

discussion 7

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Comparative Politics: Week 7 Discussion

In the academic discourse, the term "public opinion" pertains to the aggregate viewpoints and convictions embraced by the general populace. Within the domain of political science, this notion revolves around essential political inquiries, encompassing individuals' dispositions toward elected officials or public figures, their perceptions of political institutions, predilections for particular policies, and comprehension of the essence of democracy (Bozonelos et al. 289). This paper will discuss how ordinary citizens of Botswana perceive the distribution of power and accountability within their nation based on the findings of the Afrobarometer Survey (Bozonelos et al. 298).

Situational Context

Following the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, President Mokgweetsi Masisi declared a state of emergency. In addition to the considerable powers granted to the executive under Section 47 of the Constitution, the state of emergency conferred upon the president unrestricted authority to exercise governance through decrees, circumvent customary procedures for public tenders, and curtail civil liberties (Ookeditse 267). This event represented the second occurrence of a state of emergency in Botswana's history. The initial state of emergency, declared in September 1999 by then-President Festus Mogae, was motivated by the necessity to rectify an erroneous national voters roll that posed a significant risk of disenfranchising thousands of voters (Modisane 102).

The state of emergency declaration in Botswana during 2020, lasting for about 18 months, was not an isolated event within the region. Similar measures were taken by Lesotho and Namibia, which also implemented states of emergency (Shafuda 345). Meanwhile, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, and South Africa addressed the situation by leveraging existing laws related to disaster management, civil protection, and public health to declare health emergencies. However, the opposition parties in Botswana vehemently opposed the emergency declaration, asserting that the preexisting Public Health Act provided sufficient measures to address the situation (Repucci and Slipowitz). They viewed the declaration as an attempt by members of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party to exploit tender awards for personal enrichment. Additionally, they expressed apprehensions that the declaration would weaken executive accountability and impose limitations on citizens' civil liberties (Lekorwe and Molefe 3).

In a broader scholarly context, Rapeli and Saikkonen (27) have voiced concerns regarding the potential centralization of power within the executive branch during emergency rule implemented to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in specific democratic nations. Moreover, they have highlighted the apprehension that such emergency measures might exacerbate the process of autocratization in countries where democratic values are already experiencing a decline.

Findings According to the Afrobarometer Survey

Botswana demonstrates a strong emphasis on the significance of elections and Parliament as mechanisms for exercising checks on the executive authority. An impressive 93% of citizens express disapproval or strong disapproval towards the idea of abolishing elections and Parliament, thereby granting the president unilateral decision-making authority

(Afrobarometer 28). This sentiment has exhibited relative stability over time, and remains consistently robust across all major demographic segments (Afrobarometer 28).

Botswana continues to exhibit a prominent position among the seven Southern African nations concerning the emphasis placed by citizens on the significance of presidential accountability to Parliament (Afrobarometer 29). In a practical context, a significant proportion of Botswana (73%) express that their president "never" (55%) or "rarely" (18%) ignores Parliament, opting for personal decisions instead. Nevertheless, 13% of respondents acknowledge that such occurrences happen "often" or "always" (Afrobarometer 33).

A substantial majority of Botswana (80%) express a strong conviction that their president must consistently abide by the country's laws and court decisions, irrespective of personal disagreements (see Figure 11) (Afrobarometer 28). Conversely, a mere 17% of respondents hold the perspective that, since the president was elected to lead the country, they should not be obliged to comply with laws or court decisions they perceive as erroneous (Afrobarometer 28). The viewpoint advocating that the president should not be constrained by laws and courts finds notably less support among citizens with post-secondary education, with only 9% indicating agreement or strong agreement, compared to 17%-24% among respondents with lower levels of education (Afrobarometer 39). Additionally, urban residents display a lower percentage (13%) in agreement with this perspective, in contrast to 18% among semi-urban and rural dwellers (Afrobarometer 39).

Conclusion

Botswana strongly endorses the notion that their president should be subject to accountability to Parliament and, through democratic electoral processes, be responsible to the voters. Despite the data being collected before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these sentiments have exhibited enduring consistency over time, underscoring the elevated

expectations of Botswana regarding emergency executive powers. This emphasizes the significance of exercising such powers prudently and with due caution.

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