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IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY:
POWER, CLASS, AND NATIONALIST DISCOURSE IN LESOTHO

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IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY: POWER, CLASS, AND NATIONALIST DISCOURSE IN LESOTHO.

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Abstract

Despite an ideology of "one language, one history, one people," Lesotho has experienced considerable political instability since independence in 1965. Free and fair democratic parliamentary elections, the first since 1970, were held in March 1993, and promised a return of social consensus to national administration. The military rebellion and internecine fighting between two barracks of the army in January 1994, however, revealed the fragility of the country's democratic values and institutions in the face of entrenched political, social, and economic divisions. The ideology of nationalism and discourse of consultative unity that helped bring the Basutoland Congress Party total victory in the elections clearly have not served to fill in or even bridge temporarily the multiple fissures in Lesotho's political landscape. Lesotho's fundamental problems can be traced back far into the colonial period and to Lesotho's peculiar mix of dependency and opposition in relation to its powerful neighbor, South Africa. The origins of the present crisis, however, can be found in the immediate post-independence period, and in the continuing lack of fit between the ideological discourse of Basotho nationhood and the very real imbalances and oppositions between social classes and among sections of the aristocratic, military, bureaucratic and commercial elites. The lessons to be learned from these differences lying beneath self-serving consensual notions of Basotho democracy are of significance for South Africa.

Just after New Years, 1994, a group of junior officers in the Royal Lesotho Defense Force (RLDF) successfully coerced the resignations of four of their senior commanders. This action, ominous on the face of it, was reported in Lesotho's print and broadcast media with little accompanying discussion. Only a week later however, spokesmen for the same group, based principally at Maseru's Makoanyane Barracks, demanded a 100 percent pay raise for all military personnel across the board and gave Lesotho's civilian government, until the 24th of January to respond. Only ten months before, the Basotho Congress Party (BCP) had replaced the military as the government by sweeping all 65 seats in Lesotho's first parliamentary elections since 1970. By now, however, the honeymoon, if not the whole military/civilian marriage, of democracy, was over. Before the government could or would issue a definitive counter-proposal, soldiers appeared one morning at its central administrative complex and drove civil servants from their offices at gun point. A few days later factions surfaced within the army itself; the larger and more antagonistic to the government based at Makoanyane, the smaller and nominally more loyal at RLDF headquarters at Ratjomose Base at the other end of the capital. On Wednesday, January 19, elements of the Ratjomose faction hauled armor up on to the ridge¹ that snakes from behind their barracks south around the perimeter of Maseru, and the following morning began lobbing shells in the direction of Makoanyane, causing most damage to residential areas lying immediately below the line of fire. On Friday and Saturday fierce fighting ensued as troops from Makoanyane, enraged by the shelling, stormed and occupied the southern parts of the ridge with their superior ground forces. A quiet stand-off ensued, aided by drenching rains on Sunday, and when my assistant Sello Mosai and I took a taxi into town the following day all was calm.

At the start of open hostilities, Prime Minister Ntsu Mokhehle called upon his old friend and strange bedfellow, then South African Foreign Minister Roelof "Pik" Botha, to talk what

¹ This ridge is well-known in Lesotho military history as the place from which colonial forces shelled the Basotho rebels under prince Lerotholi in the Gun War of 1880. In a fight, those who control this ridge control the town.

he considered to be some sense into the heads of the soldiers. Botha duly responded - having first gotten the backing of the newly installed Transitional Executive Council - by mobilizing South African military units around Lesotho's borders and flying to Maseru to announce that South Africa would under no circumstances recognize any military takeover or any Lesotho government save the present democratically-elected one. This, followed by a series of lengthy meetings between the factions and chaired by the government, succeeded at least in calming the anger and thirst for revenge that both factions now felt towards one another. More important the government, having stated they would not be coerced, undertook to do *something* to address the soldiers' demands and the underlying causes of the crisis directly. Over the following three months this they manifestly failed to do, despite a flurry of meetings and offers of international mediation from leaders in Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and by President De Klerk and Nelson Mandela. By mid-April the frustration in the officer corps and lower ranks of both army factions brought them together in common cause. On the morning of the 15th soldiers went to the residences of four of the most powerful ministers in the BCP government in order to detain them. Three were in fact taken into custody but Deputy Prime Minister S. Baholo, refusing, as he was alleged to have shouted, to be captured by (former Prime Minister) Leabua's minions, himself opened fire on the soldiers and was killed by a return volley. Most other ministers, with the exception of the prime minister himself, fled the country, and Pik Botha was forced to reiterate his non-recognition threat. Announcing publicly that they had no desire to overthrow the government but only to have their salary demands and other grievances attended to, the soldiers released the three ministers, and their colleagues also soon returned. In the week that followed, death threats were made against certain other ministers, who again briefly fled the country. The situation was finally resolved thereafter in a compromise in which the army received only a 10% raise in pay but in addition very substantial increases in benefits and expense and equipment allowances. This allowed the government to save face by appearing to resist the soldiers' demands while essentially satisfying them. I am told the army negotiators left the talks with smiles on their faces. But peace was not long to reign. Only a few weeks after South Africa held its own first (heavily brokered) democratic non-racial elections, inspiring the world with its "reconciliation politics," the Lesotho Police Force went on strike. They demanded a 60% pay increase and a sense of parity with the army. After a few chaotic days in which Basotho gleefully ran robots by day and robbed houses by night, the government was forced to admit its weakness and call in the soldiers to restore order and exercise police functions. After three weeks the strike ended in a settlement comparable to that reached earlier with the army. The soldiers remain disgruntled, however, over an appeal that was lodged - unannounced and without consultation - with the Organization of African Unity by the Lesotho government for assistance in restraining both the army and police at a time when the former were saving the public order from the effects of labour action by the latter. The situation was exacerbated by President Robert Mugabe's most unhelpful public threat to send OAU-sanctioned military forces to Lesotho to "knock some sense" into those disrupting Lesotho's fledgling democracy, unfortunately seconded by President Mandela, who apparently failed to get sound advice or to do his homework on this occasion. Finally, the Lesotho army, shunning the politics of reconciliation that is integrating Umkhonto Wesizwe into the new South African National Defence Force, remains fearful of and adamantly opposed to government efforts to establish control over the "BNP soldiers" by integrating the veterans of their old antagonists, Mokhehle's guerilla Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA), into their ranks.

Now, we in Africa have become accustomed to the subversion of democratic processes and institutions by self-serving, totalizing conceptions of personalistic political legitimacy, as well as by more entrenched divisions for which constructions of regional and ethnic identification are the most ready idiom and instrument of expression. More sympathetically, regional and ethnic solidarities, however created, are not surprisingly the first alternative for political mobilization among segments of the polity to whom the state has manifestly failed to deliver. But the Basotho are one people with one language (though some of Xhosa descent are

bi-lingual in Xhosa), one history: the inheritors, moreover, of King Moshoeshe I's effort at autonomous, indigenous, self-conscious state formation. While Basotho do talk of their language and culture, *Sesotho*, in the reflexive sense as well as sharing many implicit, habituated preconceptions and practices, they do not in fact conceive of themselves in any essentialized way as an ethnic category. On the contrary, the Basotho explicitly construct themselves as the descendants of the four "great" and several lesser "clans" (chiefdoms really) that were politically amalgamated into a *nation* by Moshoeshe in the early 1820s. They readily acknowledge their cultural kinship and historical relation to other Sesotho-speakers over in South Africa, but unless these people's ancestors were subjects or vassals of Moshoeshe, *Basotho ba Moshoeshe*, they are not Basotho. So as Prime Minister Mokhehle pleaded in his public addresses during the January crisis, could Basotho not, as their own political culture prescribed, talk their problems over and reach, at whatever length, a consensus? Manifestly not. What then is the explanation for this extraordinary, dare I say benighted sequence of events, and what, if anything, can be learned from it about the potential for democratic transformation in our southern African region? Some selective history, if I may.

As Basutoland moved toward independence from Britain and its first elections in 1965, power seemed most likely to devolve upon Ntsu Mokhehle and his Basutoland Congress Party: nationalists with ties first to the African National Congress and then to the break-away Pan-Africanist Congress, and inheritors of the mantle of anti-colonial resistance earlier worn by Josiel Lefela's Commoners' League. The BCP's main opposition was the royalist but still anti-South African Marema Tlou Freedom Party. Chief Leabua Jonathan, however, a staunch Catholic and leading conservative - Jonathan was a great-grandson of King Moshoeshe I in his second house and the son of Chief Jonathan Molapo, a British "loyalist" during the anti-colonial Gun War of 1880-81 - saw a vacuum at the other end of the political spectrum. Leabua campaigned against the BCP as anti-religious political radicals financed by Peking. With the help of the South African government and the Catholic Church - the largest denomination in Lesotho - Leabua's newly founded Basotho National Party (BNP) came out of nowhere in the year before the election to steal a narrow victory over the BCP. Moshoeshe I's direct heir, Prince Bereng Seeiso, who had been enthroned in 1960 as Moshoeshe II, was limited to the status of a constitutional monarch, and in recurrent conflicts with Leabua and his Molapo-dominated government (Moshoeshe's second house versus his first), the king came off very much the worse. By the time of the next elections in 1970, the electorate seemed ready to give the BCP a chance to govern, and though Leabua used the old arguments and his new incumbency to good effect, the BCP won a narrow but clear majority of seats. Whereupon Leabua declared the election null and void and, using the Para-Military Unit (PMU - satirically known as the "Prime Minister's Unit") he had established during his term of office, declared a State of Emergency and violently suppressed the BCP and its followers. Ntsu Mokhehle fled into exile in South Africa where he remained until Leabua was overthrown in a military coup in 1986.

So for the last sixteen years of his two-decades in office, Leabua ruled without popular consent, manipulating democratic institutions such as parliament democratically - as rubber stamps and sham legitimators - when they were useful, dismissing them when they were not. To entrench his power, Leabua pursued the total penetration of the civil service through the nepotistic promotion of the "Tory" fraction of the elite - "Dealing with the government is like entering a shop full of cuckoo clocks," commented a friend: "It's Mo-LA-po, Mo-LA-po, Mo-LA-po!" At the same time, he suppressed the royalist faction of the aristocracy (the "sons" of King Letsie I, Molapo's elder brother) and, more important, suborned local chiefs and the newly-created Village Development Committees to the BNP. The effect was both to compromise and disorganize local administration. International development aid - with the ignorance or complicity of its agents - was made to serve the interests of the ruling party to such an extent that initiatives large and small were often frustrated by local communities who identified "development" (*isoelopele*) with domination (*'muso*; "government"). The ultimate guarantor of Leabua's rule, however, was the military he had created. Ironically but perhaps

predictably, by the 1980s, in an atmosphere of growing popular dissatisfaction with BNP rule, the main-line officers and the army rank and file had become the chief threat to Leabua, who was widely said to be "riding the tiger."

Leabua was courting danger in other ways. Smarting from the Catholic clergy's principled criticism of his rule and seeking the international legitimacy - and foreign assistance - granted to southern African "Frontline States," Leabua had changed his ideological spots and forged an alliance with the ANC. Further, he had sent out feelers to eastern bloc countries and in 1978 invited a Cuban diplomatic delegation to Lesotho. The South Africans - Pik Botha in particular - reacted with characteristic paranoia and made not only public threats but secret warnings and overtures to the Lesotho military. Nor was this the only threat. Mokhehe and his core of supporters, whose outrage time had not diminished, founded the guerrilla LLA which, with South African complicity and support, planted bombs and attacked postal and police installations in Lesotho. In response, Leabua recruited special units of the army to be trained in North Korea and whose loyalty to the government was to supersede that given to their senior officers. These units, in tandem with the tuggish civilian operatives of Leabua's BNP Youth League, and rural *Lekhotla la Khotso* ("Peace Corps"[!]) terrorized Lesotho during 1984-1985. Finally, early in 1986, the South Africans secretly informed the senior commander of the PMU, Major General M. J. Lekhanya, that Leabua was planning to have him removed, and that he should move against the government, confident of South African support. This began on January 23rd, with the near closure of all Lesotho's border crossings by the South Africans, an effective material strangulation of the country. On January 26th, the phlegmatic General Lekhanya acted at last, and television viewers around the world were treated to scenes of jubilation in the streets of Maseru as Leabua was ousted and placed under house arrest.

For the first but not the last time, the chickens of the 1970 State of Emergency, in retrospect the worst catastrophe in Lesotho's political history since the Free State wars of 1865-68, had come home to roost. While most BNP ministers were shown the door and replaced by a Supreme Military Council with new civilian counterparts, a few, most notably Finance Minister E. R. Sekhonyana (reputed to have made the fateful call to Lekhanya on behalf of the South Africans and to have the goods on most major political figures in Lesotho) remained. Together they led the unassuming and modest General Lekhanya down the primrose path of autocracy and kleptocracy so much traveled elsewhere in post-independence Africa. More significant was the new coziness between the Lesotho and South African militaries, who pledged cooperation in every sphere, including the pursuit of active opponents of the South African regime. Turning on the political refugees who had provided the justification for so many of Leabua's requests for international aid and the legitimization of Lesotho's status as a Frontline State, the Lekhanya regime expelled the ANC from Lesotho. The king, whose hereditary legitimacy and opposition to Leabua had put back in favor, was made Head of State. His unfriendliness to South Africa and attempts to exercise real authority, however, put him on a collision course with Lekhanya. Close associates of the king were dismissed from government and his personal secretary, O. Seheri, was found murdered and his body burnt in his car in a remote spot, a victim of *koeyoko* (secret political elimination). A commoner, Lekhanya was almost from the beginning challenged by royalist senior officers, especially two members of the Military Council, Cols. Sekhobe and Thabae Letsie. Lekhanya got the better of this faction, however, in succeeding in having Sekhobe Letsie convicted and sentenced to 15 years for having ordered the *koeyoko* murders of two of Leabua's closest ministers and their wives in the wake of the coup. Administering the coup *dé* grace, Lekhanya deposed the king in 1990. Moshoeshoe II abdicated in favor of his son Mohato, who became Letsie III, reportedly at the urging of his exiled father, who feared that otherwise Lekhanya might be moved to abolish the monarchy altogether. Sons of Moshoeshoe I: Oh, How the Mighty are Fallen!

Accepting R67 million in military aid from South Africa, Lekhanya signed the Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme agreement that would send the country's mountain waters down to

the parched farmlands of the Free State, something that Leabua had resisted for two decades. Among Lekhanya's other "achievements" was Order No. 4, a law that curtailed public criticism and abolished academic freedom at the National University, providing for the dismissal of any staff member at the government's discretion without explanation required. Accustomed since before the time of Moshoeshoe I to free expression in chiefs' public fora called *lipitso*, Basotho mourned the late Leabua as they smarted under the rule of an army that had not even existed at independence. Although the rank and file and many of the officers come from humble backgrounds, their exercise of power was more repressive than that of the most autocratic colonial chief. "When you ask the soldiers the reason for something," despaired an elderly wisehead, "they show you a gun."

But it was the naked thievery of Sekhonyana, still the Minister of Finance, and others in Lekhanya's coterie that moved junior officers under Col. Phisoana Ramaema to remove Lekhanya in early 1991. By this point, however, discontent among workers and peasants, fueled by a sudden round of retrenchments of Basotho migrants from the South African mines, had crystallized into an extreme and resentful grass-roots nationalism. In May 1991, local security personnel at a South African-owned clothing shop in Maseru beat to death a young Mosotho mother accused of shoplifting. The response was the "race riot" in which Chinese, Korean, and Indian-owned small businesses, and not the large South African chain stores, were the specific focus of attack. Under irresistible pressure from both within and without Lesotho to reinstate civilian rule, Ramaema finally agreed to the resumption of free political activity that culminated in the democratic elections of March 1993. In those elections, Sekhonyana led the "new model" BNP, confident in what he had come to consider an historical right to rule and the continued support of the ANC across the border. Basotho, however, were in a strongly nationalist mood and chose to right what was widely viewed as the historical wrong of 1970. In a model of free, fair, and peaceful polling, the electorate gave the returned Mokhehle and his BCP a unanimous victory. Surely now the unity of the nation that had been so badly fractured both vertically, between sections of the elite, and horizontally, between social classes, would be restored.

No such luck. The BCP had done much to win the election, but little to prepare themselves to govern. Rather than giving an appearance of vigorous activity along the lines of new American presidents' first "100 days," The aged Mokhehle and his ministers were from the outset paralyzed when faced with the complex and risky business of governmental decision-making, and to a great extent remained dependent on the existing civil service, largely BNP and unchanged from Leabua's time, for administration. Among the few decisions the new government did make in the early months was to give members of parliament - entirely BCP - pay increases of up to 300%. While it is true that parliament had not sat and thus had not set new pay scales for over a decade, your eyes do not deceive you: three hundred per cent. The significance of this move was not lost on the army, nor was the appointment of members of Mokhehle's LLA, and the promotion of officers known to be loyal to the BCP, to senior commands. Fear circulated through the ranks about a more fundamental issue: the future of the army itself. A creation of the BNP, the army wondered what use they would be in a time when Lesotho's old antagonist South Africa was itself moving towards democracy and regional cooperation, and their own government was in the hands of the BCP and the army's old antagonists the LLA. So the rank-and-file decided to test the waters. Appeals to their most senior officers to secure better pay, allowances, and benefits from the government went unheeded - leading to the forced resignation of the four senior officers that signalled the impending crisis.

The army, however, was not itself united. Makoanyane Barracks housed younger, lower ranks who nonetheless considered themselves superior to their seniors over at Ratjomose because many were among those recruited by Leabua to be sent for advanced training in North Korea. Their sympathies were with the BNP, and Sekhonyana and his party elite, black-balled at the ballot box, were widely suspected of having fed their anxieties and triggered their peremptory demands. The faction at Ratjomose countered, not so much out of loyalty to the

government as in fear of being ousted by the Makoanyane and punished by Pik Botha. One important expression of all this was the still-unresolved debate, throughout the capital and both inside and outside government circles, as to whether the army demands were fundamentally about money. We must be mindful, of course, of the words of Abe Martin, the old fictional sage of Brown County, Indiana: "When someone says, 'It's not the money, it's the principle of the thing - It's the money!'," but let me hazard a guess: The soldiers are demanded 100% raises both for the money and as a clear sign of the government's recognition of their continuing power in the Lesotho state structure. 2,500 strong, with a payroll of 3,500 (!?), these men and their equipment, facilities, and dependents consume a portion of the national budget equal to one-third of all school fees paid annually within the country, at a time when unemployment and poverty are forcing growing numbers of children out of the schools. And who are the soldiers to fight, if not each other, the government, and ultimately the people themselves? Additionally, the possible failure of Lesotho's latest flirtation with democracy could lead to a full-scale elopement with South Africa. Indeed, some observers have suggested that the ANC, still bitterly antagonistic towards Mokhehle because of his alliance with Pik Botha and attacks on their ally Leabua, are even now (through Sekonyana) behind the mutiny in the army. Their goal, which many Basotho members of the ANC-allied National Union of Mineworkers would support, is to destabilize ("Mangope-ize") the Lesotho government in preparation for the country's eventual political incorporation as South Africa's "tenth region." Not only Prime Minister Mokhehle but Lesotho itself is riding Leabua's tiger.

What, if anything, can usefully be made of all this? The lessons are not encouraging. From 1824 to 1869, the reign of Moshoeshoe I, the Basotho maintained a functioning autonomous state which, if not democratic in any Western sense, did inscribe processes of accountability and vertical flows of political communication and material resources. Contradictions and conflicts, though manifest, were effectively mediated by Moshoeshoe's innovative political structure, though significantly he never gained control of the military system, which remained in the hands of regional chiefs. Despite the defeats of 1865-1868, this structure - a sort of lineage mode of consensual, consultative feudalism I have called "hierarchical reciprocity" - was strong enough to resist colonial dismantling in the Gun War, when Basotho successfully retained the right to bear arms and secured direct "protection" and administration by the British Crown, leading to the eventual independence in the mid-1960s of not only Lesotho but Botswana and Swaziland as well. Decades of colonialism changed all that, coopting and distorting the chieftancy in the name of "indirect rule" to such an extent that by the time of independence the Basotho were prepared to let Moshoeshoe II reign only on condition he would not rule. The Westminster system they were given instead, however, proved tragically to be an even greater danger it seems than a post-colonial monarchy, leading to the nation's further and perhaps ultimate political undoing. With a vested interest in the state and its revenues, the small Basotho commercial, bureaucratic, professional, and aristocratic elite thunder in protest when political integration into a new South Africa is suggested. But the failure of Lesotho's new democracy to take hold may prove to be the hole in the dike, with thousands of Basotho flooding into a majority-ruled South Africa now both too politically sensitive, physically incapable, and, one would hope, humane to forcibly attempt to stop them.

What of democracy? Is not the whole concept in reality a code for the imposition of alien, imperially universalized institutional structures, structures that inevitably provide more useful instruments for despotism and self-aggrandizement even than the patrimonial feudalisms Weberian theory insisted they must supersede? Are we talking about "the failure of the (social democratic) state" not as a mode of power but as model for providing any well-being or security for people? In Africa, does this failure not result, as Rob Nixon points out, more from the attempt to apply state-determined rigidities onto social forms that are essentially fluid and dynamic, than from ethnic oppositions, invented or otherwise? Western governments, lending institutions, and aid agencies have made "developing" countries (a tragically farcical notion when applied to Lesotho) dependent on the "donor mode of production." When they in turn fail to use - as in the case of Leabua - or insist on using - as with the Ramaema regime -

the economic carrot-and-stick to enforce transitions to "democracy," are they not, *mutatis mutandis*, simply "cleaning the categories;" imposing a dominant particularity in the guise of a reified Wilsonian universalism?

Not long ago, my adopted compatriots and I voted for a new South Africa in an intensely fetishized, anti-witchcraft ritual of Election. As one Chicago newspaper headline screamed, HAIRY SEX DEMON STALKS SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTION.² Even those of us not given to superstition have to hope the magic works, but it's seeming failure in Lesotho (I hope I am speaking too soon) has that kindred nation - unlike South Africa, a "real" nation - whistling (and sometimes shooting) in the dark. Let us face it: discourses of democracy are popular but elections, however free or fair, do not institutionalise democracy. Further, there are many cases in which election-driven "transitions to democracy" produce disjunctions, contentions, and impasses that provide less public progress and private well-being than the autocracies they ostensibly replace. Now we see that here in southern Africa a very popular electoral transition brought to power or perhaps paralysis a government of one people, one language, one political history, one nation that listens only to those who have the physical or organizational capacity to threaten it. Let us hope I am making too much of this.

² My thanks to John Comaroff for this gem.