

BOOK REVIEW

Politics, Government and Governance in Lesotho since 1993, by Francis K Makoa, Lambert Academic Publishing, London, 2020, ISBN 978-620-2-52869-6, pp. 156.

Despite honestly conducted elections and wide choices for voters, Lesotho's democratisation has yet to produce effective government. As Francis Makoa notes in his opening chapter, most Basotho citizens remain among the poorest people in the world, many malnourished and without livelihoods. Successive administrations since 1993 have undone the meagre developmental achievements of the Basotho National Party regime, in government from 1966 to 1986. Privatisation of national financial institutions as well as the corrupt degeneration of agricultural extension services have led to the virtual collapse of farming. Dependence on income from migrant labour remains acute and migrants themselves contend with South Africa's increasingly restrictive border controls. Meanwhile Lesotho exports water to the Witwatersrand at prices fixed in 1986 and not renegotiated since. Democratic political routines have been interrupted by bouts of militarised conflict, eight such eruptions since the re-establishment of electoral politics in 1996. How do we explain these failures?

For Makoa, Lesotho's politics are endemically conflictual, expressing socially pervasive divisions that can be traced back to fundamental disagreements over the constitutional arrangements that the British installed at the time of independence, arrangements that sought to reduce the monarchy to ceremonial functions and that were at odds with the system of indirect rule through which the colony had been governed.

For the first three decades of its independence, Lesotho's main political parties represented the interests of the king, chiefs and commoners respectively. The intensity of their differences was attributable to a political economy shaped by a century-long history of land shortage, local unemployment, migrant labour and oppressive household taxation. This was not the kind of political setting in which political leaders could agree to disagree and in which officials, policemen and magistrates were likely to remain neutral. From 1986 to 1993 soldiers would rule Lesotho.

Lesotho's democratisation between 1990 and 1993 was a top-down process, a re-establishment of electoral politics in a process in which politicians were excluded from the main decisions. The elections themselves were professionally managed by foreigners. All 60 seats were won by the Basotho Congress Party (BCP), the main opposition group since independence and sponsor of a violent

insurgency through the 1980's. The results were denounced as fraudulent by the losers, probably wrongly, though given the high-handed way in which the poll was managed the election's legitimacy was likely to be questioned. In government, the BCP antagonised top bureaucrats and military leaders by changing their jobs from permanent positions to short-term contracts, effectively politicising civil service positions. Corrupt ministerial office holders helped initiate a process of factionalism which split the ruling party.

In the 1998 elections a breakaway formation from the BCP, the Lesotho Congress of Democracy, won all the seats. This prompted renewed accusations of electoral abuse as well as a violent and destructive rebellion in Maseru precipitating an invasion by the South African military. In the imposed order that followed, extensive negotiations led to agreement over the replacement of winner-takes-all elections with a mixed-member system of proportional representation (MMP) as well as a more participatory electoral commission.

Accordingly, Lesotho's elections have become less bitterly contentious. But for Makoa, the constitutional settlement reached between 1998 and 2002 'left unresolved' the key governance and power-sharing problems – especially corruption, then and today 'the prime engine and incubator of conflict in the Kingdom' (p. 60).

Makoa is heavily critical of Lesotho's particular model of MMP, blaming it for the frequency of hung parliaments as well as the fragmentation of political parties. An illuminating chapter on political parties explains the regulatory mechanisms and electoral dynamics of the system which incentivises the breakaway of splinter parties and the formation of single member entities. Not surprisingly Basotho political parties do not function as interest aggregation agencies and indeed, party politics remains highly polarised. Without mass membership or the organisation and procedures to undertake public engagement they leave a political 'void' that fortunately is filled by a well-developed civil society (p. 85). To what extent elected local government animates constructive citizenship is a topic disappointingly unexplored in quite a long chapter on the evolution of Lesotho's municipalities.

Rather surprisingly, the increasing number of parties represented in Parliament and the instability of governing coalitions have not resulted in any lessening of executive dominance. Parliamentarians are disinclined to subject ministers to any oversight, and portfolio committees are docile. Two categories of MP's, those with and without constituencies, further undermines legislators' assertiveness. Given parliamentary unconcern about official venality, Lesotho's independent courts and its quite well-established auditing and ombudsmen system can make little headway in checking corruption. A mutinous and disruptive 3 000-strong military also helps to limit the reach of effective legal constraint and regulation. The treatment of the post-1993 military is one of the

strongest sections of the book; soldiers still view themselves as autonomous partners of the state rather than its subordinate agencies.

Professor Makoia has supplied a succinct, lucid and elegant introduction to Lesotho's political life. Of especial interest to readers of this journal is his assessment of the unintended consequences of electoral reform and his arguments about the costs of moving to proportional representation.

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