



**Seymour Patterson.** *Economic Growth in Botswana in the 1980s: A Model for Sub-Saharan Africa.* Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2006. 185 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59221-328-3.



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This is perhaps the latest in a long line of celebratory studies of Botswana's economic growth, with the country's supposed democracy subsumed under that. It begins with an overview chapter, devotes two chapters to drought and famine, one to democracy and political stability in general (wherein only eleven pages are on Botswana), and accords four chapters to planning, performance, decision-making, and finally the *role-model economy*. Seymour Patterson's central thesis is that economic growth in Africa in general and Botswana particularly is dependent on "several strategic variables": political stability; the structure of government (credibility, interference); and economic conditions (resources, policies), and in addition, that "planning, forward-looking administrators, diversification and technology are understood to be critical parts of the puzzle for success" (p. 7).

Oddly trite observations are occasionally made, such as "drought occurs when the rain stops for too long" (p. 25) and, possibly relative to the author's focus on the 1980s, "children in Botswana who taste Kentucky Fried Chicken, for example, get hooked [on imported food] and try to avoid their mother's homemade dinner" (p. 30). Patterson notes importantly that the Gini coefficient of inequality was 0.70 in 1986 (p. 52), but sees this as largely a problem for the country's drought relief strategies, and does not consider the enormity of this statistic in both

African and world terms, and its significance to the overall growth model. He also emphasizes that "in the best of times, Botswana imports about 70 percent of its national food needs," and that it imports "almost all of its national needs" under severe drought conditions (p. 57). But this weakness too is seen relative to the country's successful drought relief programs, not as an aspect of the absence of economic diversification and acute diamond dependency.

Patterson is refreshingly unfooled on the subject of "traditional Botswana democracy" and recognizes that serious ethnic and class inequalities existed, but then jumps ahead to assert that contemporary democracy "worked because the people support it"; the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) continues to win elections "because the people are happy with the direction in which the country is going and/or because of incumbency advantages" (p. 76). Neither the asserted peoples' happiness, nor the real but here enigmatic incumbency advantages are in any way examined, even though election results show a clear and steady decline in popular support for the BDP. By the last general elections of 2004 support for the ruling party had slumped to 51 percent of eligible voters, while 48 percent preferred even a weak and divided opposition.[1]

The author appears scornful of the concept of ac-

countability, referred to as one of cliché and little substance (p. 80), but this does not stop him from immediately claiming that regular general elections “were the best way to make the politicians accountable to the people,” and that “by any rational standard the party must have provided the goods and services that the voters wanted” (p. 80). But if Patterson is himself aware of these standards then he does not share his understanding with his readers. The downward trend in voting support for the BDP is one clearly contrary factor, and voter turnout is another. Electoral participation of some 40 percent of eligible voters is a norm in Botswana general elections, indicative of considerable positive abstention from a sterile system of unchanging BDP predominance over forty years. That such fixed BDP dominance, based upon declining popular support and significant non-participation, might constitute the true content of the country’s vaunted stability, is nowhere considered in this book.

Accurate economic points are made by Patterson, such as his recognition on the very first page that the rationale for planning in Botswana, as he puts it, was the “maintenance of fiscal discipline.” The successful exploitation of diamonds was directed toward wealth accumulation, and not toward increasing productivity, employment, and economic diversification. When economic growth slowed in the 1990s, as Patterson also recognizes (p. 1), big and broad problems were present. Given the accumulation strategy prioritized since diamonds came on stream, productivity was already “flat” (p. 145). Diversification was also absent, with agriculture, wherein almost half the population existed, worth just over 2 percent of GDP, and manufacturing some 4 percent. Diamond production is now officially recognized as approaching its plateau. Yet Botswana’s dependency on diamonds is the world’s highest among mineral dependent economies.

Significant things that happened in the 1990s are unrecognized in this book. High-level or ruling elite cor-

ruption was exposed over the years 1991-94, calling into question the probity of the leadership and the capacities of planning and policymaking processes. The peoples’ awareness of these revelations were shown at the 1994 elections when the BDP’s share of the vote reached its then nadir (though not its command of parliament under the first-past-the-post voting system). President Ketumile Masire’s retirement in 1998 followed from the corruption revelations and the government and ruling party’s inability to remedy the problems properly. Festus Mogae and Vice-President General Ian Khama succeeded to the presidency, without correcting either the governance or the planning problems besetting the system. Parliamentarians in Botswana continually bemoan the failures of government implementation policies, and economic malaise is today the unwelcome buzzword in private business and some government institutions in Gaborone. All the eggs remain in the one basket, and the little foreign direct investment that enters the country is commanded as before by mining.

Many important writers go unmentioned in Patterson’s bibliography. Abdi Samatar, Clark Leith, and Daron Acemoglu and his colleagues are glaring omissions in the economic field, and C. J. Makgala, Mpho Molomo, Zibani Maundeni and Ian Taylor are among others in political economy and history who should have been consulted. The 1990s constituted a watershed in Botswana. That diamond dependency has nonetheless continued and that Botswana seems now to be marching towards authoritarianism is no tribute to rationality, governance, and democracy in the country.

#### Note

[1]. The BDP’s percentage of the popular vote in every election from 1974 is: 77 percent (1974); 75 percent (1979); 68 percent (1984); 65 percent (1994); 54 percent (1999); and 51 percent (2004). See Mpho Molomo, “Electoral Systems and Democracy in Botswana” in *40 Years of Democracy in Botswana*, ed. Zibani Maundeni (Gaborone: Mmegi Publishing House, 2005), 33.

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