

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Coalition Politics in Lesotho: A Multi-Disciplinary Study of Coalitions and their Implications for Governance* edited by Hoolo 'Nyane and Motlamelle A. Kapa, African Sun Media, Stellenbosch, 2022.

In his Preface to this book, Richard Weisfelder of Toledo University observes that when he was doing his doctoral research in Lesotho in 1965-66, there were few scholarly texts on the country's political development and institutions, and few of these were by indigenous authors. Although the pattern was to be disrupted by B.M. Khaketla's *Lesotho 1970: An African Coup under the Microscope* (University of California Press 1972), the major studies of Lesotho's politics that came out over the next decade were written by white, foreign authors and appeared in journals and books not easily accessible in Lesotho. By the end of the 1970s, however, 'a significant cadre of social science scholars had emerged at the National University of Lesotho'. I think his dating is a bit optimistic. There was, indeed, a very lively political debate going on among students at the University at that time, yet many of the most engaged were Zimbabweans and South Africans, each of whom had attachments to their own liberation movements. Yes, there were Basotho participants among the core group, yet the numbers were still very small. Nonetheless, Weisfelder is right when he indicates that local students, who were generally highly critical of the incumbent Leabua Jonathan's authoritarian regime, were prone to write under pseudonyms. What he does not say, is that such publications were in the local press. This was perhaps where they should have been, influencing local opinion. Yet the flip-side was that academic publication was still left largely to expatriate and foreign researchers.

Lesotho's accession to independence had prompted early enquiry about how such a small and impoverished country, long left to languish by Britain, the departing imperial power, was going to survive politically and economically when it was land-locked and surrounded by apartheid South Africa. An early stab at outlining its possibilities and limitations was provided by Jack Spence's *Lesotho: The Politics of Dependence*, published by Oxford University Press in 1968. Thereafter, what sparse efforts that followed, notably Gabriel Winai-Stroms' *Development and Dependence in Lesotho, the enclave of South Africa* (Scandinavian Institute of African Studies 1979) and *Lesotho: Dilemmas of Dependence in Southern Africa* (Westview 1985) by John Bardill and James Cobbe, were also written by expatriate and foreign researchers, as were most of the academic articles which appeared at the time. Yet things were changing, and for all the travails that the

country and its university underwent during the 1980s, (and this still needs serious research), local scholarship was developing. As Wiesfelder comments, 'a new generation of Basotho scholars at NUL' was coming into prominence. In 1990, local scholars contributed ten out of the fourteen chapters of a valuable collection assessing the prospects for *Southern Africa after Apartheid* edited by Sehoai Santho and Mafa Sejanamane (SAPES Trust) which engaged with issues vital to Lesotho's future. Even so, local students remained wary, and my own contribution to that book, examining the prospects for Lesotho joining a liberated South Africa, was prompted by local radicals saying to me: 'you can do this, we can't'!

The present collection on *Coalition Politics* demonstrates how things have changed. All but one-and-a-half of the eighteen chapters are written by Basotho scholars, the exception being an excellent contribution by a Kenyan who has been teaching at the National University for the best part of twenty years, and one chapter co-written by an American student doing his PhD at Wits. The overwhelming majority of contributors acquired their undergraduate training at NUL; many have attended South African universities to do postgraduate work; some of those who do not themselves teach at NUL hold academic positions in South Africa; some have acquired extensive experience in African inter-governmental organisations or NGOs; and many have authored contributions to international journals and edited books. Wiesfelder is right to celebrate this transformation.

Lesotho is a small and impoverished country which is largely ignored by the outside world. Especially after 2012, when the country was ruled by unstable coalitions, it has attracted little attention, except when there have been bouts of political instability, sometimes prompted by military mayhem. For foreign observers, including those watching events from within the southern African region, its politics remain obscure. In the 1970s, the country's politics was largely fought out by two main parties, the Basotho National Party (BNP) and the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP). Today, the BNP has been reduced to a bit-player, the Congress tradition has fragmented, and the number of political parties multiplies as ambitious politicians invent their own political vehicles to get themselves elected to office. It is all remarkably confusing to the outsider, and when it is rendered more complicated by the intensity of faction fighting within political parties, its dynamics become even more difficult to comprehend. In a very real sense, uncovering what is going on demands analysis by insiders – who speak Sesotho, who read the local press, who know the personalities, who can read the tea leaves. This speaks to the value of the present book.

Hoolo 'Nyane and Motlamelle Kapa, the editors, make the bold claim that Lesotho deserves attention because it has been 'an experimental laboratory of various models of governance' (p.1) (multi-partyism, one party dominance,

military juntas and now coalitions governments). They set the scene by noting that the 1993 Constitution, which heralded the return of Lesotho to civilian rule at a moment when South Africa was undergoing its own democratic transition, organised state institutions on the Westminster system and the plurality electoral system inherited from Britain in 1966. For complicated demographic and other reasons, these resulted in highly disproportionate electoral outcomes in the 1993 and 1998 elections favouring the incumbent BCP, resulting in political mayhem and the renewed threat of military intervention in 1998. The outcome was the adoption of a mixed-member electoral system (MMP) which retained the existing plurality constituency-based system but combined it with a list PR system to deliver overall proportional representation. 'The system unprecedentedly brought ten political parties into parliament' and 'it was already becoming clear that coalition politics was on the horizon' (p.2).

The present author proclaimed the new system, which was first used in the 2002 general election, 'An Unlikely Success' (*Southall Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2003), and it was in the sense that it delivered a fair outcome. Yet what this missed, and what the architects of the new electoral system also missed, was that the smooth functioning of the system relied not only on the rules which it laid down, but on the spirit which was meant to sustain them. It assumed that, in essence, the old party system, fought out by two political traditions, the one broadly conservative, the other broadly radical, would continue in the proportional representation of the established parties. But in a country where there are few economic opportunities and where entry into politics provides one of the few avenues of personal enrichment, politicians rapidly came to appreciate that the rules could be manipulated. As a result, the larger parties, notably the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), formed alliances before elections to maximise proportionality. As Jorgen Elklit is cited (*Journal of African Elections* 2008) as pointing out, this distorted the principles underlying the system. This led to no party gaining an overall majority in the 2012 election, and the formation of Lesotho's first governing coalition.

Subsequent governments have all been coalitions:

- Tom Thabane, the leader of the All Basotho Convention (ABC), became Prime Minister to form the first coalition with the LCD and BNP with the support of six smaller parties in the 2012 election, the first in which an opposition had dislodged a ruling party in the country's history.
- After this collapsed, following a dispute between the two major parties in 2014, a new election failed to produce a clear winner, resulting in a seven-party coalition led by Phakalitha Mosisili, the

leader of the Democratic Congress (DC) (who had been displaced as prime minister in 2012), with the LCD (from which the DC had broken away) as its major partner.

- Mosisili proceeded to reverse key appointments in the military made by his predecessor, leading to turmoil in the army. The subsequent assassination of the former commander of the Lesotho Defence Force (who had just been replaced) led to intervention by the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Thereafter, a split within the DC led to a splinter group aligning with the ABC, resulting in Mosisili heading into a new election to avoid defeat in a vote of no confidence in parliament.
- The resulting election in June 2017 saw the ABC under Thabane forming a four-party coalition with three smaller parties, only for it to fall prey to bitter faction fighting. This led to passage of a no-confidence motion in Thabane, whose government now collapsed like ‘a pack of cards’ (Matlosa p. 144). It was replaced by a grand coalition led by a new prime minister comprising the ABC, DC and five smaller parties.

This is a remarkably convoluted history, and when you throw in such random factors as Thabane being arraigned for the murder of his former wife, it takes a remarkable degree of commitment to master even the basics of this complex story. This is where this book does so well. It brings order to a maze of detail. Although the editors’ claim to the collection’s ‘mutlidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity’ is a bit overdone, as the diverse contributions are made largely by political scientists and constitutional lawyers, the combination is a productive one, occupying the empirical core of the book in Parts Two and Three.

The editors supply a useful summary of each chapter in their introduction. In Part One, Oscar Mwangi provides a valuable discussion of three approaches to coalition-making relating, respectively, to office-seeking, policy-seeking and portfolio-allocation, none of which are mutually exclusive. He speaks to the institutional and political factors that determine their durability, the strains and stresses to which they may be subject, and the uncertainty in which this often results. He also highlights the importance of coalition agreements. These can be tacit or explicit, and they vary in their comprehensiveness, their principal purpose being to limit the uncertainty to which coalitions seem to be inherently prone. He also makes the important point that while coalitions can be progressive and stable, they do not in themselves ensure good governance. This is a most valuable chapter which deserves wide reading.

The second part of the book, on 'Institutions, Powers and the Constitutional Framework', opens with a discussion of the juridical nature of the coalition agreements. Now that coalitions have seemingly come to stay, Kananele Mosito (Chapter 3) suggests the urgent need for Lesotho's constitution to provide for the status and regulation of these agreements. Hoolo 'Nyane (Chapter 4) argues that the Westminster-style constitution has invested the prime minister with powers that are suited to a one-party government, and that this has led to their abuse in a coalition setting. Itumeleng Shale and 'Marealeboha Makau (Chapter 5) demonstrate how coalitions have had a disturbing impact on the independence of the judiciary. Because prime ministers have misused their power to interfere with the leadership of the judiciary, the latter has become enmeshed in politics. Following 'Nyane's plea for the codification of the rules for the formation of coalition governments (which he advises will lead to less power lying in the hands of the king) (Chapter 6), Rapaleng Mosae and Mokitimi Tsosane discuss how coalitions have compromised the independence of the Attorney-General, in much the same way as it has compromised the judiciary (Chapter 7).

Part Three covers 'Political Parties, Political Stability, Security and Electoral Systems', and opens with an excellent overview of how coalition-making has resulted from the change in the electoral system from first-past-the-post to MMP. Authored by veteran commentator Khabele Matlosa, this provides a valuable introduction to Lesotho's chequered political history in recent years and should become a regular 'go-to' source for insiders as well as outsiders. Fako Likoti (Chapter 9) follows with a chapter which indicates that because Lesotho's political parties all have a very similar free-market-cum-welfare orientation, political ideologies have not been a significant factor in either the making or unmaking of Lesotho's coalitions. Sofonea Shale (Chapter 10) argues that when Lesotho's coalitions have collapsed, this has been not only because of lack of agreement about how to regulate conflicts, but a lack of will to do so. This is followed by Mokete Pherudi's highlighting the reasons for the collapse of coalitions (corruption, floor-crossing in parliament by MPs, politicisation of the public sector, squabbles between leading personalities, and so on). And Tlohang Letsie (Chapter 12) follows with a vital contribution on how Lesotho's security forces (the police, the army, and the intelligence and correctional services) have played a major role in the country's political instability, which was aggravated and often precipitated by the power of the prime minister to appoint and dismiss their heads.

Part Four groups together a rather arbitrary collection of chapters under the heading 'Public Participation, Economic Impact, Gender Dynamics and

Comparative Perspectives'. Motlanelle Kapa (Chapter 13) discusses how the comprehensive multi-sectoral reform process, supposedly refereed by SADC, was intended to be underlain by public participation, but has been hi-jacked by political elites, and worries that it has become a window-dressing exercise rather than a transformative process. Watch this space! Moletsane Monyake (Chapter 14) provides a careful examination of how voter participation and enthusiasm in Lesotho is declining. The mushrooming of political parties, the inconclusive results of elections, and the musical-chairs of coalition-forming and governance have increased voter apathy and the distrust of ordinary people in what they see as a political circus, rather a serious exercise in democracy. Mamello Rakolobo (Chapter 15) provides the necessary chapter on gender dynamics, noting that without formal roles on ministerial recruitment, women are usually marginalised within government, and when given ministerial posts, are given ones which deal with 'soft issues' such as social welfare and health. No surprise there! This is followed by a discussion of the economic impact of coalition governments by Selibe Mochoboroane and Keneuoe Mot'soene. Their basic argument is that the constant political instability associated with the coalition government era in Lesotho has had a markedly adverse impact upon budgets (capital allocations down, recurrent expenditure up), loss of enthusiasm by external donors, and capital flight. Finally, Victor Shale and Robert Gerenge (Chapter 17) provide a comparative analysis of coalition governance in Lesotho, Kenya and Mauritius. They arrive at the rather depressing conclusion that too often, coalitions are driven by the quest of elites for power rather than the desire to address developmental concerns. Concern for elite survival hampers any search for restorative justice; and whatever their announced values and aims, coalitions tend to increase ethno-regional differences.

The editors make a useful stab at pulling all this together in Part Five, suggesting that Lesotho's coalition experience offers important lessons to other countries. One, coalitions do not necessarily resolve political instability (although the implication is that they may do so under favourable conditions). Two, if coalitions are to work, participant parties need to genuinely commit to coalition agreements with their in-built procedures for conflict management. Three, coalitions can prove to be extraordinarily expensive, because resulting governments need to keep all participants happy if they are to survive. Four, coalitions may heighten rather than diminish inter-party competition, not least because each party feels it has ownership of the portfolios and ministries it has been allocated.

This book is not an easy read. The subject matter is extraordinarily detailed and complicated, and readers have to wade through a lot of undergrowth to grasp a clear picture of tendencies and personalities (alas, there are few principles to

worry about). This is not the fault of the authors, as they need to wrestle with their subjects (although a stricter edit might have cut down on unnecessary overlap between chapters and a tendency by some contributors to over-write). Nonetheless, this is a book which requires reading, especially in neighbouring South Africa where coalition-making has begun to make its uneven impact at the municipal level and where there is widespread expectation that the ruling African National Congress will lose its majority at the next general election. South African scholars therefore need to take the lessons about coalitions that this book presents very seriously. Very seriously indeed.

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