

Africa Must Wake-Up

By: Dr. Masire, Quett Ketumile

Dr. Masire, Quett Ketumile Joni, was born in 1925 in Kanye, Botswana. He started his career as a journalist in 1958 and later became the Director of the African Echo. In 1962, with **Seretse Khama**, Masire co-founded the moderate Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). He was appointed deputy prime minister in 1965 and, after taking an active part in Botswanan independence negotiations, became vice president and minister of finance under President Khama after independence in 1966. Much of Botswana's economic stability has been attributed to Masire's role as minister of development planning from 1967 to 1980. Following the death of Khama in 1980, the National Assembly appointed Masire president. He was president of Botswana for about fifteen years, (1980-1995). Having been re-elected in 1984 and 1989. In this interview with **Reuben Abati**, Dr. Masire explains the reason behind his country's stunning economic success, the lesson in it for much of Africa still reeling under abject poverty and sundry issues concerning the relationship of Africa with the world in the 21st century.

In Africa Generally, you get to hear a lot of bad stories, around Central Africa, West Africa, everywhere, but Botswana is a shining example and most of those achievements were under your leadership. What is the secret?

Well, I don't know what you call a secret. In fact, I think we just settled down to do as much as we could for our country and everybody, both the politicians and the civil servants did the best they could and the international community. So we were doing our best to resolve our problems and we had a good cooperation with both donor countries as well as multi-lateral organisations like the World bank and others. We also had established from the very beginning, principles which were the guiding principles of democracy, development, self-reliance and unity and therefore we enjoyed the cooperation of members of the public in non-dissipating national efforts. And we used the resources of the country for the benefit of all members of the Botswana society. Everybody felt we were doing the best we could for his personal needs. We also did careful planning and the implementation of those plans. We set ourselves strict rules. For instance, it doesn't matter how important a project may seem, it cannot be implemented unless it is first of all incorporated into the national development plan. Therefore we were working to plan all the time and of course we also later in life discovered diamonds which oiled the engine of development.

I know that in Botswana you have cattle and diamonds. The country also has a very strong external reserve and for almost about 10 to 15 years, your per capital GDP was about the highest in Africa. That kind of condition when it exists in other African countries encourages greed, corruption. How do you manage to keep the political elite contented and for them not to loot the treasury?

Perhaps what I should have mentioned in answer to your first question in addition to all I had said is that we also have a good financial management of the economy and that perhaps was

borne out of two factors. One was that we started as a poor country and therefore got the good training on how to handle our resources, and the other is the culture of the people that fortunately, corruption was not something which was inculcated in the culture of the people, both the tribes as well as the administration.

Are you saying then that corruption is cultural?

It depends, I think, on if in the culture of the people, there is that propensity. It might be that certain things were being done in the culture of the people which made them more amenable to corruption than others.

You were first Vice-President for about 12 years and then president for about 15 years, and then you just decided that the younger generation should be given a chance. That is quite unusual in Africa where most of the leaders are wont to stay on in power. Why did you decide to leave?

Well, the way I put it to the nation when I asked to be allowed to step down, was that we are running a relay race in a nation. Every nation is running a relay race, and if it must win, every man must not run it up to a point and hand over to somebody else who will make his own contribution. The race is likely to be won when each person does his best at his time. Afterall, nobody is good for all time.

This is an important message I think should be sold to other African leaders. I don't know if you have been making any efforts to sell the message to other African leaders outside Botswana, that leaders should not hold on to power by all means?

I am making no efforts to sell the message because I think that is a message that is obvious to everybody. And perhaps if I try to tell other people, they will say who are you trying to teach, we know this also.

The military pose a major problem to many African countries. I was in Botswana recently and one of the things I picked up was how the soldiers and the politicians have managed to work out a good working arrangement?

I don't know, but we started with no army. When we started, there was a common course for both politicians and the army. We had an external enemy to fight, we had the Rhodesians to the north and the apartheid South Africans to the south and of course, the Portuguese administration in Angola and Mozambique was not well disposed to us either. The army stated with the realization that it was there to protect the nation and not to grab power. I think the problem with other African countries is that the army has nothing to do and therefore they get bored and start challenging the politicians. But, again it is a question of greed and having power and trying to bully people around:

But fortunately, in Botswana, we have had the fortune of the army and the political class doing things in a very admirable fashion.

What has been your relationship with South Africa, considering the strong influence of that country in your country's economy?

To start with, way back in 1910, there was an agreement between Botswana, South Africa as well as Lesotho to form a customs union. Therefore Botswana goods and services as well as South African goods and services enjoy the common market and there is an investment plan to Botswana which we have created both by being a stable democracy and open economy and free flow of funds in and out. We have one of the most liberal foreign exchange regime in Southern Africa if not in the whole of Africa. The South Africans, being closer to us, do see these better than other people far away from us, and therefore the foreign investors in Botswana. You mentioned something about the Rand enjoying a more favourable climate in Botswana than in South Africa, and South Africans are running after the 'Pula' (local currency) because it is more powerful than the Rand. If you put it the other way round, you have no problem if you go into South Africa with the Pula because they know it's a strong currency.

One of the things Botswana's accused of is that there is a certain rise of some phobia; people are not encouraged to come in, it is relatively difficult to become a Botswana national. At least there is the condition that an immigrant must be able to speak Seswana (local language) before you can become a citizen. This looks like Botswana, inspite of its success, is trying to shut the people out?

Yes. I wouldn't say inspite of its success or because of this success. When the economy is doing well, and surrounding economies are not doing that well, you become like a bulb shining in the dark. It becomes very attractive, and economies are like that. When you got many economies doing better than others, it challenges the others to flow in and as soon as some other economies do better, people flow out from there into another economy.

When Botswana was so poor that we hardly afforded anybody work in Botswana other than in the civil service, the only place people could find work was in South Africa. But it has taken time to reverse that trend and that trend has come to a point where yes indeed you still have a number of people in South Africa who probably could have jobs they have in South Africa, they are sure of being there for some time. But now, other people from elsewhere are seeing advantages which Botswanas don't so readily see and are coming in. Let me talk about the point you made about Xenophobia. You would remember that probably 10,20 years ago, we were handling an inflow of refugees from Angola, Namibia, South Africa, Moza-ambique and Zimbabwe and therefore we has to make sure, we met our international obligation of looking after refugees but not fellow third worlds because we have a small population and if we allow the inflow of foreigners to the size that they totally inundate the local people, we would soon be grappling with the situation where we would be having different, different cultural elements which we are not prepared to handle.

But with your economy growing at such a fast rate and expanding, and with your small population, it looks like at the end of the day, you will necessarily have to take in more people from outside. How do you deal with that?

I entirely agree with you, but in so doing, we should be selective. We must make sure that we don't get people who are going to be a burden to the economy. We need people who are going to contribute to the economy, who are going to use the existing facilities to improve the economy. In fact, in government, there is that feeling that we should be looking to bring in people who are already made productive factors, but make sure we don't get those who are only going to be sick to be hospitalized in Botswana or be a burden one way or another.

Do you foresee a situation whereby the nationalization policy would be reviewed, because I know many people who are in Botswana and are foreigners would gladly love to take Botswana citizenship particularly when they come from countries that accept dual nationality. But they cannot become Botswana citizens because of that condition that they must speak Seswana?

Well, I think you over-emphasized the fact that they have to speak Seswana, but it is just one of the factors that have to be taken into account. It is not a do or die type of condition. It's taken into account with other conditions and we leave that long enough to see that you make a decision, yes, you are in Botswana, you want to make it your country and you are going to contribute to its development and so on and so forth.

Since you left office, I read that you decided to go into ostrich farming. What has been your relationship with the present government and what other things have you been doing?

Well, my relationship with the present government is as good as could be expected.

I know you have democracy but that democracy doesn't quite seem to be the multiparty system in the real sense of it. I got the impression that there is the predominant party which has been in power for so long, and which has continued to win elections, and then you just have smaller parties that really cannot make the difference in the parliament. Now, the stability that you have in Botswana, is it as a result of something close to a one-party state that you seem to have?

I wouldn't put it that way. I think to start with, our needs were so basic and rudimentary that if we formed many parties, we would all be talking about doing the same thing, and if the one party that was doing those same things was doing well, there was no reason why people would want to have another party, especially as the politicians in that party were not so possessive. I mean, people make so much in retirement, but you have a generation of members of parliament who had retired before me. I was the last person to retire of the original cabinet that started running the country. Therefore, it is not having one group of people but one handled by generations of leaders.

But, do you see that succession process being forged in the future, because if you have a strong party which is expusing a philosophy that people can endorse, you could also have a situation whereby some people in the future could use it the other way round and just stay there permanently and shut out the opposition. And I know that the opposition in Botswana is not so happy. They want a chance, but may be they don't have the advantage of number?

But, you see the fundamental thing is not so much the parties. What is paramount in a democracy is the public good. It is a question of do those parties want to come in to power because they feel they must also have a chance to enjoy power, or because there is something different they could make to improve the public good. So far, there is no party in Botswana other than the Botswana Democratic party (BDP) that has come with a credible programme of action of manifesto that satisfies Botswanas. Sometimes people tend to shift the paradigm to parties as if it is the parties that matters in the country. Parties are merely a means to an end, the end is the public good and any party, whatever name it chooses, is not useful, it is irrelevant unless it is to serve the public good.

Talking about the public good, I discovered when I was in Botswana that the workers have what you could call security of tenure but at the same time services are expensive. The people do not enjoy too many indulgences. One would have thought that a country that is as rich as Botswana, with such a strong external reserve, would make things a lot easier, provide a lot of goodies for the people and distribute the wealth. But it is like there is some kind of fear about the future built into the way the Botswana economy is structured, amassing and keeping and hoarding reserves and facilities without releasing such to the people...

(cuts in) Yes, releasing it to the people for their enjoyment.

(cuts in) Yes, the people have the right to enjoy it.

But you see, when you think of enjoyment, you must also think of your responsibility to meet basic needs. I was addressing the conference the other day, that we have some reserves but we have also a narrow economic base, we are prone to droughts, we are a non-cultural economy, if anything goes wrong, supposing the mines are flooded, God forbid, we have a time in which to adjust. Supposing we have periodic drought (as in the part), if we must have spent all the money in making life easy for people, then when hardships come, when they most need?

Talking about Africa, when you hear the stories of wars and strikes across Africa, dictatorship in other places, I am sure it sounds strange. But how do you relate to that?

Well, it is strange, but yet not strange because there is human propensity to do all those things. We are only better than animals because we exercise restraint and other people exercise restraint to different levels. If every time somebody in Botswana makes the president unhappy, he got rid of such a person as nature tends to dictate, then that such a thing would also give people the change to see how to punish the president for the actions he had taken. I think we should all learn to live and let live. I was talking to somebody recently that we have these parties whose unhappiness you expressed earlier, but we tried to take them seriously, but being human beings, there may be something in one of you that they are promoting, and we must therefore be prepared to listen to what they have to say. So, that is a way we run our affairs and if there is an emergency, a cattle disease and we have to treat the cattle population, we don't feel the powers are in our hands, that is the right thing to do, and we must just go ahead and forget all other people. We informed the opposition parties and say now look, this is the problem, we have looked into this problem, this is the ruthless way to do it, we regret it has been the only course available to us, but we don't find any other way to do it. And so if they go and shout

irresponsibly at Freedom Square that we are doing the wrong thing, at least, we can say we have given them the opportunity to know the facts.

If we look at the continent, there are salient structures – the OAU, SADC, ECOWAS etc. which ought – in a way, to have helped to build and encourage those structures in some of these African countries. But these organizations do not seem to have worked and often times, Africa has to rely on the moral situation of the international community. How do you think Africa can build its own structures that can inspire good governance around the continent?

I supposed the structures are there, some of the structures are there. The OAU is there, the ECA etc, what are those institutions doing to make sure that we play our roles. The Carribeans have been at it, they have prepared their case, they are ready to meet the Europeans head long. It is not an institution per se, or shall I put it the other way round: institutions must not be institutions because they are given names, and have been defined exactly, but because they act in a manner that is in consonance with the responsibilities expected of them. Then I think it's not lack of institutions but that as a people, Africans have not awoken to the fact that we are charged with the responsibilities, the rest of members of the community look up to us as to produce the good which are in keeping with our mandate.

In an age of globalisation, of computer, science and technology, the 21st century looks like it's going to be far more competitive. What do you consider to be the prospects of Africa in the face of all the problems we have at the moment. We seem not prepared for the future?

Unfortunately, you are right, and I think our prospects for the future lie on our realization that unless we change our present manner of doing things, we cannot make any headway.

Let me ask you this question. When I was in Gaborone, I felt as if I was in Europe. The streets were clean, I didn't see any typical African markets, everything seems to be in order as in Europe. What I saw was the European culture on the surface. What is the African cultural content of the Botswana story if there is any such?

I think in Botswana I don't know whether it is due to our climate or what, but we have got a culture of cleanliness. If you go out at the back of the compound, you find a house = hold where the floor is smeared with cow dungs, and with utensils clean. We have a culture of finding distant somewhere to dispose off rubbish. In the context of Botswana culture, we are dirtier than we should be. The people coming in from outside tend to feel we are not as clean as we should be.

I was trying to say that Botswana, from what I saw, looks more European than African?

It depends on why one wants to call it European or African because as I was explaining to the council here, we have the Parliament, the Judiciary, the Rule of Law, but if you look at it closely, from a distance you think we are merely talking of the Westminster type of running a affairs, but you find that we have separated authorizes in a situation where all those functions used to be

done in the same manner. But I would say that we have, yes, adopted Western culture but certainly they are blended with out local culture.

Finally, HIV-AIDS seems to be a major problem in the whole of Africa, but in Botswana it seems to be a particularly serious problem. For a country with that kind of small population, one would like to know what your country is doing about it?

Unfortunately, you are right. We have been more exposed to HIV/AIDS than most countries and we certainly are doing all we can. The president has been going round, addressing the people and those organizations that are doing something about the dreaded disease.