



**Investigating Intra-party  
Democracy in Lesotho:  
Focus on Basutoland Congress  
Party and Basotho National  
Party**

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**Introduction**

In any democracy, political parties form a critical pillar for the entrenchment of democratic culture and practice. This means, among other things, that for parties to add value to democratisation at national level, they ought to embrace and institutionalise internal democracy. Since they play a crucial role in the democratic process, “it is also incontrovertible that political parties are the key to the institutionalisation and consolidation of democracy. Thus, sustainable democracy is dependent upon well-functioning and effective political parties” (Matlosa and Sello 2005, vii).

This paper looks at the role of political parties and the extent to which they have embraced and institutionalised internal democracy. Further more, the paper probes the extent to which parties then promote the consolidation of democracy.

**Functions of Political Parties**

A political party can be construed as a group of people who share a common conception of how and why state power and resources should be organised and utilised. Political parties, unlike other social groups, are organised and have a structural formation. They not only seek to influence government policy, but also to replace the government in power through elections and thereafter control and implement national policies.

Dearlove (2000) argues that parties recruit people to form their support base and socialise candidates to party

ethics so that the party can be seen to work together in a principled fashion. Political parties form the source from which the appointment of people to positions of power on various state levels is effected. Political parties aggregate diverse interests from society. They collect sets of interests in order to produce a common policy. Similarly, while serving their grassroots supporters they also educate them politically. This is done by highlighting social problems to the masses and outlining their approaches as to how they will deal with these problems and thus better the life of citizens. Therefore, in trying to solve these problems for a common political platform, parties aggregate the interests and give weight to them as election issues. The parties 'sell' these interests by articulating them to the wider populace as an election programme or manifesto. They give wide expression to political and social interests that would have otherwise remained private. For this process they use the media and public gatherings.

Political parties mobilise people and structure the popular vote by providing a wide menu of choices at elections for voters to support their individual candidates. By mobilising people to a political issue, they legitimise the election process and stabilise the political order. Conventionally every elected government is first supported by a political party that shape its policies. Parties provide the link between the citizens and the state and thus make representative, responsible and responsive government a reality. They serve the dual function of representation and government (Dearlove 2000).

In most African countries, political parties play a legitimising role for the party that won elections held in free and fair conditions. Parties must have a robust democratic culture not based on

geographical area, ethnicity or region but representing the nation as a whole. This was very important in countries such as Nigeria, whereby the framers of the 1979 constitution argued that, for the purpose of 1979 elections a political party

*...could only be registered if it...to satisfy the Federal Electoral Commission that it was not an association confined to a part only of the geographical area of Nigeria; its headquarters had to be in the federal capital and its executive committee had to reflect Nigeria's Federal character (Tordoff 1997, 120).*

The lack of intra-party democracy is likely not only to weaken parties internally, but may adversely influence their effectiveness in driving democracy nationally, especially in emergent democracies such as Lesotho.

### **Role of Political Parties**

One of the cardinal pillars of democracy is pluralism and multiparty competition. Political parties in democracies compete for state power through regular elections to further their goals (Vanhanen 1997). While the media depicts parties as disciplined associations, the reality is far different (Crew 1993), as they are formed by people with diverse interests. They often protest or quit if they perceive that their interests have not been met. They are characterised by personal rivalries, ideological divisions and tensions between the leadership and grassroots supporters. In fact parties are uneasy coalitions (Crew 1993).

Nevertheless, political parties play a salient role in and constitute a vital element of a democracy. In fact, *the fundamental purpose of political parties and party system is to provide a stable pattern of expectation, activities and behaviour for the peaceful change*

*of government from one faction of the ruling class to another or from one set of individuals within the ruling class to another* (Nnoli 1986, 139).

In order to live up to this expectation, political parties must be democratic.

### **The Consequences of Lack of Intra-Party Democracy**

The consequences of a lack of intra-party democracy are many and vary within each party. A lack of intra-party democracy within major parties in Lesotho has produced undesirable consequences for both the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) and the Basutoland National Party (BNP).

#### ***The BCP***

The Basutoland Congress Party has, since its inception in 1952, always been riddled with protracted internal power struggles. The 1960s saw prominent BCP leaders being expelled or resigning from the party executive committee. Most of these competent leaders left the party because of Mokhehle's leadership and this "came after long disillusionment with Mokhehle's authoritarian mode of operation" (Weisfelder 1999, 44). This characteristic of the BCP leader was even more explicit during the December 1961 annual conference when Mokhehle, the BCP leader, succeeded in amending the party constitution and thus increasing his term of office from one to five years. Most importantly, however, he gained power to suspend and expel party members. This undemocratic tradition was carried into the 1993 period.

There is no party in Lesotho politics, which has spent so much time and resources than the BCP fighting over positions in the party. Immediately after the BCP elections victory in 1993, intra-party conflict could not only be sensed but was clearly

demonstrated in most political circles in Lesotho. The fight was between the two factions of the BCP. The pro-Prime Minister faction, "Majelathoko" (those-who-eat-apart) (Matlosa 1999) and the pro-Deputy Prime Minister faction popularly known as "the pressure group." The party fought numerous court cases over the results of executive committee elections. The High Court of Lesotho became the gallery for these events (CIV/APN/84, 96, CIV/APN/1/97, CIV/APN/75/97), (Sekatle 1997, Pule 1997).

On 3 May 1996, Prime Minister Ntsu Mokhehle removed members of the pressure group faction from the Cabinet after protracted infighting with his faction, "Majelathoko" (Matlosa 1998). This faction was opposed to the perceived undemocratic nature of the party in dealing with the election of office bearers. Among the most protracted of these conflicts, which came to the fore and precipitated the birth of Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) in 1997, was the incessant power struggle over the membership of the BCP's Executive Committee (NEC). Some these members were seen as sell-outs and as being too close to the BCP leader. This infighting culminated in the break up of the BCP.

On Monday, 9 July 1997, the Prime Minister convened a press conference on the grounds of the National Assembly and announced that he had formed a new party to be known as Lesotho Congress for Democracy. He argued that, "because we have support of the majority of parliamentarians, there will be no change of government" (Pule 1999, 22).

This party was formed following a long-running dispute within the party concerning Mokhehle's leadership. A few years later, the election of another NEC within the ruling LCD was to

haunt the party yet again. On 14 September 2001 the party experienced yet another fragmentation (Matlosa 1999, Pule 1997).

A breakaway group from the ruling LCD, the Lesotho Peoples Congress (LPC), brought to an end an extraordinary marriage of convenience among the incompatible role players in the party leadership (*Public Eye* October 12–18).

What is even more striking is the similarity of events leading to the split. The main cause of the LPC break-up was the disputed results of the January 2001 National Executive Committee elections held at its annual conference. There was vitriolic bickering within members of LCD, which was reminiscent of the pre-1997 June period that was also motivated by the executive committee elections.

The central issues in both 1997 and 2001 had been the executive elections and the dominant personality cult around Ntsu Mokhehle that had assumed various meanings for each party. Mokhehle has wielded considerable power over the BCP since the early 1950s. His name has become a trademark in Lesotho Congress politics and the country as a whole (Matlosa 1999).

The two warring factions within LCD were now commonly known as “Lesiba” (Feather), for the Deputy Prime Minister Kelebone Maope’s group who constituted the outgoing National Executive which lost the elections in January 2001 and “Sehlopha” (Group), who belonged to the incoming National Executive Committee elected in the same contentious period. This group enjoyed the support of the current Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili (Sekatle 1999).

The breakaway group “Lesiba”, now Lesotho Peoples Congress, were at pains to announce that “the train had derailed” (meaning that the Prime Minister does not consult and work with his cronies), and it was their obligation to put the train back on track (Nonyana 2001). They claimed that the government was becoming increasingly dictatorial and authoritarian. In most cases, the government had deliberately deviated from its electoral mandate and it was the LPC’s quest to put the Mokhehle magic back (*Public Eye* October 2001).

The issue of a derailed train cited by the new interim LPC leader clearly indicates that Mokhehle’s personality cult is as strong as ever. In all their public gatherings, both LCP and LCD invoke Mokhehle. The major blame for the fragmentation as presented by the LPC newspaper *Nonyana*, of 10 October 2001, has been laid solely at the doorstep of the Prime Minister Mosisili, as an inept, inefficient and undemocratic leader for the past four years of this marriage of convenience. Firstly, he was being charged for allegedly fomenting division within the party (LCD), by appearing to accommodate one faction over the other. It was further alleged in this paper that he relied too much on the southern faction rather than the northern faction of the country (MoAfrica 2001).

Secondly, and most importantly, the Prime Minister had on numerous occasions defied the party’s Executive Committee by his unilateral actions. He had vehemently refused to work closely with this committee, which had lost the January 2001 elections. The other cited case was the incident in the Mafeteng constituency involving Minister Lesao Lehohla. It was claimed that he contested the constituency while his party

membership had expired. The unilateral appointments of Cabinet Ministers and members of Senate, including the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry headed by Judge Pius Langa in collaboration with the South African government, the unfortunate results of which precipitated the 1998 instability in the country, with the subsequent formation of the Interim Political Authority and the mixed member electoral system, are some of the serious allegations levelled against the Prime Minister which fuelled the split (Nonyana 2002).

Thirdly, the Prime Minister failed to consult the party Executive Committee and Members of Parliament as national representatives in the selection of senior civil servants and the country's ambassadors abroad. This was the main factor among many that created instability within the party. He was further charged with accepting advice from outside the party structures.

Fourthly, matters came to the fore during the 26-28 January 2001 Executive Committee election when the Prime Minister insisted that Minister Lehohla was an LCD member even though he had not renewed his membership. He is said to have suddenly introduced an electoral system not agreed to by the party. This issue was so divisive that it was sent to the High Court of Lesotho even though a satisfactory outcome was never reached. Instead of intervention from the LCD leader, he appeared to be intolerant, lacking vision and subsequently advised the aggrieved party in the dispute to abide by the unpalatable court decision. This did not solve this political problem, but exacerbated it instead.

Finally, the Prime Minister is alleged to have been grossly insensitive by not

addressing his party's internal problems and also in his failure to raise the civil servants' salaries on a par with inflation. Instead, he only gave them a 2% subvention which was regarded as worthless and thus damaging LCD future electoral support. These allegations were, however, not exhaustive. It became clear from these accusations that the party lacks an internal mechanism for addressing dissenting views. This was exacerbated by lack of inter-party democracy within the party. Therefore, power struggles between the factions ensued in earnest, at all levels of the ruling party. (Pule 1999). This undemocratic culture was not confined to this party, as it also occurred in the second largest party in the country, the BNP.

#### ***Basotho National Party***

The BNP, after dismally losing the 1993 elections, proceeded with the charade of refusing to recognise the BCP's election victory. The party engaged in concerted and unsuccessful court battles to unseat the BCP with the claim that the elections were rigged and not free and fair. On realising that the BNP lack a single representation in Parliament, the leader of BCP in 1993, nominated the then BNP leader to the Senate. It was this nomination that sparked serious debates within the party. The BNP leader declined this nomination. He opined that the BNP would not be part of an illegitimate government that rigged the elections. It was this action that motivated the split within the party. The deputy leader berated the leader for taking a unilateral decision rather than a democratic one. He accused his leader of denying the BNP representation in the Senate without consulting the party executive and other internal party structures.

Another and even more emotive dispute within the party surrounded the

decision not to participate in by-elections. Boycotting the by-elections by the BNP took most political commentators by surprise since this action was not only uncalled for but, the reasons were not clear. The questions that must be asked are how the second largest party could behave in this manner and furthermore, whether the BNP is indeed undemocratic as a political party. A political party must participate in elections, not outside elections. How was it going to mobilise its support if it did not participate in elections? These were some of the hard questions that the party could not answer. Similarly, this decision was unilateral and no consultations were made<sup>1</sup>. The Deputy Leader of the BNP was enraged by the undemocratic behaviour of his party leader, Evarastus Rets'elisoetse Sekhonyana. This decision divided the party and its grassroots support base. Following these undemocratic decisions, the BNP deputy leader left the party and formed a splinter party, the National Progressive Party.

With time, this lack of democracy within the party has become prolific (Likoti 2001). In 1999, under the leadership of the newly elected leader Major General Metsing Lekhanya, appears suspect of any internal opposition, particularly from both Secretary General Majara Molapo and Leseteli Malefane. He successfully engineered their expulsion from the elected posts and suspended them from the party, similar to Ntsu Mokhehle's action in the 1960s.

Following the 2002 National Executive elections, the BNP intra-party conflict became more pronounced. While this did not lead to fragmentation of the party, General Lekhanya successfully

engineered the election defeat of his previous National Executive. This was except for two members who were seen to be very close to him. This created great animosity within the party, to the extent that the BNP lost its value in Parliament as a leading opposition party. Among its twenty-one Members of Parliament, eighteen openly opposed the leadership and engaged in unsuccessful efforts to oust the General from the leadership of the party.

These disgruntled MPs put forward their leadership choice as Thabang Nyeoe. The BNP Executive only acknowledged his candidature<sup>2</sup> by putting a stamp on his letter to the Executive, but fell short of informing the party supporters in a democratic way as mandated by their Constitution. By the time the leadership elections were held in April 2005, of the eighty demarcated constituencies, representatives from only seventy two attended the conference. However, when Thabang Nyeoe was nominated from the floor, the Executive ignored the proposal and went on with its business. This undemocratic behaviour sparked more acrimony between the Thabang Nyeoe and Lekhanya supporters. Consequently, fifty-three constituency committees supporting Nyeoe walked out of the conference. It was also claimed that a further twenty have been added to this support. Regardless of these protestations, the conference went on to endorse Lekhanya as a leader of the BNP. This struggle is currently being played out in the High Court of Lesotho (Likoti 2002). The BNP's performance in Parliament left much to be desired. Since it lacked a proper mechanism to ameliorate internal discontent and build an internal democratic culture,

<sup>1</sup> Since 1993 to date the party has boycotted all by-elections and the 2005 local government elections.

<sup>2</sup> Thabang Nyeoe's Letter declaring his candidature for 2005 BNP Leadership Elections.

the party began to wash its linen in public by chastising its Members of Parliament who wanted democracy within the party. It was this lack of intra-party democracy which led to disunity, especially in Parliament. The Leader of the party, General Lekhanya accused the reformist element within the party of fighting the leadership and instead, adhering to the LCD influence. The truth of the matter was that in 2003 General Lekhanya, together with his Deputy, had unilaterally written to the government without consulting the party. They wished to seek a Government of National Unity and certain ministerial positions. The Government rejected these demands with scorn.

The continued BNP non-participation in by-elections has made it difficult to judge with certainty the extent of its support base. However, the fact remains that its support had been dwindling as a result of alienating many people due to its undemocratic internal behaviour.

### **Impact on Voter Participation**

This chain of events has created voter apathy within Lesotho. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has, in recent times, been at pains to encourage voter registration. People have seemingly lost interest in the political system as the IEC's efforts have continuously been undermined by low registration. The Parliament, which is supposed to be vibrant, has become a talking shop with low quality Members of Parliament (Makoa 2005).

### **Democratic Consolidation**

The fact of the matter is that internal party differences and party functions have not been regulated since the establishment of these parties. This means that parties have not been regulated and governed by legislation

other than their own constitutions, which have proved to be outdated and not in keeping with democratic norms and values. In fact, selection of candidates has been *ad hoc* with no proper mechanism in place to manage and monitor internal party elections (Matlosa and Sello 2005). This proved extremely challenging for democratic consolidation within both the party system and the Lesotho polity as a whole.

For the BNP, its refusal to accept defeat and recognise the LCD victory made it difficult for a democratic transition in Lesotho since "the acceptance of the validity of founding elections by losing parties is crucial because it marks the first tentative consensus on democratic rules" (Bratton and Van de Walle 1998).

The persistent refusal to legitimise the victorious party appears to stem from the party's internal culture that seems devoid of democratic practice. Since 1993, elections the parties have been afflicted by internal dissent as a result of lack of tolerance. Not only did the BNP refuse to endorse the 1993 elections results, it went on to refuse to accept the 1998 results as well and mobilise its supporters and other parties to claim that the elections were rigged.

The BNP stance was the same in both the 1998 and 2002 elections, despite the fact that in the latter, the party was able to participate in Parliament under the new electoral model (Likoti2002). This incessant infighting within major parties appears to be motivated by the perception that the loss of position within the party is equated with the loss of one's employment opportunity. This is due to Lesotho's lack of a robust national economy, which lacks expansive opportunities for employment creation.

### **Economic Dimension of Intra-party Conflict**

As we have intimated above, Lesotho lacks a robust and well-endowed national economy with an expansive private sector to generate sustainable jobs. Consequently, Basotho tend to look to the state for employment generally. The public sector shoulders the larger chunk of the labour force compared to the nascent private sector. This has, in part, been the major reason that has fuelled intra-party conflicts and made elites in Lesotho attempt to stay in power by all means necessary (Likoti 2001). Since there is no alternative source of employment for those elites formerly in power, it makes sense to stay in power through all means possible. This has led to political elites fighting for power within political parties. Almost all sectors depend on the public sector. With the introduction of a mixed member proportional representation electoral system, the fight to stay in power in these major parties has intensified (Makoa 2005).

The struggle for leadership positions within the major parties (BNP and LCD) is thus linked to the struggle for easy access to state resources. This is why political elites in Lesotho perceive loss of power/executive position within their parties as the loss of access to their livelihoods. It is this perspective which appears to have intensified their fight for political positions within their parties. Inevitably, this faction-fighting has brought about authoritarian tendencies within the parties. This has in turn undermined any likelihood of promoting and building a democratic culture and practice within these institutions.

The political parties in Lesotho, similarly to the American parties in the 1970s, can be said to be “declining, decaying or atrophying, with no

prospects of recovery” (Ceaser 1990, 87). The major diagnosis has been the incessant infighting as a result of NEC elections. These parties have succumbed to authoritarian leadership. The cracks within these parties were more acute in the early 1990s than in any period during their history. Their ability to perform party functions was compromised by their functionalism.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from the discussion in this paper that political parties in Lesotho are at the crossroads. This is in part explicable by the fact that the major parties (BNP and LCD), who are supposed to be the drivers of democracy, appear to suffer serious deficiencies in terms of internal democracy. Furthermore, political parties are afflicted by divisive factional politics. This will not benefit Lesotho’s development efforts, let alone its democratic governance agenda..

While democratic values are many and varied, among these values is voter participation in elections. It is clear that lack of internal democracy within parties has made people apathetic and less interested in politics. People tend to consider politics as catering for the few rich elite but not as a means to develop the country and better the lives of the majority of the poor and marginalised. Judging from several by-elections held since 2002 and the recent local government elections, voters’ participation has drastically declined. This lack of interest in politics was also exacerbated by the BNP failure to participate in these elections. On the other hand, the BCP/LCD fragmentation has also made people despondent about the political behaviour of elites in power. The apparent LCD victories in these by-elections and the 2005 local government elections have made



people believe that their participation will make no meaningful difference.

The lack of a robust and dynamic national economy in Lesotho has also had a negative impact on the political elite. They have realised that not to participate in the National Executive of the party means one cannot be included on the PR list and thus is left out of the national cake. In order to sustain one's livelihood it is rational to stay in politics because there is no viable alternative employment opportunity outside the state sector.

This realisation has contributed to the lack of democracy within parties as

people jostle for positions of power, often through undemocratic means.

It therefore appears that democratic consolidation will suffer as long as these parties do not adhere to democratic principles. Differently articulated, it would be a mistake to expect undemocratic parties to drive and promote the culture of democracy in Lesotho. It has been this lack of intra-party democracy which has placed the future of Lesotho's democracy at the crossroads. Unless the two major parties discussed in this paper create clear internal democratic avenues, the Lesotho polity will always be torn asunder by intra-party conflicts and apathy among the voters.

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