

PROFILE OF THE LATE SIR KETUMILE MASIRE (1925-2017)

It is with a profound sense of loss that we mourn the passing on of our former President Sir Ketumile Masire, who was a chief architect of our country's democratic development. As Vice President and Minister of Finance and Development Planning, as well as President, Sir Ketumile contributed immensely to Botswana's emergence from being ranked as one of the world's ten least developed nations to middle income status. During the same period Botswana also made enormous strides in the provision of education, health and social welfare.

Sir Ketumile's long and remarkable life in many ways mirrors how far this nation as a whole has progressed over the past nine decades. Quett Ketumile Joni Masire was born in Kanye in 1925. Like most of his male peers he spent much of his early childhood as a herd boy. His big break came at the age of thirteen when he was able to attend Rachele Primary School, where he displayed a remarkable academic aptitude. As one of the first local students to earn a Government bursary, he was able to continue his studies across the border at Tiger Kloof (Old Moeding) secondary school in 1944. But tragedy struck when his parents both died in 1946. This development caused him to forfeit his opportunity to attend University on a further bursary. Instead he acquired a teacher's certificate so that he could assume responsibility for his five younger siblings.

In 1950 Masire became the headmaster of the new Kanye Junior Secondary School (now Seepapitso Senior), where he taught until 1955. While in education, Masire maintained his lifelong passion for agriculture. Once he could afford a tractor he became a fulltime farmer. His modern methods of cultivation were initially derided by some. But, big yields silenced the naysayers. In 1957 he became the first indigenous African in the Bechuanaland Protectorate to be awarded a Master Farmer's Certificate. Over the years Masire was regularly appointed or elected to various Bangwaketse development committees. From 1958 he began to acquire a national reputation as the Botswana editor of the Naledi ya Batswana/African Echo newspaper. It was in this role that he became politically engaged and first met Seretse Khama.

In 1961 Masire was elected to both the reformed African Council and the higher Legislative Council, being the only commoner from the southern Protectorate to be elected to the latter body. Later in the year he was approached by Seretse Khama and others to play the leading role in organising what would become the BDP. Drawing on his many newspaper and educational contacts, Masire quickly established an organisational network that became the basis for the party's landslide 81% of the vote in the 1965 general election. He also established and edited Therisanyo, a party periodical that appeared regularly from 1963 to 1967.

From beginning, the new political government was to a great extent a partnership between Seretse's vision and charisma and Masire's energy and organisational ability.

As the nation's first Minister of Finance as well as Vice-President, Masire championed a series of robust interventions to elevate Botswana out of its then prevailing status as one of the world's least developed countries, which in 1966 had an annual per-capita income of only about US\$ 60. His programme included channelling foreign aid, loans, and mining revenues into the development of educational, health, power and transport and communications infrastructure, while encouraging small-scale services and industries. Efforts were also made towards promoting commercial agriculture.

In the early years of independence Masire's dynamic approach was unpopular with some conservative bureaucrats, while others resented his pre-eminent influence over national policy planning. But, Seretse maintained his faith in his deputy. In 1969 Masire suffered a setback when he lost his Kanye Parliamentary seat to Kgosi Bathoen II, who had left bogosi to lead the BNF. Thereafter, Masire retained the office of Vice-President as specially elected Member of Parliament until 1974 when he was elected in the Gangwaketse West constituency.

By the end of the 1970s the success of Masire's development portfolio had gained him increasing international as well as domestic respect and political clout. Masire succeeded to the Presidency in 1980 with the overwhelming support of his party's Parliamentary caucus, presiding over the late Sir Seretse's unfinished term until 1984, when he led his party to victory in his own right. Seeing the country through severe drought and an early 1980s slump in diamond sales, Masire's tenure were characterized by continued high rates of economic growth and social development, marked by Botswana's rise to middle income status.

Indeed, from 1966 to 1998 Botswana enjoyed the highest annual economic growth rate in the world. The resulting rising revenues allowed for further investment in infrastructure and public services, as well as human resource development, with education and health consistently taking the lion's share of the budget.

Sir Ketumile's legacy goes beyond our borders as during his tenure he also played a key role as one of the leaders of the Frontline states in the liberation of our region from colonialism and Apartheid. After leaving office, Sir Ketumile divided his time between his passion for farming and frequent service as both a domestic and global statesman, often working through his Sir Ketumile Masire Foundation.

Internationally, he chaired the Panel of Eminent Persons that investigated the 1994 Rwandan genocide, was the facilitator of the inter-Congolese Dialogue and the SADC mediator for Lesotho. Up until the time of his death he remained a respected voice for peace and good governance on the African continent and beyond. Above all we will remember Rre Rra Gaone for his character, his humility, wit and decency, which personified the values of Botho.

MAY HIS SOUL REST IN PEACE AND HIS FAMILY BE COMFORTED