Lesotho’s Prime Minister has a broad smile these days and quite often follows up a sentence with a hearty laugh. His is the only game in town, and he knows it. Mr Mosisili’s party is in complete control of parliament, even more so as for the first time the opposition has seats in the National Assembly through the Mixed Member Proportional electoral model. The old rivals must face each other inside parliament – not on the streets. Every day a recurrence of the post-election riots of 1998 becomes less likely.

“We expect that the opposition will be members of select committees, give a different perspective and keep government on its toes. After 1998 we were busy for a couple of years putting out fires. Not very much happened in development. But from there we started. And LCD won the elections, again, because we had something to show that life can change for the better. We came up with a good manifesto that holds the potential to solve many of the people’s problems and responds to their wishes.”

**Long road from detention**

For Lesotho, it is once more time to look ahead. But the Prime Minister remembers his first experience of politics and the vow he made more than thirty years ago.

The young Pakalitha Mosisili was a final year student at the National University of Lesotho. He was active in the Basotholand Congress Party that surprisingly won the 1970 elections, only to have the results annulled by the Basotho National Party. The BNP imposed a state of emergency and simply continued to rule for the next 16 years.

“Many of us were picked up and thrown into detention. I spent 15 months in detention without trial, without being convicted by any court. One night I prayed and said to God: ‘If you will get me out of here alive, I will enter politics and ensure that no Mosotho will suffer the same fate that I have suffered.’ God delivered on the promise, so when free political activity was restored, it was time for me to deliver my side of the bargain,” he laughs.

The ban on political activity was lifted in 1991. An amnesty the year after brought many of the opposition leaders back home from exile, among them Mr Mosisili who had fled Lesotho in 1983 in danger of his life. In 1997 he and a majority of the parliamentarians followed their political mentor, the then Prime Minister Ntsu Mokhehle, when he broke away from the BCP – the party that he had himself founded in 1952. This time Mokhehle formed the LCD, which now became the ruling party.

Mr Mosisili was elected the LCD’s leader in 1998 when Mr Mokhehle declined to continue. After the ill-fated elections in May that year, Mr Mosisili became Lesotho’s Prime Minister. In May this year things went better. The voter
turnout was surprisingly high at 68 per cent. The elections were considered free and fair by international observers. The LCD got a mandate for a second term in government with 54 per cent of the electorate behind them, and nobody has yet set fire to Maseru. The opposition still cries foul, but Mr Mosisili smiles at the legal challenge to the outcome by BNP leader, Major General Justin Lekhanya. “In politics you should be able to accept victory with humility and defeat with dignity. To accept the will of the people is what democracy is all about.”

A small hiccup occurred on Inauguration Day at the main stadium in Maseru, when the podium collapsed under the King and his re-elected Prime Minister. The fear of an assassination attempt and a repetition of the 1998 outburst of violence was evident for a few seconds in the eyes of the dignitaries. But things quickly calmed down and the ceremony continued with enthusiastic support from the crowd.

Prospect of better lives
What can people expect now? “Given that we now have an inclusive parliament, the expectation is that we will have peace and stability and with that an opportunity to focus on development. Nobody will be shouting in the wilderness or have to go to the streets to demonstrate, because now they have a voice in parliament. We have an opportunity to better the lives of Basotho at grassroots level.”

Asked about the government’s targets and priorities, Mr Mosisili says he wants Lesotho to become an exporter of fresh food products even though only nine per cent of the land is suitable for agriculture. He sees a big future in tourism even if the neighbouring South Africans do not want to visit Lesotho, and his government has predicted a downturn in new cases of HIV in just a few years time. Mr Mosisili wants to drag his people out of poverty.

“Through poverty alleviation the ills of society can be taken care of – like crime. The thieves say they are forced to steal because they are hungry, have no jobs or means of livelihood. Job creation for our people is the other side of the same coin with which we will be fighting poverty,” says Mr Mosisili. “The majority of our people are subsistence farmers. We need to pick up agriculture and ensure that people can graduate from subsistence to a more productive and commercial level. We have a great potential in tourism that will create jobs and bring in foreign exchange. We need a proper road infrastructure for tourists to go into the highlands and admire the beautiful mountains.”

“And of course we have to prioritize the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is indeed wreaking havoc in our society. We need to address it for our own survival as a nation.

Another important issue is harnessing our water resources. Lesotho has plenty of very clean water that should be put to good use in the country as it already is to our neighbours through the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. The revenue from that project is good income for the country. The electricity that we generate through it should enable us to embark on an electrification programme which would answer a lot of problems, both at household and commercial level. With electricity people would not go out and cut trees.”

But the water is up in the mountains? “Yes, but we can bring it down fairly cheaply without heavy machinery. We must have adequate water for irrigation of our crops, with or without rain, and for industrial purposes. With adequate water we can also ensure that the water is properly treated and recycled. We are drought-prone in this part of our region, since we don’t have adequate rain. But people, animals and plants don’t need rain, they need water.”

Inauguration of the Prime Minister in Maseru’s Setsoto Stadium. From left: First lady Mathato Mosisili, the Prime Minister, King Letsie III, Queen Masenate.
Partners in development

Prior to the elections Mr Mosisili was talking a lot about the need for good governance, and he still is: “Government must be clean, transparent, accountable. We will have zero tolerance for corruption but fight it at all levels.” He looks critically at donors: “Donors are welcome partners, we need them to assist us to implement these programmes and ensure that we can pull out of the group of Least Developed Countries within the next five to fifteen years. As partners we need to interact more and cross-fertilize ideas, but it is important that we retain ownership of our development, and that our friends from the European Union and other international organisations come in to assist us to realise our dreams and not be prescriptive to us. If they say: ‘You either do this or we will not help,’ that’s being prescriptive, and I don’t think that is the right way to go about it.”

Is it being prescriptive to prioritize roads and water and sanitation? “No. The EU is involved in very critical areas, and we appreciate that.” The Prime Minister is less appreciative when he looks at working with civil society: “Who is civil society? To me it is a very amorphous entity. Is civil society the men and women in the villages who voted me into government? I am here because of their votes. Where do you draw the line between them and me and what you call civil society?”

“Who are the NGOs in a country like Lesotho? In many instances your average NGO consists of people who are failed politicians. Now they have just found themselves an easy home in the NGOs. But they are still politicians for all intents and purposes. That is the trend in many developing countries. We wish that our NGOs would be truly apolitical and involved in issues of development. In that case we would not hesitate to cooperate with them. We are ready and willing to engage everybody in Lesotho – we need to go in the same direction.”

A father of two daughters, Mr Mosisili sounds more convincing when it comes to the involvement of women in politics: “We are trying our best to be gender-sensitive. We have not achieved the 30 per cent requirement of women in parliament, but we have made significant progress from previous parliaments. Today we have 14 women in the National Assembly – that’s a record. We have instituted the Law Reform Commission to look into our legislation to rid it of any discriminatory tendencies. It is my personal view of the customary law that it is certainly wrong to the extent that it recognises women as minors. Consequently, it has to change. It is not consonant with reality. Women play an important role in the economy, even more so with the retrenchment of men from the mines in South Africa. There is no doubt in our minds that women should be helped to grow as entrepreneurs,” he says.

Benefits of opposition

More women and, for the first time, opposition in parliament should pave the way for fairer power-sharing in Lesotho. But the Basotho are still prone to mutual envy and spite. No official leader of opposition had been elected at the time of writing. Anyone aspiring to that position will need the support of a quarter of the members of parliament. It will not be easy for the opposition parties to come together and find a solution in a country where politics are defined by personal rather than ideological differences.

When the then Deputy Prime Minister, Kelebone Maope, formed the Lesotho People’s Congress a year ago it was the fourth split from the original BCP. Today three opposition parties and the ruling party all claim the legacy of the Congress movement founder, Ntsu Mokhehle. “Mokhehle was a visionary leader who had tremendous influence on the politics of Lesotho. To many of us he is considered to be the father of Lesotho politics, and so it is not surprising that factions would claim to be following in his footsteps, hoping that it would give them support among the people,” says Mr Mosisili.

“The splits that occurred in the previous two parliaments were to a very large extent caused by the lack of opposition. Without opposition we tended to create one within our own ranks. In a sense we are luckier than many other African countries. We share the same culture and language, but because we are such a homogenous nation the opposition comes from within. People find small things that can divide us.”

“Historically we were divided between chiefs and commoners. The British found it a convenient divide-and-rule policy. The homogenous society of Lesotho has also been polarised very much along denominational lines. BNP was born in the Catholic church to counter the BCP, which was seen as more Protestant-inclined. But to a very large extent all that is past. It is no longer a factor where we go to church.”

The Prime Minister looks forward: “It is good to have opposition in parliament, because that counterforce should be conducive to the ruling party consolidating within itself. I don’t want to seem selfish, but it will be good for us and for party unity.”

Mr Mosisili laughs again.

The new by-pass in Maseru: “We need a proper road infrastructure.”