

Lesotho

Ethnicity in Lesotho

Group selection

The Kingdom of Lesotho is located in southeast Africa and completely surrounded by South Africa. In 1868 it came under British protection, when Lesotho's king sought protection from the Boers. In 1966 Lesotho became an independent nation. Although politically independent, Lesotho is economically tied to South Africa as some 38% of Lesotho's men work in mines and farms in South Africa. Ethnically Lesotho is homogenous: about over 90% (the numbers vary quite substantially depending on the source consulted: Levinson (²⁴⁶⁴, 143) reports 98%, the background report of the US state department (2007) even 99.7%, the Soviet Atlas 87% and Fearon's list (2003) 85%) are Basotho of the 2 million citizens. The remaining 10% of the population in Lesotho is composed of Europeans (Afrikaner and British), Zulus and Asians.

²⁴⁶⁴ [Levinson, 1998]

Lesotho has experienced some periods of political instability since independence in 1966. It first fell under the authoritarian impulses of the conservative Basotho National Party (BNP). When it was defeated in the national elections 1970 the BNP proclaimed a state of emergency, which was followed by a coup and a period of military rule. Political liberalization from within the military council finally led to the first multi-party parliamentary elections in 1993. The Basotho Congress Party (BCP) won all seats, but the BNP protested the outcome, leading to the dismissal of the BCP-led government in 1994. Years of political instability followed, until troops from South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe intervened to resolve the political crisis. The newly founded Lesotho Congress for Democracy Party (LCD) by the former Prime Minister of the BCP party won 78 of the 80 seats, primarily due to the highly disproportional electoral system. Again, the opposition protested the results, but this time the King did not take an active role and the political violence could successfully be contained by troops from Botswana and South Africa. A new electoral system was established and the number of seats in parliament expanded, giving smaller parties a greater chance of representation in the elections 2002. The anticipated effect, however, did not occur and the LCD won 79 of the 80 directly contested seats in the newly 120 seats containing parliament. The BNP held 21 seats as the largest opposition party (²⁴⁶⁵).

²⁴⁶⁵ [Polity IV, 2009]

Power relations

According to the coding rules ethnicity is not politically relevant. No ethnic group is discriminated and there is no political party claiming to represent a certain ethnic group rather than another. (e.g. ²⁴⁶⁶: 203, 205; see also references below and sources cited in the above comments). 2006 elections did not change anything concerning political relevance of ethnicity.

²⁴⁶⁶ [Turkon, 2008]

Lesotho remains essentially homogenous in terms of the ethnicity and religious leanings of its people, and its power structure and political climate reflect the same. The homogeneity reduces the propensity of ethnically charged political conflict.

The political scenario in Lesotho has changed dramatically since the last elections in 2012, when the erstwhile ruling party of 14 years failed to secure an absolute majority and the government was formed as a coalition between the opposition parties. However, ethnicity did not play a role in determining the outcome of the elections. No political party claimed to be affiliated with any particular ethnic group, and there were no ethnically biased polarising or divisive elements that factored into the election results.

With a population of about 2 million people, of which nearly 99% is ethnically Basotho, Lesotho presently also hosts several thousand Asian migrants, predominantly from the Fujian province in China. The Chinese have been migrating to Lesotho for a few decades now. Initially attracted to the country due to attractive tax policies in the apparel industry, today, several Fujian Chinese work off of established kinship networks, and migrate to Lesotho and set up small businesses. With advisory and financial aid from the existing Fujian community network, they pose stiff competition to existing Lesotho small-scale industries. Consequently, although they make up only 0.5% of the population, Chinese migrants are amongst the richest in the poverty-stricken country.

Understandably, anti-Chinese sentiment forms part of the rhetoric in Lesotho, and tensions were last reported as late as in 2007. The community keeps itself largely removed from any political affiliation, including the Chinese government, and in the 2007 riots did not receive any assistance from the embassy in the capital. There were mixed reports of traditional Lesotho political parties colluding with the migrants at this time, but were largely unsubstantiated.

It is crucial to note, however, that both the Lesotho economy and the Basotho people are reliant on outputs of the Chinese model of small business; according to estimates from the Lesotho ministry of Trade and Industry, the textile industry that is mostly operated by Chinese migrants from the mid 1990s, today employs close to 40,000 people.

It will be interesting to see how developments in the Fujian province and Lesotho impact migration in the future, and how the consequences of this increase or reduction in migration will impact life, industry and politics in Lesotho.

Beginning with calls of an unsuccessful military coup in August

2014, lack of support for the incumbent Prime Minister Thabane resulted in an early election in 2015, in which he was replaced by Pakalitha Mosisili (²⁴⁶⁷). However, there is no evidence to suggest that ethnic identity or politics influenced this upheaval and the power-change. Instead, a vote-of-no-confidence in the parliament earlier in 2015 had led to the closing of parliament, citing calls for early elections to rectify the lack of trust in the elites (²⁴⁶⁸).

²⁴⁶⁷ [BBC, 2017]

²⁴⁶⁸ [AI, 2017]

Regarding the migrant Asian workers, we still consider them politically irrelevant according to EPR coding rules. Firstly, as they are mostly “non-citizens”, they are generally not considered in our assessment of ethnic groups. Furthermore, they are not represented politically (no politician or group claims to represent them), and neither have they experienced widespread political discrimination as a group.

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Political status of ethnic groups in Lesotho

From 1966 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sotho	1.0	IRRELEVANT



Figure 515: Political status of ethnic groups in Lesotho during 1966-2017.

Conflicts in Lesotho

Starting on 1998-09-03

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Lesotho	Military faction (Lesotho)		1998-09-03			