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Basotho favour multi-sector reforms as support for elections ebbs

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 212 | Puleng Adams, Mamello Nkuebe, and Libuseng Malephane

Summary

Lesotho experienced the third wave of democratization with the end of military rule in 1994, a new Constitution, and multiparty competition. A mixed member proportional (MMP) parliamentary system introduced seven years later was hailed as a remedy for political violence and instability.

In practice, however, the past decade has been marked by unstable coalition governments, active engagement by security forces in political processes, and Southern African Development Community (SADC) interventions in 1998, 2012, and 2014 to re-establish peace and order (Matlosa & Pule, 2010; Benyera, 2017). Each major episode draws public outcries of frustration and calls for action on the part of the Monarchy, even though the country has a constitutional monarchy with very limited powers. In response to SADC recommendations, the new coalition government has undertaken multi-sectoral reforms with an eye to returning the country to stability.

As the reform process moves forward, Afrobarometer survey findings shed some light on citizens' perceptions and preferences with regard to the process and its outcomes. Findings show that a majority of Basotho welcome SADC involvement in the reform process and want greater powers for the King, less political involvement by security forces, and a return to a majoritarian electoral system that will help the country avoid ineffective coalition governments. A dramatic drop in popular support for elections may give added urgency to reform efforts.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Lesotho, led by Advision Lesotho, interviewed 1,200 adult Basotho in December 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/- 3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Lesotho in 2012 and 2014.

Key findings:

- Three-fourths (75%) of Basotho say the Constitution should be amended to allow the King to have more say on issues of national importance. Support for expanding the

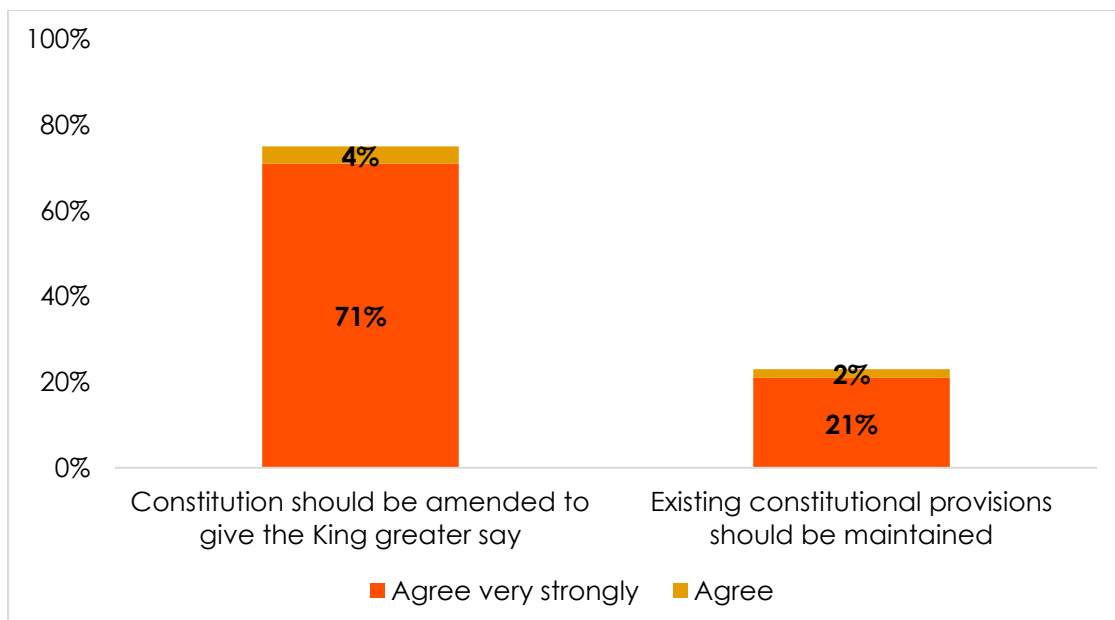
King's powers is strong regardless of respondents' location, gender, and political-party affiliation.

- Three-fourths (75%) of Basotho say the involvement of Lesotho's security forces in politics should decrease, including 64% who believe such involvement should decrease "a lot."
- Two-thirds (66%) of Basotho say the country should switch from a proportional-representation to a majoritarian electoral system in order to ensure a single-party government rather than a coalition government. Three-fourths of respondents say coalition governments are more unstable (76%) and have more difficulty getting things done (76%) than one-party governments.
- A majority of Basotho welcome the SADC's involvement in the country's processes to reform its political system (63%), electoral system (60%), and security forces (67%).
- Lesotho's political upheavals may be taking a toll on citizens' appreciation of elections: The proportion who say the country should choose its leaders through regular, open, and honest elections plunged from 73% in 2014 to 48% in 2017.

More power for the King

As in Africa's other constitutional monarchy (Morocco), the powers of Lesotho's King are defined by the Constitution. The sentiment that the Constitution should be amended to give the King more of a "voice" on issues of national importance has been expressed by the King himself (Aljazeera, 2017), and three-quarters (75%) of Basotho agree with him. Fully seven in 10 (71%) hold this view "very strongly" (Figure 1).

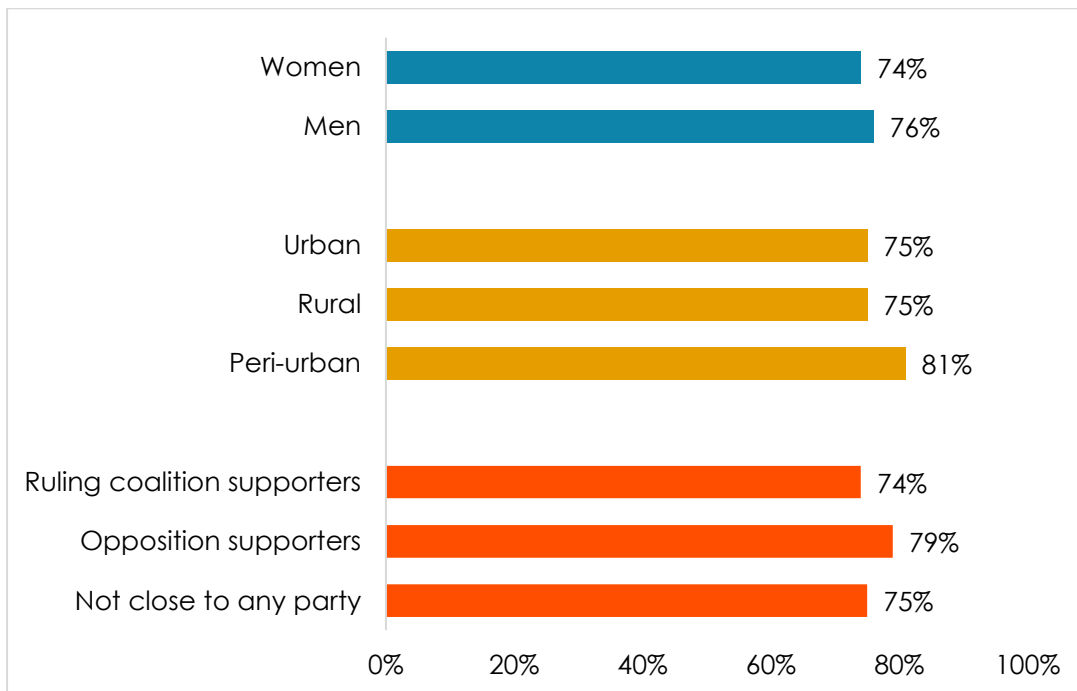
Figure 1: Should the Constitution be amended to expand the King's political powers?
 | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should be amended to allow the King to have more say on issues of national importance.
 Statement 2: The current Constitution, which limits the King's role in politics and government, has served the country well and should not be changed.

Support for amending the Constitution to give the King greater powers is strong regardless of respondents' location, gender, and party affiliation¹ (Figure 2). Opposition supporters (79%) are slightly more likely than adherents of the ruling coalition (74%) or unaffiliated respondents (75%) to favour such an amendment.

Figure 2: Support for amending the Constitution to expand the King's political powers
 | by gender, location, and party affiliation | Lesotho | 2017



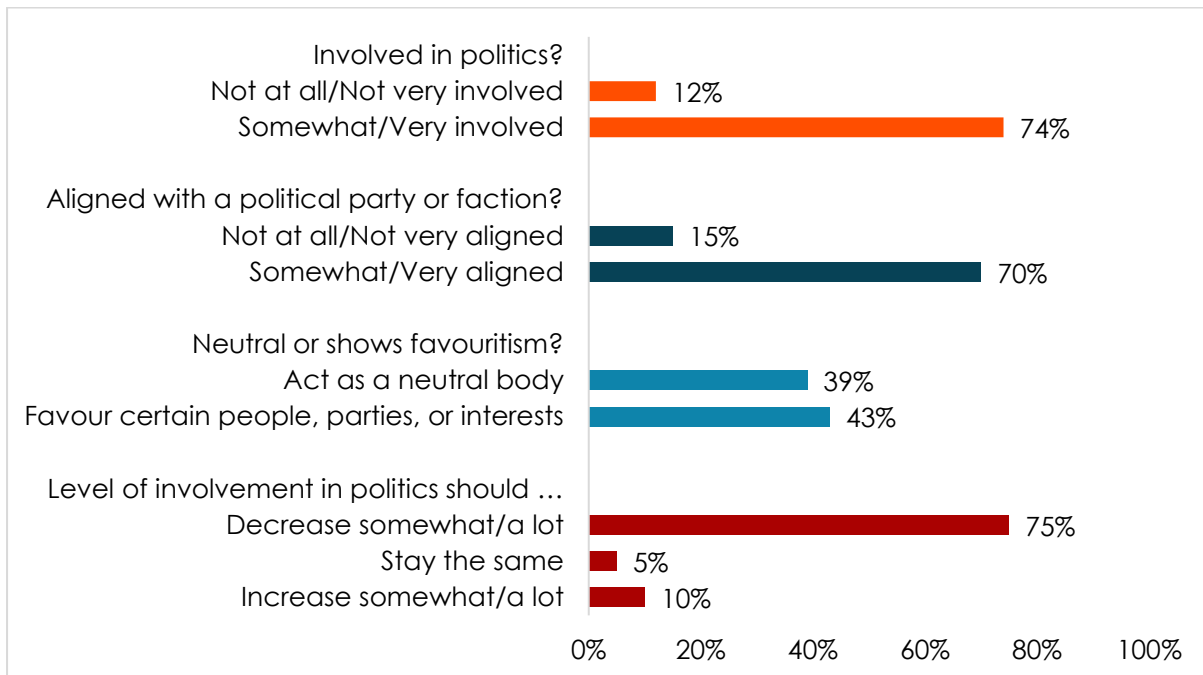
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 (% who "agree" or "agree strongly" that the Constitution should be amended)

Less political involvement by security forces

The politicization of Lesotho's armed forces, well documented in the political literature, is also very clear to the country's citizens (Figure 3). Three-quarters (74%) of Basotho say that the security forces are involved in the politics of the country, including 54% who say they are "very involved." Similarly, 70% say the security forces are aligned with a particular political party, and only (39%) believe they perform as "a neutral body guided by law" instead of favouring "certain people, parties, or interests." Three-quarters (75%) think the security forces' involvement in politics should decrease, including 64% who say it should decrease "a lot."

¹ Afrobarometer assesses party affiliation based on responses to the questions "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Figure 3: Politicization of security forces | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked:

- How involved would you say Lesotho's security forces are in the politics of the country?
- How much, if at all, do you think Lesotho's security forces have become aligned to a particular political party or faction?
- For each of the following institutions, please tell me whether you think the institution performs as a neutral body guided by law, or whether it instead makes decisions that favour certain people, parties, or interests, or haven't you heard enough to say: The army?
- Do you think that the involvement of Lesotho's security forces in the country's politics should increase, decrease, or stay the same?

Parliamentary reforms and dissatisfaction with coalition governments

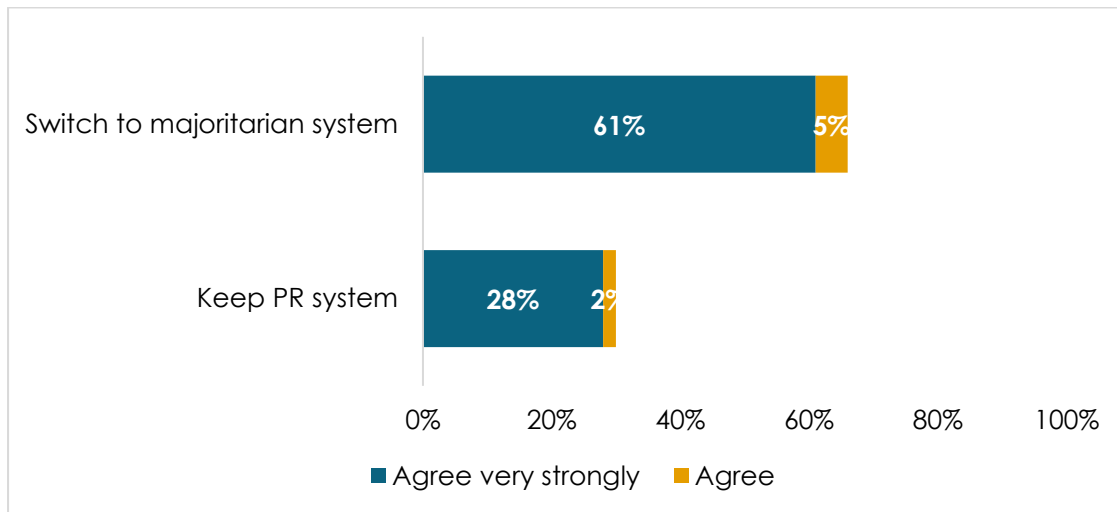
Lesotho introduced its mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system in 2001 to end a political impasse that followed post-election riots in 1998 (Lesotho Times, 2009). While the system worked well in 2002 and 2007 elections, since 2012 it has produced coalition governments, the first two of which collapsed after just two years in power.

The SADC has proposed that the country examine all parliamentary rules related to coalition governments, motions of no confidence, prorogation of Parliament, and floor crossing (Lesotho Times, 2015). A 2014 report following a study tour to New Zealand by Basotho parliamentarians, civil servants, and civil-society representatives noted that when Lesotho adopted its MMP system, it did not undertake a parallel process to reform its governance systems, and the report recommended urgent reforms to address the resulting mismatch (Lesotho Times, 2015).

Afrobarometer survey results show that two-thirds (66%) of Basotho think it would be better for Lesotho to have a single party in power and the country should therefore switch back to a majoritarian electoral system. Only three in 10 (30%) say the current system based on proportional representation should be retained even though it often produces coalition governments (Figure 4).

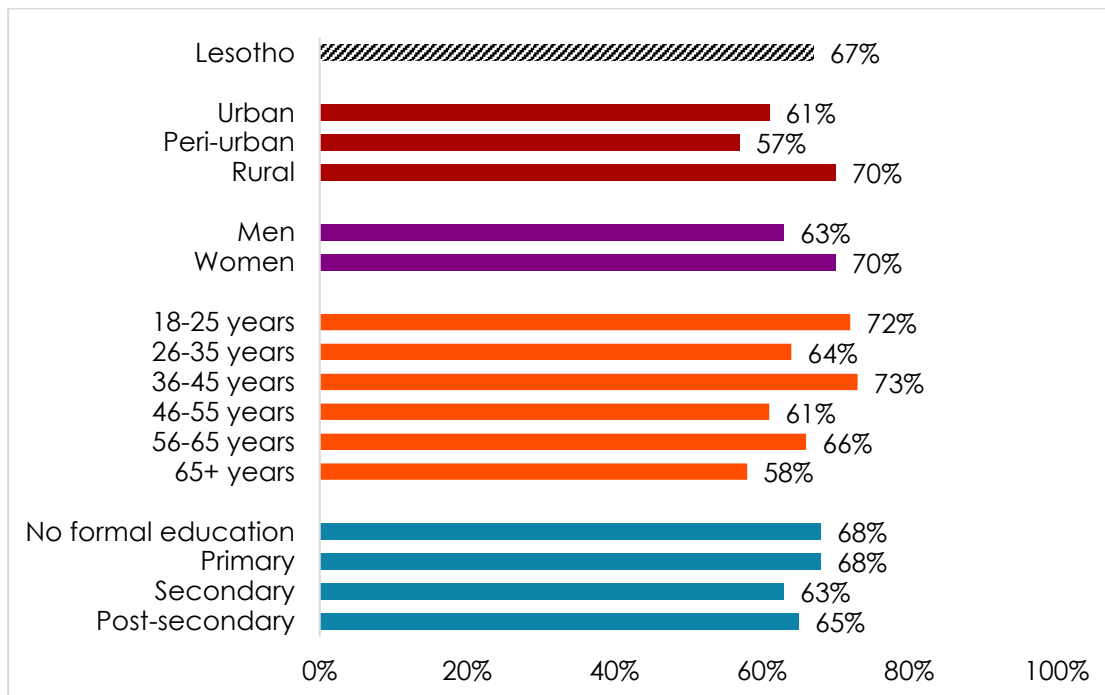
Support for switching back to a majoritarian system is strongest among rural residents (70% vs. 61% and 57%, respectively, of urban and peri-urban residents), women (70% vs. 63% of men), and respondents with no formal education or only a primary education (68%) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Should Lesotho switch from proportional representation to majoritarian electoral system? | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The country's current political system based on proportional representation should be retained, even though it often produces coalition governments.
 Statement 2: It would be better for the country to always have only one party in power, so Lesotho should switch to a majoritarian system of government.

Figure 5: Support for switching from proportional representation to majoritarian electoral system | by socio-demographic group | Lesotho | 2017



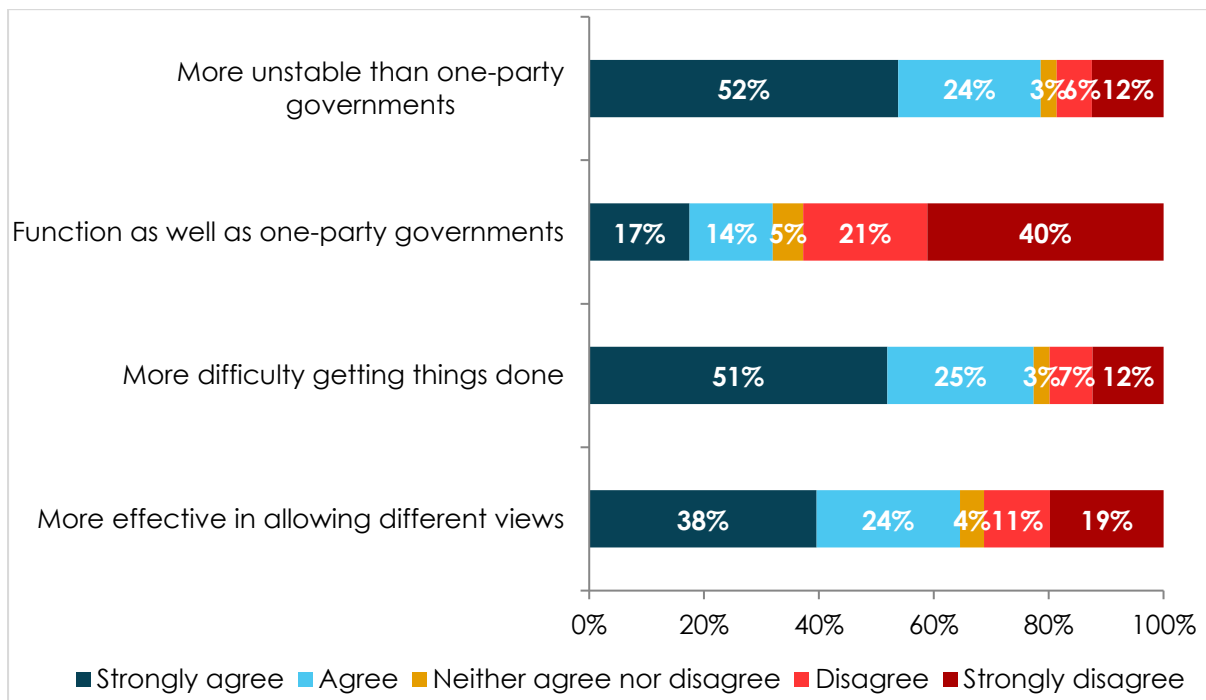
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 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with switching to a majoritarian system)

Citizens' views on coalition governments (Figure 6) provide some insight into why most Basotho would prefer to switch to a majoritarian electoral system that ensures a government by a single party.

While six in 10 Basotho (62%) say coalition governments are more effective than one-party governments in allowing different views to be presented in government, even larger majorities say coalition governments are more unstable (76%) and have more difficulty in making decisions and getting things done (76%) than one-party governments. Only three in 10 (31%) think coalition governments can function just as well as one-party governments.

Figure 6: Effectiveness of coalition governments vs. one-party governments

| Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

- Coalition governments can function just as well as one-party governments.
- Coalition governments are more unstable than one-party governments.
- Coalition governments are more effective than one-party governments in allowing different views to be presented in government.
- Coalition governments have more difficulty than one-party governments in making decisions and getting things done.

SADC involvement in reforms

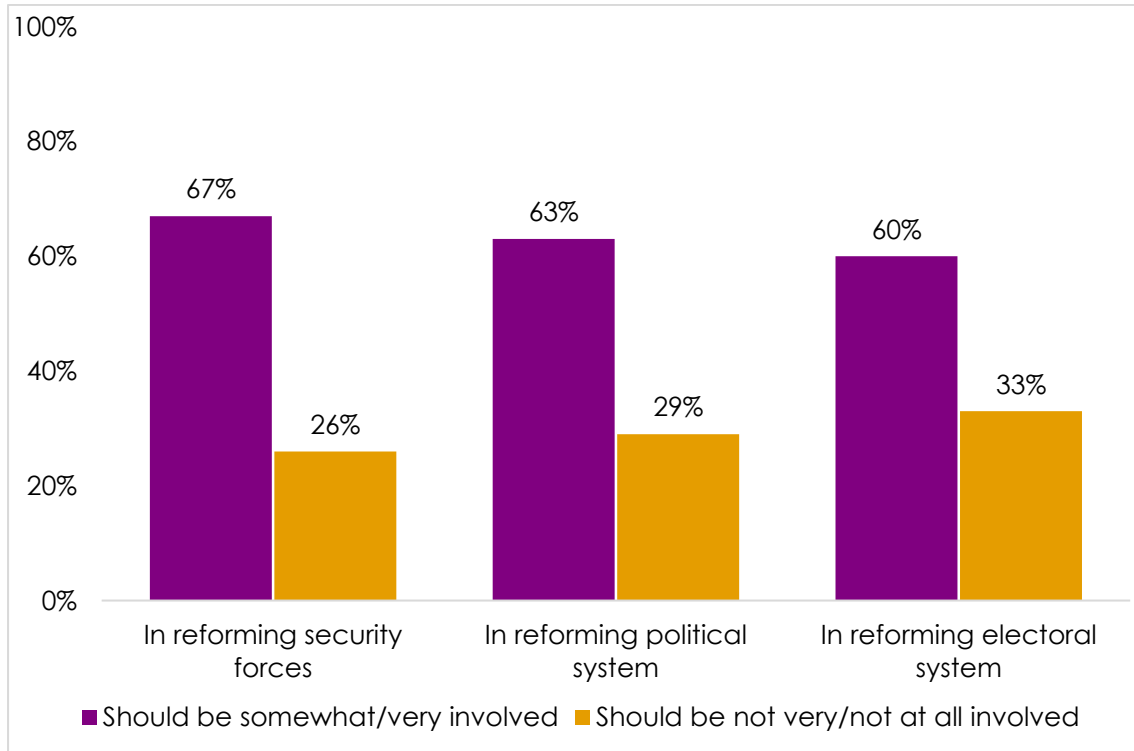
SADC has been called upon to extinguish political fires in Lesotho more often than in most member states. Each time, the regional body has made recommendations for reform, which have not been fully implemented by the Lesotho government.

Afrobarometer's 2017 survey in Lesotho took place while SADC was following up on its 2015 Double Troika recommendations that Lesotho implement reforms in a number of sectors, including security.

According to the survey findings, majorities of Basotho welcome the regional body's involvement in their country's reform processes, saying that SADC should be "somewhat" or

“very” involved in reforming Lesotho’s political system (63%), electoral system (60%), and security forces (67%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: SADC involvement in Lesotho’s reform processes | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: How involved do you think SADC should be in each of the following processes, or haven’t you heard enough to say:

- Reforming Lesotho’s political system?
- Reforming Lesotho’s electoral system?
- Reforming Lesotho’s security forces?

Waning support for elections

Lesotho’s political instability may be taking a toll on citizens’ support for elections: The proportion of Basotho who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that “regular, open, and honest elections” are the best way to choose their leaders dropped by 25 percentage points, from 73% in 2014 to 48% in 2017 (Figure 8).

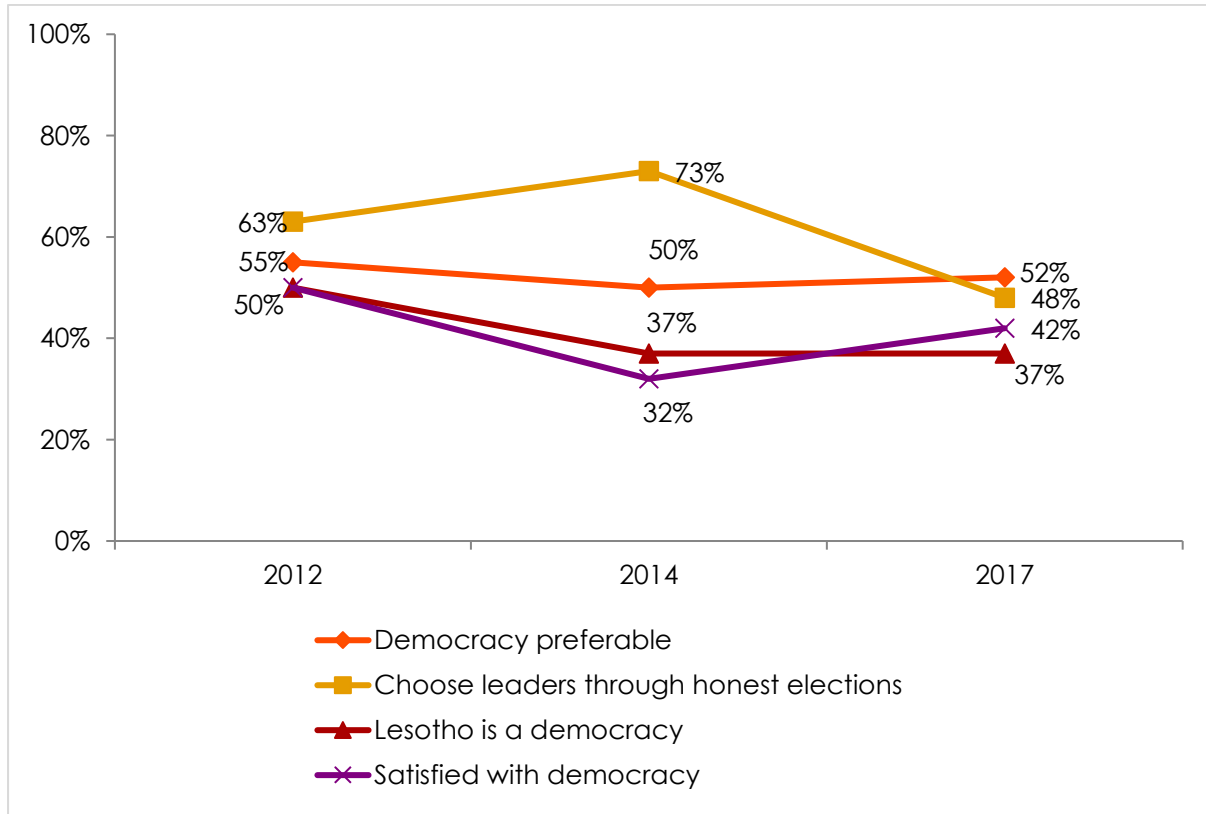
Support for democracy in general held steady, at about half (52%). The perception that Lesotho is “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems” remained at 37%, well below the 50% recorded in 2012. Four in 10 Basotho (42%) say they are “somewhat satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy is working in Lesotho – below the 2012 level of 50% but 10 percentage points better than the 2014 result.

Comparing Lesotho to six other Southern African countries already surveyed in 2017, Lesotho ranks last in support for democracy, support for elections, and perceptions of the extent of democracy, and ahead of just Zimbabwe and Malawi in satisfaction with democracy (Figure 9).

The doubling of the proportion of citizens who favour methods other than elections, from 25% in 2014 to 50% in 2017, is driven by above-average support among peri-urban and rural residents (55% and 51% respectively) and young respondents (58% among those aged 18-25

and 55% among those aged 26-35 years. This view is shared almost equally by supporters of the ruling, opposition, or no political parties (Figure 10).

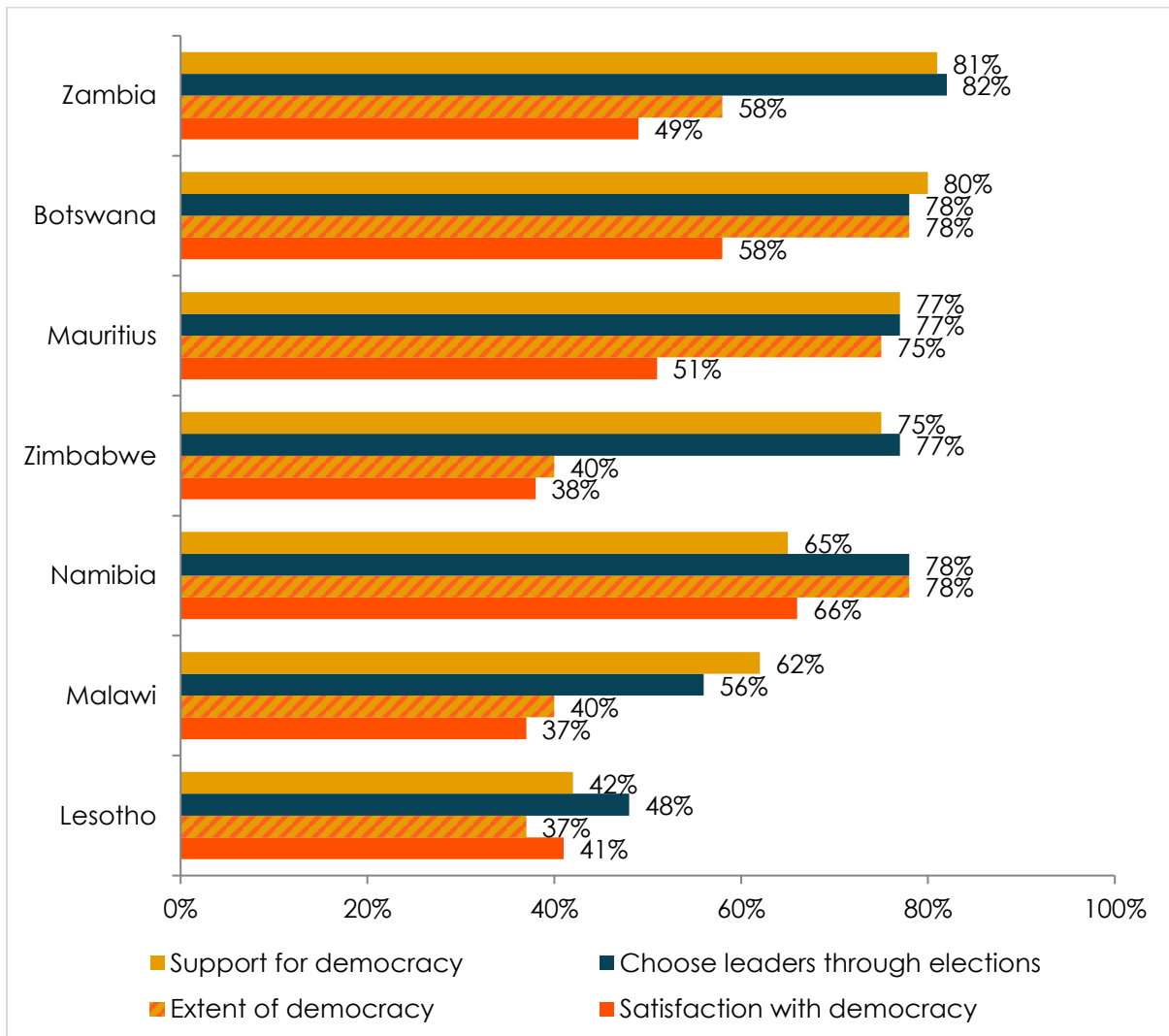
Figure 8: Democracy indicators | Lesotho | 2012-2017



Respondents were asked:

- Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.
 (% who say democracy is preferable)
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)
- In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Lesotho today? (% who say "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems")
- Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Lesotho? (% who say "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied")

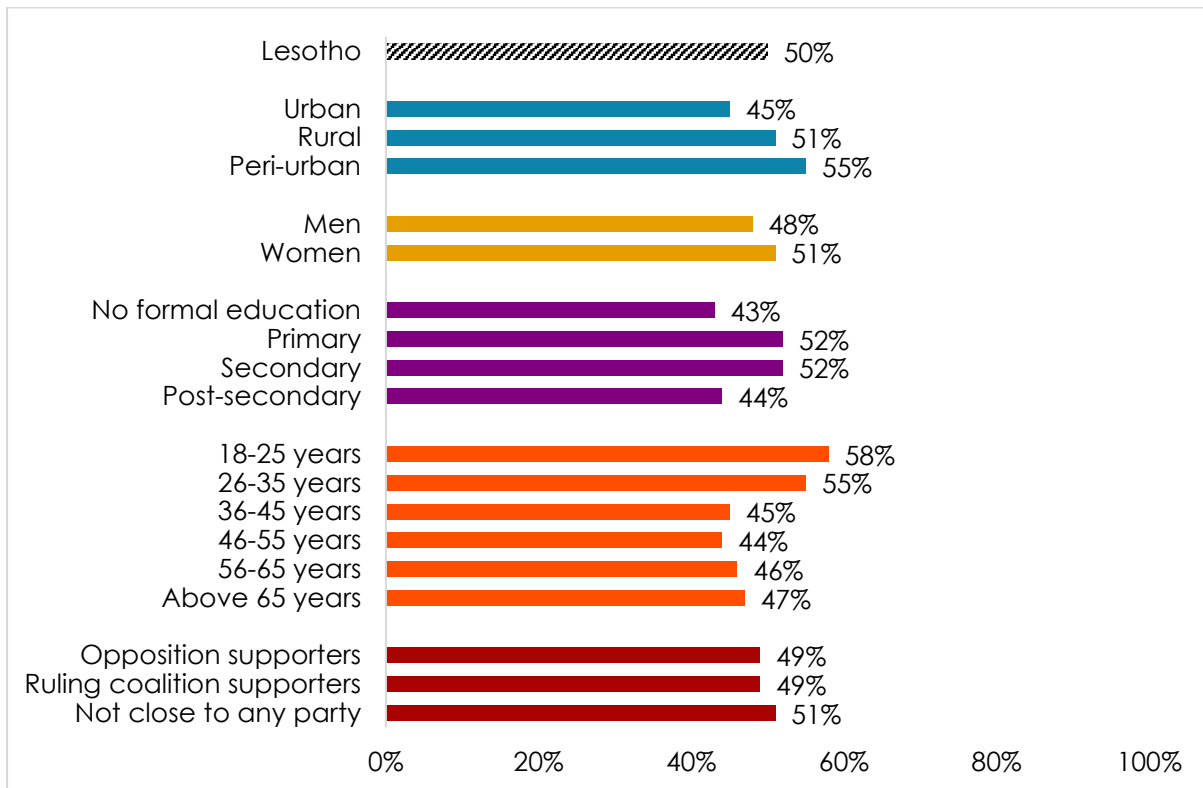
Figure 9: Democracy indicators | 7 countries in Southern Africa | 2017



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Figure 10: Support for choosing leaders by methods other than elections
 | by socio-demographic group | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)

Conclusion

The reform process becomes a necessity when institutions fall short of their expected effectiveness in addressing economic, social, and political needs of the nation. Basotho are clearly looking for change, whether in a more powerful King, less politicized security forces, or an electoral system that produces more effective government. A precipitous drop in support for elections as the best way to choose leaders may serve as a red flag that the democratic experiment requires fine-tuning.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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