



March 2009

DEMANDING DEMOCRATIC RULE: BATSWANA SUPPORT DEMOCRACY AND REJECT NON-DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVES

Introduction

The smooth transfer of political power from President Mogae to President Khama on April 1, 2008 marked yet another milestone in Botswana politics, demonstrating the virtues of the country's long-standing democracy. Such peaceful changes of leadership still elude so many other political regimes in sub-Saharan Africa. The ideals and values of democracy are founded on, among other things, regular, free and fair elections, the principles of accountable, responsive and transparent government, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and legislature, political tolerance, and freedom of speech and association.

This briefing focuses on the commitment of Botswana to democracy and elections as a system of government. We find that despite some reasons for concern, such as the lengthy dominance of politics by a single party, and the entry of former military leaders into electoral politics, that Botswana remain strongly and resolutely committed to democracy, and to elections as the preferred means for choosing their leader. They resoundingly reject non-democratic forms of rule, including military rule, one-man rule, and a one-party state.

These findings were revealed by a recent Afrobarometer survey of a representative sample of 1200 adult Botswana conducted in October 2008 by faculty from the Departments of Political and Administrative Studies, Sociology and Statistics at the University of Botswana.

Support for democracy

Based on the understanding that democracy thrives on popular support, which confers legitimacy on the regime to govern, respondents were asked to make value judgments on a democratic government compared to a non-democratic alternative. Moreover, a reservoir of public confidence gives a government the latitude to govern without having to resort to authoritarian tendencies. More specifically, they were asked "which of the following statements is closest to your opinion"?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some situations, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: To someone like me, it doesn't matter what form of government we have.

Figure 1: Support for Democracy

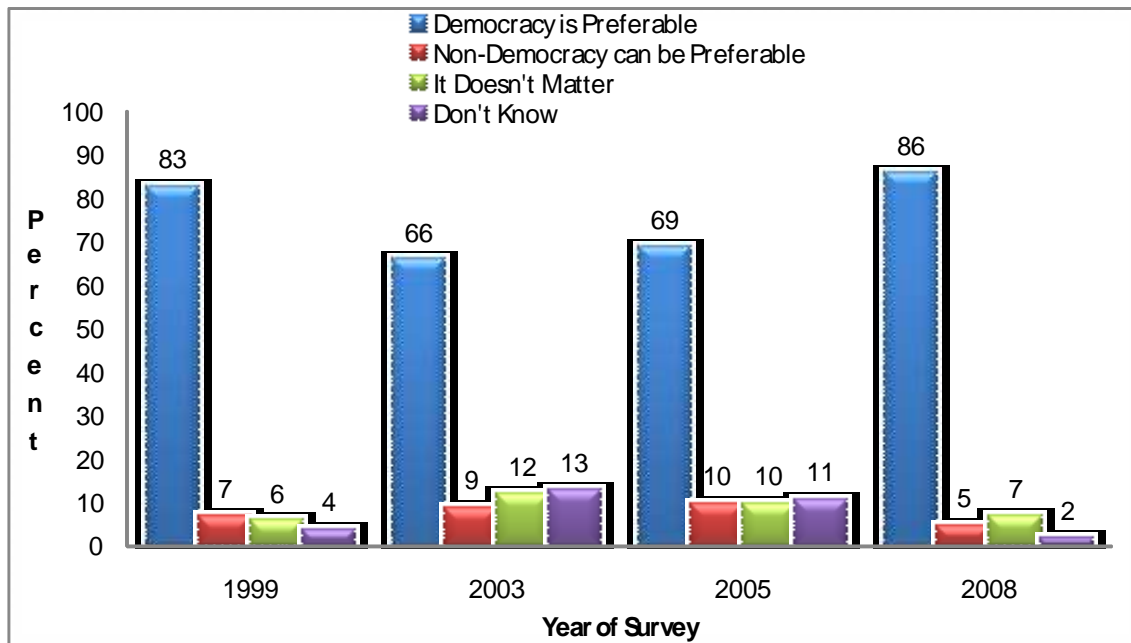


Figure 1 above indicates that in 2008, 86 percent of the respondents support democracy as a preferable form of government, and a negligible 5 percent would, in some circumstances, prefer a non-democratic government. Only 7 percent said it did not matter which form of government was in power. The Afrobarometer survey thus confirms that democracy enjoys widespread popular support in Botswana.

Rejection of non-democratic alternatives

But a committed democrat is someone who not only believes that democracy is a preferable form of government, but who also rejects all non-democratic alternatives. Democracy is not merely the right to participate in elections every five years, but a complex institutional framework that serves to secure ordinary citizens against all forms of authoritarian rule. Furthermore, since democracy can mean different things to different people, it is important to look beyond a simple expression of support for democracy. The survey probed further to determine the extent to which citizens are committed to democratic practices such as elections, and their willingness to accept any form of non-democratic rule as an alternative.

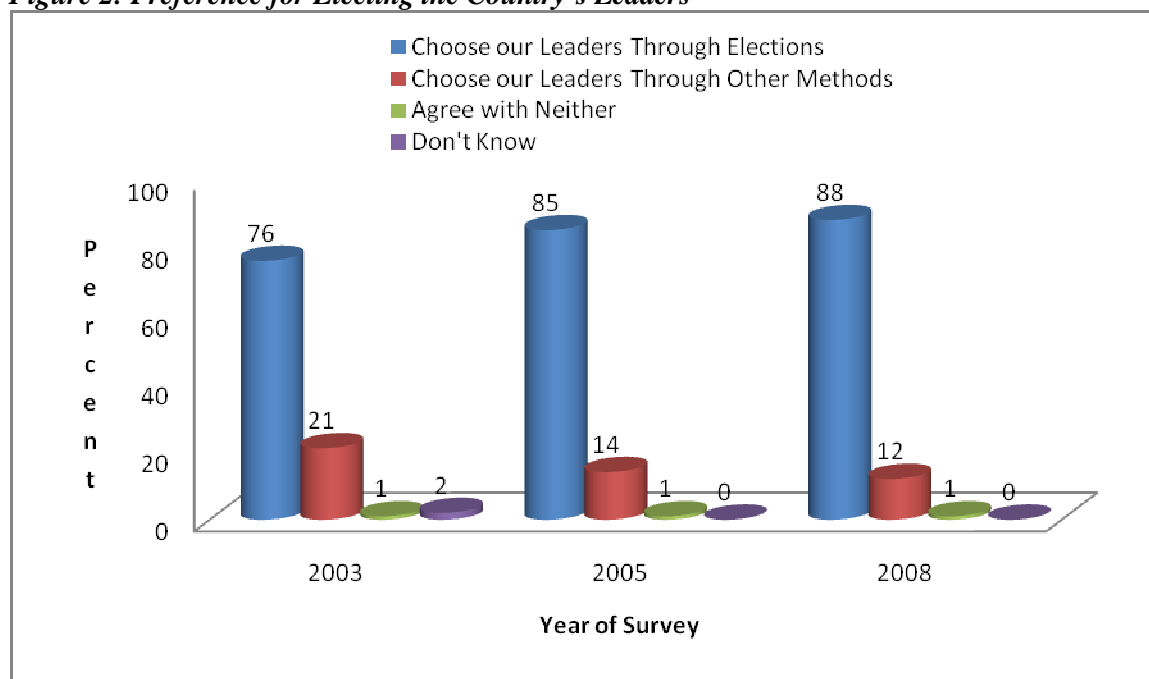
We therefore asked respondents which of the following statements is closest to their view:

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

Figure 2 below indicates that an overwhelming majority of 88 percent of respondents regard elections as the best form of selecting leaders, while only 12 percent submitted that other methods of transfer of political power could be entertained. Clearly this perception illustrates the institutionalisation of procedural democracy, a process that denies legitimacy to non-democratic processes of rule.

Figure 2: Preference for Electing the Country's Leaders



To further confirm that Botswana reject all forms of non-democratic rule, respondents were asked to tender an opinion on statements about other forms of governance. The question reads: “There are many ways to govern a country. Would you approve or disapprove of the following alternatives?”

Alternative 1: Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

Alternative 2: The army comes in to govern the country

Alternative 3: Elections and Parliament be abolished so that the President can decide everything (“one-man rule”)

(a) One man rule

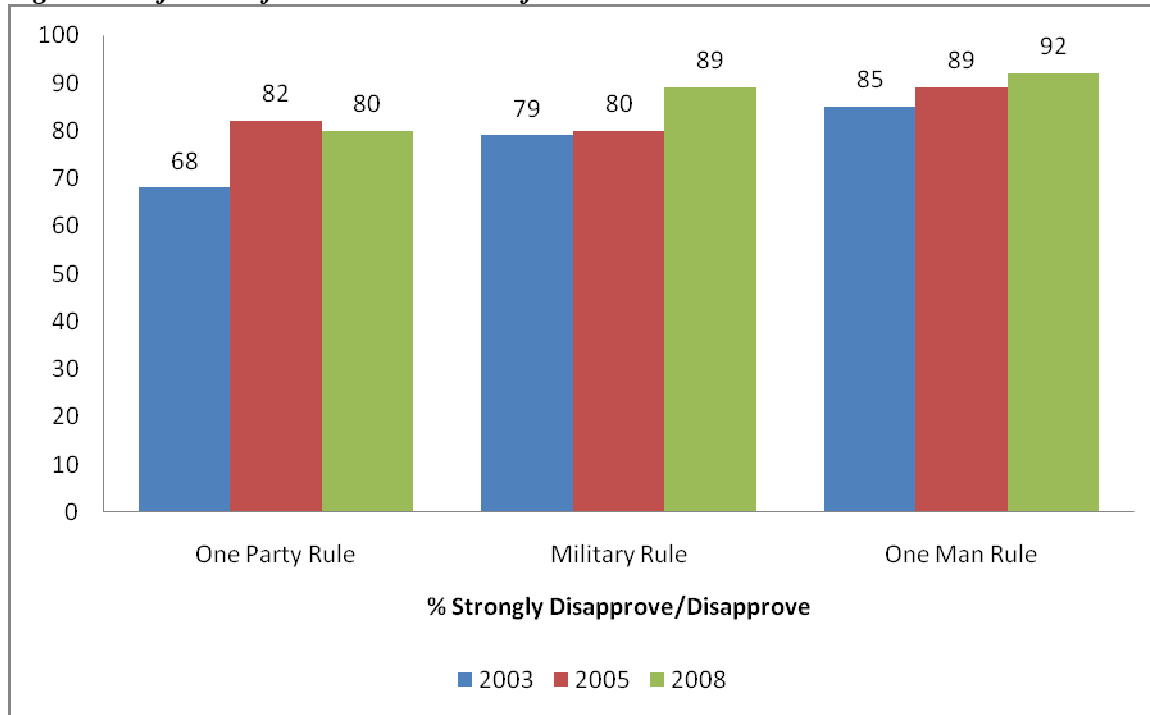
Some analysts have suggested that, since assuming office in 2008, President Khama has issued more directives compared to his predecessors. Although it is still early to be conclusive about his style of rule, these directives suggest that he has a propensity to act alone and rule by decree. Be that as it may, the Afrobarometer survey indicates that Botswana totally reject one-man rule, whereby a president abolishes parliament and elections and rules on his own. In fact, Botswana are more inclined to reject one-man rule than any of the other forms of non-democratic regime. Distaste for one-man rule has risen somewhat over the years, climbing from 86 percent in 1999 to 92 percent in 2008.

(b) One party rule

Although Botswana’s political system is firmly anchored in the Westminster parliamentary system that recognizes the role of opposition parties, in a situation where one party dominates both the executive and legislature branches of government, the checks and balances provided for in the Constitution are somewhat diluted by the fact that the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has won all elections since the independence elections in 1965, and has retained overall control of both the legislative and executive branches of government ever since that time.

One would imagine that the predominance of the BDP and the weakness of opposition parties would lead Botswana to accept one party rule. But the contrary is the case: Botswana remain resolute in their support for a multiparty framework. Figure 3 indicates that rejection of one party rule has remained robust in the last decade. In 1999, it stood at 78 per cent and declined to 68 per cent in 2003. This has since risen sharply and remained steady between 2005 and 2008 at 82 and 80 per cent respectively.

Figure 3: Rejection of Alternative Forms of Government



(c) Military Rule

Perceptions on rule by the military have come into public view since retired army officers joined politics. This has fuelled perceptions that they are making inroads into the civil service. In his road map to govern this country, President Lt. Gen. Ian Khama indicated that there can be no democracy without discipline. Vice President Lt. Gen. Merafhe, is on record as saying that he agrees with the President that if people fail to listen to them in addressing the “moral decay in society” they would “borrow some disciplinary measures from the military” to instil some discipline¹.

Although there are intimations that military-style rule could be invoked, Botswana strongly reject military rule. When asked if the military could be brought in as a form of government, 89 per cent rejected it, the highest level ever recorded in Botswana. The presence of former military leaders in high office clearly does not mean that Botswana would accept military rule as an alternative to democracy.

¹. Kaombona Kanani, “We will Rule this Country Militarily if Need Be – Merafhe,” *Echo* 4 September 2008, p. 3.

Conclusion

The conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that demand for democracy remains resilient in Botswana, reflecting the extent to which democracy has been institutionalized despite the continuing dominance of the BDP, or the entrance of several former military leaders into the political arena. Democracy is likely to deepen in Botswana for as long as citizens acclaim it as the best form of government and are willing to defend it. Botswana showed unequivocal support for democracy and reject the alternatives: one man rule, one party rule, and military rule.

The Survey

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in one of two languages (English or Setswana) with a nationally representative probability sample of 1200 adult Botswana selected from across all 26 districts in October 2008. In the first stage of sampling, 150 census enumerator areas (EAs) were randomly selected from a frame of all EAs that was stratified by district and urban-rural differences. The probability of selection was proportionate to population size based on the most recent 2001 population census. This ensures that every eligible adult has an equal and known chance of being selected. In the second stage, eight households were randomly selected within each selected enumeration area. In the third and final stage, one Botswana citizen over the age of 18 was randomly selected from a list of all household members to be interviewed. The realized sample was then weighted by population of EA and number of adults in the selected household to ensure that it matched current population estimates. The final sample size of 1,200 supports estimates to the national population of all adults that is accurate to within a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points at a confidence level of 95 percent. Estimates of sub-groups have larger margins of error.

Fieldwork for this survey was conducted under the guidance of faculty of the Department of Political and Administrative Studies, Sociology and Statistics at the University of Botswana

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The Afrobarometer, a cross-national survey research project, is conducted collaboratively by social scientists from 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), and the Institute for Research in Empirical Political Economy (IREEP, Benin). Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Department for International Development (UK), the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the U.S. Agency for International Development. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org