History of Lesotho

The history of Lesotho, once called Basutoland, began when the Basotho nation was formed from the remnants of tribes scattered by Zulu and Matebele raids in the early 1800s. Moshoeshoe (pronounced “mo-SHWAY-sh way”) the Great united the people and ruled for almost 50 years (1823–70). During a series of wars in the mid-1800s, Moshoeshoe lost considerable territory to the Boers (white settlers of Dutch, French Huguenot, and German descent). After he appealed to Queen Victoria for protection, Britain annexed Basutoland as a territory in 1868.

In 1871, Basutoland was annexed by Britain’s Cape Colony (which later became part of South Africa), but the people revolted and Basutoland became a separate British colony in 1884. Even when South Africa was formed in 1910, Basutoland remained under the British crown. South Africa expected to someday annex the region but was never successful. Internal self-rule was introduced in 1959 when a new constitution allowed for an elected legislature. Basutoland was granted full independence from Britain as the Kingdom of Lesotho in 1966. A constitutional monarchy was established with King Moshoeshoe II as head of state and Chief Leabua Jonathan as prime minister.

In 1970, Jonathan suspended the constitution and dissolved Parliament to keep his Basutoland National Party (BNP) in power. Elections in 1985 were designed to favor the BNP and were boycotted by other parties. Jonathan was finally ousted by a bloodless coup in 1986. A six-man military council took over and technically vested power in the hands of King Moshoeshoe II. In reality, the king had little authority, and the military junta ruled the country. After a power struggle in 1990, the king was forced into exile and replaced by his son, King Letsie III, who was expected to be a puppet leader.

The junta promised to restore civilian rule by 1992. However, it took another power struggle to bring about democratic elections in 1993. The Basotholand Congress Party (BCP) heavily defeated the BNP, and BCP leader Ntsu Mokhehle became prime minister. Still, political stability remained elusive. Soldiers loyal to the BNP rioted in 1994. With military backing, King Letsie dissolved Parliament and the BCP government in August 1994. Intense pressure and domestic unrest forced him to reinstate Mokhehle’s elected government a few weeks later. Letsie was able to have his father, Moshoeshoe II, reinstated as king in 1995. Moshoeshoe II died in a car accident in 1996. King Letsie returned to the throne under a pledge not to interfere with politics.
Mokhehle split with the BCP and created a new ruling party, the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), which dominated elections in 1998. Mokhehle retired and Pakalitha Mosisili was named prime minister. Opposition leaders claimed the elections had been rigged. The disputed poll sparked an army mutiny and violent opposition protests. Riots and looting devastated Maseru and other cities. South Africa and Botswana intervened militarily to restore order; their forces left in 2000. Lesotho has enjoyed relative political stability since then, though this is sometimes threatened by party disputes and economic uncertainty.

References: