

## **Consequences Of Political Interference On The Professionalism Of The Lesotho Defence Force**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the consequences of political interference on the professionalism of the Lesotho Defence Force. Political interference has affected diverse African public institutions' smooth and professional operations. Using the qualitative research approach, the study examined the consequences of political interference on the professionalism of the Lesotho Defence Force. Data was gathered from secondary sources. The collected secondary data was analysed using thematic analysis. The identified consequences encompass the politicisation of the military, the abuse of power, compromised autonomy, erosion of meritocracy, degradation of civilian-military relations, threats to national security, and diminishing citizens' trust. In light of these critical findings, the study advocates for decisive actions to mitigate the adverse effects of political interference. Specifically, the article recommends the comprehensive implementation of military security sector reforms aimed at fostering a transparent, accountable, and civilian-responsive military that aligns with the public's needs and operates in a manner consistent with international standards.*

**Keywords: Political Interference, Peace And Security, Military Professionalism, Lesotho Defence Force.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The military is historically designed to constitutionally defend the territorial integrity of a state against external aggressors and internal insurrections. However, globally, Africa is known as the epicentre of military takeovers (Eshiet, 2022). This study delves into the intricate dynamics surrounding the consequences of political interference on the professionalism of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF). The LDF emanated from the evolution of the Police Mobile Unit from 1964 to 1993. It was established through the provisions of section 145 of the *Constitution of the Kingdom of Lesotho, 1993* (hereafter referred to as the Constitution) as amended, with the main aim of protecting the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Force was essential for the country to maintain itself as a sovereign state and for the people to live in peace. It is capacitated with 11 units to fulfil these objectives for establishment. The need to oversee and professionalise the LDF led to the establishment of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) in 1994 (Lesotho Defence Force, 2023) after what Molise-Ramakoae (2003:173) points out as direct military control of civilian life. The MOD is expected to promote and uphold the highest standards of security and stability for the achievement of national interests, and to serve as a support system in holding the LDF and the National Security Services (NSS) more accountable and transparent to the people through the parliament. The Principal Secretary and the Commander of the Defence Force, respectively, run the Ministry and the Force in terms of section 145(3) of the *Constitution* (Lesotho Defence Force, 2023). Their administration manages the LDF, ensuring it has the necessary resources to carry out the key functions mandated by the Constitution. Its mission is to uphold civil control and ensure separation of powers, legality, accountability, transparency, and availability of resources.

Huntington (1957:8) described military professionalism as “the capacity of service to develop, perfect, and execute the "peculiar skill" of managing violence on behalf of the state, inclusive of expertise, responsibility, and corporateness, and subject to social responsibility to the society the military serves”. According to Ouédraogo (2022), military professionalism, serves as a standard of conduct for armed forces members. It involves effectively providing security for citizens while upholding core values such as service to the public, subordination to democratic civilian authority, allegiance to the Constitution, political neutrality, and respect for the rule of law and human rights. Further, Heywood (2007:409) stresses that military professionalism is heavily based on its refusal to enter the political sphere.

The vision of a non-political military remains a foundational element of democracy and a key feature of military professionalism. Ouédraogo (2022), states that military professionalism is commonly grounded in several overriding principles: the subordination of the military to democratic civilian authority, allegiance to the state and a commitment to political neutrality, and an ethical institutional culture. 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. In a nutshell, those principles call for the diet 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 (Ouédraogo, 2014:4).

Despite the advocacy for non-political militaries globally, reality often diverges from this ideal. Scholarly evidence on militaries in African countries reveals contrary attributes that weigh heavily towards armies that are not disciplined, puritanical, nationalist, apolitical or prudent managers of resources. History is abound with African countries that have experienced politicisation of the military as well as military coups that have paid a steep and longstanding price (York 2023). Conversely, a politicised military aligns its loyalty with a single political party, consistently advocating for and defending partisan political positions and fortunes (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

The African Center for Strategic Studies (2024) notes a wide variance in the levels of military professionalism across Africa. Countries lacking this professionalism endure high costs, including persistent instability, vulnerability to external threats, chronic poverty, deferred investment, and hindered democratization. Weak military professionalism in Africa is glaringly evident in news accounts of instability, encompassing military coups, collapses in the face of attacks by irregular forces, corruption, looting, and human rights abuses. Civil-military relations have emerged as a primary concern in contemporary African political crises, with the political class forging closer ties with the military to secure and maintain power positions (Khisra, 2020:289).

Political meddling manifests itself in civilian control of the military and partisan politics under the heads of state. The control is by the cession of a remarkable degree of operational autonomy to military commanders and sanctioning a significant reduction in transparency in the conduct of military affairs, thus creating concerns about the adequacy of civilian monitoring and control of military activities by various administrations (Brooks, 2020:8). Political leaders who frequently present the military as allies imply that it supports them in electoral politics by making direct allusions to service personnel in their speeches. They can even go as far as revealing the electoral preferences of voting for the political leaders and using the military as a backdrop in national political settings. Brooks (2020:8) asserts that military leaders are not equipped with the appropriate methods for responding to the acts, thereby allowing military politicisation. Militaries experience similar difficulties in maintaining their apolitical position. These controversies result in a loss of trust in the military, a lack of state security, violation of human rights, loss of lives, loss of foreign investment, capital flight, poor economic conditions, damage to property, and civilian harassment and intimidation, thus exposing the inadequacies of

contemporary military professionalism norms. In Lesotho, the politicization of the military has been a catalyst for violence, impacting military professionalism and contributing to national instability and authoritarian rule over decades (Leshoele, 2021).

Despite the evident politicisation, limited research has explored the consequences of such militarisation on professionalism in Southern Africa, particularly in Lesotho. Existing studies by authorities like Tusalem (2013) focus on the impact of military politicization on democratic consolidation, while researchers like Agiekum (2023) delve into the politics of armed forces through patronage exchanges between political elites and military leaders. Khisa (2020), using the Ugandan case, illustrates how the military underwent transformation while simultaneously aligning with the ruling class to undermine military professionalism. Turning our attention to Lesotho, this article aims to spotlight the often-overlooked yet profound consequences of military interference, which have imperilled the stability of the state over the last two decades.

## RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative research method was employed in this article. Qualitative research entails systematic data generation, analysis, and interpretation to address specific research inquiries (Pathak et al., 2013). This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of phenomena, unlike the quantitative method, which focuses on numerical data.

Additionally, a case study research design was used to generate an in-depth and multi-faceted understanding of political interference and its consequences on the professionalism of the LDF in its real-life context (Crowe *et al.*, 2011:1). The study relied on purposively selected secondary data from academic search engines, scholarly articles in accredited journals, newspaper articles and official reports and statements on political interference in the Lesotho Defence Force. Secondary data were selected because of the time and cost benefits obtained using readily available data. Accordingly, Bryman (2012:13) argues that there is a likely increased payoff of the investigation from secondary data since research questions can be explored without going through the lengthy process of collecting primary data. Data was analysed using the thematic and content analysis techniques. According to Bryman (2012:13), thematic analysis examines the main themes within and between various sources used when collecting data. Similarly, content analysis determines the presence of certain words, concepts or themes within some given text (Bryman, 2012:13).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This article aims to investigate how political interference affects the professionalism of the Lesotho Defence Force. The objective is to provide recommendations to enhance civil-military relations in Lesotho and promote democracy stability. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing a case study of the LDF. The data was collected from scholarly articles and official reports. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, and the identified themes are discussed in the following section.

### **Politicisation of the military**

Although military professionalism calls for non-political interference, political interference in military operations is a global trend in the military, and Lesotho is no exception. According to Matlosa (2020:398), there has always been a high level of tension within the military in Lesotho during and after national assembly elections due to political interference. The politicians lobby the military, resulting in military factions directly linked to the ruling party or

the strongest opposition party. These factions will have commanders of their choice who are selected by the political parties in secret political meetings, resulting in incessant military insubordination. A clear example of this military insubordination can be observed in the Amnesty International (2023) reports, where 23 soldiers were arrested for their perceived support for the slain LDF commander, Brigadier Maaparankoe Mahao, which was regarded as an act of insubordination by Lt.Gen Kamoli and his faction (Matlosa, 2020:398).

Similarly, political interference has led to power struggles within the military, resulting in a lack of comradeship within the army units. This would otherwise not exist where there is professionalism in the army that upholds and protects common interests as opposed to those of political factions dividing army personnel in the LDF. Furthermore, this contributes to the impediment of the professionalism of the institution through the unprofessional, self-serving conduct of LDF personnel loyal to their political factions instead of the *Constitution*.

Military factions also lead to mutinous plots which have threatened security and led to the fleeing of politicians, civilians and military personnel, who have had to live in exile for unknown periods. Former Prime Minister Thabane has also fallen victim to this, having to live in exile from 30 August 2014, alleging that the military wanted to take power and kill him. A considerable number of soldiers of the LDF also experienced this. Furthermore, there were a series of events, including the detention of 56 soldiers involved in the plot; the fleeing of opposition party leaders from ABC, BNP, and RCL to South Africa; and the demotion and subsequent killing of former LDF commander Maaparankoe Mahao (Mahlakeng, 2015).

### **Abuse of power**

Tilly (2010) suggests that military power can be abused through various means, such as statements made by military leaders, public ceremonies within and outside military bases, and symbolic actions that may favour one of the presidential candidates. Later, the elected presidential candidate may reward the military for their support by granting them public positions. This is also true for Lesotho, especially when looking at symbolic actions that may favour certain political figures. For example, the death of the former Prime Minister Thomas Thabane's first wife, Lipolelo Thabane, who was allegedly murdered at the hands of the military personnel through the political influence of his current wife, Maessiah Thabane. Investigations into the murder were in vain since the Prime Minister was reluctant to have his current wife investigated. This was also because of his alleged involvement in the murder (Amnesty International, 2017). In 2015, the SADC called for the arrest of military officers who had killed then-army chief Maaparankoe Mahao, then an ally of Thomas Thabane, who was the opposition leader. However, the calls faced stiff resistance from Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili's government. France24 reported that "Politicians plot, murder and steal public resources without fear of consequences as a result of their alliance with elements of the military".

### **Compromised autonomy**

A political, non-partisan military is a tenet of democracy and a hallmark of military professionalism. In the civilian democratic rule period, Lesotho came to experience certain political practices that either controlled and/or hindered the operational effectiveness of the armed forces. According to Polga-Hecimovich (2019:480),

"A politicised military exercises loyalty to a single political party and advocates for and defends partisan political positions and fortunes. The bureaucratic politics literature shows that these actions can negatively affect agency performance and effectiveness compared to a neutral competence bureaucracy."

Motseki *et al.* (2020:3) argue that the LDF became politically influenced and thus served and ensured the interests of politicians. During the era of Prime Minister of Lesotho, Leabua Jonathan, the military was indoctrinated into politics; in particular, officers of the military were taught about the so-called evils of communism, hence their aggressiveness against opposition-

oriented parties, the BCP and the LLA. According to Moremoholo (2005:46), “They perceived communism as a bad/radical ideology that influenced the BCP to destabilise the ruling government in Lesotho”. Thus, Jonathan used the military to keep the opposition from the political system. This led to the politicisation of the military, which sacrificed the professional and apolitical nature of the military establishment in Lesotho. The Institute for Peace and Security Studies (2019:5) reported that,

“Since 2012, political leaders have used the military to their advantage, and the military elite has shown an increasing appetite for political participation. As a result, security forces have been drawn into high-level political disputes in Lesotho”.

### **Erosion of Meritocracy**

In Lesotho, politicians still determine and influence military recruitment and promotions because of the politicisation of the LDF (Mahlakeng, 2017; Matlosa, 2022; Moremoholo, 2005). According to Moreholo (2005), after 1974, military recruitment was based on political patronage, nepotism and corruption, all of which eroded meritocracy. A meritocracy is a system in which authority and “power is vested in individual people based on talent, effort and achievement.” According to Cavanaugh (2024), even for those who would argue that military readiness is the “most important” variable in this equation, a healthy meritocracy matters because it underpins trust in the chain of command. Subordinates will not have faith in their leaders if they feel the best people and the best ideas do not rise. However, this is not the case in Lesotho, where meritocracy has been eroded in the military, affecting its professionalism. Military personnel find power very appealing, which explains why they become susceptible to political interference.

In that regard, the military in Lesotho has been known to make clear demonstrations of favour for political views or parties, emphasising to subordinates that following such choice is better for professional survival and advancement. As a result, when an official in the chain of command displays support for partisan beliefs in front of a group of subordinates, that group is unsure whether it must concur or risk being disobedient or disrespectful. Their politically induced conduct is at the promise of promotions from one rank to a more desirable one (from loyalty to a faction).

The need for political appointments has pushed military personnel to prove allegiance to factions by adhering to orders, pushing the mandate of each faction whilst compromising the established chain of command and the procedural promotion criteria. This was the case when Brigadier Mahao was identified by the ABC regime and jumped ranks as he was appointed as a commander (Mahlakeng, 2017; Muzofa, 2017) upon the removal of Lt.Gen Kamoli. Being incentivised by ranks and desirable status is detrimental to the chain of command and governance/administration and professionalism of the LDF since promotions of this kind are awarded without the necessary training, skills, competencies, and education prerequisite for promotion.

Moremoholo (2005:61) asserts that soldiers who participated in political contests lacked such prerequisites, especially education and professionalism, and as a result, were ill-disciplined and hence rebellious to the standards guiding soldier behaviour in a democratic society. LDF personnel’s indiscipline exhibited through the defiance of the judicial rulings prohibits its accountability to the state as a professional democratic institution and sets a dangerous precedent. This also contrasts sharply with the Lesotho Military Doctrine as denoted by Global Security (2023), which points to its full participation in all USG training opportunities, encouraging professionalism within its ranks, and respect for the rule of law and human rights.

### **Erosion of civilian trust in the military**

The politicisation of the military can have significant and detrimental effects on civilian trust in several ways. When the military becomes entangled in political affairs or aligns itself closely with specific political interests, it erodes the perceived neutrality, professionalism, and

commitment to serving the broader civilian population. For example, one can argue that Civilians have lost trust in the Lesotho military because of its politicisation. Research by Malephane (2019) concluded that out of 12 public institutions surveyed, the Lesotho military was the second least trusted institution by citizens.

Moreover, according to Stiftung (2016), there has been the killing of innocent civilians by soldiers, and the resulting lack of prosecution has been a recipe for greater civil unrest in Lesotho. The military has also been known for silencing dissent. Furthermore, Stiftung (2016) notes that those in power have used the army to kill and torture (and even rape) civilians during political unrest. Such abuses are never investigated and have contributed to civilian distrust of the military. This is confirmed by Leshoele (2021), who states that "The military has for a long time been used to crush dissent and to silence and stifle democratic principles in Lesotho".

Amnesty International (2022) reports that since 2017, Lesotho has seen a number of human rights violations, including excessive and disproportionate use of force by the security forces. There have also been reports of unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment of suspected perpetrators of crime by members of the security forces, including the Lesotho Mounted Police Service and the Lesotho Defence Forces. For example, in May 2022, 35 people were tortured by police officers and members of the Lesotho Defence Forces for protesting against power cuts in Liseleng in the district of Thaba-Tseka. The victims, 19 men and 16 women were beaten up and made to roll for several metres along a muddy road leading to nearby Matsoku River and then back again. They were charged with disturbing the peace.

The military and police's overlapping duties in the form of raids and attacks on civilians by the military have not only increased in frequency but in brutality, too. Letsie (2017:94) points to this brutality by stating that civilians have lost their lives in the joint operations of the police and the army. The utter lack of respect for and observation of the principle of proportionality against civilians has led to the violation of human rights. The military is rightfully deployed to complement the police as per the provisions of *The Lesotho Defence Act of 1996*, citing the clause "the army will be used to maintain law and order and to protect life and property", which is problematic because it is misused. The abuse of the clause has resulted in unprofessional conduct by the military personnel, who have been trained to detain and contain enemies of the state (Letsie, 2017:94). Their encounters with civilians reveal the nature of their training. Civilians, therefore, not only suffer in the hands of their protectors but fear them. As highlighted by Letsie (2017:94), people die from such operations.

### **Compromised National Security**

The military's primary role is to protect the nation's security interests, and its professionalism is a cornerstone of public trust. When military leaders engage in political activities or endorse political figures, it can be perceived as a departure from their professional duties, leading to a loss of confidence in their commitment to national security above political interests (Hecimovich. 2019; Stouffer and Lindsay 2012).

Lesotho has a history of military interventions, coups, and attempted coups that started in 1970 and continued until 2014 due to a lack of military professionalism. This situation has resulted in the country's political leadership relying on the military to stage coups. An absence of military professionalism has also prompted neighbouring countries like South Africa to interfere in Lesotho's national security matters. For instance, in 1998, South Africa intervened militarily to restore order (Haller, 1998), and in 2014, its security forces provided security to then Prime Minister Thomas Thabane, who had initially fled the country (Motsamai, 2014; Mataboge, 2014).

Furthermore, the case of Lesotho has shown that democratically elected representatives of the people have been unable to rely on the military to execute security policy faithfully. This was seen between 2012-2015, during Prime Minister Thabane's tenure when he was under the

protection of the South African Police Services upon his return to Lesotho in 2014 after he had fled to South Africa alleging the launch of a coup d'état against him by the LDF (Smith, 2014). He claimed he could not trust the military personnel and feared for his life. It must be pointed out that it was very uncommon to see a Lesotho Prime Minister guarded by a foreign security agency since all previously presiding Prime Ministers were and still are guarded by local military personnel.

### **Diminishing national development**

An absence of military professionalism negatively affects national policies and the country's general development. Political instability fosters an uncertain atmosphere under which economic agents may be unable to flourish (Aisen & Veiga, 2013). Furthermore, the uncertainty associated with an unstable political environment may reduce investment and the speed of economic development (Papaioannou, 2020). Makhetha (2008) observes that since gaining independence in October 1966, Lesotho has grappled with persistent political instability and internal conflicts, casting a shadow over its socio-economic development and potential to fully leverage regional economic integration. As it stands, Lesotho is the least developed country within the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), confronting various formidable developmental challenges. Notably, the nation contends with a high poverty rate while grappling with inequality levels that rank among the highest globally. Despite efforts, the existing provision of social services and economic activities proves insufficient to extricate the country from poverty. Furthermore, despite substantial Official Development Assistance (ODA) inflows spanning the decades since attaining independence, progress remains modest. The need for a comprehensive and transformative approach to address these challenges is imperative for Lesotho's sustained development and prosperity.

The EU (2021) reveals that Lesotho's investment and economic growth data shows that political developments negatively impacted economic growth before or after regime change. For instance, 1986, when Lesotho experienced its first military coup, total investment dropped by 14%. However, investment gradually picked up after 1987, when the Lesotho Highlands Water Project Treaty was signed between Lesotho's military regime and South Africa's white minority government. Investment peaked in 1992 but dropped by 15% in 1993 when the first democratic elections were held due to the political instability that led to the temporary downfall of the democratically elected government. However, the negative impact on investment was short-lived, and it began to pick up again from 1994 until 1997, the year before the second democratic election. Unfortunately, investment dropped by 13% in 1998 compared to 1997 due to the violent political protests, which were the most severe Lesotho had experienced since independence.

This research aimed to investigate the effects of political intervention on the professionalism of the Lesotho Defence Force. Based on secondary sources, this study discovers that the recognised consequences of political intervention on the professionalism of the Lesotho Defence Force include the following: the politicisation of the military, which takes on different forms and results in military disobedience and power struggles. Witnessed in the misuse of military power in the alleged involvement of military personnel in the death of the former Prime Minister's first wife and the resulting lack of investigation due to political influence, as suggested by Amnesty International (2017). A finding showing a distraction from the principle of military professionalism that calls for ethics in the military, encouraging Soldiers to prioritise society's interests over their own and have a calling to their profession.

The study also found that the other consequence of political interference was compromised autonomy in the LDF, which represents a deviation from the apolitical, non-partisan stance essential for military professionalism, as Polga-Hecimovich (2019) described. This is seen in the infiltration of political interests into the military, dating back to Leabua

Jonathan's undermining of institutional independence. This also indicates a breach in the military professionalism principle that calls for a democratic military with sovereign authority.

In addition to the above, the study also found that political interference also resulted in the erosion of meritocracy in military recruitment and promotions, which is a significant concern, echoing Moremoholo's sentiments (2005). This also contradicts Weber's ideal type of public institution that advocates for a recruitment system based on ability rather than wealth, race, or other determinants of induction (Serpa and Ferreira, 2019).

Consistent with global trends, diminished civilian trust was also established as a consequence of political interference in the military. For example, the findings of Malephane (2019) revealed that the Lesotho military is one of the least trusted institutions by citizens. Reports of human rights violations, excessive use of force, and lack of accountability contribute to a pervasive distrust among civilians (Amnesty International 2022). This is supported by research from Hetherington, who asserts that Citizens who distrust government institutions and see problems go unsolved over a series of administrations may begin to question the legitimacy of the political system itself (Hetherington, 1998).

Furthermore, the issue of compromised national security in the Lesotho Defence Force has resulted in a history of interventions, coups, and political instability. This is demonstrated in the intervention of neighbouring countries, such as South Africa, and the inability of democratically elected leaders to trust their military.

## CONCLUSION

This research sheds light on the impact of political intervention on the professionalism of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF). Based on a thorough examination of secondary sources, the study reveals a complex interplay of factors that collectively undermine the integrity and effectiveness of the military institution. The politicisation of the military emerges as a multifaceted challenge, leading to internal strife, military disobedience, and power struggles. This problem is observed in various forms and has far-reaching consequences beyond the military's internal dynamics. For instance, political interference has led to the misuse of military power in instances such as the alleged involvement of military personnel in the death of the former Prime Minister's first wife. The lack of investigation into such incidents due to political influence underscores the entanglement of political figures with the military and the erosion of accountability. The erosion of meritocracy in military recruitment and promotions further exacerbates concerns about the competence and professionalism of the military. Compromised autonomy, characterised by a deviation from the apolitical and non-partisan stance essential for military professionalism, reflects the historical infiltration of political interests into the Lesotho Defence Force.

Diminished civilian trust emerges as a critical issue, with the Lesotho military ranking among the least trusted institutions by citizens. Reports of human rights violations, excessive use of force, and a lack of accountability contribute to a pervasive distrust among civilians, amplifying the challenges faced by the military in earning and maintaining public confidence.

The study also highlights the severe implications of compromised national security in Lesotho, which has resulted in a history of interventions, coups, and political instability. The military's involvement in political matters has led to a situation where democratically elected leaders are hesitant to trust their own military, necessitating interventions from neighbouring countries to restore order.

In light of these findings, it is evident that the effects of political intervention on the Lesotho Defence Force are profound and multifaceted. Addressing these challenges requires a



comprehensive approach, including depoliticizing the military, reinstating meritocracy, rebuilding civilian trust, and implementing measures to safeguard the autonomy and professionalism of the military institution. The findings underscore the urgent need for reforms to ensure that the Lesotho Defence Force operates as a credible, professional, and apolitical entity, contributing to the nation's security and overall development.

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