultation on security, defense, and foreign policy matters". However, despite the rhetoric, in practice parliament, inter-party fora and other mechanisms were not involved in any appreciable way in policy-making (Zaffiro 1993). It appears that whatever else may have been said by way of rhetoric, decision-making in foreign policy was the domain of bureaucrats and the executive.

There is general consensus amongst observers and commentators that the recent shift in emphasis in foreign policy can be attributed to a change of leadership as well as change in the style of leadership following Khama's ascendance to the presidency (Dingake 2011a, b; Owino 2011). There are a number of reasons why many, including the authors of the present article, find this view persuasive. Firstly, the change in policy occurred not long after Mogae handed over the reins of power to Khama. Secondly, as regards the issue of leadership style, not only are there obvious and undeniable differences in the leadership style of the two men but Khama's leadership style has been portrayed as being vastly different from that of all the other presidents that came before him (Good 2009, 2010; Botlhomilwe et al. 2011, Sebudubudu et al. 2012). Khama's leadership style, which is much more direct and self-assertive than that of his predecessors, has been described as authoritarian (Henk 2004; Good 2010a, b; Throup 2011,

Bothomilwe et al. 2011; Sebudubudu et al. 2012). His personal authority is felt almost everywhere in government decision-making. Critics have even accused him of militarizing and personalizing the running of government (Good 2009; Lucas 2011). Many observers, therefore, believe that the way the shift in emphasis in foreign policy came about and developed is reflective of Khama's way of thinking and doing things as has been the case with many other policies since he assumed power. In that context it is not surprising that the debate concerning the shift in foreign policy has been as much about Khama's personality and leadership style as it has been about the meaning and substance of the policy.

### **Leadership orientation and world view**

As we have already indicated there is consensus among observers and commentators that Khama was responsible to change the country's foreign policy. A change in the direction or emphasis of a country's foreign policy is a decision that would most likely be made at the highest level and this is all the more likely given Khama's leadership style. According to Herman (2001), even though the ultimate decision unit may vary according to the nature of the problem in respect of which a decision has to be made '...for issues of vital importance to a country, the highest political authority often constitute the decision unit; there is contraction of authority to those most accountable for what happens'(Herman 2001:56). It is therefore imperative to consider briefly, Khama's background, leadership style and most importantly his attitude to the outside world in order to appreciate more fully his personal influence on the country's foreign policy.

In a study of influence of personal characteristic of leaders on foreign policy behavior of countries Herman (1980:8) found that there were marked differences between leaders who push their nation to take an aggressive or conciliatory posture in international relations. Aggressive leaders tended to be (a) High in the need for power, (b) Low on conceptual complexity, (c) Distrustful of others, (d) Nationalistic, (e) Likely to believe they have control over events. On the other hand, conciliatory leaders were (a) High in the need for affiliation, (b) High in conceptual complexity, (c) Trusting of others, (d) Low in nationalism, (e) Exhibited little belief in their own power to control events.

It is therefore vital to know the personal attributes of the leader because:

The leader's traits shape his initial inclinations and determine whether and how he will regard advice from others, react to information from the external environment, and assess the political risks associated with various actions ... Of particular relevance in explaining a predominant leader's orientation to a foreign policy problem is knowledge of the leader's orientation to foreign affairs- his or her composite set of views about how government should act in the foreign policy arena. An orientation defines the leader conception of his notion's role in the world and it presupposes a specific political style in dealing with foreign policy problems (Herman and Herman 1989: 365).

### **Khama's leadership style**

Khama has been described as a quintessential military man who 'hates politics'. Apparently he was brought into politics by the former president, Mogae, to help end factional wars in the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). Khama's "experience is restricted to three areas alone: the military; chieftaincy and dynastic politics; and state power, briefly at the highest level..." (Good 2010a: 318). As a leader he is not only exceptionally popular but also unusually divisive (Lucas 2011; Throup 2011). Even though he commands almost messianic support amongst some sections of the population, he is equally reviled by a significant proportion of the urban and educated classes for his leadership style (Henk 2004: 93). Even though it is natural to expect that politicians will occasionally exploit divisions in the population for political gain, it seems that President Khama does it in a way that makes sober discussion of issues of mutual interest among citizens difficult. For example, he has on several occasions described those in the media, the opposition and the labour movement who hold views that diverge from his on a number of important issues, as "unpatriotic" (Ntibinyane 2013; Kavahematui 2013). This has angered and alienated a lot of people including those outside the rough and tumble of politics. Even though Botswana are known for their deference to leaders, an openly hostile attitude to those hold opposing views does not sit well with them.

The president's rather overbearing leadership style has been blamed for escalation of factional conflict in the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) to a point where it resulted in a split up of BDP and the formation of a new party. When his preferred faction within the BDP lost heavily to a rival faction at the 2009 BDP elective congress, he did not perform the customary ritual of welcoming the new committee and soon set about systematically neutralizing and destroying it. The atmosphere within the ruling party became so toxic that many members of the faction that had won the 2009 party elections left the BDP to form the Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD). It has been suggested that the President's style of leadership goes against notions of tolerance associated with Botswana's indigenous philosophy which many believe has contributed to Botswana's success as a democracy.

While his supporters regard him as forthright and decisive, critics have variously characterized his leadership style as "authoritarian", "autocratic", "dictatorial", "intolerant" and even "vengeful" (Henk 2004; Good 2010a, b). He has been criticized for excessive use of directives to communicate his decisions/views on important matters. It has also been suggested he has personalized state machinery and that he puts loyalty and cronyism ahead of competence and professionalism (Good et al. 2006; Good 2010a). None of the country's previous leaders has been described in similar terms to President Ian Khama. The distinct impression one gets from these comments and assessments is that compared to him all of his predecessors may to varying degrees be characterized as benign, consensus-building, sensitive, open and pragmatic, whereas he may be characterized as a strong and domineering personality. A growing number of observers and scholars believe that, even though Botswana continues to be held up as model of democracy that other African countries may want to emulate, during Khama's presidency

democracy has come under a great strain in a number of areas such as freedom of speech and media freedom (Bothomilwe et al. 2011; Ntibinyane 2013). It has been suggested that while the Khama administration preaches democracy to other countries it fails to practice it at home, if anything it seems to be moving towards neo-patrimonial tendencies which are the source of anti-democratic and repressive behaviour it condemns so vociferously in others.

### **Khama and the outside world**

It appears that cultivating relations through official visits and attending international gatherings is not as important a part of Khama's approach to foreign relations as it was for all his predecessors. It has been suggested that compared to his predecessors he has undertaken relatively few official trips to other countries and generally shuns international gatherings (Mmegi 2013; Dipholo 2013). He appeared to confirm this recently in an interview carried in a South African newspaper, *The Business Day*. He was reported to have said in an interview with the newspaper that he did not attend United Nations General Assembly annual meetings because he did not attach much value to them (Koch 2013). He said he avoided such summits because in his view they were expensive 'talk shops' where nothing was achieved. Commenting on these observations one local newspaper criticized the president for seemingly giving priority to international gatherings concerned with conservation, a well-known passion of his, over high profile international meetings that might not be of interest to him personally but which might nevertheless be important to the country (Mmegi 2013). The same sentiment was echoed by a *Sunday Standard* columnist and ardent Khama critic who noted that while the president avoids international gatherings, the same could not be said about more celebratory events like birthday parties for regional heads of state (Dipholo 2013).

## **Botswana's new approach to foreign relations in action**

### **Foreign policy shift: The trigger**

It appears that the shift in Botswana's foreign policy was triggered by the failed Zimbabwean elections of 2008. It is not difficult to see why. Post-election prognosis suggested that the situation in Zimbabwe, which had already reached crisis proportions, was about to get worse. There were fears that a civil war might break out in Zimbabwe (Pitse 2008; Jonas et al. 2013). The Botswana government had been struggling over a number of years to control illegal immigration caused by the economic collapse of Zimbabwe. It spent large amounts of money on repatriation of illegal immigrants. After the 2008 elections a steady stream of refugees fleeing violence begun to add to this burden. For Botswana, a country of about two million people, this state of affairs was intolerable. The unfolding situation in Zimbabwe represented an existential threat in a way it did not for other countries in the region with large populations. The country feared, not unreasonably, the possibility of being overwhelmed and swamped by large numbers of illegal immigrants and refugees. Merafhe, who was Foreign Affairs Minister under Mogae, put it thus:

Until the situation in Zimbabwe is improved, there is very little we can do, although we continue to repatriate these people back to their country. We are a small country, with a population of just under two million, and there are fourteen million Zimbabweans. If we allow them to come over and take up residence in Botswana without being encouraged to go back to their country, we will run the risk of being completely overwhelmed (Hanson, 2007).

These fears were not unfounded considering that it was estimated that by 2009 over one million Zimbabweans had moved to South Africa (Global Detention Project 2009). Khama had in the past indicated that he was concerned about instability emanating from neighbouring countries. After the SADC Parliamentary Forum declared that the elections did not meet SADC standards on free and fair elections, the Khama administration probably responded quickly in an attempt to head off another crisis. While the Mogae administration had been openly critical of the Zimbabwean government since 2002, it was always careful not to be strident and hostile and together with other SADC states pursued what was euphemistically known as ‘quiet diplomacy’. SADC’s apparent inability to find a workable solution to the Zimbabwe crisis would have been particularly frustrating for Khama.

Khama declared that the time for quiet diplomacy was over and his government called for the removal of Mugabe from power (Badza 2009: 167). In an address to parliament, President Khama said that even though Botswana respected the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of other states “it discharges its international responsibilities in line with its own values, regional protocols, and global consensus, voicing its opinion as and when it feels it is justified to do so” (Badza 2009:166). Botswana’s new tone and attitude was perceived as representing both a fundamental change in relations between the two countries and a break with the SADC consensus around a policy of quiet diplomacy (Mhango 2012). The Khama administration argued that Botswana as a country that practices democracy and the rule of law it could not be seen to endorse an illegitimate result (Badza 2009: 166). Initially, the position taken by Khama on Zimbabwe won him applause at home and abroad as it appeared to be in tune with the sentiments of ordinary people in SADC countries. Botswana, would thenceforth, despite its size and geo-political vulnerabilities, pursue an ethical foreign policy consistent with its democratic traditions. The country would ride on its reputation as the longest running democracy in Africa state (Molomo 1998; Sebudubudu et al. 2011) to present itself as a norm-setter or ‘norm entrepreneur’ (Finnemore et al 1998; Ingebristen 2002; ) of the SADC.

### **Zimbabwe**

Following a presidential election run-off between Robert Mugabe and his archrival Morgan Tsvangarai on 27 June 2008 in which the former emerged as the victor, the Khama administration refused to recognize Robert Mugabe as the president of Zimbabwe because the run-off failed to meet SADC, AU and UN standards and as such he lacked legitimacy. In a

statement released through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Relations the government of Botswana called for the exclusion of Zimbabwe in AU and SADC meetings. The Khama administration claimed that silent diplomacy had failed (Badza 2009).

Zimbabwe saw this as a provocation and interference by a neighbour in its internal affairs. It charged that Botswana had been providing training for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) youth to instigate an insurgency against Zimbabwe since 2002 and that Botswana was preparing for a military invasion at the behest of Western imperial powers. The Zimbabwean Minister of Defence claimed that his country had handed over evidence on preparations for invasion over to the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security. Botswana vigorously denied the accusations. According to WikiLeaks, the two neighbours came perilously close to open warfare over the issue. Concerned about Zimbabwe's sabre-rattling, Botswana allegedly approached the United States to supply it with weapons but the latter declined because it felt such action would not advance America's strategic interests in the region (*Sunday Standard* 2011).

### **Swaziland**

Since he became president in 2008, Khama has made two official visits to the Kingdom of Swaziland, a country where opposition is banned and critics suffer political repression. At the time of the first visit to Swaziland the mood in that country was restive, with trade unions pushing for political change. Many observers believed the visits were ill-timed and unfortunate because they weakened Botswana's seemingly principled position against Mugabe's Zimbabwe (Mmegi 2008). The Swazi government has been criticized for maintaining the ban on opposition parties and dealing in a heavy handed way with those with divergent views (Mmegi 2008). The President's visit to Swaziland attracted fierce criticism from the opposition and media especially amongst those that had hailed his government's position on Zimbabwe as progressive. The visit was seen as an endorsement of the Swazi government's undemocratic conduct. However, the Khama administration saw things rather differently. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Motlogelwa 2008), the situation in Swaziland was not comparable to that obtaining in Zimbabwe because the former was a constitutional monarch while the latter was a democracy. The Minister averred that Swaziland was governed according to the principles in its constitution, flaws in that constitution notwithstanding, while Zimbabwe had chosen for itself a democratic system which the leadership had failed to uphold.

### **Ivory Coast**

When a political crisis developed in the Ivory Coast following the refusal of former President Laurent Gbagbo to leave office after losing presidential elections to his rival Alassane Ouattarra, Botswana weighed in on the crisis in a most uncharacteristically dramatic and baffling fashion. The government invited President-elect Alassane Ouattarra, who was then under siege in a hotel in the Ivorian capital, for a state visit to Botswana. The gesture invited scorn and derision from

opposition parties and the private media who suggested that the invitation was as impractical as it was impulsive (Mmegi 2011; Owino 2011). Critics charged that it was rushed and ill-considered because it seemingly did not allow time for diplomatic efforts especially by Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union (AU) to resolve the situation, to take shape. Critics described it as “reckless”, a form of “grandstanding” and as showing “lack of diplomatic acumen” (Owino 2011). The stance taken by Botswana has produced no obvious dividends for the country. More tellingly, Ouattarra, has not, since assuming power, shown any indication that he is anxious to honour the invitation extended to him during the Ivorian crisis.

### **Libya**

Concerns regarding the way Botswana conducted foreign relations arose again when the country severed diplomatic relations with Libya as events that led to the eventual toppling of the Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi unfolded. As in the case of Zimbabwe, opinions were divided over the wisdom of severing relations with Libya and the way it was done. While some believed cutting ties with countries that violate human rights sends an important message to dictators, others contended that while violations of human rights must be condemned, cutting diplomatic relations in an unsavoury manner could possibly harm the country’s image in the international arena (Moseki 2011). Contrary to some who dismissed the ties between the two countries as insignificant, the opposition Botswana Congress Party (BCP) said it believed that Libya had maintained warm and cordial relations with Botswana over many years as exemplified by the gift of camels given to former president, Mogae, and sponsorship that had been extended to some four Botswana students to study in Libya. The BCP also criticized the manner in which disengagement with Libya was conducted and believed that it was done in manner that was inconsistent with international norms:

The 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations states that when diplomatic relations are severed between states, the host state is obliged to provide assistance for the rapid departure of staff members and their families. A receiving state does not sever relations with another with immediate effect and turn around to say that the diplomats are free to remain in the territory if they so wished because that can be interpreted rightly so to be interference in the internal affairs of the sending state. The head of the diplomatic mission in any given state represents the head of state of the sending state in the receiving state. Unless he has defected, it is contrary to international norms and behavior by the receiving state to cut diplomatic relations with another state and advise the diplomats concerned to remain in the territory. We have never heard of it (Moseki 2011).

### **Malawi**

In 2011 a routine announcement by Botswana of a forthcoming three-day official visit to the country by the then president of Malawi Bingu Wa Mutharika provoked an unprecedented storm

of criticism and protest from opposition parties in Botswana (Keoreng 2011; Ntuane 2011). According to the opposition parties there had been serious erosion of civil liberties and human rights in Malawi under Mutharika's rule (Mosikare 2011). The litany of accusations made against Mutharika was that amongst other things, he suppressed independent media and incited the youth of the governing party to use violence to silence opposition critics in Malawi. To show their disapproval Botswana's opposition parties resolved to boycott all official activities conducted to mark Mutharika's visit. While the government expressed disappointment at the behavior of opposition parties, the latter were soon vindicated when a few months later there was a crackdown by Mutharika's government on protests over cost of living resulting in the death of 18 people and injuries to many more. In a statement demanding an apology from Khama for hosting Mutharika the opposition asked rhetorically: "How different is Mutharika from Muammar Gadhafi in Libya, Bashar Al Assad in Syria, Omar Al Bashir in Sudan and all other dictators that have attracted the sanctimonious wrath of the Botswana government over rights violations and atrocities against their own citizens?" (Ntuane 2011)

### **Realpolitik redux?**

Even though it seems that ethical concerns remain an important element of the country's foreign policy, evidence points to a tilt back, especially in the past two years or so, towards a policy based on national self-interest, rhetoric notwithstanding.

At face value, it seems that the Khama administration's determination to be norm entrepreneurs remains undiminished since 2008. It continues to issue boisterous statements about anti-democratic conduct and human rights violations abroad. However, closer examination shows that realpolitik may be re-asserting itself as Botswana is forced to come to terms with its economic and geo-political vulnerabilities. As the country increases the drive to diversify the economy away from diamonds and as it explores the possibility of exporting coal beyond the continent it has started to reach out to countries such as Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe in the search for alternatives to South African ports. President Khama has also indicated that his government is looking to Namibia and Mozambique to provide new routes because he believed regular strikes in South Africa disrupt regional trade (Koch 2013). It seems that Botswana is once again waking up to its vulnerabilities as a landlocked country that must depend on its neighbours for purposes of trade. This confirms predictions by some commentators that it was a matter of time before Botswana's policy towards Zimbabwe fell back into line with the rest of SADC as it could not afford to remain isolated for long (Badza 2009).

Indeed less than two years after the relationship between Botswana and Zimbabwe broke down to a point where the two countries were talking of going to war with each other, a sudden and inexplicable turn-around occurred in the relationship (Afrik-News 2010; Bhebhe 2011). Not only was there a noticeable change from strident and harsh criticism to silence but there was a sudden outpouring of goodwill between Khama and Mugabe and their respective parties. For instance, ZANU (PF) sent delegates to a BDP women's congress, a move that was reciprocated

by the latter. The delegates from Zimbabwe came bearing a gift from Robert Mugabe to President Khama which became a source of much media speculation. That was soon followed by a visit to Zimbabwe by President Ian Khama.

Speaking at the BDP congress the spokesperson of the ZANU delegates observed that “We cherish such brotherhood and sisterhood for Botswana and Zimbabwe share a common border, common history, common culture and indeed a common destiny” (Mmegi 2012).

A BDP delegate’s comments at a ZANU (PF) congress attracted criticism from commentators when he appeared not only to praise Zimbabwe’s leadership but also to endorse its policies which have had been the cause of social and economic turmoil in Zimbabwe. He was reported to have said:

You should consider yourselves blessed to have leadership that has such wisdom. It is important to reflect on how indigenization can help to propel us forward. As Africans, our greatest resource is our land. This is one commodity that we have to guard (*Sunday Standard* 2012).

However, the BDP delegate countered by suggesting that he was only responding to the theme of the conference and that the newspaper exaggerated the intimacy of the relationship between the BDP and ZANUPF.

One of the explanations put forward for the sudden rapprochement between the two countries was that Botswana and Mozambique had a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to jointly develop the port of Beira and build a railway link between the two countries which would have to pass through Zimbabwe. Local media reports have linked a close associate of the President with the project and there is suspicion that it is the desire to protect business interests that may explain the thaw in relations with Zimbabwe. There has been no official attempt to confirm or deny these claims.

The Foreign Policy Forum, which was hosted by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Relations in 2012, gave an impression that the supposed policy shift may be more apparent than real. Proceedings of the consultative forum gave no hint at all that there has ever been a shift at all in Botswana’s foreign in recent times from the traditional staid policy based on *realpolitik*. In his opening address to the forum the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Relations underlined the conservative and cautious approach of old while urging participants to consider how new realities such as regional integration and globalization might be incorporated into the policy. While the Minister did not acknowledge megaphone diplomacy in his speech he nevertheless appeared to signal a return to a policy based on national self-interest. The Minister observed that:

Foreign policy is intended to help protect a country’s national interests, ideological goals, and economic prosperity. It is therefore through foreign policy that, as a country, we can become an effective and influential player on the global stage (MOFAIC 2013).

The Minister observed that Botswana's foreign policy has traditionally been guided by amongst others, well-known internal principles; namely democracy, development, unity and self-reliance and principles such as peaceful co-existence, good neighbourliness, peaceful resolution of conflicts and territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations. Interestingly, as if in answer to critics of the Khama administration, he observed that a foreign policy should not be driven by sentiment, a point he underlined by quoting the late president of the United States of America President Kennedy who said (in 1963) that "the purpose of foreign policy is not to provide an outlet for our own sentiments of hope or indignation; it is to shape events in the real world" (MOFAIC 2013).

### **Making sense of contradictions in Botswana's foreign policy**

When Botswana decided to adopt a new posture in its foreign policy in 2008 as part of its response to a developing political crisis in Zimbabwe, few had any doubt that the newly installed president, Ian Khama, was the originator of the new policy. Khama's personal stamp on government policy had been a matter of much public comment from the time he was Vice President (Good et al. 2006). Once he ascended to the presidency the view that he preferred to lead from the front in matters of policy was soon confirmed. Therefore, it came as no surprise to many observers that from the very beginning of his administration his personal authority should manifest itself in a powerful way in the tone and direction of the country's foreign policy. Many observers believe that the new foreign policy stance reflects the president's forthright and abrasive leadership style.

Having said that, the change in policy was itself triggered by a developing crisis in Zimbabwe and what the crisis could possibly mean for Botswana's national security (Hanson 2007; Throup 2011). There were even fears that civil war was about to breakout in Zimbabwe (Jonas et al 2013) and Botswana set about preparing for war with its neighbour (Pitse 2008) which accused Botswana of training and harbouring insurgents. As already indicated, Botswana feared that if not brought under control the situation in Zimbabwe might escalate to a point where a flood of illegal immigrants and refugees might overwhelm it thereby endangering its stability and security. In that context it is not difficult to imagine why such an eventuality would have been a major concern to Khama.

There are a number of plausible reasons why Botswana decided, when confronted with a developing crisis in Zimbabwe, to adopt an ethical foreign policy that involved denunciation of human rights abuses and anti-democratic conduct. While the original context for the emergence of the new policy involved and revolved around fears about Zimbabwe as a possible source of instability in future, the Botswana government probably did not want the policy to be interpreted as being solely about Zimbabwe. So it may have decided to adopt a policy that was supposedly informed by ethical concerns as a cover for its stance towards Zimbabwe in order to parry off familiar accusations of bias and hostility by Mugabe and ZANU PF. Thus it may well be also be

that in order to maintain credibility the Khama administration was compelled to talk loudly about human rights abuses in other countries but not necessarily out of conviction.

Another reason why the shift in policy may have been no more than a smokescreen for a policy on Zimbabwe is that a recent foreign policy consultative forum held in Gaborone did not mention at all the new emphasis in policy that Khama alluded to in his address to parliament in 2008 which manifests itself in the form of regular denunciations of errant leaders and governments (Government of Botswana 2010). This leads us to wonder whether the much vaunted shift in policy was ever intended to be part of the country's long term policy. Alternatively, it may be that at the time the foreign policy forum convened the country was still undecided about the way forward or the forum was public relations exercise put on for foreign policy bureaucrats and did not affect the president's own attitude. Perhaps it is this muddle that led newspaper commentators and opposition parties to say that Botswana has no (coherent) foreign policy. As critics have suggested all these make Botswana's approach to international events seems impulsive and ill-considered. A classic example of this would be Botswana's unhelpful response to the Ivorian crisis.

It is also possible that the Khama administration genuinely believes that Botswana has the moral authority to preach to other countries about democracy even though democracy is on the decline at home. An increasing number of scholars agrees that while Botswana has a well-founded reputation for adherence to democratic values, the country's recent record is at best mixed (Dinokopila 2009 ) or at worst showing familiar signs of a slide into authoritarianism and intolerance (Botlhomilwe et al. 2011). It also seems that in the eyes of many the new policy has been blunted by its selective nature. Critics have suggested that Botswana's position regarding democracy and governance in Swaziland and Malawi (during Mutharika's rule) appeared to contradict the noble principles for which the country supposedly stands. In particular, failure to condemn the shooting of demonstrators in Malawi by security agents represents the most glaring evidence of double standards. The attitude of the President and the Botswana government towards the Malawi and Swaziland has left many people perplexed and can only lead to greater scepticism about the supposed shift in foreign policy. One of the local newspapers put it more succinctly:

We all remember how he made us feel proud when he refused to accept the sham presidential re-run in Zimbabwe. When the rest of Africa did not want to break with tradition and throw Mugabe under the bus, Khama courageously took a principled stand against Mugabe's tyranny. When he refused to recognise Mugabe as President of Zimbabwe, we believe he was guided by this country's democratic culture. Out of concern for democratic culture, we believe it is out of step with this culture for President Khama to have visited Swaziland at a time when the country is embroiled in serious internal conflicts bordering on the abuse of power and denial of democratic practice. (Mmegi 2008)

Such inconsistencies would seem to confirm the view held by some that Botswana is merely grandstanding when it condemns some countries for human rights violations. It may also be true as some have suggested that the position taken by the Khama administration on a number of international issues betrays lack of statecraft and diplomatic finesse on the part of the current leadership. The country's reaction to the Ivorian and Libyan crises most clearly illustrates this naiveté. Other incidents suggest it may be more than just naiveté at play. Many have been shocked by the hectoring, patronizing, confrontational and sometimes plainly insulting statements issued by members of the executive. This caused Parliament and the media at one point to appeal to Khama and his Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Relations to "mind your language" (Afrik News 2008; Ganetsang 2010). Perhaps one of the most disturbing examples of this was the shabby treatment of and insulting remarks directed at Rajolina, the former President of Madagascar, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Not only did the Minister of Foreign and International Relations call Rajolina a "boy" and a "DJ" in his various statements to the media, but the government ensured he was not accorded treatment consonant with his status as Head of State when he visited Botswana to attend an SADC meeting (Ganetsang 2010).

Many of these contradictions including the perception that Botswana's foreign policy is built around the president's personal preferences and interests have puzzled observers. Nonetheless, many in the media fraternity and the opposition parties believe the new approach to foreign policy is impulsive and is not at all guided by national strategic interests or goals. What concerns them even more is that the policy seems more and more to reflect the president's personal world view and interests rather than those of the country (Mmegi 2013; Dipholo 2013). But based on existing assessments of his personality and leadership style (Good et al. 2006; Good 2010a, b), such dissonance would not be disturbing to Khama himself as he appears to have lived quite comfortably with similar contradictions in the past. It is a common feature of predominant leaders with an authoritarian streak to ignore discrepant information and to pay little attention to contradictions in their conduct (Herman et al. 1989).

## **Conclusion**

One of the major issues in the debate around Botswana's foreign policy has been whether it is efficacious for Botswana to have a foreign policy that not only accentuates ethical elements, but is also premised on the idea that berating wrongdoers would cause them to change their conduct or to put it more negatively, whether such a policy would not be likely to do more harm than good to the national interest. The fundamental question is whether an ethical policy twinned with rooftop diplomacy under President Khama's government has achieved better or desired results when compared with the more subtle approaches of previous administrations.

Taken on its own terms it does not seem that the new approach has had the desired effect on countries which have been targeted in terms of behaviour change. However on Zimbabwe specifically views diverge. Most commentators believe Botswana's approach earned it a spell of isolation from its neighbours, a state of affairs which as some observers correctly predicted, the

country could not tolerate for long (Badza 2009). There was even backlash from some neighbouring states which felt that Botswana's position on Zimbabwe was patronizing, irresponsible and unwarranted. For example, a state owned Namibian daily newspaper ran an editorial calling on SADC to call Botswana "to order" for calling for sanctions against Zimbabwe (Afrik-News, 2008). The Mugabe administration not only refused to change but instead it came very close to taking Zimbabwe to war with Botswana. Many believe the Khama administration misjudged the extent of its ability to achieve desired results acting on its own. In contrast, SADC partners who believed firmly in 'quiet' diplomacy scored a success by negotiating an agreement between Mugabe and Tsvangarai in the form of the Global Political Agreement which resulted in a Government of National Unity (GNU). Having said this, there are those who credit Khama's muscular approach, especially the threat to intervene militarily in Zimbabwe with averting a civil war in that country (Jonas et al. 2013).

It is also interesting that emerging evidence suggests that in the past two years or so Botswana has been tilting back towards policy based on realpolitik. This subtle shift would appear to be informed by national self-interest or as some have suggested, the desire to promote or protect business interests of those close to the president. Though Botswana continues to make boisterous statements it is now more sensitive to the views of other SADC countries as its response to the Zimbabwe elections held in 2013 shows. Botswana's economic and geo-political vulnerabilities have always meant that a return to foreign policy informed by realpolitik would happen sooner rather than later. The imperative to diversify the economy away from diamonds means that Botswana has had to explore the possibility of exporting products such as coal which appears to be plentiful. This would inevitably involve breaking out of isolation. Indeed those who had predicted Botswana would not be able to tolerate isolation from fellow SADC states over Zimbabwe for long have been proved right. In 2010 there was a sudden and inexplicable thaw in relations between Botswana that went beyond simple normalization of strained relations after Mugabe agreed to form a government of national unity with the opposition. Fraternal relations between Mugabe's party and the ruling party in Botswana developed pretty rapidly to a point where the latter seemingly endorsed the former's controversial land policy and the party leaders even exchanged gifts.

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