

CHAPTER 3

The Campaign

Given the turbulent political history of Lesotho, it was noteworthy that campaigning by political parties was free of violence and intimidation, although there were a few reports of what appeared to be minor incidents. Officials, traditional leaders and the parties themselves seemed to have striven for a peaceful campaign. The Commonwealth Observer Group came across instances where District Electoral Officers had summoned meetings of candidates in order to defuse tension in areas with an alleged potential for violence and intimidation. They seemed to have been successful in doing so. There were also indications that the Chiefs, as the traditional leaders of the Basotho people, and the churches had played a role in creating an environment for a campaign free of violence. In addition, the leaders of all the major parties both at national and district levels stressed their desire for peaceful political activity. There were no apparent constraints on freedom of speech and assembly. The candidates and party supporters were able to express their views in an unrestricted manner.

The methods used for political campaigning in Lesotho had a distinctly indigenous flavour. They reflected the highly personalised nature of the Basotho culture, which places emphasis on the transmission of important statements in group gatherings. As a result, *pitsos* or rallies were the most prominent instrument for spreading the political messages of the various parties. These *pitsos* were held both at the national and local levels. The local *pitsos* were particularly important. In addition, candidates and their party activists undertook a significant amount of house-to-house canvassing.

Members of the Observer Group attended a number of *pitsos* of the political parties. They were present at the national rally of the BCP on 20 March. This was a spectacular affair, with songs from the choirs of the different regions, and a display of the horsemanship for which the Basotho are justly famous. The Observers also attended two rallies of the BNP held on the same day in the north and south of the country, where the party leader arrived by helicopter to address the gatherings. A few other well-organised rallies were encountered by some of the Observers when visiting the constituencies before polling day. During absentee voting, an election officer had ordered one such party rally to be moved from the proximity of the polling station, claiming that it would disturb proceedings; the rally was held further away without incident. These local rallies, in particular, were very lively, with music and

dancing and a great deal of atmosphere, and with party supporters waving flags and wearing scarves in party colours.

However, by the standards of many other countries, the last stages of the election campaign were extremely quiet. When our eight teams of Observers were deployed throughout the country to cover the last three days before polling, many of us were surprised at the absence of election fever. Placards, banners and posters were few and far between, and T-shirts with political slogans were rare. There was, however, the occasional advertisement for a candidate in the newspapers, and a few vehicles in both town and countryside displayed party colours and posters. In most districts, we saw no *pitsos*, no posters, no party flags flying on vehicles, no campaigners shouting through megaphones from the back of pick-up trucks.

It seemed there were a number of reasons for the absence of many of the more ostentatious forms of campaigning seen in other countries. The reasons included cultural factors combined with the financial constraints confronting political parties. Probably the experience of previous aborted elections and the memories of 1970 in particular resulted in a degree of caution and self-censorship among the electors. They seemed somewhat reluctant to discuss politics or to express their preferences prior to the election, except in the supportive atmosphere of the rallies.

The ultimate indicator of the success of the campaign, however, was the enthusiasm with which the people of Lesotho responded on the day itself to the challenge of holding a multi-party election, after a lapse of more than 20 years. This was reflected in the high turnout recorded, particularly in the remoter areas of the country where the terrain is extremely difficult.

Issues of Concern

While the draft Constitution and the consultative process by which it was prepared may have gained increasing acceptance over the period of its evolution in 1991 and 1992, we were soon made aware of widespread concern about an insertion into the draft in late 1992 by the Military Council of provisions relating to the establishment of a Defence Commission. Under the provisions, the Commission would be chaired by the Prime Minister but otherwise would comprise the six senior representatives of the law enforcement, defence and security agencies. The major responsibility of the Commission would be for appointments to and the discipline of the uniformed forces. But as it also had power in the exercise of its functions to give orders to public servants and could act in the absence of the Prime Minister as Chairman, fears were expressed to us that the Commission might effectively be beyond the control of Parliament. This matter was raised with us in our contacts and discussions not only with the political parties but also in our discussions with church leaders and many others.

We raised the matter during a courtesy call on the Chairman of the Military

Council, Major-General Ramaema, who explained that the provisions had been designed to prevent perceived misuse of power by civilian governments. He emphasised that the provisions were not entrenched and that a new Parliament could deal with them as it saw fit.

Notwithstanding these reassurances, the fears and concerns expressed to us were very real. We were thus heartened to learn that, on the very eve of the election, the Military Council had reacted to sustained representations from leaders of political parties, church leaders, representatives of foreign governments and others, by introducing an amendment to the particular provision concerning control over the public service which would prevent the Commission from acting in the absence of the Prime Minister as Chairman. This last-minute action by the Military Council was well received, and to some extent may have assuaged broader fears expressed about the original motives behind the introduction of the Defence Commission provisions by the Council.

In this context, we detected in many quarters a persistent unease as to the genuineness of the declared intentions of the Military Council to transfer power to a freely elected civilian government and to return the army to barracks. The oft-stated view put to us was that the period before the election and polling day itself were likely to be peaceful enough but that the transition period immediately after the election was full of uncertainty and would need to be carefully monitored and nurtured. As an Observer Group, we can only record here the emphatic assurances given to us by Major-General Ramaema and echoed by the members of the Military Council whom we met. We were repeatedly assured of the military's determination to hand over the running of the country to the civilians, leaving the military free to focus on its more traditional role of ensuring the security and integrity of the nation.

This unease as to what might happen after the election appeared to be fuelled by widespread but unsubstantiated rumours of hidden caches of arms and ammunition, and of the military training outside Lesotho of forces which might destabilise an incoming government. We found no evidence at all to support these rumours, but to us they were symptomatic of the pressing need after the election to promote at all levels an enduring climate of peace, stability and national reconciliation. We felt that only in this way would the ghosts of 1970 be finally laid to rest.

A further issue brought to our attention by our interlocutors, including the churches and some political leaders, was that of the office of the King. The view was put to us that HM Moshoeshoe II's exile to London and subsequent deposition by the Military Government were acts of injustice which would need to be addressed. It was emphasised to us that this issue and the election itself were separate matters, and that the election needed to be got out of the way first. But the issue had impacted on the election campaign and it was hoped that the incoming government would resolve the issue as a matter of priority.

Against the background of our previous comments on the need to promote peace, stability and national reconciliation after the election, we fully support

the commitment of the three major political parties, made just prior to our arrival in Lesotho, to resolve all such unresolved issues as a matter of priority when the newly elected Parliament comes into operation.

A related matter which it was feared might mar the peaceful run-up to polling day was the suspension by the Military Council with effect from 18 March 1993 of four of the 22 Principal Chiefs of Lesotho, one of them the son of HM Moshoeshoe II and younger brother of King Letsie III. The suspension was reportedly related to their involvement in the efforts by King Letsie and his supporters to hold a convention on 12 March about the office of the King, efforts which were ultimately abandoned in the face of implacable opposition from the Military Council. In the end these fears did not materialise, but this action by the Military Council in its last days in office was seen by some to be both provocative and unnecessary.

During the election campaign many rumours circulated in Maseru, some touching upon and exaggerating issues outlined above. We came to appreciate that 'the Kingsway rumour' – so named after Maseru's main thoroughfare – is a regular feature of Lesotho life.

The Role of the Media

The climate of the Lesotho election had its own character distinct from that of elections in the more news-dominated cultures of some other countries. Lesotho has a daily radio service and a limited daily television service, but no daily newspaper. Nevertheless, during the period of the election campaign the people of Lesotho had at their disposal a range of weekly and other newspapers which was substantial given the size of the population. These papers conveyed a wide variety of viewpoints on the political parties and the issues in the national life.

Most of these papers are published in the Sesotho language. Two weeklies, *Lesotho Today* in English, and *Lentsoe la Basotho* (or *Voice of the Basotho*) in Sesotho, are published by the Government. There is also the official Lesotho News Agency servicing the Government press and other clients inside and outside Lesotho. The political parties publish their own weekly newspapers: the BCP issues *Makatolle* (or *Revealer of Secrets*) and the BNP *Mohlanka* (or *Servant*). Another weekly newspaper, published in English as *The Morning Star* and in Sesotho as *Mphatlalatsane*, largely reflects the views of the MFP on the controversial issue of the monarchy. The PFD also publishes its own newspaper, *Sechaba* (or *The Nation*). The weekly English-language *The Mirror* and the Sesotho *Mo'Africa* (or *The African*) might be described as independents.

The Sesotho-language press includes two church newspapers, the Roman Catholic weekly *Moeletsi oa Basotho* (or *Adviser of the Basotho*) and the Lesotho Evangelical Church fortnightly *Leselinyana la Lesotho* (or *Little Light of Lesotho*). The religious press also comprises other publications in Sesotho and English. Among these, the quarterly magazine *Litsoakotleng* (or *Food Provision*), providing information relevant to rural life and development, and produced by the

Christian Council of Lesotho, has a substantial readership in the countryside.

None of these papers has a large circulation, though the Sesotho-language press reaches a larger readership than that in English. Moreover, despite Lesotho's relatively high literacy rate, the influence of newspapers is probably greatest in Maseru and the other urban centres along the country's western border, although the Sesotho-language press is also influential in the countryside.

In many of the rural areas, partly due to the difficulties of newspaper distribution in mountainous terrain, radio is the most influential medium of communication. The only national radio service in Lesotho is the government-controlled Radio Lesotho. Lesotho Television, also government-controlled, is very limited both in its reach, much of the country having no power supply, and in its output, consisting of one hour daily broadcasting mainly in Sesotho with some English-language content. The radio service is in Sesotho except for three brief daily news bulletins in English.

Due to Lesotho's geographical situation, surrounded as it is by South Africa, its citizens also have access to the South African media. South African newspapers are widely available in the towns, and South African television and radio broadcasts are also readily obtainable. Coverage of Lesotho in the South African press during the election campaign was sparse, and the same was probably true of South African television and radio, although there was some coverage of Lesotho in the external service of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). However, the SABC also has its own service, Radio Sesotho, broadcasting in Sesotho for the benefit of the four million Sesotho speakers living in South Africa, some of them Lesotho citizens working in the mines. Radio Sesotho was said to have broadcast programmes aimed at voter education of listeners in Lesotho. Another outside information source is the BBC World Service, with its relay station in Lesotho giving clear reception.

The Commonwealth Observer Group concluded, from the wide range of the non-governmental press in Lesotho in terms of its political and other affiliations, that no political parties had any difficulty in expressing their views in print to the electorate. It also concluded that, in this situation, the access of any political party to a particular newspaper or media outlet, inside or outside Lesotho, was not likely to have given it undue advantage with the electorate.

Since Lesotho's Military Government was not itself involved in the election nor linked to any political party, its control of radio and television and of its own newspapers was not a factor detracting from the democratic nature of the election campaign. There were no complaints that the Government's Internal Security Act had inhibited freedom of expression during the campaign. Moreover, as part of the preparation for the election, the Government had agreed to allow the political parties access to radio. Both major parties conveyed to the Group their appreciation at being allowed access to state radio, according to one of them for the first time in the history of Lesotho. All the parties declared themselves satisfied with the working of the arrangements for access.

Such problems as there were arose in the area of objective reporting of party political activity. Before the arrival of the Commonwealth Observer Group, one political party had complained of bias of two senior civil servants concerned with broadcasting and had succeeded in having them disciplined. The same party had also complained of bias in the radio reporting of its rallies. However, its complaint was acted upon effectively by the broadcasting authorities, and by the end of the campaign the rallies of both major parties were being adequately reported to their satisfaction. In the Group's view, the initial problems in reporting fairly on party political activities were not due to any systematic political manipulation but to the difficulties of the government-controlled radio service in adjusting to the requirements of democracy. The fact that complaints had been acted upon was commendable, and in keeping with the democratic nature of the political campaign.