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LESOTHO'S TROUBLED ROAD

WHY A COUP?

The government of Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan and his ruling party, the Basuto National Party (BNP) were facing two interrelated problems before the coup d'etat on 20 January this year. Domestic support for Jonathan and his BNP was waning as unemployment increased and the Lesotho government could not contain the growing conflict with the South African government. Furthermore, South Africa's deteriorating domestic environment since November 1984 tended to spillover into Lesotho, undercutting its recently-improved economic performance.

Dissatisfaction following the cancellation of the September 1985 elections, added to the increasing disenchantment of many Lesotho nationals and the Paramilitary Force (PMF) with governmental tolerance of South African refugees resident in Lesotho and the anarchical actions of the BNP's Youth League.

The Jonathan government's very existence was based on a policy of brinkmanship with Pretoria at every turn, which tended to invite bellicose and retaliatory actions by the South African authorities.

JONATHAN'S MISGUIDED CONFIDENCE:

The BNP government scheduled elections for September 1985. The opposing groups mobilising support after July 1983 included the ruling BNP, the Maramatlou Freedom Party (MFP), the United Democratic Party (UDP), the National Independence Party (NIP), the Communist Party of Lesotho (CPL), the recently formed Basuto Democratic Alliance (BDA) and certain elements of the internal Basotho Congress Party (BCP) - whose external wing included the reportedly South African-supported Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA). The BCP's traditional support came mostly from the 120 000 migrant workers in South Africa, and new electoral regulations complicated their effective participation. The opposition groups unsuccessfully called for a postponement of the election on procedural grounds, and their subsequent failure to present candidates led to the election's cancellation and a BNP victory by default. A High Court decision later confirmed the BNP government's legitimacy.

The Jonathan government had embarked over a number of years on a closer association with the socialist countries, establishing diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Democratic Korean Republic, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. It was in the

threes of confirming diplomatic relations with Cuba just prior to the coup d'etat in January 1986. The government also chose to place greater support behind the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC) and this resulted in twenty-three PAC members leaving of their own accord for Tanzania in May 1984. The government refused openly to clamp down on other South African refugees.

There were also reports of growing animosity between the PMF and the armed BNP Youth League, with the Youth League accusing the PMF of disloyalty to the government and often harassing members of the PMF. The PMF was reported to be frequently running amok and even robbing a bank. In fact, many Basutos believed the staying power of the BNP depended largely on the Youth League.

GAMBLING WITH PRETORIA:

Since the South African security forces raid on Maseru in December 1982, the Jonathan government had attempted to exploit international support for the South African liberation movements. Jonathan placed much faith in Pretoria's reluctance to mount similar raids again, or to utilise its economic muscle against its highly dependent neighbour for fear of massive international criticism. This error in judgement encouraged provocation of Pretoria and open support for South African refugees.

Bilateral relations between the two countries had, since 1980, been regulated by a joint liaison committee, but its deliberations generally excluded security issues. Shortly after the South African government had urgently telexed Maseru to act against what it charged were airlifted ANC cells from Maputo in mid-December 1985, six ANC members and three Lesotho citizens were killed in Maseru on 21 December. The UN Security Council condemned South Africa's involvement in these killings, but this did not prevent Pretoria from initiating stricter border security checks on 1 January 1986. The South African-owned and operated Maseru railway station was closed down on 13 January after Maseru-bound trains were halted on the South African side of the border for security inspections. This effectively 'blockaded' Lesotho, as consumer goods, medical and fuel supplies from South Africa only trickled through.

On 10 January, the Lesotho government suggested that joint security matters should be dealt with by a sub-committee of the liaison committee. The South African government agreed, but stipulated that Lesotho's representatives on the sub-committee should have full mandates to negotiate and to act. On 13 January, Lesotho contacted South Africa, confirming the designated membership to the high-ranking committee which was ready to fly to Pretoria.

The following day, five opposition leaders were detained on their return from talks with Pik Botha in Pretoria. They were accused of encouraging Pretoria to tighten its stranglehold on Lesotho. Jonathan then appealed to western nations to mount a Berlin-type airlift, without immediate response.

On 15 January, the PMF surrounded the Prime Minister's Offices in Maseru, and apparently the head of the PMF, Major-General Justinian Lekhanya forced Jonathan to visit the King, Moshoeshoe II, at the royal residence, after which he was reportedly confined to his rural home at Ha Rakolo outside Maseru. The following day, there was an attempted coup

led by elements within the BNP Youth League, which was effectively crushed by the PMF. Some BNP Youth League members took to the hills around Maseru, resulting in sporadic clashes.

A high-powered delegation (including Lekhanya) from Lesotho visited Pretoria on Friday 17 January, to discuss security concerns, the 'blockade' and the establishment of a special joint frontier security commission, returning to Maseru on Saturday 18 January to face an insurrection within the PMF. Thirty-five members of the PMF unit appear to have mutinied and this resulted in four PMF deaths. On Sunday, 20 January, Jonathan held a press conference for foreign journalists at his mountain retreat to explain that he was still in control and retained the loyalty of the PMF and Lekhanya. He also warned that assistance would be sought from the socialist states if the West was not prepared to offer it.

Only a few hours after this, Lekhanya staged a bloodless coup d'etat, which was first announced at 06h00 on Monday 20 January. All cabinet ministers were put under house arrest, with essential government services left in the hands of departmental secretaries. An 18h00 to 06h00 curfew was imposed in Maseru and all district towns. The actual administration was transferred to a Military Council chaired by Lekhanya under the Head of State, Moshoeshe II.

An urgent meeting of delegations from South Africa and Lesotho met in Cape Town on 21 January to discuss a host of issues, including the border measures taken by South Africa. At the same time, officers in the South African Defence Force accompanied Deputy Director-General of Foreign Affairs, Neil van Heerden, to meet with their counterparts in Maseru for 'follow-up discussions'.

The Military Council's chief concern was to persuade Pretoria to lift the 'blockade', whilst South Africa's priority remained the removal of the ANC presence in Lesotho. The guarantees offered by the head of the Lesotho delegation to Cape Town, former Lesotho Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs Evaristus Sekhonyana, were sufficient to permit the South African government to relax the border checks. A ban was instituted on all political activities within Lesotho, although the detained opposition leaders were soon released, later supplemented by an amnesty offer by Moshoeshe II to all political exiles. All border restrictions were lifted by South Africa on 24 January 1986.

The Military Council seems determined to demonstrate its good intentions both domestically and in its relations with South Africa. However, its powers of manoeuvre are largely dictated by the South African demands that Lesotho should not permit its territory to be used as a base/sanctuary for ANC sympathisers/querrillas and other operations.

THE REFUGEE ISSUE:

The refugee issue has been central to the deteriorating relations between Pretoria and Maseru, and also to the fortunes of the domestic environment in Lesotho. South African refugees resident in Lesotho numbered some 11 000 before January 1986, of which only a small number were considered ANC activists. The Jonathan government's repeated refusal openly to classify or categorise refugees, complicated the task of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Maseru. South Africa insisted that it wanted Lesotho to hand over ANC activists and certain other refugees,

although the Lesotho government hoped to retain its territory as a sanctuary in terms of the Geneva Convention. This resulted in the last minute airlifting of refugees (supposedly mostly ANC activists) to Lusaka, Maputo and Dar es Salaam prior to the coup d'etat.

Since the coup, the Military Council has co-operated with the UNHCR and is screening refugees to determine their status. Further groups have been airlifted to Lusaka. However, the screening process places tremendous demands on those refugees who might sympathise with the broader, non-violent aims of the ANC, yet not support the organisation beyond this point. These are the ones most at risk where their safety and permanence of asylum in Lesotho are concerned.

The subsequent substantial reduction in numbers of South African refugees in Lesotho has been the direct result of South African pressure on the Lesotho authorities - which in effect has forced the Military Council greatly to compromise the country's record as a reliable sanctuary. The Military Council has effectively been perceived by the international community as having bent over backwards under pressure from South Africa, if not actually having become its surrogate. Such perceptions are neither in the best interests of the South African nor the Lesotho governments.

The ANC has also been forced to abandon Lesotho as an operational or mobilising base, and it seems that the South African government is determined to clear all neighbouring states of the ANC, PAC and other South African refugee presence at any cost - be it via military raids or economic pressures, to achieve a guaranteed and permanent security arrangement with its neighbours in this regard. This does not bode well for regional stability. It certainly does not do so for domestic security of the neighbouring states and especially those not currently following Pretoria's line: Botswana and Zimbabwe - let alone Zambia and Angola.

WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS?:

The Military Council has accorded greatly enhanced power to Moshoeshe II and this may pave the way to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. It will, however, be difficult to achieve a modicum of agreement among the various groups and parties including the BNP, on their participation in the political process. With a ban on all political activities, the Council and the King will be vetting these groups, with a view to a return to civilian cum monarchical rule. The King will have to distance himself from his traditional sympathies with the MFP. The role of the Catholic Church in facilitating a return to peaceful political processes also seems important.

Particularly vital is the ability to demonstrate a return to stable conditions, which in essence means disarming all members of the BNP Youth League and other opposition groups and insisting upon fulfilment by the Military Council of its intention to return the country to civilian rule. The South African government could, and has complicated this task both by its long association with various opposition parties and groups and by its demands that Pretoria's security concerns should receive the new regime's most immediate attention. This could stretch the capabilities of the Military Council beyond acceptable limits, which in turn might undermine the new regime's legitimacy and staying power. The restoration of stability should be a wholly internal matter, though regional realities cannot be ignored.