

# LESOTHO COUPS D'ÉTAT: POLITICAL DECAY AND EROSION OF DEMOCRACY

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## INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND OF LESOTHO

The Basotho nation and its proto state came into being in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1868 the territory became the colonial possession of the British Crown.<sup>3</sup> As a colonial possession, Britain entrenched its colonial policies in a newly acquired territory. Its loss of political sovereignty and indigenous independence was implicit in the Annexation Proclamation which declared that "the said tribe of the Basotho shall be, and shall be taken to be to all intents and purposes British subjects, and the territory of the said tribe shall be, and shall be taken to be British territory".<sup>4</sup> Bringing the Basotho under British subjugation meant an end to and the amelioration of the communal practices and the beliefs of the Basotho. As British subjects, the Basotho had to conform to the voice of the new masters. This conformity was emphasised in the churches, schools and communal assemblies (Li pitsong) under the supervision of the British officials. Some chiefs collaborated with the new rulers to suppress possible insurrection among the Basotho.

Rugege argued that the Britons subjugated the Basotho because they wanted to avert a possible annihilation of the people in the continuing wars with the Boers.<sup>5</sup> Protecting the Basotho against Boer intrusion from the Free State was an oversimplification of the state of affairs. It is true that the Free State wanted to incorporate Lesotho but it is important also to recognise that Britain had an ambition of acquiring colonies from Cape to Cairo. Therefore the acquisition of Lesotho in one way or the other would enable Britain to attain her imperial dream. Britain also misconstrued the request of Moshoeshe the Great. He requested Britain to have Lesotho as a protectorate, not as a colony, but the colonization sentiments of Britain could not be confined to the request of Moshoeshe the Great. Lesotho, like

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<sup>3</sup> ML Pherudi, Paper titled, "Intolerance election outcome: Focus on Africa", August 1999, pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Morija Museum and Archives, Annexation Proclamation No. 14 of 1868.

<sup>5</sup> S Rugege, *Chieftaincy and society in Lesotho: A study in the political economy of the Basotho chieftaincy from pre-colonial times to present* (Oxford, 1993), p. 20.

a helpless lamb, found itself between the two wolves, i.e. the Britons and the Boers, and the strongest of the two entrenched itself among the Basotho.

The proclamation brought the Basotho and their land under total subjugation to British control.<sup>6</sup> As British subjects, the Basotho were subjected to the tax system; they had to pay head and hut taxes. There was taxation without true representation, because some chiefs had become collaborators with the British colonial officials. Head tax was paid by the head of the family while the hut tax was paid by every member of the household. Tax collected was not necessarily used to develop the Basotho and their land; instead it was used to prolong the colonial stay in the territory. The communal subsistence economy was destroyed and the Basotho became labourers, who earned money to be able to pay tax. Seeking labour resulted in social disintegration of family life among the Basotho. Under British rule, Lesotho became a source of forced labour.

For ninety eight years Lesotho remained a British protectorate until they were granted independence on 4 October 1966.<sup>7</sup> Freedom was not voluntarily given by Britain. It was demanded by some of the Basotho, who wanted to have a say in matters which directly affected them. The breaking of the colonial manacles resulted in receiving the responsibility of governing the country and determining the form of government free of colonial influences and dictates. The attainment of independence was a moment of excitement for the Basotho since they would have an opportunity of taking charge of their own destiny.

Lesotho presents one of the most bizarre political complexities of southern Africa. Its politics since independence have been characterised by a deep-seated constitutional crisis, lack of a popularly elected government and rule by brute force rather than consensus (which have tremendously undermined human rights and accountability), and a lack of well-co-ordinated, synchronised popular strategies which could have long ago exerted pressure for democratic transformation.<sup>8</sup>

## ORIGIN AND DEFINITION OF A COUP D'ÉTAT

The concept coup d'état (ku: deita) is of French origin. The military coups were the French contribution to the modern world and constitutional reality.<sup>9</sup> Coup

<sup>6</sup> NL Mahao, *To integrate or not to integrate: The predicament of Lesotho security in the 1990s*, (s.a., s.l.), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> K Matlosa, "Multi-partyism versus democracy in southern Africa: Whither Lesotho", *Lesotho Law Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1991, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> WCM Maqutu, *Contemporary constitutional history of Lesotho* (Mazenod, 1990), pp. 2-3.

d'état means the violent or illegal seizure of power.<sup>10</sup> Louis XIV of France had all power concentrated in his hands. He aptly summed up the situation in his phrase "I am the state". On another occasion he is reported to have said "the thing is legal because I wish it".<sup>11</sup> During the then French rule, power was in the hands of an individual, who made decisions without consultation and that triggered the reaction to absolute rule, which was in the form of a revolution which finally culminated into a coup d'état.

The injustices of the social system were revealed in the writings of the philosophers of the eighteenth century. It was the age of reason, when men adopted a critical attitude towards all institutions - political, economic and social. Philosophers like Montesquieu criticised the French form of government and praised the British constitution because it gave liberty to individuals. Voltaire and Rousseau asserted that the people have the right to rebel against the ruler, because in France the king had become a tyrant and oppressor, thereby losing all claim to allegiance. They further argued that if people are not satisfied, they must be able to change their ruler.<sup>12</sup> The French philosophers discouraged despotic rule and a coup d'état was seen as a viable solution since the despot had all protective means like the army. As the winds of change spread into other parts of the world, the French strategy of forceful removal of despots became a norm and Lesotho was no exception in this regard. The only difference was that in Lesotho coups were not spear-headed by philosophers but by politicians, the monarchy, the army and some disgruntled civilians.

## FACTORS WHICH FACILITATED COUPS IN LESOTHO

Factionalism<sup>13</sup> was one of the contributing factors to the coups in Lesotho. The country was mainly dominated by factions and that was evident in many respects. For example, after the 1970 elections some members of the Basotho National Party accepted the defeat of their party by the Basotho Congress Party led by Ntsu Mokhehle. When Chief Leabua Jonathan was preparing to hand over power, the faction led by Fred Roach and Jack Hindmarsh<sup>14</sup> did not agree with Leabua. Both Roach and Hindmarsh had great influence on Leabua and they convinced him not to hand over power to the victorious Basotho Congress Party. They mainly feared for revenge and the coup was an alternative at that time, which

<sup>10</sup> The Oxford Hachette French Dictionary, French-English (Oxford, 1994), p. 1130.

<sup>11</sup> Britannica Encyclopaedia (Chicago, 15<sup>th</sup> edition), Vol. 19, p. 493.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> ML Pherudi, *The Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho - A community in political crisis, 1965-1986* (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, 1996), p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Roach was the Head of the Lesotho Police whereas Jack Hindmarsh was the Commissioner of Police. They were both British, and helped Leabua Jonathan to suspend the constitution. They also opposed nationalists like Ntsu Mokhehle.

resulted in the political decay and erosion of the democratic process of the ballot paper. No one could ever expect commissioned officers of Her Britannic Majesty's government to overthrow a constitution which was a British Act of Parliament. Yet in Lesotho they did just that. After all, they were not bona fide of Lesotho. It was evident that their patriotism was with Britain, not with Lesotho, despite the fact that Lesotho's constitution was tailored along the lines of Westminster.

Depressing economic conditions in Lesotho also facilitated coups in the area. There were no huge industries which could provide jobs for the Basotho, and such a situation promoted poverty and fatalism among them. This view was corroborated by Weisfelder who said that "a highly politicised population exists in an environment of abject poverty and negligible potential satisfying popular aspirations ... fully mobilised with no place to go, the Basutho employ their energies in political battles".<sup>15</sup> The political battles were evident through the coups which took place in Lesotho.

The emergence of the aristocracy and the commoners among the Basotho became fertile ground for coups. The commoners distrusted the aristocracy and felt that they were not representing their interests and aspirations. On the contrary, the aristocracy underestimated the strength of the commoners by neglecting them. Indirect rule by the British created more divergence between the commoners and the aristocracy because the latter were held in high esteem by the colonial British and that made the commoners feel like outcasts.<sup>16</sup> The commoners felt sidelined by the chiefs even on matters which directly affected them. In 1974 the commoners showed their dissatisfaction by attempting a coup under the auspices of the Basutho Congress Party which was crushed by the then government led by the Basutho National party, assisted by Fred Roach and Jack Hindmarsh.

Resistance to change usually aggravated violence. There has been a lot of violence in the new African governments, including Lesotho, due to the desire of a strong leader to silence others.<sup>17</sup> Immediately when Maj. Gen. Justin Metsing Lekhanya took power after the 1986 coup, he silenced all opposition through Order No. 4 of 1986, forbidding party political activity until 1992.<sup>18</sup> The coming into office of Maj. Gen. Lekhanya showed that criticism and opposition would not be tolerated and that created suspicions and doubts about the mission of the government led by Maj. Gen. Lekhanya, hence the need for a subversive strategy of dealing with the new regime. Meanwhile the moral base of the military rule was

<sup>15</sup> RF Weisfelder, "Power struggle in Lesotho", *Africa Report*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 1976, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Transcript interview with EP Makombe, Professor of History, National University of Lesotho, 29 June 1995.

<sup>17</sup> S Marvin, *Africa - South of Sahara*, pp. 148-50.

<sup>18</sup> Maqutu, p. 16; Government Printers, Maseru, *The laws of Lesotho*, Vol. XXXI, 1986, p. 11.

eroded every day. After the 1986 coup, there was propagation by some members of the army that "hoa ikhapeloa" (it is self-usurped).<sup>19</sup> Such propagation created an impression that anybody could stage a coup when he had the support of the army. The factors cited clearly show that no single factor could be attributed to the dawn of coups in Lesotho. But most importantly, the support of the police and the army to whichever party intended to stage a coup, was very critical. Both the army and the police were the pawns in this game, because more often than not they helped in a coup because of the promised incentives like pay increase, and if the promised incentive was not fulfilled, they would not hesitate to stage another coup within a short space of time. Therefore the coup plotters had a strategy of dangling a financial carrot before the armed force members in order to elicit their support. But again, if the armed forces are like loose cannons, they can easily hold a country hostage by launching a coup within the wink of an eye.

## COUPS IN LESOTHO

The first general elections held on the basis of a universal suffrage in Lesotho, took place on 29 April 1965 and the Basotho National Party emerged victorious.<sup>20</sup> Going to the polls for the first time was a real experience for the Basotho. Most importantly, the Roman Catholic Church contributed greatly to the victory of the Basotho National Party. After the elections Chief Leabua Jonathan became the first Prime Minister of independent Lesotho.<sup>21</sup> After winning the elections, Leabua mocked the opposition, who had lost, by saying that "I haven't got degrees like those in the opposition, I only made standard six but I am the Prime Minister".<sup>22</sup> Leabua Jonathan's boasting was part of his political strategy but he then exposed himself by admitting that he did not possess what it takes to lead the country in terms of academic standing. Indirectly, he sent a signal that he would not tolerate opposition or defeat in the next coming elections.

The next round of elections was scheduled for 27 January 1970.<sup>23</sup> Before the election day Chief Masiribane of Quthing, the leading Basotho National Party leader, was confident about his party's victory and that became evident when he declared: "How can we lose the match? The ball is ours, the jerseys are ours, the field is ours and more importantly, the referee too, is ours".<sup>24</sup> It was evident that the Basotho National Party hoped to sweep the electoral boards like it had done in

<sup>19</sup> Pherudi, *The Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho*, p. 140.

<sup>20</sup> *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, Vol. 98, No. 6, 27 March 1965, 1; WJ Breytenbach, *Society, politics and government of Bolewa* (Pretoria, 1977), p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> *Mohlalani*, Vol. 11, No. 13, 27 March 1966, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> APJ van Rensburg, *Contemporary leaders of Africa* (Cape Town, 1975), p. 187.

<sup>23</sup> JJ Swanepoel, *Die diplomatie van adv. B.J. Vorster* (Bloemfontein, 1982), p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> J Diekie and J Rake, *Who is who in Africa* (London, 1973), p. 215.

1965. They undermined the canvassing power of the opposition by taking it for granted that they were the victors even before the election outcome was known.

The election day dawned and the Basotho went to the polls in large numbers since the 1970 elections were the first after independence. Before the final election results were announced, the then Prime Minister, Leabua Jonathan, had abandoned the elections, imprisoned the political leaders (among them Ntsu Mokhehle, the leader of the Basotho Congress Party, that was leading the votes), and declared a state of emergency (Qomatsi), suspended the constitution, announced a "five year holiday from politics"<sup>25</sup> and further emphasised: "I have seized power and I am not ashamed of it, I know that the majority of people are behind me."<sup>26</sup> His lack of shame was not shared by most of his fellow countrymen and was self-deceiving because the unofficial election outcome showed that the Basotho National Party did not get the majority of the votes, instead it was beaten by a huge margin. The Basotho National Party had 127 410 votes whereas the Basotho Congress Party only had 151 862 (151 862 - 127 410 = 24 458). In the light of the statistical computations, it was difficult to comprehend Leabua's assertion that the majority of people were behind him. Unfortunately he was not aware that the majority had turned against him and were no longer supporting him.

In defence of his action, Leabua Jonathan submitted that "I, the Prime Minister of Lesotho, in terms of the constitution hereby declare the state of emergency. The decision I and my ministers have just taken is in full consideration of the interests of the nation. This drastic step has been taken in order to protect not only the liberty of the individuals but also law and order. The nation requires the maintenance of law and order ... I hereby suspend the constitution, pending the drafting of the new one..."<sup>27</sup> Leabua displayed a totalitarian attitude by refusing to accept a political defeat through democratic means, and that marked the first coup d'état in the history of Lesotho. His understanding of democracy based on the Westminster model was beginning to fade away and like Louis XVI of France, he wanted to hoard power for himself. His assertion that through the coup he was representing the aspirations of the nation of the Basotho, was unfounded. He was representing his own interests and further disappointed the nation because failure to recognise the election outcome spelt doom for Lesotho. Those who publicly confessed the misrepresentation of the interests became the victims of state repression and oppressive agents like "koeeko". Totalitarian power was entrenched by using non-existent threats of violence as an excuse. The drafting of the new constitution

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> DT Sixishe, *But give him an army too. Leabua Jonathan, a biography* (Maseru, 1994), p. 67.

would surely not guarantee free democratic practices, for it would never come into being because it would be used as one of the tools of ousting him.

After the 1970 coup, Lesotho became a one-party dictatorship under Leabua Jonathan,<sup>28</sup> and that marked the first step of political decay and the erosion of democracy because the will of the Basotho was violated and undermined. Political actors who opposed the despotic rule of Leabua became victims of torture and brutal murder. Many Basotho went into exile and became refugees. Only the Basotho National Party remained operative. Suppression of political activity created a political colossus out of Leabua Jonathan, who continued to crush any form of opposition. Little did he know that those who took power by force would lose it in the same manner.

Chief Leabua Jonathan was lambasted from different angles for his actions. *The African Weekly Post* described the Basotho Prime Minister as a "man who would not take no for an answer"<sup>29</sup> and launched a scathing attack in an editorial entitled "political thuggery", saying that "no amount of verbal camouflage about law and order, and preserving the freedom of the individual can disguise that the Prime Minister has behaved like a political thug defending his territory against a rival by jailing Mr Ntsu Mokhehle and declaring the state of emergency".<sup>30</sup> More wryly the *Rand Daily Mail* remarked that Chief Leabua Jonathan's "discovery of democracy's defect was made in the nick of time. It coincided precisely, it seems, with his realisation that he had just lost the election. At that point he found it necessary to nullify the results and imprison the opponents".<sup>31</sup> The condemnation of the 1970 coup was a sign of total rejection. It is interesting to realise how some politicians maneuvered the election outcome. Leabua could not accept the defeat, and planning the coup only became a reality when he realised that his party was losing. That coup was therefore an impromptu decision.

Instead of condemning Leabua's coup, the then Prime Minister of apartheid South Africa, John Vorster, submitted that "despite the 1970 coup I am prepared to continue good relations with Leabua Jonathan".<sup>32</sup> The criticism and the condemnation of Leabua's coup was vital because preservation of democracy should have been a priority. His act was an embarrassment to democracy because it suppressed the decision and the aspiration of the masses. The coup and the emergency regulations created miseries for the Basotho, because they were not used to emergency powers, police roadblocks or having their vehicles stopped and searched. They

<sup>28</sup> *The African Weekly Post*, 1 February 1970, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 February 1970, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Cape Times*, 3 February 1986, p. 1.

were under absolute authority for the first time and the disappearance of people or their being under house arrest, were new practices, frustrating and confusing the Basotho. They learnt to live under the emergency rules as part of a new dispensation. The condonation of the coup in Lesotho by the then apartheid South Africa clearly showed that there was little respect for democracy by the apartheid regime particularly when the minority ruled over the majority at that time.

The second coup developed gradually in Lesotho, and the then apartheid South African government played a pivotal role. Unlike the 1970 coup, which was internally orchestrated, the second one was externally instigated. South Africa closed the borders with Lesotho and only one vehicle per hour was allowed to cross the border. Cars and trucks were subjected to a thorough and extensive search and some took several days to get across the border, but most trucks carrying perishable goods turned back rather than waiting. Key items such as hospital supplies and petrol were not allowed to cross into Lesotho. As border restrictions began to bite, South Africa was preparing a fertile ground for a coup,<sup>33</sup> because they wanted Leabua Jonathan to collaborate with them by handing over the cadres of the liberation movements like the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and the South African Communist Party. In return Leabua would be given the members of the Lesotho Liberation Army who were destabilising the Basotho National Party's government by mortar attacks. Leabua refused to co-operate by doing what he termed "political business transaction with human beings". He remained adamant and further extended a hand of friendship to the communist countries like Cuba.

Around midday, Wednesday 15 January 1986, the Lesotho Defence Force Units surrounded the Prime Minister's offices and the Basotho National Party's Headquarters.<sup>34</sup> They cleared the civil servants out of the Prime Minister's offices, and apparently talked to Leabua about their concerns, which among others included the disarming of the Basotho National Party Youth League which posed as a threat to the Lesotho Defence Force and also about the border blockade by South Africa. On 17 January Maj. Gen. Justin Metsing Lekhanya and a six person delegation set off to Pretoria for discussions on the border crisis. Their efforts were fruitless because South Africa stood firm in its demands which among others included the expulsion of liberation movements like the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and the South African Communist Party.<sup>35</sup> At that time, when the former South African apartheid government also became adamant, it gave the assurance to some members of the Lesotho Defence Force that they would not op-

<sup>33</sup> *Weekly Mail*, 23 January 1986, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Pherudi, *The Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho*, pp. 117-8.

<sup>35</sup> R Edgar, "The Lesotho coup of 1986", *South Africa Review*, p. 378.



pose a coup which would indirectly influence and hasten an insurrection against Leabua and his government. Therefore a fertile ground was prepared for a coup.

On 18 January 1986 some members of the Lesotho Defence Force attacked the homes of the leading Basotho National Party's Youth League's sympathisers. The Lesotho Defence Force was in firm control of the situation. At that time they had not yet decided the fate of Leabua Jonathan. In the meantime Jonathan had gone to his Kolonyana home, about 50 kilometres from Maseru, the capital city. Once there, he put up the appearance of being in firm control of the situation and declared that "I myself believe that I am in firm, complete control. I have never in all my political career of more than thirty years been so accepted, not only within the military force, but within the country at large."<sup>36</sup> Ironically, he was unaware that his days were numbered. The coup was spearheaded by the Letsie brothers, Sekhobe and Thaabe. Initially Maj. Gen. Lekhanya did not support the coup proposal due to his allegiance to Leabua, but he was informed that the coup would nevertheless go on with or without his support. On second thoughts he collaborated, particularly when South Africa indicated that it would not intervene in the event of a coup.

On 20 January 1986, Radio Lesotho announced that the Lesotho Defence Force had toppled the government of Leabua Jonathan<sup>37</sup> after twenty years in power.<sup>38</sup> The first five years, 1965-1970, were legitimate years of rule but from 1970 to 1986, thus almost sixteen years, he was an illegitimate ruler because he took power through coercion, not through the outcome of a secret ballot, and a one-party dictatorship was given a resounding farewell.<sup>39</sup> The second coup in Lesotho showed that an unwanted government could not be kept in power, particularly when it would not dance to the tune of the then apartheid South African government. In time it was evident that South Africa was prepared to render any neighbour ungovernable if it refused to comply with its demands and Lesotho presented an example of this. After the coup Maj. Gen. Lekhanya was ushered with the chairpersonship of the Military Council, because he was a long serving soldier in the army and his experience would enable the new military government to handle any possible insurrection with ease.

He then committed his government to full co-operation with South Africa by stating publicly that "(i)t is our commitment to normalise the relations with South

<sup>36</sup> Pherudi, *The Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho*, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> R. Edgar, "After the coup: South Africa's relations with Lesotho", *South Africa Review* 5, p. 378.

<sup>38</sup> "The 1993 elections in Lesotho and the nature of the BCP victory", *African Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1, June 1997, p. 144.

<sup>39</sup> Transformation Resource Centre, Maseru, "South Africa uses economic blackmail to reduce Lesotho to its knees" (AHG-00226).

Africa and we shall do all that is humanly possible to achieve this objective. We espouse the noble principle of peaceful co-existence and neighbourhood and we are prepared to demonstrate our sincerity whenever called upon".<sup>40</sup> Collaboration with South Africa was part of Lekhanya's strategy of entrenching his stay in power, because any insurrection which was intended to reinstate Leabua's government would be crushed, if possible with South African help.

He then summoned the opposition leaders in Lesotho and warned them that "no political activities would be allowed until such time that goals of national reconciliation shall have been agreed upon, no person shall take part in any public meeting organised for propagating political ideas or information. The display in public places of whatever signs, symbols, flags, insignia or emblems or political uniform is barred".<sup>41</sup> Furthermore Maj. Gen. Lekhanya announced to the nation that "for a long time this nation has been plagued into political quagmire by politicians whose actions did not necessarily align themselves with the national interests ... We have, therefore, decided that there shall be no political activity which has been the root cause of our internal problems in Lesotho."<sup>42</sup> The words of caution by Maj. Gen. Lekhanya did not only spell doom for political activity in Lesotho, but also showed that Lekhanya was not different from Leabua. In fact, they had commonalities in many respects. They were both the recipients of coups. They both relied on the army for support and their stay in power. They did not only dislike opposition but they crushed it. They centred power around themselves by eliminating any possible opposition. The second coup showed that Lesotho had gone African because power rested on guns rather than on the democratic process of an election. It was good of the military to strive for national reconciliation but again it was doubtful whether the banning of political activities would indeed restore it. The military was using the national aspirations as a pretext for permanent stay in power thus eroding the hopes of democratic restoration. The re-emphasis of *no opposition, no politics* to the Military Council sent a chilling message to those Basotho who hoped for a new political dispensation free of autocrats.

Like Leabua Jonathan, Maj. Gen. Lekhanya promised to restore reconciliation, peace and return to a popularly elected government through the holding of free and fair elections as soon as possible,<sup>43</sup> but soon thereafter some of the military members propagated that "do it yourself, it is self-usurped".<sup>44</sup> The military govern-

<sup>40</sup> M Sejanamane, "Lesotho in Southern Africa from an assertive to a submissive foreign policy", *Lesotho Law Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1988, pp. 12-3.

<sup>41</sup> Government printers, Maseru, *The Lesotho Laws*, Vol. XXXI, 1986.

<sup>42</sup> RF Weisfelder, *Defining national purpose - the root of factionalism in Lesotho* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> *Natal Witness*, 20 January 1986, p. 6; G Cronje, "The economic and business report - Lesotho", *Africa Review* 1992, p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> Transformation Resource Centre, Maseru, *Work for Justice*, No. 30, September 1991, p. 11.

ment began to rule with an iron fist.<sup>45</sup> The army became directly involved in the politics of the country although their duty was not to rule, but to serve by protecting the law of the land and maintaining law and order. The army had no mandate to rule, laudable as its motives for removing Leabua were. Its noble act of removing Leabua could only be tinted by a continual clinging to power.<sup>46</sup> The military's taste for power created a volatile situation in Lesotho politics, hence the reluctance to return to popular civilian rule. In the process it became evident that the army did not topple Leabua so that the civilians should share the spoils, they did it for themselves and for personal gain and greed.

On 30 April 1991, Maj. Gen. Lekhanya was bloodlessly coupéd.<sup>47</sup> The bloodless coup meant that there was no bloodshed in the process of forcefully taking power. He was toppled after having ruled from January 1986 to April 1991, almost four and a half years.<sup>48</sup> He was led to the Radio Lesotho Broadcasting premises to announce his resignation on air.<sup>49</sup> It is interesting that Maj. Gen. Lekhanya said that he did not resist the coup process because of wanting to avoid bloodshed.<sup>50</sup> The fact is that he knew that any form of resistance would not be tolerated. He could have been killed immediately because he had inculcated a non-resistance attitude among the army members, and any one who defied the army was subjected to harsh treatment.

The 1991 was a coup within a coup, because through the help of the Lesotho Defence Force members the coup was staged and some faction within the very Defence Force toppled their initial trustee. That coup was the third in less than six years in Lesotho,<sup>51</sup> and thereafter Maj. Gen. Lekhanya announced that he was planning to retire to his holding and farm with sheep and cattle.<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to realise that the barrel of a gun had a way of facilitating a change of plans as it was evident with Maj. Gen. Lekhanya. He was succeeded by Col., later called Maj. Gen., Phisoana Elias Ramaema, two days after the coup,<sup>53</sup> because the defence members could not agree on who should take over. The dawn of the third coup served as a confirmation of the inherent inability of a dictatorial form of government. The coup exposed the fallacy of the discredited argument that the involve-

<sup>45</sup> G Mills, "Between independence and incorporation", *Southern Africa at crossroads? Prospects for stability and development in the 1990's* (Rivonia, 1992), p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Africa Research Bulletin in the Political and Cultural Series*, Vol. 28, No. 42, 1991, 10094; V Maphai, *South Africa: The challenge of challenge* (s.a., s.l.), p. 58.

<sup>47</sup> *Lentsoe La Basutho*, Vol. 6, No. 5, 4 May 1991, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Africa Research Bulletin*, Vol. 6, No. 5, 4 May 1991, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Keessing's Contemporary Records*, Vol. 38, 1992, R14; *Sunday Times*, 5 May 1991, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> T Hoecane, "Ramaema takes charge", *New African*, August 1991, p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> *Weekly Mail*, Vol. 7, No. 17, 9 May 1991, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> *African Business*, June 1991, p. 7; *Daily News*, 3 May 1991, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> *Sowetan*, 3 March 1993, p. 1.

ment of the army in the running of the country was a pinnacle of stability. The Basotho once again witnessed the deepening decay of politics brought by the military government, which was reluctant to restore civilian rule. It must be noted that those who win power by force, often lose it in the same manner. The 1991 coup could further be described as a *silent coup* because there was no excitement as with the 1986 coup. It happened unnoticed. The very members of the army who condoned and defended the 1986 coup were the ones toppling their leader, thus becoming a coup within a coup. Coups were becoming endemic in Lesotho - since independence in 1965 there were three coups, i.e. in 1970, 1986 and in 1991.

On 27 March 1993, national elections were held in Lesotho and they were the second round of elections since independence.<sup>54</sup> The voters showed great patience, determination and maturity since they had been denied a right to vote for almost sixteen years. The Basotho Congress Party gained an overwhelming victory, capturing all 65 contested parliamentary seats plus about 74% of the total number of votes cast by the electorate.<sup>55</sup> These elections went well without reports of disturbances and the international observers confirmed that they were free and fair, but that confirmation did not guarantee a smooth sailing for the newly democratically elected government led by Dr Ntsu Mokhehle. The advent of democracy and constitutional or civilian rule brought no stability in Lesotho.<sup>56</sup> Instead the new government was faced with critical issues like the reinstatement of Moshoeshoe II. The agents who were pro-Moshoeshoe II demanded his reinstatement but Mokhehle's government reacted by instituting a commission of inquiry into the activities of the king from the time before he went into exile. The establishment of the commission was necessary so that the government could be informed of who had maintained and financed Moshoeshoe II while in exile, lest they would have to bear the financial burdens which were not of their making. Mokhehle wanted to exonerate his government in the event of possible financial obligations to be met. On the contrary, many Basotho, including King Letsie III, were hurt.

In response to the adamancy of Mokhehle's government to abandon the commission, his democratically elected government was dissolved on 17 August 1994, by His Majesty Letsie III, after sixteen months in office. The dissolution announce-

<sup>54</sup> FK Makoa, Paper titled, "King Letsie III's short lived coup", read at the Social Sciences staff seminar, National University of Lesotho, 2 February 1995; K Matlosa, "Electoral system, stability and democratic governance in southern Africa: A case study of Lesotho", SADC/EU conference proceedings: Strengthening and consolidating democracy in SADC through the electoral process, 20-22 June 1999, p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> FK Makoa, "Political instability in post-military Lesotho: Crisis of the Basutho nation state?", *African Security Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Lesotho National Library, *Tlhahiso ea boemo ba puso ho tlhoha ka la 17<sup>th</sup> Phato 1994*; *The Citizen*, 17 January 1996, p. 2.

ment was done through Radio Lesotho.<sup>57</sup> In dissolving the democratically elected government of the Basotho Congress Party, King Letsie III suspended certain sections of the Lesotho Constitution through Orders Nos 1 and 2 of 1994 which indicated the following:

1. Chapters IV and VII of the constitution of Lesotho are suspended;
2. Sections 87 and 98, 158 and 159 are also suspended;
3. Parliament is dissolved;
4. The government of Lesotho which existed prior to 17 August 1994 is dissolved.<sup>58</sup>

Thereafter, Makhaola Lerotholi, the king's spokesperson, submitted that Letsie III "did not violate democratic rules because democracy ... is not indefinite. It is relative to the circumstances."<sup>59</sup> It was lamentable that the hard-earned democracy should be said to be circumstantial. The cabinet ministers and the parliamentarians were forced out of their offices and their official cars were confiscated by members of the Lesotho Defence Force, thus confirming that the army was behind the 1994 coup.<sup>60</sup> The collaboration of the King and the army against the democratically elected government clearly showed that there was no respect for democracy in Lesotho.

The 1994 coup in Lesotho was exceptionally different from those of 1970, 1986 and 1991. For the first time the Basotho stood together by denouncing and condemning the coup act of Letsie III. They sang in one voice that *kaofela re a hana, kaofela re a hana Basutho, Letsie a tla a e duba thankha, Ntsu ke oena Tona-Khoho*.<sup>61</sup> Through singing the Basutho expressed their disapproval of the royal coup. Their feelings were bitter and hostile. They felt that through the elections, they had decided on who should rule them for the next five years. No one had the right to nullify or undermine their decision other than through another election process.

The ultimate source of power resided in the Basotho themselves. Maina Kiai, the Executive Director of the Kenyan Human Rights Commission, argued that "the people's power and confidence to change their own situation is evident in many

<sup>57</sup> Government Printers, Maseru, *Lesotho Government Gazette Extraordinary*, Vol. XCXXIX, No. 73, 17 August 1994.

<sup>58</sup> Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria, OL EAA 0276 31 0402 AFS/AFP TD99.

<sup>59</sup> Government Printers, Maseru, *Lesotho Government Gazette Extraordinary*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 73, 17 August 1994.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*; Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria, SWB AL2079 A/17.

<sup>61</sup> SABC-TV News Bulletin, 17 August 1994. (We all disapprove, Basotho disapprove, Letsie has created a chaos, Ntsu is the Prime Minister). Personal translation.

ways..."<sup>62</sup> as was the case in Lesotho. The Basotho left their working offices and condemned the king's act. They openly pledged their solidarity with the government of their choice and they also supported the two day strike in demand of the reinstatement of the democratically elected government. Corroborating Kiai's view was Kolawole Olaniyan of the Constitutional Rights Project in Nigeria, when he said "civil societies are in the vanguard of campaigns against constitutional violation of lives and freedom of the citizens".<sup>63</sup> No one could defend the constitutional rights of the Basotho except the Basotho themselves. The Basotho dictated the directions of the political scenario during and after the coup process of Letsie III. The observable uniqueness about the 1994 coup was the reaction of the Southern African Development Community and the international communities. With the previous coups in Lesotho there had been no serious reaction like the one Lesotho experienced in 1994. The United Nations Organisation and the Organisation of African Unity joined forces for the reinstatement of the legitimate government of the Basotho Congress Party, because if the Lesotho chaos continued unabated, the entire southern region would be affected by scattering refugees, and that would also create the impression that anybody could stage a coup and there would be no reaction.

On 14 September 1994, the Statement of Understanding was signed between Dr Ntsu Mokhehle, the Prime Minister, and King Letsie III in the presence of the three M's, i.e. presidents NR Mandela, R Mugabe and K Masire, who were the guarantors of the agreement.<sup>64</sup> After signing the Statement of Understanding, the Basotho left their working offices and celebrated in the streets of Maseru, the capital city. They danced on the street pavements and motor vehicles hooted along the main street, Kingsway. Dr Mokhehle thanked the cheering crowds and the presidents of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana for their efforts in defence of the constitution and consequently democracy.<sup>65</sup> The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) described the reinstatement as a "victory for democracy in the region and in Africa".<sup>66</sup> The restoration of the democratically elected government was the culmination of the total rejection and the disapproval of the coup by the majority of the Basotho. Indeed, letshele le beta poho. The signing of the Statement of Understanding was a rigorous effort which included broader consultation of almost all stake-holders. If it were possible, it would be important that whoever thinks of a coup, should first consult with almost all the constituencies

<sup>62</sup> Sowetan, 2 January 1997, p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Government Printers, Maseru, *Lesotho Government Gazette Extraordinary*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 78, 14 September 1994; Puo ea Motlotlehi ha a khutisetse Dr Ntsu Mokhehle setulong sa Botona-Khoho, la 14<sup>th</sup> Loetse 1994.

<sup>65</sup> Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria, SWB AL/2102 A/5; *The Citizen*, 26 September 1994, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Business Day*, 15 September 1995, p. 1.

for an approval. But nevertheless, the joint effort of the majority of the Basotho reversed the coup by witnessing the reinstatement of the democratically elected government.

Lesotho held its third general election on 23 May 1998 under the auspices of the Independent Electoral Commission headed by S Mafisa. The Lesotho Congress for Democracy<sup>67</sup> overwhelmingly won 78 of the 79 constituencies, mostly by a margin of thousands.<sup>68</sup> The opposition group which consisted of the Basotho National Party, Basotho Congress Party, The United Party, the Lesotho Labour Party, and many others, rejected the outcome of the elections. They emphasised that *li pheuoe, li a nkha* (they are rigged).<sup>69</sup> The opposition groups camped at the royal residence in Maseru, demanding the intervention of King Letsie III and the situation deteriorated day by day. That was evident through the complete collapse of law and order, the breaking down of security, the confiscation of the government vehicles, the closing down of the Lesotho Radio Broadcast. The government had lost control over the army and the police and death threats were constantly made to the ministers of the government.<sup>70</sup> The sum total of the mentioned factors amounted to an undeclared coup. The eminent coup situation was acknowledged by the Prime Minister, Professor Pakalitha Mosisili, when he made an appeal for aid on the Southern Africa Development Community in a letter dated 16<sup>th</sup> September 1998, saying: "I wish to urgently request your excellency to come to the rescue of my government and other people of Lesotho. The only intervention I can and do request urgently is of military nature ... This morning the situation has worsened ... further serious threats being made included abducting ministers, killing the Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister at any time. The most serious tragedy is that the police, in particular the army are, at best, spectators ... We have a coup on our hands".<sup>71</sup> The government was rendered ineffective and there was a complete paralysis. A coup was eminent but not yet declared. The South African Defence Force (SADF), under Operation Bolesas, pioneered by Col. Bobbie Hartsliet, entered the country on 22 September 1998, and saved Lesotho from another coup.

<sup>67</sup> The Lesotho Congress for Democracy was a split group from the Basotho Congress Party. Dr Ntsu Mokhehle of the Basotho Congress Party, the then Prime Minister, transferred power to the new party. Out of 61 MP's, 41 transferred their loyalties to the new party thus giving it a majority in parliament.

<sup>68</sup> M.L. Pherudi and S.L. Barnard, "The dawn of the political cloud over Lesotho 1998 elections", *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 24, No. 2, December 1999, pp. 38-9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> South African Broadcasting Corporation, Cape Town, "Mbeki's national statement on the Lesotho crisis", 2 October 1998; *Sowetan*, "Lesotho boils over", 11 September 1998, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> *Mall and Guardian*, "SA troops alert as Maseru mutinies", 18-24 October 1998, p. 1.

## EVALUATION

There were mainly three internal political complications in Lesotho, which resulted in the decay and erosion of democracy. Firstly there was the desire for absolute power as shown by Basotho politicians in many respects. Leabua Jonathan wanted to hoard power for himself through the arming of the Basotho National Party Youth League. Maj. Gen. Metsing Lekhanya was not much different. He consolidated his position by banning all political activities. At the initial stage the banning of politics was acceptable as a means of restoring law and order and preparing the country for the new dispensation characterised by freedom and true democracy. It only turned out later that he wanted to stay in power unopposed hence the erosion of democratic expectations, which finally resulted in a bloodless coup. The coming into office of Maj. Gen. Phisoana Ramaema resulted in Lesotho becoming a civilian ruled government under the Basotho Congress Party led by Dr Ntsu Mokhehle, but that could not guarantee peaceful political co-existence among the Basotho.

Secondly, the geographical position of Lesotho created an atmosphere conducive for the coups. The 1986 coup was orchestrated by South Africa through its destabilisation strategy, in which the military government came into power and danced to the tune of the South African government by expelling the liberation movements like the African National Congress. Thirdly, there was the involvement of the Lesotho Defence Force in politics, because since tasting power in 1986, the army had been in a political crisis. The primary mission of an army is to maintain law and order but in Lesotho the army was politicised. It was unfortunate that anybody who had the support of the army in Lesotho could render the country ungovernable by staging a coup at any time, and that was evident with the 1994 coup when the Lesotho Defence Force members were indifferent when Letsie III dissolved the democratically elected government.

Lastly, the disapproval of the 1994 coup by the Basotho was unheard of in Lesotho and that evinced the fundamental fact that coups can be avoided only if the people stand together to condemn it in the strongest terms. If the Basotho could continue to deny power mongers an opportunity to usurp power without their mandate, democracy would indeed be preserved.



## ADDENDUM

## Sequence of coups in Lesotho

## Successful coups



30 Jan. 1970  
(Palace coup)



20 Jan. 1986  
(Military coup)



30 Apr. 1991  
(Military coup)



17 Aug. 1994  
(Royal coup)

## Attempted coups



Jan. 1974  
(BCP's attempt)



May 1991  
(Military attempt)



Feb. 1996  
(Three men attempt)

## Undeclared coup



Sept. 1998  
(Opposition groups  
in Lesotho)<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> R Uwecheu (et al), *Africa Today*, (London, 1996, third edition), p. 888; BJ Kelso, "An uncertain future", *Africa Report*, Vol. 3, No. 2, March-June 1993, p. 24; R Brown, *Surveys of the modern world - Africa south of the Sahara 1997*, 26<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 529-30; Pherudi and Barnard, pp. 38-9.