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Wind of change

In Botswana, the opposition alliance surprisingly wins the election. The peaceful change of government is a signal for the entire region

For the very first time since gaining independence in 1966, Africa's oldest democracy has voted out the ruling social-conservative Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). The election was peaceful and, according to election observers, there were no relevant problems. The transfer of power between the previous and new presidents is running smoothly. The former President Mokgweetsi Masisi has recognised the result and called on the civil service to cooperate with the new government. The union-friendly and socialist-orientated opposition alliance Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) won the election by a surprisingly large margin and will now be able to govern alone with newly elected President Duma Boko. The social democratic Botswana Congress Party (BCP) will be the main opposition force unless it is invited into government by Boko.

The deeply rooted democratic culture in Botswana, an independent electoral commission and fair competition between the parties have contributed to democratic change in the country in a similar way to South Africa. The comparatively low dependence of the political elite on state resources allows them to lose elections without having to worry about their future.

The defeat of the BDP is one of a series of difficult elections for the liberation movements in southern Africa this year. The loss of parliamentary majority of the South African National Congress (ANC) and the subsequent national unity coalition in May, as well as the controversial re-election of the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO) in October, had already caused shock waves in the region. Together with the heavy defeat of the Botswanan BDP, these results also cast a shadow over the upcoming elections in Namibia in November, in which the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) fears for its majority.

Looking to the future, not the past

The former liberation movements of Southern Africa are struggling with a changed, younger, more urbanised and more self-confident electorate, for whom past successes in achieving independence from the colonial powers are less relevant than for their parents' and grandparents' generations. Campaign strategies that rely on patronage, clientelism and the fear of change driven by opposition parties are less successful. The desire for change alongside the electorate's search for solutions to the pervasive problems of unemployment, social injustice and the high cost of living is becoming increasingly widespread. It is not only the urban centres, which are largely dominated by the opposition in southern Africa, that are proving particularly interesting, but also the group of urban rural voters who are returning to their villages for the elections. As a result of their resources, higher education and urban discourse circles, they are increasingly influencing election results in rural areas.

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In Botswana, the election campaign was dominated by the weakening economy, rampant unemployment (including underemployment of over 40 per cent) and increasingly empty state coffers due to a drop in diamond sales. The lack of culturally important modesty shown by the BDP, its decreasing ability to listen to the population's fundamental objections and controversial candidate decisions within the party made the final weeks of the election campaign more difficult for the ruling BDP, which was still firmly in the saddle six months ago. In the end, the ruling party was no longer believed to have a plan for the future. The successes of the past are no longer enough, especially for the younger generation.

The peaceful and democratic change of government in Botswana can be seen as a huge success beyond southern Africa. Especially in view of the controversial elections in Mozambique and in Zimbabwe in 2023, which both saw violence. What is now important is that the opposition puts the national interest above that of the party and adopts a conciliatory stance towards the previously ruling BDP. While there will most likely be a replacement of state secretaries, some judges and heads of security agencies, it is in the interest of the new government to use the wealth of experience of the civil service and not to politicise it.

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of the new UDC-led government, also in order to combat high unemployment and to pay for the numerous election promises. In this context, the trade unions, as founding members of the UDC, will play an important role and make sure that Botswana's present status as a low-wage country is improved.

The country's democratic development is likely to be exciting because the new government might relaunch the constitutional reform process in which the people of Botswana can establish a modern and inclusive constitution for their country. There might also be progress in the integration of ethnic minorities, as Boko himself belongs to the Xhosa minority, which could improve relations between the dominant Tswana and other minorities.

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In terms of foreign policy, no changes are to be expected in the short term, as relations with South Africa and within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) group of states are crucial for the comparatively small country of Botswana and are unlikely to change. Certainly, a UDC-led government will seek closer ties with some opposition movements in other countries such as the Nelson Chamisa-led opposition in Zimbabwe, the Julius Malema-led EFF in South Africa and the Venâncio Mondlane-led PODEMOS in Mozambique. The UDC will also seek to maintain equidistance from major powers in foreign policy, preserving Botswana's traditionally neutral role as the 'Switzerland of Africa', and deepen relations with other countries of the Global South.

Following Zambia's Frederick Chiluba in 1991, Malawi's Bakili Muluzi in 1994 and Zimbabwe's Morgan Tsvangirai in 2008, Boko is now the fourth opposition leader in southern Africa to replace a ruling liberation movement. However, with the exception of Tsvangirai, they all share the disappointment of voters' high expectations for more democracy, a more social society and a united nation that followed the successful election. In initial analyses, representatives of civil society have emphasised that it is in the national interest for the UDC to focus on modesty, objectivity and reconciliation, particularly in its communication and dealings with the former ruling party, the BDP. Something that was indeed observed over the weekend in Boko's speeches where he graciously thanked the former president and showed a lot of humility.

Thanks to the peaceful change of government, Africa's oldest democracy has grown democratically. Its people want to be heard and be involved. Young people are also demanding their rightful place. Democracy is widely accepted, has cultural roots and now has a 'duty to deliver' when it comes to socio-economic problems of unemployment and injustice as well as social challenges such as the high level of gender-based violence or alcoholism. People in neighbouring countries will for sure also be keeping a close eye on further developments in Botswana.



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