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POLICY ENGAGEMENT ACTION FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

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How Political Patronage is Distorting Lesotho's Democracy

By Policy Engagement Action for Civic Education [PEACE]

Lesotho's political landscape is increasingly defined not by policy or parliamentary performance, but by rampant political patronage that continues to erode democratic accountability and citizen empowerment. The once-hopeful trajectory of Lesotho's democratic development now teeters under the weight of a distorted system where gift-giving and populist stunts trump lawmaking and public service.

For decades, many Basotho voters have been unable to distinguish the critical difference between Members of Parliament (MPs) and local councilors, much less understand the constitutional roles of each. This confusion is not limited to voters alone—MPs themselves frequently promise services and projects that fall squarely under the jurisdiction of local government, creating a cycle of unmet expectations and political mistrust.

The Rise of the “Spoils System”

This distortion is rooted in the persistent use of what is widely referred to as the “spoils system” otherwise known as the patronage—a practice where politicians use material incentives to curry electoral favor. From food parcels and blankets to sports tournaments and feasts, the political focus has shifted away from policies to gifts. These tokens, often handed out during campaign seasons, have become the primary tool for securing votes, pushing policy debate and democratic education to the periphery.

Lesotho's legal framework prohibits such practices. The National Assembly Electoral Act of 2011 and the Electoral Code of Conduct explicitly forbid inducements designed to sway voters. Section 4(h) of the Code urges parties to “refrain from offering any inducement or reward” in exchange for support. Yet, these laws are routinely flouted with little to no consequence.



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The roots of this problem run deep. Vote buying first reared its head in the run-up to Lesotho's 1965 elections, with cattle feasts becoming the norm at rallies. The culture of political gifting was revived in the early 1990s and remains deeply embedded in today's political tactics. The phrase "Maposholi o oa sala Pitseng tsa Nama" – loosely translated as "Maposholi can cook the meat but she won't get the votes" – captures the cynicism that surrounded the practice even in its early days of Lesotho's democracy. It must be noted that, Basotho are so consumed by this practice so much that if an MP fails to provide patronage he is not elected come the next election.

Patronage Over Accountability

Today, voters in Lesotho often view MPs as personal benefactors rather than lawmakers. Expectations range from school fees and funeral costs to road construction and employment opportunities—services that MPs are neither mandated nor resourced to provide. This has led MPs to use their own limited salaries to meet these demands, further entrenching the patronage system.

The result is a political environment devoid of accountability. Very few MPs use their platforms to inform constituents about laws passed in Parliament or explain how they have held the Executive accountable. Instead, many focus on delivering short-term goods while ignoring their legislative duties. Political parties' followers currently expect politicians to reward them for voting for them rather than holding them accountable. They (Voters) expect to be granted favours or access to opportunities, in some cases not based on qualifications, but on their political connections or support of a particular party or politician.

Undermining Democracy

This systemic failure is damaging Lesotho's democracy. With voter expectations shaped by handouts rather than informed civic engagement, voter apathy has become widespread. Many



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citizens, disillusioned by the transactional nature of politics, are opting out of the democratic process altogether.

The distortion has also sidelined the work of independent constitutional bodies, such as the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), whose roles are often misunderstood or completely ignored. The failure to clearly delineate the roles of MPs, councillors, and oversight institutions has created a vacuum where governance is confused and often dysfunctional.

This patronage system has completely decimated accountability of MPs to voters. MPs have often failed to account to their constituents instead they provide handouts and performs activities that, they are not elected for. They are not even familiar with their roles and functions of a parliamentarian.

The Way Forward

Experts and civic leaders are calling for urgent and widespread civic education. Grassroots efforts—particularly those spearheaded by community-based organizations in both rural and urban areas—are essential in empowering citizens with the knowledge needed to demand genuine representation and accountability.

The Parliament of Lesotho, along with independent bodies, must also step up to educate both current MPs and the electorate about the foundational responsibilities of parliamentary office. A clear understanding of the separation of powers, the role of policy in development, and the importance of clean electoral practices is essential for restoring democratic integrity.

If unchecked, the growing culture of political patronage threatens to derail Lesotho's democratic progress. It is imperative that both voters and politicians reject gift-driven politics in favor of substantive political programs and genuine accountability. As the next election approaches, the choice lies in the hands of Basotho—to vote for development or for more blankets and feasts.