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## Police oversight in the Republic of Botswana: Challenges and prospects

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#### ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding Botswana's reputation for adhering to democratic ideals and good governance, the nation has not established sound oversight mechanisms for the police service. Over the years, the Botswana Police Service has faced criticism over allegations of abuse of powers and functions, manifesting through violation of citizens' rights. Various media houses have reported police excesses such as unlawful arrest and detention, illegal searches, torture and death of suspects while they are in police detention. Amidst all these allegations, there are no independent mechanisms in place to hold the Botswana Police Service to account. In the absence of external accountability mechanisms, citizens whose rights are violated by the police will have to depend on the same violators to investigate. In this paper, we explore the current police oversight systems in the Republic of Botswana. We also present arguments for the creation of an independent police oversight body in the nation.

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Botswana police; human rights; police accountability; police oversight; police misconduct

#### Introduction

While Botswana is one of the countries with a good human rights record on the African continent, this reputation is slowly fading away.<sup>1</sup> The once positive record was largely due to the strict observance of the rule of law in the post-independent Botswana.<sup>2</sup> While progressive democracies have developed sound accountability mechanisms for institutions such as the police, Botswana has been lagging behind in terms of holding the police to account.<sup>3</sup> Given the significant role that the police play in entrenching democracy, any unchecked misbehaviour by the police will have serious implications on democracy.

In all progressive democracies, independent oversight of the police is an essential tool for taking corrective action when police engage in improper conduct, and to ensure that the police are accountable to the public for what they do and how they do it.<sup>4</sup> As the gatekeepers of the criminal justice process, the police are an important link between the citizens and the courts of law. While the citizens expect the police to ensure that they enjoy their constitutional rights freely, the police find themselves in a dilemma as they are also empowered by the same constitution to use force in order to ensure that majority of the citizens enjoy their constitutional rights. This dilemma calls for a system of independent checks and

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balances in order to ensure that police powers are exercised within the confines of the law and in a manner that brings public confidence in the police service. However, most nations have found it difficult to have a purely independent police oversight mechanism that is insulated from the undue influence of the police organisation,<sup>5</sup> while at the same time not stifling police operations.

To perform their constitutional mandate of preserving law and order, the police are vested with far-reaching powers such as the power to arrest, detain, search and seize, as well as to stop and question. Ironically, these essential far-reaching powers are susceptible to abuse as individual police officers use discretion to exercise them. As the police exercise these intrusive powers, tensions often arise between the citizens and the police, thus calling for the need to ensure that the powers are checked and regulated.<sup>6</sup> This then justifies the need for robust checks and balances to curb police abuse of power. Despite the availability of legislative controls through the Constitution, the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act and the Police Act, these legislative controls, alone, are inadequate for robust police accountability mechanisms. Importantly, accountability 'is not intended to eliminate or undermine police power, but rather control it from becoming an instrument of repression and exploitation'.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, we interrogate police oversight in the Republic of Botswana. The paper evaluates the current internal and external mechanisms for police oversight in Botswana. Borrowing from other countries that have established independent police oversight institutions on the African continent, the paper proffers an ideal model of police oversight for Botswana. The paper comes amidst a backdrop of increased allegations of police excesses in the execution of their powers and functions. More often, the Botswana Police Service has faced criticism from media platforms and other human rights pressure groups over alleged incidents of abuse of power, which manifests through wrongful arrest, torture and indiscriminate use of force. The paper provides context-specific information on the policing challenges in an otherwise stable democracy within the region. There has also been a dearth in empirical research into police oversight in Botswana and this may be attributed to the absence of effective independent mechanisms to hold the Botswana Police to account. Thus, this paper provides an impetus for future researchers to delve into the important area of police accountability.

#### Models of police oversight

While the models of police oversight vary across the globe, there is a general consensus among researchers that three broad police oversight models exist and these are the 'internal affairs model', the 'civilian review model' and the 'civilian control model'.<sup>8</sup> With the internal affairs model, complaints against police officers will be received by the police department and the police department will conduct its own internal investigations.<sup>9</sup> In most instances, the regulations that govern the police will have provisions for disciplinary procedures which must be followed on all incidents of police misconduct.<sup>10</sup> The main argument for the internal affairs model is that the police should be able to internally handle all minor cases of police misconduct. Notwithstanding the inevitability of internal mechanisms for handling minor incidents of misconduct, 'there have been concerns over the lack of objectivity in internal investigations of officer misconduct'.<sup>11</sup> Previous researchers have also pointed out the high level of loyalty that the police officers display among themselves,<sup>12</sup> meaning that when a police officer mischaves, fellow police officers are likely to tolerate the misbehaviour due to loyalty. In his study on internal police oversight mechanisms, Porter, pointed out the

bias that characterised internal investigations of police misconduct, as well as allegations of leniency and intimidation of complainants and witnesses.<sup>13</sup>

Given the inherent challenges with the internal affairs model, there will be a need for a mechanism that provides for independent police misconduct investigations. The establishment of civilian review bodies has been one of the responses to the bias that characterise the internal affairs model. Thus, the civilian review model entails the use of an external body comprising of non-police officers for handling incidents of police misconduct.<sup>14</sup> With this model, the police conducts internal investigations first through the internal disciplinary processes and the external agency plays a monitoring role.<sup>15</sup> The model may involve *ex post facto* reviews of internal police disciplinary processes by a panel 'made up of some or all lay or civilian representatives; the ongoing monitoring of misconduct investigations undertaken by the police'.<sup>16</sup> The main drawback of the civilian review model lies in the review agency's limited powers and scope, as the agency's role will be just to establish whether the misconduct incident was fairly and competently dealt with by the police department, as well as to make recommendations for corrective action.

The model which addresses the limitations of the internal disciplinary mechanisms and the civilian review model is the civilian control model, which is also referred to as the investigative model. With the civilian control model, independent investigations into police misconduct are done by an independent commission or board.<sup>17</sup> The board or commission is given investigative powers so as 'to increase public confidence that investigations of police officers would be conducted with greater scrutiny and fairness'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the civilian control model is premised on; inter alia, 'the inability or unwillingness of the police to police themselves in a manner acceptable to the public, and the public's belief that independent investigation of police misconduct is fairer and more objective'.<sup>19</sup> A number mechanisms are available for the civilian control model, with the most prominent being an Independent Police Complaints Commission, whereby aggrieved members of the public can directly file complaints for incidents of police misconduct.<sup>20</sup> The Ombudsman can also investigate citizen complaints against maltreatment by government officials, including the police.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, human rights commissions can hold the police to account on human rights-related forms of police misconduct.<sup>22</sup>

#### Brief on international and regional police oversight mechanisms

Across the globe, there has been a shift towards the adoption of independent police oversight mechanisms. In Europe, there are a number of independent police oversight bodies and the notable are: 'Standing Police Monitoring Committee in Belgium; Independent Authority for the Investigation of Complaints and Allegations against the Police in Cyprus; Independent Police Complaints Commission in Hungary and Garda Siochana Ombudsman Commission in Ireland'.<sup>23</sup> In England and Wales, the most notable police oversight body is the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) and it is empowered to receive and handle investigations on all serious manifestations of police misconduct.<sup>24</sup> Northern Ireland has the Police Ombudsman, who 'has the sole responsibility for handling all complaints, including investigations, against the Police Service of Northern Ireland'.<sup>25</sup> Established by legislation and accountable to the National Assembly, Northern Ireland's Police Ombudsman is an independent and impartial complaints mechanism, just like independent commissions in other European jurisdictions.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, all these police accountability bodies adopt the civilian control model and their role is to independently investigate incidents of police misconduct.

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Most African nations have established broad-based police accountability institutions such as anti-corruption commissions, human rights commissions and Ombudsmen.<sup>27</sup> Malawi launched the Independent Complaints Commission (ICC) in 2020 and the institution is mandated to investigate all the complaints made by the public against the police.<sup>28</sup> Apart from the recently established ICC in Malawi, South Africa and Kenya had long established independent bodies responsible for investigating incidents of police misconduct. The Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) is mandated to investigate all public complaints against the Kenya Police Service.<sup>29</sup> IPOA was established by the Independent Policing Oversight Authority Act in 2011, and became operational in 2012. The IPOA is mandated to: 'investigate deaths and serious injuries caused by police action, investigates police misconduct based on complaints from members of the public, and monitor, review and audit investigations and actions by the Internal Affairs Unit'.<sup>30</sup> For South Africa, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) is mandated to investigate complaints against South Africa Police Service. IPID is mandated to investigate criminal activities by police officers, as well as to investigate all deaths in police custody.<sup>31</sup> The Independent Police Investigative Directorate Act (1 of 2011) (IPID Act) empowers the investigating officers to arrest, detain, search and execute warrants (Berg, 'Civilian Oversight of Police in South Africa').<sup>32</sup>

## Background and context of the Botswana police oversight

While it is a dominant view that the government of Botswana generally upholds the rule of law and respects the citizens' rights,<sup>33</sup> social and political commentators and analysts have often raised serious concern over the worsening human rights situation in the country in recent years.<sup>34</sup> Majority of the concerns over the human rights situation 'revolve around the treatment of civilians by security personnel including the police'.<sup>35</sup> There has been an increasing number of reports, particularly in the private print media, regarding the police treatment of suspects.

The police have been accused of disappearance of civilians in police custody, unlawful detention, torture during routine interrogations and unlawful killing of civilians.<sup>36</sup> In 2020, the President of Botswana, Mokgweetsi Masisi, condemned police brutality after pictures of people maimed by the police under the pretext of enforcing the lockdown regulations appeared on social media.<sup>37</sup> In 2022, the Botswana police made headlines, for excessive use of force after a fatal shooting of nine suspects and two bystanders as they responded to a cash-in-transit robbery.<sup>38</sup> A 2022 survey by Afrobarometer established that 'significant proportions of the population say the police 'often' or 'always' engage in improper practices, including using excessive force in dealing with criminal suspects (41%) and in managing protests (24%), participating in illegal activities (35%), and stopping drivers without good reason (24%)'.<sup>39</sup> The results of the Afrobarometer survey seem to confirm the general state of affairs between the public and the police during their daily encounters. While there have been some successful criminal cases and civil suits against the Botswana Police Service, with some attracting widespread media attention, there has been concern over the absence of an institution of enquiry into police misconduct by the government. In most cases, the police command seems to believe in the 'few bad apples theory of misconduct', a phenomenon that has been discredited in most leading democracies. Moreover, there appears to be a tacit approval of the intrusive methods used to extract information from suspects, whereby the police accused of wrongdoing are often given official pardon after conviction.

As regards police corruption, while the police in many African countries are perceived to be the most corrupt of government institutions, the Botswana Police continue to be perceived as the least corrupt, making the top five of the least corrupt among the 34 African countries surveyed in 2011/2013.<sup>40</sup> In the year 2016, Transparency International ranked Botswana number 34 out of the 176 countries surveyed.<sup>41</sup> Favourable perception scores notwithstanding, the Botswana Police Service is not exactly corruption free, particularly in the lower echelons of the police where there is the largest interaction with members of the public. Though the 2015 Afrobarometer survey ranked the Botswana Police Service among the least corrupt on the African continent, the Police were considered as the most corrupt among the three state institutions namely, Botswana Unified Revenue Service, Judges and Magistrates, and the Police.<sup>42</sup> There have been increasing number of reports on the private print media regarding increased corruption particularly among the special constables. A 2022 Afrobarometer survey established that 'more than one-third of citizens (36%) believe that 'most' or 'all' police are corrupt'.<sup>43</sup> The Botswana Police.<sup>44</sup> Despite these concerns at the highest levels, there is a relative absence of official reports detailing the incidents, neither is there indication regarding reforms to put in place to ensure that corruption is dealt with.

## Police oversight mechanisms in Botswana

In this section, we look at the mechanisms for handling police misconduct in Botswana. First, we need to highlight the pivotal role that the courts are playing in holding the police to account, especially through the prosecution of police officers implicated in police misconduct, as well as presiding over civil suits against the police. Notwithstanding the central role that is played by the courts, our discussion will revolve around the mechanisms which fall within the three police oversight models, namely the internal affairs, the civilian review, and the civilian control models. To this end, we discuss the Botswana Police Service's Internal Affairs Unit and the Ombudsman office.

#### Internal affairs unit

In 2010, an administrative reform to establish the Botswana Police Internal Affairs Unit/Branch was made. The unit, headed by an Assistant Commissioner – a relatively senior rank, is made up of serving police officers and is housed within the police service. According to Bosaletswe, the establishment of this unit was prompted by 'a growing number of complaints involving the conduct of the police towards their customers'.<sup>45</sup> The police themselves had conceded on their website that the establishment of the unit was a reaction to reports of corruption, torture and unlawful arrests by the police among others. Whenever aggrieved, members of the public, or the police themselves, are expected to contact the police through telephone, in person, or in writing to report either as victims or witnesses of police misconduct. Upon receipt, the allegations are investigated, and the final report with recommendations is forwarded to the Botswana Police Commissioner for a final decision. If dissatisfied by the outcome of the process, the aggrieved parties have the opportunity to appeal to the Commissioner or seek legal redress.

The Internal Affairs Branch has received constant criticism from local media outlets, and even the Botswana legislature. For example, in 2016, the editor of a local news outlet, Mmegi, remarked that, 'It is obviously problematic that the police themselves can provide an objective redress for police misconduct when they are both employer, prosecutor and judge of those with questionable conduct'.<sup>46</sup> Echoing similar sentiments, during a

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parliamentary debate, Palapye MP, Onneetse Ramogapi also noted that it was unfair for police officers to be 'their own judges' on matters that affect them.<sup>47</sup> Apart from the mistrust over the Internal Affairs Branch to handle incidents of police misconduct, concerns have also been raised over their capacity to complete investigations. For example, from a total of 105 cases against police misconduct received by the Botswana Police Service Internal Affairs Branch between 2019 and 2023, only 52 of these cases had been finalised by April 2023.<sup>48</sup> This development also highlights the limited capacity of the Internal Affairs Branch to handle cases of police misconduct. It is this mistrust of the internal mechanisms to deal with police misconduct and the limited capacity that calls have been made for the establishment of an Independent Police Complaints Commission body as early as 2010. An effective police oversight system must adopt multiple points of control. Moreover, a credible system of oversight must be sufficiently independent from the police and free from actual or possible interference. While it can be argued that internal disciplinary measures are inevitable for minor incidents of misconduct, there is a need for a healthy combination of internal and external police oversight mechanism, with all the internal processes having to be reviewed by an external board. The concerns over the Internal Affairs Branch's effectiveness resonate with arguments by previous researchers that police officers cannot objectively investigate their own.<sup>49</sup> With the continued absence of an independent complaints system, those citizens aggrieved by police excesses in Botswana remain at the mercy of a system in which the police have to police themselves.

#### The Ombudsman

Apart from the internal mechanisms and other legal safeguards available in Botswana, the Ombudsman Office is perhaps one of the ways through which victims of police excesses can direct their complaints for redress. The Office of the Ombudsman was established in 1995 through the promulgation of the Ombudsman Act. Section 3 (a) of the Ombudsman Act provides for 'any member of the public who feels aggrieved through maladministration to make a complaint directly to the Ombudsman'. At its inception and up until 2022, the Ombudsman Office did not have a human rights mandate and the focus was mainly on maladministration. In 2014, the proposal to amend the Ombudsman Act to incorporate the human rights mandate was mooted,<sup>50</sup> leading to the subsequent amendment of the Act. Interesting though, the then Ombudsman was strongly against the addition of the human rights mandate for the Office, the argument being that it overburdened the Office.<sup>51</sup> The argument by the then Ombudsman was justified, given that other Southern African nations have independent institutions such as Human Rights Commissions, which are dedicated to handle human rights related violations by public servants such as the police.

Notwithstanding the human rights mandate of the Ombudsman Office, it is imperative to note Botswana's Ombudsman is not a Police Ombudsman. Unlike an Ombudsman with a broad mandate as is the case in Botswana, a Police Ombudsman specifically handles complaints against the police that relate to wrongful arrests and detention, unlawful search, indiscriminate use of force and other human rights violations by the police. As noted by previous researchers,<sup>52</sup> developed countries such as Ireland and Northern Ireland, have the Office of Garda Siochana and Police Ombudsman as independent bodies that specifically handle police officers' misconduct. In these nations, the Ombudsman office has the primary mandate of representing and protecting the interests of the public in relation to police policies, conduct and operations. Given that the Botswana Ombudsman Office has a broad

mandate, they may not be in the best position to handle intricate issues pertaining to police misconduct – a position which was shared by the then Botswana Ombudsman in 2018 when he advocated for a stand-alone Commission or Institution.<sup>53</sup>

Compounding the challenges faced by the Ombudsman Office to hold the police to account is the presence of Section 4 (b) of the Ombudsman Act, which proscribes the investigation of security agents if the misconduct arises from action 'taken with the objective of protecting security or investigating crime', as well as Section 4 (e), which precludes the Ombudsman from investigating 'action taken with respect to orders of directions to the Botswana Police Force or the Botswana Defence Force or member thereof'. Such provisions seem to negate the whole purpose of having the Ombudsman Office as an effective independent oversight mechanism to prevent police abuse of power. Moreover, the incorporation of the human rights mandate to the Ombudsman Office is rendered inapplicable when it comes to human rights violations by the security arms of the government such as the Police.

#### The independent police complaints body – the missing link

Despite being the bastion of democracy within the Southern African region, police accountability in the Republic of Botswana has not evolved to match the democratic standards. In an effort to move with international trends, the Botswana Police Force changed its nomenclature to Botswana Police Service in the late 1990s. This change was necessitated by the need to have an accountable police service with a positive public image. While this was a positive move, the change was not accompanied by reforms to the police complaints system or police oversight. Although the creation of the Internal Affairs Unit was a positive step, longstanding research has shown that the police cannot objectively investigate their own.<sup>54</sup> While the Internal Affairs Unit should be allowed to handle minor incidents of police misconduct through internal disciplinary processes, there is need for another independent oversight body to review the operations of the Internal Affairs Unit.

As clearly revealed in the preceding section, the Botswana Ombudsman Office is not capacitated to handle incidents of police misconduct. This then calls for the establishment of an Independent Police Complaints Commission, with a two-pronged mandate as follows: (a) to receive all complaints against members of the Botswana Police Service and (b) to review all investigations by the Internal Affairs Unit. Thus, the independent body should adopt both the civilian review model by reviewing all internal investigations by the Botswana Police Service, and the civilian control model through instituting independent investigations for police misconduct. In reviewing the investigations by the Botswana Police Service's Internal Affairs Branch, the Independent Police Complaints Commission should arrive at any on the three positions, namely: to certify that the investigations were done properly; to order a reinvestigation where investigations were not properly conducted; and to offer advice on how to prevent similar incidents of police misconduct in future. On the political front, the idea to set up an Independent Police Complaints Commission was mooted as far back as 2011, with the tabling of the motion in the Parliament.<sup>55</sup> However, the idea is yet to materialise, more than a decade later. Within the Southern African region, the establishment of the independent body can be benchmarked with South Africa's IPID. To this end, the starting point should be to enact an enabling statute similar to South Africa's IPID Act, which can be termed 'The Independent Police Complaints Commission Act'.

Most importantly, the independent board must attach liability to responsible officers and provide restorative measures to the victims/complainants. It must be equipped with requisite

authority to investigate, punish, monitor, reform policies and programs, deal with training and personnel issues that might bear on accountability, be open and accessible to the public, and most importantly, be sufficiently civilian. The independent body must also have safeguards against police capture and should also be accorded the necessary powers and authority to enforce cooperation from the police during investigations. To this end, the independent body should be given powers such as the powers to arrest, search, summon implicated police officers, and subpoena witnesses. While the Independent Police Complaints Commission will have oversight role over the Botswana Police Service, the Parliament should also play the oversight role over the Commission – a scenario which also obtains in South Africa and Kenya.

Notwithstanding the imperative for an Independent Police Complaints Body, there is need to consider the key stakeholder in the policing discourse – the public. The Botswana Police Service needs to make sustained efforts in improving the police public relations. This can be achieved through increased police visibility, conducting crime awareness campaigns in communities and schools, and opening up lines of communication through social media platforms and suggestion boxes. This will help in building the police image and creating public confidence in the police. Moreover, the public also needs to be educated about the role of the Independent Police Complaints Commission, as well as the complaints procedure. This will help in creating public confidence in the whole police misconduct investigations process. Apart from the central role played by the public, there will be need for strong political will from both the government and the legislature. The Independent Police Complaints Commission plays a pivotal role in the entrenchment of democracy, hence should be adequately resourced with the necessary human and material resources.

## Conclusion

Despite being one of the African countries with a positive human rights record, this paper reveals that the Republic of Botswana falls short on holding the Botswana Police Service to account. The rise in the incidents of police excesses during police execution of powers and functions calls for strong police oversight mechanisms in the nation of Botswana. The nation mainly relies on the Internal Affairs Unit to investigate police officers' misconduct and the argument that police cannot objectively investigate themselves subsists. It can be argued that internal mechanisms to handle misconduct do not amount to oversight. While hope for holding the Botswana Police to account could have been found with the establishment of the Ombudsman Office, the broad mandate, as well as exclusionary provisions within the Ombudsman Act, limit the efficacy of the Office in dealing with police misconduct. Ultimately, the creation of an Independent Police Complaints Commission is the best way forward. This should be anchored on sound political will, with the legislature playing the initial role of passing the enabling statute – The Independent Police Complaints Commission Act. The independent body should receive complaints against the police, as well as reviewing the investigations by the Internal Affairs Unit.

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## **Disclosure statement**

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