

Basotho support limits on executive power and transparency in use of public information

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 239 | Thomas Isbell and Libuseng Malephane

Summary

The principle of accountability, described as early as the 19th century by Alexis de Tocqueville, is central to the functioning of democratic rule. Citizens bestow legitimacy upon representatives to govern on their behalf through the process by which representatives are chosen and the “rules” they must adhere to (Behn, 2001; Ferejohn, 1999; Schedler, Diamond, & Plattner, 1999). Accountability ensures that if elected representatives breach this mandate, they will face consequences in court or at the ballot box (Chambers, 2003)

Lesotho's turbulent recent history has been marked by crises of accountability, including what Sejanamane (2015) called a collapse of the rule of law when court cases brought by soldiers detained on charges of mutiny after the reinstatement Lt. Gen. Tlali Kamoli as commander of the Lesotho Defence Force in 2015, were ignored. The crisis deepened with the assassination of Lt. Gen. Maaparankoe Mahao, in which members of the National Army were suspected. The Lesotho government's resistance to accepting a Southern African Development Community Commission of Enquiry report on the assassination (ENCA, 2015; Shale, 2015) is seen as tantamount to refusing to be accountable to the nation (Southern African Litigation Centre, 2016).

This dispatch uses Afrobarometer survey data to explore popular attitudes toward accountability in Lesotho. The data show that Basotho widely favour accountable government over purely efficient government, even if this gap has been closing over the past half-decade. Basotho affirm limits on the powers of the prime minister, who they say should be bound by laws, accountable to Parliament, and limited to a maximum of two terms in office.

A majority of Basotho also demand public access to information held by government agencies, even if substantial minorities doubt they could obtain such information.

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 completed in 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 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Lesotho in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

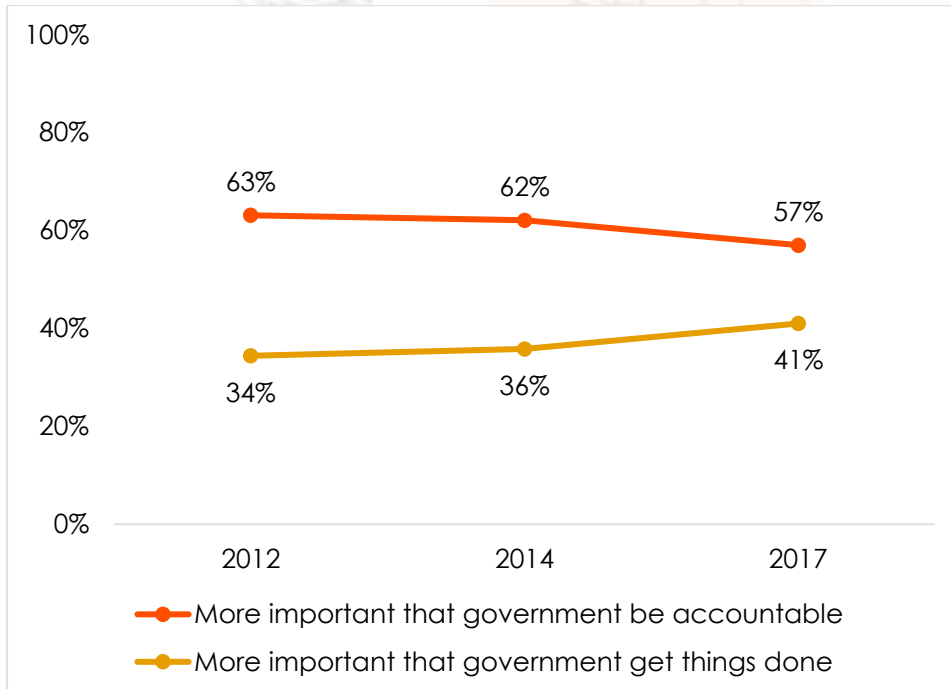
Key findings

- A majority (57%) of Basotho say the government should be accountable to the people, even if that limits its efficiency. But a growing number of citizens are prioritizing a government that can “get things done.”
- Basotho support limits on executive power. Majorities say the prime minister should be accountable to Parliament (62%) and must always obey laws and courts (86%). More than half of citizens say that in practice, the prime minister “rarely” or “never” ignores Parliament and the courts.
- Six in 10 Basotho (62%) also favour limiting the prime minister to a maximum of two terms in office.
- A majority (57%) of Basotho say that information held by public officials should be accessible to the public. But about four in 10 believe they would have trouble obtaining information about development plans and school budgets.

Accountable vs. efficient government

A majority (57%) of Basotho say it's more important that the government be accountable to the people than that it “get things done,” a modest decrease from 62% in 2014 (Figure 1). Four in 10 disagree, arguing that having an efficient government is more important, even if citizens “have no influence over what it does.”

Figure 1: Government accountable vs. efficient | Lesotho | 2012-2017



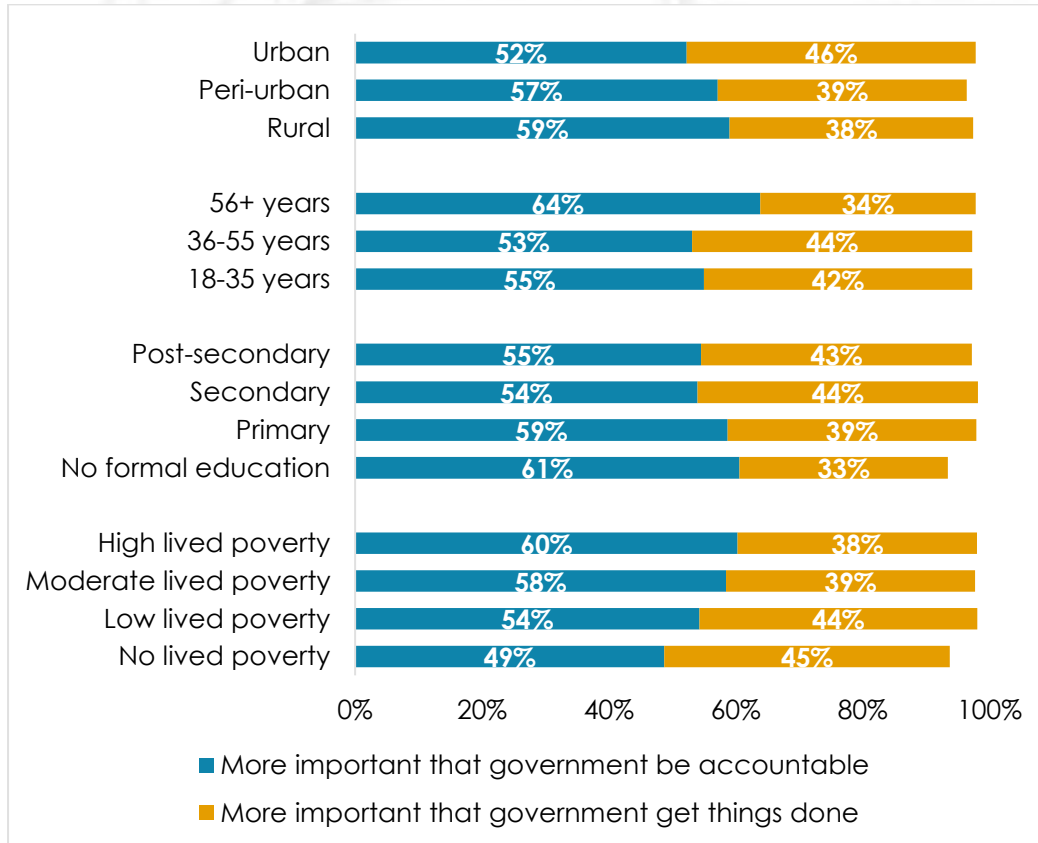
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

- It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.
- It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

A preference for accountability over efficiency is stronger among rural residents (59%), senior Basotho (64%), those with no formal education (61%) or only primary education (59%), and poorer respondents (60% of those with high lived poverty)¹ (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Government accountable vs. efficient | by socio-demographic group
 | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

- It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.
- It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

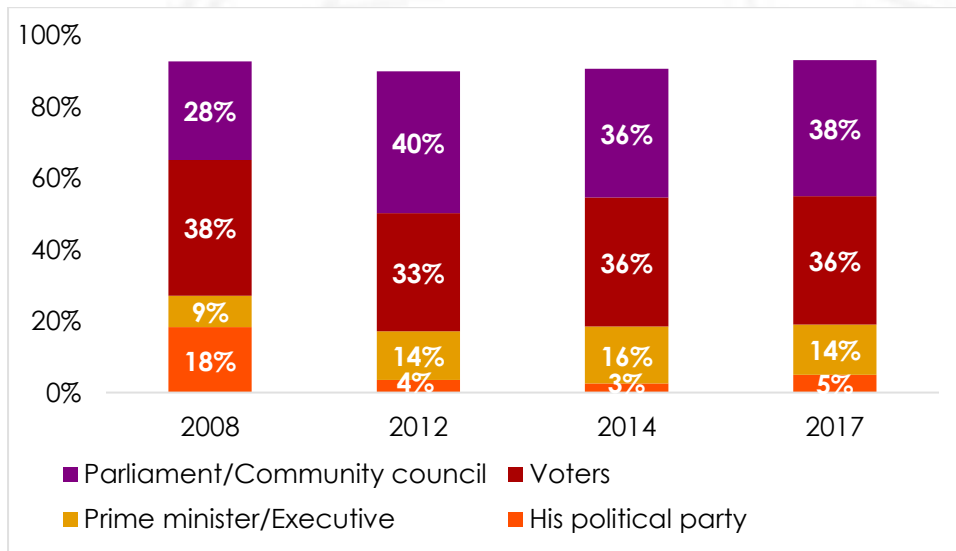
(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Limits on executive power

When asked who should hold the prime minister accountable for doing his job, Basotho divide the responsibility between other elected officials (38% say Parliament or community councils) and the voters (36%) (Figure 3). These views have been fairly stable since the first Afrobarometer survey in 2008.

¹ Afrobarometer assesses respondents’ “lived poverty” based on responses to the following questions: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

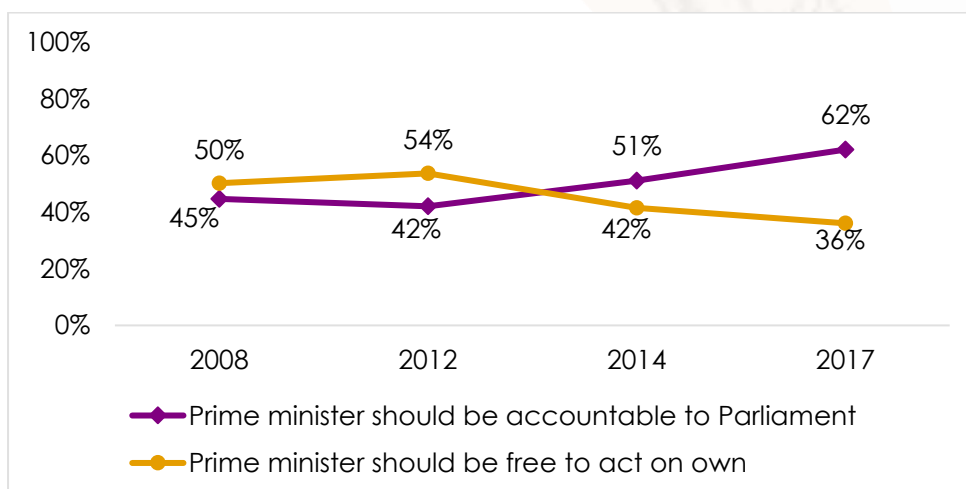
Figure 3: Who is responsible for holding prime minister accountable? | Lesotho | 2008-2017



Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, the prime minister does his or her job?

Parliamentary power to hold the executive accountable is also endorsed by a majority (62%) of Basotho who agree that “Parliament should ensure that the prime minister explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers’ money.” This continues an upward trend in public support for executive accountability to Parliament, from about four in 10 in 2008 and 2012 (Figure 4). The proportion of respondents who say the prime minister shouldn’t have to “waste his time justifying his actions” to Parliament continued its decline from more than half to 36%.

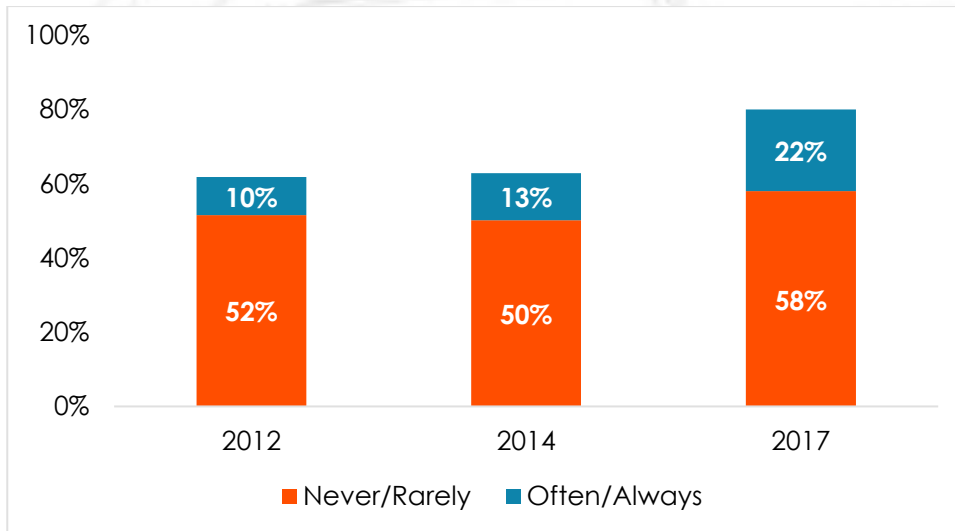
Figure 4: Should prime minister be accountable to Parliament? | Lesotho | 2008-2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the prime minister explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers’ money.
 Statement 2: The prime minister should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

In practice, a majority (58%) of Basotho say the prime minister “never” or “rarely” ignores Parliament – also an increase from 50% in 2014 (Figure 5). On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who say the prime minister “often” or “always” ignores Parliament also increased, to 22%, while the proportion of “Don’t know” responses declined from 37% to 21%.

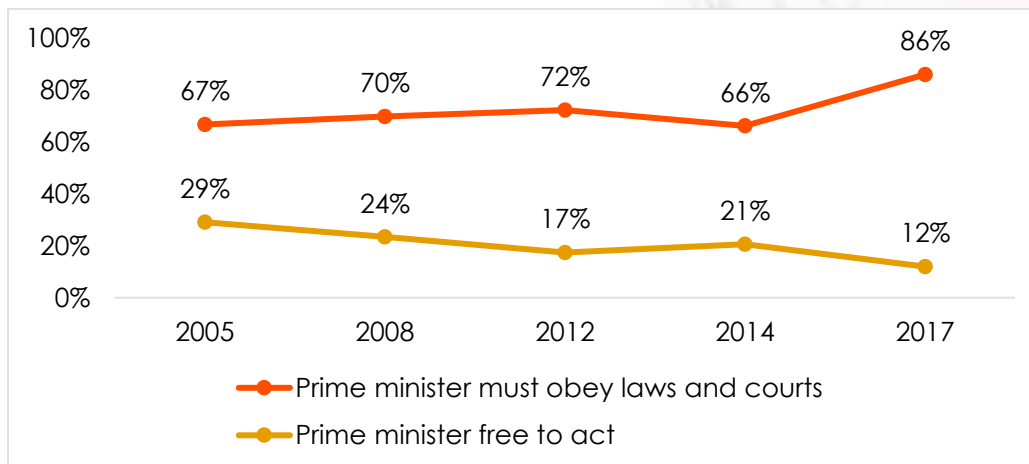
Figure 5: Does prime minister ignore Parliament? | Lesotho | 2012-2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the prime minister ignore Parliament and just do what he wants?

Judicial oversight and controls are also important limits on executive powers in a democracy. Almost nine out of 10 Basotho (86%) share the view that the prime minister must always obey the laws and courts, even if he thinks they are wrong. This represents a 20-percentage-point increase from 66% in 2014 (Figure 6). Conversely, the share of Basotho who feel that the prime minister, as the elected leader of the country, should not be bound by laws and courts dropped by about half, to 12%.

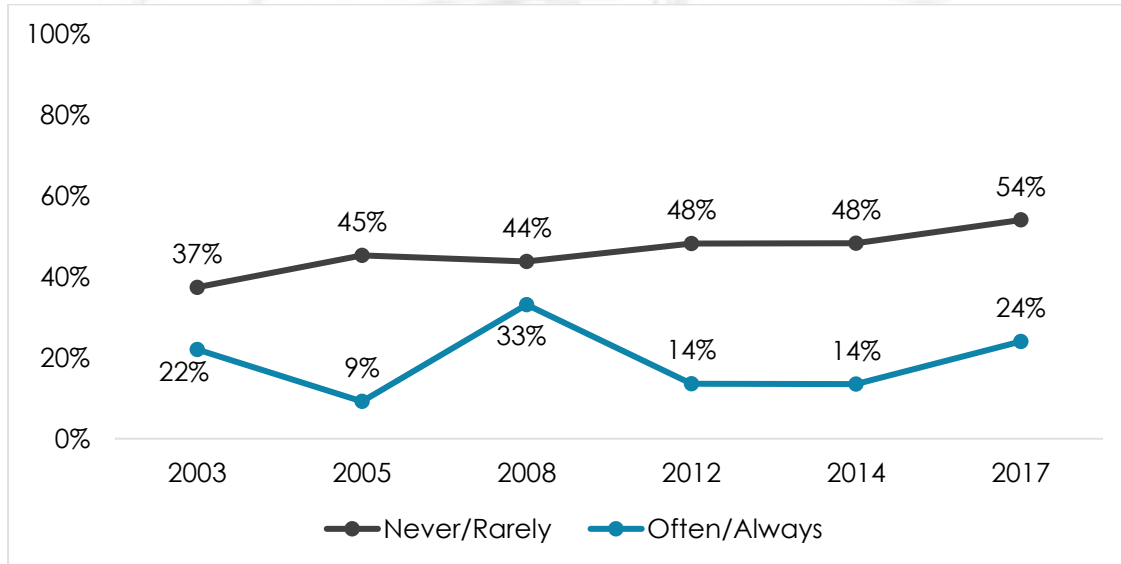
Figure 6: Must prime minister obey courts and laws? | Lesotho | 2005-2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.
 Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

When asked how often the prime minister in fact ignores the courts and laws, a slim majority (54%) of Basotho say he “never” or “rarely” does so (Figure 7). The share of Basotho who share this view has been increasing steadily over the years, from 37% in 2003.

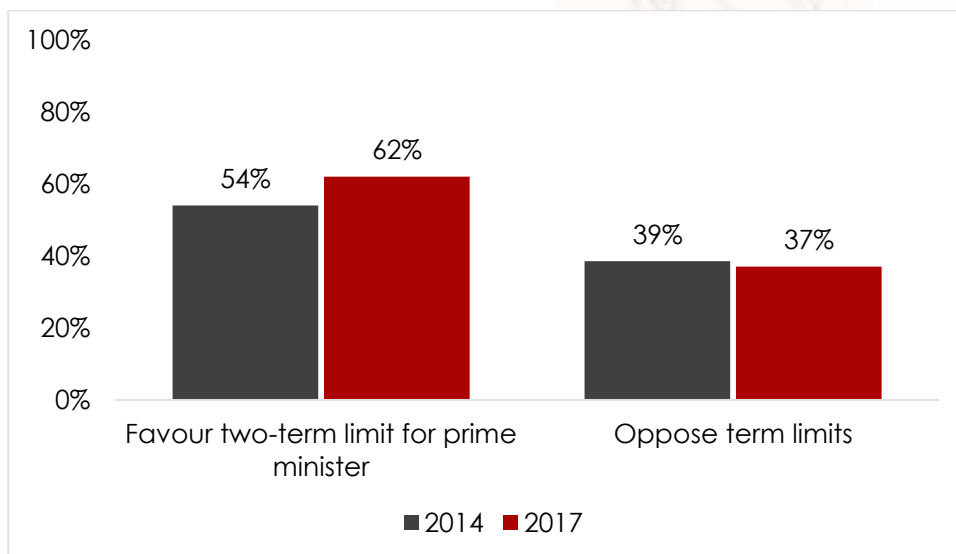
Figure 7: How often prime minister ignores courts and laws | Lesotho | 2003-2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the prime minister ignore the courts and laws of this country?*

Moreover, around six in 10 Basotho (62%) approve of limiting their prime minister to a maximum of two terms in office. Support for term limits increased by 8 percentage points from 2014 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Term limits for prime minister | Lesotho | 2014-2017



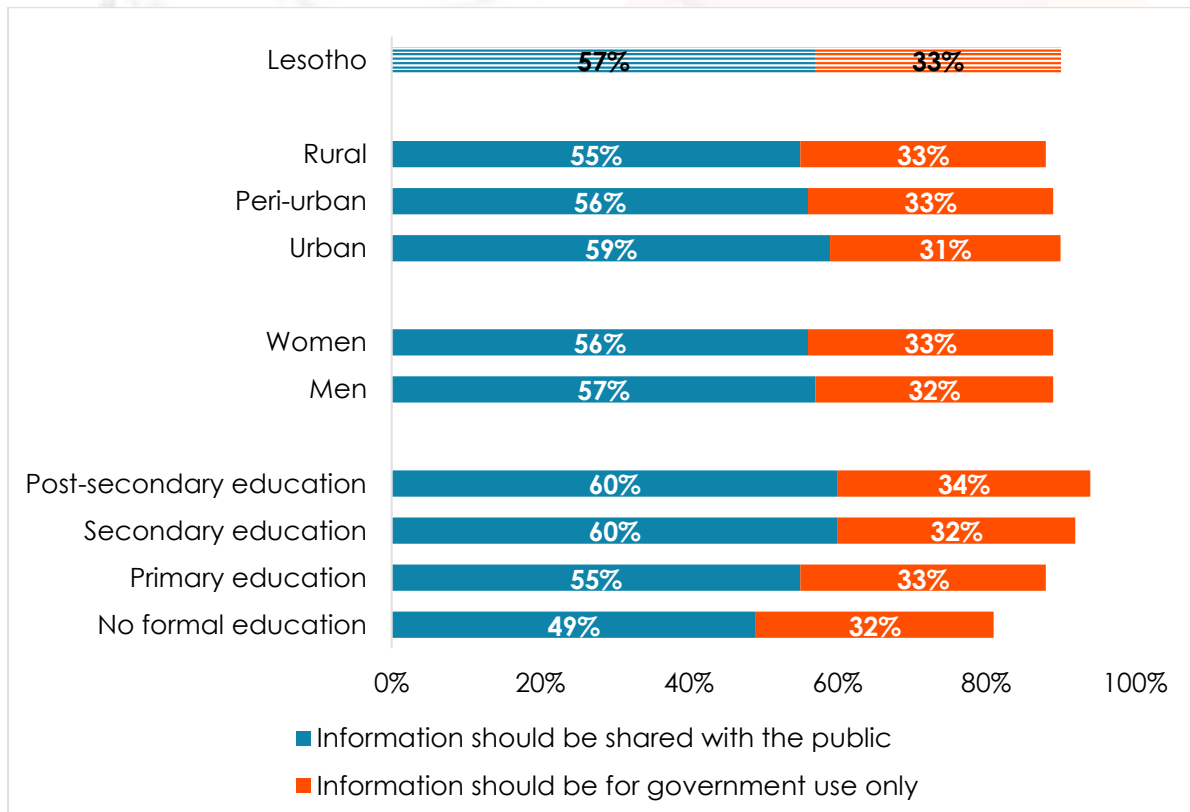
Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
 Statement 1: *The Constitution should limit the prime minister to serving a maximum of two terms in office.*
 Statement 2: *There should be no constitutional limit on how long the prime minister can serve.*
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Transparency

To hold their political leaders accountable, citizens need information. Transparency is thus a prerequisite for accountability. A majority (57%) of Basotho demand transparency, asserting that information held by public authorities should be shared with the public. One in three (33%) believe instead that such information should be only for the use of government officials (Figure 9).

Better-educated respondents are more likely than their less-educated counterparts to want such information shared with the public: 60% among those with secondary or post-secondary education, compared to 49% of those with no formal education. Among 26 African countries surveyed by Afrobarometer, Lesotho is near the average of 54% who say the public should have access to such information, though countries vary widely in their views, from 36% of Ivorians to 74% of Malawians.

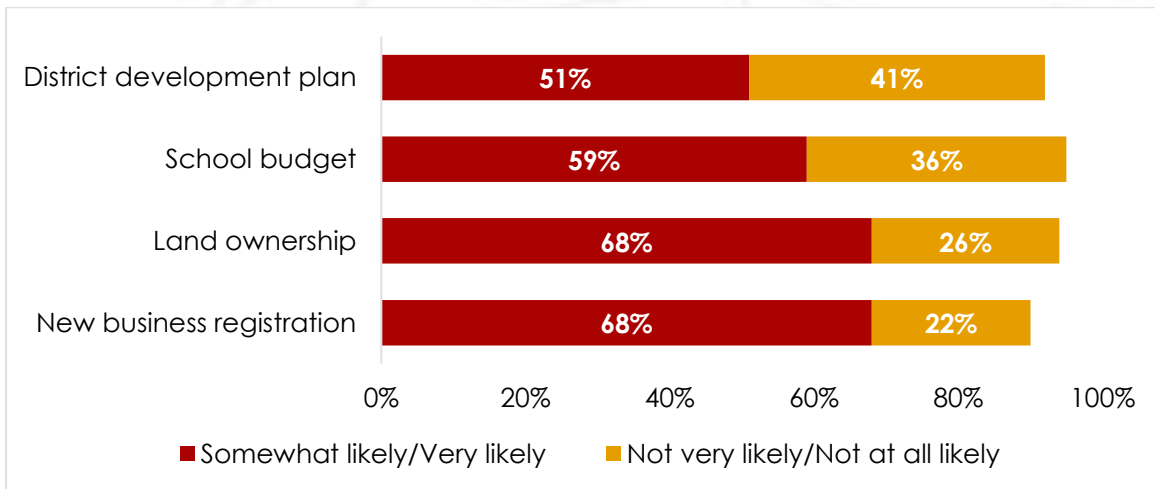
Figure 9: Share information held by public authorities | by socio-demographic group | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not be shared with the public. (% who “agree/strongly agree” and who “disagree/disagree strongly”)

In practice, while a majority of Basotho think they could probably obtain such information from various public authorities, substantial proportions have their doubts (Figure 10). About four in 10 see it as “not very likely” or “not at all likely” that they could obtain information about district development plans and budgets (41%) or school budgets (36%). About one-fourth say the same regarding information about land ownership (26%) and new business registration (22%).

Figure 10: Access to information from public institutions | Lesotho | 2017



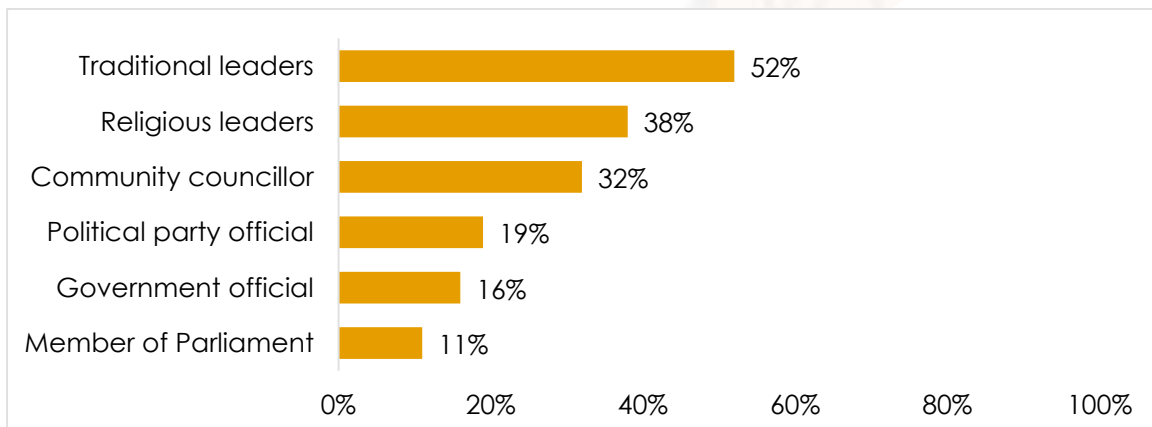
Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say?

- If you went to the local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?
- If you went to the community council office or Land Administration Authority to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- If you went to the district administration office to find out about the district development plan and budget?
- If you went to the district administration office to find out how to register a new business in your community?

Citizens making their voices heard

Another aspect of accountability is communication, as when citizens let their leaders know what they think and expect. Only one in 10 Basotho (11%) say they contacted a member of Parliament at least once during the previous year to discuss an important problem or share their views. Contact was somewhat more frequent with government officials (16%) and political party officials (19%). About one-third (32%) of respondents say they contacted a community councillor. The most frequent contact was with traditional leaders (52%) and religious leaders (38%) (Figure 11).

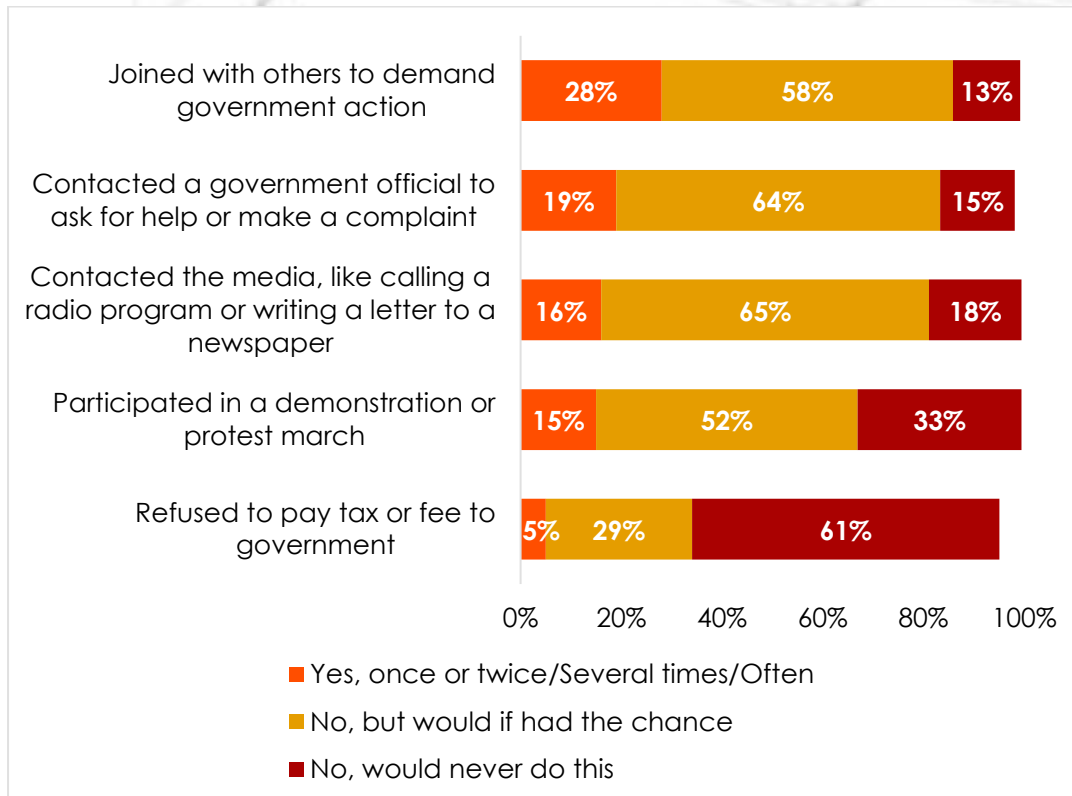
Figure 11: Contacting officials | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

As for taking action to express dissatisfaction with the government, about three in 10 respondents (28%) say they joined others in their community to request action from the government “once or twice,” “several times,” or “often” during the previous year. One in five (19%) say they contacted a government official to ask for help or make a complaint, while fewer say they contacted the media (16%), participated in a demonstration or protest march (15%), or refused to pay a tax or fee to the government (5%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Citizen action when dissatisfied with government | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometime take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Conclusion

A majority of Basotho demand accountability from their government, even if a growing number prefer a government that “gets things done.” Citizens widely support limits on executive powers and see voters and Parliament as responsible for holding the prime minister accountable. A majority want average citizens to have access to information held by public officials, but many say getting access to such information may be difficult.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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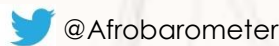
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