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Lesotho on the brink: battling embedded fragility

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Introduction

Suddenly in June 2014 the small southern country, the Kingdom of Lesotho, precipitated to the brink of anything from a complete collapse of order to an opportunistic coup. Conflict within the governing coalition led to the desolution of parliament and fears of a collapse of government and some like South Africa feared that this made a coup imminent.

But a quick move by various actors to get parties to start negotiations helped calm the situation down, opening the way for dialogue towards some settlement. The question is what explains this sudden decent towards a crisis and are responses undertaken adequate to ensure that this meltdown does not happen again? What needs to be done to solve the problems that lie beneath the surface?

On Lesotho as an Inherited State and Fragility

Our knowledge of the underlying fragility of the state of Lesotho explains our fears of a quick descent into a complete collapse. Like most African states, what is today known as Lesotho is a creation of the British colonial empire, which established Basotholand in the late 19th century as little more than a

colony for plunder and exploitation by Dutch farmers who took Basotho territory piece by piece. It would become a labour reserve for the burgeoning mining industry in Kimberly and the Rand.

Like most colonial states, Basotholand was formed out of colonial assumptions about nationhood and the need of colonies to have the form of a modern nation state. It was not supposed to have the essence of the post-Westphalian nation state though, i.e. national sovereignty and self-determination. While Basotholand had a semblance of similarity with the pre-colonial state under Moshoeshoe, the colonial political economy of modern-day South Africa had changed the political, social, economic and psychological conditions under which the colonial state would exist. Basotholand was always a reserve, a sub-state in a bigger British colonial federation in southern Africa.

This means that the achievement of independence of the territory in the 1960s would amount to the British handing over back to Basotho an incomplete colonial state, a poisoned chalice, a state without its full sovereignty and stability.

Basotho would spend the past fifty years trying to establish firmly an independent, sovereign state of Lesotho. They would contend with the difficulties of decolonising the state handed to them. It would be much easier to rename it, give an important role to their monarchy, establish new schools and hospitals, establish a party-based democracy and become an active member of the community of nations, than to get rid of the curse of fragility, limited sovereignty and other colonial legacies that haunt post-independence Lesotho.

The kingdom of Moshoeshoe was a state created organically by Basotho and could survive internal and external challenges much better than the colonial state that became Lesotho.

The indigenous Basotho state was fashioned by a combination of identity formation or consolidation

that Basotho acquired as they responded to changes in the physical, social and economic environment. It was rooted in the culture, the social fabric and political economy of Basotho as a people. But it was not an ethnic state, but a much more complex system of power and authority defined not just by culture, but also economics, politics and relations with others in Southern Africa. It was not necessarily always peaceful, neither was it perfect, but it was authentic.

The colonial state was formed out of concerns and interests arising from outside Basotho as a people and outside Southern Africa in general, European imperial interests. It is a state fashioned by the distortion or deformation of indigenous state, society and economy in order to serve as a subservient source of resources and cheap labour for the colonial economy in Southern Africa and the global/imperial economy.

Created to be subservient in global coloniality, the modern nation state was an exogenous invention with appearance of endogeneity in the fact that elements of pre-existing kingdom were preserved in the process of making a new state. As is always the case, the colonisation process is a violent project for it requires the destruction or forced reconstruction of existing notions of identity, power and knowledge.

It requires colonisation of space and time. It requires the introduction of a racist view of humanity as bifurcated into superior and inferior human beings for which the invention of the notion of race is instrumental.

Just as many would agree that there was modernization of the people and land of Basotho through a civilizing mission in which missionaries, teachers, doctors and administrators were instrumental, we must accept that this was not an innocent and interest-free pursuit of progress; rather

modernity has a darker side, one that produced colonial realities today.

In this sense, those were not just missionaries, teachers, doctors and administrators; they were part of a bigger global colonial power matrix. Each of these professional groups was different, but they were joined together by European notions of humanity which were supremacist in nature and sought to make others in the image of a European man.

No new state really emerges after independence, but the colonial state is transferred from the hands of colonists to Africans.

Governments since independence have been marked by fragility of one form or the other. Either governments lost public legitimacy or their institutions were too weak to withstand the power of disruptive forces or the army was enticed into overthrowing governments teetering on the brink of collapse. The national bourgeoisie in Lesotho has been unable to forge a new and strong statehood, and has rather been willing to take advantage of this fragility in order to get their turn at the helm of this very state. Political parties have tended to become elite platforms to state power rather than mechanisms for strengthening national politics.

The oldest party, the Basotho National Party (BNP) has survived many challenges, but there are no indications it has ever turned itself into a national movement dedicated to bring various parts of the country, different constituencies and social partners to resolve the haunting national question.

The first independence government under Jonathan Leabua of BNP installed in October 1966 was voted out of power in elections of 1970, but Leabua refused to cede power to newly elected Basotho Congress Party (BCP). Instead, he forced King Moshoeshoe II out of power, and arrested BCP leaders, forcing them

to become a guerilla movement engaged in running battles with the partisan army until a coup brought Leabua's dictatorship in 1986.

The military government under Major General Justin Lekhanya restored the king to his position as head of state. But when the king decided the case for democratic transition on behalf of Basotho, he was forced into exile in 1987 and his son, King Letsie III was installed.

A year later, the BCP was rocked by very public leadership disputes, leading to its president, Ntsu Mokhehle, breaking away to form Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), followed by the majority of BCP members of parliament thereby achieving a parliamentary coup.

The LCD subsequently won the general elections of 1998, the results that the alternative parties disputed and started a round of protests that led to a SADC military intervention in August 1998 led by troops from Botswana and South Africa. This led to even more rioting and destruction of property. When the troops finally agreed to return to barracks ten months later there was an interim political authority charged with preparing the country for elections by devising an electoral system that did not promote the winner-takes-all outcomes that precipitated inter-party conflicts. It was on this basis that the elections held in May 2002 saw LCD, which won 54 per cent of the vote, take 77 of 120 seats and thus for the first time 9 alternative parties had seats in parliament, sharing 40 proportional seats.

This gave Lesotho an opportunity to build a culture of cooperation and peaceful political competition in parliament. It helped avert another political fracas that would have led to a military coup. But this would not resolve the deeper-seated issues of fragility and their manifestation in stability-threatening cleavages among the political class.

In 2006, the LCD suffered a BCP type split when the All Basotho Convention (ABC) emerged under the leadership of Tom Thabane.

As the country concluded the first term under a new and more inclusive electoral system, further problems bubbled up. The LCD had a major split as its Prime Minister, Pakalitha Mosisili, formed the Democratic Congress just before May 2002 general elections. The LCD thus suffered the fate of the BCP that it was born out of when BCP leader, Mokhehe, split the party to form the LCD. This happened in the context of uprisings over government's inability to solve the problems of unemployment, inequality and poor public services.

The Democratic Congress of Mosilili won 39 per cent of the vote and 48 out of 120 parliamentary seats, just ahead of ABC's 25 per cent and 30 seats, and LCD's 21 percent and 26 seats.

It thus fell short of a simple majority required for it to form government. For the first time, Lesotho saw an inconclusive poll result, one where three major parties were forced to look for partners to form coalitions with in order to form government. Of course, this raised fears that Lesotho was too fragile to have a leadership vacuum while parties negotiated. There was concern that even if a government was formed, coalition administrations are usually fragile and therefore work in stronger and well-established states, that Lesotho was not quite ready for this.

In the scramble for coalition partners, the ABC was successful in cobbling together a shaky coalition government with the LCD and Basotho National Party, giving them control of parliament and as a result ABC's Thomas Thabane became the prime minister in a government in which ministers were appointed from all three parties.

Power sharing always hangs on sharing of key political posts in the hope that this gives parties space to co-decide the policy direction and services programme for government. However, it goes beyond that, requiring the putting in place of mechanisms for inter-party dialogue and consultation. It is much easier to do the former than the latter, yet it is the latter that can undermine power-sharing arrangements. While the former is a matter of having representatives of different parties in cabinet and other decisions in line with the coalition agreement for all to see, inter-party relations and continuous dialogue and consultation are tricky and complex prices. They ensure that all parties experience the power-sharing in the nuances of governing

This difficult element of politics takes the coalition arrangements to the realm of perceptions and feeling, a tricky part of politics given the fact that competitive party politics engenders mistrust among parties whose interests pit them against each other. Because governing parties tend to want to monopolise power as much as possible and the very logic of alternative parties is to acquire power in the hands of the governing party, no party is fully secure about the interests of other parties. Here also lie the challenges of the Lesotho coalition government. The tensions did not arise over positions in cabinet, but when ABC's partners felt that they were not accorded sufficient respect in the coalition government. They accused the prime minister of operating as if they did not exist, taking decisions on a day-to-day basis without consulting them. The prime minister was surprised, believing that these were unfair accusations. Coalition parties decried unilateral conduct of the business of government that reduced them to a rubberstamp for ABC's political agenda. The exact nature of this unilateral behaviour is not clear as the parties did not specify incidents where this took place.

The disgruntlement was serious enough to prompt the LCD to threaten forming a new governing alliance. It is at that point that the prime minister suspended with the blessing of the king the parliamentary sitting, thus averting a vote of no confidence that would have brought down his coalition government, paving a way to new government. It could also have led to such a vacuum during negotiations among parties or such public spats that would enticed the military to intervene.

Regional responses

There were already worrying physical movements of the troops that prompted the SADC to send envoys mandated by the SADC Organ of Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation under the leadership of President Hifikepunye Pohamba of Namibia. The Organ's position articulated as the crisis set in was that the political leadership needed to establish a political process to amicably solve the problems encountered by parties to the coalition government and to do so within the framework of the kingdom's constitution and democratic principles as they apply generally in the region. Of course, with the latter point the SADC Organ was insisting on the regional norms for resolving disputes, which stress dialogue, constitutional and legal means of dispute resolution, and rejects authoritarianism and military solutions.

South Africa publicly expressed its concern about 'the political and security situation' in the kingdom, singling out 'the unusual movements of the Lesotho Defence Force units in the capital, Maseru.' There was no further statement from the SA government as it seemed that the Lesotho came back from the brink of a coup or a deep crisis. Some suggested that SA exaggerated the situation and caused unnecessary alarm.

Others say it sent a signal to the military that it was being watched, a pre-emptive move. No one knows for sure what the motive was.

The first signs of stabilisation would come almost immediately when the Lesotho prime minister held a unity rally which the leaders of the coalition parties attended to underline their shared interest in keeping the unity of the coalition notwithstanding the troubles of a couple of days earlier. Indeed, for weeks these stabilisations continued and strengthen as the SADC Organ and the domestic mediators helped keep the parties in dialogue to fully resolve the political issues that precipitated a near-crisis.

The leader in the LCD took the lead in developing proposals for inter-party negotiations, a dialogue process that occupied the coalition for whole of June and it was hoped that the major inter-party convention on 10 July would adopt a final agreement that would lead to resumption of the parliamentary programme and would include a new framework of rules that would govern the functioning of the coalition government. But this failed to materialise and parties continued with dialogue. While this was seen as some sort of failure by those who see the signing of an agreement as a success per se, the continuous dialogue must be appreciated because it can have a cathartic effect on party conflicts and a revisiting of the very essence of the modern Kingdom of Lesotho.

Quick negotiations leading to an elite pact deciding how the political class will share state powers would be inadequate because the fundamental problem lies much deeper than cooperation among parties. The underlying cause of fragility of Lesotho is in the genealogy of the state itself, its very essence as an inheritance of the colonial era in a world yet to overcome global coloniality.

Conclusion

Lesotho's recent political fracas has its roots in the very nature of the post-colonial state Lesotho inherited, a state designed to dominate the territory and facilitate the exploitation of the population for the benefit of the regional colonial economy built on mining and commercial agriculture in modern day South Africa and for the good of global imperialism with comparatively negligible benefits for the local bourgeoisie.

This indigenous political class puts up this cursed heritage for benefits it accrues. The quick reaction by SADC and the local church as well as the willingness of coalition parties to dialogue their way out of a crisis helped avert a catastrophe in the form of a coup or street violence. But none of what has been done adequately responds to the fundamental problem, the historically determined national question

Policy Recommendations

Lesotho government.

The government should consider asking the king to establish a rolling national dialogue on the Lesotho Basotho want.

While this could lead to a vision or a plan, the dialogue must continue well beyond such an outcome to become a form of healing the country.

The interparty dialogue should lead to a platform for coalition partners to continuously consult on matters of governing the kingdom

SADC and SA.

SADC should support a wide-ranging dialogue whose end is both cathartic and utilitarian where this is meant to tackle specific problems in the political system.

SADC needs to discuss ways of exploring a second transition by which is meant helping countries free of remaining colonial heritage that limit options for state transformation in southern Africa. This is because independence was a stage in the decolonial transition of the region and not an end in itself.



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