

Dispatch No. 381 | 7 August 2020

## Disenchanted with democracy, Basotho want reforms limiting PM powers, expanding King's

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 381 | Libuseng Malephane

### Summary

In 2015, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) recommended that Lesotho undertake wide-ranging reforms of the Constitution, Parliament, the judiciary, and the public and security sectors (Post, 2017). These recommendations followed a 2014 coup attempt, then-Prime Minister Thomas Thabane's escape to South Africa, the assassination of army commander Lt. Gen. Maaparankoe Mahao, and an SADC intervention.

In pursuit of political stability, all political parties signed an agreement to establish the National Reforms Authority (NRA) in 2019 after a process of citizen consultations and the Lesotho Multi Stakeholder National Dialogues under the guiding document "The Lesotho We Want: Dialogue and Reforms for National Transformation" (Government of Lesotho, 2017).

The resultant In-District Consultations Consolidation Report, titled "Leaving No One Behind" (Government of Lesotho, 2019), outlined citizens' dissatisfaction with the government's poor service delivery, doubts about the effectiveness of the reform process, and concerns about the size and costs of Parliament, parliamentarians switching parties ("floor-crossing"), too much power in the hands of the prime minister and too little in the hands of the King, unclear roles for the police and military, as well as "a public service that is lazy, corrupt and indifferent to the needs of the public and a media that is ill-trained and politically aligned."

Of these thematic areas, the constitutional sector looked at, among others, the powers and terms of office of the prime minister, prorogation and dissolution of Parliament, political conflict resolution mechanisms, the office of the King, the formation of the government and coalitions, and the electoral system and elections management.

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show widespread popular support for a variety of proposed constitutional reforms curtailing powers held by the prime minister in favour of enhanced political powers for the King. Most Basotho would welcome replacing elections and Parliament with rule by the King. A majority would reassign the prime minister's powers to appoint judges and the head of the army and institute direct election, term limits, and age limits for the prime minister.

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer National Partner in Lesotho, Advision Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult citizens of Lesotho in

February-March 2020. 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, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

## Key findings

- Three-fourths (76%) of Basotho are dissatisfied with the way their democracy is working, up from 53% in 2017. A majority (57%) would prefer to choose leaders through methods other than elections.
- Two-thirds (67%) of Basotho would approve of abolishing elections and Parliament in favour of rule by the King. Even larger majorities want the King to have “more say on issues of national importance” (88%, up by 13 percentage points from 2017) and to have the power to appoint a caretaker government in the event of a no-confidence vote in the prime minister (90%).
- Conversely, most Basotho support proposed reforms that would circumscribe the powers of the prime minister:
  - Large majorities say the prime minister should no longer be the one to appoint judges (82%) and the head of the army (72%). Instead, they should be selected, respectively, by the Judicial Service Commission and Parliament.
  - A majority of citizens support minimum and maximum age limits as well as a two-term maximum in office for the prime minister. And they overwhelmingly say the prime minister should be directly elected by the voters, rather than by Parliament (MPs) (85%).
- Most citizens support penalizing members of Parliament who switch political parties (83%), but they are divided as to whether to change to a full proportional electoral system.

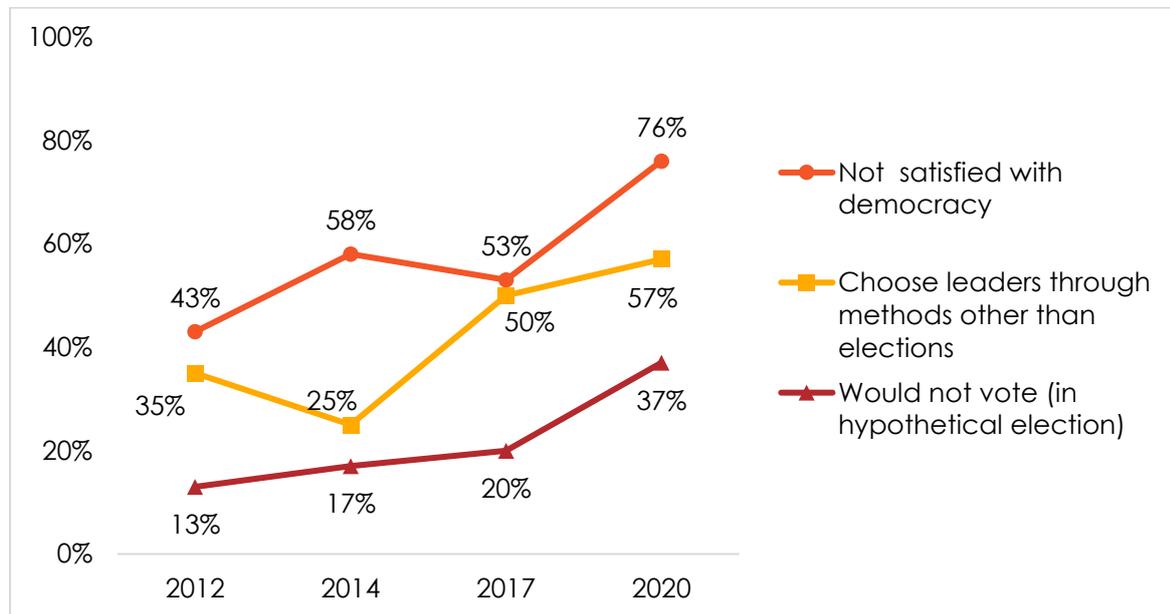
## Views on democracy and the King

Lesotho has known little stability since its return to democracy in 1993. Turmoil reached new heights under coalition governments, resulting in three elections (2012, 2015, and 2017) within a period of five years and repeated SADC interventions. Disenchanted Basotho say the country’s constitutional monarch could help, but his “mouth is zipped” by a Constitution drafted by politicians.

Afrobarometer data show that Basotho are increasingly unhappy with their democracy. Three-fourths (76%) say either that the country “is not a democracy” or that they are “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” with the way democracy is working, up from 53% in 2017. Nearly six in 10 (57%) would prefer choosing leaders through methods other than elections, a 7-percentage-point increase from 50% in 2017. And in a hypothetical election the day after the survey, close to four in 10 respondents (37%) say they would not vote, an increase of 17 percentage points from 2017 (Figure 1).

Moreover, while three-fourths (74%) of Basotho reject one-man and military rule as political systems for their country, a majority (56%) approve of one-party rule. And fully two-thirds (67%) favour abolishing elections and Parliament to allow the King to rule (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Views on democracy | Lesotho | 2012-2020**



**Respondents were asked:**

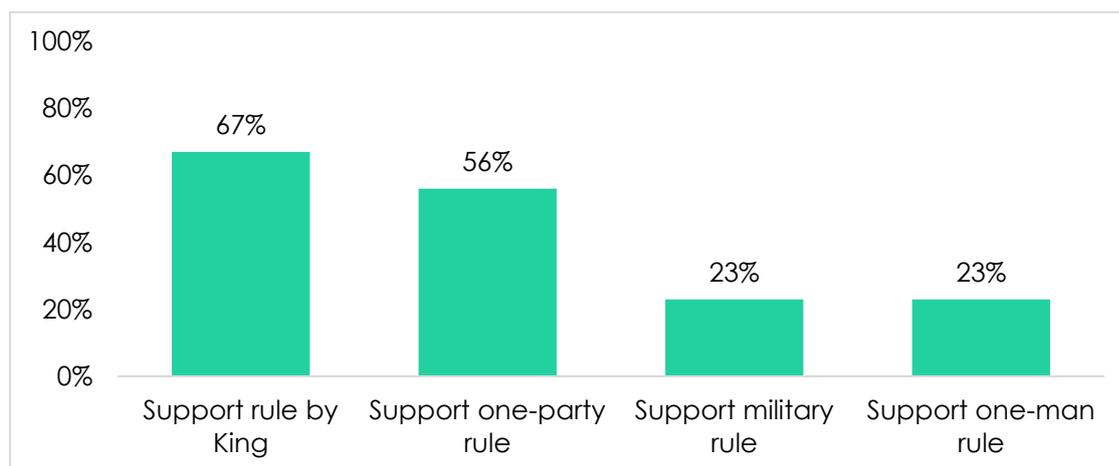
Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Lesotho? (% who say “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” or “Lesotho is not a democracy”)

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 strongly” with Statement 2)

If general elections were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for? (% who “would not vote”)

**Figure 2: Support for non-democratic regimes | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?

Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

The army comes in to govern the country.

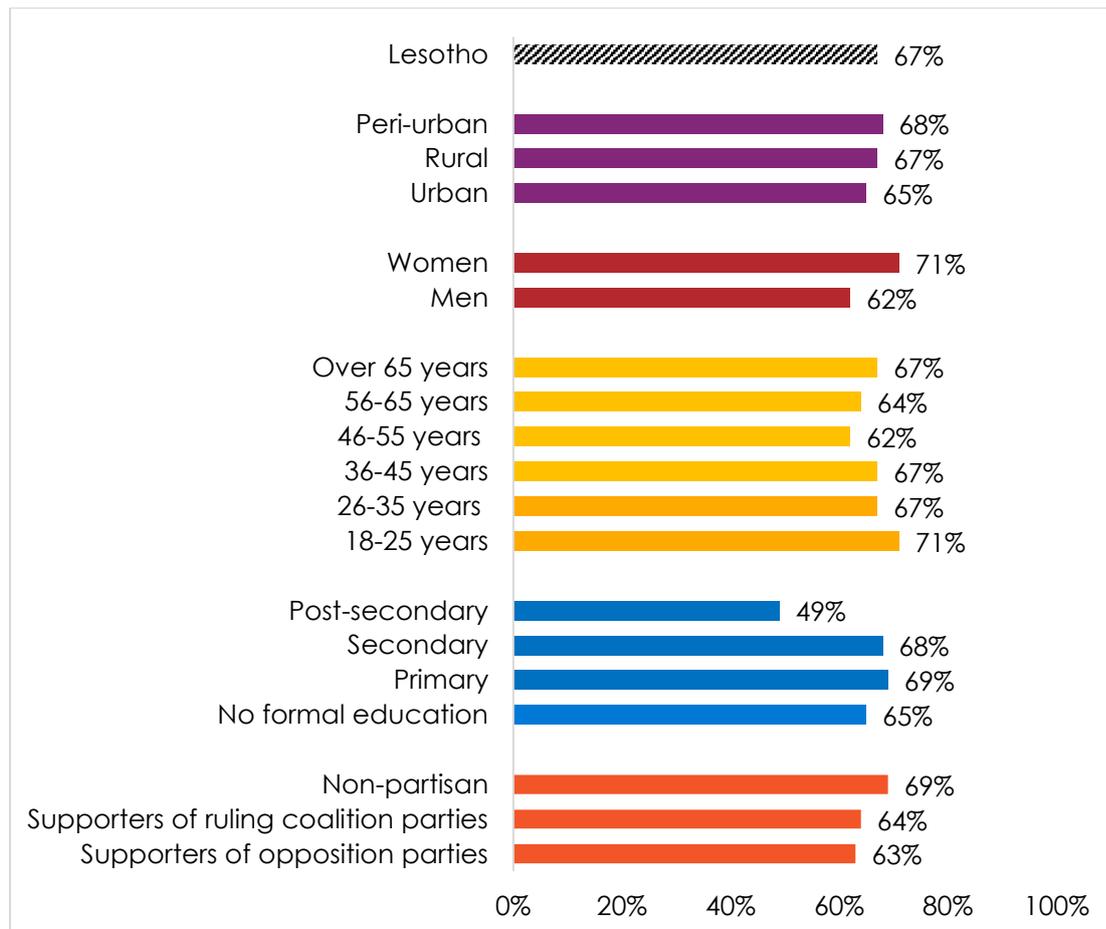
Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the prime minister can decide everything.

Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the King can govern the country.

(% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

Support for rule by the King is particularly strong among the youngest respondents (71% of those aged 18-25), women (71%), and those not aligned with any political party (69%).<sup>1</sup> Citizens with post-secondary education are less likely to endorse rule by the King (49%) than their less-educated counterparts (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Support for rule by the King | by socio-demographic group | Lesotho | 2020**



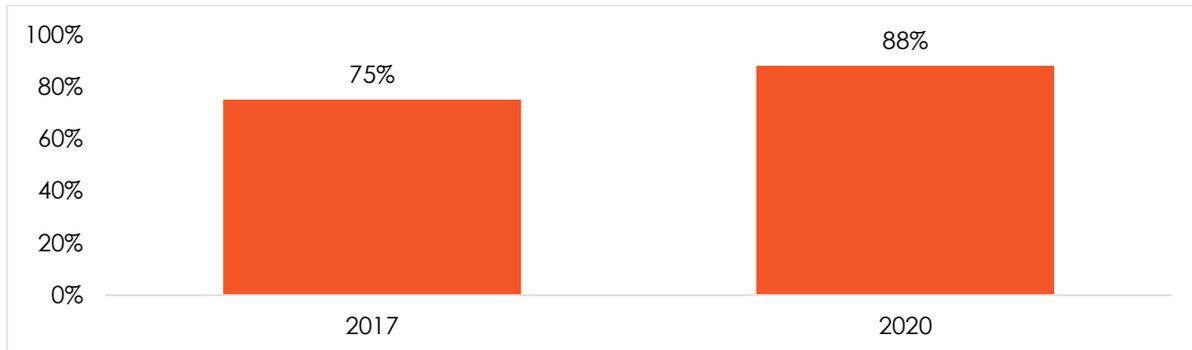
**Respondents were asked:** There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the King can govern the country? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

An even greater majority (88%) support a constitutional amendment to allow the King to “have more say on issues of national importance,” an increase of 13 percentage points from 2017 (Figure 4).

And 90% of Basotho would support a constitutional reform proposal to give the King the power to appoint a caretaker government in the event of a successful motion of no confidence in the prime minister (Figure 5).

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

**Figure 4: Should the king have more say? | Lesotho | 2017-2020**



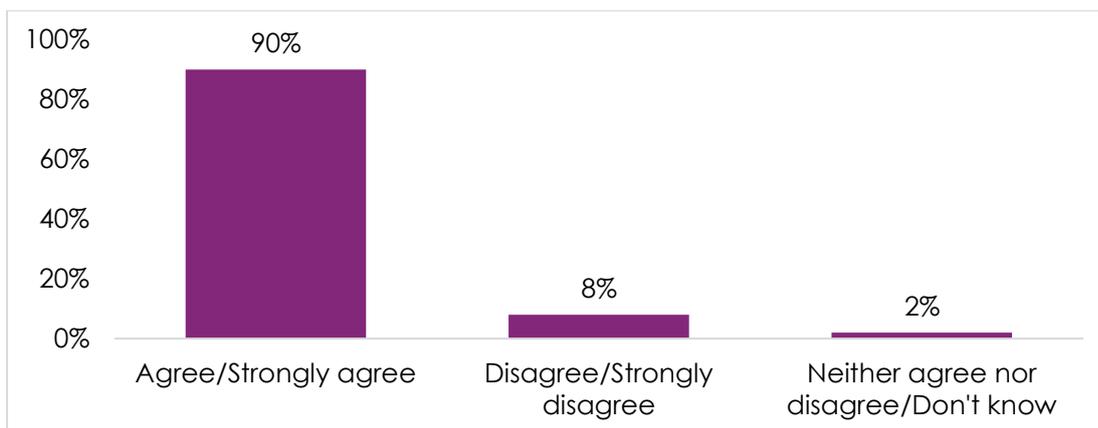
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

*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.*

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

**Figure 5: Give King the power to appoint a caretaker government? | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Currently, Lesotho is considering several proposals that are part of the ongoing constitutional reforms. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree, or have you not heard enough to say: The King should be granted the power to appoint a caretaker government in the event of a no-confidence vote in the prime minister?

### Views on the prime minister

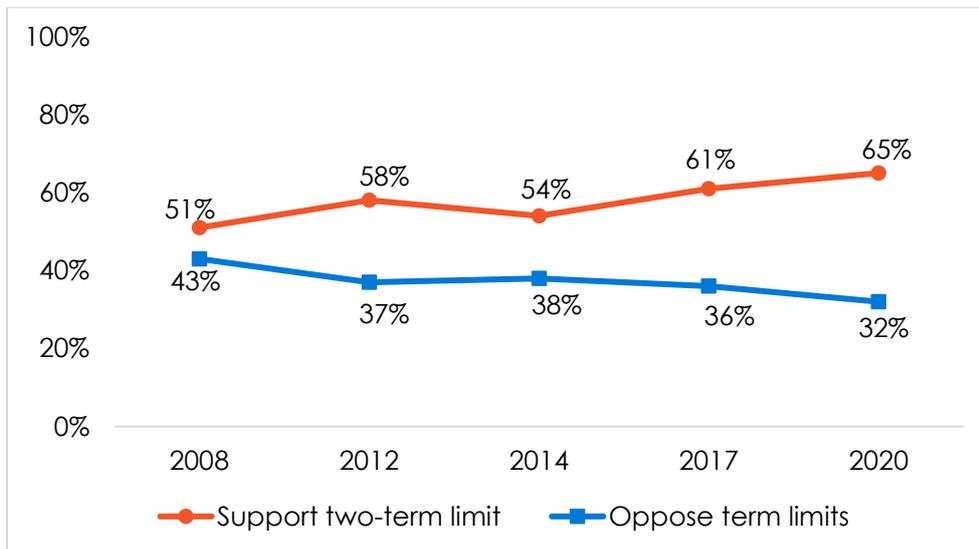
A strong majority of Basotho support constitutional reforms circumscribing the role of the prime minister, including term limits, age restrictions, direct election by voters, and reassignment of his powers to appoint judges and the head of the defense forces.

Two-thirds (65%) of respondents support limiting the prime minister to a maximum of two terms in office, an increase from 51% in 2008 (Figure 6).

Six in 10 (62%) also favour instituting a minimum age for candidates for prime minister, and even more (72%) support a maximum age (Figure 7). When asked what the minimum age should be, the most common response (by 16% of all respondents) is 40 years, while about one in 10 respondents propose 30, 35, and 50 years.

For the maximum age, one in five respondents propose 60 years (20%), and about the same proportion favour 70 (19%).

**Figure 6: Term limits for the prime minister | Lesotho | 2008-2020**



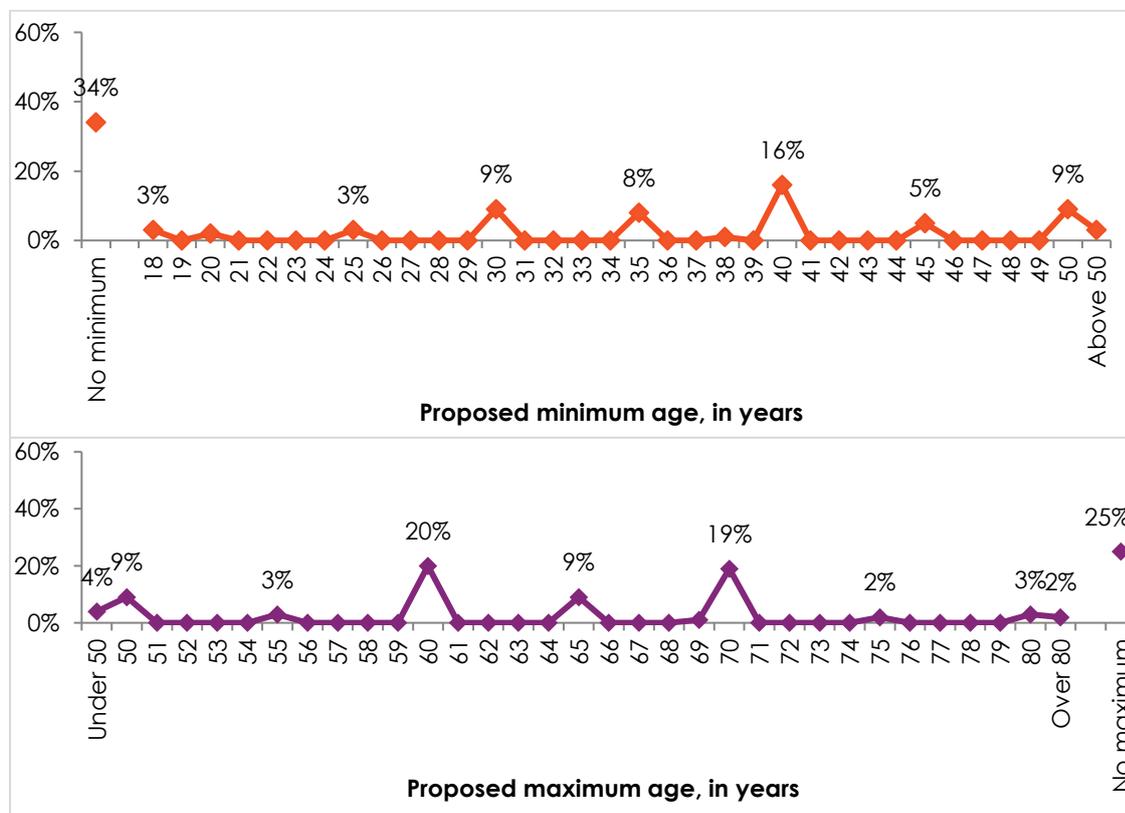
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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 "strongly agree" with each statement)

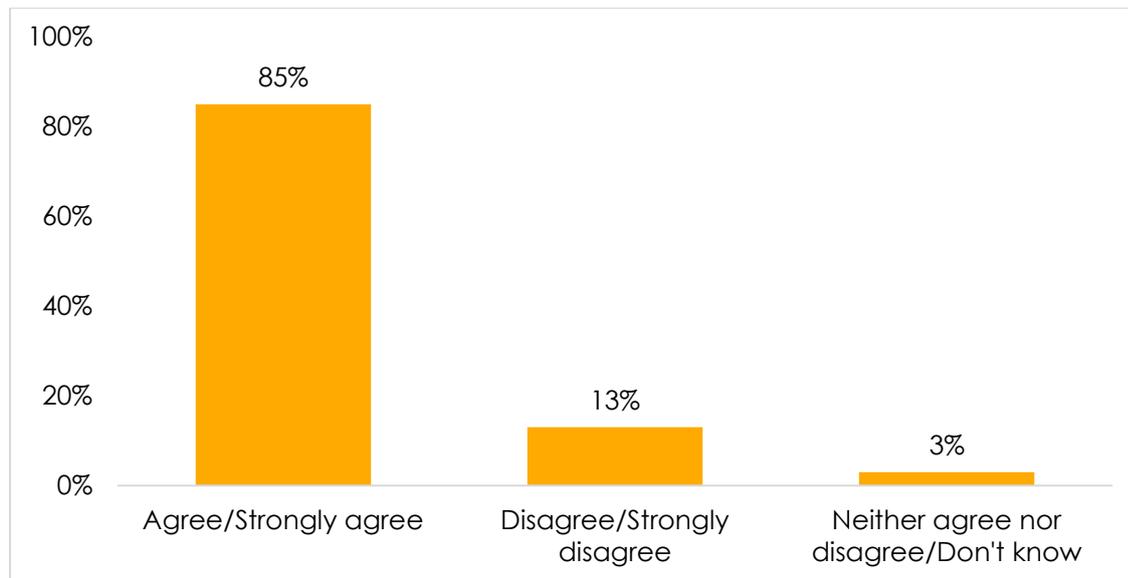
**Figure 7: Minimum and maximum ages for prime minister | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Should there be a minimum/maximum age for candidates for prime minister? [If yes:] What should the minimum/maximum age be?

Another proposed reform concerns the method of electing the prime minister. Under the current system, parliamentarians elect the prime minister from among their ranks. However, more than eight in 10 Basotho (85%) want the prime minister to be directly elected by voters, including nearly two-thirds (64%) who “strongly agree” with this proposal (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Should prime minister be directly elected by voters? | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Currently, Lesotho is considering several proposals that are part of the ongoing constitutional reforms. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree, or have you not heard enough to say: The prime minister must be directly elected by the voters, not Parliament?

Another issue that reform proposals have addressed is concerns that the executive interferes with the judiciary, through the dismissal and appointment of judges (African Legal Information Institute, 2018), and with the leadership of the military.

---

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](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

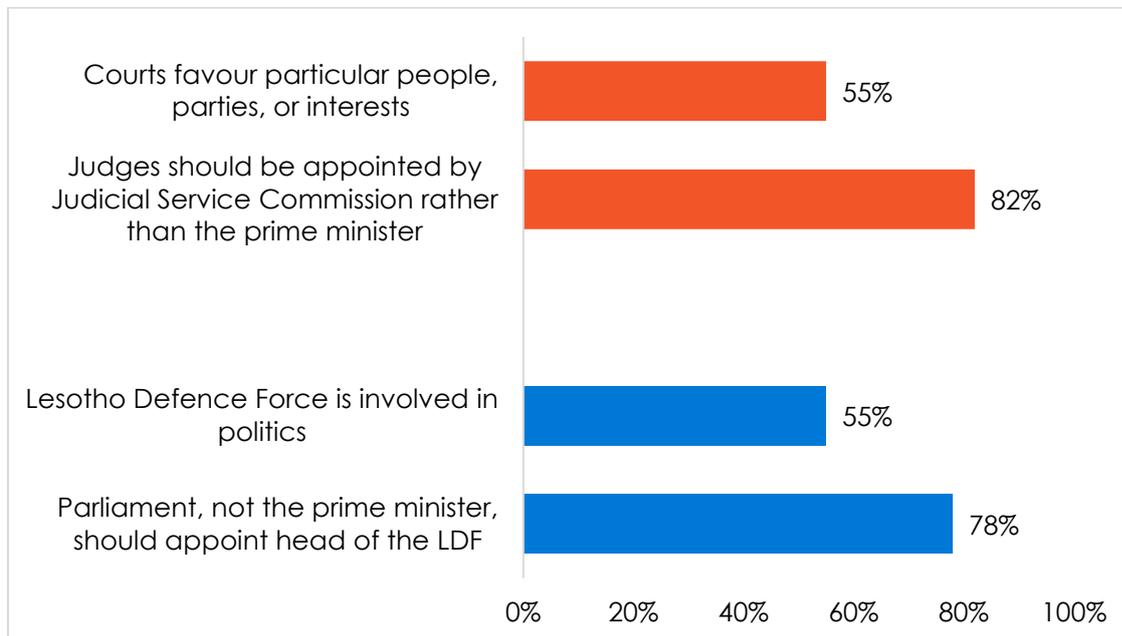
---

In the Afrobarometer survey, more than half (55%) of respondents say the courts are not impartial but “favour certain people, parties, or interests,” and the same majority say that the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) is “somewhat” or “very” involved in politics (Figure 9).

Even more clearly, eight in 10 respondents (82%) say that judges should no longer be appointed by the prime minister but should instead be appointed by the Judicial Service Commission.

And nearly as many (78%) say that the power to appoint the head of the LDF should be reassigned from the prime minister to Parliament.

**Figure 9: Should prime minister appoint judges and LDF head? | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:**

*For each of the following government bodies, please tell me whether you think it performs its duties as a neutral body guided by law, or would you say it makes decisions that favour certain people, parties, or interests, or haven't you heard enough to say: The courts? (% who say the courts "make decisions that favour certain people, parties, or interests")*

*In your opinion, how involved would you say the Lesotho Defence Force are in the politics of the country? (% who say "somewhat involved" or "very involved")*

*Currently, Lesotho is considering several proposals that are part of the ongoing constitutional reforms. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree, or have you not heard enough to say:*

*Judges should no longer be appointed by the prime minister but by the Judicial Service Commission?*

*The prime minister should no longer have the power to appoint the head of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF), and Parliament should instead play this role?*

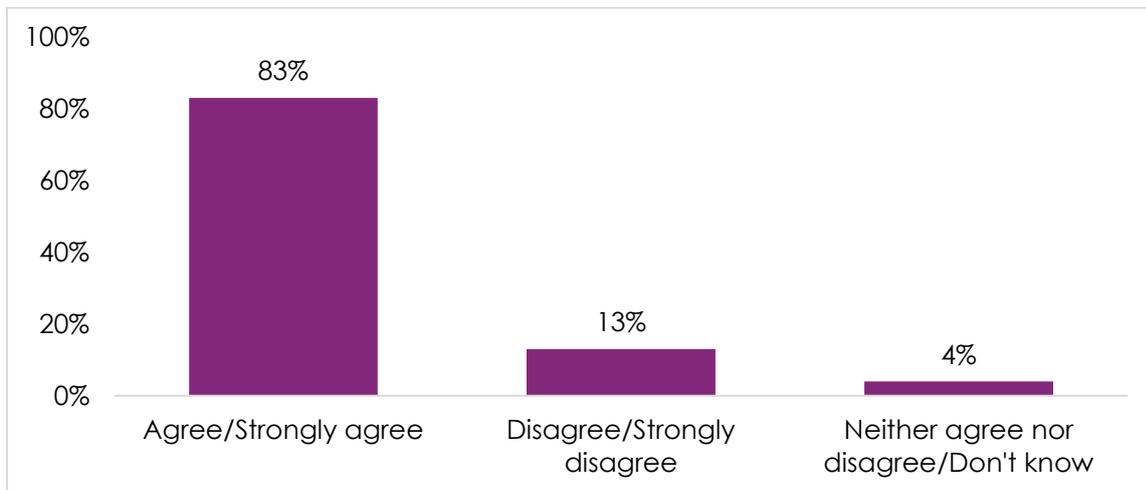
*(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")*

**Elections and Parliament**

Basotho also support a proposed constitutional reform that would penalize MPs for changing parties, but they are divided as to whether to change Lesotho's electoral system from the current mixed member proportional (MMP) system to a full proportional system.

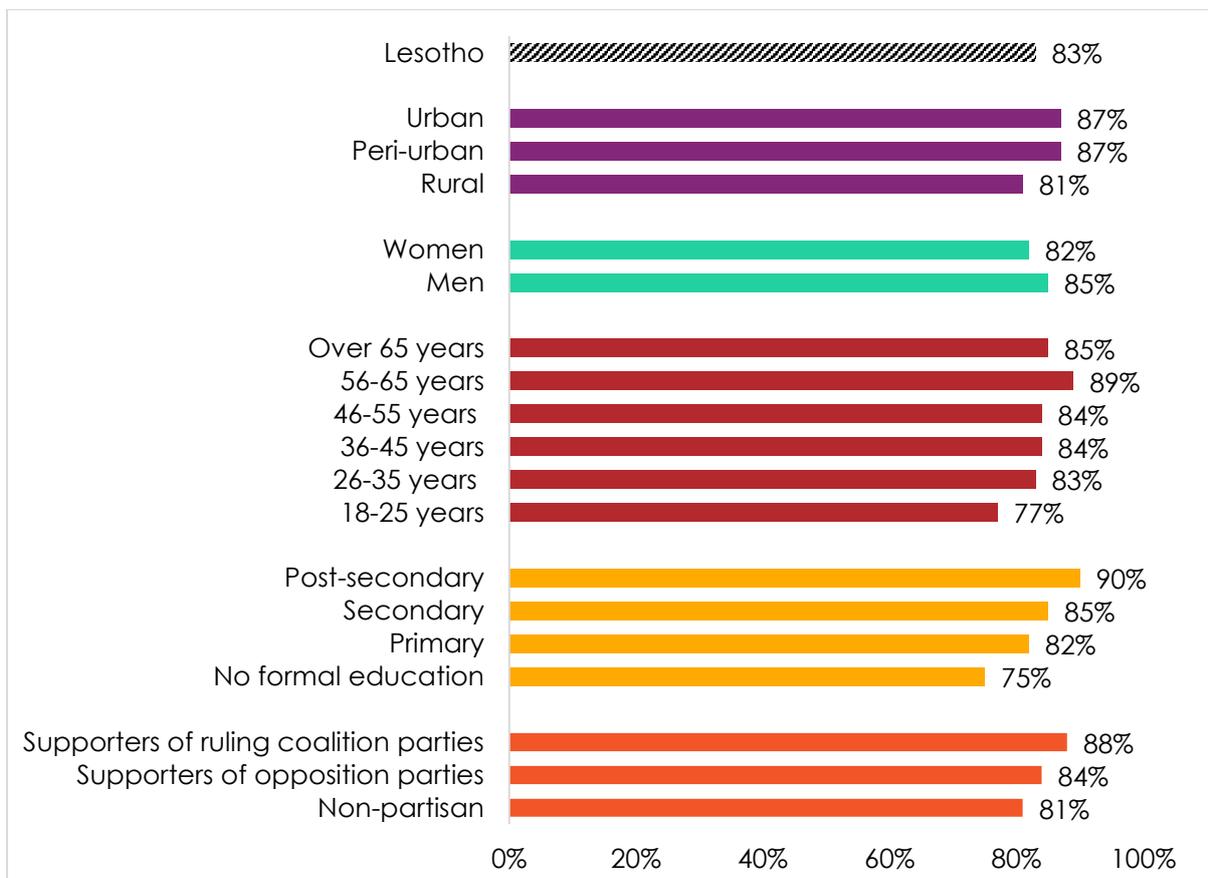
More than eight in 10 respondents (83%) agree that "floor crossing" – when an MP switches political parties – should require the MP to lose his or her seat in Parliament (Figure 10). This change is particularly popular among more-educated citizens (90% of those with post-secondary qualifications) and supporters of the ruling party coalition (88%) (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Should MPs lose their seats if they leave their party? | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree, or have you not heard enough to say: Elected members of Parliament must lose their seats in Parliament if they leave their party to join another one?

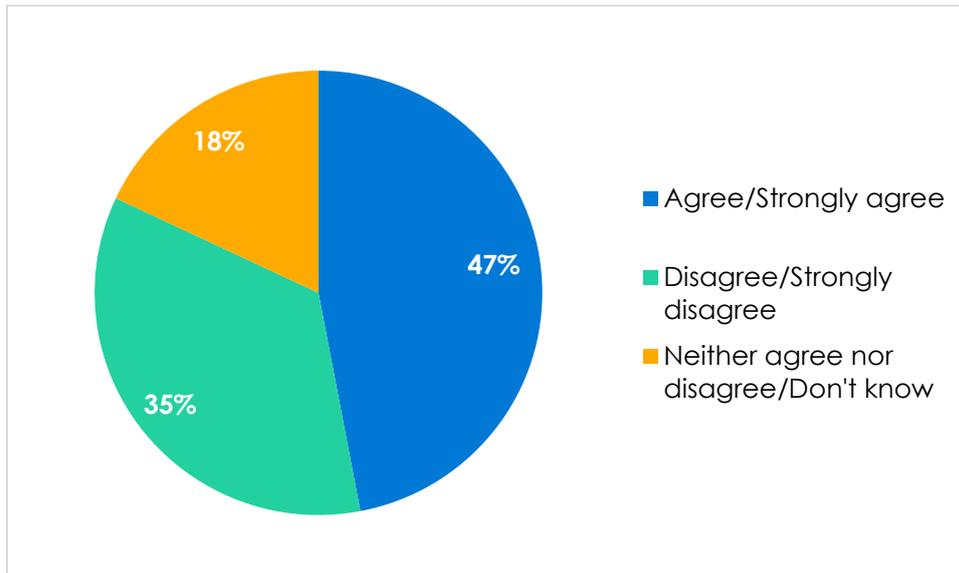
**Figure 11: MPs should lose their seats if they leave their party | by socio-demographic group | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree, or have you not heard enough to say: Elected members of Parliament must lose their seats in Parliament if they leave their party to join another one? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

With regard to changing the electoral system from MMP to full proportional, almost half (47%) of Basotho support the change, but a sizeable minority (35%) are opposed (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Change electoral system to full proportional? | Lesotho | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree, or have you not heard enough to say: Lesotho's current electoral system of mixed member proportional should be changed in favour of a full proportional system?

## Conclusion

The most recent Afrobarometer survey documents Basotho disenchantment with the processes and benefits of democracy, leading them to prefer monarchical rule. To answer national aspirations, the reforms process must address citizens' frustrations. These findings confirm results of the national consultations and should assist the National Reforms Authority in its mission of overseeing the implementation of badly needed changes.

## References

- African Legal Information Institute. (2018). Removal of chief justice. 27 September.
- Government of Lesotho. (2017). The Lesotho we want: Dialogue and reforms for national transformation – vision, overview and roadmap.
- Government of Lesotho. (2019). In-district consultations consolidated report: Leaving no one behind.
- Post. (2017). SADC reforms roadmap. 26 January.

**Libuseng Malephane** is the national investigator for Advice Lesotho. Email: libusengmalephane@gmail.com.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)) or contact Bruno van Dyk ([bruno.v.dyk@afrobarometer.org](mailto:bruno.v.dyk@afrobarometer.org)) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 381 | 7 August 2020