

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Political culture as a source of political instability: The case of Lesotho

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Accepted 12 April, 2013

This article considers Lesotho's political history and culture, a political history characterised by rebellious chiefs who had rejected Christianity and who were heavily armed and fought numerous wars against their black and white neighbours. Its argument is that the state's dysfunctionality in small Lesotho is a result of a political culture and history of armed resistance, producing rebellious political elites who feuded between themselves, against the colonial establishment and against the postcolonial government. It was also a political culture that rejected Christianity, accepted old leaders to die in office and encouraged factionalism. The political parties that emerged from such a political culture were traditionally oriented, radical, dominated by old leaders and were factionalised. Such a society was not easily open to renewal through fresh leaders and borrowed ideas. The article suggests that Lesotho need to come to terms with its political history and to come up with a cultural re-orientation away from traditionalism, rebellion and factionalism.

**Key words:** Lesotho, Christianity, cultural re-orientation, traditionalism.

## INTRODUCTION

Lesotho has experienced state dysfunctionality that is uncommon with big states. A new book on Big African States claims that Africa has not developed primarily because her big states, in terms of population and landmass (Angola, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa), are dysfunctional and lack developmental focus. In all six countries selected in this study, the state exhibits varying conditions of dysfunctionality (defined as 'the lack of provision of welfare and opportunity to the population), and excluding to some degree South Africa, a sustained period of civil unrest, economic decline, state atrophy and social corrosion. These large states are diverse, incorporating large numbers of ethnic groupings within their territory, which, coupled with religious tensions, may act as fault lines for social and geographic fission' (Herbest and Mills, 2006: 1).

Surprisingly, Lesotho has suffered political instability and state dysfunctionality despite the fact that it is very small. However, while the state dysfunctionality of big states are characterised by diverse ethnic differences and religious tension, Lesotho's was tied to a turbulent political history in which brothers, sons and cousins of successive paramount chiefs, were appointed to senior

positions in the traditional state, disrespected the paramount chief, led rebellions and fought numerous wars with neighbouring black and white states.

According to the editors of Big African States, the notion that bigness defines state viability is a West European notion which has failed Africa. '...it is surprising that there has not, in general, been a focus on country size when discussing Africa's problems. Size and the particular dysfunctionality of the large states, should be the context in every discussion concerning Africa' (Herbst and Mills, 2006). In contrast, Lesotho defies the implied logic that smallness, ethnic homogeneity and the absence of religious tension, define state viability in Africa. The fault lines do not lie with the ethnic diversity of the population as Lesotho has a homogeneous population. Lesotho has an ethnically and linguistically homogenous population with over 99.5% of the population belonging to the Sotho ethnic group' (EISA, 2007: 1). Neither does the fault line lie with an un-manageable size. Lesotho is a small country in terms of size (30, 355 sq km) and in terms of population (2.2 million people). So that size does not seem to matter in the analysis of state dysfunctionality in Africa.

One of the other contributors of Big African States, after

examining Ethiopia, adds that the central problems of Ethiopian state dysfunctionality lie, not so much with its size or ethnic diversity, as with its intolerant political culture (Clapham, 2006: 20). This is the line of inquiry I intend to pursue on Lesotho in this paper. Lesotho's fault lines would seem to lie with tensions between three groups: (i) traditionally oriented political elites grouped under *Lekhotla La Bafo* and its successor Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) that rejected western traditions, (ii) traditional elites under the chiefs and later under kings with strong traditions of rebellions and (iii) Mission-educated modernisers who never acquired legitimacy and often ruled through illegitimate means. This article considers Lesotho's rebellious political culture and a history of armed conflict, to be the primary elements promoting political instability, frequent government collapse and political violence in Lesotho.

## **BASOTHO'S TRADITIONALISM**

Basutoland was founded in the 1820s by Moshoeshoe of the Bamonaheng people. Scattered groups such as the Phuting, Tlokoa, Bamonaheng, Phaleng and Pedi, entered into a federation (Martin, 1093; Smith, 1939; Eldridge, 1993). Moshoeshoe rose to dominate the federation, not by defeating the others, but by occupying a strategic mountain that provided superior defences and whose surroundings consisted of fertile soils and rich water resources. The Sotho federation was joined by Nguni refugees fleeing from Zulu expansionism in the east. Clientelism and marriage were used to absorb the new comers (Eldridge, 1993).

Thus, the Sotho nation was a federation of different ethnic groups and a collection of refugee groups. Other languages also spoken in the kingdom included: Setswana, IsiZulu and IsiXhosa. The federation character of the state partly explains why Paramount Chief Moshoeshoe I could not impose discipline on any of his independent chiefs, preferring to call a *pitso* (public gathering attended by all the chiefs and their supporters at national level) for consultation purposes. As an institution, the *pitso* was designed for national debate and consultation (where oratory skills were prominent) and not for imposing discipline on wayward chiefs and their armed followers.

Basotho encountered French missionaries and Christianity in the early 1830s, but did not allow these to tone down their traditions, lifestyle, beliefs and social order (Eldredge, 1993; Martin, 1903). Practically, Sotho traditional political elites regarded missionaries as necessary evils to be used for foreign diplomacy (Eldredge, 1993) and for rain making (Smith, 1939). Paramount Chief Moshoeshoe I kept his 33 wives (in clear contradiction with Christianity). In addition, 'Lerotholi (third paramount chief) is, of course a polygamist, but then almost, if not all, the chiefs are the proud possessors of more than

one wife...' (Martin, 1903: 5). Thus, Sotho traditionalist state elites remained polygamists, fathering children many of whom became principal chiefs and lesser chiefs.

Those who succeeded as paramount chiefs (Letsie I and Lerotholi) did not even attend mission schools and could not read nor write. It is reported that paramount Chief Letsie wished to become a Christian at his death bed, but died before he was baptised (Martin, 1903). In addition, 'As a boy, Lerotholi was not allowed to share the educational advantages of his brothers, and was for a time kept in the mountains, in charge of his father's cattle; subsequently he can neither read nor write, but has considerable natural ability and is quick to penetrate the right and wrong of the case brought before him for judgement' (Martin, 1903: 4). Kept in the mountains distanced him from missionaries and their modernisation teachings.

It is evident that Moshoeshoe's other sons who attended mission schools had rejected Christianity too. In a speech given by Moshoeshoe at the funeral of a French missionary in June 1854, he observed: You say that my ancestors Pete and Monaheng are your gods, and perhaps after my death you will say Moshoeshoe is your god. Ah! Why do you not acknowledge the Lord of gods? Do you know that a single seed of a tree can produce a multitude of trees? It is in this way that whites and blacks proceed from one God. That God, oh Molapo, oh Masupha, my sons I was hoping by your means our people would come to know. But you have abandoned Him and you have left me alone, me that know not yet the truth... (Smith, 1939: 61).

Thus, Moshoeshoe's sons who had attended mission schools also rejected Christianity. The practice of preventing future paramount chiefs from having serious contacts with missionaries and allowing their brothers to do so was a weird way of introducing fundamental changes to a society. Such a way of handling missionaries was bound to lead to friction, with the potential to further discredit Christianity in the eyes of the community. Thus, the Basotho traditional state elites remained stuck in traditionalism and this influenced future political developments as will be shown in subsequent sections. This partly means that Christianity, Christian churches and modernisation ideas remained illegitimate, and never fitted into the Sotho structure and political culture.

Generally, Basotho rejected the missions and Christianity that later became associated with 'social outcasts who were attracted to the mission stations, where they received Christian charity and western clothing' (Eldredge, 1993: 94). In 1864, Moshoeshoe's son, 'Chief Molapo prohibited the wearing of European clothing as a symbolic rejection of the hypocrisy of western "civilisation" as experienced by the Basotho in the midst of a desperate struggle against "Christians" across their border. A missionary wife in the 1860s complained that after she dressed a young girl servant in European clothing, the mother refused to allow the girl to continue

working for her, for fear that the girl would become a Christian (Eldredge, 1993: 95). Thus, it is clear that Sotho traditional leaders influenced their followers against Christianity and western values.

Moreover, there were only 151 baptised members of the Paris Evangelical Mission (PEMS) church in Lesotho in 1843, too few to have any significant influence on the political culture of the Sotho. The total number of adult Christians in the PEMS church, including communicants and catechumens, grew from 393 in 1843 to 13,733 in 1894.

Communicants, or those with church membership, numbered a combined total of 19,577 in the 1904 census for the PEMS, Anglican, African Methodist Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Seventh day Adventist churches, the number of adult Basotho Christians as counted by the missionaries rose from 0.5% of the population in 1843 to a mere 5.6% in 1904. Thus, only a small minority of the ordinary Basotho welcomed Christianity and western values. This means that they were an isolated minority without legitimate claims to state power.

## **BASOTHOS'S GUN CULTURE AND VIOLENT POLITICAL HISTORY**

Paralleling the rejection of Christianity was the welcoming of guns. Basotho chiefs and their followers developed an early gun culture, creating a political culture prone to armed violence, rebellion and factional politics. 'Basotho and other tribesmen were attracted to the diamond mines and railways by the knowledge that they could return home with guns. General Sir A.T. Gunyghame, commander of the troops, estimated that upwards of 400,000 muskets were in the hands of natives' (Smith, 1939: 243). In 1858, the Boers declared war on the Basotho over 'cattle-raiding by certain Basotho chieftains, chiefly Moshoeshoe's brother, Poshudi, who took this revenge for the lands he had lost, and Jan Letele, a chief of the Bamonaheng who claimed higher rank than Moshoeshoe, whom he regarded as a mere upstart. Behind the cattle-stealing, which kept the frontier in a state of incessant turmoil and gave rise to repeated claims and counter-claims, lay the land (Smith, 1939: 92-3). Boer land grabbing, widespread gun ownership and Basutoland state incoherence combined to lead to a troubled frontier.

In 1863, the Orange Free State declared a second war on the Basotho after 'the people of Lesaohana, an unruly nephew and son-in-law of Moshoeshoe who had remained in the Free State (by arrangement, it is said, with the Boers) stole cattle and horses and fired upon a Boer patrol' (Smith, 1939: 142). This war lasted until 1866. Evidently, Moshoeshoe's brothers and sons-in-law who were also principal chiefs exercised independent authority and had no respect for the paramount chief beyond his chairing of the *pitso*. It is also evident that the Sotho federation could not follow a coherent policy of peace as

each senior chief was almost independent from the paramount chief. This confirms the fact that the paramount chief had no control over his brothers and sons-in-law who commanded followings of their own and whose activities invited war for the whole Basotho.

The Boers followed the European political culture of the time and confiscated all captured territory and sold it as farms and Basutoland became smaller and smaller. It was also during that time that, the Griquas and Kora raided the Basotho for cattle, creating a culture of widespread cattle rustling.

But why would the Basotho continue to live in such an unstable and violent region? Why not opt out as other groups had done? Migration out of the area was not an option for the Basotho partly because the principal chiefs and their followers were independently heavily armed, making migration out of the area not an option at all. In addition, paramount Chief, Moshoeshoe I and many of his senior chiefs grew too old, making immigration less viable. Moshoeshoe ruled until he was 84 years old. He was no longer able to direct and control the fortunes of his state. Moshoeshoe's fortunes, were at a very low ebb at this moment. He was now about eighty-five years of age; his vigour was much abated; he was no longer able to control effectively his sons Letsie, Molapo, Masupha, whose jealousy and rivalry threatened to break up the unity of the tribe. He was evidently losing grip upon affairs' (Smith, 1939: 149).

Widespread gun ownership produced a new political culture. 'By the 1870s, gun ownership had become deeply embedded in the newly emerging political culture of the Sotho' (Storey, 2008: 258). One magistrate, Charles Bell from the district of Berea, advised the Cape Government against disarming Basotho, observing that 'a gun in the eyes of a Mosotho, being the most valuable article he possesses, and the possession of which he considers it his duty to retain at any sacrifice' (Storey, 2008: 269). Such a strong gun culture aided resistance against disarmament and encouraged rebellion against the Cape government and against the paramount chief. Storey reminds us that the 'Sotho chiefs had mastered the art of frontier warfare in recent conflicts with the Orange Free State. The chiefs could still summon thousands of skilled veterans to defend their rugged country' (2008: 266). Thus, Sotho traditional elites modernised through widespread gun ownership rather than through education and Christianity. They chose violence over peaceful means of modernisation.

Indeed, Chief Moorosi of the Phuthing in the district of Quthing started a rebellion in 1879. 'Moorosi was a Phuthing Chief under the rule of the paramount Chief. At that time he was an old man, almost completely under the influence of his son Dodo, a crafty, rebellious, and cruel man, who had been imprisoned and heavily fined by Mr Austin, Magistrate of Quthing, but had made his escape' (Martin, 1903: 55). Armed confrontation with the Cape colonial government was fast approaching. In February

1879, just after Zulu defeated the British at Isandlwana, Moorosi forced Austen resident magistrate to flee Quthing district. Moorosi and the Phuthi defenders were now in open revolt. Griffith invaded Moorosi's territory with a force of about a thousand reluctant Sotho together with two hundred Cape militiamen and a contingent of one hundred Cape Mounted Rifles. Shortly after Sprigg's pitso, on November 20, 1879, Cape forces brought their siege of Moorosi's mountain to a bloody conclusion. The Cape Mounted Rifles stormed the mountain and killed Moorosi and his sons.

The chief's head was severed and his body parts were put on display, accounts vary as to the grisly details (Storey, 2008: 274 and 287). Miraculously, Dodo, escaped (Martin, 1903: 56). The history of the Sotho federation with chiefs experienced in armed confrontations ensured that Basotho traditional state elites had a strong militant history to fall back on. Disarmament divided both colonial administrators and Basotho, many of whom (including his own sons) became disloyal to their paramount chief, Letsie I.

In June and July 1880, strife broke out in Basutoland surrounding the linked problems of disarmament and loyalty. Letsie himself urged compliance but his own sons prevented him from turning in his guns. The loyal principal chief Molapo died, while the other principal chief, Masupha, was urging disobedience. Lesser loyal chiefs sought to give up their arms by the new deadline of July 12, while rebel chiefs threatened them with violence if they did. Many powerful chiefs, including Masupha and Letsie's son, Lerotholi, were openly defiant at a public meeting hosted by Letsie on July 3, 1880, in which the delegates to Cape Town discussed their reception. Reports from different parts of Basutoland indicated that many chiefs were keeping their weapons and even building fortifications. Chiefs who were disloyal were "eating up" or removing cattle and belongings from chiefs who were loyal. Loyal chiefs and their followers were fleeing to the residences of Cape magistrates, who had few resources for providing food and shelter. Even the paramount chief, Letsie, was not being obeyed (Storey, 2008: 312).

Rebellion became entrenched in Sotho political culture. Christianity and missionaries who preached peace became more marginalised. The Gun War (1880-81) that resulted, saw praise poems being composed, praising the rebel chiefs. Lerotholi, the symbol of resistance and rebellion, significantly influenced the political culture of traditional Sotho state elites. During the Gun War, Lerotholi led 8000 men, all mounted. Chief Joel led 5000 "braves". In contrast, Chief Jonathan who was loyal to the Cape colonial government could only raise an army of 2000 men, and 'his village was burnt to the ground, and all his flocks and herds carried off, while he and his small following took refuge in Thlotse River, the whole country, from there to Maseru being by this time in the hands of the rebels (Martin, 1903: 61). These wars made both

chiefs and followers to be militant traditionalists, but plunged the country into more hardships. In times of war, both Africans and Europeans fighting in southern Africa often deliberately induced famine by the wholesale destruction of enemy crops and foodstores so as to weaken their resistance.

This scenario recurred in the vicinity of the Sesotho-speaking peoples time and again in the nineteenth century, setting them against both African and European neighbours in a struggle which became increasingly desperate by the middle of the century' (Eldredge, 1993:73). These wars not only radicalised the traditional elites who led them, they also created political traditions that mistrusted neighbouring people, particularly the Dutch and the English and their cultures and beliefs. While the Orange Free State accused the French missions and destroyed them for harbouring the Basotho rebels, the latter destroyed missions of all other denominations.

In 1891, Lerotholi succeeded his father Letsie I. Paramount Chief Lerotholi was assisted by his sons (Letsie II the heir apparent and Griffith, the young favourite son) and by his cousins (Jonathan, Joel and Mama- sons of Molapo), as principal chiefs. We have already seen that the political culture of appointing sons, brothers, cousins and sons-in-law as principal chiefs worked against a coherent state policy, encouraged indiscipline and entrenched factionalism and rebellion in Sotho politics.

## EARLY POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

The early political movements emerged outside the traditional state culture. Christian-led early political movements that called for the democratisation of the British colonial state existed side by side with traditionalist oriented movements that completely rejected the presence of the British colonial government in their territory but there were outside the traditional state structure. The Basutoland Progressive Association (BPA) was founded in 1907 by commoners trained in the PEMS (Weisfelder, 1974). BPA's 'ranks were filled primarily by teachers, evangelists, writers, traders, clerical workers in the colonial civil service and other laymen sharing portions of a common educational experience whatever their degree of doctrinal commitment to the PEMS (Weisfelder, 1974: 398).

BPA was a peaceful organisation that called for parliamentary democracy and opposed the abuse of chiefly powers in the courts, land allocation and other equally crucial roles (Weisfelder, 1974). This was in line with former French missions that advised the paramount chiefs to seek peace, only to be defied by the principal chiefs who favoured violent confrontations. The BPA participated in the official National Council that included chiefs and colonial administrators. The BPA collapsed by the 1950s. We have already noted that the Sotho state

elites had not welcomed Christianity whose followers remained small and illegitimate and whose ideology remained less influential.

In contrast, Lekhotla La Bafo, a more radical association of uneducated commoners with a traditional outlook was more embedded in Sesotho state culture. Lekhotla La Bafo claimed to represent the uneducated and non-Christian rural population, and 'made an effort to speak for the rural peasants instead of educated, (urbanised) Christians and evinced a more strident tone than the BPA by questioning not only specific failings of the colonial regime, but also the very legitimacy of alien rule (Weisfelder, 1974: 400). This was in line with paramount chiefs who in their early lives avoided contact with missionaries and could not read and write. Lekhotla La Bafo saw the BPA as 'suspiciously soft and inevitably condemned some of its leaders as pawns of British colonialism' (Weisfelder, 1994: 400). It favoured chieftainship and the revival of Sesotho traditions and opposed British colonial rule and the Christian missions (Strom, 1986; Weisfelder, 1994). Lekhotla La Bafo regarded mission assaults on indigenous initiation schools as cynical attempts to destroy the fabric of Basotho society, since the missionaries permitted circumcision in other circumstances (Weisfelder, 1974, 403). However, it combined traditionalism with modernising tendencies such as linking up with the South African Communist Party that published its messages and opposed the participation of Basotho in World War II (Weisfelder, 1974: 403). Its leader (Mr Josiel Lefela – a self educated man who did not attend mission schools) and 'his lieutenants spent most of the World War II in custody for urging the Basotho not to serve in a white man's war and for criticising the initial British failure to arm Basotho participants, who had been relegated to menial roles (Weisfelder, 1974: 404). Lekhotla La Bafo held the strong opinion that the British Government had belittled the Basotho by refusing to arm them for purposes of fighting in World War II

Finally, the authorities (the British authorities, the paramount Chief and the National Council) banned its meetings and violently dispersed its gatherings. But Lekhotla La Bafo had displayed the legendary uncompromising character of Basotho political elites, thus making it very popular. It will be remembered that the uncompromising character of the Basotho rebel principal chiefs saw them attracting large followings and starting numerous wars in defiance of paramount chiefs who called for peace. Thus, uncompromising was part of the Sotho traditional and modern political culture. Ntsu Mokhehle who later founded the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) had been a member of Lekhotla La Bafo and shared its radical, uncompromising traditionalising ideology (Strom, 1986; Weisfelder, 1994). Traditionalist chiefs broke away from the BCP in 1957 and formed the Marematlou Party (later called Marematlou Freedom Party). This meant that the traditional oriented BCP lost

an important anchor that unified it with Sotho state traditions. It also meant that the traditional elites became competitors for power.

Modernising the BCP by linking it with communist parties, led to another split. The Communist Party of Lesotho (CPL) that had been formed by Basotho miners in South Africa in 1961 operated within the framework of the BCP (Strom, 1986: 41). Thus, while *Lekhotla La Bafo* cooperated with the Communist Party of South Africa, the BCP cooperated with the Community party of Lesotho. The presence of communists in the BCP provoked a split led by Chief Leabua Jonathan who formed the Basutoland National Party (BNP). It will be remembered that Leabua was the grandson of Jonathan, a mission-educated principal chief who had collaborated with the Cape Government in the Gun War against the Basotho and whose village was burnt down by the rebel chiefs. His BNP had emerged from diverse groups opposed to the BCP, such as "the Sons of Moshoeshoe", the Traders' Organisation, the village chiefs and Catholic teachers (Strom, 1986). Expectedly, the BNP embraced most of the BPA's Christian-leaders who became cabinet ministers after the Jonathan coup d'état of 1970 (Strom, 1986). It was obvious that the BNP could only rule through the force of arms as it originated outside the dominant Sotho state political culture.

In 1960, King Moshoeshoe II was installed, marking a revival of traditionalist forces. Thus, the traditional label of paramount chief was modernised to become king. It was the king that appointed the second commission to draft the constitution which made him a constitutional monarch, sowing the seeds of a complicated rivalry with the political parties as shall be shown below.

## **NATIONALISM THEORIES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER**

Nationalism theorists provide insights into the study of political instability in nation states. As a political activity, nationalism always involves two types of interacting participants, those who defend a given order, and those who challenge it or are viewed as challenging it. Historically, nationalism emerged concomitantly with the appearance of both national state and the nationalist movement, the latter pitting challengers against people who run national states (Beissinger, 1998: 177).

Ironically, in Lesotho, challengers mostly come from among those who run the state rather than from nationalist movements. Lesotho experienced what Beissinger calls a contest between those who run states and those who challenge states. Brubaker calls it 'nationalising nationalism', which involves claims made in the name of a 'core nation' or nationality, defined in ethno-cultural terms and sharply distinguished from the citizenry as a whole. The core nation is understood as the legitimate 'owner' of the state, which is conceived as the state of and for the core nation (Brubaker, 1998: 277).

In the Lesotho case, the core nation is defined in terms of Chief Leabua Jonathan's 1970 coup ended Lesotho's of the traditional elites and their followers and the institution of electoral democracy and ushered in a new era of political development – the senate consisting of the principal chiefs and the kingship occupied by the king. Parties with Thus, it was the modernist BNP that abolished democracy in Lesotho. However, the fact that the ruling BNP uneducated rural masses have a share in that core actually lost in 1970, prompting it to cancel the election. Lesotho's entire political history is marked by partly indicates that it may not have rigged the elections incessant and protracted conflicts. These conflicts, which after all. Once the BNP came to power through a coup, are both overt and covert, have been punctuated by out-violence was legitimised as an instrument of either sub- violence of one form or another, at different points of taining the ownership of the state or of challenging it. The the country's turbulent history' (Matlosa, 1999: 163). The main opposition, the BCP was banned. The Youth Wing political groupings that grabbed state power or exercised of the ruling party was turned into a para-military group. more violence, or controlled large factions, became the The BNP regime in an attempt to consolidate its hold on owners of the state. It should be noted that the first ruling power, bolstered image and stature of the BNP's Youth party, the BNP with a modernist orientation was led by League at the expense of the Lesotho Defence Force Chief Leabua Jonathan. Thus, in Lesotho, chiefs led (LDF) an action which virtually turned the Youth League parties that ended up ruling the country. Moreover, the into a para-military force (Molomo, 1999: 139). The chiefs were concentrated in senate where all the 22 elevation of the BNP Youth League was perceived as principal chiefs were members. But BNP's modernisation threatening the status of the military which engineered a outlook disqualified it from being the legitimate ruler of coup in 1986. Chief Leabua Jonathan was overthrown in the country. a military coup which installed a military government. The It was obvious in 1965 that the losing BCP would rightly second coup deprived both the BNP and the BCP of the or wrongly claim fraud, question the legitimacy of the control and ownership of the state. The coup also BNP government. A systematic suspension of electoral signalled the entry of a fourth competitor, the army, for processes and suspension of the constitution charac- the ownership of the state. Thus, the introduction of terised BNP rule. District councils were abolished in military coups promoted a culture of military activism and 1969, primarily because the ruling BNP controlled only violent politics in Lesotho politics, placing traditionally one, while the BCP controlled nine councils (Shale, oriented parties, traditionalists and modernisers into the 2005). 'The Local Government Repeal Act was passed in

camp of the opposition. 1969 and the district councils were abolished on political Tension was developing between the military govern- grounds as the ruling party deemed them undesirable' ment and the traditional elites represented by the king. (Shale, 2005: 102). All these meant that Lesotho's Late in 1990, the tensions between King Moshoeshoe II independence-parliamentary democracy was dysfunc- and the military leader, Lekhanya, came to a head. The tional and unstable from the beginning, in the sense of King, now representing himself as the champion of bitter rivalries between the ruling and opposition parties, democracy, refused to return home unless the military the abolition of by- elections and of local government government stood down. structures. Lekhanya responded by passing a decree deposing Mutual suspicion between the exclusive parties Moshoeshoe II and installing in his place his eldest son, prevailed until the following election in 1970. The BNP the 27 year old Mohato seeitso who was sworn in as King intended to keep state power at all costs, including Letsie III' (<http://www.iss.co.za/af/profiles/Lesotho/> resorting to unconstitutional means. It suspended the Politics.html). constitution (Shale, 2005), annulled the 1970 elections, However, the military proved to be fractured when there arrested BCP leaders and banned their party (Interview was another military coup in 1991. The BCP was un- with LCD leaders, 16 February, 2007). Many BCP banned at a time when it had acquired a military wing activists, including the current Prime Minister Mosisili, which complicated the picture further. The fact that the were detained (Interview with LCD leaders, 16 February, Lesotho army successfully resisted both the BNP youth 2007). Apartheid South Africa and the Catholic Church in wing and the BCP's military wing from being integrated Lesotho considered the BCP as communist, and both into the army meant that its ownership of the state could colluded with the BNP to deny the party the right to rule. not be acceptable to the other challengers. However, it This was happening in a Lesotho with a long history of was the conflict between the military government and the hatred against the Boers and the Catholic Church. Thus, king that took centre stage. In the middle of the election state ownership was forcefully retained through the campaign, in mid-January 1993, King Letsie III caused a support of such groups as the Catholic Church and racist stir by indicating publicly that he wished to return the neighbours such as apartheid South Africa. Such crown to his father (<http://www.iss.co.za/af/profiles/> interventions further de-legitimised the ruling BNP and Lesotho/Politics.html, p4). In contrast, there was a false one of the largest church groupings in Lesotho, the unity of purpose between the military, BCP and BNP Roman Catholics. opposing the monarchy's involvement in politics. But

chiefs were also involved in politics as they occupied the Senate.

Elections were held in 1993 and the BCP won all the 65 parliamentary seats on offer, fuelling suspicions of rigging and further placing the legitimacy of the state in more doubt, further drawing the traditionalists into politics. In contrast, Senate with 33 members was dominated by the principal chiefs who were appointed by the king. More importantly, the 1993 election partially transferred the ownership of the state to the BCP, with a traditional orientation courted with socialism and an enfeebled leader, Mokhehle. 'At the age of 74, the years had treated him less kindly than they had South Africa's new president.

His health seemed unlikely to allow him more than a brief tenure at the head of government, and denied him the stamina to deal effectively with the challenges the BCP now faced. From the onset, then, the new administration confronted an ill-disguised competition for the succession to the leadership (<http://www.iss.co.za/af/profiles/Lesotho/Politics.html>, p10-11). In addition, the BNP challenged the outcome of the election through the courts but its allegations of electoral fraud could not be sustained (SADC Parliamentary Forum, 2002: 7). In addition, there were military disturbances in January, 1994 in which the commander of the elite Air Wing, Lieutenant-Colonel Patrick Majara, was wounded by troops at the Mokoanyane barracks, just outside Maseru (<http://www.iss.co.za/af/profiles/Lesotho/Politics.html>, p6). Military disturbances allegedly continued until 15 August when 'thousands of BNP supporters demonstrated in Maseru demanding the reinstatement of King Moshoeshoe II. Two days later, King Letsie III made a radio broadcast in which he announced the dismissal of the Prime Minister, the dissolution of Parliament and the suspension of certain articles in the constitution (<http://www.co.za/af/profiles/lesotho/Politics.html>, p8). Thus, the king assumed executive powers. Traditionalists were asserting themselves and claiming ownership of the state.

When SADC intervened and reinstated Prime Minister Mokhehle, King Moshoeshoe II also returned to the throne, thus a win for both the traditionally oriented BCP and the traditionalists, opening wide the contest for the ownership of the state. First, opposition parties took their struggle to the courts and failed and protested on the streets, thus re-igniting the old state culture of violence. Second, the BCP government conflicted with the monarch and the army, making violence more likely. There emerged hostilities and rivalry between the ruling BCP whose leaders made anti-military statements, referring to the army as an enemy of democracy as it supported the king over his 1994 dissolution of the elected BCP government (Mothibe, 1999: 49). Third, there was rivalry between the factions of the ruling BCP over the status of the armed wing of the party, with some alleging neglect. 'King Moshoeshoe II's death in a motor

accident in 1996 brought his son Letsie III back to the throne. Further complicating the scene was that disputes between and within the police and the army continued to flare violently, and the government seemed unable to assert its authority (<http://www.co.za/af/profiles/Lesotho/Politics.html>, p8).

The ruling BCP, split under stress. There was a huge parliamentary split in 1997 and 2002, an expected situation in Lesotho political culture in which the aging prime minister defected and formed the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) which immediately became the ruling party with 38 parliamentarians, displacing the elected BCP that immediately became a bitter and hostile opposition under the leadership of Molapo Qhobela who was once the deputy leader of the BCP and a former minister of foreign affairs. In short, there was a palace coup and state ownership shifted to the LCD overnight and its enfeebled leader.

As the May 1998 election drew closer, the bitterness among the contestants became increasingly pronounced. The animosity and the rivalry were real as the opposition parties planned to either dislodge or destabilize the LCD government through both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary means (SADC Parliamentary Forum, 2003: 7).

Informally and practically, violent street protests replaced elections as the legitimate instrument towards state ownership. This meant that no electoral win would be enough to gain the LCD any legitimacy. Its subsequent win of 79 out of 80 seats, combined with BNP's one parliamentary seat, and BCP's and other opposition parties' no seat, saw Lesotho quickly degenerating into turmoil. On the one hand, the blame was wrongly but emphatically placed squarely on the electoral system (Matlosa, 1999; Molomo, 1999; SADC Parliamentary Forum, 2002: 7). The outcome of these elections manifested themselves as the most cogent example of how unrepresentative the winner-take all situation can be (Molomo, 1999: 138). On the other hand, the opposition parties alleged electoral fraud, charges that were meant to justify the planned violence that followed. SADC investigated through a commission which found instances of broken seals of containers holding ballot books and counterfoils that had been opened without a proper instruction from the high court (Molomo, 1999: 137). SADC ruled that these were limited in nature and not enough to overturn the results. However, SADC failed to anticipate the planned violence that followed. As Brubaker notes, past violence forms the base for future violence.

Ruling parties in Lesotho engineered defections and opposition parties suffered from them. Defectors, and victims of defections, have ruled Lesotho most of the time. Victims of defections ensured that ruling parties were so much hated by the rest of the opposition parties who doubted the legitimacy of the government. In the first instance, opposition parties believed that the defector-BNP had stolen the first election and had cancelled the

second. In the second instance, the 1993-97 BCP government was extremely hated by the rest of the opposition parties that also believed it had stolen the election. Similarly, the 1997 - 2006 defector-LCD government benefited from a major defection. It was hated by the rest of the opposition parties that too believed it had stolen the election.

In short, Lesotho politics tended to reward defectors and made victims of defections to be the main opposition, or the reverse, creating a legitimacy crisis for the state. The persistent questioning of the legitimacy of the government fuels the hatred and rivalry, and prevents Lesotho from moving forward.

The hatred partly comes from the humiliation suffered by previously big parties that were instantly reduced to small entities through defections and breakaways or that had been prevented from ruling through defections and un-constitutional means. It also comes from the fact that those who formed opposition parties were victims of defections or had been expelled or forced to resign from governing parties, and had been compelled to form parties that ultimately remained small and unviable. The question is why are defections and expulsions and resignations occurring so frequently and with such devastating effects?

## **FACTIONALISM AND THE CULTURE OF INTOLERANCE**

As each leader owned his party until death, lack of internal party democracy predominated and unclear succession rules muddled the situation, fuelling defections and the politics of doubtful legitimacy. The BCP split of 1959 that led to the formation of the BNP was explained in terms of conservatives leaving the progressive BCP party with the intention of suppressing it. According to LCD leaders, Chief Leabua Jonathan of the BNP was a chief who had a traditional outlook and considered the BCP as a communist organisation that was not fit to rule. More importantly, the first defection denied the BCP state power in 1965 and led to its banning in 1970, both painful experiences that legitimised the use of violence. The second and third defections from the BCP led to the formation of the LCD in 1997. That party then suffered from a defection in 2002 that led to the formation of the Lesotho Congress Party (LCP), one of the few defectors that failed to rule Lesotho. Officially these defections were explained in terms of 'exiles' and 'stay homes', and in terms of rivalry between the government and the ruling party. The official version for the split is that the previous banning of the BCP had created physical distance and political divisions within the party, between the exiles on the one hand, and the stay-homes, together with those who joined the party later, on the other hand. The official view of LCD leaders is that the exiles and the migrant workers considered only them-selves to be the true and legitimate leaders of the

Congress tradition and sidelined other factions as well as the non-aligned individuals. They tended to dismiss their rival as a clique of power hungry and untrustworthy opportunists without any real understanding of the BCP's constitution and the party's way of doing things (Pule, 1999: 5).

Due to lack of internal conflict resolution mechanisms (Matlosa, 1999) and to the presence of life presidency of the leader, BCP internal matters were put before the courts of law whose ruling insisted on political dialogue which did not exist in the party. For instance, a BCP meeting called to resolve the issues was disrupted by the rival group who objected to the presence of Tom Thabane who was then the prime minister's special advisor. The disrupted meeting was followed by several court cases that failed to resolve the political conflicts within the BCP.

The then ruling BCP had difficulties in trying to accommodate new prominent members and had little capacity to strike compromise between factions. For instance, Tom Thabane who having entered politics through the Lekhanya coup of 1986 which made him minister of foreign affairs in that regime, and later joined the BCP and participated in the faction that formed the LCD, was always sidelined by the exiles who dominated the two former ruling parties (BCP and LCD). His group of stay-homes and retired civil servants wanted to be treated as equal participants in the BCP and LCD governments, with equal rights to be elected to party positions and to be given the voice to influence government decisions. Members of Thabane's faction never got elected into the structures of the BCP and LCD, and their policy proposals were rejected by cabinets of the two parties most of the time (Interview with LCD leaders, 16 February, 2007). In fact, internal rivalry in cabinet, parliament and party later drove Thabane to defect and to form his own, All Basotho Convention (ABC) in 2006. Non-acceptance of new members into leadership positions and their marginalisation in policy issues shows ideological inflexibility and the dominance of the veteran attitude which derails change and adaptation.

Lesotho politics also has an element of personalisation. Lefela (of *Lekhotla La Bafo*) dominated that organisation until he reached an advanced age. Lesotho's founding father, Moshoeshe I (1786 - 1870) ruled until his death at age 84. In January, 1868, Missionary Mabile wrote that 'Moshoeshe is now so aged, his faculties are so enfeebled, that he is no longer able to watch carefully over the interests of his people' (Quoted in Smith, 1939: 153). Sotho leaders held positions for life. This explains why King Letsie III abdicated for his father, Moshoeshe II who had been forced into exile. Lesotho's second elected Prime Minister Dr. Ntsu Mokhehle led his BCP from formation in 1952 until he became prime minister for the first time at the age of 74. Dr. Ntsu Mokhehle was the embodiment of the BCP and later, the LCD. He too was enfeebled at the time of his death. The first Chief Molapo

stayed in his position until he was an enfeebled old man. Thus, it is acceptable in Sotho political culture that a leader stays on until death, a culture that rejects limited terms of office associated with modern democratic politics. All other opposition parties were the embodiments of their founding leaders. So, Lesotho political parties are personal fiefdoms of their founders and not democratic institutions which allow a change of leadership. In one instance after his death, the fact that Ntsu Mokhehle's brother had not been elected into the LCD executive was played into a serious political crisis as it worked against the historical state culture that rewarded sons, brothers and sons-in-law of the leader.

It should be noted that Prime Minister Mosisili was Mokhehle's chosen successor, embraces the notion of a life presidency or an enfeebled leader, and refuses to consider a fixed term in office. However, Mosisili considers himself a neutral liberal whose duty in the last government (2002 - 2007) was to prevent the marginalisation of Tom Thabane's faction which consisted of enlightened technocrats who historically stayed out the traditional state structures. Mosisili did not quite succeed in his mediating, a role that was outside the Sotho traditional state culture.

Can any electoral system defuse political tensions in a Lesotho that is traditionalising? Ironically, Lesotho is one country that has complied with the Principles for Election Management, Monitoring and Observation of elections in Southern Africa (PEMMO). These principles were developed by the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA) and the Electoral Commissioners Forum (ECF), representing all SADC electoral commissions. PEMMO was adopted by all election bodies and civil society organizations in the SADC region and laid down best electoral practices for the region. In compliance with PEMMO, Lesotho has an independent electoral commission that runs elections, a peaceful pre-election atmosphere in which all parties held their star rallies on 11 February 2007 before polling on the 17th, the presence of teams of international observers who declared the election free and fair and an orderly and peaceful voting process. Even though demarcations of boundaries had not been done and the registration process had experienced bottlenecks, all the contesting parties agreed that the 2007 elections should go ahead. Yet, despite all these electoral achievements, Lesotho was still vulnerable to political instability.

The country recently settled for a combination of (FPTP) and compensatory Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) with the hope of defusing conflict within the ruling party and among the opposition parties. The system is such that 80 seats are contested through the FPTP and 40 seats are allocated to the leading losers through the MMP system.

This combined system was used in 2002 and 2007. In the first instance, it saw the BCP winning 79 of the 80 constituency seats (which are vulnerable to defections).

In contrast, the 40 MMP seats were shared as shown in the second column, and excluded the LCD. However, political instability has continued as evidenced by members of the ruling LCD party who defected in 2006 and formed the ABC party, leading to the early election in 2007. Thus, the combined FPTP and MMP have not defused tensions and have not saved the government from collapse. In the first instance, the combined electoral system failed to ensure political stability. It should be noted that the FPTP is vulnerable to defections, and the MMP is not. But MMP's compensatory nature (only reserved for the small opposition parties), primarily helped the opposition parties in 2002, totally leaving the ruling party alone exposed to defections which are allowed in the FPTP system. Defections encourage indiscipline, a core principle of Sotho political culture. The ruling party was determined to build a fortress by gaining from both the FPTP and the MMP to lessen its vulnerability to indiscipline and defections. The main opposition was also determined to gain from both, to make rebellion rewarding. Thus, both went into alliances with smaller parties in preparation of the 2007 election.

Thus, political stability was sought through systematic violation rather than adherence to the MMP portion of the electoral system that was meant to benefit the losing parties. The primary characteristic of the build up to 2007 election was the building of four coalitions in order to defraud the electoral system. The whole idea of coalition politics in Lesotho in 2007 was to defraud rather than to comply with the MMP electoral system. For instance, the ruling LCD forcefully entered into partnership with a reluctant NIP and this has the seeds of future instability as it exposed the LCD government to further questions about its legitimacy.

However, the LCD-NIP partnership allowed the LCD to contest all the constituency seats through the FPTP system and won 61 seats. Concurrently, and defrauding the MMP system, NIP's symbols were used in the party list which also contained an overwhelming number from the LCD which has become a new source of controversy. NIP won 21 MMP seats, most of which were given to LCD members on the joint party list. The whole idea of a LCD-NIP alliance was to render the compensatory MMP system in-operable by preventing it from excluding the winning party as happened in the 2002 election (Table 1) and by awarding the ruling party seats that could not be lost through floor-crossing. The LCD-NIP partnership allowed the ruling LCD to replace those of its MMP MPs who are failing to support the party but who could not defect as this was illegal in accordance with the country's constitution.

In contrast, the Alliance of Congress Parties (ACP) was a partnership between BAC and LPC. In this case, the ACP partners agreed not to field candidates in the same constituencies, and designed a joint list for the MMP election. This opposition coalition established an internal governing council whose primary duty was to consider

**Table 1.** 2002 election results.

Party	Number of PR seats	Number of constituency seats
Basutoland African congress (BAC)	3	0
Basutoland congress party (BCP)	3	0
Basutoland national party (BNP)	21	0
Lesotho congress for democracy (LCD)	0	79
Lesotho people's congress (LPC)	4	1
National independent party (NIP)	5	0
National progressive party (NPP)	1	0
Lesotho workers party (LWP)	1	0
Marematlou freedom party (MFP)	1	0
Popular front for democracy (PFD)	1	0
Total	40	80

Source: Lesotho IEC

**Table 2.** 2007 election results.

Party name	Total party (valid) votes	Constituencies won	MMP seats	Total seats	% (valid) votes
Alliance of congress parties (ACP)	20,263	1	1	2	4.6
Basotho Batho democratic party (BBDP)	8,474	0	1	1	1.9
Basutoland congress party (BCP)	9,823	0	1	1	2.2
Basotho democratic national party (BDNP)	8,783	0	1	1	2.0
Basotho national party (BNP)	29,965	0	3	3	6.8
Lesotho workers party (LWP)	107,463	0	10	10	24.3
Marematlou freedom party (MFP)	9,129	0	1	1	2.1
National independent party (NIP)	229,602	0	21	21	51.8
Popular front for democracy (PFD)	15,477	0	1	1	3.5
All Basotho convention (ABC)	-	17	0	17	0.0
Lesotho congress for democracy (LCD)	-	61	0	61	
Total	442,963	79	40	119	100

Source: Lesotho IEC

and approve candidates, and to resolve coalition-related conflicts. Such an opposition coalition was thought to enable more opposition leaders to enter parliament. However, this has not happened as the ACP alliance won only one MMP seat and one constituency seat. Such a huge loss exposes the alliance to continued rivalry against the ruling LCD and to rivalry within the alliance.

On the other hand, the ABC party entered into a coalition with the Lesotho Workers Party (LWP) allowing the former to contest constituency elections and the latter to contest MMP elections through a shared list. ABC won 17 constituency seats and its partner LWP won 10 MMP seats, a total of 31 seats in parliament. This coalition constitutes the biggest opposition group. But it should be noted that the ABC-LWP partnership was also formed to defraud the MMP system. On the one hand, the FPTP and the MMP have effectively displaced the small parties as shown on Table 2, contrary to the spirit of the electoral law. Most parliamentarians come from the two largest

coalitions, LCD-NIP and ABC-LWP. Parties which did not go into a coalition saw their performance dropping sharply. For instance, BNP (the first ruling party) experienced seats reduction from 21 in the 2002 election to 3 in the 2007 election.

In another case, BCP (the second ruling party) also experienced a decline from three seats in the 2002 election to one in the 2007 election. Even the other coalitions also performed poorly. Such big losses by the two former ruling parties added to the politics of hatred, rivalry and state dysfunctionality. It was clear that the 2007 election would encourage political instability. In contrast, how was an increased number of opposition MPs helpful to Lesotho when the level of hatred and rivalry between the ruling and opposition parties was so high and was likely to play itself in parliament? On the one hand, the effect of this scenario was to render parliament ineffective in discharging its duties, and to prevent government from being effective in service delivery. On the other hand, an

increased number of opposition MPs would have ensured that they become important stakeholders who could form the basis of a loyal opposition even though this was uncertain. However, Lesotho's political parties were structured to promote state dysfunctionality as shown below.

## **POLITICAL CRISIS AFTER THE 2007 ELECTION**

Lesotho has been gripped by a political crisis after the 2007 snapshot election. The crisis has two dimensions to it. The first is that one of the small opposition parties, Marematlou Freedom Party (MFP) or the party of chiefs, launched a court case challenging the distribution of seats under the MMP system. The MFP was challenging the alliances that defrauded the MMP system in favour of the coalition partners. The MFP was challenging the alliances between the LCD and the National Independent Party (NIP) as well as the one between the All Basotho Convention (ABC) and the Lesotho Workers Party (LWP). It was also demanding the re-allocation of seats (Lesotho Times, 19 August 2009). It must be remembered that the MMP component of the electoral system was introduced before the 2002 election to cater for the small parties. This happened in 2002 when all the small parties were awarded at least one MMP seat. This ensured that all political parties in the country had representation in parliament.

In contrast, the 2007 election that was characterised by coalitions placed the MMP upside down by benefiting the two coalition partners (NIP and LWP) and by marginalising the small parties it was intended for. NIP (in coalition with the ruling LCD) was allocated 21 MMP seats and LWP (in coalition with the ABC) was allocated 10 MMP seats. The rest of the 9 MMP seats were shared among the smallest parties, each getting one MMP seat each, except the BNP that got 3 MMP seats. The small opposition MFP alleged that the allocation was illegal as it did not specifically cater for the small parties and that the coalition partnerships which led to this distribution were also illegal. However, the opposition MFP lost a court case in 2009 that ruled that the high court had no jurisdiction over the allocation of seats and that the litigant had no *locus standi*. The court ruling reads in part:

“It seems to this court that both under the constitution and under the supporting electoral legislation, a political party, the applicant being one, lacks *locus standi* in *judicio* to question the final allocation by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of PR seats. Political or public interest is not sufficient to clothe or cloak it with the necessary *locus standi*. Section 93 (1) of Act No.16 of 2001 vests in the IEC the ultimate power to determine the allocation of seats in terms of section 92A (*supra*) read with the provisions of Schedule 5” (The High Court Judgment CIV/APN/116/07).

The second dimension of the political crisis was that the 2007 MMP seats allocations prevented the ABC that had come second in the FPTP electoral system, from becoming the main opposition party in parliament. It should be noted that the opposition ABC had won 17 FPTP seats and its partner won 10 MMP seats. But as the coalition had no legal standing, their votes could not be added up. Instead, the party that was declared the main opposition party in parliament was NIP who had partnered with the ruling LCD. NIP was awarded 21 MMP seats. Practically and officially, this meant that while the LCD was the ruling party, its coalition-partner was the main opposition. Yet the coalition partner included LCD officials in the joint list. So that when the NIP leader died in 2009, he was replaced in parliament by an LCD candidate from the joint list (Victor Shale, email to the author dated 10th September 2009). Thus, the LCD-NIP partnership came out of the 2007 election constituting the governing party as well as the main opposition. In more practical terms, the LCD has become the governing party as well as the main opposition in parliament. The other opposition parties perceived this as electoral fraud aimed at denying the ABC from becoming the main opposition and the small parties from benefiting from the MMP system. Thus, Lesotho faced two simultaneous political crises.

But the party that had taken the IEC to court lost, inviting other forms of intervention. SADC, the regional organisation intervened through a mediator who allegedly met stumbling blocks from the ruling LCD that insisted that mediation should be aimed at charting the way forward and not at reversing the seats allocations. The opposition parties insisted that mediation should reverse the current allocation and should be aimed at coming up with an equitable allocation of seats. The SADC mediator pulled out and was replaced by an internal mediator from the churches who never had a legitimate standing in Lesotho political culture. The results are not promising.

## **CONCLUSION**

The competition for state ownership has not yet been settled in Lesotho. It is a contest among members of the ruling elite. The politics of defections, doubtful state legitimacy, hatred and rivalry between political parties define Lesotho's independent existence. Doubtful legitimacy is associated with defections and disputed election results, extremely large and high profile defections that immediately take over the leadership of the government or that become the largest and hostile opposition. Hatred and armed rivalry define the relationship between the ruling and opposition parties. Such politics have paralysed Lesotho. All these are directly linked to a historical state culture characterised by incoherence of the traditional state, indiscipline of its principal players and armed confrontation that mirrored Basutoland's colonial history. Lesotho's history of mistrusting both foreign neighbours

and their own Christian churches, combine with their long history of armed confrontation imply that political mediation is alien to their political culture and they can neither take it seriously nor respect its outcomes. This makes mediation a difficult endeavour whose results are uncertain, thus inviting armed political violence.

The political culture of enfeebled leaders makes change and modernisation extremely difficult. Enfeebled leadership makes it difficult to democratise political parties, to promote internal democracy and tolerance. Theoretically, the size of the state does not seem to matter in explaining state dysfunctionality. Its political history and political culture seem to matter more.

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