

Keynote Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic, Mr. Festus G. Mogae, in his capacity as President of the Botswana Democratic Party, to the National Congress of the Botswana Democratic Party Women's Wing at Mochudi (5/5/05)

I am honoured once again to be given the opportunity to interact with the BDP Women's Wing at this important event in their calendar of activities. I am happy that there are increasing numbers of women in leadership positions.

The Women's wing congress provides a platform for analyzing obstacles and opportunities for women leaders, exploring new leadership and gender frameworks, enhancing communications, mentoring, networking, and sharing personal, organizational and community experiences.

Today's gathering therefore presents a unique opportunity for you, participants, to share knowledge and leadership experience and to enhance strategic networking and information-sharing on your advancement and empowerment.

The success of our Party depends on inclusive leadership models that leverage the potential and experience of all its human resources. The full and active participation of women in leadership is a pre-requisite for positive change and development in Botswana.

We're certainly making a difference to the women of our country. In this Parliament 3 women were specially elected to Parliament and all of them are ministers as I speak. For the first time we have a Woman Deputy Speaker and a Woman Chief Whip.

Although our Party does not subscribe to the 30 percent quota system, Democrats will recall, that in my address to the Selibe Phikwe women's congress, I urged the women folk of our Party to embrace Bulela-ditswe (primary elections system) because it afforded them the opportunity to increase their representation at all levels of national elective office.

Your response was indeed positive but inadequate, because although I was happy to note an increase in the number of women contestants in Bulela-ditswe, your numbers were not large enough. Although a great many who stood did not win national elections, I want to encourage you not to despair but to increase your numbers at every election.

As there are more women voters than men voters, the fact that many of you lose either Bulela-ditswe or national elections, would appear to indicate insufficient or deficient mobilization of women voters on your part. You are aware that while I support women candidates, during polling, my advocacy must of necessity be somewhat muted for fear of dividing the Party.

Our system does not, as it does in our sister Republics of Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, permit either me or the Central Committee to increase the women candidates outside the primary elections. We do not have a Party list, nor the right of the President to appoint some candidates and later make direct appointments to

Parliament as they do elsewhere. We only have the four specially-elected Members of Parliament by Parliament after nomination by me and other Party leaders and even ordinary MPs.

As a government we continue to support women. Recently of the 103 nominated Councillors 40 of them are women representing or rather constituting 39% of the nominated Councillors. Indeed there is room for improvement but we must commend the Minister of Local Government for this. As a party we will continue to strive to create an enabling environment that permits women to attain positions in political decision making institutions.

And since we introduced a new law on marital powers, we have helped nearly all of our women folks. But of course there is more to do. And in the next five years we want to give more families more choice and more support through Vision 2016. That is the difference between us and opposition parties who are against Vision 2016, at least those of them who say they do not support it.

It must be noted that the Women's Wing Regulations 5 and 6 have been amended in line with the Resolution of the Selibe Phikwe Congress in 2003. The clause that permitted male members of the Party to vote as per their official positions has been repealed. It was an anomalous situation that in a Women's Wing Congress, whose purpose is to promote women's political, economic and social empowerment, male delegates could vote. Ruth Motsete once told a United Nations meeting in Tanzania, on the empowerment and role of women in development, that the meeting, which was attended in the majority by men, reminded her of a conference of cats discussing the welfare of rats.

The new regulations will be tabled at the National Congress in Serowe in July. Only then will they be operational. This is very interesting because our male folks have today what we may call their "last supper". It will be the last time here in Mochudi that men will vote in a BDP Women's Wing Congress.

This is indeed historic and it goes a long way in showing our commitment to empowering women. I hope the youth wing could copy their mothers' initiative and also change their rules and regulations such that only young people could vote at their congresses.

Now that the dust has settled over the bickering of Bulela-Ditswe results, the party has to solidify its support base ahead of the country's 10th elections in 2009. Accepting that the Party's popular vote decreased during the 2004 elections, we have to build a strong support base and the onus is on all of us to bring unity into the Party. It is a serious test for democrats. Firstly, we have to show that charity begins at home by welcoming with open arms those who do not see eye to eye with us in the Party.

This will be a bold step to pave the way for the much-needed unity which is in short supply as evidenced at the last elections when some democrats voted with the opposition.

After taking the chairmanship of the Party, the Vice President committed himself to healing the rift and divisions among us. He has now been backing his words with action by coming up with initiatives that seek to bring about unity. We all must support him. My appeal is

that we go to the 2009 general elections not to play but to win. Our entire future is hanging in the balance. As Party leaders we should stop worrying about positions and rather help to form a strong Party, and the time is now.

The way you are going to conduct your affairs throughout this congress will go a long way in helping to cement the foundation for continued peace in our Party. It is incumbent upon you as the women of the Party to embrace the concept of healthy competition amongst yourselves without mudslinging and maligning others who might want to contest elections.

I encourage you to continue with your initiative of helping the under-privileged, through your annual contribution to the Masiela Trust Fund and building houses for the needy. This spirit should continue and grow, but please do not lose sight of the fact that the Party is facing financial difficulties, hence you should come up with better initiatives of sustaining yourselves. The Party Treasurer mentioned at the recent National Council meeting in Gaborone that the Party wings are now increasingly turning to the main Party for funding, this tendency must not continue, I know you have the ability to generate money for yourselves, please use it, the Party needs support from you.

Go out and mobilize your troops in the branches because it is only when they are up and running effectively that the Party can stand on its feet and be a power with which to reckon. I mentioned at the National Council that this Party is so precious and the country needs it, therefore we should harness our human and material resources to work for it with renewed conviction.

I wish to once more challenge you to help me and my government in the fight against HIV/AIDS, even though many Batswana are now going for testing there are still many more who are lagging behind. As the Women's Wing of the ruling Party you should be at the fore front of this fight encouraging other women and young people to test and also enrol on the ARV programmes when they test positive.

It is common knowledge that women and children are the most vulnerable groups, hence I challenge you to work hard to change this reality if as a nation we are to achieve some of the goals of Vision 2016.

As a Party in government we have developed schemes aimed at alleviating poverty amongst Batswana, we therefore need you as mothers of the nation to mobilize and teach our people to take advantage of these programmes.

Finally, let me challenge you to support each other in all spheres of life, be it in politics or other endeavours. Stand up and encourage more women to stand or run for positions of influence, in politics and in the business world. By so doing you will be helping your government in its drive to empower women.

In government we have many women holding senior positions, such as Permanent Secretaries, their Deputies, Directors, etc, but it is still not enough. It is upon you to encourage women to acquire skills for them to be competitive, in that this is a world of competition. Although there has been progress, much still needs to be done in taking

practical steps to realise Party unity. These efforts need to be carried out by all people concerned.

In conclusion let me wish you well in your Congress and encourage you to be level headed in your discussions if you are to come up with meaningful resolutions. I wish to see renewed commitment to peace and prosperity for the Party and country. You must not only talk the talk but walk the walk as womenfolk. The Women's Wing bears a special responsibility in contributing to the change of attitudes.

The salvation of Domkrag lies primarily with BDP members themselves. Optimism must become our virtue and widely disseminated psychological trait, even in the face of challenges. Regardless of what our detractors say or do, democrats themselves must never lose faith in their own capacity and ability to change the course of events, to achieve the willed future for themselves.