



Lesotho — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[Historically the territory of Lesotho occupied the Basotho Kingdom, the name of the British colony on the territory was Basutoland.]

11/03/1871 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: Prior to British rule, the territory known today as Lesotho was ruled by Moshoeshoe I. It was a nation constituting the Basotho Kingdom which emerged as a polity in 1822. After war with Boer settlers in 1856 and in 1886, Moshoeshoe appealed for British protection (Turner 2016). Protection was granted in 1868, however the Kingdom was annexed to Cape Colony (now South Africa) shortly afterwards in 1871, confirmed by an Order in Council of 11/03/1871.¹ In 1883, it was placed under direct British rule when it was annexed as a Crown colony and governed by the High Commissioner for South Africa (Keltie 2014, Turner 2016). While by name and the fact that the territory was annexed by the British, Lesotho was a colony it was de facto a borderline case between a colony and a protectorate. It remained under direct rule by a commissioner, while effective internal power is said to have been „wielded by tribal chiefs”.² While Moshoeshoe had been succeeded as paramount chief by his son, Letsie I, and he in turn was succeeded in 1891 by Lerotholi Letsie I, yet they acted in concert with the British representative in the country, to whom was given the title of resident commissioner.³ Furthermore, self-governance was encouraged in Basotho: Although the Commissioner possessed the authority to enact laws through Proclamation on specific matters like external affairs, defense, and the public service, these subjects were beyond the jurisdiction of the National Council. However, the Commissioner was obligated to present a draft of any Proclamation to the council and take their feedback into account. The constitution included specific provisions concerning objections raised by the council regarding particular matters.⁴ The British established a dual rule system that vested significant authority in the paramount chiefs: Letsie (1870-1891), Lerotholi (1891-1905), Letsie II (1905-1913), Griffith (1913-1939), Seeiso (1939–1940), and the regent ‘Mantsebo (1940–1960) – all direct descendants of Moshoeshoe I. These leaders delegated power through a hierarchy of regional chiefs selected from the royal lineage and key chiefdoms.⁵ Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Political liberties were absent according to LIED and not really present according to V-Dem’s PCLI. Despite the significant role of traditional chiefs and the British strategy of governing through these local structures, Lesotho during the colonial period is best classified as operating under Direct Rule due to the lack of binding decision-making powers afforded to the chiefs within defined policy spheres. While the chiefs had some genuine authority over some aspects of local governance, the British maintained ultimate control over critical matters. Within the colonial government, the chiefs were merely afforded an advisory role and the ultimate authority remained with the resident commissioner.⁶ For the relevant period, V-Dem’s JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are robust. At the same time, V-Dem’s LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. From 1951-1964 they were absent.

04/29/1965 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start (Monarchical) Electoral Hybrid Regime [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]: In 1965, complete internal self-government was attained under King Moshoeshoe II (Turner 2016). Universal suffrage was introduced in 1965⁷ and pre-independence general elections were held on 04/29/1965. The result

was a narrow victory for the Basotholand National Party (Engel 1999: 495).⁸ Lesotho is a monarchy. It is hereditary, following male primogeniture. Along our coding lines Lesotho is a borderline case between a ruling constitutional monarchy and a regime with a ceremonial monarch. However, in all regime datasets with the category monarchy like AF, CGV, HTW and GWF Lesotho is at no one point in its history classified into this category. In addition to that qualitative literature indicates that the king had no executive powers (Nyane 2020). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies the 1965 election as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores it as somewhat free and fair while their CEI scores it as not really clean. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive encountered substantial institutional limitations on power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

10/04/1966 Continuation (Monarchical) Electoral Hybrid Regime [as independent country]: On 10/04/1966, Basutoland achieved independence as the Kingdom of Lesotho. The Basotho National Party (BNP) ruled from 1966 until January 1970.⁹ Regarding severe democratic defects regarding executive constraints among other things the regime is coded as an electoral hybrid regime. The classification in other datasets of the regime varies. RoW classifies the regime as an electoral autocracy, LIED as a multiparty autocracy, BMR as non-democratic, PRC as a semidemocracy and GWF as a democracy. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. From 1966 to 1968 LIED classifies elections as not competitive. The V-Dem EF&FI scores elections as somewhat free and fair. Their CEI scores them as ambiguous. Additionally, political liberties are absent (LIED). V-Dem's PCLI states their presence as ambiguous since 1965. Polity5 indicates that it is an anocracy, a hybrid regime between a democracy and an autocracy (Marshall 2018c). Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive encountered substantial institutional limitations on power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited until 1968, whereafter V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive.

01/31/1970 End (Monarchical) Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start (Monarchical) One-Party Autocracy: The ruling Basotho National Party (BNP), which won a free and fair pre-independence election, annulled the first post-independence election when it appeared to be losing against the Basotho Congress Party (BCP) (Matlosa 1997: 143). Prime minister Leabua Jonathan declared a state of emergency, made de facto a self-coup and suspended constitutional restraints on his executive power. In January 1974, Jonathan accused the BCP of attempting to stage a coup and the party was outlawed. In September 1985, for the first time since 1970 a general election took place in Lesotho. However, all parties except the BNP boycotted the election. Since Jonathan ruled as leader of the BNP the regime is classified as a one-party autocracy. However, since there have not even been one-party elections from 1970 to 1985 it is a borderline case between a personalist autocracy and a one-party autocracy.¹⁰ According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held until 1984, in 1985 executive and legislative elections, which weren't multiparty, were held. As classified by FH for 1972, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. In 1983 the country receives a score of 8, which we interpret as falling into the rather not free category. For the remaining period it scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. Moreover, political liberties are coded as absent following LIED and can be interpreted as not really present according to V-Dem's PCLI. From 1970 to 1972, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations. Between 1973 and 1985, the executive experienced minimal limitations on decision-making, placing it in the first intermediate category. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive are robust, while until 1972 V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of

legislative constraints on the executive. Between 1973 and 1985 they were absent.

01/20/1986 End (Monarchical) One-Party Autocracy/Start (Monarchical) Military Autocracy: A military coup led by General Justin Lekhanya ousted the single-party BNP government. Lekhanya became the chairman of a junta. (Baynham/Mills 1987: 52, Machobane 2001: 52-65, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 74).¹¹ On 11/12/1990 King Letsie III first became king of Lesotho, following the forced exile of his father, King Moshoeshoe II. The king's powers were nominally increased, but real power remained with the military junta. However, on 11/12/1990 Lekhanya launched a self-coup against the king in order to consolidate all power in his junta. The regime suspended the constitution and suppressed political opposition. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Per FH's evaluation for 1986, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. For the period between 1987 and 1990 the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. Political liberties continue to be coded as absent per LIED. V-Dem's PCLI indicates them as not really present. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive are robust, while between 1986-1989 V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive.

04/30/1991 End (Monarchical) Military Autocracy/Start (Monarchical) Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: Colonel Elias Phisoana Ramaema led a coup ousting Prime Minister General Justin Lekhanya. Ramaema took over as head of the existing military junta.¹² The policy changed fundamentally. Ramaema lifted bans on political parties and initiated reforms. Preparations began for democratic elections, leading to the restoration of civilian rule in 1993. In this period no multiparty executive or legislative elections took place. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1, between unlimited authority and slight limitations. As classified by FH for 1992, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. LIED still codes political liberties as absent. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI increased into a range which indicates that political liberties were in an ambiguous state. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

03/27/1993 End (Monarchical) Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy: On this date a general elections took place that were considered free and fair by international observers (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 74). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies the elections as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores them as somewhat free and fair. Their CEI scores them as of ambiguous electoral cleanliness. Per FH, for 1993, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. Besides, political liberties remain absent (LIED). V-Dem's PCLI scored them as somewhat present. However, due to the first-past-the-post electoral system the BCP won all 65 seats in the parliament. The new constitution, which was promulgated in 1993, stripped the monarch of his executive authority and banned him from participating in political affairs.¹³ According to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

08/17/1994 End (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy/Start Autocratic Monarchy: On this date, facing mutinies from his security and civil services, King Letsie III declared himself an absolute ruler, dissolved the parliament, and established a ruling council under his direct control.¹⁴

09/14/1994 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Constitutional Monarchy: On this date, the elected government was reinstated, but Letsie III remained in power.¹⁵ On 01/25/1995, King Moshoeshoe II ascended to the throne again. He died in a car accident on 01/15/1996.¹⁶ King Letsie III became King again one month after Moshoeshoe's death.¹⁷ In 1997, the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) was established due to split in the BCP. The LCD obtained two thirds of the Members of Parliament. This enabled Prime Minister Mokhehle to remain in office as head of the new ruling party. The BCP became the opposition.¹⁸ On 05/14/1998 general elections were won by the LCD, which managed to secure 79 of the 80 parliamentary seats.¹⁹ While the opposition claimed that the elections had been fraudulent, international observers were convinced that the election results had not been influenced by fraudulent incidents.²⁰ As a consequence of the elections, opposition protests began to occur more frequently and in a more violent manner. The Government asked the South African Development Community (SADC) for help in maintaining public order and preventing a coup d'état. SADC troops entered Lesotho on 09/22/1998. Despite their presence looting, riots and violence occurred throughout the country. The last of the troops left Lesotho in May 1999.²¹ According to LIED executive and legislative elections, which weren't multiparty, were held during this period. Per FH's scoring for the assessed regime period, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. Moreover, LIED continues to code political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI increased into what we interpret as somewhat present. From 1994 to 1997, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was significantly constrained by institutional checks. In 1998, the executive's authority was significantly constrained, nearing parity with other branches, placing it in the third intermediate category. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

12/16/1998 End Constitutional Monarchy/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime: On this date the first formal meeting of the Interim Political Authority (IPA) took place.²² It was tasked with reviewing electoral processes in the country. The IPA proposed a new electoral system, adding 40 seats in parliament which were to be filled on a proportional basis.²³ Based on our observations no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held, which contradicts the observations of LIED. As per FH, for this regime period, the country receives a score of 8, which we interpret as falling into the rather not free category. Moreover, political liberties are coded as absent per LIED. However, V-Dem's PCLI indicates their full presence. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 3, between substantial limitations and executive parity or subordination. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

05/25/2002 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: The general elections on this date were the first under the new mixed member proportional representation system (Marshall 2018c). For the first time there was a considerable number of opposition members elected to the parliament of Lesotho.²⁴ On 02/17/2007 early general elections were held. Several members had previously resigned from the LCD, leaving the party with only a narrow majority in parliament. The opposition protested the early elections as they did not see enough time for electoral preparations and campaigning. It was speculated that the early calling of the elections was prompted by concerns about potential additional defections from the LCD, which could have resulted in the party losing its majority.²⁵ In the aftermath of the elections a dispute about the allocation of the seats arose, despite the acknowledgement that the LCD had won the election.²⁶ National Assembly and prime ministerial elections took place on 05/26/2012. No party was able to acquire an absolute majority of votes. Therefore, a coalition between the ABC, the LCD and the BNP was formed. The largest party, the Democratic Congress (DC) remained in opposition. Thomas Thabane (ABC) succeeded Mosisili as prime minister.²⁷ In 2014 critical voices towards Thabane grew louder. The LCD turned to the DC to plan a vote of no confidence. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During this period, LIED categorizes elections

as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores them as free and fair between 2002 and 2006, after which it scores them as somewhat free and fair. Their CEI scores them as somewhat clean during the entire period. As per FH's classification for the period until 2008, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. Between 2009 and 2011 the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. Subsequently, the country was again assigned a score of 5, signifying a rather free status. In addition, political liberties are still not achieved by LIED's score. However, V-Dem's PCLI points out that political rights are fully achieved from 2002 to 2006 and since 2009. The other two years they were somewhat present. From 2002 to 2004, as per Polity5's categorization, the executive's authority was significantly constrained, nearing parity with other branches, placing it in the third intermediate category. Since 2005, based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate until 2009 and robust for the rest of the period. According to our observations Lesotho is in this period a borderline case between a liberal and an electoral democracy.

06/19/2014 End Electoral Democracy/Start (Monarchical) Democratizing Regime: On this date, Thabane suspended the parliament for a period of nine months with the endorsement of Letsie III. Tension was high and there were rumors about a possible coup. On 08/30/2014, the Lesotho Defense Forces (LDF) occupied several government buildings as well as the police headquarters in Maseru. Thabane's house was surrounded by the LDF, however, he had been able to flee to South Africa prior to the events. While Thabane spoke of a coup d'état, this was denied by LCD and opposition members.²⁸ The vice president Metsing (LCD) took over as ruling president. On 08/31/2014 and 09/01/2014 negotiations were held in Pretoria. Many international actors, such as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, called upon Lesotho to return to a constitutional order. On 09/03/2014, Thabane returned to Lesotho, heavily protected by South African police forces. However, there was still large opposition in the armed forces and Thabane refused to announce a date for the reopening of parliament before the issue of military leadership had been dealt with. On 09/16/2014 it was announced on behalf of the SADC that the elections planned for 2017 should be held earlier.²⁹ In connection with the Maseru Facilitation Declaration, the election date was set for the 02/28/2015. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which contradicts the observations of LIED. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, whereas V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are present. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive. Per FH's scoring for this regime period, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category.

02/28/2015 End (Monarchical) Democratizing Regime/Start (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy: Parliament was reopened on 10/17/2014 but no vote of no confidence was permitted until the new elections had been held. Foreign security forces remained in the country until the elections. On 02/28/2015, general elections were held. The SADC Election Observer Mission declared the elections as peaceful and transparent, but also criticized the electoral process and made suggestions to improve the process. In the aftermath of the elections, the DC, LCD, PFD, MFP, NID, BCP and LPC formed a coalition (Commission 2015).³⁰ In May 2015, the leaders of the opposition parties fled the country.³¹ The opposition parties boycotted the parliament. In November 2016, the DC fraction collapsed and they left the coalition. The parliament was once again closed. On 03/01/2017 there was a successful vote of no confidence against Mosisili's government. On 03/07/2017, Letsie III agreed to elections that were to be held within the next three months. On 06/03/2017 general elections were held in Lesotho.³² Election observers declared the contest peaceful, generally well administered, and competitive. However, isolated instances of political violence were noted, as was a heavy security presence at many polling places, which electoral officials said intimidated some voters.³³ In May

2020, the coalition government disintegrated following Thabane's resignation, leading to the ABC establishing a new coalition with the DC later in the month. Since its formation, the present coalition government has encountered persistent challenges to its stability, primarily stemming from internal conflicts within the ruling ABC and strained relations between coalition partners.³⁴ As classified by FH for the period until 2021, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. From 2022 onward the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. Political and civil liberties are generally guaranteed but are not always fully respected.³⁵ According to LIED they were absent for the whole time. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI scores them as fully present in 2015 and since 2018. The other two years they were somewhat present. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust until 2020 and comprehensive until 2023, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust besides in 2019 in which they were comprehensive. On 10/07/2022 general elections took place. International observers considered them well organized, but still identified deficits in the electoral process and in the guarantee of political rights (EU-EOM 2016).³⁶ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 2015 LIED categorizes elections as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as somewhat free, fair and clean. Until 2022 FH categorized Lesotho as partly free (bordering on the values of free countries) and since 2023 as free. (Monarchical) Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basutoland>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesotho#Basutoland>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesotho#Basutoland>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesotho#Basutoland>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Lesotho/The-Sotho-kingdom-1824-69>

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Lesotho/The-Sotho-kingdom-1824-69>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1965_Basutoland_general_election

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesotho>

¹⁰ In the dataset of Geddes, Wright and Frantz the regime is also not classified as a personalist autocracy, but a party autocracy.

¹¹ http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-20/news/mn-30866_Lradio-lesotho

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_Lesotho_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Lesotho#Kingdom_of_Lesotho

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Lesotho#Kingdom_of_Lesotho

¹⁵ https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesotho#Kir%C3%A1lyok_%C3%A9s_r%C3%A9gensekhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Lesotho#Kingdom_of_Lesotho

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshoeshoe_II_of_Lesotho

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Lesotho#Kingdom_of_Lesotho

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Lesotho#Kingdom_of_Lesotho

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1998_Lesotho_general_election

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Lesotho#Kingdom_of_Lesotho

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_African_Development_Community_intervention_in_Lesotho

²² https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/irin_12161998.html

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Lesotho

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_Lesotho_general_election

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_Lesotho_general_election

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_Lesotho_general_election

- ²⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Lesotho_general_election#
- ²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Lesotho_political_crisis
- ²⁹ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Staatskrise_in_Lesotho_2014#Weitere_Verhandlungen_und_Fortdauer_des_Konflikts
- ³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Lesotho_general_election
- ³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Thabane#Post-premiership
- ³² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Lesotho_general_election; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakalitha_Mosisili
- ³³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lesotho/freedom-world/2021>
- ³⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lesotho/freedom-world/2022>
- ³⁵ <https://bti-project.org/de/reports/country-report/LSO#pos0>
- ³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Lesotho_general_election

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