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REVIEW ARTICLE

## Botswana: An African miracle or a case of mistaken identity?

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*An African Miracle: State and Class Leadership and Colonial Legacy In Botswana Development*, by Abdi Ismail Samatar, Heinemann, 1999, pp.217, ISBN: 0-325-00068-9

About a decade ago, the left leaning *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE) published an article by Hoogvelt et al (1992) entitled: 'The World Bank and Africa: A Case of Mistaken Identity'. The article criticised the World Bank's simplistic tendency to lump together African countries as if Africa is one entity. In their critique of the World Bank's simplistic methodology, the authors cite several statements from the bank's reports that posit, *inter alia*, that Africa is facing deepening crisis because of weak economic growth, low levels of manufacturing, poor export performance, declining industrial output, climbing debt, falling per capita incomes, low levels of investments and savings, weak institutional capacity and deteriorating social indicators, all compounded by accelerating population growth. Whilst the World Bank argues that these key variables provide for a commonality that requires a common strategy, Hoogvelt et al used a range of statistical techniques of cluster and discriminant analysis through which they found not ONE, but FOUR distinct types of countries in Africa. Twenty six poorest countries were assigned Cluster One, nine relatively better countries were assigned Cluster Two and three vastly richer countries were assigned Cluster Three, whilst Botswana was assigned Cluster Four, all to herself. In other words, Botswana was regarded as a country like no other. It would seem this uniqueness of Botswana derives from the fact that although its GNP per capita was lower than in cluster three, Botswana did far better than any other in variables relating to *growth* (emphasis in the original).

In his introductory chapter to *The Political Economy of Democratic Development*, Stedman (1993) argued that at a time when Africa's dismal economic performance and political corruption and mismanagement have given rise to a new intellectual movement called 'Afro-pessimism', Botswana has stood out as an example of economic development, functioning governance, multi-party liberal democracy and as an exception that confounds generalisations. Stedman argued that Botswana's exceptionalism prompts analysts to see it as a hopeful model for Africa, 'the Switzerland of Africa'.

And just when you thought that you have had enough praise-singing about Botswana's much vaunted economic success stories, enter Ismail Samatar's *An African Miracle: State and Class Leadership and Colonial Legacy in Botswana*.

According to the author, the book represents an antidote to Afro-pessimism and is about the ways in which Africans can realistically disprove the prophets of doom. Samatar argues that Botswana has eluded the rampant corruption and mismanagement that bedevil most Third World countries and what's more, all these developments have taken place in an environment of a genuinely functioning liberal democratic system, something that is in sharp contrast to the Asian tigers whose economic miracle took place in the context of political repression. '...Botswana's thirty years of independence have been a time of hope, optimism and progress' (p.1), Samatar argues.

Two questions come to mind on Samatar's book: Is this just another addition to a list of accolades on Botswana's 'miracle'? Or, is there something new about Botswana that has not been said before?

The answer to both questions is yes and no. Yes in the sense that Samatar departs from most other commentators on Botswana in his somewhat radical interrogation of Botswana's history and political economy. According to him, it is important to bring class back into the analysis of development issues and formation of public policy. On the other hand, the answer can be a no in the sense that, like several other commentators on Botswana, Samatar gives us the usual rags to rich statistical information on Botswana's economic performance since independence in 1966: a meteoric leap from a GDP/per capita of less than US\$80 in 1966 to a dynamic middle income economy with a GDP/per capita of about US\$1,800 in 1996; annual growth rate of 9.3 per cent between 1980 and 1991, outperforming, in aggregate terms, all countries in Africa and even all the first and second generation Asian tigers except South Korea. According to Samatar 'in addition to this awesome economic and social performance' Botswana accumulated tremendous amounts of foreign exchange reserves, which gave it import cover longer than was the case with Singapore and Thailand (p.3).

### **The secret of Botswana's 'success' story**

Samatar attributes the success of Botswana's post-colonial development to what he characterises as a political and economic unity of the dominant class under the tutelage of a political leadership that is disciplined and conscious of the institutional requirements of its project. According to him, the small size of the dominant class, its narrow and relatively homogeneous economic base and common ideological views provided the basis for this unity. 'The first development plan made clear that capitalism was the chosen economic order' (p.67). This is not surprising, Samatar argues, considering that the majority of the leaders who took over state power in 1966 were all medium to large cattle owners supplemented by old colonial state bureaucrats and educated stratum. For example, twenty-seven Members of the first independent Parliament were large or medium scale cattle owners, thirteen went to Tiger Klooff, two attended Lovedale, eleven were schoolteachers. It can be argued, following Samatar, that Botswana's economic development is a class project that has been nurtured *systematically* by this political leadership (emphasis in the original). Secondly, and presumably as a result of the political disintegration of the Botswana People's Party, the Botswana Democratic Party class project took off relatively easily because of the absence of organised or mobilised social groups whose interests contradicted those of the dominant class (p.71).

According to Samatar, Botswana's experience contradicts the IMF and World Bank position regarding the role of the State in development, and a careful analysis of Botswana's experiences shows that:

an interventionist state is responsible for the country's economic transformation...state agencies dominate major sectors of the economy such as housing, industrial investment, transport, communication, education, livestock, agriculture and mining... The Botswana experience supports recent research in East Asia that reveals the centrality of state leadership in guiding dynamic economies (p.16).

Samatar argues that the successes of Botswana's experiences and the failure of other economies with a high rate of state intervention in the economy confirm that, in fact, it is not the size of state intervention per se, but more fundamentally, the types of state. In his words, '... a socially responsible and more effective activist African state is essential for the continent's recovery' (p.2).

Accordingly, another secret to Botswana's miracle lies in a state-society relationship characterised by 'embedded autonomy'. This concept, borrowed from Evans (1995) represents a contradictory combination of the state's bureaucratic insularity and its simultaneous and or selective immersion in the surrounding social structure. Embedded autonomy raises the possibility of state-civil society relations in which a relatively autonomous state endorses or instigates a particular accumulation strategy and seeks alliances with social groups necessary for the realisation of such a programme. Samatar posits that state-society relations in Botswana reflect this embedded autonomy in the sense that the state is relatively independent from civil society as its institutions are insulated from the 'undesirable' societal influences, whilst on the other hand these same institutions selectively link up with segments of civil society whose active involvement in the economy is necessary for transformation. This relative autonomy is largely due to the existence of a weak civil society that cannot impose its will on the state bureaucracy (see also Molutsi and Holm 1990). Because of its relative autonomy, the Botswana state has been able to endorse or instigate a particular accumulation strategy and to seek alliances with those social groups necessary for the realization of such a programme. To illustrate his point, Samatar argues that the Botswana state has been playing the roles of midwifery and husbandry. The midwifery role is exemplified by the assistance the state gives in developing entrepreneurs or encouraging the existing ones to move into new areas, and the husbandry role is exemplified by the nurturing of firms spawned through midwifery to ensure maturity. The Botswana Development Corporation and Financial Assistance Policy are used as examples of the main tools for both midwifery and husbandry, respectively.

#### **Botswana: A case of mistaken identity?**

What I find particularly refreshing about Samatar's book is his somewhat radical approach to Botswana's political economy. And this for several reasons. The first is Samatar's forthrightness about the fact that Botswana's post-colonial economic development is really a class project. In this way, Samatar veers away from various liberal and neo-liberal pretensions that the state is a neutral arbiter standing above class interests and conflicts (p.5). To Samatar, the problem with African development

is the inability of one leading class or alliances of classes to successfully impose a hegemonic project on society, a failure that has undermined systematic accumulation with chaotic political and economic conditions (pp.5-6). He attributes the success of Botswana's economic development largely to the cohesion of its ruling class under a political leadership that is disciplined and conscious of the institutional requirements of their class project. This is one feature that distinguishes Botswana's ruling class from their counterparts in the continent (pp.6-8).

Now that Samatar has perhaps unwittingly exposed the myth of the Botswana miracle, let us take a closer look at the socio-economic theatre in which this much-vaunted miracle was performed. It is important to note that miracle was performed by Botswana's ruling class rather than by Botswana, although this has been presented to the outside world as national miracle. Botswana's ruling class has successfully presented its class project as a *national project* in the *national interest*, thus achieving class hegemony.

In a country like Botswana where private capital accumulation is seen as the best way of securing social production and reproduction, classes emerge in their wake, and class conflict arises because of the relations of production embedded in the process. It is interesting to note that Botswana's economic growth and structural transformation of the past thirty-five years are looked at as if they take place in a vacuum. The process of class formation and the social relations of production are always absent from the analysis. Although Hoogvelt et al, (1992), Stedman (1993) and more recently Samatar, to name but a few, have generously praised Botswana, they have chosen to leave out of their analysis this very crucial aspect of class formations and relations of production.

One of Botswana's 'other side' is its extremely high level of social inequalities. These social inequalities which emanate from social relations of production and distribution embedded in a capitalist system are *systemic* rather than *aberrant*. As far back as 1974, the Rural Income Distribution Survey carried out by the Central Statistics Offices (CSO) revealed that the poorest 40 percent of households in Botswana had less than 12 percent of the national income, whilst the richest 20 percent had 58 percent of the national income. The gini-coefficient, the measure of relative inequality was 0.52. In 1985 the CSO conducted a more comprehensive income distribution survey, the results of which revealed that the income share of the poorest 40 percent had declined to 10.7 percent whilst that of the richest 20 percent had gone up to 61 percent. The Gini-coefficient was 0.56, up by four points from the 1974 level. The survey further revealed that about 74 percent of urban households had an income of less than P500 per month. In 1994 the CSO conducted yet another income distribution survey and the results revealed only a marginal decrease between the rich and the poor in Botswana. According to this survey, the income share of the poorest 40 percent now stood at 11.6 percent whilst that of the richest 20 percent stood at 59.3 percent, and the gini-coefficient was 0.537 (Mogalakwe 1997; see also Household and Income survey, 1974; 1985/86; 1993/94 CSO, MFDP, Botswana Government).

Whilst Botswana has been praised for sustained economic growth over the last several years, it can be argued that Botswana experienced what could be characterised as jobless-growth. Although Botswana's labour force was growing at an average of 3.4 percent per annum between 1991 and 1996, formal employment was growing at only one percent per annum, a situation that caused a mismatch between

the supply of labour and its demand and resulted in growing unemployment (Mogalakwe and Siphambe 2001). Although unemployment rate was reported to be about 14 percent in 1991, the 1995/6 labour force survey revealed that 34.6 percent of the labour force was unemployed. This figure came down to 21.5 percent when the so-called discouraged job seekers were discounted. The youth (12-34 age group) were the hardest hit, accounting for about 70 percent of the unemployed (Mogalakwe and Siphambe 2001).

Underemployment is also rife in Botswana. The 1995/96 labour force survey revealed that the underemployed, defined as those who worked for less than 35 hours in the reference survey week for an economic reason, but who said they were available for more work, stood at 8.3 percent. The crisis of social inequality and unemployment is closely linked to poverty. In 1993/94 a survey revealed that 38 percent of Botswana households were living in poverty and that poverty was higher in the rural areas than in the urban areas. Unemployment, underemployment and very low wages for those in employment are a major cause of poverty and have also contributed in no small way glaring social equalities. It can be argued following Seers (1969), that the question commentators such Stedman, Hoogvelt et al and Samatar ought to be asking themselves about Botswana are: what has been happening to unemployment, poverty and social inequality during this period of phenomenal economic growth for Botswana? As Seers correctly argues, if one or two of these problems have been increasing, especially if the all three have been increasing, it will be would be strange to call the result development, even if the per capita income of a country has increased.

There are several other examples of mistaken identity identified by Samatar about Botswana, that need to be revisited because of their importance to understanding Botswana's historiography. One is the status of Bechuanaland before independence in 1966: was Botswana just another colony or was it a protectorate, as we are often told? A second concerns the purpose of the visit of Batswana Chiefs to England in 1895. Did the three chiefs really go to Britain to ask for protection as we are often told, or was their visit for a different purpose? Samatar, like some historians such as Chirenje (1997), Parsons (1985) and Maylam (1980), raises issues that question the validity of the claims that Bechuanaland was a British protectorate and that the three Batswana chiefs went to England to ask for protection. I shall discuss each one of these in turn.

### **Bechuanaland Protectorate or Colony?**

According to Samatar, as far back as the 1850s some Tswana rulers became alarmed by the activities of European mercantile capitalists who had developed the habit of raiding their territories. For example, in 1852 the Boers raided the Bakwena and took many prisoners of war, including defenceless women and children. This incident, which Colclough and McCarthy (1980:11) say was only met mild remonstrations from the British authorities, alarmed some Tswana rulers. In 1867 Chief Matsheng of Ngwato, acting on the advice of Rev. John Mackenzie, applied to the British High Commissioner in the Cape for protection, but to know avail. In 1881 however, competition for land between the British and the Boers led to the outbreak of the First Anglo-Boer War in which the British were quickly defeated. It would seem that this defeat of the British led to perceptions among them that the victorious Boers in the Transvaal might team up with the Germans in South West Africa (now Namibia) and the Portuguese to the east to annex the central part of Southern Africa, and thereby

close off to the British the route between the Cape Colony and Central Africa – their corridor or so-called Road to the North. Following the Boer incursion into Ngwaketse territory in 1885, a British expeditionary force under the command of Sir Charles Warren was dispatched from London, to reassert control in the area and to declare British ‘protection’ over Bechuanaland (south of the Molopo - called British Bechuanaland and now the North West Province of South Africa).

Chirenje (1977) argues that after Paul Kruger annexed the Rolong in January 1885, the commander of the British expeditionary forces in Southern Africa, Sir Charles Warren, was instructed to move his forces up north and inform bo-Kgosi Bathoen, Kgama and Sebele, who had all in the past been denied British protection, that British protection was now going to be extended to them. Chirenje says that ‘Tswana responses to Warren’s declaration varied from one chiefdom to another, ranging from Kgama’s ready acceptance to Sebele’s cautious reserve’ (p.132). On the 27<sup>th</sup> April 1885 Warren held a Kgotla meeting with BaKwena to try to convince them that British protection was in their own interest, but was resisted by Kgosi Sebele. On 12 May 1885 Warren held a Kgotla meeting with Kgosi Kgama who was easily persuaded. According to Chirenje, although Northern Tswana chiefs did not wage armed resistance against the British rule, they nevertheless expressed reservations and even protest against the authority that British officials now exercised in their territories. On the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1885, the British established the Bechuanaland Protectorate after much hesitation and reluctance and only for strategic reasons to guarantee the route to the north (Chirenje 1977; Colclough and McCarthy 1980; Maylam 1980 and du Toit 1995; Samatar p.44).

*The Report of the Economic Survey Mission* of 1960 quotes the British High Commissioner in the Cape Colony as saying that the British had no interest in the country north of Molopo (now Botswana) except as a road into the interior and that the colonial administration will confine itself to preventing the ‘protectorate’ (sic) from being occupied by filibusters and do as little in the way of administration or settlement as possible. The fact that Britain did not show the same kind of interest in Botswana that she showed in say Kenya and Zimbabwe, did nothing to stem the tide of resentment by the Tswana chiefs to British rule. Throughout the protectorate the resentment seemed so serious that on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1889, the Deputy Commissioner Sidney Shippard tried to convene a conference at Kopong to reassert British authority. According to Chirenje, except for Kgosi Kgama’s declaration of loyalty, all chiefs expressed the wish to rule themselves without British interference.

### **The Three Chiefs Visit to England**

We have often been told, and I think even our government accepts it, that the three Batswana rulers, namely Bathoen of BaNgwaketse, Khama of BaNgwato, and Sebele of BaKwena went to England to ask the British for protection from the Boers. Samatar reminds us that the three rulers went to England in 1895, almost ten years after the British had formally established their presence in the Bechuanaland ‘protectorate’. The truth of the matter seems to be that the mission of the Dikgosi was not to ask for protection from the British, who were already present in Bechuanaland, but rather, to protest against or petition the British government plans to handover their territories to the British South Africa Company (BSAC) (see Maylam 1980). Another case of mistaken identity! Another myth exploded!

According to Samatar, the BSAC was willing to help the colonial administration with its difficult financial circumstances for about 4,000 pounds. This act of generosity was however, induced by the knowledge that it was the intention of the colonial office to hand over Bechuanaland to BSAC and relieve the British government of the responsibility and expenditure of administering the territory (p 44). The Ba-Tswana rulers resolutely resisted this intended transfer of their territories to a commercial company and took their protest to the court of the British public opinion. The protests generated sympathy from British civil society and the British government shelved the intention (see Maylam 1980). It was agreed that each of the chiefs should have a territory in which to live, as before, under the protection of the Queen of England and to rule their own people much as at present under the officer who has to receive his orders from the Queen through the Secretary of State.

### **From Bechuanaland to Botswana**

Samatar puts the evolution of modern Botswana to about 1920 when the colonial administration introduced the Native Advisory Council to deal with *Dikgosi* collectively. Samatar argues that while colonial rule brought all Batswana together under one authority, it also maintained and petrified the divisions amongst them (p.46). In order to perpetuate the policy of indirect rule over the colonised, the colonial administrators invented a system of 'tribal reserves' and turned the flexible, boundless and expanding *morafe* into a rigid territorially based order. The colonial rulers also turned *Dikgosi* into territorial monarchs and always sided with the chiefs in internal conflicts. According to Samatar, (pp.46-47) the previously flexible, boundless and expanding *morafe* was turned into a rigid territorially based order and the colonialists inscribed into the soul of the protectorate local identity based on territory and tribal affiliation. These Native Reserves, which were now administered by the chiefs under the watchful eye of the colonial administrators, strengthened the chiefs in relation to their own people by closing off the frontier to groups of people who wanted to break away from the chiefs' tyranny. The *Kgosi*, now an instrument of indirect rule, had a pride of place in such an edifice as territorial monarch and principal native administrator and judge.

According to Samatar, the demands for independence for Botswana started in the late 1940s (p.53) and its principal leaders were Bathoen and Tshekedi. These two chiefs used the joint advisory Council to press for the formation of a legislative council with law making powers. This eventually came in the form of the Legislative Council and ironically closed the final chapter of the age of strong territorial chieftainship, which was what Bathoen and Tshekedi wanted to protect in their legal challenge to the Proclamations 74 and 75 of 1934. The essence of these proclamations was to make the chiefs more accountable. That is to change the chiefs from unaccountable territorial monarchs created by the British to democratic leaders who follow bureaucratic procedures. But more importantly the colonial administrators wanted to make the chiefs more and more accountable to the colonial administration. These were seen as being in contravention of the Order-in-Council of 1891. Samatar argues that the two proclamations went into effect in 1935, after Tshekedi Khama and Bathoen lost their legal challenge at a special court in Lobatse.

The arrival of the Legislative Council also effectively put Botswana on the road to independence. According to Samatar, Seretse Khama and Kgosi Bathoen

became members of the Executive of the Legislative Council and local counterparts on constitutional, racial and administrative matters. The arrival of the Council also ushered in a new era in which political parties emerged. Among these was the Botswana People's Party (BPP), which became too critical of both the colonial administration and the traditional elite. According to Samatar, the BPP was viewed by the colonial state administrators as too radical and likely to be dangerously antagonistic to South Africa and would stir racial tensions within Botswana itself.

Another commentator on this issue is Gosset (1986), who goes much further than Samatar on the emergence of the BDP. Gossett refers to a brief prepared for the Joint Parliamentary Under Secretary for Commonwealth Relations by the Bechuanaland Government Secretary, in which the colonial administration indicated that they took the BPP threat to the British interests in Bechuanaland very seriously. By this time the BPP had embarked on a campaign of mass action, which included boycotting white businesses, especially in Francistown and Lobatse. Whites businesses were allegedly discriminating against African employees and customers. The colonial administration wrote that the administration could not oppose the BPP actions without generating a backlash from African population. According to Gossett (1986:248), the colonial government suggested the creation of a multi-racial party headed by Seretse Khama (Gossett 1986:248). This new party, the Bechuanaland Democratic Party (BDP) was launched several months later after consultation between Seretse Khama and other African leaders. To Gossett, although it remains uncertain just to what extent the colonial government helped the BDP, the party's formation was nevertheless viewed positively by the colonial administration. Apparently, one of these 'positive' developments brought about by the political entry of the BDP was its habit of always encouraging its followers to cross the BPP picket lines during the boycott of white owned businesses (Gossett 1986).

Although Samatar comes to the same conclusion as Gossett on several issues, his interpretation of the immediate events that led to Botswana's independence in 1966 differs from Gossett's. Samatar argues that it was the moderate BDP that convinced the British to speed up the movement towards full independence (p55). Gossett points out that in fact it was not the BDP or Seretse Khama, but the colonial administration that came up with the idea of independence in 1966 whilst Khama and the BDP were still vacillating. Gossett argues that when the colonial administration realised that the BPP would most likely be defeated at the polls because of its factionalism and ideological disputes, the decision was taken to bring the date for independence forward. This was because the BDP's national strength was now inversely proportional to the decline of the support for the BPP. Both authors agree that the BDP was part of the colonial administration since its formation in 1962 and the colonial state party of choice, with its leading members seen as trainee ministers under the tutelage of the colonial administrators whom they expected to replace. Gossett is more direct and argues that by commanding the support of the majority of unofficial Legislative Council members and having the sympathy of the colonial administration, the BDP became the ruling party without ever having fought an election or waged a nationalist struggle (1986:248). Although this point is also not new, having been made by amongst others Picard (1895) and Mogalakwe (1997), it is interesting to note that it keeps reappearing in several books but very few people in Botswana seem to take it seriously.

## Conclusion

As is the case with any work of this nature, Samatar's book has both its strengths and weaknesses. The strength of book is in two areas. First is Samatar's radical departure from most neo-liberal analysis that has come to dominate much of the analysis of the political economy of the so-called 'developing countries'. By correctly diagnosing Botswana's strategy of economic development as a class project, and bringing social relations of production and class into play, Samatar has done what few other commentators on Botswana have done. Samatar comes to the inescapable conclusion that a development strategy is at the same time a class strategy and indicates which class or class fractions will take the responsibility for expanding the economy and benefiting from the process of private capital accumulation.

The other strength of the book is that by raising issues pertaining to the establishment of formal British presence in Bechuanaland and the visit to England by the three *Dikgosi*, Samatar is presenting a challenge to what might actually be orthodoxy and a historical fallacy that is so entrenched in Botswana's national psyche and scholarship. If indeed Botswana was a colony like any other, then is it not about time that history textbooks at primary, secondary and even tertiary education should be corrected accordingly? It remains a mystery why history textbooks, including even those approved for secondary schools continue to perpetuate this myth. It is even more interesting to note that Botswana government has uncritically accepted these historical distortions to the extent that recently the Bank of Botswana issued new banknotes to honour the three rulers who went to England for the service they rendered to the country by asking the British for protection.

The correct historical evidence suggests that these rulers went to protest against the intended transfer of their territories to BSAC, a commercial company owned by Cecil John Rhodes. The irony of all this is that just over a hundred years later, with the advent of the policy on privatisation, the descendants of Bathoen, Sebele and Khama are doing exactly what the British wanted to do in 1985 and were so vigorously resisted by the three forefathers. The only difference is that now it is not just one company, but several commercial companies, including multi-national corporations, who are going to be parcelling out the Botswana cake. But is this difference really important? Signs of the times?

Although Samatar presents what I believe is well thought out thesis about Botswana's postcolonial economic development strategy, he devotes a lot of space to agreeing with what other people have said rather than using these people's views to support his own thesis. Instead of extracting information from these other experts to support his thesis, it is Samatar who is now supporting these other people. For example on page 15 he prefaces the chapter with a quotation from Peter Evans and Kenneth Good, and page 62 he prefaces the chapter with another lengthy quotation from Penelope Hatland-Thunberg, and page 95 he prefaces his conclusion with a long quote from Raphaeli Roumani. Other pages where this occurs include 67, 76, 77 and 176.

There is also a very laborious emphasis on the role of the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning and on the issue of bureaucratic insulation from the popular demands. There are also careless mistakes that could have been avoided such as referring to Baledzi Gaolathe as President of the Ministry of Finance and

development Planning for seventeen (17) years. The last but by no means the least important weakness is that Samatar is comparing Botswana, reputed to be an African economic miracle with Somalia, a country where the state has collapsed completely. The book would have been even more rewarding if Botswana, one of the best in Africa was compared with one of the best in South East Asia, such as Taiwan, Malaysia or South Korea. There is very little to be gained by comparing the best with the worst, but a lot to be gained by comparing the best with the best and therefore, gauging the best out of the best, rather the best out of the worst. These weaknesses notwithstanding, I believe that the book is a very welcome contribution to the debate on the political economy of Botswana.

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