

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KENNETH KOMA AND THE BOTSWANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY, 1965–2003

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## ABSTRACT

This article assesses the weaknesses of opposition in Botswana through the case of Kenneth Koma, the influential President of the Botswana National Front (BNF) from 1977 to 2001. This is done by examining the perception that from 1997 Koma's relationship with the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) destabilized and weakened the opposition in the country. The article challenges a view, held by some of his detractors in the opposition, that his leadership style was out of tune with global trends. It also argues that what some people have viewed as 'tribalism' — the domination of the BDP leadership by members of the Bangwato tribe (of which Koma is also a member) — seems to be primarily a matter of expediency. This alleged tribalism is used by Koma's critics as a smear. The article analyzes the relationship between Koma and the BDP at both political and personal levels. At the political level, Koma's failure to keep the BNF united has been capitalized on by the BDP to tighten its grip on power. At the personal level, Koma has used his connections in the BDP to advantage in his business dealings. Koma's cult status and his personal and political choices have therefore significantly contributed to *de facto* one-party rule in Botswana.

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THIS ARTICLE ASSESSES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the former socialist Kenneth Koma and the conservative and pro-capitalist Botswana Democratic Party leadership from 1965 to 2003. The article shows that from 1997, Dr. Koma has exercised increasing influence in the BDP, and has received from it unprecedented displays of public respect. This increasingly warm relationship has contributed to splits within Koma's own Botswana National Front, compounding the opposition's fragmentary nature, which many observers had already offered as an explanation for the

uninterrupted rule of the BDP.<sup>1</sup> A common perception in Botswana is that the Koma-BDP détente is to be explained by tribal ties, and in particular by close links between Koma and Ian Khama, seen by many as a president-in-waiting. The present article argues that a more important reason is a loss of ideology in Botswana politics, a trend which, contrary to popular belief,<sup>2</sup> is not out of step with current global economic and political developments.

The tribalist thesis explains Koma's accommodation with the BDP by reference to Bangwato political hegemony. The domination of Botswana's political leadership by the country's Bangwato tribe can be traced to 1885, when Britain began her colonial enterprise in Botswana.

The BDP was formed by Seretse Khama in 1962. Seretse was a hugely popular but uncrowned Kgosi (Chief) of the Bangwato. The veteran opposition politician, Motsamai Mpho, has argued on several occasions that the BDP is the extension of the Bangwato chieftainship masquerading as a political party.<sup>3</sup> The Bangwato themselves have become quite proud of being the 'natural leaders' of Botswana, and do not take kindly to attempts by the BDP leadership to 'undermine' this order of things. Significantly for the 'tribalism' thesis, Kenneth Koma is also said to be a Mongwato of royal background.

Seretse's pervasive chiefly mystique helped greatly in wooing voters to the BDP in the 1965 general elections. This magnetism continued beyond his death in 1980. According to Michael Crowder and Willie Henderson, Seretse's humane character and outstanding leadership qualities translated into Botswana's national character.<sup>4</sup> Crowder goes on to say that 'unlike other African leaders he did not seek to manipulate the constitution to suit his own needs or that of his governing party. Rather, he seems to have taken pride in operating a constitution he had helped to design. . . . He was

1. See Brian T. Mokopakgosi and Mpho G. Molomo, 'Democracy in the face of a weak opposition in Botswana', *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 14, 1 (2000), pp. 3–22; Onalenna Doo Selolwane, 'Monopoly politikos: how Botswana's opposition parties have helped sustain one-party dominance', *African Sociological Review* 6, 1 (2002), pp. 69–90; Christian John Makgala, "'So far so good?": an appraisal of Dr Ng'ombe's prophecy on the fate of the BNF', *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 17, 1 (2003), pp. 51–66; Steffan Darnolf and John D. Holm, 'Democracy without a credible opposition: the case of Botswana', *Journal of African Policy Studies* 5, 2 & 3 (1999), pp. 3–33. On the role of other individuals and groups in the BNF see Makgala, 'So far so good'.

2. Log Raditlhokwa, 'BNF must defeat Koma', *The Botswana Guardian*, 23 November 2001, and Comrade Moore, 'Party Line embodiment of indiscipline', *Mmegi*, 28 June–4 July 2002, p. 23. The reliance on newspaper articles in this paper is justified on the grounds that most of the articles were written by political activists and observers and appeared to be representative of large sections of the political spectrum. My numerous attempts to interview Dr Koma were unsuccessful, as he stated that he was busy preparing for the general elections scheduled for late 2004.

unostentatious — like most Batswana, whether Chiefs or Commoners.’<sup>5</sup> Seretse was succeeded by his vice-president, Ketumile Masire. ‘President Masire who is a Mongwaketse [a predominantly BNF tribe] had to appease the Bamangwato by appointing Seretse’s cousin, Lenyeletse Seretse, to the position of vice-presidency’, asserts Lydia Nyati-Ramahobo.<sup>6</sup> ‘[W]hen Lenyeletse Seretse died in 1983 Masire felt confident enough to name Peter Mmusi, a . . . [Mohurutshe], as his new deputy’, observed Crowder.<sup>7</sup>

Seretse’s leadership was characterized by a parsimonious use of national resources. However, his death in 1980 and the country’s economic boom since the 1980s resulting from diamond mining led to corruption, mismanagement and unaccountability on the part of the new leadership.<sup>8</sup> In 1991, Vice-President Mmusi was implicated in illegal land dealings in Mogoditshane<sup>9</sup> and was forced to resign the vice-presidency. Masire then replaced him with Festus Mogae, as vice-president. Mogae himself is a Mongwato<sup>10</sup> with training in economics, and a proven technocrat. The Mogoditshane land scandal and a number of others, which implicated senior government officials, severely affected the BDP’s fortunes in the 1994 general elections, where the BNF won an unprecedented 13 parliamentary seats.<sup>11</sup> The BDP retained power with a reduced majority of 27 seats out of a total of 40. In order to ward off the perceived BNF takeover of power in the 1999 general elections, the faction-ridden BDP was advised that Masire should retire and be replaced by someone who was not associated with the party’s belligerent factions.<sup>12</sup> Again the Khama factor became crucial:

The perception of the Bangwato, when Masire succeeded Khama after his death in 1980 was that he was only holding the fort for Khama’s son, Ian Khama Seretse Khama, to enable him to develop a career in the army, grow up and eventually take over as President.

5. Crowder, ‘Botswana and the survival of liberal democracy’, pp. 463–4.

6. Lydia Nyati-Ramahobo, ‘Ethnic identity and nationhood in Botswana’, in Isaac N. Mazonde (ed.), *Minorities in the Millennium: Perspectives from Botswana* (Lentswe La Lesedi, Gaborone, 2002), p. 24.

7. Crowder, ‘Botswana and the survival of liberal democracy’, p. 470.

8. On corruption and mismanagement see Kenneth Good, ‘Corruption and mismanagement in Botswana: a good case study’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, 3 (1994), pp. 499–521. However, in comparison with most countries in Africa Botswana has remarkably low levels of corruption.

9. See Republic of Botswana, *Report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Land Problems in Mogoditshane and other Peri-urban Villages* (Government Printer, Gaborone, 1991).

10. ‘[Mogae] earned himself disrepute at Moseitse and Dukwi [predominantly Kalanga villages] by maintaining that everyone living in Gammangwato was a Mongwato including himself, though a Motalaoda’ (Mmualefhe Raditladi, ‘Live-Wire’, *Guardian*, 23 January 1998, p. 11).

11. See M. Z. Bothornilwe, ‘The emergence of electoral support for the opposition in Botswana’ (unpublished MA thesis, University of Lancaster, 1997).

In a seemingly logical set of events, after Festus Mogae was inaugurated Botswana's third President on 1 April 1998, he appointed Lieutenant General Ian Khama Seretse Khama Vice-President and Minister of Presidential Affairs and Public Administration. The appointment of Ian Khama to the position of Vice-President and also to head a powerful ministry of Presidential Affairs and Public Administration was well received by Bangwato. They perceived the move as grooming their heir apparent to eventually take over the high political office.<sup>13</sup>

Ian Khama was a proven commander of the Botswana Defence Force, which was impressive on international peace-keeping assignments and also remained largely apolitical locally. As shown below, some observers have argued that the ascent of Ian Khama to the vice-presidency drastically changed Koma's decades-long acrimonious relationship with the BDP. Koma himself is alleged to have written to Ian Khama in 1997–8 recruiting him for the BNF presidency and promising to step down for him.<sup>14</sup> Had Khama agreed, this would have been a massive boost to the BNF's electoral chances, given his immense following in the BDP's heartland of Central District which has more parliamentary and council seats than any other district in the country. However, Khama decided to join his father's party, the BDP. The contention here is that any party, even other than the BDP and the BNF, would have stood a good chance of winning constituencies in the Central District if it had had Ian Khama in its ranks.

Koma's alleged attempt to recruit Ian Khama is similar to what happened in 1969 when Kgosi Bathoen II of the Bangwaketse resigned his chiefly office and joined the BNF. Whereas Koma was previously against chieftainship, he welcomed Bathoen into the party as a matter of expediency. While this move paid dividends as the BNF won some constituencies in Bathoen's tribal area, it was perceived as tribalism on the part of Koma. His facilitation of Bathoen to the presidency of the party in 1970 led to a number of BNF members resigning, citing tribalism and loss of direction by the party.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Koma: The BNF leader outside Parliament, 1965–84*

After forming the BNF, Koma preferred to serve as organizer, secretary and publicist until 1977 when he became the party's president. Until 1984 he preferred keeping a low profile and discouraged his followers and admirers from glorifying him, which earned him great respect amongst BNF members. Between 1965 and 1984, and even up to 1998, the relationship between the BDP and the BNF, in particular its leader Koma, was a

trenchant one. Initiatives by Koma and Seretse for co-operation between their parties were rejected outright by their followers. In December 1984 Koma stated that 'In 1974, Sir Seretse Khama approached me about the possibilities of a coalition but his own supporters opposed him. I wrote their party a letter encouraging the idea, but they responded by criticizing me at public meetings, saying "What is more national than the BDP?"'<sup>16</sup>

From the inception of the BNF, the government authorities were displeased with what they saw as a communist movement intending to dominate the opposition and rig elections. 'A number of pamphlets began to appear in August 1965, vilifying Koma and his movement.'<sup>17</sup> Seretse and his government were worried 'that it could put paid to their hopes of dashing Botswana's image of hostage of the White South and of developing links with the north'.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, 'the "united front" might attract such overwhelming hostility to the B.D.P. from Black Africa that the elected government would be subverted and possibly overthrown — inviting in turn intervention and re-colonization of Botswana by White Africa'.<sup>19</sup> Koma's *Pamphlet No. 1*, though celebrated by his followers, was heavily condemned by the BDP government as a seditious communist tool. According to one historical analysis:

[The BNF] was a new kind of opposition party quite different from the B.P.P. or B.I.P., which had only been successful among marginalized people in the railway towns. It had a manipulative style of its own, aimed not only at recruiting young left-wing intellectuals but also attracting dissident elements from traditional society. Towards the end of 1965, security reports reaching the Prime Minister indicated that the B.N.F. was making dangerous progress among ward headmen and sub-chiefs, whipping up renewed opposition to 'Phuti' [BaNgwato] rule in the Bangwato district, as well as resentment in the country as a whole against supposed Bangwato rule in the form of the B.D.P. government.<sup>20</sup>

In August 1967, Bill Grant, the head of the Special Branch, compiled a report claiming that the BNF was a Moscow-controlled radical communist group hell-bent on indoctrinating the civil service, young people and labour groups with communism. In November that year the scared BDP government ordered the police to raid the BNF office. During the raid the police seized copies of the BNF's newspaper *Puo Phaa* ('Straight Talk'). Koma and four others, including a woman called Pretty Molefe, were rounded up

16. *Mmegi*, 'Koma in favour of coalition', 8 December 1984, p. 1.

17. J. Ramsay and N. Parsons, 'Emergence of political parties in Botswana', in W. A. Edge and M. H. Lekorwe (eds), *Botswana: Politics and society* (J. L. van Schaik, Pretoria, 1998), p. 148.

18. N. Parsons, W. Henderson and T. Tlou, *Seretse Khama, 1921-1980* (Gaborone, Macmillan, 1995), p. 236.

and charged with sedition. In January 1968, 'Naomi Mitchison [Lady (Naomi) Mitchison, the Scottish novelist and wife of a Labour peer, who had attached herself to the Bakgatla since 1962] protested at the Botswana High Commission in London. She complained about what she believed to be political persecution of the BNF leadership and also came up with an idea of setting up a legal defence fund for them'.<sup>21</sup> The fund established in Botswana received various contributions from anonymous civil servants, Kgosi Bathoen, Kgosi Linchwe II of the Bakgatla and Kgosi Neal Sechele of the Bakwena. Nevertheless, the sedition charge against the BNF leaders was later dropped on the grounds that 'the Office of the President, as a result of poor intelligence or advice, had over-reacted against a minor threat from the BNF'.<sup>22</sup>

Some BDP activists used the BNF's socialist propaganda to scare the uneducated masses by claiming that if they voted the BNF into power the people would be forced to share their property and wives.<sup>23</sup> 'Christians were scared to their bones about the "threat of communism" in Botswana. By so doing, the BDP then assumed the "messianic image" of a party that would save Botswana from the "communist hydra" — the opposition — that would otherwise swallow up the church and the people.'<sup>24</sup> From the 1970s to the 1990s, the BDP viewed the BNF as unpatriotic and keen only on fomenting trouble. The party was believed to be inciting mob action, strikes and riots by students, workers and the armed forces. The BDP went to great lengths to warn the general public against Koma, saying that he advocated political thuggery and violence, and was a corrupter of the youth.

Whereas BNF followers glorified Koma's education and writings, the BDP members rubbished them at every turn.<sup>25</sup> 'African leaders . . . such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda and to some extent, Dr Kenneth Koma . . . are regarded as "philosopher Kings". Not so much that Dr Koma had any philosophy of his own behind him like perhaps Nyerere and his Ujamaa or Kaunda with his humanism, but because his youthful followers regarded him as such', observed Maundeni.<sup>26</sup> Being one of the few citizen PhD holders in the country at a time when a lack of skilled and educated Batswana was rife, he was offered jobs such as lecturing at the

21. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

23. *Daily News*, 'Pamphlet No. 1 to be re-distributed', 11 January 1984, p. 1.

24. Paul Rantao, *Makatolole No. 1: An exposé of pimples and pitfall in Botswana's political economy* (Gaborone Printing Works, Gaborone, 2000), p. 11.

25. *Daily News*, 'Koma wastes time writing books — Nwako', 21 December 1984, p. 2.

University of Botswana, being general manager of the Botswana Meat Commission, or representing his country at the United Nations, but he declined them.<sup>27</sup> He justified his rejection of the job offers by arguing that they were ‘a move to sabotage his party so that it should not develop into the main opposition party’.<sup>28</sup> For refusing such lucrative offers, Koma attained great respect among his followers who saw him as selfless and a messiah.

Members of the BDP seized every opportunity to castigate Koma, and sometimes his private life or his bachelorhood was publicly ridiculed. They also told anybody who cared to listen that Koma was a millionaire businessman masquerading as a man of modest means.

#### *Koma as leader of the opposition in Parliament, 1984–98*

When Koma became a Member of Parliament for the Gaborone South constituency in late 1984, after defeating Vice-President Peter Mmusi in a by-election, ‘Fame surrounded [him] and his ingress into Parliament was hailed almost like the arrival of a messiah by his followers’, wrote BNF veteran Mmualefhe Raditladi.<sup>29</sup> In March 1985, the independent *Mmegi* newspaper reported that Lady Mitchison, author of some 80 books, who was visiting Botswana, was planning to write on Koma, whom she likened to Mahatma Gandhi, and introduce him to the world.<sup>30</sup> Mitchison believed that Koma was a good man who loved people rather than money; this was after she had been impressed by his contribution to the budget debate in Parliament.<sup>31</sup> However, Koma’s entry into Parliament augmented the BDP activists’ malice against him and unwittingly contributed to his cult status:

The BNF addresses itself directly to the problems and plight of the nation while the BDP is concerned with the furtherance of its bourgeois tendencies and ambitions. These are the tendencies that the BNF led by Dr Koma and his compatriots reject, like the prophet Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations chapter 5:1–5.

Why is Dr Koma insulted? He is insulted for his brilliant ideas and popularity. He is insulted for his education — four degrees! I would advise the (BDP) not to insult or speak ill of Dr Koma. He is the hope of this nation.<sup>32</sup>

27. *Daily News*, ‘Koma’s relationship with SA causes concern — Mmusi’, 9 November 1984, p. 1. Also see Daniel Keatametse Kwelagobe, *Beware of Wolves in Sheepskins! No. 2 (O se bone Thola Borethe, teng ga yone go a baba)*, cited in Kenneth Kebaone Mokopane, ‘The political career of Dr Kenneth Goabamang Koma to 1989’ (BA research essay, Univ. of Botswana), p. 27.

28. *Daily News*, ‘Koma cautions the BDP against friction’, 14 November 1984, p. 2.

29. Mmualefhe Raditladi, ‘Is the “BNF War” an unusual event?’, *Mmegi Monitor*, 2–8 June 2002, p. 14.

On 3 June 1985 Koma and one Bothojwamotho Moloji appeared before the Serowe magistrate's court facing three charges of attempting to defraud the National Development Bank and the Financial Assistance Programme, as directors of Kgobati Construction. 'When the case was reported at rallies in Gaborone North and South people were in tears and some were heard saying "we will follow him wherever he is taken".'<sup>33</sup> Guilty or not, what this tells us is that for a long time Koma professed socialist ideals but made use of the BDP government's credit facilities to further his entrepreneurial enterprises. The BDP capitalized on this contradiction to besmirch Koma as a hypocrite. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that in some parts of the world it was not uncommon for socialist groups to have successful and wealthy businesspeople as members.

'The BNF's failure,' argues Otsweletse Moupo, 'to develop a solid organisational and administrative structure and sustain a programme of political education which would have enabled it to train a politically sophisticated cadre facilitated the development of KK's [Koma] cultism.'<sup>34</sup> In the absence of inner-party debate and of anyone who could match Koma in terms of political understanding, he was elevated to the position of an unchallenged ideological guru of the movement, argues Moupo. 'In these circumstances his word came to be regarded as gospel and his pronouncements treated as party policy. His negative tendencies could not be timeously criticized and checked.'<sup>35</sup> According to Akanyang Magama, Koma from time to time revised *Pamphlet No. 1* without consulting other members of the BNF.<sup>36</sup> His immense intellectual prowess and popularity in the BNF led to his remaining party president even after the BNF was routed by the BDP in a number of general elections. However, this scenario was not limited to the BNF since other opposition parties, as well as the BDP, also had 'life presidents'.<sup>37</sup>

33. *Mmegi*, 'Koma appears in court', 8 June 1985, p. 1. A follower wrote 'Remember a man is not guilty until proven guilty by a court. Still more, a man could be found innocent by a court of appeal. Therefore Dr Koma is still and will always be the respected, adored leader of the BNF' (Otto Tekane Otukile, 'Is Dr Koma really scandalous?', *Mmegi*, 13 July 1985, p. 10). In 1989, an admirer wrote: 'In . . . [1984] Parliament witnessed the coming into the House of Dr Kenneth Koma, whom many ruling party MPs saw as a monster to be annihilated.' The admirer continued, 'Instead of Domkrag [BDP] MPs addressing themselves to the needs of their electorate they wasted a lot of time attacking Dr Koma. What was of interest here was that Dr Koma never responded to these attacks as most of them were childish' (Odirile Kgabung, 'Proceedings "boring"', *Guardian*, 6 January 1989, p. 7).

34. Communication with Otsweletse Moupo (BNF President), April 2003.



*Koma's influence in the BDP, 1997–2002*

In mid-1997, President Masire prevented what might have led to the break-up of the BDP as a result of serious factional fighting within the party by handpicking members for the Central Committee from the two warring factions. Since 1991, the deep fissures in the BDP had become public knowledge, with the two hostile camps becoming known as the Daniel Kwelagobe and the Mompoti Merafhe factions. 'Needless to say that the BDP won [the 1994 general election] decisively, the poll reflected significant gains by the opposition. The BNF share of the popular vote increased from 27 percent in 1989 to 37 percent in 1994 whilst that of the BDP dropped from 65 percent to 54 percent.'<sup>38</sup> For the first time since 1965, the BDP was faced with a serious electoral challenge. Interestingly, in October 1997, the *Gazette* newspaper came up with a story that Koma was playing a pivotal role in defusing factional fighting in the BDP. This was entitled 'Is Koma the BDP's real leader?':

Is the real power behind the BDP no other than the leader of the BNF, Dr Kenneth Koma? Dr Koma seems to have become a power broker between the warring BDP factions which have eroded President Masire's influence over the party. Lt Gen Mompoti Merafhe joined forces with the opposition Botswana National Front to sponsor Mr Moutlakgola Nwako's candidacy for the position of Speaker of the National Assembly, forcing President Masire to climb down on his bid for former Ministers Archibald Mogwe and Kematlamang Morake.

All powerful — or is he? — BDP Secretary General Daniel Kwelagobe and Party Chairman Ponatshego Kedikilwe's faction conspired with the BNF to oust Lt Gen Mompoti Merafhe and Thebe Mogami as Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.<sup>39</sup>

From mid-1997, the BNF was itself embroiled in a bitter factional row between its 'old left' and 'new right' members after the former were badly defeated in the party's Central Committee elections, which the old left, calling itself the Concerned Group, alleged that the new right had rigged. By late 1997, some members of the Concerned Group were suspended, while others were expelled from the party by the Central Committee. Koma rallied solidly behind the old left and this deepened the division in the party.

An anti-Koma campaigner, Log Raditlhokwa, had argued that, since the BDP's president Festus Mogae (who was intended to succeed Masire in April 1998) and Ian Khama (planning to quit the army on the eve of Masire's retirement) were Bangwato as was Koma, the latter was wanting to perpetuate 'Ngwatoism'<sup>40</sup> in Botswana's political leadership. To Raditlhokwa this was an act of tribalism by Koma, but Raditlhokwa was taken to

task by an ardent Koma supporter: 'To label Dr Koma a tribalist is a very unfair and extreme form of dishonesty. Raditlhokwa should show that Dr Koma's interests are not narrow. Koma is a revolutionary Pan Africanist whose interests transcend class and ethnicity.'<sup>41</sup> The situation resembled Arap Moi's regime in Kenya where 'the saccharine of the sycophants was matched in equal measure by the acid of those who had either lost their place in the sun or had always lived in the shadow of power'.<sup>42</sup>

So bad was the division in the BNF that lack of co-operation between the two factions led to a brutal confrontation at a special conference in Palapye in April 1998. The result of this mayhem, or the 'Battle of Palapye' (as the media called it), was that Koma dissolved the Central Committee. This was after the committee had suspended him from the party's presidency but a High Court ruling had confirmed his supremacy of the BNF — a development which motivated Raditlhokwa to repeat his charge:

Koma's Achilles' heel is that he has a profound and self-incapacitating love for his two most powerful tribesmen, President Festus Mogae and his vice, Lt.-Gen. Ian Khama. Their ascendancy to top positions in the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and government has completely disarmed him. He no longer has the zeal to spearhead a fierce struggle against the BDP. He would rather fragment and enervate the BNF to give his favourite tribesmen and the BDP a free ticket to power in 1999 . . . .

It should be understood that, despite all his camouflages, Koma is not only a conservative traditional patriarch; he is also a tribalist at heart.<sup>43</sup>

The same sentiment was echoed by one P. Bothale, who asserted that 'Koma is incorrigibly a believer in tribalism. He wants the BNF to be ruled through Ngwatoism as in the BDP.'<sup>44</sup> A later writer has argued that Koma's fire against the BDP was effectively doused by Ian Khama's entry into the BDP leadership.<sup>45</sup> Koma himself has dismissed the view that he is an admirer of Ian Khama as day-dreaming.<sup>46</sup>

At one of the rallies addressed by the members of the dissolved Central Committee in Gaborone, it was alleged by one of the speakers, Mokgweetsi Kgosipula, that Koma and President Mogae had met clandestinely at the Gaborone Sun hotel immediately following the Battle of Palapye to chart the way forward in the destruction of the BNF. Titus Mbuya of the *Mmegi* newspaper accused the government media of partiality, arguing that they reported favourably on the Koma faction and created the impression that

41. Kingdom Ipotseng, 'BNF: adopt law of contradiction', *Mmegi*, 6–12 March 1998, p. 19.

42. Andrew Morton, *Moi: The making of an African statesman* (Michael O'Mara Books Ltd, London, 1998), p. vii.

43. Log Raditlhokwa, 'Koma cannot solve BNF crisis', *Mmegi*, 1–7 May 1998, p. 18.

44. P. Bothale, 'Koma is to blame', *Guardian*, 12 June 1998, p. 10.

45. Mbaki Henry Mpenya, 'Letter to Dr Koma', *Guardian*, 14 February 2003, p. 20.

46. *Guardian*, 'What is all the fuss over Koma?', 29 November 2002, p. 9.

the dissolved Central Committee was a rogue group.<sup>47</sup> 'This is not surprising because it is in the interest of the ruling party that the BNF perishes,' he said.<sup>48</sup> At political rallies Koma also vowed to dismantle the BNF's regional structures throughout the country, since he believed they were loyal to the dissolved committee. Meanwhile, his hardline loyalists threatened to burn down the houses of BNF MPs belonging to the committee. So serious was the threat that selected residences had to be patrolled by the police. The independent *Botswana Guardian* newspaper was of the opinion that the 'problem is that there is too much indiscipline, lack of tolerance, jealousy, and "the bring him down" syndrome [in the BNF]. And Koma seems to be encouraging it.'<sup>49</sup>

The dissolved Central Committee managed to remain relatively calm; even after dissolution, its members, believed to be led by Paul Rantao (MP for Gaborone West constituency), continued to demonstrate a modicum of respect and acknowledgement of Koma as their undisputed leader. For instance, Rantao was reported to have complained that 'It is not interesting to see the concerned group treat our beloved leader like a teddy bear'.<sup>50</sup> The Concerned Group ensured that members of the dissolved committee did not have access to Koma. Interestingly, while the BNF veterans talked reconciliation, a BDP defector and member of the dissolved committee, Kabo Morwaeng, had the audacity to declare that 'if Koma ever ruled Botswana, it would be ruled with . . . an iron rod like Rwanda and Burundi'.<sup>51</sup> In addition, he stated that 'Dr Koma is a fake leader, too tribalistic and racist. That's why we suspended him from the party.' However, Morwaeng did not explain his allegations concerning Koma's racism.

Hardening feelings between the Concerned Group and the dissolved Central Committee precluded reconciliation. As a result, some members of the latter group broke away from the BNF in July 1998 to form what they styled the Botswana Congress Party (BCP). In the run-up to the 1999 general elections, the BNF and the BCP spent a great deal of time and

47. Titus Mbuya (staff reporter), 'Reconciliation, BNF's only hope', *Mmegi*, 24–30 April 1998, p. 4. According to Darnolf and Holm, 'In spite of intense infighting within both government and opposition parties, Radio Botswana and *The Daily News* ignore all BDP battles while reporting opposition (whether within or among the parties) conflicts with relish. One telling example was the infighting within the BNF that erupted in 1998. On Monday June 15th the BNF's party leader Kenneth Koma was allowed on national radio to discuss the internal struggles of his party. When the ruling party's Secretary General and cabinet member, Daniel Kwelagobe, almost ended in a fistfight with a fellow member of the Central Committee at about the same time, nothing appeared in the government media. The same pattern was apparent during the early 1990s, prior to the 1994 elections. The BDP's two factions were at each other's throats, but the government media took no notice' ('Democracy without a credible opposition', pp. 15–17).

resources vilifying each other. The BDP became the main beneficiary of the BNF split as it raked in 36 parliamentary seats, with the BNF winning six and the BCP only one. The legacy of 'life presidency' perpetuated by party officials seemed to have been accommodated in the BCP: following its humiliating defeat, its president, Michael Dingake, attempted to resign in line with 'Western tradition', but his followers pleaded with him to stay on.

Up to this point the BDP relished the disarray of Kenneth Koma and his party. BDP activists capitalized on the Palapye fracas as clear proof of what they had always preached about Koma as the embodiment of political delinquency, intolerance and thuggery. In May 1998, the BDP welcomed some 150 alleged 'disgruntled former members of the BNF' at a rally in Thamaga.<sup>52</sup> At the same rally, the elated BDP National Chairman, Ponatshego Kedikilwe, stated: 'It is a good omen that Koma's party is now dying a natural death.'<sup>53</sup> The MP for Thamaga, Gladys Kokorwe, also took advantage of the gathering to declare, with great joy and tremendous relief, the strong likelihood of a BDP landslide victory at the 1999 general elections. At what was described as a poorly attended rally in Molepolole, Daniel Kwelagobe gleefully told his reportedly bored audience that 'Koma was getting a dose of his own medicine. "He is reaping what he has sown"',<sup>54</sup> that is, allegations of advocacy for violence.

The newly sworn-in President Mogae was not left behind, as he also upheld his party's decades-long tradition of portraying Koma as an ill-natured leader and public enemy number one. 'Mogae told his audience [in Serowe] that the BNF leader has, over the years, equivocated and vacillated the use of thuggery, hooliganism and violence as a means of achieving political power.'<sup>55</sup> However, Koma soon became something of a hero in the BDP, a matter to which we now turn.

*'Political honeymooning'? The formation of BCP and BDP's sudden 'respect' for Koma*

The formation of the BCP quickly resulted in the BDP toning down its negative view of Koma and beginning to show unprecedented respect for him, and to some extent his party. The BCP Members of Parliament, when still in the BNF, had given their BDP counterparts a hard time in parliamentary debates. The BDP was not used to such a vigorous challenge in Parliament. Curiously, since the 1999 general elections, the relationship between a handful of opposition parliamentarians and their BDP counterparts has been the antithesis of the 1994–9 scenario. The BDP has even

52. *Guardian*, 'PHK welcomes BNF defectors', 22 May 1998, p. 5.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Guardian*, 'DK attacks BNF leader', 29 May 1998, p. 3.

55. *Midweek Sun*, 'Mogae takes a swipe at Dr. Koma', 29 April 1998, p. 2.

described the opposition MPs as co-operative and reasonable, and different from the 1994–9 cohort. This rather unusual relationship was dubbed ‘political honeymooning’ by Paul Rantao.<sup>56</sup>

The formation of the BCP was met with immense hostility, general intolerance and even violence by BNF and alleged BDP scoundrels. Hordes of BNF elements, and alleged BDP thugs, rampaged at rallies addressed by the BCP activists, grabbing public address systems and sending the speakers scampering for cover. In some instances, the police had to escort BCP activists from assailants baying for their blood.

In August 1998, in what appeared to be solidarity with the BNF, Gladys Kokorwe moved a motion in Parliament calling for the enactment of legislation barring parliamentarians and councillors from defecting to other parties with their seats.<sup>57</sup> But given the rather undemocratic manner whereby Kokorwe herself became a Member of Parliament, her motion was taken with a pinch a salt in some quarters. ‘The principles behind the motion are well understood and appreciated. However, I doubt whether Kokorwe was true to her convictions or she merely wanted to cement the Botswana Democratic Party’s flirtatious relationship with the Botswana National Front’, wrote one Puna Ndeseng.<sup>58</sup> Ndeseng went on to remind his readers that ‘Kokorwe has a history which defines her place in our democracy. She left the public service and within 24 hours she stood for BDP primary elections. She lost the primary election. Kabo Morwaeng won, Ntsatsi came second and she was a distant third. . . . Now she turns around and lectures parliament on democracy.’

The BDP did not seriously condemn acts of violence by BNF members, and in the isolated cases where something was said it seemed to be only half-hearted. Needless to say, this was a far cry from the past. As if to demonstrate its new-found respect for Koma, the BDP government offered him the Presidential Order for Meritorious Service for his ‘contribution’ to the political development of Botswana. However, Koma rejected it, and his inner circle argued that he deserved the more prestigious Naledi Ya Botswana (‘Star of Botswana’) award, since the one offered him had become an every Jack and Jill affair. As late as 2002 Koma was seen as a highly respected MP: ‘The leader of Opposition in Parliament, Dr Kenneth Koma, commands respect among his comrades and members of the ruling BDP. When he speaks, everybody listens. He is not interrupted as often as other

56. Rantao, *Makatolole No. 1*, p. 9. Rantao (who defected back to the BNF in 2000), while he was still a BCP official, wrote: ‘almost all sections of the civil society are in protest e.g. workers, teachers, students, nurses, vendors and hawkers, smallholding farmers and even the police. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there is virtually no opposition in parliament, but political honeymooning’ (*ibid.*).

MPs. This was the case when he rose to make a contribution on the ongoing debate on the Budget Speech. Spicing his speech with jokes as usual.’<sup>59</sup>

*2001 BNF congress and its aftermath*

Koma’s planned retirement in November 2001 led to the emergence of two belligerent factions in the BNF: a reformist faction called Concerned Group, because its membership consisted largely of members from the previous Concerned Group, and a ‘conservative’ opponent dubbed the ‘Party Line’. Koma openly backed the latter. Like the dissolved Central Committee in 1998, the new Concerned Group was against what it saw as Koma’s ineffectual leadership style.

It appears that the Party Line, like the old Concerned Group, remained complacent, banking on Koma’s support, whereas the new Concerned Group ‘spent sleepless nights’ canvassing for support ‘in an attempt to dislodge “Goliath”’<sup>60</sup> at the November 2001 congress planned for Kanye. The main contenders for the presidency were Otsweletse Moupo of the Concerned Group and Peter Woto of the Party Line. On the eve of elections for the Kanye congress the staunch anti-Koma campaigner, Log Radithhokwa, gave elaborate advice claiming that the BNF’s greatest enemy ‘was not the BDP and its imperialist mentors and sponsors’ but ‘Koma and a cabal of his misguided agents’:

Shortly after the [1998] split, Koma approached other opposition parties to create the Botswana Alliance Movement (BAM) which he disorganised before the elections to give the BDP victory on a silver platter. The BNF is now in an extremely shabby state. . . . As BNF activists go to the Kanye congress on Saturday they should cast their minds back to remember who Koma is. He is an enigma.

A man with two tongues. One appears to be speaking for people’s power, freedom, justice and purpose. The other divides the party militants who seek to fight for democracy and justice. Many BNF functionaries who had a promising political career have fallen by the wayside due to Koma’s antics. . . .

Those who can afford to should also travel to Kanye on Saturday and plead with BNF factions that should Koma triumph over the BNF again, it should stop dreaming about winning the 2004 elections. In fact, such a catastrophic mistake may even lead to the break up of the BNF before the elections.<sup>61</sup>

Moupo’s faction swept the board during the elections, which was totally unexpected by many. Woto and the Party Line protested that the election

59. *Mmegi*, ‘Koma commands respect’, 22–8 February 2002, p. 5.

60. Central Committee, ‘BNF — way forward’ (paper for discussion by CC at Gaboron Hotel, 17 August 2002).

61. Log Radithhokwa, ‘BNF must defeat Koma’, *Guardian*, 23 November 2001. On allegations that in the past Koma deliberately ensured that efforts for the opposition party’s unit came to nothing, see Shadrack Nyeku [Botswana People’s Party official], ‘Koma derailed unit talks’ (*Mmegi*, 29 August–4 September 1997, p. 14). Also see R. K. K. Molefi, ‘Dr Kenneth Koma’ (poem in preparation).

were rigged, and Koma rallied behind them. The new Central Committee invited the Party Line to a discussion on resolving the impasse, but this overture was cold-shouldered by the latter. The two camps could not agree on who would chair the proceedings.<sup>62</sup> Threats of 'disciplinary action' were issued to the Party Line by the new BNF Secretary General, Akanyang Magama. It was also accused of leaking confidential party information to the public, as well as of insubordination and addressing the supposedly retired Koma as the BNF President. However, unlike in the past, Koma this time faced waning support and even ridicule from erstwhile loyalists and the independent press. Nonetheless, the Party Line also took the war to the enemy. It uncompromisingly defended itself against threats of disciplinary action by Magama, and accused the Central Committee (still calling it Concerned Group and a faction) of being dictatorial, of having cheated its way into office, of opportunism, campaigning through newspapers, showing disrespect to Koma, and hypocrisy. It swore to retaliate by all means necessary.<sup>63</sup>

With no end to the quagmire in sight, the Central Committee expelled Peter Woto and a number of others seen as ringleaders. Koma and others were suspended for six months. As in previous expulsions, those shown the door continued to regard themselves as full BNF activists, and continued addressing rallies in the name of the party. Koma became their rallying figure. Hence, the Party Liners were castigated by pro-Central Committee elements as incorrigible henchmen, saboteurs and BDP spies.

After a long silence the BNF Youth League, through its Secretary General, Rasterns D. Mathengwane, stated in a press release 'We are disappointed by Dr Koma's conduct of openly inciting members of the party to go against the leadership, and openly identify as party line than BNF' (sic).<sup>64</sup> The League accused Koma of divisive tendencies and castigated him for 'disorganising the party and denying BDP the potential opponent in the forthcoming elections'.<sup>65</sup> It also lamented that 'Having been the party leader for nearly two decades, and being, as we are made to believe, one of the first educated Batswana of his time, he must know that a party like the BNF must be run by rules, procedures and regulations, not by personal feelings as he wants it to be'.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, the Party Line did not relent in the face of the malicious propaganda levelled against it. Some Party Liners stepped up their

62. Party Line Secretariat, 'The developments in the Botswana National Front (BNF) since the November 2001 Party Congress: A summary report' (presented at the Organizers' Workshop held at Boikhutso Primary School in the Gaborone North constituency, 7 September 2002).

63. P. Tshenyo, 'In defence of the BNF Party Line', *Mmegi Monitor*, 15–21 January 2002.

64. *Sunday Tribune*, 'BNF youth endorse expulsions', 9 June 2002, p. 5.

glorification of Koma, and one even declared that 'Koma is the BNF'.<sup>67</sup> In June 2002, the Central Committee instituted legal proceedings before the High Court, requesting that the suspended and expelled Party Liners be prevented from addressing rallies in the name of the BNF. The war of attrition between the two sides led to Koma and the Party Line registering a new party called the New Democratic Front (NDF) in early 2003.

*The 'invisible hand' of the BDP in the BNF conflict*

The BNF Youth League was also at pains to attempt to explain the existence of a 'third force', namely the BDP, in the destabilization of the BNF. This, the League argued, was carried out by means of issuing permits to expelled party members to hold political rallies in the name of the BNF. The BNF requests to the police to refuse such permits to the expelled members were futile. In particular, an accusing finger was pointed at the Minister for Public Administration and Presidential Affairs, Daniel Kwelagobe, since the police fall under his ministry. He was also blamed for the BNF's woes because of his enthusiastic following of the party's rallies at which speakers slandered their fellow members much to the delight of the BDP members present.<sup>68</sup> Party Liners were also said to be openly claiming that they were getting logistical support from the BDP, as well as sharing confidential BNF information with the BDP. However, the latter denied all these charges. Nonetheless, the *Mmegi Monitor's* gossip column charged that:

Though we accept DK [Daniel Kwelagobe] and the police's denials that Domkrag [BDP] is not fuelling the BNF wars we aver that there is still part of the truth that has not been revealed (sic). For example if the BDP is not engineering the BNF wars what is it doing to put them off as a political 'Big Brother'? Could the BDP tell us whether it would lament and mourn if its biggest threat commits a political harakiri? And did we not hear of a BNF faction reporting its grievances to the Domkrag in what is basically an internal row? BDP might not be instructing cops to issue political rally licences to BNF dissidents but the Domkrag is not entirely clean when it comes to El Front wars.<sup>69</sup>

On numerous occasions, particularly in the 1980s, some BDP officials had threatened that opposition parties could be banned if 'they endanger the lives (and property) of the people in one way or the other'.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, 'During the campaign for the by-election in Kanye in 1986, the BDP candidate, Archie Mogwe, said the "BDP had the power to declare a one

67. *Midweek Sun*, 'BNF factions on road show', 12 June 2002.

68. *Mmegi*, 'DK denies fuelling BNF wars', 21–27 June 2002, pp. 1–2.

69. *Mmegi Monitor*, 'The cutting edge', 25 June–1 July 2002, p. 10.

70. L. Picard, *The Politics of Development in Botswana: A model for success?* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO, 1987), p. 166.



party state” if the opposition parties misbehaved.<sup>71</sup> Curiously, nowadays, with the BNF activists resorting to violence which threatens people’s lives and actually damaging property, the BDP government has remained opportunistically silent and has not threatened to deregister the BNF. The *Mmegi* newspaper was the one which expressed concern in June 2002:

We call on the feuding factions within the BNF to sort themselves out for the sake of public peace and security. . . . One can safely say that if the current rioting evidenced in Gaborone West and Thamaga rallies continues, then rowdy members of the BNF might destroy the property of innocent people.<sup>72</sup>

The row between the Party Line and the Central Committee disillusioned many members of the BNF, resulting in some councillors crossing the floor with their seats to the BDP. Some BCP activists accused the BDP of playing a role in the BNF tragedy by welcoming defectors from the BNF.<sup>73</sup> Curiously, the BDP remained silent on Gladys Kokorwe’s proposal for a law prohibiting defections with seats. When asked recently about this, Kokorwe claimed to be too busy doing other things.

The BDP (which celebrated with great pomp its fortieth anniversary in 2002 at rallies where opposition defectors were welcomed in large numbers) re-awarded Koma the Presidential Medal, but once again he declined it. Some regarded the government’s action as a token of appreciation to Koma for his role in ensuring the BDP’s continued electoral success.<sup>74</sup> In late 2002, in a somewhat unusual development Koma accepted an invitation to grace the BDP’s anniversary celebration in Serowe (tribal capital of the Bangwato,<sup>75</sup> the BDP’s heartland and Koma’s birthplace.) His presence at this BDP event was condemned by some BNF members as an act of betrayal.

Koma’s association with the newly formed NDF led to the BNF stripping him of his position as the so-called ‘Misleader of Opposition’<sup>76</sup> in Parliament. This move was condemned by some BDP Cabinet Ministers and MPs who ‘praised the deposed . . . Koma for his “visionary leadership, exemplary tolerance, patience and unparalleled contribution that he has made” to the political and economic development of Botswana since independence’<sup>77</sup> — a dubious honour which was dismissed by Nehemiah

71. Mpho G. Molomo, ‘Government and opposition parties in Botswana’, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 38, 1 (2000), p. 70 (cited from *Guardian*, 11 April 1986).

72. *Mmegi*, ‘BNF threatens public safety’, 21–27 June 2002, p. 34.

73. *Mmegi*, ‘BCP blames BDP for BNF’s woes’, 15–21 November 2002, pp. 6 and 9.

74. Mbaki Henry Mpenya, ‘Letter to Dr Koma’, *Guardian*, 14 February 2003, p. 20.

75. See Christian John Makgala, ‘Brief notes on history of Serowe’, *Botswana Notes and Records* 34 (forthcoming).

Modubule, the new leader of the opposition in Parliament.<sup>78</sup> For his part, Koma was alleged to have regretted what he did to the BNF.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps it should be pointed out that the financial rewards and perks accorded to the leader of the opposition in Parliament are similar to those accorded to a cabinet minister. It was therefore a blow to Koma's profile, source of income and comfort, as he appeared to have succumbed to the inducements of capitalism.

*Dr Kenneth Koma: messiah or careerist?*

'In Botswana politics, the way to moral high ground is by turning your nose up at money and comfort. And the fastest way to fall from political grace is by demanding money and comfort.'<sup>80</sup> This observation seems to fit with Koma's earlier and later political career. Koma's father was said to be one of the wealthiest cattle barons in the Bangwato area, but whereas Koma inherited much of this wealth, in the 1970s and early 1980s he appeared generally indifferent to wealth and his inheritance may have been used by associates and not the party.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, there is not much record of his making donations to party, community or charity, notes Ndai-Paulos. 'If he has become driven by profit it has to do with his wrong practical politics, political associates and accommodation to BDP and a new vision that accepts the hegemony and inevitability of liberal democracy and free enterprise.'<sup>82</sup>

After Koma's refusal to accept the Presidential Medal in late 2001 *Mmegi* noted in an editorial: 'Ironically Koma does not reject other things that benefit him materially which were initiated by the same government. He was the first to grab and endorse a nice salary for the Leader of Opposition, housing and an official car.'<sup>83</sup> The newspaper continued, 'If there was a financial reward that was extended to him, Koma would have been the first to grab it with both hands against the "considered advice of his confidantes"'.<sup>84</sup>

Koma's portrayal of himself as selfless or a messiah was lambasted as a sham on a number of occasions in the past by BDP activists. As indicated

78. *Mmegi Monitor*, 'Modubule dismisses BDP criticism', 18–24 February 2003, p. 2.

79. *Mokgosi*, 'Koma o a ikotlhaa', 23 February 2002, p. 1.

80. *Guardian*, 'Editorial comment', 26 July 2002, p. 18. The *Guardian* continued, 'It is no wonder successful businessmen never made it in Botswana politics. Switched on politicians know that they only have to sneer at money and comfort to shore up their approval ratings. And the trick works like a charm every time. Former Botswana National Front President, Dr Kenneth Koma used to create a cult of personality. He was almost revered by his supporters as a Mahatma Gandhi reincarnate, who had denounced all the earth material things, lived among the people and ate *Kabu* [simple corn meal] for lunch (sic)'.

81. Communication with Ndai-Paulos.

above, Koma is believed to be a millionaire businessman and part of the country's landed elite. In the 1980s he lashed out at the BDP government's Financial Assistance Programme as useless to the people, although he benefited from it to build up his businesses. For instance, in November 1984 Daniel Kwelagobe declared at a political rally that 'about P40,000 has been granted to . . . Koma and Bathoen Gaseitsiwe [BNF Vice-President] from the Financial Assistance Programme to be used in their Kgobati Construction Company and also to pay the workers of the company'.<sup>84</sup>

In late 2001, Koma was reported to have engaged in a profitable business deal with Satar Dada, the multi-millionaire BDP Treasurer and the country's motor industry magnate. This deal attracted attention from the media and a negative response from some people in the opposition. Koma's defence of his co-operation with Dada was couched in business language and showed no tolerance of his business competitors: 'He [Dada] just made sure that I am given time to raise money to buy shares in the business. It is on a small patch of land we used to call Koma Brothers. Had I been elbowed out I would have hated my ousters for doing so.'<sup>85</sup> For this, Log Raditlhokwa condemned Koma for duplicity and opportunism, adding that 'For Koma, personal survival has now become more important than protecting the image of the party'.<sup>86</sup>

On the eve of the 2001 Kanye congress, Raditlhokwa had implored the presidential contestants to be mindful of a changed and effective BNF as well as the future of Botswana. 'If the BNF does not change,' he cautioned, 'the entire opposition would remain stagnant. If the opposition does not change, Botswana won't change. Logically, if Botswana does not change, our nation, which has so much potential for development and prosperity, will dismally fail to make its mark in the rapidly globalizing world.'<sup>87</sup>

However, as this article has demonstrated, Koma's 'transformation' from being a socialist to an aggressive capitalist is in line with 'the rapidly globalizing world' or the 'new world of global capitalism'. As Stephen Haseler has pointed out, 'the new capitalism and its market sovereignty is . . . destroying the realm of politics . . . by eroding the sense of political community, weakening the institutions of politics . . . , and discrediting politicians, and even the calling of the political and public life. Today's heroes are businessmen, not statesmen.'<sup>88</sup>

84. *Daily News*, 'Koma receives P40,000 grant', 27 November 1984, p. 2.

85. *Mmegi*, 'Koma clears relationship with Dada', 23–29 November 2001, p. 4.

86. Log Raditlhokwa, 'BNF must defeat Koma', *Guardian*, 23 November 2001.

### *Conclusion*

This study has tried to assess the weaknesses of the opposition in Botswana by examining the relationship between Koma and the BDP at the conceptual and political/personal levels. At the conceptual level it looked at the way changing international political processes have impinged on Koma's political career and the general political landscape in Botswana. The collapse of the former Soviet Union led to socialist organizations compromising their traditional values in the wake of the Western capitalist victory over the international socialist project. It seems that the lure of the new world of global capitalism can best be used to explain the centrality of Koma's new relationship with the BDP, and not his tribal background, as some of his disgruntled followers maintain. His growing openness to wealth, in which his BDP connections are useful, has made him open to accusations of duplicity. At the political level, the study shows that the relationship between Koma and the BDP in recent years can help to explain the BDP's long-standing domination of the political landscape in Botswana. The result of the BNF's situation or that of the opposition in general has been widespread disillusionment on the part of the masses in the country's political processes and voter apathy.

Despite the BNF's self-incapacitating tendencies and declining electoral fortunes, it has played a crucial role over the years in keeping the BDP government on its toes. It has also positively influenced important government policies such as free education, and labour and social welfare policies, amongst others.

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