How will the conflict between Masisi and Khama end?

Joel Konopo

The night that former president of Botswana, Ian Khama, escaped under the cover of darkness into neighboring South Africa, marked a loss of innocence in Botswana’s usually stable, harmless politics. Tensions between Khama and his handpicked successor, current president Mokgweetsi Masisi, has spilled out into the open. It threatens to inflame tribal malaise and destabilise a country once known for its sparkling diamonds and thriving economy.

Once considered an exception in an increasingly authoritarian continent, a democratic decline is now underway in Botswana. Khama said that in November of last year, he received a tip that threats to his life were real and he needed to leave. There had, after all, been a string of hostile behavior towards him dating back to 2018, after handing over power. They encompass the scaling down of security personnel at his residence, the constant searches at his residence without a warrant, the detention of his twin brothers, allegations that he aided one of his brothers, a former minister, to steal a government helicopter, and the biggest accusation: allegations that he diverted $10 billion from Botswana’s central bank to City Bank accounts in New York with the help of South African Reserve Bank.

Khama now faces 13 criminal charges, including illegally possessing fire firearms, according to court documents. The former president - and son of founding president Seretse Khama - is accused alongside four others, including a former intelligence chief, Isaac Kgosi and a the current police boss, Keabetswe Makgope. The four have been summoned to appear before a court in Gaborone, Botswana’s capital, in June, and it is unclear if Khama will show up as ordered.

 All this highlights the deep flaws in the ruling party’s automatic succession politics – a system in which the incumbent hand picks his successor when his term comes to an end. It is a tradition that has served the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) since 1980, after the death of Seretse Khama when his vice president Ketumile Masire succeeded him. Khama was recruited from the army to stabilize the ruling party in 1997, a role which failed. Instead, as a former army general, Khama insisted on enforcing strict disciplinary codes in politics, further deepening tensions in the fragile BDP.

Masisi’s elevation to the vice presidency in April 2018 was as surprising as an uninspiring affair. The former school teacher emerged as the least objectionable compromise candidate between bickering factions within the ruling BDP.

However the two have a complicated relationship. Masisi’s father, Sethomo Masisi, was one of Seretse Khama’s loyal ministers.

Masisi was supposed to be a relatively safe pair of hands, but in African politics, successors rarely take orders from predecessors. It happened in Angola in 2017 when president, Edwardo Dos Santos handpicked, a relatively unknown politician, Joao Lourenco. It didn’t take long before Lourenco showed his colors and arrested the Dos Santos family accusing it of corruption.

In Botswana, Masisi appears to have been closely watching Lourenco. After assuming the reins of power in April, 2018, he sacked the head of intelligence on the first day in office and accused his predecessor of laundering $10 billion with the help of the South African Central Bank, annoying his neighbour to the South. Masisi also reversed some of Khama’s policies, including the reintroduction of a controversial hunting ban.

“I made a mistake,” Khama would reminisce to the same media he once branded “unpatriotic and offering nothing new.”

“I was very foolish [to have appointed Masisi]. I have apologized to the nation that I regret my decision.” As tension escalated in the run-up to the watershed election in 2019 when Khama dramatically broke ranks with the ruling BDP and formed his own party, the Botswana Patriotic Front. It contested and won 5% of parliamentary seats.

 In the past, the BDP - which has ruled for nearly six decades - propelled the country to an African success story, elevating the country from one of the poorest in the world at independence in 1966 to one of the richest in Africa. It escaped the “resource curse” because its founding leaders were a hardworking, honest and humble cadre of public servants who, according to Somali political scholar Abdi Samatar, ensured that the country succeeded where so many others with more resources and talent failed. But that generation ended with former president Festus Mogae, an Oxford economist, who maintained a solid commitment to democracy and macroeconomic stability.

This has been replaced by a new kind of commitment within the BDP – to corrupt self-enrichment and indifference to rising poverty. Botswana has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the world, after South Africa, Namibia and Brazil. On the campaign trail in 2019, Masisi promised to break with Khama’s era, when he accused his predecessor of rampant corruption. While Khama was Masisi’s main target, other political opponents also endured his wrath. In the run up to the 2019 election, the leader of the opposition, Umbrella for Democratic Change, Duma Boko, a Harvard-educated lawyer, faced obstruction, including impounding of his campaign vehicles

Critics say Masisi’s anti-corruption crusade does not seem genuine, and some members of the public are becoming cynical. The head of the secret service he appointed in 2019 is accused of bribery and overstepping his mandate. Some people are wondering why Masisi is not going after some senior ruling party figures implicated in maladministration, such as Mabuse Pule, a former immigration officer, now cabinet minister, who has been implicated in underhanded dealings regarding immigration.

Masisi has also been tainted by corruption scandals with accusations that he was one of the top political figures who directly benefitted from irregular National Petroleum Fund deals. Recently he has been accused of awarding himself prime government farmland - even though his bid did not meet the brief. He is also accused of handing his sister, Boitumelo Phadi Mmutle, a $50 million government contract, without going through the tendering process.

Transparency Internationals’ Corruption Perception Index shows that Botswana dropped from 61% in 2018, when Masisi took office, to 55% in 2021.

Critics say the watchdog agencies Masisi inherited – the Directorate on Intelligence Services and the Financial Intelligence Agency – are black holes in which corruption has proliferated.

The intelligence agency often runs roughshod over institutions that try to conduct themselves in a professional manner, such as the corruption watchdog, the Directorate on Corruption and Economic and Crime (DCEC), and the police. For example, recently the DCEC boss accused intelligence services organization in court papers of abuse of office after they allegedly sealed off his offices on the pretext of conducting an investigation. DCEC director general, Tymon Katholo said some of the officers within the intelligence services organization face criminal investigation for accepting bribery.

Weak media and civil society organizations have reduced the ability to hold the BDP and government accountable.

Making journalists' jobs difficult is the lack of a freedom of information act. Beside pay lip service, Masisi has done little to keep his campaign promise to repeal the Media Practitioners Act of 2008, largely seen as intended to restrict and intimidate journalists.

Reporters Without Borders’ Freedom of the Press Index released in May 2022 identifies Botswana among countries with a “problematic” record, while Namibia and South Africa remain in a lofty position. The Corruption Perception Index said Botswana dropped by 1.32% to 23.3 points in 2022, partly because little has changed since Khama left office.

Social media, particularly Facebook, has become a breeding ground for doxing? by rogue intelligence agents, with pseudo-Facebook accounts they use to dig up information, curate and propagate disinformation. A fake Facebook account belonging to an influencer calling himself France Museveni uses this tactic to typically intimidate and silence opposition politicians and those who differ with president Masisi within the ruling party.

On the economic front, Masisi has made progress in opening Botswana up for business, and, has also attempted to reposition Botswana in the global arena after years of Khama’s inward-looking policies.

Recently he hosted the Forbes 30 Summit in Gaborone and now has set his eyes firmly on co-hosting Afcon with Namibia for an income-generating football tournament. (See: side bar)

But then there is the accusation of money laundering which has strained diplomatic relations between Pretoria and Gaborone. In 2029, Botswana’s Directorate on Public Prosecution (DPP), accused the South African central bank aided Khama and his allies of transfering $10 billion from the central bank in Botswana to secret offshore accounts. The Botswana high court said the DPP did not back its claims with hard evidence. The DPP dropped the charges.

 Khama said: “It was an extremely unfriendly move. All is not right,” he told the SABC journalist, Kayelithe Khumalo.

Khama’s analysis may be self-serving, but that does not make it necessarily wrong.

Recently, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said that South Africa does not believe that Khama is a fugitive.  Former South African president Thabo Mbeki, one of Africa’s most respected statesmen, also weighed in, declaring Khama his guest in South Africa.

“South Africa has a responsibility to make sure Khama is well protected and taken care of at all costs,” he told the South African media.

However, one political observer seemed to downplay the seeming diplomatic tension between the two countries.

“South Africa will surrender Khama to Botswana if her economic interests are at stake,” said Dr. Kebapetse Lotshwao of the University of Botswana.

He admits that Botswana prosecutors acted clumsily in addressing the money laundering accusations against South Africa, but believes the country is doing well in mending relations.

The other reality that may work in Khama’s favour is Ramaphosa’s close proximity to the Khama family. His wife, Tshepo Motsepe is a family friend of the Khamas, while Motsepe’s father, Augustine Motsepe, attended the University of Fort Hare, Ramaphosa’s alma mater. However, Lotshwao points out that bilateral relations often triumph over personal friendships.

So how will the conflict between Masisi and Khama end?

It's hard to say if this is the endgame. Some argue that Khama should be ignored, to deprive him of the political oxygen that he craves.

“We are no longer interested in Ian Khama and his antics. We treat him as an ordinary member of the opposition who currently lives in South Africa out of his freewill, and that’s really none of our business,” says BDP spokesperson, Kagelelo Kentse.

But some Masisi supporters such as Kebadiretse Mokibelo believe Masisi should fight fire with fire.

“He is tarnishing the image of the country and the party; if he returns he should be jailed,” she says.

But Khama spokesperson Lawrence Ookeditse is of the view that Masisi’s wish is to “finish Khama off.”

“There is a pattern of systematic harassment against political opponents. Khama is not an exception. On the basis of the intelligence, he had to leave,” said Ookeditse.

Botswana goes to the polls in October 2024. Hopefully the opposition will help end the impasse if it wins. But the opposition is deeply divided and has failed consistently to offer an inspiring alternative, relying on BDP’s fetish for “self-immolation” to win by default. This has not helped the country in the 57 years since independence.

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