

**A hagiographic autobiography requiring a healthy dose of scepticism**

**Mompoti Sebogodi Merafhe, *The General: In the Service of My Country***

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In this brief autobiography of Botswana's late and former vice president, Mompoti Sebogodi Merafhe, the author chronicles his life story which began in Serowe in 1936. Like most Batswana at the time, his parents were peasants and he looked after the family livestock before attending primary school in Serowe. Merafhe claims that he was a brilliant student with an admirable flair for the English language which other pupils were encouraged to emulate. However, owing to family commitments, his academic potential could not be fully realised and he ended his schooling at a lowly standard 6 level. Thereafter, he joined the colonial police force in 1960 in Gaborone. Merafhe's first posting was in the intelligence unit called the Special Branch. He says its prying and intrusive nature put him off so much that he asked to be transferred elsewhere and he was then shifted to the paramilitary Police Mobile Unit (PMU) in late 1960. Soon he also left the PMU and was transferred to Lobatse Police Station.

Merafhe claims that he was so impressive in his police work that he was promoted from the rank of constable to sergeant skipping that of corporal. He was later transferred from Lobatse to Gaborone in 1965 to work as an instructor at the police college. In the book he also discusses the uncomfortable race relations in the police service at the time. In 1965 he enrolled for a Bachelor of Laws degree programme with the University of South Africa (UNISA) through distance learning, but could not complete the course owing to the pressure of his police work. He provides no explanation about how he was able to register for a Law degree with just a standard 6 education. After leaving the police college he became a prosecutor, which job he enjoyed immensely because he was able to mesmerise judges and magistrates with his mastery of the English language. He writes that while he enjoyed his prosecution work he sometimes felt sorry for those who were jailed because of his spirited arguments.

When the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) was formed in 1977, Merafhe was appointed its first commander by President Seretse Khama. This was at the time of cross-border military attacks on Botswana by Ian Smith's white minority regime in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) allegedly in pursuit of liberation struggle fighters. Merafhe helped design the BDF emblem. Here one feels that he ought to have elaborated on what inspired the features in the emblem because the national symbols that appear in the coat of arms and in the logo of the University of Botswana have recently elicited interest in historical scholarship.

Merafhe credits Seretse Khama with laying the foundation for sound economic development in Botswana, which was accelerated during the presidency of his

successor, Quett Masire (1980–1998). He argues that the credit for what the international community called the African miracle in Botswana “belonged as much to Masire as it did to Seretse Khama” (p 91).

Merafhe left the BDF in 1989 to become a specially elected member of parliament under the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) ticket. He was appointed a cabinet minister in the powerful presidential affairs and public administration portfolio which also included the BDF. During his tenure in this ministry (1989–1994) the army did the country proud with its competent, professional and impressive conduct in peace-keeping missions in Somalia and Mozambique. Thereafter, his performance as minister for foreign affairs for 14 years (1994–2008) was quite outstanding. Even the iconic Nelson Mandela, president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999 was so impressed by Merafhe that he recommended him for the position of chairman of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). While previous chairpersons served for a period of two years and some had their terms extended for a further two years, Merafhe served for six consecutive years (1998–2004), a “record that stands to date”, as he proudly puts it (p 138). He goes on to tell us that the British prime minister, Tony Blair, strongly recommended his continued chairmanship of the CMAG despite differences of opinion between these two men. However, Merafhe does not divulge any details on the nature of his differences with Blair.

As foreign affairs minister Merafhe dealt with many controversial international issues such as the repatriation to Botswana of the remains of El Negro, that were previously on display in a Spanish museum; the execution of a white woman, Marietta Bosch; and the relocation by government of the Basarwa community from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Merafhe declares:

I became deputy [police] commissioner, the penultimate pinnacle, within ten years after joining the force. And I did not rise through all the ranks as at some stage I leapfrogged some of them. For instance, I skipped the superintendent rank and vaulted straight to assistant commissioner in October 1970. In a space of only seven months in 1971, I was promoted twice – from assistant superintendent to assistant commissioner in February and from assistant commissioner to deputy commissioner in September (p 45).

Perhaps, he should have noted that this was by no means unusual in Botswana at that time. For instance, many young graduates became very senior government officials such as permanent secretaries owing to the paucity of experienced local personnel and government’s localisation drive.

Early in his political career Merafhe became a leading figure in the BDP’s fierce and longstanding faction fighting. He led one faction while Daniel Kwelagobe led a rival group. However, Merafhe dismisses former BDP president, Quett Masire’s assertion that he and Kwelagobe were responsible for starting factionalism in the party. He cites a vague statement attributed to the late President, Seretse Khama in 1977 accusing unnamed elements in the party for “wasting precious time engaging in

mudslinging, plotting and counter-plotting, while the many problems which face the country are left unsolved” (p 85). However, Merafhe does not explain the dynamics and gravity of factionalism in the BDP between 1977 and 1989, when he joined politics, to make his claim believable. During the 1994 general election, he represented the BDP in Mahalapye against Billy Makuku of the opposition Botswana National Front (BNF). Merafhe attributes his easy victory to his “intellectual polish” against what he alleges was Makuku’s “crass” campaign, in which he described Merafhe as a carpetbagger from Serowe. This is exaggerated because Mahalapye was a resolute BDP heartland in 1994 and anybody would have won it on the BDP ticket.

On the country’s long struggling opposition, which has never been in power, Merafhe says: “Granted, I would have loved the opposition to draw level with the ruling party to lend real legitimacy to the spirit of plural politics. To me, a vibrant opposition is essential in a genuine democracy. It not only acts as a check on the excesses of government but it keeps it on the double all the time. Going by their showing in all the elections to date, the opposition parties had a lot of homework to do to graduate from the backbench to the frontbench. It was a tall order really, because clearly they “faced a perpetual uphill struggle to endear themselves to the electorate” (p 92). This statement completely ignores the severe marginalisation of the opposition by the well-resourced incumbent party. Merafhe’s former cabinet colleague, David Magang, candidly acknowledges this in his 2008 memoirs, *The Magic of Perseverance*, while Ray Molomo, also a former cabinet colleague of Merafhe, hints at this in his *Democratic Deficit in the Parliament of Botswana* (2012). A recent campaign for reform in the now declining BDP shows signs of the realisation by party activists that if the party lost power and was subjected to the same marginalisation it had inflicted upon the opposition for decades, it too would be doomed.

Merafhe’s assessment of the country’s economic development is still wedded in the now trite ruling party propaganda which took its cue from the work of certain scholars who describe Botswana as the “African Miracle”. He writes:

Critics have scoffed that economic diversification has stalled, that we are virtually stuck in gear one. The facts on the ground tell a different story. At the turn of the century, the mining sector accounted for 75 per cent of Botswana’s foreign exchange earnings, 60 per cent of government revenue, and 33 per cent of GDP. As I write, mining’s contribution to GDP is a mere 20 per cent. If the country were the ‘mono-cultural economy’ it is sneeringly characterised as, we would not have weathered the 2007–2011 global economic crisis as resiliently as we did (p 181).

This is in stark contrast to the views in former BDP cabinet minister David Magang’s extensively researched and strongly argued book *Delusions of Grandeur* (2015). Magang questions the use of GDP figures and argues that while statistics on the country’s economic development may look impressive, the government has not created jobs to reduce unemployment and widespread economic inequality. As far as he is concerned, the African miracle is an “African mirage” to the citizens of Botswana.

As vice-president (2008–2012) Merafhe was also head of the house (parliament) which has been described by critics as merely a “rubber-stamp” and “doormat” of the executive. Two former speakers of parliament, namely Ray Molomo in his *Democratic Deficit in the Parliament of Botswana* (2012) and Margaret Nasha in her *Madam Speaker, Sir* (2014), document the predicament of parliament, but Merafhe ignores their concerns. Owing to failing health, he retired in 2012 after 52 consecutive years in the service of Botswana, and died in early 2015. Generally, the memoir is filled with rather too much self-praise; it is haughty in numerous respects, and several of the country’s historical issues that are raised could perhaps have been handled better. Hopefully, Merafhe’s future biographers will rectify these flaws.

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