

CHAPTER 1

Political Background

Lesotho has its origins as a nation in the 19th century when King Moshoeshe I rallied the Basotho from ethnic groups scattered in central and southern Africa. At the request of the King, the British declared a protectorate over the mountain Kingdom in 1868. Basutoland, as it was called at the time, was initially administered by Cape Colony, but in 1884, the British took over direct responsibility for the protectorate. It was thereafter administered as a High Commission Territory.

Modern party politics began in 1952 with the founding of the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) under Dr Ntsu Mokhehle. The BCP advocated full independence from Britain. A legislative council was introduced in 1956, and a Constitution granting limited powers of self-government was adopted in 1959.

The first general election held on the basis of universal adult suffrage took place on 29 April 1965. The elections were won by the Basutoland National Party (BNP, renamed the Basotho National Party after independence), whose leader, Chief Leabua Jonathan, became Prime Minister. The King, Moshoeshe II, became a constitutional monarch and as such Head of State.

Democratic government, however, lasted less than four years. When it appeared as if the main opposition party, the BCP under Dr Mokhehle, had won a majority of seats in the National Assembly in elections held in January 1970, Chief Jonathan declared a state of emergency, suspended the Constitution, and arrested Dr Mokhehle and other leaders of the BCP. The elections were annulled and several people were reportedly killed in disturbances that followed. The King went into exile in The Netherlands.

The King was allowed to return to the country in December 1970 and Chief Jonathan attempted to form a government of national reconciliation. Several BCP members joined the Government. Others, including Dr Mokhehle, however, resisted and were blamed for a coup attempt against Chief Jonathan in 1974. Dr Mokhehle and most of the BCP leadership fled the country. Lesotho effectively became a one-party state.

In July 1985, the Government announced that elections would take place in September, but these were cancelled in August when the opposition parties refused to contest them. It was announced that BNP candidates had been returned unopposed in all the constituencies. The cancellation of the elections raised considerable domestic political opposition. Meanwhile, owing to Chief Jonathan's new policy of support for the ANC and his refusal to sign a non-aggression pact with South Africa, the South African Government imposed a blockade on the border

with Lesotho in January 1986, thus impeding access to vital supplies of food and fuel.

On 15 January 1986, Chief Jonathan was overthrown by troops of the Lesotho paramilitary police under General Justin Lekhanya. The National Assembly was dissolved, and all executive and legislative powers were vested in the King, acting on the advice of a military council. A Cabinet comprising three officers and 17 civilians was also set up. In May 1988, General Lekhanya allowed Dr Mokhehle and several other members of the BCP to return to the country.

In early 1990, conflict developed between General Lekhanya and the King when the latter refused to approve the dismissal of three members of the Military Council whom General Lekhanya accused of involvement in a coup plot. General Lekhanya suspended the King's executive and legislative powers and announced that a return to civilian government would take place in 1992. In March 1990, the Military Council assumed the legislative and executive powers which were previously vested in the King. The King went into exile in Britain.

A few months later, a National Constituent Assembly made up of 108 appointed members was set up to draft a new constitution. The Assembly included members of the Military Council, Council of Ministers, all Principal Chiefs and politicians, including Dr Mokhehle. Between October 1990 and April 1991, it held consultations using the 1966 independence Constitution as its starting point. In September 1991, the Assembly appointed a Constitutional Commission to assess public opinion on the document before it was adopted. The Commission received a substantial number of written submissions and held numerous well-attended public meetings throughout the country. The views expressed were taken into account in the final draft which was eventually published on 5 February 1993.

Meanwhile, in October 1990, General Lekhanya invited the King to return to Lesotho from exile. The King, however, made his return conditional upon the lifting of military rule and the formation, by representatives of the political parties, of an interim government, pending the adoption of a new constitution and the holding of internationally supervised elections. General Lekhanya responded by promulgating an order deposing the King with immediate effect. His son, who became Letsie III, was appointed King in his place by the Military Council. Although he acted as King during his father's exile, Letsie III refused to be crowned – on the grounds that his father was alive, able and willing to discharge his responsibilities as a monarch.

General Lekhanya was removed as Chairman of the Military Council on 30 April 1991 in a palace coup led by another member of the Council, Colonel (later General) Elias Ramaema. Although General Ramaema repealed the law banning political parties, tensions continued to rise in the country following an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow his regime and restore General Lekhanya. Tension rose further in April 1992 when Moshoeshe II announced his intention to return to the country from exile in defiance of the wishes of the Military Council.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General used his good offices to promote dialogue in London between the former King and General Ramaema, which led to the return of Moshoeshe II to Lesotho in July 1992, and paved the way for multi-party elections in March 1993.

The 1993 Elections

In March 1993, the draft constitution drawn up by the Constituent Assembly was adopted, to come into effect upon the election of the National Assembly and the appointment of a Prime Minister.

The elections to the National Assembly took place on 27 March 1993. The BCP under Dr Mokhehle swept to power, winning all 65 seats and gaining 54 per cent of the vote as against the BNP's 16 per cent. Ten other parties shared the remaining 30 per cent of the vote. Dr Mokhehle was sworn in as Prime Minister in April 1993.

A Commonwealth mission led by the Rt Hon Lord Carlisle of Bucklow observed the March 1993 elections and concluded that despite some administrative problems on the day, the outcome of the elections reflected "a free expression of the will of the people of Lesotho."

The BNP refused to accept the results of the elections and the country remained unstable. In November 1993 and again in January 1994, there were mutinies in the Royal Lesotho Defence Force, ostensibly over pay but also reflecting political differences between supporters of the new government and those of the BNP. In mid-April 1994 the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Selometsi Baholo, was shot and killed by disaffected troops who also abducted and briefly detained four government ministers. Two emissaries of the Commonwealth Secretary-General helped to promote negotiations between the Mokhehle Government and the army, leading to the end of the mutiny as well as a related strike by police and prison officers.

The 1994 Crisis

Lesotho went into renewed crisis in August 1994, when following the appointment by Dr Mokhehle of a commission of inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the dethronement of

Moshoeshe II, King Letsie III announced the dissolution of the National Assembly, the dismissal of the Mokhehle Government, and the suspension of the Constitution. The army and the police appeared to support the King, but a general strike called by the BCP and the Lesotho Council of NGOs effectively paralysed economic activity in the country in late August.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General worked closely with the Presidents of Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe to promote dialogue between the King and Prime Minister Mokhehle and to restore the elected government.

On 14 September 1994, King Letsie III and Prime Minister Mokhehle signed an agreement, guaranteed by Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The Mokhehle government was restored and King Letsie III stepped down in favour of his father, Moshoeshe II. The King was killed in a motor accident in January 1996 and Letsie III returned to the throne.

The Formation of the Lesotho Congress for Democracy

In June 1997 Dr Mokhehle decided to resign from the BCP following a long-running dispute within the party about his leadership. He formed a new party – the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) – taking 40 of the BCP's 64 members of parliament (the BCP having lost one seat through a by-election) with him. Thus, the LCD was able to secure a parliamentary majority and retain its hold on government.

The Prime Minister's actions were challenged as unconstitutional by several groups and individuals in the country, including the BCP. The Government, however, remained in power.

The 1998 National Assembly Elections

Twelve political parties and 30 independent candidates were to contest the 80 seats in the National Assembly. The race was dominated by the three main parties: the LCD, now led by Professor Pakalitha Mosisili following the retirement earlier in the year of Dr Mokhehle, aged 78, after a long political career; the BCP, led by Mr Molapo Qhobela, a former Minister of Justice; and the BNP, led by Mr Evaristus Sekhonyana, a former Minister of Finance.

The other contesting parties were:

- Christian Democratic Party
- Kopanang Basotho Party
- Lesotho Educational Party
- Lesotho Labour Party/United Democratic Party Alliance
- Marematlou Freedom Party
- National Independent Party
- National Progressive Party
- Popular Front for Democracy
- Sefate Democratic Union.