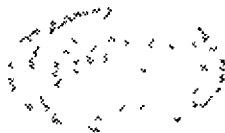


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JONATHAN'S LESOTHO : STILL AN UNSTABLE IRRITANT WITHIN SOUTH AFRICA?

From protégé to vehement critic

Lesotho's relations with South Africa have undergone a remarkable transformation in the past decade. Prior to Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan's coup d'état, when he prevented defeat by the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) by aborting the January 1970 general election, he was arguably South Africa's closest friend and ally in black Africa. In 1966 and 1967 he visited Dr. Verwoerd and Mr. Vorster, respectively, and Jonathan publicly committed himself to peaceful co-existence and non-interference vis-à-vis South Africa and strongly opposed violence, terrorism and boycotts against his neighbouring state. Differences in "political philosophy", he agreed with Vorster in 1967, were not an obstacle to fruitful co-operation. Jonathan welcomed considerable South African assistance, e.g. seconded South African officials and agricultural medical and commercial aid. Even his own position was to some extent at least the result of South African aid: the Republic provided covert assistance to Jonathan's Basutoland National Party (BNP) in both the 1965 and 1970 general elections.

There were, however, already two signs of tension in this early period of cordiality immediately after Lesotho's independence in 1966. The first and most important was that Jonathan had made no secret of his dislike of apartheid and he committed himself to its elimination, but by peaceful means. The second was South Africa's failure to establish diplomatic ties with Lesotho, although Jonathan favoured it. South Africa's patently unconvincing explanations for this failure, coupled with the fact that diplomatic relations were established with Malawi in 1967, inevitably raised suspicions in Lesotho about the Republic's good intentions.

In October 1970 Jonathan announced his dialogue initiative, offering Lesotho as a "bridge" between South Africa and black Africa. On the one hand, this was in line with his known commitment to peaceful change in South Africa. "We condemn violence as a means of achieving political objectives on the basis of the Christian principles on which we stand", Jonathan explained. On the other hand, his championing the dialogue idea was no doubt also an attempt to give his close relations with South Africa greater respectability in black Africa. This was an acknowledgement that his ties with his white neighbour tended to undermine his bona fides further north.

The dialogue initiative, on which Jonathan placed a high premium, did not produce the desired results. South Africa failed to capitalise on the overtures of a number of black states in 1970/71. What particularly incensed Lesotho, was that South Africa neglected giving Lesotho due recognition for its role in the initiative and instead focused on "bigger stakes", such as the Ivory Coast. The OAU also took a tough stand against dialogue with South Africa, thus putting Lesotho in something of a spot.

The failure of dialogue, which Jonathan inter alia saw as a peaceful and practical means "of persuading the South African Republic against continued practice of apartheid", not unexpectedly gave rise to a radically different approach to South Africa. "We definitely support the liberation struggle in Southern Africa", Lesotho's Foreign Minister announced in August 1972. Frustrated by the "absence of constitutional machinery" in white-ruled Southern Africa, the "liberation movements" had resorted to violence to achieve "freedom from colonialism and racism". Lesotho's previously rather guarded denunciations of apartheid likewise gave way to a vehement new tone. Apartheid, Jonathan claimed in 1972, "has assumed the most predatory of all its forms", and he warned that opposition to racism was escalating to a point "where very soon there will be no room for dialogue and the victims of this system will see violence as presenting the only chance for the attainment of equality and freedom". At the United Nations, Lesotho abandoned its cautious stance on the South African issue from 1972 onwards, and stood up to be counted in support of condemnatory resolutions.

In this atmosphere, it came as no surprise that South Africa and Lesotho failed to implement their decision of May 1972 to establish consular links.

The presence of seconded South African officials in Lesotho was by then a thing of the past, as were many other forms of official South African assistance. Various other foreign aid donors, and the UN in particular, emerged on the scene in Lesotho. Geographic and economic realities, however, meant that all this had not lessened Lesotho's dependence on South Africa to any meaningful extent.

In the political sphere, the alienation between Lesotho and South Africa continued:

Firstly, Jonathan's use of his country's annual independence celebrations for attacks on apartheid, prompted South Africa not to attend after 1972.

A second illustration was given by the difficulties involved in setting up a meeting between Jonathan and Vorster. The rather low-key meeting eventually took place in 1974, a good two years after the possibility was first mentioned publicly.

The third example vividly illustrates the reversal in Lesotho's policy towards South Africa. At the height of the Southern African détente period (late 1974 - early 1975), when even such traditionally hostile countries as Zambia and Tanzania gave support to negotiations with South Africa, Lesotho was conspicuous in its opposition.

Fourth, the independence of Transkei in 1976 marked a new low point in relations between Lesotho and South Africa. Lesotho accused South Africa of closing three border posts between the two countries in an attempt to coerce Lesotho into recognising Transkei's independence. Lesotho skilfully exploited this fabricated claim and managed to extract over R90 million in aid from the UN to overcome the effects of the border "closure". It was a bonk which paid off handsomely for Lesotho, both in material and political terms. The border dispute, together with the Soweto riots, effectively neutralised the improvement in relations reported after Foreign Minister Hilgard Muller's official visit to Lesotho in May 1976.

The fifth example of the increasing estrangement is provided by a statement made by Lesotho's Foreign Minister, Mr. C.D. Molapo, in 1977. In the most radical statement to that date on the use of violence against the Republic, he declared that the effects would be devastating, but a "better South Africa would emerge from the embers".

Sixth, the increasingly strident assertions of Lesotho's claims to the so-called conquered territory (though not clearly defined, it embraces at least parts of the Orange Free State bordering on Lesotho) are no doubt linked to the deterioration in relations.

Coming to the present, Lesotho has used the extension of its diplomatic ties with socialist bloc countries as a means of demonstrating its independence and indeed political distance from South Africa (although this was probably not the sole reason for establishing such links). This applies particularly to Cuba (links established June 1978) and the Soviet Union (links established February 1980). Lesotho now has diplomatic relations with over 40 countries, the majority of which, however, do not have resident diplomats in Maseru.

There are numerous other instances of the strain in relations between Lesotho and South Africa. Among the more important are the position of Basotho migrant workers in South Africa (particularly on the mines); the treatment of Lesotho citizens at South African border posts; South Africa's withdrawal in 1977 of its R2,5 million subsidy on wheat and maize exported to Lesotho; unilateral South African action in other economic matters affecting Lesotho, such as import controls and devaluation. For its part, Lesotho has endeavoured to lessen its dependence on South Africa in the economic and transport fields by insularia seeking increased foreign aid; developing domestic industries; trying to arrange for a direct supply of Arab oil, not via South Africa; and planning a new international airport.

The most recent tensions between Lesotho and South Africa were caused by the flare-up in violence in Lesotho (last November), instigated by the exiled BCP, and the subsequent flight of several hundred Basotho refugees to the Republic. South Africa was accused of allowing its territory to be used

as a base for (BCP) attacks on Lesotho. The detention of a South African exile, Winston Nkondo, by the South African police while en route to Lesotho in December 1979, brought another sharp reaction from Lesotho.

Lesotho's unsettled domestic scene

While his country's deteriorating relations with South Africa throughout the 1970s must have been one of Jonathan's major preoccupations, the troubled state of Lesotho politics since the 1970 coup was his main priority. His coup, suspension of the constitution and incarceration of the Opposition, precipitated considerable violence. The long-standing tension between Jonathan and King Moshoeshoe II over the monarch's alleged involvement in party politics came to a head after the coup. Jonathan blamed much of the unrest and indeed the BNP's setback at the polls on the King's meddling in politics. Moshoeshoe in March left Lesotho for Holland for a temporary exile. Jonathan declared a five year "holiday from politics" to try and effect reconciliation in his politically divided country. After several attempts, he managed to persuade a majority of BCP MPs to join a nominated new Interim Assembly. This led to a split in the BCP, with its leader, Mr. Ntsu Mokhehle, refusing to co-operate.

In January 1974 violence again broke out, after the relative lull following the upheaval immediately after the coup. An attempted coup by Mokhehle's followers sparked off severe Government reprisals, and the ensuing clashes left over 100 dead. The coup attempt was aborted and Mokhehle and some of his lieutenants managed to flee Lesotho, leading to charges from the Lesotho Government that South Africa had allowed the fugitives to escape to Botswana. In February 1976, unrest again surfaced in Lesotho, but was easily contained. The exiled BCP, which was blamed for the unrest, reportedly planned to infiltrate supporters who had undergone military training abroad.

Given these clear manifestations of opposition to his autocratic rule, Jonathan was unwilling to make good his promise of an election in 1975 and thus decided to extend his "holiday from politics" indefinitely. To secure his position, Jonathan relied heavily on the tough para-military Police Mobile Unit and the infamous Lesotho Peace Corps, which acted as an agent of the BNP and had a reputation for strong-arm tactics against opponents.

In November 1975, Jonathan had appointed two Opposition leaders - of the BCP and Maseratlou Freedom Party - to his Cabinet, but this was a far cry from a government of national unity demanded by Mokhehle and others. Mokhehle, however, had his own share of troubles, for he was expelled as BCP leader by the party's executive (also in exile) in January 1977. He refused to step down, claiming his expulsion was unconstitutional. This produced a split in the exiled BCP, with the anti-Mokhehle faction - led by Mr. Tseliso Makhakhe - willing to enter into negotiations with Jonathan. Mokhehle's leadership was also contested by the BCP's exiled Secretary General, Mr. Koenyama Chakela, who led a number of senior BCP members in another break-away.

Despite Mokhehle's hard line against Jonathan, emissaries of the two leaders met clandestinely in Gaborone and Lusaka towards the middle of 1977. Jonathan's own Party, however, opposed the dialogue and effectively thwarted a reconciliation between the two main adversaries. Jonathan instead again broadened the base of his Government, by appointing the leader of the third opposition party, the United Democratic Party, to the Cabinet in November 1978. For the first time, the Government had representatives of all domestic political parties in its ranks.

It soon became evident that Jonathan's brand of a national government was patently insufficient to heal Lesotho's deep-seated political divisions. In May 1979, Lesotho police were involved in violent clashes with armed gangs, presumably BCP elements, which left 19 people dead. Some of the insurgents, Jonathan claimed, were Basotho labourers recruited on South African mines and their arms were of South African origin. It was furthermore suggested that South Africa had "turned a blind eye" to the insurgents crossing the Republic en route to Lesotho. Four months later bombs destroyed power and water installations in Lesotho, for which BCP members were again blamed. The most serious fighting between the police and armed BCP insurgents occurred in November last year. Mokhehle revealed that his faction of the BCP had formed a military wing, the Lesotho Liberation Army, and that they were involved in the renewed violence in Lesotho. Apart from a sizeable death toll, the fighting led to an exodus of nearly 300 Basotho, who sought refuge in South Africa, while

22 prominent Basotho (including Mokhehle's wife) fled to Botswana. The vast majority of the Basotho refugees being housed in a camp at Bethlehem, have adamantly refused to return to Lesotho, fearing reprisals at the hands of the authorities.

Lesotho and South Africa: the economic and geographic realities

For all its outspoken criticism of South Africa, Lesotho's very survival still depends on its powerful neighbour. This is clearly borne out by some basic facts and figures. Lesotho is one of the world's 25 least developed countries, with few natural resources other than diamonds and water. Between 200 000 and 250 000 Basotho are employed annually in South Africa and their remittances accounted for 42% of Lesotho's GNP of R250m in 1977/78. Of the country's total revenue in 1978/9, 72,5% was attributable to the Customs Union with South Africa. Being totally surrounded by South Africa (and Transkei, which Lesotho refuses to recognise as an independent state), the movement of people and goods to and from Lesotho of course depends on the goodwill of the Republic.

Conclusion

Despite the severe constraints imposed by economic and geographic factors, Lesotho has shown few inhibitions on the political level of relations with South Africa. It can indeed be argued that Lesotho has resorted to a form of brinkmanship vis-à-vis the Republic. As long as Jonathan remains in power, this trend is likely to continue: Lesotho will exploit to the full the remarkable degree of political manoeuvrability it possesses in relations with South Africa, but will try and stop short of antagonizing South Africa to the point where it retaliates in a manner damaging to Lesotho's vital interests.

On a wider front, Jonathan can be expected to pursue his efforts to place Lesotho on the map and establish himself as a leader to be reckoned with in Southern Africa. One way of achieving this would be for Lesotho to join the group of Frontline states, along with the prohibition of Jonathan. His chance may come next month, when Lesotho and Swaziland will join the five Frontline states in Lusaka to discuss an anti-Pretoria constellation of states.

Jonathan's main concern will, however, continue to be the unsettled domestic situation. Lesotho has been in something of a political vacuum since the coup of ten years ago. Powerful forces are still ranged against Jonathan's autocratic regime, thus holding out a strong possibility of renewed violence and instability in the near future.

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