

Botswana and Nation-Building Theory

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Abstract : This paper argues that nation-building theories that prioritize democratic governance best explain the successful post-independence development of Botswana. Three main competing schools of thought exist regarding the sequencing of policies that should occur to re-build weakened or failed states. The first posits that economic development should receive foremost attention, while democratization and a binding sense of nationalism can wait. A second group of experts identified constructing a sense of nationalism among a populace is necessary first, so that the state receives popular legitimacy and obedience that are prerequisites for development. Botswana, though, transitioned into a multi-party democracy and prosperous open economy due to the utilization of traditional democratic structures, enlightened and accountable leadership, and an educated technocratic civil service. With these political foundations already in place when the discovery of diamonds occurred, the resulting revenues were spent wisely on projects that grew the economy, improved basic living standards, and attracted foreign investment. Thus democratization preceded, and therefore provided an accountable basis for, economic development that might otherwise have been squandered by greedy and isolated elites to the detriment of the greater population. Botswana was one of the poorest nations in the world at the time of its independence in 1966, with little infrastructure, a dependence on apartheid South Africa for trade, and a largely subsistence economy. Over the next thirty years, though, its economy grew the fastest of any nation in the world. The transparent and judicious use of diamond returns is only a partial explanation, as the government also pursued economic diversification, mass education, and rural development in response to public needs. As nation-building has become a project undertaken by nations and multilateral agencies such as the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Botswana may provide best practices that others should follow in attempting to reconstruct economically and politically unstable states.

Keywords : Botswana, democratization, economic development, nation-building

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