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Citizens endorse traditional leaders, see greater role in contemporary Lesotho

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 413 | Puleng Adams and Libuseng Malephane

Summary

Studies on the role of traditional leaders in post-independence African societies show that they have remained relevant in most countries across the continent. Rather than wither in the face of Africa's progression toward democracy, traditional leadership has continued to evolve and co-exist alongside modern institutions of governance that are associated with democracy (Logan, 2008).

The fortunes of Lesotho's elected leadership have slumped and peaked during the country's half-century of independence (Ngwawi, 2014). Recent years have been marked by political instability, inadequate service delivery, and widespread public perceptions of a democracy with major problems and a country going in the wrong direction (World Bank, 2016; Afrobarometer, 2020).

It is possible that the current Government of Lesotho reforms program known as the Lesotho National Dialogue and Stabilization Project (Nkoe, 2018), undertaken in 2017, will harness the strengths of traditional leadership in building sustainable peace and stability in the country, as the issue is addressed in an expert report on the reforms process ('Nyane & Makhobela, 2019).

Afrobarometer survey findings show that traditional leaders continue to enjoy popular support in Lesotho. They are more widely trusted than elected officials, and seen as less prone to corruption. Indeed, a majority of Basotho would favour an even stronger role for traditional leaders, who they say look out for the interests of their communities and work in cooperation, rather than in competition, with elected leaders. These findings suggest that in Lesotho, traditional and modern systems can work in concert for the benefit of ordinary citizens.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer National Partner in Lesotho, Advision Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult citizens of Lesotho in February-March 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Lesotho in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

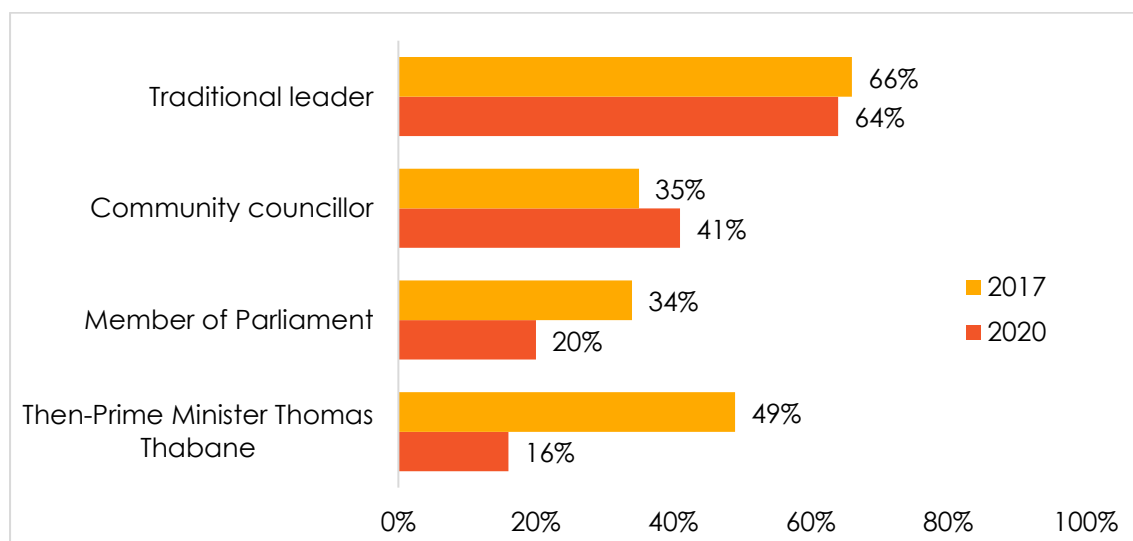
Key findings

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Basotho approve of the job their traditional leaders are doing, a far better performance rating than they give their community councillors, members of Parliament (MPs), or then-Prime Minister Thomas Thabane.
- Traditional leaders are considerably more widely trusted (57%) and less commonly seen as corrupt (16%) than elected officials.
- Most Basotho see traditional leaders as highly influential in resolving disputes and governing their local community, but few say they carry much weight in affecting how people vote in elections.
- Six in 10 Basotho (61%) support an increased level of influence for traditional leaders in the governing of local communities.
- A majority (52%) of respondents say traditional leaders “often” or “always” do their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say – a far more positive assessment than they give community councillors (25%) and MPs (8%).
- Two-thirds (66%) of Basotho believe traditional leaders look out for the interests of the people in their communities, and even more (87%) say traditional authorities cooperate with elected leaders to get things done, as opposed to competing with them for resources and power.

Job performance of elected and traditional leaders

Basotho are considerably more satisfied with their traditional leaders than with their elected officials. Two-thirds (64%) of respondents “approve” or “strongly approve” of the way their traditional leaders have performed their duties, compared to just 41% for their community councillors, 20% for their members of Parliament (MPs), and 16% for then-Prime Minister Thomas Thabane (Figure 1). Approval ratings for MPs and Thabane declined significantly between the 2017 and 2020 surveys, while those for traditional leaders held steady.

Figure 1: Approval of leaders’ job performance | Lesotho | 2017-2020



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Prime Minister Thomas Thabane? Your member of Parliament? Your community councillor? Your traditional leader? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

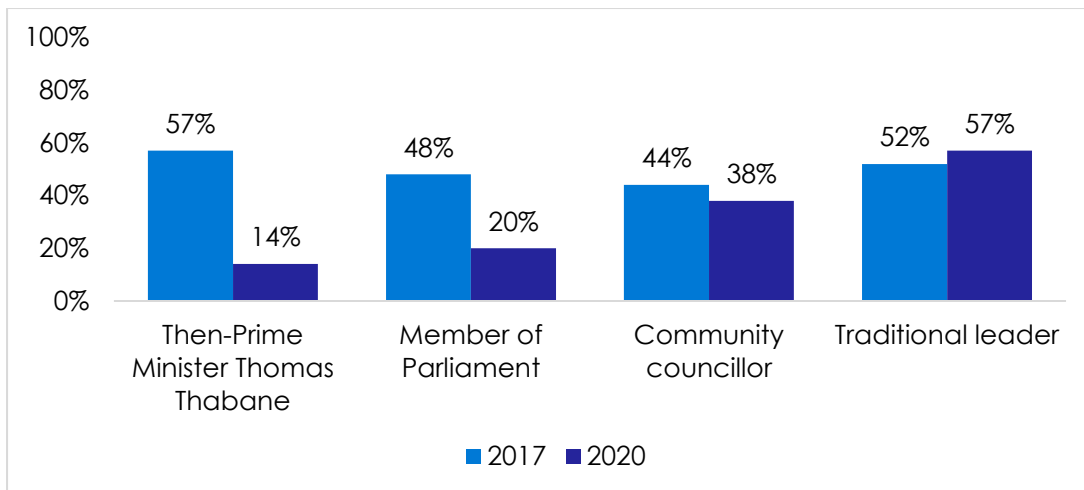
Trust and corruption

In line with job-performance ratings, traditional leaders fare better than elected officials when it comes to popular trust and perceptions of corruption.

While trust in Lesotho's governance structures have been low in recent years, a majority (57%) of respondents say they trust their traditional leaders "somewhat" or "a lot," a 5-percentage-point increase from 2017. Trust levels are lower, and on the decline, for community councillors (from 44% to 38%), MPs (from 48% to 20%), and then-Prime Minister Thabane (from 57% to 14%) (Figure 2).

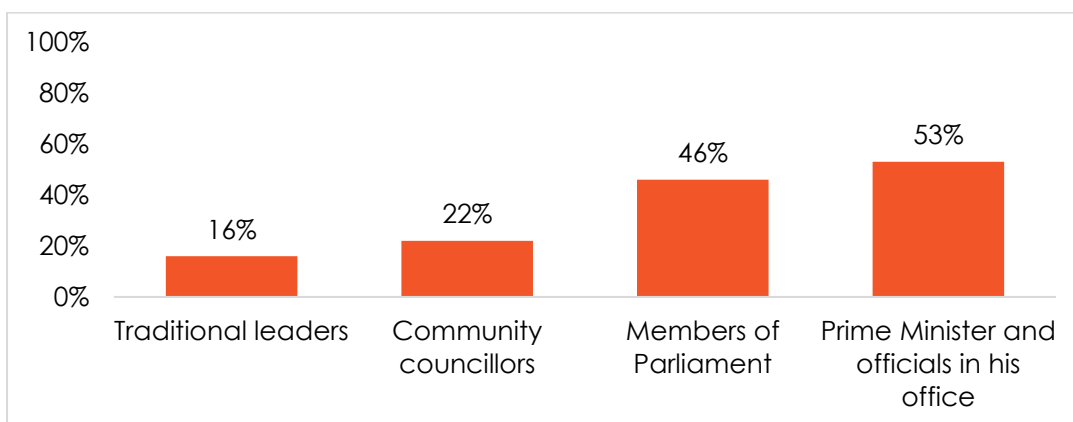
Similarly, only 16% of Basotho say "most" or "all" traditional leaders are corrupt. Roughly three times as many see widespread corruption in the prime minister's office (53%) and Parliament (46%) (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Popular trust in leaders | Lesotho | 2017-2020



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Prime Minister Thomas Thabane? Members of Parliament? Community councillors? Traditional leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 3: Perceptions of corruption among leaders | Lesotho | 2020



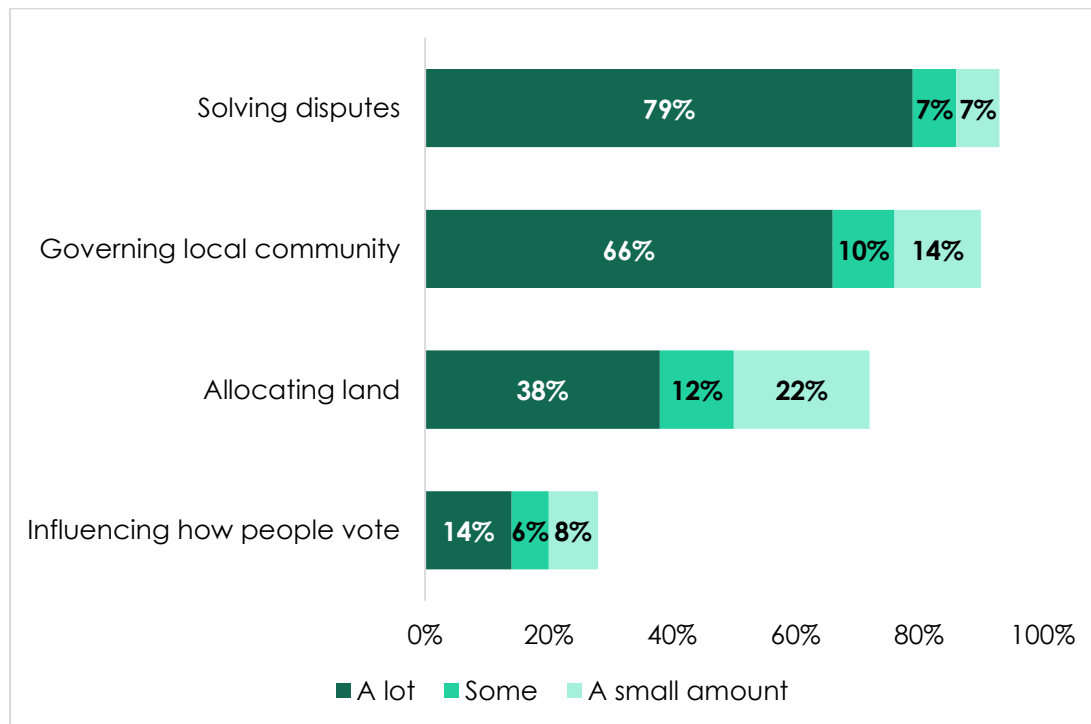
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The prime minister and officials in his office? Members of Parliament? Members of your community council? Traditional leaders? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

The role of traditional leaders in local governance

In Lesotho, citizens regard traditional leaders as highly influential in resolving disputes and governing their local community, but much less so in affecting how people vote in elections (Figure 4). Eight in 10 respondents (79%) say traditional leaders exert “a lot” of influence in settling disputes, while two-thirds (66%) say the same about their role in local government. About four in 10 (38%) say they have “a lot” of influence in allocating land, although another one-third of respondents say they have “some influence” (12%) or “a small amount of influence” (22%) in this area.

Only one in seven (14%) see traditional leaders as highly influential in shaping how people vote.

Figure 4: Influence of traditional leaders in local governance | Lesotho | 2020

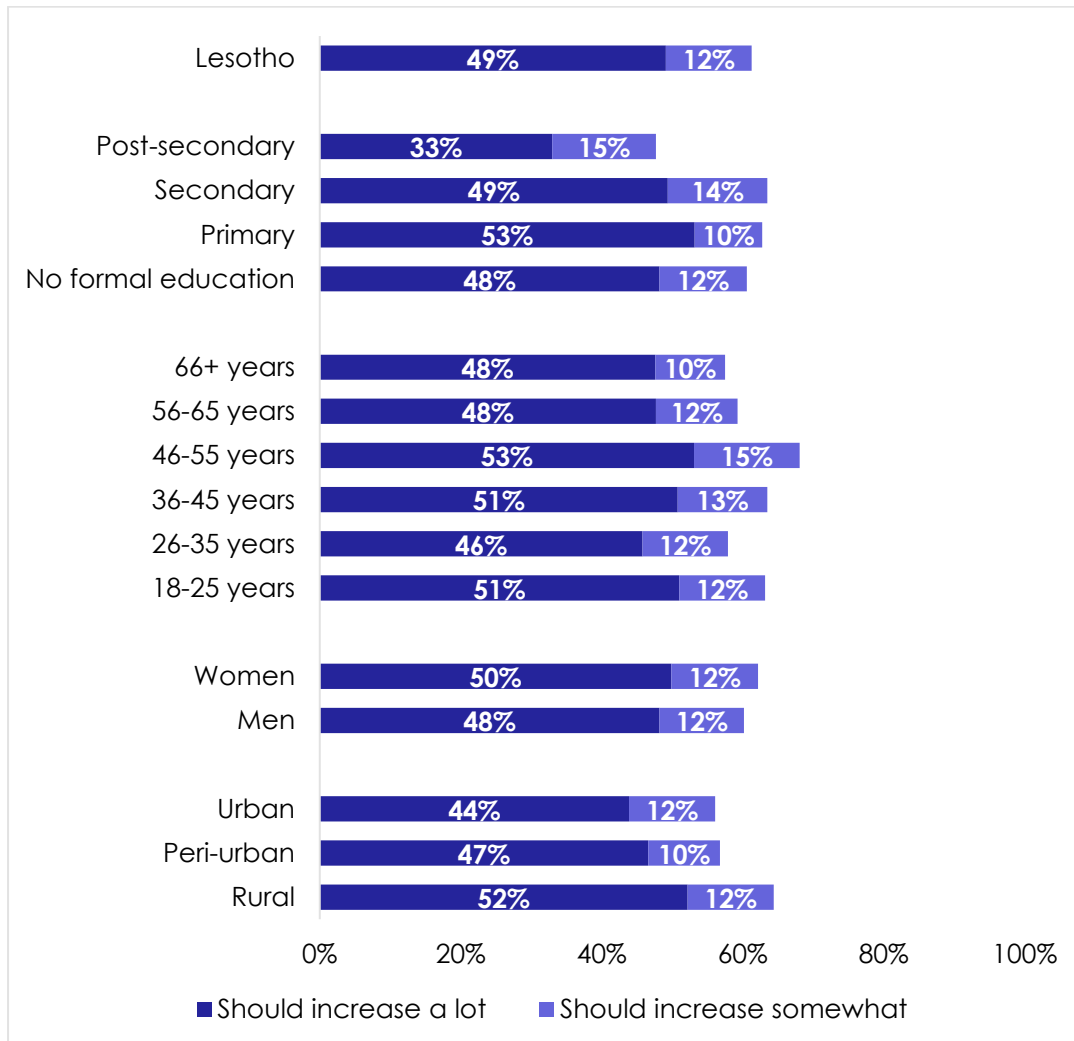


Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Solving disputes? Governing your local community? Allocating land? *Influencing how people in their communities vote?*

Even though traditional leaders are already seen as influential, six in 10 Basotho (61%) would like to see their influence in governing local communities increase, including half (49%) who say it should increase “a lot” (Figure 5). The view that traditional leaders should have “a lot” more influence is more common among rural residents (52%) than among the urban population (44%) and is least popular among the most educated respondents (33%, with 40% saying their influence level should stay the same).

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Figure 5: Should the influence of traditional leaders increase? | by socio-demographic group | Lesotho | 2020



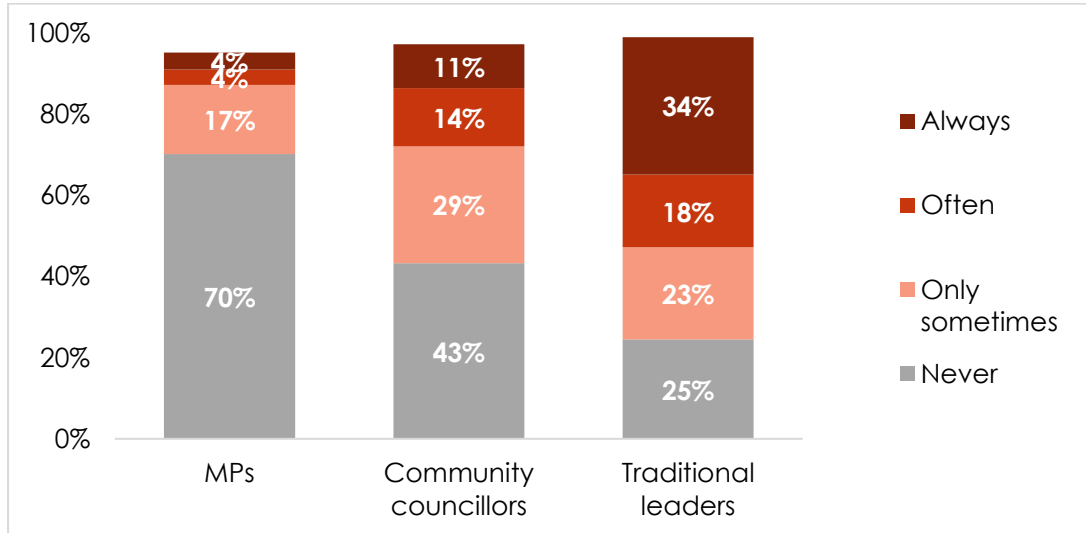
Respondents were asked: Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase, stay the same, or decrease?

Strengths of traditional leaders

Among strengths that may underlie popular support for the influential role of traditional leaders are perceptions suggesting that they are closer than elected officials to local communities and more attentive to local problems.

A majority (52%) of Basotho say traditional leaders “often” or “always” do their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say. While that still leaves almost half of the citizenry who say traditional leaders “never” (25%) or “only sometimes” (23%) listen, it’s a far better assessment than they give community councillors (25% often/always) and MPs (8% often/always) (Figure 6).

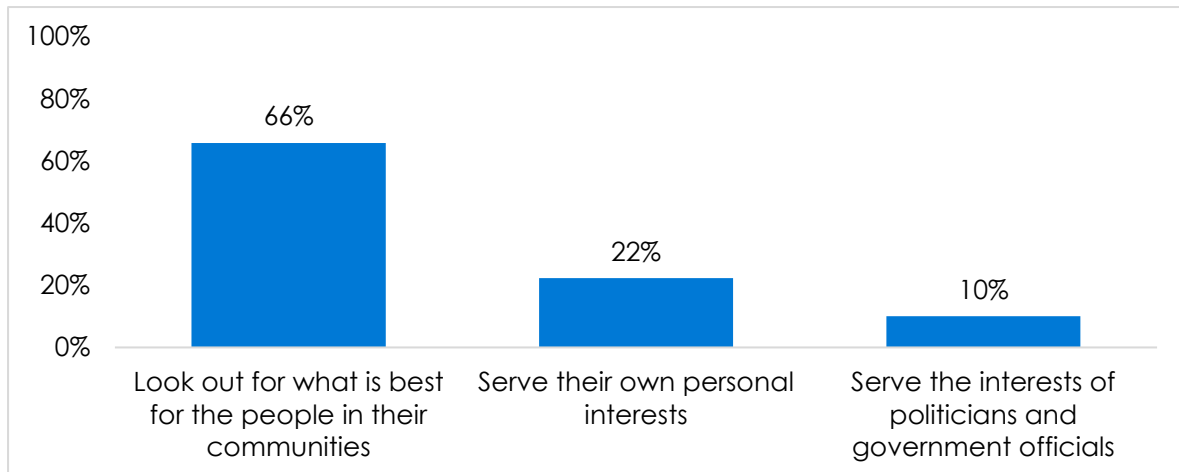
Figure 6: Do leaders listen to people? | Lesotho | 2020



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament? Members of the community council? Traditional leaders?

Further, two-thirds (66%) of Basotho say traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities instead of serving their personal interests (22%) or the interests of politicians and government officials (10%) (Figure 7).

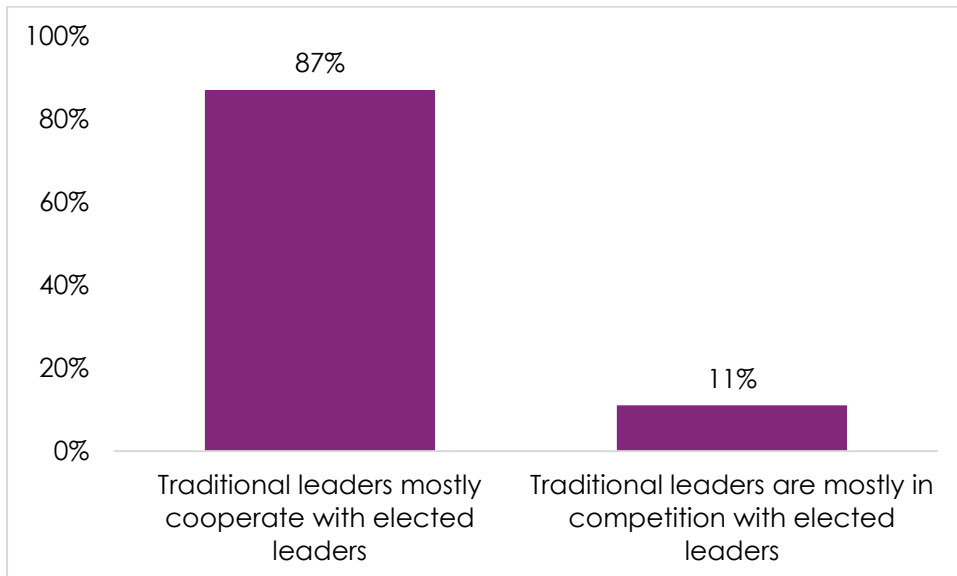
Figure 7: Perceptions of whose interests traditional leaders serve | Lesotho | 2020



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities.
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials.
 Statement 3: Traditional leaders mostly look out for their own personal interests.

Finally, an overwhelming majority (87%) of Basotho say that traditional leaders mostly cooperate with elected officials to get things done, instead of competing with them for resources, power, and influence (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Do traditional leaders cooperate or compete with elected leaders?
 | Lesotho | 2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Traditional leaders are mostly in competition with elected leaders for resources, power, and influence.

Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly work in cooperation with elected leaders to get things done.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Conclusion

Contrary to the idea that traditional leadership might cease to be of relevance in a democratic dispensation, the institution continues to enjoy legitimacy in Lesotho, where democracy falls far short of the promises made ever-so-regularly in step with the election schedule.

Traditional leaders, who are typically at the coalface of service delivery and local governance, beat elected leaders when it comes to popular trust and job performance. In fact, Basotho would like to see the influence of traditional leaders increase, probably in part because traditional leaders pay more attention than elected officials to the views and interests of local citizens.

The current political moment, marked by dialogue and reform, is opportune for revisiting governance structures with an eye to engaging all levels of leadership in shoring up Lesotho’s under-performing democracy.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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