



Botswana — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[formerly known as Bechuanaland]

03/31/1885 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime: On 01/27/1884 Botswana (or Bechuanaland) was divided into two political entities divided by the Molopo River.¹ The northern part was declared a protectorate in 1884, as the Bechuanaland Protectorate, while the southern part, called British Bechuanaland, became a crown colony. In 1895, the latter was annexed into and administrated by Cape Colony (Morton/Ramsay 2018). The British governed Bechuanaland protectorate through the Office of the High Commissioner and its administrative headquarters were outside the territory (Morton/Ramsay 2018). Local administration was headed and executed by a Resident Commissioner who had less authority than a colonial governor (Morton/Ramsay 2018).² Crucially, the protectorate was heavily subordinated to South African interests. Its administrative capital was located in Mafeking, South Africa, until 1964. The British government exiled Seretse Khama, the future president, in 1950 to appease the apartheid regime, which opposed his interracial marriage.³ Following his return in 1956, Seretse Khama mobilized popular support, leading to the formation of an independence movement and political parties. There was regular consultation between the British colonial officials and the local chiefs of the tribes who maintained self-governance and who wielded the ability to shape and mold policy in alignment with their personal objectives and there existed collaboration between the colonial administrators and the indigenous population (Makgala 2010). A national legislature was created in 1961, and political parties were formed. Seretse became the leader of the Bechuanaland Democratic Party, which was endorsed by the British government to lead post-independence.⁴ According to our observations, no multiparty legislative and executive elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. V-Dem's PCLI classifies the presence of political liberties as not really present until 1961 and ambiguous from 1962 to 1965, while according to LIED political liberties were absent for the colonial time. Male suffrage according to LIED was introduced in 1961. From 1900 to 1960, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are comprehensive. Simultaneously, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. For the rest of the regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

03/01/1965 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: The first elections held under universal suffrage took place in 1965, prior to independence.⁵ Seretse Khama and the BDP won 80% of the vote and 28/31 seats in this competitive election before independence (Sillery 1974: 158-59). According to LIED the elections were not competitive. Whereas V-Dem's EF&FI scores the elections as free and fair, their CEI scores them as somewhat clean. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as ambiguous regarding the state of political liberties. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust.

09/30/1966 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, Botswana became independent. The prime minister was replaced by a president elected by the legislature (renamed the National Assembly) and vested with executive powers (Morton/Ramsay 2018).⁶ Among researchers it is disputed whether Botswana is democratic or autocratic. For instance, Mokopakgosi and Molomo (2000: 7) call Botswana a „de facto one-party state”. GWF classifies the regime as a party autocracy due to indications of an imbalanced environment despite contested elections, and due to the effective constraints on competition imposed by both formal and informal political regulations in Botswana (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 47-48). In addition, it is argued that the BDP has almost monopolized appointments to the civil service (Mokopakgosi/Molomo 2000). For over five decades since gaining independence, the BDP has consistently maintained a majority of no less than two-thirds of the seats in the Assembly (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 48). GWF therefore classifies Botswana as a party autocracy. In the same line MCM addresses Botswana as a multiparty autocracy. However, HTW as well as LIED classify Botswana as a democracy. As classified by FH for 1972, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. For the regime period between 1973 and 1978, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category. In 1979 it is categorized as free with a score between 2 and 4, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. From 1980 to 1988 the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. During the period from 1989 to 1992 Botswana is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. In the years 1993 and 1994 it is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category. Per FH, for the regime period between 1995 and 2008, the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4 once again, which we also place in the free category. From 2009 onwards, Botswana is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. According to LIED political liberties were present from 1988 to 2012, and absent from 2013 onward. V-Dem’s PCLI classifies political liberties as present since 1966. According to our standards, Botswana is over small parts of this regime period a borderline case between an electoral democracy and an electoral hybrid regime. The elections were always declared as free, but not entirely fair, by international observers. In addition to deficits in the electoral process, deficits in the guarantee of political and civil rights can be traced. These include constraints on freedom of press and expression.⁷ Since its independence, LIED classifies elections as competitive. According to our observations, multiparty legislative and executive elections were present during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. V-Dem’s EF&FI scored the countries elections as free and fair. Their CEI indicates that elections were somewhat clean until 1990 and clean afterwards. By 2019, the ongoing internal political conflicts and the dominance of personality-based leadership attributes remain obstacles to the formation of a cohesive opposition. The countries score in both the CEI and EF&FI dropped to their elections being classified as only somewhat free, fair and clean. In 2021, President Masisi appointed a commission to address electoral irregularities and to establish reforms.⁸ During this regime period, according to Polity5’s categorization, various periods regarding executive constraints can be identified. From 1967 to 1986, based on Polity5’s assessment, the executive encountered substantial institutional limitations on power. Between 1987 and 1996, as per Polity5’s categorization, the executive’s authority was significantly constrained, nearing parity with other branches, placing it in the third intermediate category. Since 1997, according to Polity5, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. From 1967 to 1993, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. Between 1994 and 2019, V-Dem’s JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. During the years 2020-2022, V-Dem’s JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For the year 2023, V-Dem’s JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive.

10/30/2024 End Electoral Democracy/Start Liberal Democracy: BDP lost its majority to the opposition party Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) on 10/30/2024. Duma Boko assumed the presidency on 11/01/2024, marking the first peaceful transfer of power in the country's history.⁹ Botswana illustrates an upward transition, moving from electoral to liberal democracy once opposition success was respected and executive dominance curtailed. According to FH Botswana is considered free with a score of 4, which we also interpret as free. V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. Based on V-Dem's PCLI, political liberties were somewhat present and the CEI scores the cleanliness of the elections as ambiguous.

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Baumhögger 1999, Emminghaus 2002, Lea/Rowe 2001, Makgala 2010, Mokopakgosi/Molomo 2000, Morton/Ramsay 2018, Robinson 1992, Sillery 1974)

Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Bechnaland
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechnaland_Protectorate
- ³ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Botswana/British-protectorate>
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Botswana_Democratic_Party
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_Botswana
- ⁶ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Botswana_2016?lang=en
- ⁷ <https://bti-project.org/de/reports/country-report/BWA>;
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/botswana/>
- ⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/botswana/freedom-world/2022>
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Botswana_general_election

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