

Lesotho Dilemma

Lesotho is part of Africa and its inheritors will be the men who have seen this simple truth and acted on it.

IAN HAMNETT

THE DIFFERENCE IN STARTING-POINTS that distinguish the parties are reflected in their internal policies too. Each party must look to fairly determinate and reliable groups for support; the National Party depends upon three main sources, all of them intransigently conservative: the minor chieftainship, the Roman Catholic Church, and a large section of the traditional peasantry. The lesser chiefs have clearly all to lose and nothing to gain from the urgently needed reforms in land tenure and administration that the original constitutional documents proposed but which have now been whittled down or delayed. The Roman Catholic Church, which in Basutoland has never felt the wind of change blowing from Rome, prefers a safe tribalism to the doubts and changes that radical reforms would entail. It played perhaps the crucial role in securing the National Party's marginal victory last year. Many of the traditional peasantry (more especially the women) were easily moulded by these two forces, which form, after all, the principal influences in their lives.

With this kind of backing, the BNP is inevitably and inescapably involved not only in conservative policies at home, but also — even against its will — in reactionary policies abroad. Like its allies and clients, it can thrive only in a localised, traditional society, and the price of securing this parish-pump paradise is an embarrassing meekness in the face of South African arrogance; it must be meek, since it could only muster effective resistance to the Republic by mobilising precisely those forces that would threaten the internal support on which the party relies.

In the circumstances, it is encouraging that the Congress should have come so near success as it did. Inevitably it has had a harder fight. Most Basuto are, understandably enough, more concerned about their own and their families' livelihood than they are aware of the emergence of the new Africa in the north. The BCP have accordingly been obliged to base their appeal almost wholly on domestic reform rather than upon wider aspects of continental policy that could hardly be expected to appeal to the mass of the people, and which might well have positively alarmed many of them. It is revealing that in practice the BCP have been even more articulately hostile to British colonialism than to South Africa itself. No doubt this was principally because it was Britain and not South Africa that ruled the country, was directly responsible for it, and stood directly in the way of independence; but it was also because attacks on South Africa would have alarmed the people more than attacks on Britain did, since the Republic means bread and butter and there is at least a river between it and Basutoland, whereas Britain meant magistrates and tax-collectors and it was *there*. It is both the virtue and the weakness of Congress that perhaps it was not local enough. Their well-planned electoral excursions into the villages were often regarded by the local population as invasions by strangers and town-dwellers who could make fine speeches happily enough, but afterwards were free to depart and did not have to live under the local chief.

All the same, that the BCP should have come as close to success

as it did is not only a tribute to its industry and dedication but also an index of the growth of a modern political consciousness in a country that it often unthinkingly dismissed as a backwater of subsistence tribalism. The voting figures suggest the thought that the traditional institutions are not after all as static or as resistant to change as they are frequently assumed to be. (It is also, of course, true that if the BNP could exploit the people's dependence on South Africa for work and imported goods — the Congress, against this, could exploit their experience of South African racialism.)

WHAT I AM TRYING TO DO in this analysis is to explode the notion that political action is only to be understood in terms of personalities, conspiracies and particular goals — the idea that people foresee and intend all the consequences of their original choice. Of course, some events can be explained in this way, but not usually the most important ones. I believe that the current political rivalries in Basutoland will only be distorted if discussed in terms of treachery, collaborationism, communist plots, and so forth. Just as the BCP are not political lunatics who propose to found a Red state in Basutoland and launch it suicidally at the Republic, so the BNP are not venal self-seekers who are engaged in a deliberate underhand deal with Verwoerd. Accusations like this, though polemically very satisfying, tell us less than nothing about the real determinants of political action and provide hopelessly misleading guidance for the future.

The BNP pursue collaborative policies abroad and reactionary ones at home, not so much because these are the policies they would ideally choose to pursue, but because no other policies were open to them once they had decided to make a serious electoral bid for power. This decision entailed the selection of a specific political programme and the mobilisation of an effective body of support — each of these two requirements, of course, having implications for the other. But neither of these steps was taken in an open field, since the Congress was there already, with a known policy and an extensive organisation. Any rival was thus forced to choose between (1) outbidding the Congress on its own terms — offering *more* radical policies at home and a *more* belligerent one abroad; and (2) proposing policies exactly opposite to those of the Congress — conservative at home and accommodating abroad.

It is, of course, no accident that the BNP chose the second path, and this for several reasons. First, the BNP was led by men who were not likely, either by inclination or interest, to choose policies more radical than those of the Congress. From the beginning, its support lay among the lesser chieftainship and the Roman Catholic Church. Secondly, the necessity of mobilising support ruled out any attempt at challenging the Congress on its own ground. Radicalism was a race that only the Congress could win. Thirdly, the widest alternative field left free lay not to the left of the Congress but to its right. The eclipse of the formerly powerful Marematlou-Freedom Party after the killings, at Rothe left a political vacuum on the right that no sensible rival to Congress could ignore.

The BNP was therefore committed, by the very structure of the political field before it, to determine its policy in constant

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relation to, and reaction against, the BCP. Since, however, the Congress was not, in fact, stupidly or imprudently bellicose towards the Republic, the National Party was led step by step (a) to represent the Congress as a communist-inspired threat to Basutoland's economic survival and (b) to claim for itself the title of a bulwark against communism and the only party that South Africa would trust. In domestic affairs, it was similarly obliged to rely increasingly on the most conservative interests, since the more radical were defined as its opponents: hence the ever greater role of the chieftainship and the Catholic Church; hence the open satisfaction of the trading and commercial interests when the election results were known.

SINCE THEN, THE NATIONAL PARTY has been obliged to follow through the logic of its initial choice to conclusions that must be repugnant to many of its supporters. The recent threatened proscriptions against political refugees are only the latest step in a consistent movement towards a political accommodation with South Africa. Domestically, it would be naive to expect that even the present emasculated reforms in land administration will be effectively implemented by spokesmen of the very class that stands to lose most by their application. The National Party is in fact the prisoner of its own self-committal to policies that command no vested support outside the world of the Bantustans. It has circumscribed its own freedom of action to a point where it can only become ever more reactionary in act, though it can cling to the trappings of power and harbour the illusion of choice.

I repeat: the emergent consequences of its decision were not intended by the deciders. The BNP are not willing cowards or collaborators, though their acts may be acts of cowardly collaboration. Nor did they altogether choose reaction: reaction hunted them down. Any party that limited its horizon to Africa south of the Zambesi was bound to submit to the same necessities.

The Congress lost the battle, but they, or people like them, will win the war. Unlike the BNP, they have not been forced to adapt their strategy — though of course they will modify their tactics — to fit their opponents' line of battle. The Congress were there first; moreover, they will be there last, since time is on their side. Basutoland is part of Africa, and its inheritors will be the men who have seen this simple truth and acted on it.

ONE YEAR AGO THIS MONTH, Basutoland achieved self-government; simultaneously, its people directly elected, by universal adult suffrage, the lower house of Parliament. If both houses now ask for independence, as they are expected to do, Britain has bound itself to give effect to this request "as soon as possible," provided that conditions in Basutoland are "such as to enable power to be transferred in peace and order." In order to preserve continuity of government, it was deliberately decided that no new elections should be required before transfer. If, therefore, "peace and good order" be required before transfer. If, there, "peace and good order" persist, Basutoland — or Lesotho as it is to be called — may be expected to gain independence within a few months, and power to be transferred to Chief Leabua Jonathan, the Prime Minister, and his government. What is the political condition of Lesotho at this critical time?

THE MOST OBVIOUS FACT about Basutoland is that it is part of South Africa. That it is therefore also part of Africa is equally obvious but more often forgotten. These two different perspectives define the current political dichotomy of the country. It is more than usually apt to speak of a dichotomy, since in the 1965 self-government elections the electorate was almost equally divided between the National Party (BNP), which received 108,000 votes, and the Congress Party (BCP), with 103,000. This close finish was fairly neatly matched in the figures for the National Assembly, where the government have 31 seats to the opposition's 25.

The geographical isolation of Basutoland, and its almost total economic dependence on South Africa, mark the limits of BNP thinking. Recent food shortages (due partly to misfortunes of

climate) have reinforced this localisation of attention, but quite apart from this the fact that nearly half the adult male population is at any one time working in the Republic means that every Basuto family and household is aware of this dependence. South African hostility could mean acute deprivation: South African goodwill means relative comfort. So the argument runs, and as far as it goes no one with a full belly and a good home has a right to sneer at it. But these obvious truths do not mark the starting-point of BNP thinking: they mark its limits.

The Congress looks to wider African horizons. Its perspective is pan-African in more than the narrow sense. It looks forward in the end to a Lesotho which will form part of a liberated continent, and its political presuppositions are based on the assumption that this is the real goal of all African nationalist activity.

IT WOULD BE EASY BUT FALSE to deduce from these broad generalisations that the National Party are shameless collaborators with the Republic, or that the Congress are callous ideologues reckless of the people's suffering, though these accusations are commonly made both in Basutoland and outside it. Neither the BNP as a body, nor the great majority of its members, are pro-South-African by intention or in ideology. Racism as a whole and white supremacy in particular are as abhorrent to them as to any other African. Naturally, the collaborators and the "sell-outs" prefer the BNP to the Congress, since such people are bound to choose the tactically appropriate ally, but only a fool will judge a whole movement by its least principled and most opportunist supporters.

Similarly, the Congress are as sane as the next man, and have neither stated nor implied that they would place Basutoland in the absurd position of attempting, at this point of time, actively to confront or defy its giant neighbour. Politics here as elsewhere are more complex than the strident tones of electoral vituperation suggest. One element in this is the practical question of how long the present kind of regime in South Africa will last. The Congress, with a whole continent in mind, can see that its days are numbered; the BNP act on the assumption that South Africa will last indefinitely. But this very assumption only helps to prolong the regime, and moreover gives the National Party a direct political interest in the regime's survival.

IN THIS AS IN other ways, attitudes and intentions fail to yield an adequate account of political action, and objective analysis reveals an unhappier picture of BNP policies than a simple recapitulation of their avowed aims and goals might suggest. One reason for this is that once the essential preconditions are granted, Verwoerd is neither so fastidious nor so hard to please that he will quarrel over trifles. If Basutoland cracks down on refugees and "subversive" activities, and barters its claim to a place in free Africa in return for improved trading facilities and some tons of mealies, Verwoerd will be perfectly happy to allow its leaders to make patriotic or even multiracial speeches, to "deplore" supremacist policies, and to thump rostrums at the United Nations and elsewhere. It is the realities of power, not impotent attitudinising, that matter to South Africa, as the Transkei experience shows.

Yet if, as I seem to imply, the Congress could do little more than the present government to challenge the South African ogre, what serious difference would it make if they were in power? I think quite a lot. If the BNP boast of a more realistic assessment of Basutoland's place in South Africa, the Congress can claim a more realistic assessment of South Africa's place in the world. They would be ready to push their patriotism and nationalism further because, with their wider perspectives, they are more aware of the limitations as well as the scope of South Africa's present power. In sober reality, the National Party fear the Republic's bark more than the Congress fear its bite. While the Congress are ready to go as far as prudence permits, the government will go not a step further than caution dares. This may look like a merely relative difference of emphasis, but in fact it is an index of much wider divergences.