Political Instability and Elections: A Case Study of Lesotho

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An election is considered, by most political analysts, as one of the cardinal pillars of democracy, although by itself an election does not turn a political system into a democracy. Put simply, an election is a critical ingredient of democracy, but does not, in and of itself, constitute a sufficient political condition for democratic practice and culture. In Lesotho, like in most African states, the contribution of elections to democracy is hampered by political instability. Some of the negative impacts of political instability on elections include the tendency to divert the electorate's attention from real national/policy issues to trivial issues of personality squabbles and political apathy which in turn reduces voter participation during the election.

Introduction

One of the most intractable social problems of the developing countries has been political instability. Instability is used here to refer to a situation or process whereby a society is steeped in overt and covert conflicts which in turn pose serious threats to its social fabric. It should be emphasised from the on-set that conflicts, in and of themselves, may have a positive and dynamising effect on social change. Put differently, not all types of conflict are undesirable for social change. However, if conflicts are not well-managed and ultimately translate into violent confrontation among various political actors, then instability sets in.

Instability creates a climate whereby both state and non-state actors end up devoting an enormous amount of energy and resources either escalating or containing conflict situations. Consequently, economic development is sacrificed on the silver platter of political expediency. As economic development fails, poverty becomes acute. Under conditions of poverty, various types of conflict multiply and become uncontrollable. A combination

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of the political and economic conflicts has clearly marked the phenomenal incidence of instability in developing societies. In this sense, it is easy to locate the direct correlation between political instability and poverty in most of these societies.

Lesotho, as one of the developing societies, is no exception to the general trend of instability which is generated by multivariate conflicts. Our concern in this article is mainly with political instability. We trace the root causes of this instability and interrogate the extent to which general elections help escalate or de-escalate this instability.

Section One below presents an overview of Lesotho's political landscape with a view to provide a context for subsequent discussion on instability and elections. Section Two unravels the nature of political instability using two complementary modes of analysis: (a) institutional-functionalism and (b) structuralism. Section Three investigates the implications of political instability for the forthcoming general elections in Lesotho. The conclusion restates the principal thrust of the paper.

Lesotho's Political Landscape

Political instability in Lesotho is undoubtedly embedded within the trajectory of the country's political development, especially since its independence in 1966. This political transition was preceded by two important electoral contests which set the scene for the country's post-colonial politics (Matlosa, 1997). The first was the District Council election of 1960 and the National Assembly election of 1965. The three main contestants in the District Councils election were the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), the Basutoland National Party (BNP) and the Marematlou Party (MTP). The BCP won the electoral contest with a comfortable margin and was set for a landslide victory in the general election five years down the line. However, the BNP won the 1965 contest with a razor-thin majority to the chagrin of the overconfident BCP and indeed to the dismay of Lesotho's political observers who had predicted an easy BCP victory (for reasons behind the BNP victory see Weisfelder, 1974; Bardill and Cobbe, 1985; Matlosa, 1997). Relations between these two parties were marked by mutual mistrust, subdued hostility or outright hatred which in turn led to deep polarisation of society along political lines over and above

various other social cleavages. This situation had certainly laid a fertile ground for deep-seated political instability during the post-independence era.

After independence, the country inherited the Westminster model of government which was to ensure parliamentary democracy after the image of its colonial metropole-Britain. On the basis of this political model, a multi-party political system based on general election after every five years was envisioned. Thus the first round of electoral contest in post-colonial Lesotho was in 1970. Still conscious of its pyrrhic victory during the 1965 election and worried about the prospect of losing state power to the popular and well-organised BCP, the BNP turned the tables up-side down by annulling the election; suspending the constitution; suspending the judiciary; putting the late King Moshoeshoe 11 under house arrest; arresting opposition leaders and banning the Communist Party of Lesotho (CPL). Not only was the stage set for intense, and at times violent, conflicts, but by 1970 the seeds of instability had begun to germinate.

The 1970 election contributed to Lesotho's political instability not only because it was a clear breach or violation of democratic culture and practice, but moreso because it laid a firm ground for authoritarian rule. That rule proceeded through both repression and accommodation of opposition elements aimed mainly at entrenching the BNP political elite in power and keeping the BCP at bay. Repression was anchored upon the security establishment while accommodation rested on patronage and pork-barrel politics. As the political elite began to view politics in zero-sum terms, and not as a positive-sum game, contestation for state power became tantamount to some form of warfare whereby only the fittest would survive. State managers would invest more energy and resources on annihilating the opposition than on ensuring social stability and economic development. Some of the outcomes of the twin-strategy of repression and accommodation were increased defense spending and misuse/abuse of public resources by the ruling elite for self-serving political ends.

The Machiavellian praetorianism that marked Lesotho's politics since 1970 meant that elections would not feature prominently in the rulers' political scheme of things. Their continued legitimation and credibility would rest more on coercion and *diktat* than on persuasion and consensus. Evidently, the Lesotho state has experienced a serious institutional crisis since 1970. This has

been manifested by clear lack of coordination and checks and balances between and among the key organs of government i.e. the Executive, the Judiciary, the Legislature including the subsidiary layers such as the bureaucracy and the security establishment. The political supremacy of the executive over all other organs of the state was entrenched and this in part explains the all-pervasive politicisation of the key organs of the state in a way that they served the class interest of the ruling elite. The institutional crisis of the state also expressed itself in the form of a profound legitimacy and credibility crisis of the government (i.e. state managers). The general political disenchantment of electorate; internal faction-fighting within the ruling party; and conflicts between the executive and the security establishment were all critical manifestations of the legitimacy and credibility crisis of the state managers.

Until 1985, the BNP would not venture into any general election for fear of retribution from the electorate and the prospect of losing state power. Even the 1985 'mock' election was called under pressure from internal and external forces which were eager to see restoration of the legitimacy and credibility of state mangers and institutional stability of the state. The opposition parties boycotted the electoral contest due mainly to two provisions of the electoral law: (a) that each candidate had to pay M1000.00 for his/her candidature; and (b) that a candidate had to mobilise about 500 signatures of supporters endorsing his/her candidature. Although the election never really took place, the BNP candidates were declared elected unopposed merely upon nomination. Like the 1970 election, the 1985 'mock' election only helped harden political attitudes and fan open hostility and polarisation in a manner that escalates conflicts and instability in Lesotho. It is no exaggeration to surmise that after the 1985 election, the BNP government had reached a political *cul-de-sac*.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the BNP government was toppled by the military in 1986. Although various internal and external factors contributed to that sudden political change, the first of its nature in the whole Southern Africa region, the crisis of legitimacy and credibility occupied centre-stage. During its eight-year tenure of office, the military regime merely deepened the authoritarian character of the state and its institutional crisis became much more pronounced. The legitimacy of the rulers was founded solely on the bullet rather than the ballot. In the process, democratic practice and culture remained a distant mirage. Under pressure from both internal and external actors, the military relinquished power in 1993, retired gracefully to the

barracks and opened the political market place to free competition for state power. This led to the holding of the 1993 election which was won overwhelmingly by the BCP (Southall and Petlane, 1995; Matlosa, 1997).

Interestingly, the 1993 election turned out to be all about settling political scores of 1970. The electoral contest was more about punishing the BNP for its unconstitutional actions during and after the 1970 election than about the critical issues for the survival and economic development of the country. Issues of policy and ideological differences mattered little in the minds of the electorate as emotions drove their impulses to punish the BNP and reward the BCP. Hence it was that, as Ajulu puts it, "the 1993 Lesotho election was precisely about the 1970 election" (1995:16). Southall and Petlane corroborate this observation by arguing that "the 1993 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" (1995:xiii). The BCP's landslide victory was both intriguing and interesting. Intriguing because although most political observers had predicted a likely victory for the BCP, the scale of the victory stunned even experts themselves. Interesting because the electoral outcome ensured continuity of Lesotho's age-old tradition of one-party rule, albeit this time around predicated, as it were, on the ballot not on the bullet. Even the 1993 election, which is generally acclaimed as the most democratic of all the post-independence electoral contests, did not lead to de-escalation of Lesotho's conflicts and instability.

The key manifestations of the instability included: (a) conflicts between the state managers and other key organs of the state such as the monarchy, the security establishment, the bureaucracy etc.; (b) diminishing national sovereignty as external forces came to play a key role in resolving Lesotho internal conflict thus stealing the political limelight from the state and its institutions; and (c) intense faction-fighting within the BCP which ultimately led to the split within the party.

The Nature of Political Instability

A careful and rigorous analysis of political instability in any society requires an application of useful and reliable instruments of interpretation of phenomena. Without such tools, any adventure into that exercise will be tantamount to navigating in the high seas without a compass. In order to dig

out the deeper roots and permutations of political instability in Lesotho, this study uses two distinct, albeit complementary, approaches: (a) institutional-functionalism and (b) structuralism.   The former explains instability by focusing on the interface between institutionalisation and political participation, while the latter gives pride of place to social stratification and the configuration of power relations among social forces within and without the ambit of the state.

(a)   *Institutional-functionalism: institutions and participation*

In his seminal work published in 1968 under the title "Political Order in Changing Societies", Samuel Huntington propounded a thesis that in societies where political participation is high yet the process of political institutionalisation is low and weak, there is bound to be what he terms political instability or political decay.   Political instability/decay in most developing societies, argues Huntington, is "in large part the product of rapid social change and rapid mobilisation of new groups into politics coupled with the slow development of political institutions" (1968:4).

In most African countries, Lesotho included, the political system is fragmented and the "political institutions have little power, less majesty, and no resiliency ...[and]... governments simply do not govern"(Huntington, 1968:2). Huntington perceives political institutionalisation as the process by which organisations and procedures acquire value and stability over time. The degree of institutionalisation of any political system can best be defined by adaptability, complexity, autonomy and coherence of its organisations and procedures (Huntington, 1968:12).

The application of the Huntingtonian thesis in Lesotho's contemporary politics reveals that, indeed, there is a high rate of political mobilisation and participation whereas political institutionalisation severely lags behind.   The incongruence between political participation and institutionalisation helps us to fathom the present political instability/decay which has thus far adversely affected the nation-building project and economic development as a whole. The four defining characteristics of political institutionalisation can be used as the key indicators to demonstrate the incompatibility of participation and institutionalisation which in turn breeds political instability/decay.

(i)   **Adaptability-Rigidity**

The political system is not static; it is a dynamic process that has to always adapt to both endogenous and exogenous changes in order to function properly. The more the adaptability of the system, observes Huntington, "the more highly institutionalised it is; the less adaptable and more rigid it is, the lower its level of institutionalisation" (1968:13).   The Lesotho political system exhibits extreme forms of rigidity which inhibit adaptability to domestic, regional and global changes over time. This explains, in part, why the country is unable to adapt properly to the current centripetal pressures unleashed by the twin processes of globalisation and regionalisation to the extent that its very survival is at risk.   The specific examples that attest to the rigidity of the system are as follows:

- ♦   the one-party rule remains the norm since the 1966 independence;
- ♦   the electoral system has not been adapted in such a way that it provides mutual benefit to the electorate and political leaders; and
- ♦   from 1970 to 1993, the country was ruled by decrees as the national constitution remained suspended.

(ii)   **Complexity-Simplicity**

The political system is complex if it is run by clearly structured hierarchies of power, authority and responsibilities.   It is simple if it rotates around an individual, thereby promoting the personality cult syndrome.   The more the complex the system, the more institutionalised it is; the less complex and more simple it is, the less institutionalised it is.   The simplicity of the Lesotho political system is marked by the following:

- ♦   the personality cult syndrome;
- ♦   lack of distinction between the ruling party and government;
- ♦   problems of succession at both party and government levels; and
- ♦   the predominance of patronage or pork-barrel politics.

(iii)   **Autonomy-Subordination**

Another measure of the level of institutionalisation of the system is the extent
to which it is relatively autonomous from various political forces operating
within it. Huntington postulates that "political institutionalisation, in the sense
of autonomy, means the development of political organisations and procedures
that are not simply expressions of the interests of particular social groups"
(1968:20). In other words the state must develop national programmes that
transcend sectarian interests of particular social or class forces and in that way
political institutionalisation is ensured. That the key organs of the Lesotho
state are subordinated to the interests of the ruling class for both political
expediency and economic accumulation brooks no dispute.

(iv)   **Coherence-Disunity**

The coherence of the political system is crucial in determining its level of
institutionalisation. According to Huntington, the more unified and coherent
the system is, "the more highly institutionalised it is; the greater the disunity
of the ...[system..., the less it is institutionalised" (1968:22). The coherence
of the system can be ensured through a broadly-based political consensus or a
social contract between the government and the governed, political tolerance
and respect for all symbols of nationhood. Disunity which undermines stability
and institutionalisation in Lesotho is manifested by the following:

- deep-seated political polarisation;
- intense political conflicts and lack of internal conflict
  management mechanisms; and
- intervention of various external forces into the system, thus
  undermining the capacity of the state and whittling the already
  debile sovereignty.

As is abundantly clear from the foregoing, Huntington's institutional-
functionalist approach is much more concerned with political institutions and
political behaviour and how their interface leads to either stability or
instability. Valuable as this approach is, its major deficiency is that it reduces
the heart of politics to institutions and the way they function. In this way, this
approach fails to capture the role of other social forces outside the state sphere
in moulding political systems. This is so because the approach does not seem

to acknowledge the existence of class and class struggles in African societies. That is why it does not perceive some of the conflicts as class-based, but rather suggests that all forms of instability are related to the degree of institutionalisation and level of participation. The structuralist perspective comes in handy as a complementary theoretical theodolite for measuring political instability in Africa. It is to this perspective that we now turn.

(b)   *Structuralism: the power-development nexus*

Structuralist approaches to the analysis of political instability in Africa proceed from the premise that the ruling classes have reduced political power to an end in itself primarily for their own self-serving interests. Hence it was that African politics came to centre more around the state and state power leading Chabal to conclude that "to talk about politics in Africa is virtually to talk about the state" (1994:68). This is exactly how the ruling elite defines the political process. In this perception, national development suffers as the ruling elite focus energies and resources to that 'scarce commodity'.power. The capture of state power, upon independence, immediately assured the new ruling elite enormous political power. The newly-acquired political power was then translated into economic power through accumulation and, in most instances, malfeasance by the ruling classes. The combination of political and economic power was meant to ensure the total, and, most often uncontested, hegemony of the ruling party over politics both within and outside the state sphere. This explains, in part, the all-pervasive tendency towards authoritarianism of both civilian and military varieties in the African continent especially during the period 1960s-1980s. There is no doubt that one of the victims of political instability and economic malaise in Africa has been development since independence. Claude Ake reminds us that:

> although political independence brought some changes to the composition of
> the state managers, the character of the state remained much as it has in the
> colonial era. It continued to be totalistic in scope, constituting a statist
> economy. It presented itself as an apparatus of violence, had a narrow social
> base, and relied for compliance on coercion rather than authority (1996:3).

This does clearly suggest that the political environment in Africa since independence, with few exceptions, has been immensely inimical to development. In Ake's words, "the struggle for power was so absorbing that everything else, including development, was marginalised" (1996:7). Chabal

corroborates this argument by observing that the post-colonial state was endowed with

> an inordinate degree of power, given the means to control the fate and the resources of the independent country effectively unhindered and unaccountable. It was not just that the post-colonial state possessed all the formal power and attributes of the colonial state, it was also that it was subject to the constraints of colonial political accountability (1994:72).

Herein lies the power-development nexus that explains political instability through the epistemological prisms of structuralism. Simply put, the social stratification in Africa since independence has ensured the political hegemony of the ruling classes over all other class forces. Capturing state power became a *sine qua non* for hegemonic politics. Hegemonic politics has given way to perpetual underdevelopment and the institutionalisation of what could be termed 'crony democracy'in most African countries. This political hegemony has been used by the ruling classes not only to reproduce themselves, but also to ensure economic accumulation. The failure of development strategies and policies led to the diminution of the legitimacy and credibility of the ruling parties in the eyes of the electorate. The more the ruling parties lost their legitimacy and credibility, the more they resorted to rule by coercion and this in turn intensified political instability.

Lesotho's political elite has not behaved any differently from their counterparts in other parts of the African continent thus far. From the BNP government, through the military junta and the BCP rule, to the present LCD regime, the principal pre-occupation of the ruling elite has been the accumulation of power and imposing their political hegemony over other class forces outside the state in order to undermine opposition. Carrot and stick tactics have been effectively used by the ruling elite with a view to exhort political acquiescence on the part of various other actors in the political scene. The carrot strategy has involve mainly a recourse to politics of patronage or what can otherwise be termed pork-barrel politics whereby the political elite extends political favours to buy support. The stick strategy has taken the form of repression by way of elevating the role of the bullet as a medium of interaction and discourse in the political system, thus undermining the significance of the ballot. This has essentially been the form and content of Lesotho's 'crony democracy' whose principal anchors have been repression and accommodation. This

explains why elections have not really been a key pillar of Lesotho's political system since independence. The ruling political elite did not see the value of elections as they generally perceived the fountain of their legitimacy as the security establishment which was immensely abused. Even the few elections that were attempted were either marked by conflict or resulted in conflict situations. What then are the implications of the current conflict situation in Lesotho for the 1998 election? It to this vexed question that the next section now turns the spotlight.

Implications for the 1998 Election

The Lesotho election has been scheduled for the 23th May and parliament was dissolved on the 27th February 1998. A lot of steps have been taken to prepare for the election including (a) the establishment of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC); (b) the amendment of the Constitution to allow the eighteen-year youth to vote; (c) the delimitation of constituencies; (d) the Ngo-driven process of voter education; (e) registration of political parties in advance of political campaign; and (f) registration of voters.

The above steps notwithstanding, the IEC seems to be facing difficult problems which could hamper the smooth running of the election. In fact the IEC and the government disagreed fundamentally on the appropriate date for the election. The former proposed that the election be rescheduled for sometime in August 1998. Various factors drove the IEC perception that it would be impossible to organise a free and fair election any time between April and June 1998. These included the following: (a) voter register has not yet been compiled and computerised; (b) the IEC itself does not seem to have enough resources (financial, technical and human) to organise the election as originally envisaged; (c) the sour relations between the IEC and the government does not augur well for smooth preparation of the election; and (d) the delimitation of constituencies is still marred by some controversy between the government and the opposition parties given that it was undertaken prior to the establishment of the IEC, hence opposition political parties argue that it amounted to gerrymandering by the ruling party.

Although the election process itself is confronted with various technical problems which fall outside the purview of this article, the major challenge is posed by political instability in the country which has a long history and deep-

seated roots. The climax of this instability was wrought by the split of the ruling party 1997 which led to the establishment of the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) which immediately declared itself the ruling party. In the meantime, the BCP which was put into power by a popular vote in 1993 was turned into an official opposition. This situation has not only exposed hollowness of the Constitution in guarding against political excesses by the executive branch of government, but has caused so much bitterness among both the political elites and the mass of the people. It has deepened further political polarisation and political disenchantment which are clearly to have their own impact on the election. Anecdotal evidence point to a tendency towards political apathy among Basotho and their loss of confidence in political parties. This suggests two possible processes: (a) this election will be marked by more independent candidates than any other election in Lesotho's history; and (b) voter turn-over will be extremely low compared with the past elections. It is therefore not surprising that some labour unions have publicly passed a vote of no confidence in political parties and announced that they will field their own candidates during the election who will represent workers' interests in parliament.

On Sunday, 1st February 1998, the Lesotho Clothing and Allied Workers Union (LECAWU) held a special conference to elect its own candidate for the forthcoming general election who will contest for a parliamentary seat in the Thetsane Constituency No. 31. The importance of this conference, which was attended by about 600 workers, is three-pronged. First, thus far unions have been tied to right-wing parties which have misused and abused them for the latter's own self-serving political ends. Unions in Lesotho are beginning to come to terms with this stark reality and this conference was an important step to break with the past political traditions and as such it represents a political tendency that could threaten the power base of right-wing political elite. Second, the conference set a precedent which could as well be replicated in other industries and other spheres of social life as organised civil society becomes disenchanted with the political elite. This is a trend that is discernible in most parts of Africa since the late 1980s which some scholars refer to as the informalisation of politics (Gibbon et al, 1992). Thirdly, the conference elected a female candidate, Mrs Matanki Mokhantšo, thus contributing to efforts made by various organs of civil society to increase women's participation in the country's political process.

A couple of weeks after LECAWU's ostensibly epoch-making conference, a serious industrial dispute erupted at Thetsane industrial site as the CGM factory workers demanded improved remuneration and working conditions. As the management remained intransigent and ultimately purported to have summarily dismissed all the workers, the latter staged a sit-in on the factory premises and locked part of the management inside the factory for the entire night of February 12, 1998. A court order directing the workers to leave the premises of the factory and to release the management was served on the Union leader, Billy Macaefa, at around 10.00 p.m. Since the workers had ignored the court order, in the morning of the following day, the police intervened forcefully and killed one woman while six more workers sustained serious bullet injuries. Furthermore, about 40 more people suffered injuries but were discharged immediately from Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Maseru on Friday, 13th February 1998.

This incident was high on the agenda of nine (9) trade unions which met from 14th to 15th February, 1998 at the Maseru Campus of the National University of Lesotho to form a trade union federation known as the Congress of Lesotho Trade Unions (COLETU). The conference condemned the killing of one worker, injury of many others and harassment of the leader of LECAWU by the police. Furthermore, the conference resolved as follows, among others: (a) COLETU fully supports the decision by LECAWU to field an independent candidate for the forthcoming election; (b) COLETU shall not look at trade unionism from a narrow economistic standpoint, but shall have a clear political programme to address the broader interests of the working class; and (c) COLETU shall strike a tactical alliance with a progressive political party whose manifesto and track record would be found to be in accord with the Workers' Charter and interests of the workers.

Conclusion

Political instability has critical bearing on elections and democracy in any given country. In Lesotho, it is abundantly clear that elections have either fanned political conflicts or have not been able to resolve deep-seated conflicts. This does not mean that elections are inherently conflict-inducing or are unable, in and of themselves, to reduce the intensity of instability. But this situation illustrates the manner in which Lesotho's political elite perceive politics and the role of elections. As we have argued, the political elite view politics in zero-

sum terms and regard elections as an exercise wherein winner takes all and totally annihilates the loser and in turn institutionalises what can be termed 'crony democracy'. The term 'crony democracy' is used here to characterise the type of political system which is predicated mainly on patronage and pork-barrel politics. Interestingly, the flip-side of pork-barrel politics is political repression and authoritarianism. So 'crony democracy' could be seen as democracy for the political elite and their cronies and authoritarianism for many other social forces outside the state arena who cannot be won over through patronage. This has been the hallmark of Lesotho politics since independence to date and to what extent the 1998 election will bring about a fundamental change of the system away from 'crony democracy' still remains a moot point.

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