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The 1993 Elections in Lesotho and The Nature of the BCP Victory

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Introduction

Almost without exception, African states are undergoing a profound policy shift informed by the twin processes of economic adjustment and political liberalisation (Gibbon *et. al.*, 1992; Chole and Ibrahim, 1995; Mkandawire and Olukoshi, 1995; Baylies, 1995; Clapham, 1995). Although both are driven by the two powerful international financial institutions — the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank — and various Western bilateral donors, the latter is also the result of endogenous factors within these states, especially after the collapse of the bi-polar world order in 1990 (Mkandawire, 1995 : 82). Nonetheless, economic adjustment has been regarded by the donor community in general as a necessary condition for the transition from authoritarian rule to multi-party democracy. This explains in part the tendency by donors to recommend that these two processes be implemented in tandem; and political liberalisation is now perceived by donors as a critical conditionality for continued development assistance to African states. (Ninsin 1993 : 5).

Lesotho, a small, landlocked and impoverished state in Southern Africa is not an exception to this post-Cold War rule of thumb that governs current relations between donor and recipient countries. Although Lesotho's 1993 elections can be explained as the result of donor pressure on the then military dictatorship to open up the political market place, it should also be seen as the outcome of internal struggles waged by civil society. The focus of this article, however, is not so much on what factors propelled the political transition in Lesotho but rather the nature of the victory of the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) in the 1993 elections which undoubtedly deepened Lesotho's political transition. Section one provides a sketch of the historical background to the elections and introduces the principal

contestants. Section two discusses the electoral process and its outcome. This section also investigates the nature of the BCP victory and the post-election challenges that confront this party. The conclusion draws a cautious note about the nature of the transition process in Lesotho.

Background to the 1993 Elections

Three important developments provided a conducive anchor to Lesotho's general elections which took place on 27 March 1993, after 23 years of authoritarian rule. These are the realignment of global political and economic forces which emerged following the collapse of the bi-polar world order and the resultant pressure for political pluralism in Africa; the increasingly changing regional political landscape in Southern Africa as the demise of the apartheid regime drew closer; and domestic pressure mounted by civil society to force the military regime to open up the political space for free and fair competition by all political interests.

Lesotho achieved its independence from British colonial rule on 4th October 1966. This epochal political development was preceded by two important events: the District Councils elections of 1960 and the pre-independence general elections of 1965. The District Council elections were aimed at building a firmer foundation for efficient local government and democratising the local structures of government. The three main contestants in the District Council elections were the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), the Basutoland National Party (BNP), and the Marema-Tlou Party as well as independent candidates. As Table 1 clearly shows, the BCP emerged as the overwhelming victor in the elections.

Table 1: District Council (DC) Elections, 1960

| Contestant | Votes won | % of total | DC seats | Basutoland National Council (Legislative) seats |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--|
| BCP | 12 787 | 36 | 73 | 30 |
| BNP | 7 002 | 20 | 22 | 1 |
| MTP | 3 043 | 9 | 16 | 5 |
| Indepts | 12 473 | 35 | 51 | 4 |
| Total | 35 302 | 100 | 162 | 40 |

Source: Bardill and Cobbe, 1985 : 36.

The BCP victory vindicated its nation-wide popularity as the oldest nationalist movement; its commanding mass base which could not be challenged by the other protagonists; its Pan-Africanist ideology which was then a strong force in the

liberation politics of the moment; and its strong and deep-rooted network of local structures of village and constituency branches. The BCP won 36% of the total votes; 73 out of 162 district council seats; and 30 of 40 National Council seats. The BCP's performance sent shivers down the spine of the conservative political actors as the independence elections approached. In those circumstances the BCP naturally anticipated yet another landslide victory five years down the line and undoubtedly imagined itself assuming the mantle of government from the departing British colonial authorities. As Machobane has observed, "there was no doubt in the minds of most people in 1960 that the BCP would lead Lesotho to independence, with Ntsu Mokhehle as the first Prime Minister" (1990 : 284).

By a twist of fate, however, this expectation was dashed when the BNP unexpectedly won the 1965 pre-independence elections by a razor-thin majority. Paradoxically, even the BNP did not expect this surprising swing of the political pendulum in its favour, especially in the light of the BCP's landslide victory in the district elections of 1960. Nor did the losers expect to make such a poor showing at the polls. Even Lesotho's political observers did not anticipate that

... Chief Jonathan's (BNP leader) poorly organised conservative amalgam of rural peasants, junior chiefs and Roman Catholics could prevail against the militant, Pan-Africanist thrust of Ntsu Mokhehle's Congress Party (BCP) and the royalist imagery of the Marema-Tlou Freedom Party (MFP) (Weisfelder, 1979 : 250).

Table 2 shows the results of the 1965 elections. The BNP won about 42% of the votes and 31 out of 60 parliamentary seats.

Table 2: General Elections for the National Assembly, 1965

| Contestant | No. of votes | % of votes | No. of seats |
|--------------|----------------|------------|--------------|
| BNP | 108 162 | 41.6 | 31 |
| BCP | 103 050 | 39.67 | 25 |
| MFP | 42 837 | 16.5 | 4 |
| MTP | 5 697 | 2.2 | 0 |
| Indepts | 79 | 0.03 | 0 |
| Total | 259 825 | 100 | 60 |

Source: Bardill and Cobbe, 1985 : 37.

The BNP victory was the result of a number of factors. The BCP campaign was affected by serious internal dissent and power struggle (Machobane, 1990:284-5);

its sources of funding were dwindling; its antagonistic attitude towards the Catholic Church — the biggest religious denomination in the country — and the chiefs who constituted the largest block in its rural political base; its radical postures and anti-apartheid stance did not endear it to both the South African government and the West who, therefore, threw their weight behind the conservative BNP. In contrast, the BNP enjoyed massive material support from the West (especially Germany and Britain) and apartheid South Africa; its virulent anti-communism endeared it not only to the West, but more especially to the Catholic Church; it was also given extensive coverage by the apartheid South African media and unfettered access to the Basotho mine workers in South Africa — privileges which the BCP was denied.

The 1965 election outcome suggests a very tight and fierce contestation for state power between the BNP and BCP. The latter's 'narrow escape' presented it with an awkward predicament as the first party to hold the reins of power in post-colonial Lesotho. The prospect of another general election in a space of five years after 1965, therefore, was not relished by a party which, like many others in post-colonial Africa, was determined to consolidate its hegemony and reproduce itself as the ruling elite. As with the BCP after the district council elections of 1960, the BNP was to await Lesotho's usual political miracle following its 1965 victory.

The Westminster Constitution that was bequeathed to Lesotho by the British colonial power provided for quinquennial elections which meant that the second round of electoral contest for state power would be due in 1970. That election did take place in January of that year. But unsure of the prospect of being returned to power through the ballot, the BNP put in place contingency plans for the assumption of power by undemocratic means. As the elections progressed the BNP became increasingly convinced that it was losing political power to the BCP, and therefore acted swiftly to stem the tide of history. On the 31st January 1970 the Prime Minister and leader of the BNP, announced jubilantly: "I have seized power. I am not ashamed of it. It may appear undemocratic, but I have most of the people behind me."¹ The BNP leader then annulled the whole exercise and the final election results were not officially announced; suspended the independence constitution; suspended the judiciary thus subverting the justice system; put the King — Moshoeshe II — under house arrest for alleged connivance with the BCP; arrested BCP leaders and harassed their supporters; and banned the Communist Party of Lesotho.

The latter step was crucial because the BNP had attempted to use its anti-communist rhetoric and scare-mongering as a bargaining chip during the electoral contest. A year before the election, Leabua Jonathan, the leader of the BNP, had made this position crystal clear:

Basotho are fundamentally a Christian nation and to expose them to ideologies that by their foreign nature are a threat to their beliefs would be a gross failure on my part ... There are no two ways about these things ... I reject communism and all it represents (Leistner, 1983 : 209).

By justifying his actions on the basis of his anti-communist beliefs, therefore, Jonathan sought to enlist the support of the South African government, the West, the Catholic Church and chiefs towards the BNP's 'palace coup'. Although the South African government, the minor chiefs and the Catholic Church gave the BNP the needed support, the West was hesitant. For instance, Britain and Sweden withheld aid to the Lesotho government between January and June 1970 (Matlosa, 1995a : 76). At any rate, the seed of praetorian rule had been sown; and it germinated rapidly. The BNP evolved a *de facto* one party dictatorship which is typical of post-colonial Africa. Rule by decrees and outright repression became synonymous with that government.

It was this BNP *coup d'état* and the events that culminated in the controversial elections of 1985 which precipitated the military coup of 1986. With the support of the monarchy the military ruled the country for eight solid years until 1993 when it was forced to conduct general elections as the prelude to returning the country to civilian rule.

Towards the 1993 Elections

In the early 1990s, exogenous and endogenous factors compelled the military regime to open up the political space thereby initiating a process which ultimately led to the transfer of power to a civilian government. Lesotho's donors played a significant role in facilitating this process. However from 1990 onwards, internal feuding within the monarchy-military oligarchy also contributed to this process, especially when the alliance between the military and the monarchy broke down in 1990. As such internal conflicts and pressures from civil society gathered momentum, it became clear that the military had lost its grip on power. The prohibition on party political activities was therefore revoked; BCP exiles were allowed back in the country; and preparations for a general election were set in motion in 1991.

The next elections had initially been scheduled for November 1992; but they were postponed to 1993. The military government promulgated the National Assembly Election Order in 1992; meanwhile the registration of voters had commenced in December 1991. The publication of the electoral law was followed by the establishment of the Electoral Office. From the beginning of the process, opposition parties and other political actors expressed reservations about the military government's capacity to conduct the election in a free and fair manner. They insisted that a neutral authority should be instituted to manage and conduct

the elections. Through the Commonwealth Secretariat, the military government secured the services of the Director of Elections in Jamaica, Mr. Noel B. Lee who became the Chief Electoral Officer. An Electoral Advisory Committee, comprising representatives of 12 political parties, the police, the military, the Council of Churches and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) was established to assist the Chief Electoral Officer (Lucas, 1993 : 5). Mr Lee was later recalled to Jamaica and was duly replaced by Ms. Joycelyn Lucas from Trinidad and Tobago who, in conjunction with the Advisory Committee, successfully conducted the 1993 elections.

The Electoral Contest

Lesotho inherited the constituency-based electoral system commonly known as the first-past-the-post. The number of constituencies was increased from 60 to 65. The delimitation of constituencies throughout the country is shown in Table 3 below.

Political parties started their campaigns immediately after the military lifted the ban on political activities in 1991. At the close of nomination on January 28, 1993 twelve political parties had filed nomination papers for a total of 234 candidates. Seven others contested the election as independent candidates increasing the number of contestants to 241. Table 4 shows the distribution of candidates per political party.

Table 3: Constituencies for the 1993 Elections

| District | No. of Constituencies |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Butha-Buthe | 4 |
| Leribe | 10 |
| Berea | 7 |
| Maseru | 16 |
| Mafeteng | 7 |
| Mohale's Hoek | 7 |
| Quthing | 5 |
| Qacha's Nek | 3 |
| Thaba-Tseka | 3 |
| Mokhotlong | 3 |
| Total | 65 |

Source: Lucas, 1993 : 10.

Table 4: Candidates for the 1993 Elections

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------|
| Basutoland Congress Party | 65 |
| Basotho National Party | 65 |
| Marematlou Freedom Party | 51 |
| Popular Front For Democracy | 17 |
| Hareeng Basotho Party | 13 |
| United Democratic Party | 9 |
| Independents | 7 |
| Kopanang Basotho Party | 4 |
| Lesotho Labour Party | 4 |
| United Party | 2 |
| National Independence Party | 2 |
| Liberal Party of Lesotho | 1 |
| Lesotho Education Party | 1 |
| Total | 241 |

Source: Lucas, 1993:13

Only the BCP and the BNP fielded candidates in all 65 constituencies. Three main factors explain this situation: (a) The BCP and BNP are the parties which have traditionally dominated Lesotho's political landscape and thus have a firmer rooting in the country's polity. (b) These parties have well-organised and deep-rooted structures throughout the country and as such have a considerable political appeal among the Basotho people. (c) Unlike the other contestants they have substantial resources to mount nation-wide election campaigns. Although the other parties played an important role in the election, not least because they challenged the political monopoly of the established political parties, the actual contest for power was between the BCP and BNP.

The BNP entered the contest with a heavy baggage of its past as the first party to assume state power in Lesotho's post-colonial history. It had annulled the 1970 election and usurped power by force; it had suspended the constitution and ruled the country by orders and decrees; it had institutionalised praetorian rule anchored on outright repression of some members of the opposition parties; its system of governance had been premised on *de facto* one party rule; it had employed the security establishment and members of its youth league to intimidate members of the opposition and flagrantly violated their basic rights; its development policies, projects and programmes had also had the least impact on the standard of living of the ordinary people. This party therefore entered the electoral contest as a lame horse. Hence, as observed by Gill, "the BNP ... [was not] ... able to mobilise

significant support at its public rallies — the party ... [seemed] ... demoralised and on the defensive.” (1993 : 247).

The BCP, on the other hand, projected an image of a liberating force — a force to liberate Basotho from the political and economic excesses of the previous BNP and military dictatorships. The major advantage of the BCP was that, unlike the BNP, it had never governed the country, and more especially it could capitalise on its rich history of nationalist struggles against colonial rule. Over and above, the BCP made a considerable political mileage out of the BNP’s seizure of power in 1970 which denied the former the golden opportunity to assume state power. In fact, the BNP’s unconstitutional as well as undemocratic actions during its tenure of office became the central theme of the BCP campaign. It can, therefore, be argued, as Ajulu does, that “... the 1993 Lesotho election was precisely about the 1970 Lesotho election” (Ajulu 1995 : 16); and that “the 1993 election was viewed overwhelmingly as an opportunity to right the historical wrong done to the country by the BNP by its unconstitutional seizure of power in 1970” (Southall and Petlane, 1995 : xiii). This is why even issues of ideological differences between the two dominant political parties and their manifestos mattered the least in the elections.

The Electoral Outcome

The outcome of the elections was a predictable one. The BCP scored total victory by winning all the 65 constituencies. Of the 736,930 registered voters, 532,678 voted — a voter turn-out of 72%. A breakdown of the election result is provided in Table 5.

Table 5: The 1993 General Election Results

| Contestant | No. of Votes | % of Votes | No. of Seats |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| BCP | 398,355 | 74.7 | 65 |
| BNP | 120,686 | 22.6 | 0 |
| MFP | 7,650 | 1.43 | 0 |
| PFD | 947 | 0.17 | 0 |
| UDP | 582 | 0.10 | 0 |
| HBP | 646 | 0.12 | 0 |
| LPL | 43 | 0.008 | 0 |
| LLP | 244 | 0.045 | 0 |
| NIP | 241 | 0.045 | 0 |
| KBP | 417 | 0.078 | 0 |
| UP | 51 | 0.009 | 0 |
| LEP | 63 | 0.011 | 0 |
| INDEPTS | 2,753 | 0.51 | 0 |

Source: Lucas, 1993 : 26.

The BCP victory and the nature of Lesotho's electoral system meant that the results were likely once more to produce a one party state. Lamenting this situation, Ajulu remarks that "[i]t was probably the first time in African politics when a one party government came about freely and fairly through the ballot box" (1995 : 16). But clearly the BCP won the elections not so much on the strength of any alternative policy initiatives which it had proposed in its election manifesto; it won precisely because the election campaign was devoid of any national debate on the challenges confronting the Lesotho nation. To be sure, the 1993 election was primarily about punishing the 'devil' whom the voters knew and rewarding the one they did not know: it was an election that was driven more by voters' sentiments than by declarations of alternative party policy and vision.

The election was given a clean bill of health by local and international observer groups who declared that it had been run smoothly and was considered free and fair. Surely, some parties had alleged that the BCP had colluded with the military to rig the elections. But with the exception of the BNP which lodged a law suit against the BCP none of the others did pursue these charges; and even the BNP lost its case. As argued by Sekatle, its allegations of election rigging were superfluous: they were "founded much more upon a pervasive lack of trust which exists between politicians in Lesotho than upon any firmly grounded evidence" (Sekatle, 1995 : 105).

The BCP's total victory denied all other parties even a shadow of representation in parliament. Consequently, Lesotho's tradition of one party rule has continued. This poses a serious challenge for the democratisation of Lesotho politics largely because winning a free and fair election is one thing and institutionalising democratic culture and practice is another. Since the BCP came to power it has attempted to entrench itself through politics of hegemony, patronage and clientelism. Second, it has been engaged mainly in managing one crisis after another. The most threatening of the crises has revolved around its rather cold relations with the country's security establishment and the monarchy. These tense relations deteriorated to the lowest ebb in 1994 culminating in the removal of the government in August by King Letsie III in what amounted to a coup. It was only through internal pressure by various civil society groups, and the intervention by leaders of Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe that the BCP government was reinstated in September 1994 (Matlosa, 1994; Southall and Petlane, 1995). Third, factional fights within the BCP continue to undermine its capacity to govern. Partly due to this internal feuding and partly to the chain of crises it has to grapple with, it is likely that the BCP government will feel so threatened as to refuse to honour the constitutional requirement to call fresh general elections in 1998 — at least until it has sufficiently consolidated itself as the hegemonic elite.

Conclusion

After the authoritarian rule of both civilians and the military Lesotho held its first

democratic election in 1993. Nonetheless, the political environment and circumstances of the transition raise grave doubts about the outcome, which echoes Riley's guarded optimism about the current democratic transitions in Africa. He observes that "it may be that the widespread moves towards more democratic politics across Africa are simply partial in effect, and likely to be temporary" (Riley, 1992 : 540). For Allen *et.al*,

multipartyism and the rule of law, indeed even the codification of basic human rights, do not of themselves imply participation, representativeness, accountability or transparency. They may be essential to the possibility of reducing inequalities and of removing oppression, but do not accomplish this of their own accord (1992 : 10).

Indeed, the situation in Lesotho compels us to agree that political liberalisation and democratisation are not synonymous processes. The former refers to a "combination of loosened restrictions and expanded individual and group rights ... [while the latter] ... involves more than the mere extension of political rights" (Keller, 1995 : 224). Surely Lesotho's *free and fair elections* have brought about political liberalisation; but they did not usher in a democratic political regime (Matlosa, 1993 : 21).

Notes

- * Khabele Matlosa lectures at the National University of Lesotho where he heads the Department of Political and Administrative Studies.
- 1. Quoted in Wellings (1985 : 201). The election outcome was not in favour of the ruling party as Table 6 below clearly shows.

Table 6: 1970 General Elections for National Assembly

| Contestant | No. of votes | % of votes | Seats Won |
|--------------|----------------|------------|-----------|
| BCP | 152 907 | 49.8 | 36 |
| BNP | 129 434 | 42.2 | 23 |
| MFP | 22 279 | 7.3 | 1 |
| Other | 1 909 | 0.52 | 0 |
| Total | 306 529 | 100 | 60 |

Source: Neocosmos, 1995 : 7.

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