



Botswana

Botswana, dubbed “an excellent democratic partner” by the State Department, generally performs well on governance, economic, and human development metrics. The arid, landlocked, and sparsely populated Southern African country is known for its unique ecosystems, which underpin a thriving tourism industry. Issues for Congress may include oversight of U.S. assistance programs, which have historically centered on combatting HIV/AIDS and supporting wildlife conservation.

Politics

Botswana is a multi-party democracy and scores higher than many African nations on indices of freedom and transparency, despite some challenges. Constitutional checks and balances are relatively robust, though the executive branch holds significant power vis-à-vis the legislature. In 2018, President Masisi’s assumption of direct control over Botswana’s two core security services spurred concern over further executive power centralization. Botswana ranks 39th out of 180 countries (third-best in Africa) on Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index*, and in 2021, the Financial Action Task Force removed Botswana from its grey list of jurisdictions with poor money laundering protections. Anti-corruption agencies have recorded few successful prosecutions, however, and reportedly face political interference.

The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has maintained a legislative majority and, as the legislature elects the president, controlled the executive branch since Botswana’s independence from Britain in 1966. The BDP has prioritized economic growth and incremental institution-strengthening built around a national identity aligned with the ethnic majority Tswana people, an approach that some analysts have labeled “developmental nationalism.”

Historically, the BDP has retained power and sought to project unity in part by selecting its presidential successors well before elections, avoiding election-year intra-party tensions. In 2018, then-President Ian Khama resigned in line with that model, and U.S.-educated then-Vice President Mokgweetsi Masisi, 62, succeeded him. The two have since engaged in public disputes, however, driven in part by Masisi’s reversal of some Khama policies (e.g., a hunting ban). In 2019, BDP dissidents, including Khama, formed a new party, the Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF). Botswana authorities (Botswana is a plural adjective and noun for Botswana and its people) charged Khama with theft, illegal arms possession, and money laundering and seek Khama’s extradition from South Africa, where he lives in exile.

Tensions between the two leaders could hurt BDP prospects in elections slated for October 2024, as could high youth unemployment (44% in 2023), a gradual loss of voter support in recent elections, and the emergence of Khama’s BPF. While Botswana elections historically have been described as free and fair, opposition parties sometimes

have taken a different view. Though the State Department reports that international observers found the most recent elections, in 2019, to be generally free and fair, the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) opposition coalition sharply questioned the integrity of the voting process in public remarks and in an unsuccessful lawsuit.

Table 1. Botswana at a Glance

Size: Slightly smaller than Texas
Population: 2.4 million; 1.4% growth; 73% urban
Languages: Setswana (lingua franca), English (official), other (local) (2011)
Ethnic Groups: Tswana 79%, Kalanga 11%, Basarwa 3%, other 7%
Religions: Christian 79%, Badimo 4%, other/unspecified 2%, none 15% (2011)
Median Age: 26.8 years
Life Expectancy: 66 years (male: 64, female: 68)
HIV/AIDS Adult Prevalence (ages 15-49): 16.4% (men 11.8%, women 21.1%) (2022)
Literacy Rate: 88.5% (male 88%, female 89%) (2015)
Key Exports: Diamonds, copper, wiring, beef (2022)
GDP: \$20.8 billion (total), 3.8% growth, \$7,758 per capita

Source: CRS graphic; data from CIA *World Factbook*, IMF, and UNAIDS databases (2023 estimates unless otherwise noted)

Some critics have alleged that some state policies have threatened the cultural and economic survival of the aboriginal San or Basarwa, who comprise about 3% of the population.

Economy

Botswana’s economy, which is underpinned by a free market system and an open investment regime, has long enjoyed moderate but steady growth fueled by diamond export revenues, which have been used to decrease poverty and fund free education and healthcare. Per capita incomes are high by regional standards, but Botswana faces extensive unemployment and has among the most unequal income distribution rates globally. Botswana’s heavy reliance on diamonds (about 86% of total exports) leaves the country susceptible to global commodity price shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a 8.7% GDP contraction in 2020, leading to the first-ever World Bank budget aid program in Botswana. The economy recovered, expanding by 11.9% in 2021, though growth has since moderated, to 5.8% in 2022 and 3.8% in 2023.

Botswana’s diamond reserves are gradually being depleted, prompting state efforts to diversify the economy. These efforts focus on exploiting the country’s coal reserves, exporting other mined commodities (e.g., copper) and potentially critical minerals (e.g., manganese, nickel, and cobalt); and further developing local value-added

processing of diamonds. In 2023, Namibian and Botswana officials reaffirmed a longstanding joint plan to build a rail line to service Botswana coal exports by sea.

Conservation

Botswana's government considers wildlife conservation and protection important, both for biological diversity protection reasons, and to support ecotourism's significant contribution to the economy. About 45% of Botswana land is subject to conservation measures. The Okavango Delta, a large, uniquely biodiverse, wildlife-rich inland delta that floods each year, hosts major wildlife migration routes. The Kalahari Desert also holds a range of unique species. Both are draws for tourism, which contributes one in 11 jobs.

Threats to Botswana's biodiversity include habitat and water source damage and loss, barriers to wildlife movement, invasive species, and reported climate change impacts. Some stakeholders assert that Botswana's current biodiversity policies and institutions are inadequate. In 2014, the Khama government banned hunting, citing declining wildlife populations. The decision drew criticism from some communities reliant on hunting tourism revenue or concerned over human-wildlife conflict and damage to crops by animals, notably elephants. Some stakeholders have argued that the elephant population exceeds the environment's capacity to sustain that population. In 2019, citing such concerns, President Masisi lifted the hunting ban to permit regulated hunting, including of several hundred elephants annually. The Botswana government also has pushed back against European efforts since 2022 to ban wildlife trophy imports.

Botswana also has long faced challenges from organized criminal poaching, which often targets iconic, high-value species (e.g., rhinos, lions, and elephants). Botswana has made a concerted effort to halt poaching through conservation programs, law enforcement wildlife protection efforts, and measures to reduce human-wildlife conflicts.

HIV/AIDS

At 16.4% in 2022 (latest UNAIDS data), Botswana has the fourth highest adult HIV/AIDS prevalence rate globally, but HIV/AIDS control is improving. In the 2000s, adult prevalence rates exceeded 25%, tens of thousands of children were orphaned, and the workforce was depleted. Care is now widely accessible and anti-retroviral therapy free. Botswana reportedly was the first country to achieve the UNAIDS "95-95-95" HIV target (i.e., that 95% of HIV-positive persons know their HIV status, of whom 95% receive treatment, and that 95% of this group achieve viral suppression). Incidence rates (new infections), a key epidemic control metric, declined to 3.3 new infections per 1,000 adults in 2022, down from 28.9 in 2000. Some populations are at higher risk; young women aged 15-19, for instance, reportedly face incidence rates almost 700% higher than their male counterparts. About a third of Botswana's national HIV/AIDS response is funded by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR); the Botswana government funds roughly 60%.

Foreign Relations

Botswana shares close economic and cultural ties with neighboring South Africa, its largest trading partner and a source of employment for many Botswana. Botswana also maintains friendly relations with the People's Republic of

China (PRC), which regularly provides loans, mostly for infrastructure or housing, and varied development grants. Botswana has installed PRC firm-supplied "safe cities" infrastructure, including surveillance technology, and PRC firm Huawei has a training agreement with Botswana's government. A 2022 Afrobarometer survey found that Botswana was among the few Africa countries in which respondents ranked the PRC more favorably as a developmental partner and positive influence than the United States, albeit by relatively small margins.

The world's number two diamond producer after Russia, Botswana could gain market share as a result of G7 sanctions on Russian diamonds. Botswana officials, however, have expressed opposition to these G7 measures over concerns that they were imposed without adequate consultation with Botswana; could increase the cost of Botswana diamonds; and might undermine Botswana's diamond processing industry by requiring certain diamonds be routed through Europe. Botswana voted to condemn Russia's 2022 expansion of its war of aggression on Ukraine at the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA), but abstained from later votes on Russia's actions.

Botswana contributed to the multi-dimensional Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), a military-civilian mission to combat an Islamic State terrorist insurgency in northern Mozambique, a U.S.-supported goal.

Botswana opposed a 2021 African Union (AU) decision to grant Israel AU observer status. After Hamas's October 2023 attacks on Israel and Israel's subsequent military operation in Gaza, Botswana voted in favor of UNGA resolutions in 2023 calling for a "humanitarian truce" and a "humanitarian ceasefire" in the Gaza Strip.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

The State Department views bilateral ties as "strong and grounded in a shared commitment to good governance and inclusion." Botswana hosts a U.S. Agency for Global Media broadcasting station, a U.S. regional C-12 transport aircraft, and a U.S.-funded International Law Enforcement Academy, which trains selected police from across Africa. In June 2024, Botswana co-hosted with the United States the U.S.-facilitated African Chiefs of Defense Conference.

U.S. bilateral aid for Botswana administered by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development totaled \$52.4 million in FY2023 (most recent full-year data), with \$50.6 million requested for FY2025. Such aid has been devoted almost entirely to PEPFAR, apart from a U.S. International Military Education and Training program. Botswana, which also benefits from U.S. global or regional programs, participates in U.S. initiatives such as Prosper Africa, a trade and investment effort, and the Young African Leaders Initiative. A minor bilateral U.S. trading partner, Botswana is eligible for U.S. duty-free African Growth and Opportunity Act trade benefits, though its AGOA-eligible exports annually averaged a low 0.6% of its total exports to the United States, 2014-2023

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