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Democratisation in Africa: the case of Botswana and what Africans expect from the Obama administration

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ON “DEMOCRATISATION IN AFRICA: The Case of Botswana and What Africans Expect from the Obama Administration”

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
1. News from Africa in recent months was that, there was a coup d’état in Mauritania, then in Guinea, then in Guinea Bissau and finally Madagascar. Of late, world headlines were dominated by the capture and subsequent rescue of an American captain off the coast of the failed State of Somalia. It may not be surprising therefore if people thought that Africa is a place of bad only news. That perception would be understandable but not valid, because there are many countries in Africa where there are no coups and where Africans are governing themselves democratically even in the face of adversity. It has to be borne in mind that Africa is a continent bigger than the United States, Canada, Mexico and Central America put together.

2. By way of illustration, I am going to tell you the mundane story of my own country, Botswana. A country the size of the State of Texas or France, in the centre of Southern Africa, a country which, at independence, was surrounded by apartheid South Africa, South African ruled and controlled South West Africa and the racist Smith regime in Rhodesia. South West Africa is now the democratically ruled Republic of Namibia, South Africa is now a vibrant democracy in which men are engaged in a no-holds-barred contest for political power very much in your own American tradition. Rhodesia is now the Republic of Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe is of course Zimbabwe.

3. Botswana has been a multi-party democracy since independence in 1966. It has held eight popular elections since then, at 5-year intervals, four of which were officially observed by members of the international community, including the African Union, the Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum, the Southern African Development Community national elections observers, the European Union and the Embassies of the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Nigeria and others. It was the last four elections that were observed by the international community because the practice of doing so is recent. The elections were declared on each occasion free and fair.

4. Starting with a transitional plan for social and economic development the country has since produced nine 5-year, 3 year rolling National Development Plans.
5. It has respected the constitutional separation of powers between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. By American standards, this separation is blurred by the fact that Cabinet members must be from among elected representatives, i.e. Members of Parliament as is the case in Britain. This respect of the Constitution has meant that the country has practiced the rule of law, respected human rights and civil liberties, including freedom of worship, of assembly, of speech and of the press.

6. At present the local press is howling in protest because the new Administration has introduced a law requiring the Press Council, which is the regulatory body for standards of reporting, to include a private lawyer, a member of civil society and a civil servant, instead of only journalists.

7. In the 43 years of our independence, there has never been a political prisoner or a Motswana refugee in another country. Up to about the Year 2000, all Batswana studying abroad returned home. The United States Immigration Service were so impressed by the fact that even Batswana women married to Americans and living in America kept their Botswana citizenship, consequently we used to be granted ten year visas.

8. Unfortunately some Batswana students and other adventurers started misbehaving by over staying their visas in the present century and now post September 11 terror attacks, we now have the same strict visa requirements as everyone else. On the other hand, we unilaterally abolished visas for most countries of the world except about 15 or 20, for special reasons.

9. Botswana has also practiced sound macro-economic management and prudent financial husbandry. This has been attested to by prominent institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, World Economic Forum, Transparency International, etc. For example, various studies sponsored by the World Economic Forum have consistently placed us in either first or second place on our continent in terms of our global competitiveness, quality of public institutions, and sustainable development.
10. These findings have been further buttressed by the corresponding studies of such institutions as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the World Bank Institute, and most recently the Inaugural Report of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, authored I believe here at Harvard.

11. The World Bank Institute’s 2007 Report entitled, “Worldwide Governance Indicators 1996-2006”, ranked our country number one in Africa, followed by Mauritius and Cape Verde. This measures such broad areas as human rights and accountability, political stability, public service delivery, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption.

12. Botswana’s record in the control of corruption has, of course, also been confirmed on an annual basis since 1998 by Transparency International. This achievement is in no small part due to the multiple safeguards we have put in place, which include such relatively new institutions as the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (DCEC), Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Board (PPADB) and the Ombudsman, as well as our constitutionally entrenched provision for independent oversight by the Auditor General, Parliament and the Judiciary.

13. The question I am always asked and which I find difficult to answer authoritatively is, why did Botswana develop as a democracy when some of her sister Republics did not? Before I attempt to answer the question, - the good news is that while Botswana was one of the then four countries considered democratically governed in the seventies and eighties, today it is one out of about twenty democratically governed Sub-Saharan countries. Granted, some of the democracies such as Liberia are newly created, others such as Lesotho are threatened by political disturbances caused by rival political parties.

14. In spite of the recent coups to which I have referred, a pro-democracy atmosphere now exists and is applying pressure on the dictators and would-be dictators.
15. For instance, while Botswana was the sole and only multi-party democracy when the Southern African Development Coordinating Community (SADCC) was formed in 1980, today not only all Southern African Development Conference (SADC) countries recognize the existence of opposition parties, this is also the case throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

16. Elections, some of them may be, however imperfect, are taking place and are observed by outsiders and reported upon by the press. That is why irregularities get to be identified and condemned. The African Union no longer recognizes leaders who come to power by unconstitutional means, the Africa Forum, which is the association of Retired Presidents, requires that applicants for membership prove their democratic credentials by demonstrating what contributions they made to the development of democracy in their country during their reign. Here in Boston APARC has invited only Former Presidents who have contributed to democracy in their countries to a greater or lesser extent.

17. Mo Ibrahim has instituted a democracy prize for Sub-Saharan African Presidents on their retirement. The prize is intended to encourage them to practice accountable governance, while in office and also to retire when their terms end. It demonstrates that there is life after the presidency and that one can earn oneself not only a good name by treating ones fellow citizens fairly, through democratic practice but also can live comfortably afterwards.

18. One ebullient colleague of mine still in office has complained that the prize is meant to buy people to leave office. Other people have argued that there is no justification for rewarding Presidents for doing what they are supposed to do and what they are elected to do.

19. The point is, however, if there is justification for creating the International Criminal Court for punishing those who violate human rights while in office and if there is justification for going to war to remove dictatorial regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, at huge cost in human lives and ruinous financial expense, then there must be justification for rewarding those who do or have done that which we profess to like or approve of.
20. All that I have just cited constitute a pro-democracy atmosphere in Africa at the present first decade of the 21st Century. With the end of the Cold War, the blur in the perception of the United States and Western Europe of African Leaders has been removed. There is therefore, a greater chance of the United States formulating a genuinely pro-democracy African policy and implementing it.

21. Coming back to the question why Botswana developed along democratic lines, I think the answer lies in the traditions and practices of the Batswana pre-colonialism and pre-independence. As Peace Corps Volunteers, American Ambassadors and other American citizens who have served in Botswana will attest, Batswana believe in consensus building to a fault. They waste a great deal of time consulting. They had and still have a consultative system called the “Kgotla” where the Chiefs had to consult people and the people were free to express their views freely, without fear of victimization, so long as those views were expressed openly at the “Kgotla”

22. Concepts such as the role of civil society are not new to Batswana in substance. So, modern democratic institutions such as Parliament and Council, rural and urban were easy to sell to Botswana as consultative fora. Interminable consultation of course, entails patience and tolerance. Batswana are also known as peace-loving among the tribes of Southern Africa.

23. Together with the temperament and traditions of the people, the type of colonial rule was also conducive to the ultimate emergence of democratic rule. As a protectorate, Batswana continued to rule themselves according to their customs under the umbrella of British rule. Compared to South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia, Botswana as a desert was not attractive for white settlement and this made for minimum disruption of customary law and practice.

24. Thirdly, we were lucky in the quality of leaders in our first and second Presidents. As President and Vice President respectively, they campaigned for and obtained the consent of the tribes in the districts, that all natural resources should vest in the State and be used for the good of all. This was before diamonds and other minerals were discovered. Tribal land rights were extended to all citizens irrespective of tribe.
25. This precluded the possibility of some districts becoming rich while others remained poor and making invidious comparisons between themselves and those in whose districts, natural resources were being exploited. This national agreement also meant, that the utilization of revenues from natural resources were also in the public eye because the government had promised at independence that they would be used for the public good in general.

26. So when mineral revenues subsequently materialized, they were shown separately in the governmental revenue estimates and presented to Parliament. This transparency, while not as good as the table now designed by Extractive Industries Transparency International (EITI) ensured confidence in the nation that the revenues were used for public good.

27. The second act by the leadership which promoted democracy was the building of consensus around national priorities such as education and training, water development, poverty alleviation, through employment creation and the establishment of safety nets and physical infrastructure development.

28. The result was that, political parties competed to this day, in terms of who would do these things better, including the maintenance of peace and freedom of expression. I think these are the factors that explain Botswana’s democracy. The rest is fortuitous detail.

29. Otherwise, Botswana has all the usual weaknesses of Sub-Saharan African countries. However, Botswana was also lucky in the person of my predecessor who retired of his own accord like Nyerere before him and Mandela after him. I mention this because we have in Africa the strange phenomenon of popular leaders, actually national heroes, would be icons, over-staying their welcome and gradually converting from heroes into monsters or villains with tragic consequences for their countries and their people. This was the case with Sekou Toure in Guinea, Kamusu Banda in Malawi and now Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

30. Finally, let me say what we Africans expect from the Obama Administration. We, Africans are acutely aware of the constraints under which any American President operates.
Nevertheless, Africans expect a great deal from President Obama for the simple reason that they consider him part of their Kith and Kin. They love and identify with him and are happy that he seems to be one of those American Presidents who generate much passion and enthusiasm in the tradition of the Kennedy’s and Bill Clinton.

31. We Africans are aware that he is facing the worst economic problems since the stock market collapse of 1929, that the challenge is unprecedented in magnitude in global terms and that his first obligation is to attend to the needs of the American people and secondly to the imperatives of global leadership by the United States. Any special attention to Africa can only come as part of his global initiatives which as President of the most powerful nation on earth he is expected to and is bound to take.

32. The above notwithstanding, Africans have certain definite expectations of the Obama Administration. In general, they expect the present cordial relations between Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States to continue, including the habit or practice of visiting Africa as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both did. They do not expect Obama to discontinue this practice, a practice that is becoming a tradition, which assures us that the United States President is aware we exist.

33. They expect Obama to come up with Africa focused and targeted pro development policies along the lines of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, (AGOA) the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the Millennium Development Account.

34. AGOA created tens of thousands of jobs in Sub-Saharan Africa, including and especially in the least developed or poorest countries. It alleviated poverty through employment creation. The Presidents Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief also specifically targeted Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. It was unprecedented in magnitude and generosity to Africa where the money was actually spent on the Africans and not on Americans dealing with Africa.

35. It was a response to the fact that Sub-Saharan Africa, especially Southern Africa, is the epicenter of the AIDS pandemic and its concomitant tuberculosis epidemic. The Millennium Development Account is global but as the majority of poor countries are in Africa, it was therefore, also a pro Africa initiative.
36. In particular, we expect the Obama Administration to take due cognizance of Africa’s genuinely special position, regarding the actions that need to be taken in respect of Climate Change, which is resulting in global warming to the detriment of Africans who are innocent of the causes of climate change.

37. There is an emerging consensus, that there should be a special fund to help developing countries efforts at adaptation and mitigation of the effects of climate change. This should be accompanied by technology transfers to make adaption technically feasible.

38. Adaption will to some extent, entail Africa foregoing the use of some of its natural resources such as coal. So, financial resources and technology transfers will be needed to compensate Africa for foregoing the use of its own coal, and for suffering the worst consequences of climate change such as drought, food and water shortages, heightened temperatures, and sinking coastal areas. All these, when Africans have not had any contribution to the problem of climate change and as only about 24% of them are said to have access to electricity.

39. Whenever special measures are taken and or special dispensations made for developing countries in general, Africa ends up the loser. This is because these measures, such as the International Development Agency (IDA) of the World Bank, are based on population, so our Asian colleagues and others in Latin America end up taking 90% of the resources or the benefits, to the disadvantage of Africa.

40. So we expect from the Obama Administration and the world, a specially tailored package of measures for Africa, separate from that for other developing countries, as I said, in the tradition of AGOA and PEPFAR. We also expect a pro democracy initiative, one that provides incentives for democratization in Africa.

41. AGOA was a poverty alleviation initiative, it therefore rightly did not take into account the situation of democracy in a country. In fact, when it was first adopted and implemented, it left out four of the democratic countries of Sub-Saharan Africa - Mauritius,
Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, in spite of the fact, that when it was piloted in Congress by representatives, Jim McDemott and Charles Rangel, we wrote support letters and had our Ambassadors attend hearings on the bill.

42. If in fact America believes, that democracy is good for Africa, then it should put its money where its mouth is. When I speak of incentives, I mean the carrot and not the stick. That is, if indeed America means it when it says it wants democracy. We want to be helped, not to be attacked militarily.

43. I must however, clarify my personal position on one point. I agree with and support the ongoing consultations between the United States and Africa regarding Africom. It has the potential of enhancing Africa’s capacity to do peace-keeping and peace-making in Africa. Our feeble participation in the Darfur peace-keeping is pitiable and tragic. We throw our boys into a vast desert area with grossly inadequate logistical support and they become sitting targets for well armed militias.

44. Regarding the current credit crunch and recession, we are encouraged by the steps that President Obama has already taken. His stimulus package is intended not only to bail out banks and major corporations, which it is in the logic of circumstance to do, but also and above all, to assist individual families retain their homes. In his speeches, the humanitarian content of his measures comes out very clearly. That is ethical leadership which can be expected from a man of his background.

45. I, for one, am happy with the initial steps that the United States together with the other members of the G20 has taken to resuscitate the global economy. Obviously, charity begins at home but it should not end there. The actions of home players in the major economies are responsible for the mess in which the world finds itself, including of course, vulnerable Africa, innocent of causation of the troubles. More has to be done, not only to restore confidence in banks and financial markets but also to bring relief to Africa and the least developed countries of the world.
46. This would not be charity but a moral imperative, - an obligation to assist those who one has hurt by one’s actions, however unintentionally. It is the lack of integrity that has led to where the global community finds itself. To ignore the plight of Africa would be to perpetuate the lack of integrity and ethical leadership that has been displayed by many in the leading financial center, Wall Street.

47. We therefore expect the G20 to formulate internationally coordinated supervisory regulations regarding, accounting and disclosure standards, securitization, rating practices, payments of bonuses, private equity funds, hedge funds and off-shore financial centers.

48. There should be greater transparency in the practices of those, whose actions can result in so much harm to so many. I suspect that “Winston Churchill would have said of the present situation, “never in the history of human development has so much damage been done to so many by so few”. I also suspect that both Walter Fluker and Melvinia King of Morehouse College would see a deficiency of ethical leadership in the financial sector by both market movers and the regulatory authorities.

49. I endorse Transparency International’s call for a comprehensive inventory of all types of risks taken by banks and other financial actors which led to the crisis. Above all, the regulatory authorities in the mature economies should cooperate to ensure increased cross-border coordination of accounting standards in the financial sector, with all countries requiring disclosure of all forms of derivative products and off the book entities and below the line accounts of financial institutions. This should then be crowned by Africa focused development programs.

50. Finally, we expect President Obama to take due cognisance of Africa’s special problems in international trade. Africa should be assisted to add more value to its raw material exports through technology transfers. We want to export chocolate not just cocoa, coffee and tea not just unprocessed beans, polished diamonds and jewelry and not just uncut rough diamonds.
51. My country as an exporter of clean diamonds is dependent on the prosperity of the consuming countries for its exports. Before the credit crunch, Americans, Europeans, Japanese, Indians, Chinese, the people in the Middle-East, were buying diamonds and so children in my country attended school, orphans were cared for and poverty was being reduced. Even our friends the Israelis and the Palestinians buy diamonds when they are not fighting.

52. So Obama should bring peace to the Middle-East, it is good for African development. We hope he will succeed in all his endeavours.

53. On the Doha round negotiations we ask that the developed world, led by the United States, discontinue subsidies to agriculture, because they distort market values of agricultural produce. They also constitute unfair competition to us in a situation in which America and Europe are already more efficient because of mechanization and superior large scale operations, and use of chemical fertilizers. If the United States cannot do it for the rest of the developing world, then agricultural AGOA is called for.

54. We ask that tariffs on agricultural produce be reduced if not abolished altogether but that we ourselves be allowed to keep some of our tariffs on a time-bound basis pursuant to infant industry protection.

55. While we admit that revenue tariffs are not sustainable in the medium to long term, we need time to adjust and have to be capacitated to do so. We need time to adjust.