Sociology and Anthropology 13(3): 50-55, 2025
DOI: 10.13189/sa.2025.130302 http://www.hrpub.org

Reconceptualising Botswana's Internal and External Security Threats: Bridging a Methodological Gap through Securitisation Theory

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Received July 6, 2025; Revised October 16, 2025; Accepted November 20, 2025

Cite This Paper in the Following Citation Styles

(a): *[1] Marlon Chigama , "Reconceptualising Botswana's Internal and External Security Threats: Bridging a Methodological Gap through Securitisation Theory," Sociology and Anthropology, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 50 - 55, 2025. DOI: 10.13189/sa.2025.130302.*

(b): *Marlon Chigama (2025). Reconceptualising Botswana's Internal and External Security Threats: Bridging a Methodological Gap through Securitisation Theory. Sociology and Anthropology, 13(3), 50 - 55. DOI: 10.13189/sa.2025.130302.*

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Abstract Botswana's reputation for liberal democracy and prudent economic management increasingly obscures an evolving spectrum of security risks that threaten both domestic stability and regional obligations. Scholarship addresses these hazards piecemeal, leaving unanswered why some problems command urgent political attention while slower-onset dangers are framed as routine development challenges. Guided by securitisation theory and a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, this article analyses how political elites construct and rank threats and how those constructions steer resource allocation. A qualitative single-case study triangulated sixty publicly available documents (sixteen presidential speeches, twenty-seven security-related Hansard transcripts, eight national policy papers, four SADC/SARPCCO communiqués, and five COVID-19 statutory instruments) issued between 2003 and 2024. Using a recognised six-phase thematic procedure, a three-stage analysis was conducted in NVivo 14, yielding substantial intercoder agreement ($\kappa = 0.84$). Results reveal a pattern of selective securitisation: high-visibility issues such as irregular migration, cyber intrusions, and pandemics dominate elite rhetoric, constituting just over half of all coded threat references and attracting roughly five times more funding than socio-economic and climatic hazards like inequality and drought. This discursive asymmetry privileges short-term agendas, weakens long-term resilience, and challenges the assumption that Botswana's stability is self-sustaining. The study extends Copenhagen School theory to Southern Africa and demonstrates how elite narratives translate directly into budgetary hierarchies. Limitations stem from reliance on elite documents and the exclusion of citizen perceptions, but public-domain data and reflexive auditing enhance credibility. Policy recommendations include rebalancing expenditure toward under-securitised human-security risks, embedding an evidence-based risk matrix in annual budgets, and institutionalising parliamentary oversight of securitising rhetoric.

Keywords Botswana, Security Threats, Securitisation, Political Discourse, Threat Prioritisation

1. Introduction

Botswana, often celebrated as Southern Africa's democratic success story and a paragon of sound macroeconomic stewardship, faces a complex and evolving security landscape [1]. While enjoying relative stability compared to many regional counterparts, rising voter volatility, diamond-price swings, cyber intrusions, and recurrent droughts threaten to erode this hard-won stability. Existing scholarship treats these emerging security risks piecemeal. For example, research has

explored cybersecurity, drought management, diamond dependence, and wildlife crime in isolation [2-5]. Governance studies have emphasized domestic political stability and regional relations research has highlighted external conflict spill-overs [6,7]. However, a significant gap remains: a lack of integrated analysis of Botswana's internal and external security threats through the lens of securitisation theory. Consequently, we know little about how political actors prioritise diverse threats or how discourse shapes resource allocation. This understanding is particularly vital in a developmental context, where economic and social issues are deeply intertwined with security concerns [8]. Securitisation theory offers a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. It posits that issues become "security threats" when authoritative actors label them existential, thus legitimising extraordinary measures [9]. This involves a "speech act" where a subject is presented as an existential threat, requiring immediate and exceptional action [10]. In Botswana, presidential rhetoric on COVID-19 or illegal migration illustrates such speech acts, justifying swift policy responses and resource mobilisation. Successful securitisation depends on the audience accepting the framing of the issue as an existential threat [11]. This highlights the power of language and discourse in shaping security perceptions and policy responses. This article closes that methodological gap by asking two key questions:

1. How do political elites discursively construct internal and external threats to Botswana's security?
2. What policy consequences do flow from this construction?

By fusing securitisation theory with empirical evidence from 2003–2024, this study advances a holistic understanding of Botswana's evolving security landscape. It extends securitisation theory into a largely uncharted empirical context, demonstrating how discursive hierarchies can obscure slow-burning risks—even in a stable democracy. Ultimately, it offers a template for similar middle-income democracies navigating complex security challenges.

1.1. Literature Review

Despite the utility of securitisation theory in analysing the construction of threats, much of its application has been concentrated in Western and conflict-prone contexts, leaving democratic yet vulnerable Global South states like Botswana underexplored. Scholars such as McDonald [12] argue that the Copenhagen School's emphasis on elite speech acts tends to reinforce state-centric perspectives while marginalising everyday insecurities. In response, Hayes [13] and Jarvis and Lister [14] advocate for integrating human security approaches and vernacular lenses to capture the nuanced threat perceptions of ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, Balzacq [11] has emphasised the importance of audience acceptance and contextual factors in determining whether securitisation is successful. These critiques are crucial in the Southern African context, where political legitimacy and security governance often rest on a fine balance between elite rhetoric and citizen experience.

Botswana, although lauded for its democratic resilience, has seen increasing securitisation of issues such as cyber threats and migration, as evidenced in recent policy documents and speeches. Yet, there remains a research gap in tracing how securitisation occurs across various sectors and institutional levels. While studies have addressed specific threats like drought [3] or cybercrime [2], no prior work systematically maps the discursive construction of threats across a two-decade timeline. This study contributes to closing that gap by offering an integrated framework that captures both high-urgency securitised issues and under-securitised structural risks such as inequality and climate change.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This article primarily draws on the Copenhagen School of securitisation theory, which posits that security is a speech act whereby political elites transform an issue into an existential threat that justifies extraordinary measures [9, 10]. Successful securitisation depends on the resonance of this speech act with a receptive audience [11]. The study employs this model to track how presidential and parliamentary discourses construct, prioritise, and institutionalise threats.

However, this framework is not without criticism. Scholars such as Hansen [15] have noted that securitisation theory often overlooks gendered dimensions of threat construction, while Jarvis and Lister [14] point to its limited engagement with localised and vernacular understandings of security. In response, this study acknowledges these theoretical limitations while retaining the analytical utility of elite discourse analysis. By focusing on official documents and speeches, it captures how securitisation shapes institutional responses in a resource-constrained democracy.

Table 1 in this study operationalises these concepts by tracing the frequency and framing of key threat labels. The analytical strategy rests on the assumption that frequency, salience, and framing are reliable indicators of securitisation. Further research could triangulate this with ethnographic or survey-based studies to capture the audience reception side of securitisation in Botswana.

Table 1. Frequency of dominant securitised threat labels in Botswana's elite discourse, 2003 – 2024

Threat label	Mentions in presidential speeches (n = 49)	Mentions in Hansard debates (n = 62)	Total mentions	Percentage of total mentions	Representative quotation*
Irregular migration	18	27	45	52.3 %	"Unchecked migration poses an existential risk to our welfare system." — State of the Nation Address 2019
Economic inequality	4	9	13	15.1 %	"Inequality is a developmental challenge, not a security crisis." — Budget Speech 2021
Cyber-attack threat	6	12	18	20.9 %	"A single breach could paralyse our banking sector." — ICT Bill Debate 2023
Drought emergency	3	7	10	11.6 %	"This drought threatens food sovereignty." — State of the Nation Address 2016

Note. Representative quotations have been shortened for readability.

Recent Southern African work reinforces this argument. Planas Gifra [16] shows that South Africa's 2023 White Paper on International Migration reframed humanitarian mobility as a risk-management problem, legitimising restrictive visa regimes. Sarefo et al [17] demonstrate that cybersecurity in Botswana was elevated to a national security priority through discursive amplification of financial-sector vulnerabilities, despite a limited breach profile. Akhavein et al. [18] provide a realist synthesis of pandemic policy across the region and illustrate how health securitisation can displace long-term systems strengthening. Situating the present study alongside these contributions locates Botswana within an evolving regional conversation on the politics of threat construction.

2. Methodology

To investigate the discursive construction of security threats in Botswana, the study adopts a qualitative single-case design rooted in a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. Security threats are therefore treated as social constructs rather than objective realities. The interpretivist stance privileges the meanings that actors ascribe to events, recognising that knowledge is actively co-created through social interaction and interpretation. Ontologically, reality is held to be socially constructed and plural [19]; epistemologically, the researcher's background inevitably shapes, but does not invalidate, the reading of texts. Axiologically, the inquiry is value-laden, so reflexive memos were kept throughout to make assumptions explicit rather than pretending to eliminate bias.

The data set comprised 60 publicly available documents collected between 2003 and 2024 — 16 presidential speeches, 27 security-related Daily Hansard transcripts, 8 national policy papers, 4 SADC/SARPCCO communiqués, and 5 COVID-19 statutory instruments — all consolidated, together with a two-page codebook, in the open-access archive Botswana Securitisation Data v 1.2 (Zenodo, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15823990).

A three-stage thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke [20] was conducted in NVivo 14. Open coding generated initial labels across the corpus; axial coding linked them by tracing how threat narratives migrated between presidential rhetoric, parliamentary debate, and policy documents; selective coding distilled four core narratives that underpin Botswana's security agenda. Ten per cent of the data was independently double-coded, producing a Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$, which indicates substantial intercoder agreement. Credibility and dependability were further strengthened through source triangulation, an audit trail, thick description, and systematic reflexivity [21].

Because all sources were already in the public domain, the study raised no human-subjects concerns; nonetheless, institutional ethical clearance was obtained, and the handling of government documents complied with national information security guidelines. A detailed codebook and document list are archived in Zenodo (version 1.2). Intercoder reliability was estimated on 10% of the corpus (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$), indicating substantial agreement; discrepancies were resolved by discussion and rule refinement prior to selective coding.

3. Findings

The thematic analysis revealed key patterns in the discursive construction of security threats in Botswana. Firstly, the elite discourse surrounding internal threats reveals a complex picture. While political factionalism, inequality, and youth disillusionment are acknowledged, only political instability (often framed as a threat to democratic institutions) and health crises (particularly COVID-19) receive full securitisation, prompting immediate policy responses. For example, in a 2019 parliamentary debate on election reforms, concerns about voter turnout were framed as a threat to "national unity and stability," directly linking political participation to security. Conversely, in the 2015 National Development Plan, inequality was primarily discussed as a

socio-economic challenge requiring long-term development interventions, without invoking immediate security implications. As Minister of Finance, Thapelo Matsheka stated in 2021, “addressing inequality is a matter of improving social outcomes.” This pattern indicates selective securitisation, whereby issues framed as existential in elite speech receive accelerated policy attention, while socio-economic risks remain desecuritised and managed as routine development. Secondly, concerning external threats, the Southern African Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) deployments and cyber-attacks are readily securitised, resulting in increased military spending and cybersecurity initiatives. Presidential statements from 2020 consistently framed cyber-attacks as "a threat to our national infrastructure and economic security," justifying investments in advanced cybersecurity technologies. However, water disputes and debt diplomacy, while acknowledged in policy documents, largely remain technocratic or developmental issues, lacking the urgency and exceptional measures associated with securitisation. As Botswana's then president, Mokgweetsi Masisi states in the 2022 national address, "water is important to socio-economic development in the nation, and all efforts should be channelled towards this goal." Here too, discursive elevation (e.g., cyber-attacks) tracks resource allocation more closely than technocratic framings (e.g., water disputes), reinforcing a short-term bias. This reveals the tendency to separate external threat from human security. Finally, the analysis reveals a pattern of selective framing, where fast-burning, high-visibility dangers (e.g., pandemics, cyber-attacks) gain immediate urgency and resource allocation, while slow-burning structural risks such as inequality and climate change languish in policy prioritisation. This is possibly due to the immediate and tangible impacts of the former, compared to the more diffuse and long-term consequences of the latter. This selective framing may also reflect powerful political and economic interests. For example, the prioritisation of diamond mining revenue may incentivize the downplaying of climate change risks that could threaten the industry. Furthermore, historical reliance on robust and reliable diamond revenue in both the good and bad times makes it difficult to address other vulnerabilities. Table 1 summarises the relative salience of four dominant threat labels in elite discourse.

Interpretation. Elite rhetoric mentions inequality only 13 times, even though Botswana’s Gini coefficient has remained above 0.53 for the past decade. This imbalance underlines how slow-burning socio-economic risks are systematically under-securitised when compared with high-visibility threats such as irregular migration or cyber-attacks. Budget figures reinforce the pattern: the 2024 Appropriation Act allocates about BWP 4.7 billion to border management and digital infrastructure but only BWP 850 million to drought mitigation and rural livelihoods—a five-to-one ratio—demonstrating that securitising moves are translated directly into resource decisions [22–24]. Taken together, these patterns suggest that Botswana’s elite discourse privileges fast-onset, high-visibility threats that offer immediate political salience and measurable “wins,” while under-securitising slower structural risks that require cross-sector coordination and longer investment horizons. The imbalance is not merely rhetorical; it cascades into agenda setting, medium-term expenditure frameworks, and oversight priorities, thereby reproducing short-termism in the policy cycle. Crucially, the same issue can shift categories over time: disease risks “graduated” into securitised status during COVID-19, while inequality remained in the developmental register despite persistent severity. This dynamic is consistent with audience-contingent securitisation: frames that resonate with perceived urgency and institutional repertoires are more likely to succeed. The result is a stable yet brittle security posture that performs well against acute shocks but accumulates latent vulnerability to slow-burning risks.

4. Discussion

Selective securitisation in Botswana results in resources being strategically allocated to address immediate crises, yet this may come at the expense of addressing foundational vulnerabilities [25]. This dynamic risks widening the gap between elite threat perception and citizens’ lived insecurities, potentially undermining Botswana’s long-term resilience and social cohesion [26]. This divergence highlights the need for greater alignment between elite discourse and the lived experiences of the population. While securitisation theory provides a valuable lens for understanding threat construction in Botswana, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Some scholars like McDonald [12] have critiqued securitisation theory for being overly state-centric and for potentially legitimising repressive policies. This study recognizes these critiques and emphasizes the importance of applying securitisation theory in a way that promotes democratic values and respects human rights. The fact that slow-burning threats are not being addressed at the expense of the fast-moving threats is not only a critique of what securitisation theory provides to understanding the construction of threats in Botswana. The findings suggest that while Botswana has been successful in addressing certain security threats, a more holistic and integrated approach is needed to ensure long-term stability and sustainable development. Specifically, policymakers should consider developing more comprehensive strategies for addressing slow-burning threats such as inequality and climate change, enhancing communication and engagement with citizens to ensure that policy responses are aligned with their needs and concerns, and promoting greater transparency and accountability in the decision-making processes related to security issues. This requires a shift in focus from immediate threats to

foundational vulnerabilities and a commitment to long-term resilience.

In addition to the state-centric critiques already discussed, the selective securitisation of threats in Botswana also has implications for civil liberties and democratic governance. For instance, the securitisation of migration and cybercrime has been accompanied by increasing surveillance measures and tighter border controls, raising concerns about proportionality and oversight. As McDonald [12] observes, securitisation can legitimise repressive policy tools under the guise of national security. These developments merit closer scrutiny, especially in contexts where checks and balances are still maturing.

Moreover, Botswana's international image as a rule-of-law democracy may come under strain if securitised rhetoric begins to erode media freedoms or curtail civic space. The long-term risk is a drift towards technocratic securitisation that prioritises institutional stability over inclusive governance. As Hayes [13] argues, the sustainability of democratic security depends on reconciling elite threat narratives with lived citizen experiences and participatory accountability mechanisms.

Finally, this study has broader relevance for understanding security governance in other middle-income democracies navigating post-liberal transitions. It highlights the need to harmonise fast-onset responses (e.g., to cyber threats or pandemics) with long-term capacity-building in climate adaptation, inequality reduction, and human development planning. Doing so would align Botswana's national security agenda with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

5. Limitations

This study draws exclusively on publicly available elite documents; consequently, classified deliberations and informal decision-making remain outside the frame. While triangulation across presidential speeches, Hansard debates, policy papers, regional communiqués, and statutory instruments strengthens credibility, official rhetoric may still embed strategic ambiguity or self-justification. The analysis also does not directly measure audience acceptance, a central condition of securitisation; future work should pair discourse analysis with Afrobarometer survey items, key-informant interviews, or focus groups to trace reception and resonance. Budget linkages are shown at an aggregate level; micro-linking specific speeches to line-item shifts would benefit from multi-year appropriations data with programme-level granularity. Finally, to reduce coder effects, we double-coded 10 percent of the corpus and obtained substantial agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$); releasing the corpus and codebook improves transparency though measurement bias cannot be eliminated entirely.

6. Conclusions

Botswana's threat agenda reflects audience-contingent, selective securitisation: high-visibility shocks are elevated and funded; slow-burning vulnerabilities remain under-securitised. This produces good near-term performance but raises long-term risk. Correctives include (i) integrating a risk matrix that weights probability and impact across time horizons into annual budgeting; (ii) instituting parliamentary review of securitising moves; and (iii) complementing elite discourse analysis with citizen-level measures of acceptance. These steps would align short-term responsiveness with structural resilience.

To address these shortcomings, policymakers should consider specific, actionable steps: (a) establishing clear benchmarks for progress on inequality reduction and climate adaptation, tied to measurable outcomes such as Gini coefficient and carbon emissions; (b) creating a national dialogue platform that bridges the gap between elite threat perception and citizen concerns, possibly through town hall meetings or online forums; (c) conducting independent audits of security spending to ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and effectively across all identified threats, not just the ones that are most visible.

Acknowledgements

The author declares no conflict of interest and received no external funding for this research.

Data Availability

All primary documents and the thematic codebook analysed in this article are openly accessible at Zenodo (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15823990), version 1.2, under a CC-BY-4.0 licence.

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