

## South Africa's Military Intervention in Lesotho: The Nature of Inter-state Conflict, Opposition Struggles and Implications for Regional Stability

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**ABSTRACT** The democratic South Africa's first military intervention, during the second half of 1998, in a neighbouring state (Lesotho) obviously had implications for the invaded country. In this contribution the author not only points out the aforesaid consequences for Lesotho, but also discusses the impact of the intervention on South Africa's image, role, foreign policy, and on the South African National Defence Force.

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper discussions centre around two major, recent developments in Southern Africa: firstly, Lesotho's Independent Electoral Commission, albeit without clean hands itself, passed the May 1998 elections, which international observers declared "free and fair", despite cries of "foul play" from the opposition. Secondly, South Africa, acting on the basis of a Southern African Development Community (SADC) "mandate," and a plea from the elected government under the leadership of the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), helped to stamp out an effective coup with a view to restoring law and order. Put differently, mutinous soldiers of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) led to Pretoria's intervention under the aegis of the SADC. When it seemed that the army could no longer maintain law and order, Lesotho's prime minister, Pakalitha Mosisidi, asked South Africa to intervene without consulting King Letsie III, the country's constitutional monarch (Pitsane, 1994).

In order to understand the latter development, it is important to note that the basic problem of Lesotho in this regard is one of exclusive politics. It began in the sixties with independence

and continued in recent years under the LCD regime, to the extent of the electoral process being manipulated in its favour. The LCD is a breakaway splinter of the Basotholand Congress Party (BCP), which won a landslide victory in the 1993 elections. The LCD regime had been targeting the SADC leadership to keep it in power and engaged in a fierce lobbying exercise in respect of SADC states - the ultimate objective being to prop up its government in Lesotho.

In debating whether or not there was a crisis worthy of intervention, it may be appropriate to ask whether immediate military intervention was the correct instrument. Two issues are at stake here. Firstly, whether or not there were peaceful alternatives to the use of force and, secondly, whether or not the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was prepared for such an operation. In this regard several critical views will be examined. The first of these is that the Lesotho "invasion" was not very damaging to South Africa, as it was an act of disapproval of a coup d'état against an elected government. Another view, centres on the South African-led debacle (said to be masquerading as an intervention to restore law and order) which resulted in the loss of numerous lives and the destruction of Maseru and various other towns in Lesotho. In order to put these views in perspective, it is necessary to address the reasons for the intervention, especially the situation before the invasion and the effects of the intervention.

The controversy surrounding the South African military operation (a target of scathing criticism, because the military raid promoted instability and sustained what critics refer to as a vile and malevolent regime) will also be dealt

with under the heading: 'Wider implications'.

#### REASONS FOR THE INTERVENTION

From an economic viewpoint observers ascribe the intervention by the SADC to the fact that "we need their water at a price we can afford". The idea that the reason for the Lesotho invasion was to secure their water is, however, strongly refuted by the South African authorities (Muller, 1998: 28). It is pointed out that the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) benefits both parties (Lesotho and South Africa) and that the future of the region depends on regional cooperation.

Another and more pertinent reason for the military intervention concerns a probe into the country's elections prompted by the allegations that the election outcomes were rigged. These allegations were investigated by the deputy president of South Africa's constitutional court, Judge Pius Langa. His investigation indicated that there had indeed been irregularities during the election, but that these did not affect the outcome substantially. A further reason is related to the fact that junior military officers in the LDF had arrested and jailed the country's top military leadership effectively bringing to a halt the functioning of the Lesotho Government. And then, of course, there is the fact that Pakalitha Mosisidi - acting fully within his constitutional powers - had addressed two letters to SADC heads of state pleading for a military intervention to save democracy and, poignantly, his own life. These letters were written in circumstances of deteriorating political order: the army had mutinied, the government was paralyzed and the opposition armed. As Lesotho teetered on the brink of anarchy, the crucial question was whether South Africa and Botswana, as leading democracies in the SADC, should send a peacekeeping force to stabilize the country.

Against this background, a decisive and far-reaching intervention was perceived necessary to save democracy in Lesotho. South Africa, as its immediate neighbour and as the region's leading democracy along with Botswana, had to shoulder the responsibility for action. The invasion or "intervention", as the government in-

sisted on calling it, marked a shift in South African foreign policy, namely from a policy of encouraging the idea of negotiated settlements (as in the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo) to one of military intervention.

Thus the military intervention did not proceed without preparatory steps, particularly the Langa Commission, which examined the election results and found irregularities and discrepancies in the Independent Electoral Commission's management of the elections, but was "unable to state that the invalidity of the elections had been conclusively established". The opposition demonstrated jubilantly outside the royal palace, but the government refused to step down on the grounds that the report had upheld the elections in spite of pointing out some irregularities.

#### BEFORE THE INTERVENTION

The critical questions are: What sort of intelligence evaluation or assessment was performed before the SADC troops were ordered into Lesotho? Did the arson and looting come as a complete surprise? Was the operation deliberately botched to embarrass President Nelson Mandela?

Reports of flawed intelligence suggest serious cost in lives of South African soldiers. Information lag in terms of what was going on in Lesotho and in the LDF resulted in some strategic uncertainties, including a lack of knowledge regarding the precise bases where weapons were stored and the movements of arms and ammunitions inside Lesotho. It was also believed that South African soldiers would meet little resistance from the rebels. The consequences of this erroneous belief were aggravated by a failure to establish the size of the LDF, inadequate preparation for countering the looting and anarchy that followed the military action, and a leak regarding the planned military intervention which also affected its impact.

Perhaps more revealing were the discoveries of tons of weapons hidden underground and a secret bunker at the Makoanyane military base in eastern Maseru, which is a multi-million military complex, comprising luxurious subterranean offices, computer systems, a water purification plant and a massive supply of diesel - all



designed to serve as a last-ditch retreat for the Lesotho Government. While the "origin and intention" behind the stockpile are not public knowledge, the base itself had a lot to do with the "status" such a facility conferred on the Lesotho military, including a critical role as a planning centre during times of crisis.

#### EFFECTS OF THE INTERVENTION

Some observers regard the military intervention in Lesotho as catastrophic. For one thing, they are saddened by the fact that South African troops were wounded and killed on foreign soil; and they cannot see how Lesotho's unimpressive government with its evidence of electoral fraud deserved support. Secondly, criticism was levelled at "South Africa's disastrous foray into Lesotho" which was described as "smacking of rank amateurism," largely because of "rushing in prematurely", being unprepared for resistance, without a proper plan and deficient in respect both of numbers and of weapons.

Indeed, the SADC seems to have been guilty of grave miscalculations, and South African soldiers, in particular, did not expect the amount of resistance they met. In fact, some thought they were not going to fight, which was quite naive. This perhaps explains why nine South African soldiers were killed, as were an unknown number of Basotho, during several days of shooting and looting.

As for other critics, this negative scenario suggests a savage military invasion and occupation of Lesotho as well as a brutalization of its peaceful people by the South African military masquerading as SADC. It paints a picture of naked aggression against a neighbouring sovereign state trying to solve its own problems. In this regard, the Lesotho opposition representative, Mamelo Morrison, had this to say: "Even at the height of their madness, the apartheid government would not have sent troops to invade our palace like the African National Congress did" (*Mail & Guardian*, December 24, 1998 to January 7, 1999: 4).

A counter view holds that South Africa did in Lesotho what any responsible and caring neighbouring country would have done under the circumstances. While the loss of life and the

wanton destruction of property in Lesotho were regrettable, it would be unfair to criticize South Africa for its intervention and hold it responsible for what happened. This view further regards South African troops having entered Lesotho as part of a regional task force, after a plea for military assistance by the legitimate government of that country. Such a plea was made on the understanding that anarchy and defiance of authority prevailed, as both opposition parties and rebel soldiers colluded to seize political power. This was a threat to democracy, stability and the will of the majority which critics of South African military intervention do not seem to have taken into account.

#### WIDER IMPLICATIONS

From the foregoing it would seem that machismo politics is gaining ground in Southern Africa. On the one hand, there was Zimbabwe's dispatch of troops to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in an attempt to repulse the Rwandans and the Ugandans, or was it because Zimbabwe sought to prove the point to South Africa that South Africa is nobody's "Big Brother" and should not be "throwing its weight about" within the SADC and beyond? On the other hand, did Zimbabwe's so-called "wrong-footing" of South Africa over the DRC play any role in persuading Pretoria to embark on the precipitate military intervention in Lesotho? The impression seems to be that the two Southern African nations are playing a game of acquisition of "spheres of influence". Important grounds exist for such an assertion insofar as South Africa is concerned. Pertinent in this regard is the one view which has it that Lesotho's politicians are accustomed to weak political institutions (*Mail & Guardian*, September 25 - October, 1998) and that South Africa has made them so over generations of exploitative political relations with a vassal state (Weisfelder, 1997). Implied, of course, is that Lesotho has traded its manpower (Matlosa, 1996) and natural resources for the crumbs off South Africa's table. Having had a strategic interest in a precious human resource (Lesotho's cheap migrant labour), South Africa's policy towards this impoverished region has been to bantustanize it

(Bardill & Cobbe, 1985). Under the two nationalisms, white and black, the LHWP and, in particular, the Katse Dam is the key to South African thinking - if it can be called that - about Lesotho.

The unintended consequences of the acquisition of "spheres of influence" have been a full-blown civil war erupting in the DRC and the Tutsi-led rebels as well as their collaborators, the Ugandans, literally advancing on Kinshasa to depose Laurent Kabila's government. At the same time Mandela strongly opposed any military involvement, opting for a peaceful settlement through negotiations, much to the annoyance of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe who sent troops to bail out Kabila's regime. As far as Lesotho is concerned, citizens regard "the savage military invasion and occupation" of their country and "the brutalization of its peaceful people by the South African military masquerading as the SADC" as insensitive and humiliating. As one Mosotho citizen put it: "(T)his very same enigma (referring to President Mandela) has the audacity to authorise a military invasion of a neighbouring country, where there is no violence, let alone war, without the consent of the head of state of that country to prop up a fraudulent and unpopular Mafia regime, thereby turning a once proud nation into a kaffirstan" (*Mail & Guardian*, October 9 to 15, 1998: 22).

The opposition parties under the leadership of Vincent Malebo did not regard the forces of intervention as those of the SADC, but as those of Botswana and South Africa, with attendant consequences in terms of demands, both economic and political. Economically, the opposition reiterated its call for South Africa to foot the bill for the damage inflicted during the SADC mission. However, the ruling party, together with South Africa, maintained that Lesotho would pay the costs incurred when Basotho went on the rampage, razing shops and other businesses in protest against what they saw as interference by President Nelson Mandela in the internal affairs of that country.

Politically, a negotiated solution centred on giving Lesotho an interim political structure, paving the way for dialogue and peace. Though the SADC negotiators proposed that an interim structure be formed to run parallel with the

present government - a suggestion that was at first rejected by the LCD - both sides finally signed for a parallel structure to take effect.

In terms of internal dynamics arising from the military intervention, the eastern part of Lesotho is likely to pay for "the foolishness of the west," at least in the short term. With much of the area affected by drought and sealed distribution routes to the west, the economic disaster looming for such eastern towns as Mokhotlong and its 50 000 residents is a certainty. Subsisting on wheat and sorghum crops - now damaged by the drought - the town's sole source of export revenue remains wool and mohair. It is likely that with the population having used up their winter stores, the government will look after "the west" first.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

To some observers (Hlasa, 1998:19) the "Lesotho affair" seems to suggest lack of coordination on the part of South Africa's foreign affairs policy, particularly the bifurcated approach of talking with Lesotho's political forces whilst the SANDF was crossing into the mountain kingdom. Critics further point to South Africa's foreign policy of pursuit of negotiations as a viable option for the DRC while military intervention in Lesotho took its toll, reviving memories of the past destabilization of neighbouring countries during the white apartheid rule.

Indeed, the *Mail & Guardian*, in its "1998: Report Card" gave Joe Modise, Minister of Defence and Alfred Nzo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, "poor" and "very poor" ratings respectively. On the one hand, critics said that Modise might have to resign over operational failures in Lesotho whilst, on the other hand, Nzo was criticized for intervening in Lesotho without legal justification or clear purpose. For democratic South Africa its first exercise in 'gunboat diplomacy' easily dismissed the political storm over whether or not Operation Boleas (code name for the military intervention) was properly mandated. All combatants were united in the SANDF's first test of courage under fire. There was no longer any talk of Transkei, Bophuthatswana and Ciskei, referring to the former homeland armies which



were already technically integrated but not yet one in spirit. Combat had knitted them together as they relied on each other for survival. Indeed, soldiers and civilians, black and white, stood shoulder to shoulder, united by a comradeship forged in grief. The men's baptism of fire had forged an unprecedented *esprit de corps* among the troops.

There is, however, a dark side to this, in that the military operation enjoyed only moderate success: a small number of mutinous Basotho soldiers turned themselves in. But it catalyzed mass destruction of South African businesses by the local Basotho population which was overwhelmingly opposed to the military action. As the region's economic and political powerhouse (Schneider, 1991), it is important that South Africa does not tarnish its image and wreck its own good intentions regarding regional economic integration and political stability on the sub-continent. It is equally important that, as the region's economic giant, it secures the support of its neighbours in order to survive the turbulent economic crises that lie ahead. As for Lesotho -

which is economically dependent on South Africa - it is already paralyzed and it will take some considerable time for it to rebuild its business sector and infrastructure.

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