



March 2009

BATSWANA SUPPORT PRESS FREEDOM AND CRITICAL SPEECH

Introduction

Botswana has been known for its tolerance of freedom of speech and independence of the media. Tswana traditional society was based on freedom of speech where individuals could state their views without fear. This freedom of speech, which was coincident with free press, was encapsulated in the maxim “*Mmualebe o bua la gagwe*” (every person has the right to his or her own opinion). However, in the last few months there seem to be increasing indicators of growing intolerance of free speech, such as political parties (both Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and Botswana National Front (BNF)) clamping down on free-speaking members, and government coming down hard on critical voices in the press. The BDP has institutionalized its parliamentary caucus such that its decisions are binding on its Members of Parliament, irrespective of how their constituencies feel on the matter. Although he was later pardoned, the recall of Pono Moatlhodi, following what was dubbed “undisciplined behaviour” and utterances that “brought the party name into disrepute,” showed the determination of the BDP to silence critical thought. Botsalo Ntuane, a vibrant BDP backbencher, was also forced to retract statements he made regarding stringent liquor regulations. Kabo Morwaeng’s public condemnation of suggestions that Central Committee elections should not be held in an election year also drew the wrath of the party. And this lack of tolerance of opposing views is not only characteristic of the ruling party. The BNF has likewise expelled a number of its members for holding different views from those of the leadership. For instance, it has, amongst others, expelled its Member of Parliament for Lobatse, Nehemiah Modubule for holding a different view with the party leadership on whether to hold a party conference or congress in 2008. He was for the latter as it would have the mandate to elect a new leadership.

There have also been instances where Radio Botswana and Botswana Television (Btv) programmes such as *Masa-a-sele* and *Matlhoaphage* were not aired by government owned media because they were alleged to be critical of government. The Media Practitioners Bill, which will give the government greater control over the media, sailed through Parliament on 10th December 2008 without debate. The Bill stipulates that no journalist resident in Botswana may work in the country unless he or she has been registered and accredited by a government-appointed executive committee. To this end there has been tension between the government and media houses such that the Press Council intimated it would take government to court if it were to be assented into law.

The media, especially the private media, is widely regarded as a watchdog of democratic politics. In Botswana, the media has largely played this role. Recently, hardly a week passes by without the private

media exposing scandals implicating senior government officials, including some cabinet ministers. Activists believe that increased use of the media can expand the range of considerations citizens bring to bear in making political judgments. However, the government has shown its capacity to withdraw advertising in those media houses that have been critical of government, as has happened with the Midweek Sun and the Botswana Guardian. These could be seen as early warning signs of an intolerant government. In addition, protection of individual freedoms, such as people's freedom to state their views without any fear, is also a cornerstone of democracy. But while individual freedoms are guaranteed in the constitution of the country, their enjoyment is still not automatic.

Given these concerns, how do ordinary Batswana feel about freedom of speech and of the press? Batswana overwhelmingly express support for media and individual freedoms. This suggests that freedom of expression – both personal and collective – is regarded by the Batswana as an essential attribute of a functioning democracy. Despite recent government attempts to suppress the media and individual freedoms, Batswana have remained firm in their commitment to these freedoms. These findings were revealed by the recent Afrobarometer survey of a representative sample of 1200 adult Batswana conducted in October 2008 by faculty from the Departments of Political and Administrative Studies, Sociology and Statistics at the University of Botswana.

Curtailement of Media Independence

An independent media is essential to promote government transparency and accountability, which are central tenets of a democratic system. An investigative media is especially critical for curbing the problem of corruption. A free media has thus contributed to Botswana being regarded as one of the most democratic and least corrupt countries in Africa.

In order to solicit the views of Batswana on this question, respondents were asked which of the following statements is closest to their view;

Statement 1: Government should be able to shut down newspapers that print stories it does not like.

Statement 2: The news media should be free to publish any story that they see fit without fear of being shut down.

- The results show that 80 per cent of Batswana say news media should report stories as they see fit, against only 16 per cent who say the government should close newspapers that report stories it does not like. This indicates that Batswana are committed to having independent and critical reporting in the press.
- When viewed over time, we see that in 2005, about 71 percent of Batswana said the news media should be free to publish any story that they see fit. This figure has thus gone up by about 9 percentage points between 2005 and 2008. These figures confirm that a large majority of Batswana support the view that the media are an important means for making sure that their leaders are held accountable.

With respect to whether the media should be investigative and report on corruption as well as government mistakes, the survey again asked respondents to choose between two statements:

Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on corruption and the mistakes made by the government.

Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like corruption, only harms the country.

About three quarters (75 percent) of Batswana say that they ‘agree’ or ‘agree very strongly’ that the media should be investigative, while just 23 percent think free reporting is detrimental to the country. This question was not asked in 2005.

Freedom of Expression

Botswana has gained international accolades for allowing its people to speak their minds without fear. For instance, in its World Country Ratings on political and civil rights, Freedom House has classified Botswana as ‘free’. Except in very few cases where non-citizens have been declared prohibited immigrants, Botswana has no record of arresting citizens for holding different political views.

How consistent are the assessments of Batswana themselves with those of the international community? The Afrobarometer survey sought to solicit the views of Batswana about individual rights to free expression by asking them to choose which of the following statements is closest to their view:

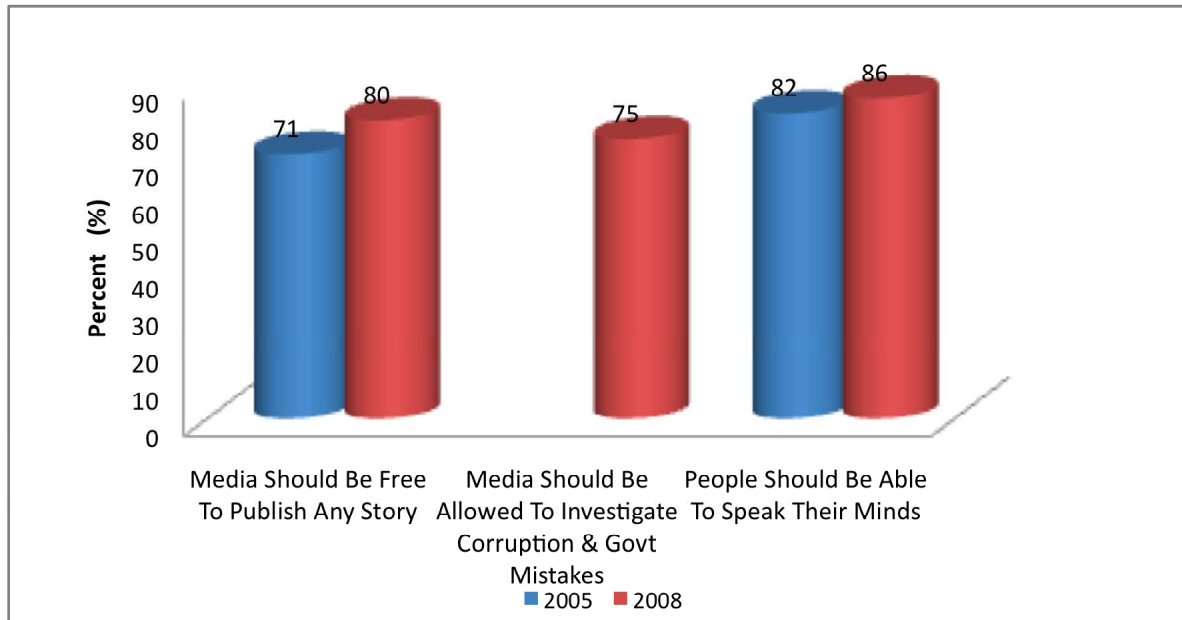
Statement 1: Government should not allow the expression of political views that are fundamentally different from the views of the majority.

Statement 2: People should be able to speak their minds about politics free of government influence, no matter how unpopular their views may be.

- Once again, an overwhelming majority (86 per cent) of Batswana say they ‘agree’ or ‘agree very strongly’ or that people should be able to speak freely about politics.
- This reflects a small (i.e., within the margin of sampling error) increase in the level of tolerance for diverse views since 2005, when 82 percent backed unfettered free expression. Nonetheless, in combination with the increasing support for media freedom noted above, this suggests a possible trend toward growing support for openness across the board.

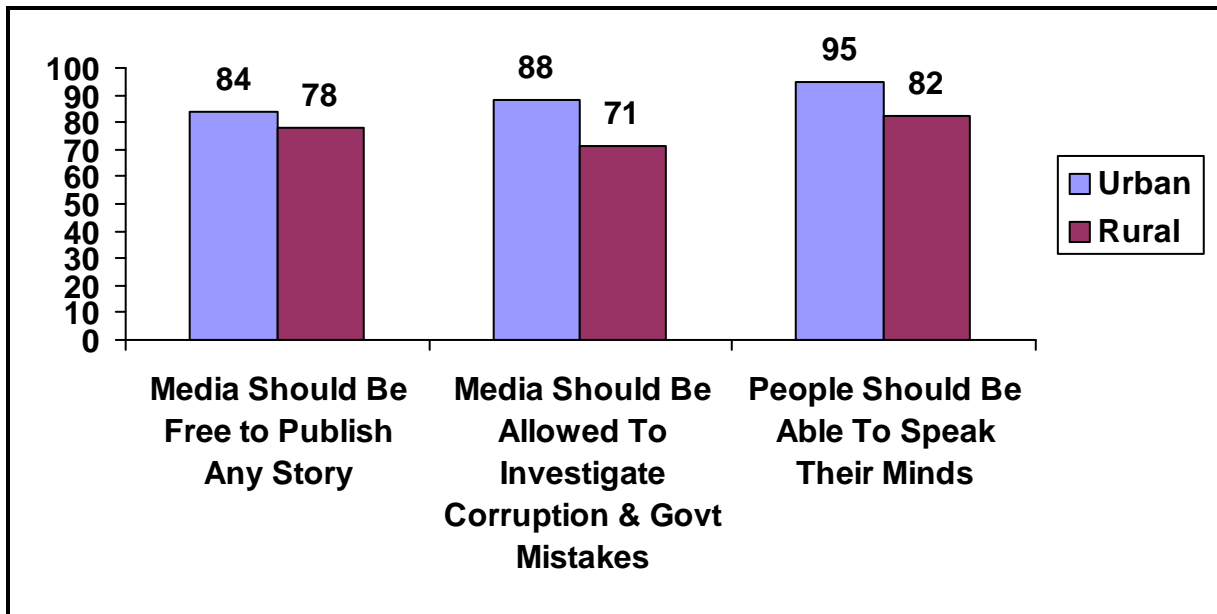
Batswana clearly want freedom of speech. To what extent do they feel they actually have it? Is the country indeed “free” as Freedom House ratings suggest? To what extent do people see overt political discussion and debate as involving personal risk? To explore this issue, we asked respondents: “In this country, how often do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?” Two thirds (67 per cent) said they ‘never’ or only ‘rarely’ have to be careful when airing their political views. This shows that Batswana enjoy considerable space to express themselves openly and without fear of negative consequences.

Figure 1: Support for Media and Individual Freedoms (% of those who Agree/Strongly Agree)



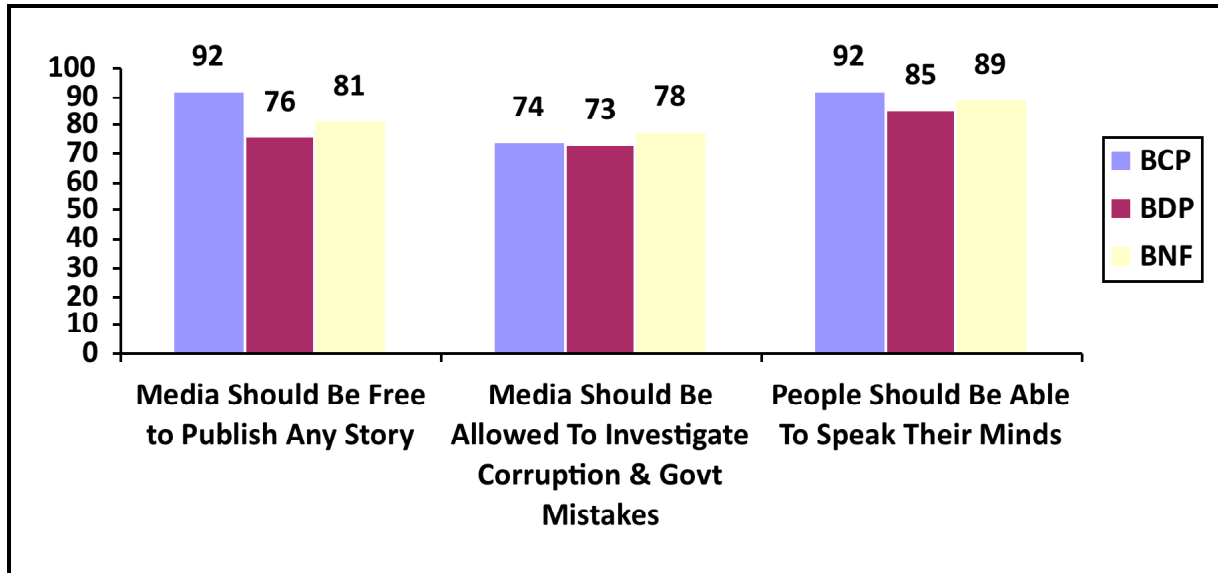
These demands for critical media freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes and freedom of expression are important in holding governments and leaders accountable to citizens. And these views are confirmed by Batswana irrespective of where they live, or even of party affiliation. As Figure 2 shows, with regard to all three questions we find that more than three quarters of Batswana in both urban and rural areas support these expressive freedoms.

Figure 2: Support for Press and Individual Freedoms by Location



Equally important is that support for expressive freedom is shown by a large majority of Batswana irrespective of party affiliation. Although those closer to the BDP show slightly lower support than those who link themselves to opposition parties, over 70 percent support these freedoms across all parties, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Support for Press and Individual Freedoms by Party support



It is however, interesting to note that for those affiliated with the three political parties, the demand for accountability and support for critical media has on average gone up by more than 6 percentage points between 2005 and 2008.

Conclusion

No country can call itself a democracy unless it guarantees freedom of expression. Botswana has been renowned for its democratic media independence and openness. It has been one of the few countries in Africa that has, until recently, allowed the media to operate relatively freely. As the government seems poised, however, to curtail some of the freedoms of speech and press that Batswana have enjoyed, the findings presented here suggest that such actions would run counter to the will of the people.

The Survey

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in one of two languages (English or Setswana) with a nationally representative probability sample of 1200 adult Batswana selected from across all 26 districts in October 2008. In the first stage of sampling, 150 census enumerator areas (EAs) were randomly selected from a frame of all EAs that was stratified by district and urban-rural differences. The probability of selection was proportionate to population size based on the most recent 2001 population census. This ensures that every eligible adult has an equal and known chance of being selected. In the second stage, eight households were randomly selected within each selected enumeration area. In the third and final stage, one Motswana citizen over the age of 18 was randomly selected from a list of all household members to

be interviewed. The realized sample was then weighted by population of EA and number of adults in the selected household to ensure that it matched current population estimates. The final sample size of 1,200 supports estimates to the national population of all adults that is accurate to within a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points at a confidence level of 95 percent. Estimates of sub-groups have larger margins of error.

Fieldwork for this survey was conducted under the guidance of faculty of the Department of Political and Administrative Studies, Sociology and Statistics at the University of Botswana

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The Afrobarometer, a cross-national survey research project, is conducted collaboratively by social scientists from 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), and the Institute for Research in Empirical Political Economy (IREEP, Benin). Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Department for International Development (UK), the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the U.S. Agency for International Development. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org