

Can Political Independence be maintained without Economic Independence, asks the writer?

BASUTOLAND

The Basutoland elections have come and gone. The 162 seats on the District Councils have been filled, the National (Legislative) Council has been duly constituted. All the long-sought changes under the new constitution have been introduced. The problem of the Paramount Chieftainship has been settled with the accession of Bereng to power with the backing of the entire Basuto nation. Now life is getting back to normal and the people are taking stock of themselves, perhaps wondering whether all the excitement has been worthwhile.

For the record, here are the final figures of the elections:

Basutoland Congress Party	73 seats
National Party	22 seats
Marema Tlou	16 seats
Independents	51 seats

The total electorate numbered 191,663 voters of all races on a common roll. The main qualification to become a voter is payment of tax, and the bulk of voters were therefore African men, but other elements were also on the roll, including about 1,000 Europeans, 100 Indians, 56 women and perhaps a handful of Coloureds. The figures must be approximate, because no racial register is kept.

At the time of the elections, it was estimated that 43 per cent of the voters were absent, working in the Union. They could vote by proxy, but only about 10 per cent did so. The result is there was a very low poll, only 35,302 votes being cast in all the constituencies. Of this total, the Congress Party received 12,787 and the National Party 7,002.

Low Poll, But No Apathy

From the figures it might appear as though the Basuto nation was apathetic about the elections, but in fact this was not so. The elections aroused the most tremendous interest. Meetings were held in all parts of the territory, including the villages in the mountains, and one of the features of the campaign was the participation of the women, who came to meetings in large numbers, asked questions and sometimes even accompanied their menfolk to the polls on election day.

No, it was not apathy which kept voters away from the Poll. It must be remembered this was the first time elections by secret ballot had ever taken place in Basutoland. (Previously popular decisions were taken at the pitso.) Procedures which are familiar to voters in other countries were here being introduced for the first time, and there is no

ELECTIONS, ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND THE FUTURE

doubt there was a lot of uncertainty and misunderstanding among the electorate. I was given the explanation at one voting station about 35 miles from Maseru that the low poll there was due to the fact that the local chief had not informed his people that voting was to take place on that day. Of course the parties should not have left it to the chief, but should have communicated with the voters themselves, and no doubt next time they will do so.

Then there is the sheer difficulty of getting to the polls. While polling in the urban areas was estimated to be about 50 per cent, in the country areas the figure dropped to between 15 and 20 per cent. It was not a question, as in a Union platteland election, of a voter climbing into his Cadillac and driving to the polls, or of a candidate operating a fleet of cars to bring voters to the polls. In Basutoland candidates were forbidden to try to influence voters on election day — they could not fetch and carry them, argue or bark at them or organise displays to impress them at the polling booths. Even the letters B.C.P. had to be obliterated on the Congress vans, and John Motloheloa was nearly arrested at Maseru for selling copies of *New Age* which contained a picture of B.C.P. leader Ntsu Mokhehle on the front page. So it was left to the voter to make his own way to the polls. True, election day was a public holiday, but what if a voter had work to do in his fields which could not be left to the morrow, or had no horse and could not afford to take a bus, or just could not physically make it because there was no means of transport at all?

First Elections Ever

So the figures are no real guide to the enthusiasm of the people about the elections, which was terrific. And with good reason. Here for the first time in Southern Africa the common people with black skins were able to take part in the constitution of the law-making body for the territory. True, their vote is indirect; true, the powers of the legislative council are still restricted; true, the British High Commissioner still has the last say. But nothing like this ever happened in the Transkei, and never will under Bantu Authorities. The British

Government may be prepared to see the B.C.P. sweep the board in Basutoland, as it did, and become the most powerful political group in the territory. Who can see Verwoerd ever allowing the A.N.C. such an opportunity in South Africa?

What a pleasure it was to see White and Black standing together, quite relaxed, in the same election queue on election day.

The visitor to Basutoland is immediately struck by the absence of racial tension in the high mountain air. Sure, there is still discrimination, but there are no pass laws or police raids in Basutoland, no pick-up vans cruising around looking for victims, no curfew, no terror. No man has ever been deported or banished, no family broken up like that of Elizabeth Mafekeng or Ben Baartman. Ask our Union exiles how they are getting on in Basutoland and they reply, with a sweep of the arm: "Well, man, I'm free here. But", and here comes the rub, "there's no work".

Freedom . . . But No Work

No work? How can there be no work? one wonders. There are houses and people, roads and fields, surely there must be work? Yet, when you get down to it, you find that this is the real terror of the Basuto people, this is their discipline, their pass, their policeman — this, the terrible burden of their poverty.

There is no industry of any sort in Basutoland, not a single factory. If you want to live, you must have a piece of land to live from (and the land is already heavily overpopulated) go into domestic service for the Europeans (who pay you as little as £1 or £1.10s. a month), get a job in the civil service (and you have to have the education to qualify), work for a white firm (that will pay you £7.10s. a month for doing the same work as a white woman who gets £30), or open up a business (where you immediately run into competition from the highly organised and long-established white monopolies which dominate the trading life of the territory). Not surprisingly, almost 50 per cent of Basuto manhood must go out to earn a living in the Union, as migratory labourers on the mines, farms and in the towns.

Moreover, the poverty of the nation seems to be getting deeper every year. For the first time the country is unable to balance its budget, and will have to receive financial help in future from London. Figures quoted by Patrick Duncan in a recent issue of *Contact*, based on a survey conducted by the World Health Organisation, show that the birthrate, which was 30.6 per thousand in 1951, had dropped to 22 per thousand in 1957. Infantile mortality was 116 per thousand in 1957, double what it was in 1951.

This is a desperate situation, and must be a source of great concern to all Basuto leaders. On the one hand they are waging a determined and increasingly successful fight for self-government and independence from the Union, whose apartheid policies they naturally abhor. For the moment no party is demanding outright independence, because all feel the need for British support in the struggle against incorporation. I have no doubt whatsoever that any attempt by Verwoerd to take over Basutoland would lead to a state of war, and that the Basuto people would fight with their bare hands rather than submit to domination by the apartheiders.

Economic Dependence on the Union

On the other hand, Basutoland, entirely surrounded by Union territory, at the moment cannot exist without the Union and is unlikely even to be able to do so in the future. The British have no programme for economic development, and it is difficult to see what can be done in this sphere because the country appears to be deficient in natural resources. There are great possibilities for the development of hydro-electric power based on the construction of strategically situated dams in the mountains. But power projects are unlikely to be developed in the absence of the industries which will pay for and feed from them — unless, again, they are linked with industrial projects in the Union. For the rest there is a licensed prospector, backed by De Beers, scratching for diamonds in the north of Basutoland, but it is not known how far this development will lead.

The likelihood is that Basutoland will win a great measure of internal self-government in the near future, for the Congress Party is now well placed to pursue its demand for the establishment of a fully democratic Parliament based on universal suffrage. But can political independence be maintained without economic independence?

Basuto leaders of all parties speak of the need for industrial development, and many are looking hopefully towards the economic agencies of the United Nations Organisation. But the development of

Basutoland as an economic unit completely independent of the Union would presuppose the investment of fantastic amounts of capital which are not warranted by the economic potential, and one can hardly see U.N.O., the Russians or anybody else underwriting such development merely to satisfy unrealistic national ambitions.

There can be no question, of course, but that Basutoland has the right to self-determination, and all South African democrats will support without any hesitation the fight of the Basuto people against incorporation. But just as Basutoland now is economically bound to the Union, so will she be at all times in the foreseeable future, and it seems to me that this factor must be viewed realistically by the Basuto people. Under present conditions, with a Nationalist Government in power in South Africa and capitalism as the prevailing economic system, the relationship of South Africa to Basutoland is one of gross exploitation of cheap labour — an exploitation which was tragically underlined by the recent disaster at Coalbrook.

The Future

One envisages, however, that at some time in the future a Congress government will come into power in South Africa, basing its policies on the Freedom Charter. Such a government, honouring the right of Basutoland to independence, would be under an obligation to put an end to the exploitation of the Basuto people, and to render fraternal assistance to them to enable them to live together in peace and friendship with their South Africa brothers. The development of the two countries and peoples side by side without friction is surely possible and desirable. The extent to which their economies would be interrelated would be determined by the free wish of their respective peoples, but if the element of exploitation is eliminated, there is no reason why any such co-operation should not be used to the mutual advantage of both parties.

This, however, is a matter for the future, and we are living in the here and now. Nevertheless, should we not, on both sides of the border, be thinking about these things, and perhaps making plans for the future? Good relations after freedom has been won can be cemented by good relations during the freedom struggle itself. In fact, there could be no better guarantee of enduring friendship between our peoples than the fact that each had helped the other to win their freedom.

This is a task for the Congress movement of both countries, and they should get down to it without any further delay.

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