
Lesotho's Domestic Priorities and Global Interests: Small Country Levers for International Influence

HE Dr Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Lesotho

Chair: Ian Lucas MP

Shadow Minister for Africa and the Middle East

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Introduction

The following document contains a summary of a meeting and questions and answer session held at Chatham House on 7 April 2014 focusing on Lesotho's domestic development and its international interests.

Since the formation of a coalition government in May 2012, Lesotho has concentrated on economic development and democratic growth. Lesotho and South Africa have recently begun Phase II of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, which involves the transfer of water from Lesotho to South Africa in return for development aid for hydroelectric power. Lesotho is a proponent of international engagement, as well as regional economic organisation with neighbouring countries and throughout Africa. This engagement and integration are key to solving issues of peace and security and creating economic growth.

The meeting and the questions and answers session were held on the record and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The speaker began by discussing Lesotho's history of democracy, which he noted has been characterized by instability. Following the May 2012 elections, however, a coalition government was formed for the first time, due to the inability of any single party to previously govern effectively on its own. He described how the coalition has brought together parties that would never have been open to discussion with each other before. This new government, he stated, has finally brought peace and stability to Lesotho. This allows the government to concentrate on development and growth, particularly in terms of democracy and economic development. However, he acknowledged that issues such as poverty and HIV/AIDs remain problems for the country.

The speaker highlighted that Lesotho is focusing on four main areas of growth – commercial agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and mining. He explained that addressing these areas requires an integrated approach, and such an approach is best placed to solve the economic issues faced by Lesotho. In terms of economic development, specific areas of attention include tackling poverty, with the long-term goal of eradicating it altogether, and the creation of more jobs. In addition, the growth of democracy in Lesotho focuses on areas such as human rights and gender empowerment.

The speaker explained that Lesotho is a proponent of international engagement. It is a member of the South African Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU), the Commonwealth and the United Nations. He stressed that multilateral diplomacy must be used to resolve international issues. He also stated that he takes a firm stance against terrorism and supports full independence for all nations, discouraging the continuation of any form of colonial rule. Lastly, he acknowledged that all countries, even those as small as Lesotho, are affected by climate change and stated that work must be done to tackle this problem.

Summary of questions and answers

Question

The Lesotho Highlands Water project is highly significant for the growth of the country. What is the government's developmental approach for the next two years? Will water be exported to the wider region?

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The Highlands Water project is a joint development scheme between Lesotho and South Africa. South Africa is a developed nation, with a very large industry, but does not have sufficient water. Lesotho, on the other hand, is less developed, but has an excess of water resources. The project will involve the transfer of water from Lesotho through agreed mechanisms and in agreed quantities to South Africa in exchange for money and development aid. This development aid will focus on energy infrastructure in Lesotho. King Letsie III of Lesotho and President Jacob Zuma of South Africa have recently signed a new deal that marks the start of Phase II of the project. The speaker stated that the electricity that the project will generate will help both Lesotho and South Africa. The two states have an interdependent relationship, with each needing something from the other. This partnership, which involves a peaceful exchange between the two states, bodes well for the region. This is also an investment opportunity for large international companies, something neither country can provide alone.

Hon. Mohlabi Kenneth Tsekoa

Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Relations

The speaker explained how the project will directly benefit the people of Lesotho. The country's infrastructure will be developed and, in the areas which are proximal to the project, new roads will be built and electricity will be provided. The project will also result in improvements to public services such as education and health care, as well as increased access to clean water. Some communities had to be resettled from areas in which the project would be operating, but following negotiations with the government, the communities agreed to move to new areas of their own choosing.

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

Botswana has also expressed an interest in developing a similar water project with Lesotho. There is a great need for water in Botswana so this is an area of potential. While questions have been raised as to whether there will be sufficient water for this project, the speaker expressed his belief that there will be enough of the resource for both South Africa and Botswana to benefit.

Ian Lucas

There is a thirst for education in Lesotho, yet newly qualified individuals frequently leave the country. What steps is the government taking to retain the skilled members of society?

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

Lesotho currently has a coalition government, bringing together parties that did not want to cooperate before. The speaker explained that the country had previously gone through a difficult period, with a lot of infighting between parties. This, he stated, led to a lot of people leaving the country. However, the unity

government is now resolving many of these issues and is improving the situation in the country. The speaker stressed that the key to development is democracy. There were many problems under one-party rule in Lesotho. People voted to change the system of government and voted for a coalition government instead. The government has been made to listen to what the people want. If politicians wish to be voted into parliament again, they must pay attention to the electorate. This, the speaker suggested, is a new step for Africa, which is catching up with the rest of the world in terms of democratic governance. Africa has passed the stage of which dictators could disregard the will of the people. The speaker stated that the government is working to resolve the remaining problems in Lesotho in order to ensure that the country is peaceful and secure.

Mohlabi Kenneth Tsekoa

The speaker stated that the government is committed to investing in people; this is evident in its focus on education and skills building. However, this is never a cheap process, and, problematically, some individuals do migrate to South Africa after acquiring skills in Lesotho. Other individuals are trained in South Africa and choose to stay when offered higher salaries. However, the speaker noted that this must all be examined within the context of the SADC, of which Lesotho and South Africa are both member states. The SADC seeks regional integration, and this will include the integration of employment policies in the future. The speaker suggested that this will not mean a loss of skilled workers; rather, it will mean a circulation of these individuals throughout the economic region. However, he acknowledged that Lesotho is currently suffering because it is losing people to South Africa.

Question

There were some controversies within the Commonwealth last year, such as Gambia's withdrawal and the decision to hold the 2013 Heads of Government Meeting in Sri Lanka. What are the speaker's thoughts on international engagement in light of these controversies?

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The speaker stressed that engagement will continue and that it is a mistake to walk away from international engagement. He highlighted the issues surrounding Zimbabwe and he stated that as members of the SADC, Lesotho and Zimbabwe need to engage with each other. The two countries have a strong historical connection through the Christian Church, dating back to the Southern Rhodesia era. Direct involvement has been reduced, as black Zimbabwean students no longer need to come to Lesotho. However, the connection ensures that dialogue between the two countries is possible. Therefore, Lesotho will always engage with Zimbabwe. On the issue of Gambia, the speaker did not feel he could comment as Gambia had withdrawn without comment and had not shared its reasons with Lesotho.

Question

What are the speaker's thoughts and recollections of the first ten years of the AU, and how should the organization move forward?

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The speaker indicated that the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was correct in deciding to transform itself into the AU, as this change resulted in a much stronger organization. He stated that the AU is currently faring well. However, he highlighted the issue of conflicts developing throughout Africa. These

are mainly over the discovery of natural resources, such as the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Mali and South Sudan. In the case of South Sudan, there is a reluctance to let go of some of the territory, despite agreements relating to the division of the country. He considered how best to solve the problem of South Sudan and expressed his belief that it requires determination and perseverance on the part of African states. The support of the EU is also required, as dealing with issues of peace and security is expensive, and there is a need for increased resources and financial support. He also noted that there exists some clandestine support from outsiders, which helps finance the conflict in South Sudan, and stated the need to investigate such claims.

Mohlabi Kenneth Tsekoa

Africa has long been labelled an awakening giant, and the speaker suggested that this can be seen in the socio-economic sector. The greatest trend in the continent is integration through various regional economic organizations, such as the SADC, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the East African Community (EAC). The speaker stressed that Africa is as strong as these regional organizations, which are necessary for integration on the continent. He stated that it is through these organizations, and the continued integration of African states, that issues such as hunger and poverty will be solved.

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The speaker appealed to Europe to not walk away from Africa.

Question

What will Lesotho do to promote human rights and democracy in Swaziland through its relationship with Swaziland and the Commonwealth?

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The speaker explained that King Letsie III of Lesotho and King Mswati III of Swaziland enjoy frequent bilateral visits, and the Lesotho government tries to persuade the monarchs to improve the situation in Swaziland. Lesotho will continue to bring up the issues of democracy and human rights. Thus far, the government has been non-confrontational in addressing these areas. The speaker expressed his hope that there will not be a violent revolution in Swaziland. There are an increasing number of young people, who have been educated elsewhere, returning to the country, and he said he hoped that they would aid a peaceful transition in Swaziland.

Mohlabi Kenneth Tsekoa

The speaker explained that democracy is infectious when it is implemented successfully. While democracy has its own problems, it is usually the best system of governance. He noted that Swaziland's membership of the Commonwealth is a positive sign because the organization supports the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The speaker expressed his wishes that a time will come when Swaziland will begin its transition to democracy, and speculated that its future system of governance could be similar to the constitutional democracy implemented in Lesotho.

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The present prime minister of Swaziland was educated in Lesotho. The speaker stated that the prime minister is quite progressive and hopes to find a solution to the problem. He said he felt that it is not a hopeless situation, but acknowledged that there is pressure in terms of time.

Ian Lucas

Lesotho and the United Kingdom have something in common – they both have a constitutional monarchy.

Comment

They also both have coalition governments.

Question

Could the speaker comment on the current state of the relationship between Lesotho and Europe, and Africa and Europe, in light of the recent EU-Africa summit, particularly in terms of their economic partnership?

Mohlabi Kenneth Tsekoa

Africa has a very good relationship with the EU. The EU helps Africa with problems of peace and security – financially, technically and militarily through peacekeeping. As long as peace and security remain a challenge to Africa, Europe should continue to work with the continent. The EU also helps Africa in issues of health, such as fighting HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, as well as aiding education and infrastructure development. In Lesotho, the EU has helped in the construction of road infrastructure. At the EU-Africa summit, there were three key areas of focus: peace and stability, investing in people, and prosperity or socio-economic development. The EU was challenged to increase its engagement with Africa. The summit also highlighted how there is a change in the nature of the relationship. It is now less of a donor-recipient relationship, and more of a partnership.

Question

As they serve to introduce people to new ideas, are increased connectivity and internet access a problem in Lesotho? Or are they beneficial in terms of increasing regional peace and security?

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

The younger generation of Lesotho uses the internet. Throughout Africa and Lesotho there is increased connectivity, which is particularly visible in schools and villages. Cell phone usage is found even in the remotest villages in Lesotho. The culture of connectivity has developed in Lesotho, despite the country lacking some of the necessary infrastructure.

Ian Lucas

Some schools in Wrexham are linked with Lesotho schools, and the students communicate over the internet. The challenge is to increase this through using tools such as Skype. The development of infrastructure is needed. However, the degree of internet access in Africa remains a great achievement.

Question

How is the Lesotho Highlands Water Project being financed in Phase II, and are new projects going to be introduced?

Mohlabi Kenneth Tsekoa

Phase II is co-financed by Lesotho and the South African government. Lesotho is relying on loans from its traditional partners – the World Bank, the European Development Bank and the African Development Bank. South Africa is sourcing some of its own funding. Phase I was financed in the same way and Lesotho does not want to lose its partners.

Motsoahae Thomas Thabane

Phase II is not short of financing. The speaker explained that internet communication technology can be used by even the most impoverished. If used properly, access to such technology can be highly empowering for such individuals.