


Rivalry between the Lesotho Defence Force and the Lesotho Mounted Police Service: Causes, Manifestation and Remedy, 1966–2024

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War and the post-independence era saw many nations, including Lesotho, bolstering their security apparatus. As part of these efforts, Lesotho undertook reforms within its security forces, including the Lesotho Defence Force, the Lesotho Mounted Police Service, and the National Security Service. These developments led to growing tension between the Lesotho Defence Force and the Lesotho Mounted Police Service, which became arch-rivals following the independence of Lesotho in 1966. This rivalry hindered the two institutions from fulfilling their mandates effectively and professionally.

This article reports on the root causes of the conflict between the Lesotho Defence Force and the Lesotho Mounted Police Service, as well as internal divisions within the Lesotho Defence Force itself. The article shows how these tensions have manifested, the measures taken to address them within the security sector, and their broader impact on governance in Lesotho. The discussion concludes with key recommendations for fostering stability and cooperation.

Keywords: Lesotho, Rivalry, Politicisation, Lesotho Defence Force (LDF), Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS), Governance

Introduction

The origins of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) and the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) trace back to the colonial era when Lesotho came under British rule in 1868.¹ In 1872, British colonial administrator and army officer Colonel Charles Griffith established the Basutoland Mounted Police (BMP), the precursor to today's LDF.² The BMP later expanded with the creation of Police Mobile Units (PMUs) in 1963, designed to manage political unrest amid British concerns that the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) was a militant and potentially dangerous organisation.³ Towards the end of 1967, recruitment for the PMU doubled from four to eight platoons. Some of its leaders were John Hurst, John S McFall, and Justin Lekhanya,⁴ as well as Fred Roach.⁵

With the end of the Cold War in 1991, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, and the wave of independence across Southern Africa, many countries, including Lesotho, embarked on security sector reforms. These reforms were shaped by emerging security threats, national identity, rising nationalism, and local, regional, and continental interests.⁶

Lesotho became independent on 4 October 1966. In 1979, the then prime minister (PM), Leabua Jonathan, transformed part of the PMU into the Lesotho Paramilitary Force (LPP), under the command of Lekhanya.⁷ At the time, the country only had a police unit, as it did not yet have a formal defence force. This changed in the 1980s when the defence force was established, evolving into the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF), which included both an army and an air wing. Its motto was *Tshepo ea Sechaba* (Hope of the Nation). After the military coup of 1986, the LDF was renamed the Royal Lesotho Defence Force (RLDF) because of cordial relations between the Military Council under Lekhanya and His Majesty King, Moshoeshoe II. The entity only reverted to the name LDF in 1993 after multiparty elections, thirteen years after the independence of the country.⁸ At the time, Lesotho was stable, having recently transitioned from military rule. The newly elected democratic government introduced new frameworks for the LDF.⁹

In most democracies, the security apparatus is commonly governed or guided by the principles of subordination of the military to democratic civilian authority, allegiance to the state, a commitment to political neutrality, and an ethical institutional culture.¹⁰ Under democratic civilian leadership, security actors are empowered to implement a citizen-based security strategy, gaining the trust and support of the public in the process. Briefly, the above principles call for activities to embody basic values, such as acceptance of the legitimacy of democratic institutions, non-partisanship in the political process, and respect for and defence of individuals' human rights.¹¹ In Lesotho, the security apparatus became deeply entangled in politics and internal conflicts, driven by overlapping mandates and power struggles. This led to distrust, suspicion, and a lack of cooperation among security forces.¹²

By law, the LDF was tasked with a range of responsibilities, including protecting territorial integrity and sovereignty; assisting in the preservation of life, health, and property; and maintaining essential services.¹³ Additionally, the LDF supported civil authorities, such as the LMPS, upheld law and order, and provided assistance to other state departments as directed by government. It also played a role in ensuring compliance by the country with international obligations, including participation in peace support operations and regional military cooperation, as well as preventing and suppressing terrorism, among other duties determined from time to time by the minister responsible.¹⁴ The current commander of the LDF is Lieutenant General (Lt Gen.) Mojalefa Letsoela. He was appointed on 23 January 2018 and was to retire on 30 August 2025. Government has extended his tenure for an additional three years until 3 August 2028 due to a need for continued stability and leadership within the LDF.¹⁵

Another branch of the PMU remained a police force known as "Basutoland Mounted Police" from 1878 until independence in 1966. Following the 1986 coup, this branch was renamed the "Royal Lesotho Mounted Police", a title retained until 1998. Since then, it has been known as the "Lesotho Mounted Police Service" (LMPS).¹⁶ The LMPS operates under the motto *Lepolesa Motsoalle* – "A helper, a friend".

By law, the LMPS is responsible for maintaining law and order, preserving peace, protecting life and property, preventing and investigating crime, apprehending offenders, and bringing offenders or criminals to justice, among other duties.¹⁷ All police officers are

expected to adhere to these responsibilities at all times. Advocate Borotho Matsoso has served as the Commissioner of the LMPS since 24 May 2024, following his swearing-in by PM Ntsokoane Sam Matekane.¹⁸

Since independence in 1966, cooperation and amicable relations existed between the LDF and the LMPS.¹⁹ The situation changed in 1993 when Ntsu Mokhehle became prime minister. A lack of governance experience laid the groundwork for a deepening rivalry between the LDF and the LMPS. Mokhehle's government was met with distrust from the security apparatus, as these forces had historically been aligned against him, his party – the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) – and its military wing, the Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA). Both the LDF and the LMPS experienced mutinies, ostensibly over demands for pay increases. When the LMPS mutinied and occupied police headquarters, Mokhehle ordered the LDF to launch an attack on the police headquarters. This confrontation set a dangerous precedent for hostility between the two institutions. In the Sesotho language, the rivalry between the two security apparatus was described as “*Dijana maro ntja tsa setsomi*” (Brothers are fighting).²⁰

Causes of Political Rivalry between the LDF and the LMPS

Various factors contributed to rivalry between the LDF and the LMPS. The author identified two key factors.

- First, overlapping mandates between the LDF and the LMPS manifested as a turf war between the two entities. In some instances, the members of the LDF and the LMPS found themselves patrolling the same area.²¹
- Second, politicisation of the security sector in the country, although the politicisation of the LDF and LMPS in Lesotho is not a new phenomenon. This political–military relationship can be traced back and/or attributed to a number of socio-political events, which can be categorised into two notable eras, namely the era of ‘autocratic rule’ (1965–1986), and the era of ‘military rule’ (1986–1993). In these periods, the LDF was used more or less to access, maintain and/or exercise government power vis-à-vis ‘maintaining the political and social status quo’.²² What was experienced later in the current ‘democratic civilian rule’ (1993 to the present) was a result and consequence of these two eras.

After independence in 1966, Leabua Jonathan depended on PMUs to conduct politics and to maintain power when his legitimacy waned.²³ He also used the PMUs to intimidate opposition parties, and to secure and sustain political power.²⁴ Politicisation of the security apparatus therefore started immediately after independence.²⁵ In 1970, Jonathan staged a coup.²⁶ Consequently, Jonathan achieved his unconstitutional stay in office with the help of the PMU. After the 1970 coup d'état, the Basutho National Party (BNP) government exercised stringent control over the armed forces, and shaped the military to serve its own political ends.²⁷ The Lesotho security sector, comprising the LDF and the LMPS, has frequently interfered in political affairs, both directly and indirectly. These institutions have often taken sides in high-level political battles, with one faction supporting the government while the other aligned with the opposition.

Moreover, the LDF and LMPS were actively and openly involved in political disputes, often being used as instruments of intimidation, torture, and even assassination of politicians, as well as the suppression of political activism.²⁸ Undoubtedly, this can be attributed to the historical relationship between politics, the LDF, and the LMPS following independence.

During the tenure of Lt Gen. Tlali Kamoli (2012–2014 & 2015–2016 respectively) and of Commissioner of the LMPS Khotatso Tšooana (2014–2015), tensions between the LDF and the MPS escalated to unprecedented levels, eventually leading to open confrontation in 2014.²⁹ Tšooana identified Kamoli as the primary source of instability in the country, stating that LMPS officers constantly feared attacks from the LDF. On the other hand, Kamoli warned the LMPS against closing roads at night, arguing that such actions hindered the ability of the LDF to carry out its patrol duties. He further cautioned that the LDF was losing patience. This period was marked by escalating accusations and counter-accusations between the two institutions, deepening distrust and further destabilising the country.³⁰

Before the 2015 elections, Robyn Dixon, a researcher studying Lesotho history, corroborated a view that politicisation of the security forces was a dangerous sign to peace and stability in the country.³¹ In February 1997, the LMPS staged a protest at their headquarters in Maseru during which they refused to comply with the BCP-led government instruction to resume duties. On 12 February 1997, government resolved to use the LDF against the LMPS, and on 16 February 1997, the LDF attacked the Maseru LMPS Headquarters. Guns and explosions rocked the capital Maseru between 06:00 and 13:00. Due to LDF power and strength, the battle was one-sided, and the LMPS members surrendered.³² This event marked the beginning of animosity between the LDF and the LMPS.³³

After the subjugation of the LMPS by the LDF, one of the opposition leaders, Molapo Qhobela made two observations:

- Mokhehle has wittingly or unwittingly sown seeds of dissension between the army and the police; and
- Mokhehle has made the army aware of its power, which would one day turn that strength against him.³⁴

Manifestation of Rivalry between the LDF and the LMPS

After the 2012 elections, no single political party secured a majority, leading to the formation of the first-ever coalition government in Lesotho.³⁵ This coalition comprised three political parties: the All Basotho Convention (ABC) led by Thomas Thabane, the Basotho National Party (BNP) led by Chief Thesele Maseribane, and the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) led by Mothejoa Metsing, who became the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM).³⁶ At the time, there were different political alignments between the LMPS and the LDF. Tšooana of the LMPS was seen to be affiliated to the ABC.³⁷ On the other hand, Kamoli was regarded as affiliated to the LCD.

The administration of the former PM, Pakalitha Mosisili (2015–2017), was suspect and largely seen to be supported by the army under the former LDF commander, Kamoli. Former PM Thabane's (2012–2015) administration was viewed to be supported by the late and former LDF Commander Lt Gen. Mahao, and the head of the LMPS, Tšooana.³⁸ The security sector in Lesotho was seen as a crucial tool for the political elites in the country shaping the distribution of power and resources. This, however, often came at great cost, resulting in numerous casualties among security personnel, civilians, and government officials.³⁹

The rivalry within the LDF resulted in the killing of Mahao. Those responsible for his murder were arrested, and their prosecution is still underway.⁴⁰

Appearing before Justice Charles K Hungwe as the Crown's fourteenth witness in the Mahao murder case, Tšooana directly implicated Kamoli as the mastermind behind the killing.⁴¹ Tšooana testified that, after his appointment, he pursued several criminal cases involving LDF members under Kamoli's command. He sought to have these cases handed over for investigation, and requested that firearms used in two crimes in the Mafeteng district be surrendered.⁴²

A request was made to Kamoli because LDF members could not be arrested directly by the LMPS; instead, they had to be apprehended by the Military Police (MPs), who would then hand them over to the LMPS. Consequently, the LMPS formally requested Kamoli to instruct the MPs to arrest the implicated soldiers and to transfer them to police custody. Tšooana's attempts to secure their release were however unsuccessful.

Testifying in court, Tšooana revealed that, as tensions between him and Kamoli escalated, he received an intelligence report indicating a plot to assassinate both himself and Mahao. Further investigations uncovered that the LDF members who attacked Mahao's home on 30 August 2014, had been tasked with killing him on that same day. Those implicated in attacking Mahao's home were Colonel Tefo Hashatsi, Brigadier Bulane Sechele, Private Posholi and Corporal Mokete Halahala.⁴³

The 2015 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Commission of Inquiry, which investigated the assassination of Mahao, found that Kamoli was a polarising figure, not only in the army, but also in the politics of Lesotho. The Commission therefore recommended that he be relieved of his duties as a commander. In addition, enough evidence was presented to the Commission to indicate that 'a section within LDF is law unto itself having been involved in several criminal atrocities in Lesotho, and that several attempts by the LMPS to have access to the suspects were denied'.⁴⁴

Tšooana testified before court that the LMPS tried for more than two years to arrest the LDF members implicated in several criminal cases, but Kamoli refused to hand over the suspects. The implicated LDF members were, Captain Litekanyo Nyakane, Lance Corporals Khauhelo Makoae and Sebilo Sebilo, as well as Privates Tsepi Tlakeli and Thebe Ntsepe. Paradoxically, those accused of crimes, such as assault, were released to the LMPS as requested.⁴⁵

Kamoli confirmed that he did not release some members of the LDF wanted for questioning regarding human rights violations because he feared for their safety, given the notorious reputation of the LMPS for torturing and killing suspects at the time.⁴⁶ The issue of LMPS brutality was merely a pretext, as the LDF had already handed over members accused of petty crimes. If concerns about police brutality were genuine, then no LDF member should have been surrendered to the LMPS in the first place. Kamoli went so far as to hold press briefings to undermine the LMPS command publicly.⁴⁷ In one such briefing, he told journalists that the title of the Army Commander was written with a capital C, whereas the title of the Commissioner of Police was written with a small c, implying a hierarchy in authority. The LMPS command did not respond to such media statements.⁴⁸ The LDF, under Kamoli's command, used any available opportunity to undermine the command of the LMPS, and this heightened the rivalry between the two institutions.⁴⁹

Ultimately, the rivalry between the LDF and the LMPS also created conflict within the LDF itself. During Kamoli's tenure as Commander of the LDF, some members of the LDF engaged in criminal activities.⁵⁰ For instance, some members attempted to assassinate Tsooana and his family, carrying out bomb attacks on his Ha Abia⁵¹ residence, as well as on the Moshoeshoe II home of former First Lady Maesaiah Thabane. When the LMPS completed their investigations, Kamoli refused to hand over the implicated members of the LDF and the ammunition used.⁵² Not only that, Mahao reprimanded Captain Hashatsi who argued that he did not accept the change of command of the LDF by government.⁵³ This incident led to Mahao being hauled before the court martial, which was ultimately disbanded and the charges dropped. Evidence collected by the SADC Commission of Inquiry confirmed:

Lieutenant General Kamoli was neither comfortable nor at ease with Brigadier Mahao, thus he regarded him the enemy of the state. The division became even more evident after the removal and appointment of Lieutenant General Kamoli and Brigadier Mahao respectively.⁵⁴

The rift within the LDF was confirmed by the Judge Phumaphi Commission of Inquiry, which argued:

Soldiers were then divided into two groups, [the] majority of those who joined the army in 1996 known as the Intake 21 rallied behind Brigadier Mahao, while others rallied behind Lieutenant General Kamoli.⁵⁵

Divisions within the LDF were visible to the extent that Hashatsi publicly declared that Mahao would never become the LDF commander, and further stating that such an appointment would happen 'only over his dead body'.⁵⁶ Hashatsi's statement was made on 29 August 2014, following the announcement of Mahao as the new LDF Commander. A staunch Kamoli loyalist, Hashatsi openly expressed his discontent with the decision. He was one of the participants in the attack of Mahao's property during the fateful event of 30 August 2014 and his assassination in June 2015. Hashatsi's statement implied two things. First, he would defend Kamoli at all cost even if he were to lose his life. Second, he was determined to defy the civilian authority if Kamoli were to be removed.

In an interview with one of the local news outlets, Mahao narrated one of the major incidents where he reprimanded Hashatsi – then captain and head of LDF Special Forces – for the apparent lack of respect for civilian control over democratic control of the military, an issue that worsened Mahao’s already sour relations with Kamoli.⁵⁷ Consequently, Mahao was branded an enemy of the state, and Kamoli, along with his supporters within the LDF, orchestrated a plan to remove Mahao from the army. Despite multiple attempts, including an assassination attempt on 30 August 2014, all their efforts initially failed.⁵⁸

After multiple failed attempts to remove Mahao from the LDF, some members assassinated him on the morning of 25 June 2015, while he was travelling from his home village, Mokena, near Maseru. Following the attack, one of the soldiers made a call and reported, ‘We found him. We shot him. I am with Sergeant Majara.’⁵⁹

Kamoli refused to hand over those suspected of killing Mahao, despite recommendations by the 2015 SADC Commission of Inquiry. The Commission established that Mahao had faced persistent threats from some LDF members, who had openly declared – before military parades – that he would be shot if he set foot in the barracks.⁶⁰

The Commission of Inquiry further found that, on a balance of probability,⁶¹ Mahao did not resist arrest, contrary to claims made by the LDF members who killed him. Instead, Mahao died from bullet wounds inflicted by three close-range shots from an AK-47 rifle.

Among its recommendations, the SADC Commission of Inquiry investigating the circumstances leading to the assassination of Brigadier Mahao urged Lesotho to ensure a criminal investigation into Mahao’s death, with the LMPS adequately resourced to bring the case to finality through a transparent justice process.⁶²

Testifying before the High Court on the assassination of Mahao, Letsoela laid blame on interference by authorities in army affairs as a root cause of the instability that led to the fatal shooting of Mahao in 2015. Letsoela painted a picture of a deeply fractured military, where divided loyalties and defiance of lawful authority paved the way for chaos and ultimately, tragedy. Letsoela told the court that Mahao had been lawfully appointed as the Commander of the LDF on 29 August 2014, by Thabane as a competent authority. The change in command was however never fully realised due to what Letsoela described as ‘unhealthy civil-military relations’ and deliberate interference from senior officials and politicians.⁶³ Letsoela further testified, that, Mahao’s appointment, although lawful, was not honoured. Kamoli had been lawfully relieved of his duties; yet, he continued to exercise power within the army. This created two centres of command, one under Kamoli, the other under Mahao. According to Letsoela, this dual command structure bred division and confusion within the military ranks. Soldiers were unsure whom to obey, and factions began to form, a dangerous situation for any disciplined force, but particularly volatile in a politically sensitive environment, such as Lesotho at the time.⁶⁴

The LDF often contested for operational space with the LMPS.⁶⁵ At the time, the Deputy Commander of LDF, Maj. Gen Matela Matobakele, reprimanding LMPS for not making progress to resolve the high murder rates in the country, commented, 'Lesotho has no police force to speak about.'⁶⁶ The undermining between the LDF and the LMPS gained such momentum in 2014 that it almost led to an open conflict between the two agencies.⁶⁷

On 30 August 2014, the LDF launched a failed coup after allegations that the LDF had seized weapons from several police stations in the country. At the police headquarters, the LDF demanded the criminal dockets of DPM Metsing who was accused of corruption relating to allegations of receiving kickbacks from a company in terms of a lucrative road construction tender project.⁶⁸ Corruption is viewed as a universal problem and a highly contagious disease that goes deep and involves the awarding of tenders and contracts by the corruptor and the corruptee.⁶⁹ Failure to produce the abovementioned docket resulted in the killing of Sub-Inspector Mokheseng Ramahloko and the injury of some LMPS members by some LDF members.⁷⁰ At the LMPS headquarters, the LDF demanded access to the LMPS armoury and the files on the most sensitive high-profile anti-corruption investigations.⁷¹ After the killing of Ramahloko, there was an outcry in the country for the arrest of Kamoli. Mosisili, however, argued against the arrest saying Kamoli's arrest might trigger 'atrocities and [a] bloodbath'.⁷² The response by Mosisili was clearly shutting down the role of the LMPS, as he protected the LDF commander despite the public nature of the LDF atrocities.

Following the killing of Ramahloko, the LDF surrounded Thabane's residence in Maseru and jammed the communication system. Residents and diplomats in the neighbourhood said the following:

Thabane said he fired the LDF Commander, Lieutenant General Kennedy Tlali Kamoli, replacing him with Brigadier Maaparankoe Mahao. But the Army spokesperson ... said Kamoli was still in charge of the military. Thabane said, Commanders of the armies are appointed by government, it is not up to them to say who is in control.⁷³

The military, however, denied staging a coup after an announcement by South Africa that it would not allow a coup in Lesotho. Every time there is a conflict in Lesotho, it spills over into South Africa; consequently, South Africa serves as an external stability element because of diplomatic relations between the two countries.⁷⁴

On 1 December 2016, Kamoli resigned as commander of the LDF following the recommendations of the SADC Commission of Inquiry, mounting pressure from the SADC and the international community, and the United States threatening to remove Lesotho from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).⁷⁵ He was succeeded by Lt Gen Khoantle Motsomotso, who was committed to handing over all LDF members implicated in the aforementioned criminal activities to the LMPS.⁷⁶

Motsomotso's stance deepened divisions within the LDF. High-ranking officers, Hashatsi and Sechele, accused him of betraying them to the police, citing that no LDF members had been arrested under Kamoli's command. As tensions escalated, Motsomotso was

assassinated in his office on 5 September 2017 by Hashatsi and Sechele – just two years after Mahao’s assassination. The same rogue elements, also involved in Mahao’s killing, sought to destabilise the country in the wake of the 2017 elections.⁷⁷ Motsomotso’s “crime” was his commitment to restoring order, discipline, and respect for command and authority within the LDF, ensuring democratic civilian oversight of the military. His assassination triggered the deployment of the 269-strong SADC Standby Force, known as the “SADC Prevention Mission in Lesotho” (SAPMIL), which operated from 2 December 2017 to 28 November 2018.⁷⁸ The author is of the opinion that none of the LDF members was prepared to take accountability for their actions, and they resorted to various means, including killings and assassinations.

In 2024, Matobakele called for a three-month state of emergency to empower the LDF to sweep across the country and curb domestic violence. By implication, Matobakele suggested that the LMPS was not fulfilling their duties. Matekane concurred with Matobakele, and said:

Deploy men and women from your team to help end these killings. Do everything in your power to restore peace in Lesotho ... We have witnessed your dedication in Mozambique – now, the same commitment is needed here to put an end to this violence.⁷⁹

The remarks by Matobakele and Matekane faced criticism from various quarters, as they implied a lack of competence within the LMPS.

Efforts Aimed at Improving the Relations between the LDF and the LMPS

At the Prime Minister’s Cluster meeting held on 30 October 2024, issues of trust and the lack of joint operation became the centre of attention. In this regard, the chairperson of the Prime Minister’s Cluster Committee, Kobile Letlailana, asked about the relationship between the LDF and the LMPS regarding joint operations. Letlailana also sought clarification on when and why the LDF gets involved in police operations. In response, LDF Commander, Lt Gen. Letsoela, indicated that the lack of joint operations between the LDF and the LMPS had created cooperation gaps, and recommended an audit of the security apparatus in order to address existing issues.⁸⁰ Without audit, trust issues among the agencies would persist. Lt Gen Letsoela referred to section 5 of the Lesotho Defence Force Act (No. 4 of 1996) that permits independent operations, such as Operation Hard Fist, allowing the military to suppress terrorism, maintain order, and prevent crime, especially in situations of high crime prevalence. He concluded by adding that these coordination failures should not be viewed as personal disputes, but rather as institutional problems.⁸¹

After sending the commands of the LDF and the LMPS on leave of absence, the acting commands organised a joint walk in which they took the lead. At the time, Maj. Gen. Lineo Poopa led the LDF and Acting Commissioner Koketso Monaheng led the LMPS. The walk started in the city centre⁸² of Maseru and ended at Makoanyane Barracks. During the walk, both commands of the LDF and the LMPS delivered messages of support and

appealed to their respective members to work together and respect each other's mandates. This initiative gave hope that there would be reconciliation between the two entities.⁸³

The Transformation and Resource Centre (TRC) and the Women in Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), organised the "Makhoakhoa Walk" where the community, members of the LDF, and the LMPS participated in the annual walk. This 30-km-long walk is held annually from 1–4 October.⁸⁴ One of the key objectives of the walk is to foster harmonious relations between the LDF and the LMPS, as well as the communities they serve.

On 15 May 2019, the security sector leadership comprising the LDF, the LMPS and the Lesotho Correctional Services (LCS) held a high-level meeting in Maseru, sponsored by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).⁸⁵ The LDF, LMPS and LCS affirmed their support for the ongoing national dialogue and reform process with a commitment to work together in ensuring that the rule of law is upheld in the country, and to prevent all forms of human rights abuse.⁸⁶

The words of the LDF Commander Lt Gen. Letsoela resonated well with the aspiration of collaborations among the security apparatus in Lesotho when he said:

The Lesotho army has the primary mandate to defend the sovereignty and protect the independence of Lesotho including the citizens' human rights but this mandate is not achievable in isolation ... LDF has to work collectively with other sister entities to achieve their primary mandate.⁸⁷

The current author is of the opinion that the security sector in Lesotho, as in many other nations, operates with interdependence, despite the distinct mandates of its various entities. For instance, the LDF and LMPS should collaborate to maintain peace and stability in the country.

Deployment of the SADC Observer Mission

The SADC mission was established following the appointment of Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, the then Deputy President of South Africa, as the SADC Facilitator to Lesotho. The SADC Observer Mission to the Kingdom of Lesotho (SOMILES), led by Ambassador Fanie Phakula, sought to reconcile the LDF and the LMPS under the leadership of Kamoli and Tšooana, respectively. Tensions remained high, however, with both commanders openly antagonising each other even in the presence of SOMILES.⁸⁸

In an attempt to ease hostilities, SOMILES recommended a leave of absence for both commanders. Unfortunately, this measure failed to achieve its intended purpose. Instead, two successive LDF commanders were later assassinated, and the rivalry between the LDF and LMPS persisted, undermining any prospects for cooperation.

Deployment of the SADC Preventive Mission to the Kingdom of Lesotho

As tensions between the LDF and LMPS escalated, the SADC Preventive Mission to the Kingdom of Lesotho (SAPMIL) was deployed to support security sector reforms. The mission comprised 258 personnel, namely:

- 207 military personnel;
- 15 intelligence officers;
- 24 police officers; and
- 12 civilian experts from various fields.

The SAPMIL mandate was set for six months, and was directed in facilitating lasting reforms by:

- Strengthening peace and security, implement security sector reforms;
- Identifying immediate areas of priority that are to be implemented urgently, including the specific amendments in the LDF section 24 and section 4 of LMPS Acts respectively with a view to ensuring separation of powers between the Army and Police; and
- Undertaking re-training of its personnel, especially in the area of civil–military relations (CMR).⁸⁹

The SADC was explicit that SAPMIL was not deployed to take over or replace the LDF or the LMPS, but rather to support and complement the efforts of the Oversight Committee and assist the government of Lesotho in its quest to attain lasting peace and security in the country.

Impact of the LDF–LMPS Rivalry in Governance

The power struggle between the LDF and the LMPS had significant implications for stability in the country and the political landscape. The government was forced to seek external support every time there was rivalry between the two security entities.⁹⁰ Weisfelder confirms this when he says:

[A]lmost all Lesotho's past and present leaders have, at one time or other, denounced South African interference with Lesotho's sovereignty. Nevertheless, the same leaders have not hesitated to call for assistance when their own power has been threatened, often asking for more extensive engagement than SADC and South Africa permitted.⁹¹

The deep-seated rivalry between the security apparatus in Lesotho had a spill-over effect into the LDF itself. This internal discord ultimately led to the assassination of successive LDF commanders by their own subordinates – soldiers who, under international military norms, were duty-bound to honour and serve them.⁹² The protection by the law made some members of the LDF to be a law unto themselves undermining the Lesotho Constitution and the LDF Code of Conduct.

The attack on the LMPS headquarters and the defeat of the police by the LDF in 1997 made the LDF conscious of its power. Consequently, the LDF supported several coups in the country in 1970, 1986, 1998 and an attempted coup in 2014 respectively.⁹³ The LDF tasted power from 1986 for almost six years under Lekhanya who, ironically, also lost power through a coup in 1991.⁹⁴

In August 2015, the LDF launched a second attack on the LMPS headquarters, justifying their actions by claiming they had intelligence suggesting the LMPS intended to arm mass protesters.⁹⁵ This assault was, however, largely a demonstration of power, as the LMPS offered little to no resistance. Many officers fled, while those who remained were brutally beaten and severely assaulted.⁹⁶

The politicisation of these institutions often resulted in state capture by some of the political elite who were determined to govern in perpetuity for personal gain, and through extreme forms of patronage and militarised repression.⁹⁷ As the current author sees it, the entanglement of security establishments with political parties has severely undermined democracy and will continue to do so unless the LDF and LMPS disengage from partisan politics. This toxic relationship has been a persistent source of instability in the country.

Justice was delayed for many Basotho who suffered violations at the hands of some LDF members, as Kamoli refused to hand them over to the LMPS. This reluctance fostered a culture of impunity within the LDF, as its members knew they were shielded from accountability.

The politicisation of both the LDF and LMPS led these security entities to fight political battles on behalf of politicians, thereby undermining the Lesotho Constitution. Expressing his concerns over this troubling dynamic, Principal Chief of Matsieng, Khoabane Theko, lamented, 'Politicians think they cannot do anything if they do not have the backup from the army.'⁹⁹ Sharing similar sentiments is Dimpho Motsamai who says:

The military's involvement in Lesotho politics is still an aberration and symptomatic of a malfunctioning political system. It is also underlined the inevitability of the politicisation of security institutions because the security forces have been drawn into high-level political disputes.¹⁰⁰

The LMPS strike that was ended by the LDF had disrupted the normal LMPS services, such as crime prevention, criminal investigations, and patrols. The relations between the politicians and the leadership of some security commanders undermined governance in the country.

Some politicians, such as Mosisili, appeased and patronised the LDF. For example, after 2015 elections, Mosisili publicly thanked the LDF for helping him gain power, and declared that he would not have been in office if it were not for the help of the military. 'Had it not been for you, I would not be here.'¹⁰¹ Such sentiments from Mosisili enhanced the ego of the LDF, and it was not surprising that Kamoli later referred to himself as 'The Right Honourable' Commander of the LDF.¹⁰² According to Mafa Sejanamane, Kamoli – as Commander of the LDF – was practically the one in charge of government.¹⁰³ In

the British governance system, the title “Right Honourable” is reserved for the prime minister and is not used in the military.¹⁰⁴ Kamoli, however, perceived himself as being on a par with the prime minister.

Tšooana and Kamoli defied civilian control. Tšooana refused to meet with then DPM Metsing, as Tšooana was more aligned with Thabane’s party, the ABC, than with DPM Metsing’s LCD. Instead, Tšooana insisted that any meeting should be arranged through the office of the Minister of Police – who at the time was Thabane himself.¹⁰⁵ As a result, governance matters could not be addressed because of political alignments between DPM Metsing and Tšooana.

Similarly, on 29 August 2014, Thabane dismissed Kamoli from the command of the LDF. Kamoli refused to comply, and went public that he was still the commander.¹⁰⁶ The then DPM Metsing also went public, and announced that he did not recognise the dismissal of Kamoli by Thabane.¹⁰⁷ The defiance of Thabane by Kamoli clearly showed the broken CMR.¹⁰⁸ Supporting the position of LCD leader, DPM Metsing, was the LDF. In his testimony to the SADC Commission of Inquiry, Sechele told the commission how the then LDF command dismissed allegations that Kamoli was removed, and that Mahao was appointed his successor. Sechele also testified that the LDF did not recognise former Thabane as legitimate, and that the police were not allowed to interrogate or arrest soldiers.¹⁰⁹ This bears testimony that the LDF under Kamoli did not recognise the civilian rule led by Thabane.

Recommendation and Conclusion

Comprehensive security sector reforms are urgently needed to address overlapping mandates, while complementing each other rather than competing with each other and to ensure that security entities uphold the Lesotho Constitution. Stakeholders should identify immediate priority areas for implementation, including specific legislative amendments and revisions of the relevant acts for clear mandates and responsibilities between the LDF and the LMPS, for example, section 5 of the Lesotho Defence Force Act (No. 4 of 1996) provides for the secondary or internal functions of the LDF, including assistance in the preservation of essential services and maintenance of law and order in support of the police when required, and section 4 of the Police Service Act (No. 7 of 1998) defines the primary police mandate and their responsibilities. Additionally, well-defined guidelines should be established to regulate the role of the LDF in relation to other security components.

Encouraging joint projects between the LDF and the LMPS will foster cooperation and contribute to lasting peace and stability in the country. A lesson learnt here is that politicians should refrain from politicising security institutions for personal gain. Furthermore, regular refresher courses for both the LDF and the LMPS are essential to reinforce professionalism, mandates, and strict adherence to codes of conduct. Capacity-building initiatives in CMR should be prioritised to enhance understanding and collaboration between security forces and civilians.

Scholars, such as Tlohang Letsie, have proposed the disbanding of the LDF and strengthening the LMPS, arguing that Lesotho, lacking external enemies, does not require

a military force.¹¹⁰ This perspective warrants serious consideration among stakeholders as they seek lasting peace, security, and political and economic stability in Lesotho.

Lesotho can gain insight from nations, such as Costa Rica, Iceland, Mauritius, Monaco, Panama, and Vanuatu, which have no standing armies but maintain well-equipped police forces, often referred to as gendarmerie units.¹¹¹ It is, however, also important to acknowledge that Lesotho may have ambitions to participate in regional peace and stability efforts, such as Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)¹¹² and other multilateral deployments. This strategic role could make the prospect of operating without an army less appealing.

Endnotes

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