Advision Lesotho

Dispatch No. 837 | 21 August 2024

Basotho take pride in their national identity but say country is heading in the wrong direction

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 837 | Libuseng Malephane

Summary

The Basotho nation was founded by King Moshoeshoe I in 1824 at Thaba-Bosiu ("Mountain in the Night"), a nearly impregnable stronghold where he was able to provide protection for his people during the time of trouble and war known as *lifaqane* (Parsons, 2019; Ellenberger, 1912). This security attracted other groups, which together formed the Basotho nation (Mofuoa, 2015).

King Moshoeshoe I is considered to have been "the most astute man of his race and time, quick to realise the advantages of policies of benevolence and mercy, quite a new thing in those wild days when people were ruled by force and fear" (Ellenberger, 1912). The characteristics he displayed of patience, humility, and carefulness enabled him to rule over multiple clans and avoid wars with powerful chiefs of his time. He embraced the diversity of his people. His vision was for a united, prosperous, inclusive, and peaceful nation of Basotho.

As Lesotho celebrates its bicentennial, how do ordinary Basotho perceive the state of the nation 200 years on?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that Basotho are proud of their nationality as well as their ethnic identity, and most express tolerance for differences of religion, ethnicity, nationality, and political affiliation. However, they report poor economic conditions, show limited trust in their political leaders, and voice concern about the direction their country is taking.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Lesotho, led by Advision Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Basotho in March 2024. 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, 2017, 2020 and 2022.

Key findings

On nationhood and identity:

- Almost all Basotho (91%) say they are proud of their nationality.

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- Seven in 10 (70%) say they identify equally strongly with their national and ethnic identities.
- The share of citizens who say they have a political home has declined over the past decade, from 68% in 2014 to 53%.

On tolerance:

- Large majorities express tolerant attitudes toward people from different religious backgrounds (85%), supporters of different political parties (84%), immigrants and foreign workers (75%), people from different ethnic groups (68%), and refugees (65%).
    - Only 30% express tolerance for homosexuals.
- About two-thirds of Basotho say the country should reduce or eliminate entry by refugees and foreign job seekers.

On country's direction and the economy:

- About two-thirds (65%) of citizens see the country as going in "the wrong direction."
- More than three-quarters say the country's economic condition (77%) and their personal living conditions (77%) are bad.
- About six in 10 experienced moderate (37%) or high (22%) levels of lived poverty during the previous year.
- Majorities disapprove of the government's performance on key economic issues.

On leadership:

- Among key leaders, the king is most widely trusted (73%), while members of Parliament (MPs) are least trusted (29%).
- Nearly half (48%) of citizens say "most" or "all" MPs are corrupt.
- Fewer than half (47%) of Basotho approve of the performance of their prime minister. Only a quarter (25%) think their MP is doing a good job.
- Basotho are divided in their assessments of how well the current government is advancing founding values of the country: 59% praise its efforts to promote peace, 51% to promote unity, and 51% to promote inclusivity.

Basotho nationhood and identity

Pride in being a Mosotho

Basotho are quite proud of their national identity. When asked how proud they are to be Basotho, more than eight in 10 (83%) say they "very proud," and another 8% say they are "fairly proud" (Figure 1).

This feeling of pride is especially pronounced among rural residents (95%) and citizens with primary schooling or less (94%-96%, compared to 74% among those with post-secondary education) (Figure 2). It increases with respondents' age, ranging from 87% among 18- to 35-year-olds to 97% among those over age 55.

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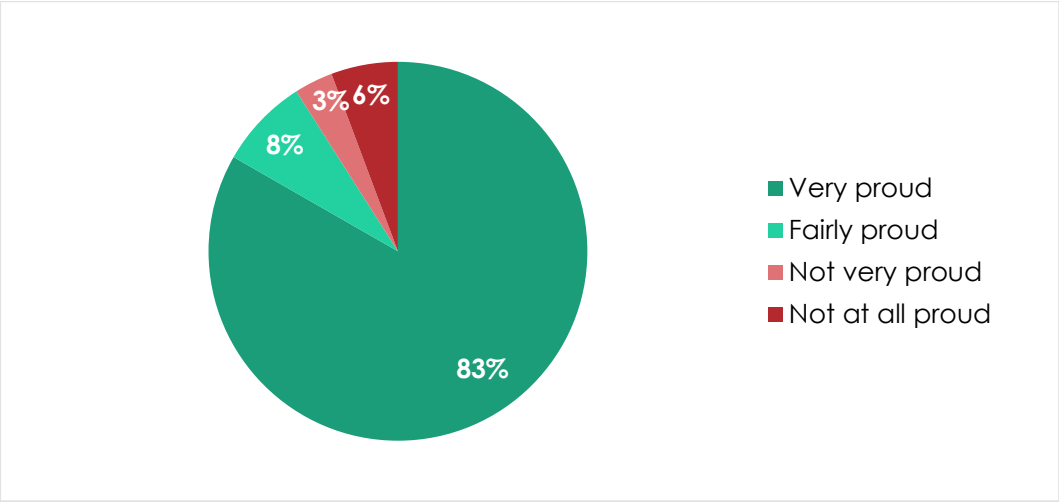
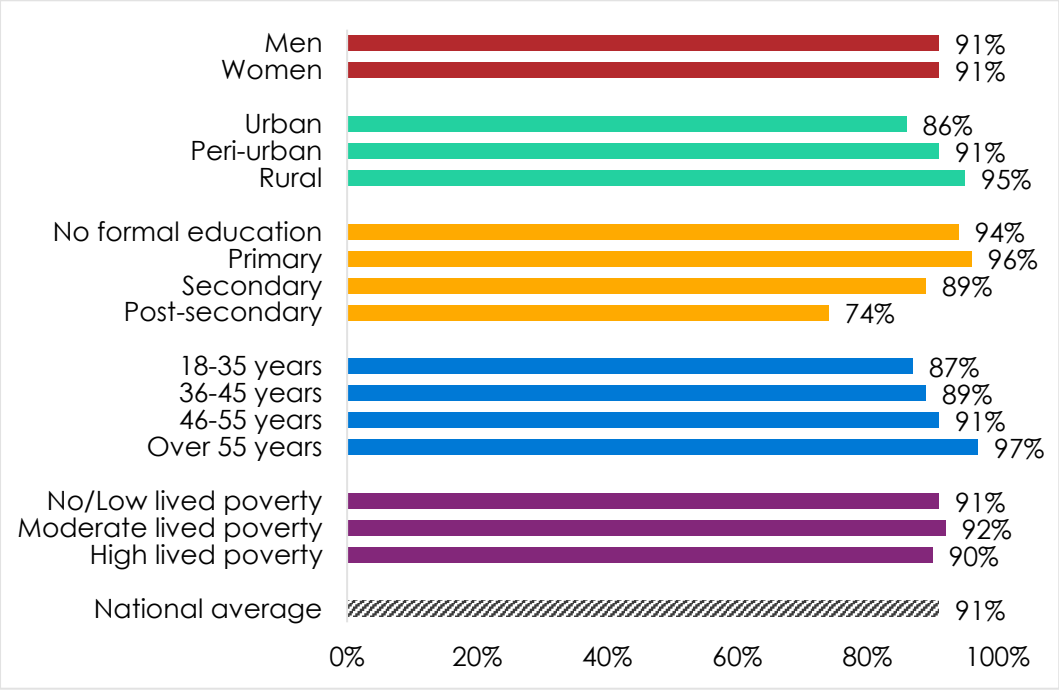
Figure 1: How proud are you to be a Mosotho? | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Now I would like to discuss with you a few questions about the country's 200th-anniversary celebrations: How proud are you to be a Mosotho?*

Figure 2: Proud to be a Mosotho | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Now I would like to discuss with you a few questions about the country's 200th-anniversary celebrations: How proud are you to be a Mosotho? (% who say "fairly proud" or "very proud")*

National vs. ethnic identity

Lesotho is made up of more than 15 clans (ethnic groups), and many people embrace their ethnic as well as their national identity. Seven in 10 citizens (70%) say they identify equally with their national and ethnic identities. About one in six (17%) feel exclusively or predominantly attached to their national identity, while 13% identify more strongly or only with their ethnic identity (Figure 3).

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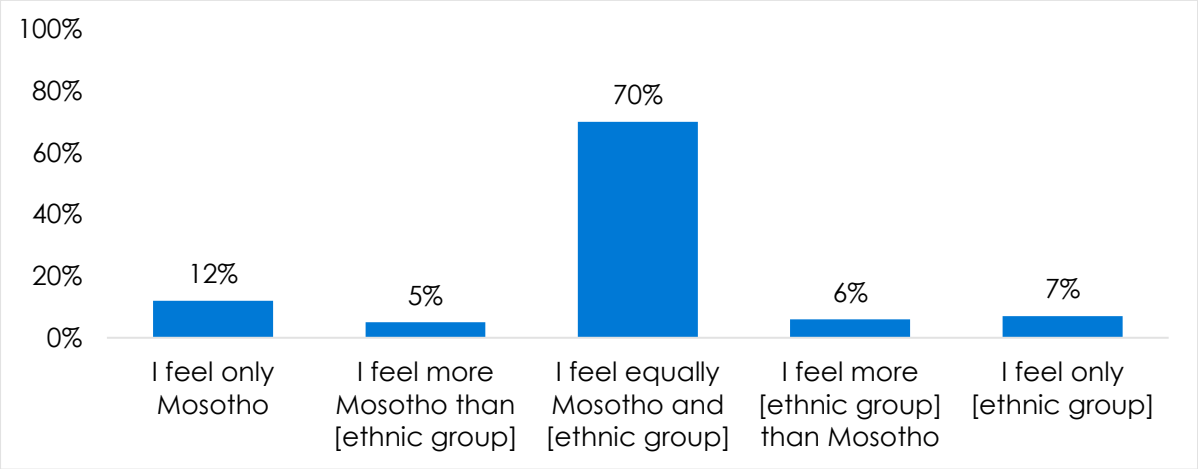
Figure 3: National identity vs. ethnic identity | Lesotho | 2024

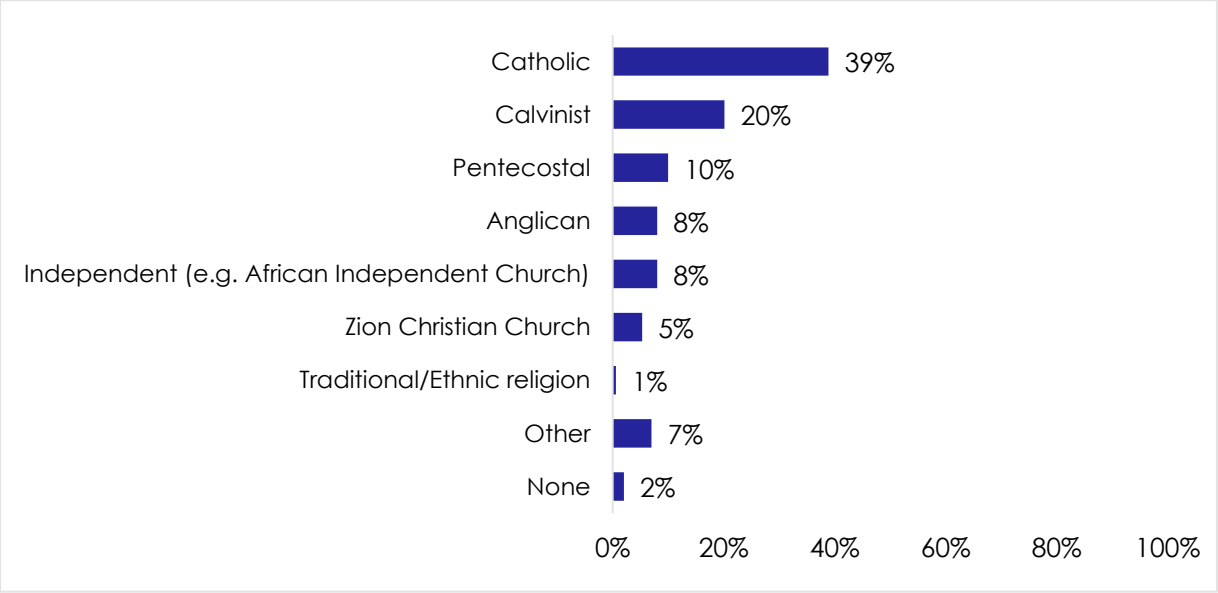


Respondents were asked: *Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Mosotho and being a [member of the respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?*

Religious and political identity

Basotho also identify with their religious and political party affiliations, both of which have tended to be divisive. With regard to religion, almost all citizens (97%) profess to be Christian, led by Roman Catholics (39%), Calvinists (20%), and Pentecostals ("born again") (10%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Religious affiliation | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *What is your religion, if any?*

Identification with a political party has waxed and waned over the past 10 years, dropping from 68% in 2014 to a low of 44% in 2022 before rallying back up by 9 percentage points to 53% in 2024 (Figure 5).

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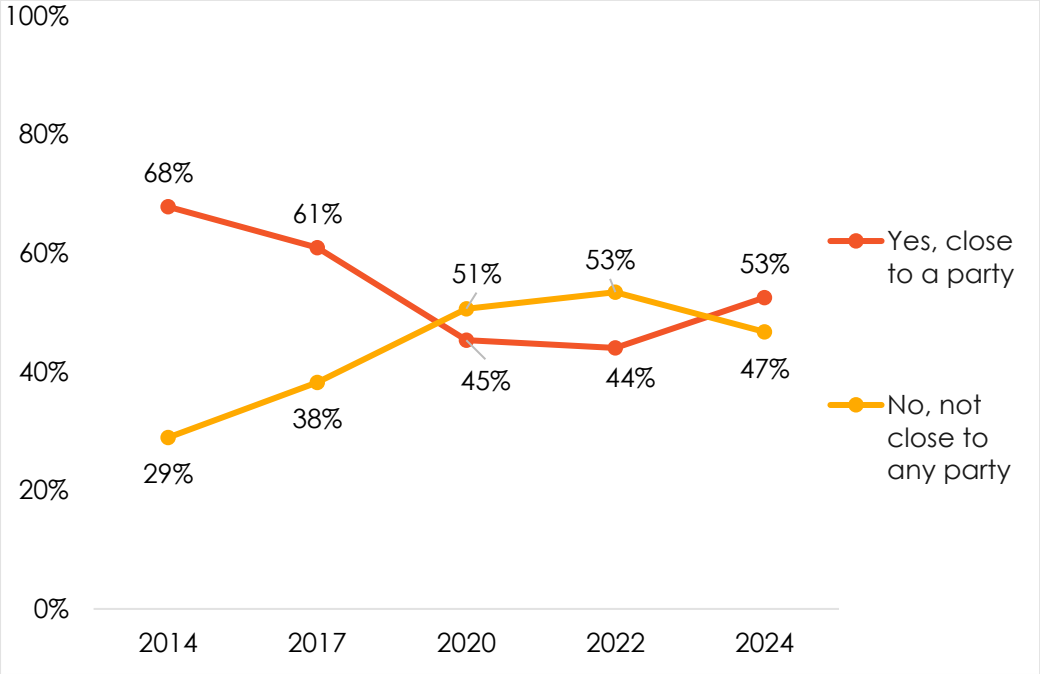
Figure 5: Political party affiliation | Lesotho | 2014-2024



Respondents were asked: *Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

Identification with any of a variety of political parties is more common in rural areas than in cities (57% vs. 46%) and increases with respondents' age, ranging from 45% of youth to 59% of seniors (Figure 6). Party affiliation declines sharply as education levels rise, from 66% of those with no formal schooling to just 42% of those with post-secondary qualifications. The poorest citizens are somewhat more likely to "feel close to" a political party (55%) than those experiencing low or no lived poverty (50%).[1]

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[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

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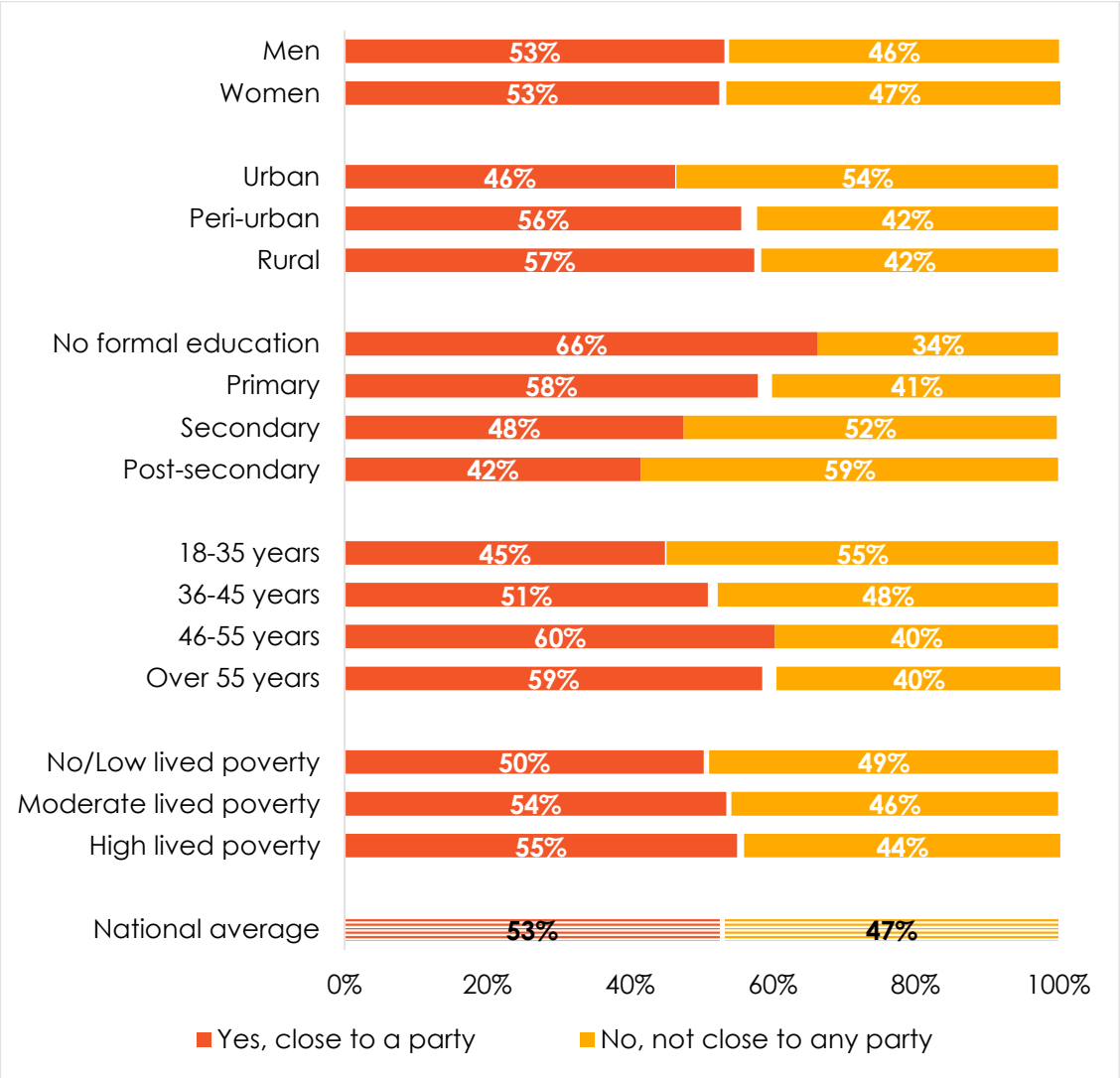
Figure 6: Political party affiliation | Lesotho | by demographic group | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

Tolerance

The Basotho nation was built through the coming together of various ethnic groups, embracing diversity. King Moshoeshoe welcomed everyone into his fold, including cannibals who were roaming the country as a result of starvation brought about by the *lifaqane*. One of his famous sayings is "*U se ke oa re ho moroa, 'Moroa tooe'* " ("Do not say to a bushman 'You horrible bushman' "), meaning that everyone should be welcomed with respect. He also made a law that said, "Let no man molest the traveller or take his goods" (Ellenberger, 1912). So how tolerant and welcoming are Basotho today?

Afrobarometer measures social tolerance by asking whether respondents would like, dislike, or not care if they had people from different groups as neighbours. In Lesotho, more than eight in 10 respondents say they would like or not mind having people from other religions (85%) or political parties (84%) as neighbours. Three-quarters (75%) express tolerant attitudes toward immigrants and foreign workers, while about two-thirds do the same regarding different ethnic groups (68%) and refugees (65%). In contrast, only 30% express tolerance for homosexuals (Figure 7).

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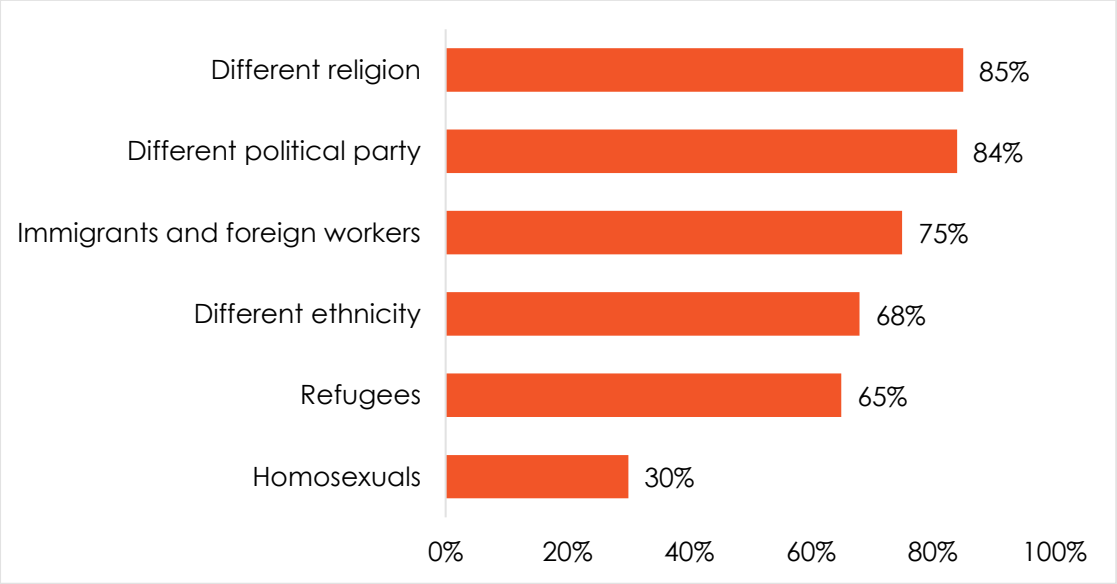
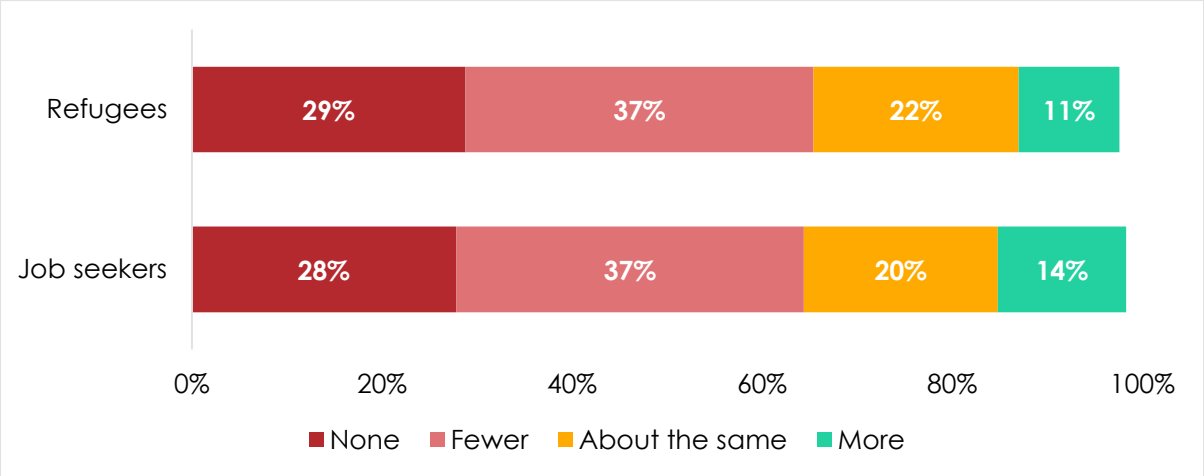
Figure 7: Tolerance for social differences | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People of a different religion? People from other ethnic groups? Homosexuals? Immigrants or foreign workers? People who support a different political party? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution? (% who say they would "strongly like it," would "somewhat like it," or "would not care")*

Despite their expressions of tolerance, few Basotho are interested in having more foreign workers or refugees in the country. About two-thirds of citizens say the country should eliminate (29%) or reduce (37%) entry by refugees, and a similar majority want no (28%) or fewer (37%) foreign job seekers (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Should the country allow more or fewer job seekers and refugees? | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked:

Do you think Lesotho should allow more or fewer job seekers from other countries to come to live and work in this country?

Do you think Lesotho should allow more or fewer refugees from other countries to come and live in this country?

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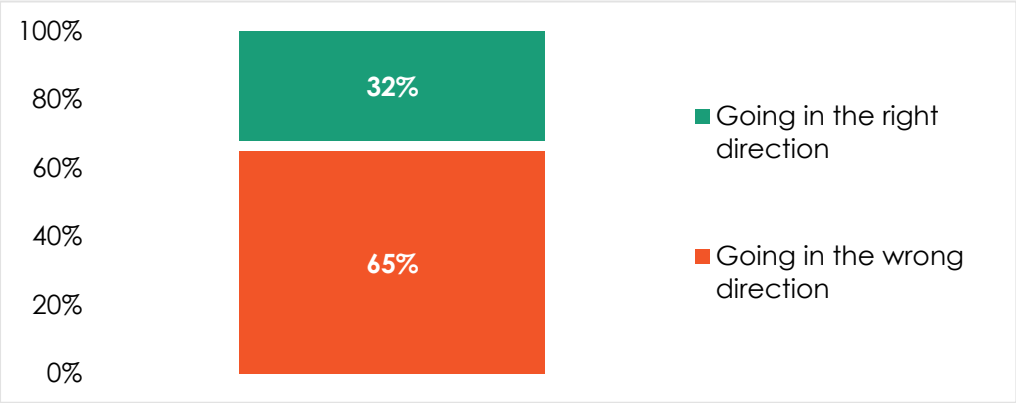
Country's direction and economic conditions

As Basotho celebrate their bicentennial, a look back at their origins also invites reflections on their current situation as regards the general direction of the country, its economic conditions, and its leadership.

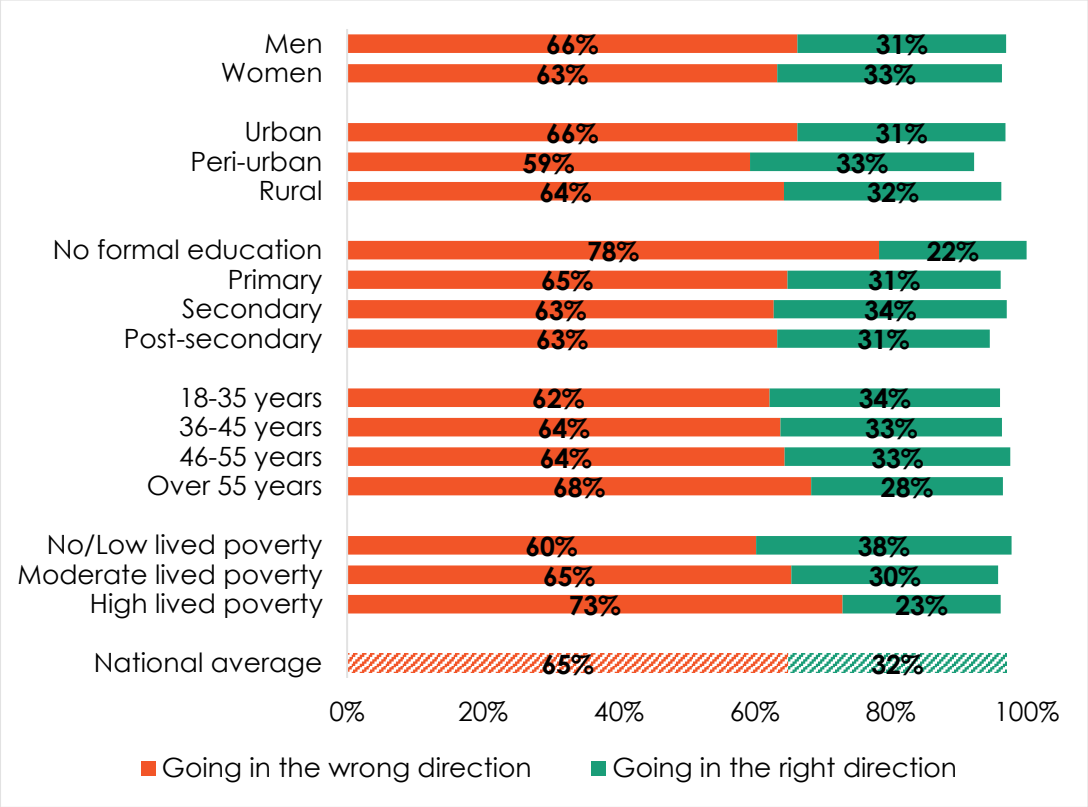
Only one-third (32%) of citizens say the country is now going in "the right direction," while two-thirds (65%) see it as going in "the wrong direction" (Figure 9). Citizens experiencing high lived poverty (73%) and those with no formal education (78%) are particularly likely to say the country is on the wrong path (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Overall direction of the country | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

Figure 10: Overall direction of the country | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

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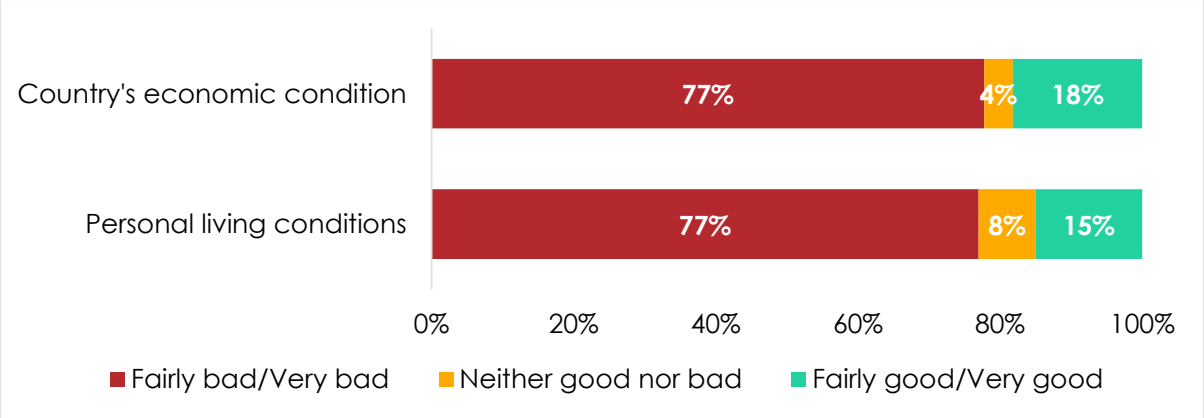
Economic conditions

Lesotho is classified as a lower-middle-income country (World Bank, 2024) and a least developed country (LDC) (United Nations, 2024), and is pegged in the low tier of the Human Development Index (World Population Review, 2024). The LDC status and the low human development ranking are usually associated with widespread poverty and high unemployment rates.

Afrobarometer survey findings show that more than three-quarters (77%) of citizens see the country's economic condition and their own living conditions (77%) as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 11).

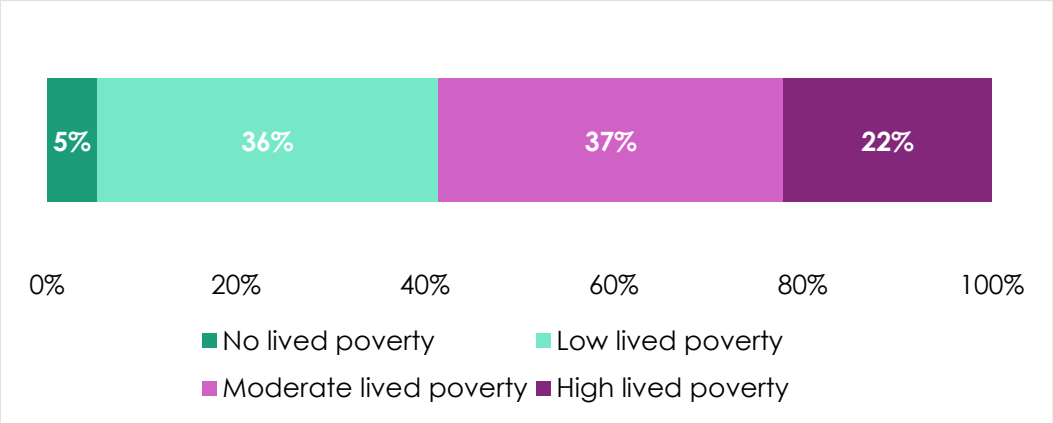
Based on Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index, which measures the frequency with which respondents go without five basic life necessities (enough food and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income), about six in 10 Basotho experienced moderate (37%) or high (22%) levels of lived poverty during the past year, and only one in 20 Basotho (5%) experienced no lived poverty (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Country's economic condition and personal living conditions | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe: The present economic conditions of this country? Your present living conditions?*

Figure 12: Lived poverty | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

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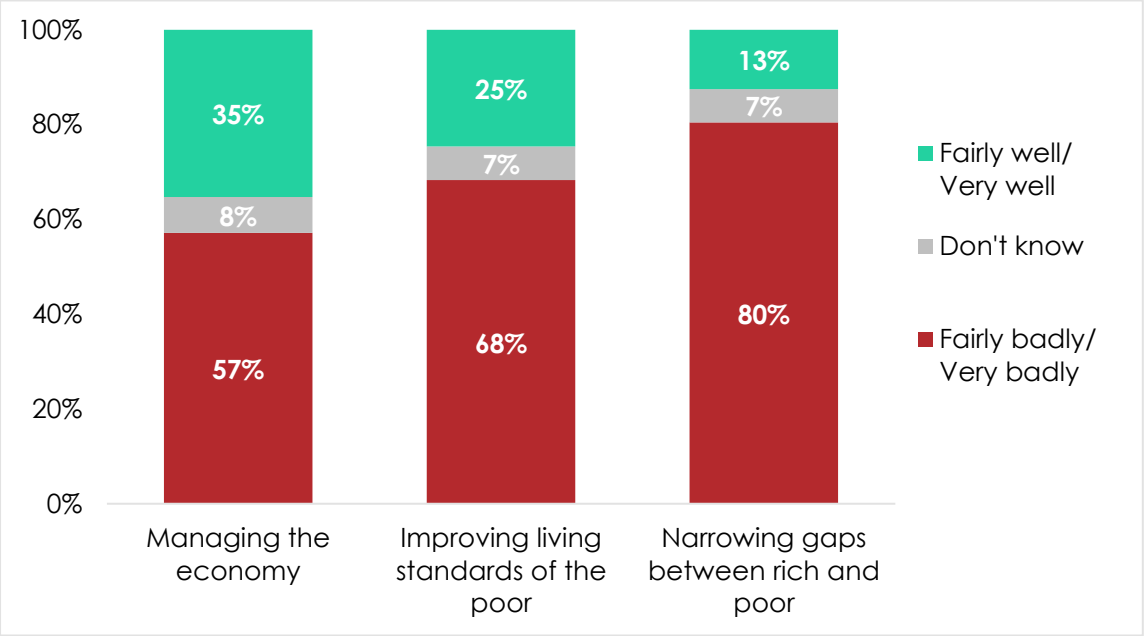
Given their dissatisfaction with current economic conditions, it's not surprising that Basotho give their government poor job performance ratings on economic issues. Nearly six in 10 (57%) say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on managing the economy, while larger majorities give it failing marks on improving the living standards of the poor (68%) and reducing inequality (80%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Government performance on economic issues | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the economy? Improving the living standards of the poor? Narrowing gaps?*

Perceptions of the current leadership of the country

With modernity and independence from colonialism in 1966 came democracy as Lesotho took its place in the community of nations. The Constitution of Lesotho declares: "Lesotho shall be a sovereign democratic Kingdom." It is a kingdom with an elected prime minister as head of government and a constitutional monarch as head of state. As such, Lesotho must hold general elections at least every five years. It also has local governance by traditional leaders and elected councillors.

Trust and perceived corruption among Lesotho's leaders

The king is the leader most trusted by citizens: Nearly three-quarters (73%) say they trust the king "somewhat" or a "lot" (Figure 14). About two-thirds say they trust traditional and religious leaders (both 65%), while about half express trust in the prime minister (51%) and their community/urban council (48%) and only 29% trust Parliament.

Least trusted among these leaders, members of Parliament (MPs) are also most widely seen as corrupt: Nearly half (48%) of citizens say "most" or "all" MPs are corrupt, in addition to 39% who say that "some of them" are involved in corruption (Figure 15).

Three in 10 respondents (30%) say "most" or "all" officials in the Office of the Prime Minister are corrupt. Religious leaders fare best (13%), while traditional leaders and community/urban councillors tie with perceptions of widespread corruption registered by 24% of respondents.

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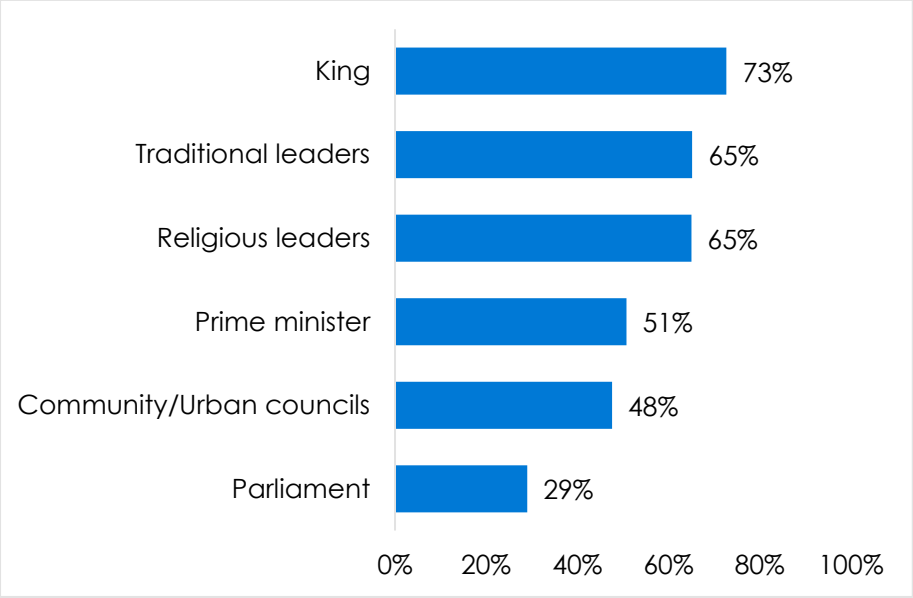
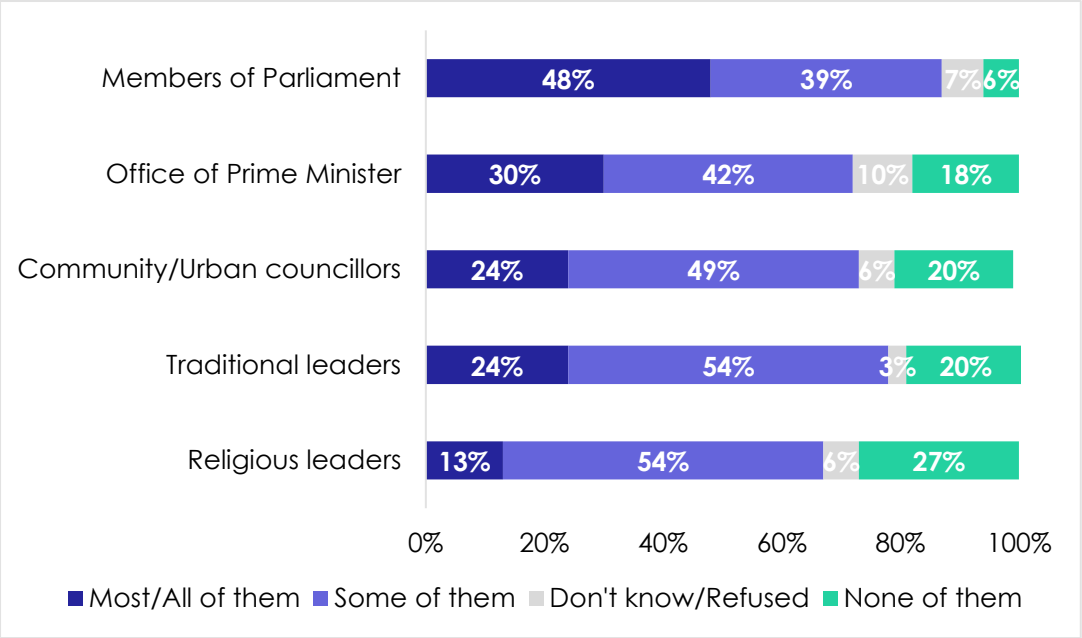
Figure 14: Popular trust in leaders | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Figure 15: Perceptions of corruption | Lesotho | 2024



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?*

Evaluation of leaders' performance

Citizens' views are mixed on the job performance of the current prime minister, Sam Matekane: 47% "approve" or "strongly approve," while 45% don't (Figure 16). Fewer (38%) approve of the job their community/urban councillors are doing, and only one in four (25%) give their MPs a passing mark.

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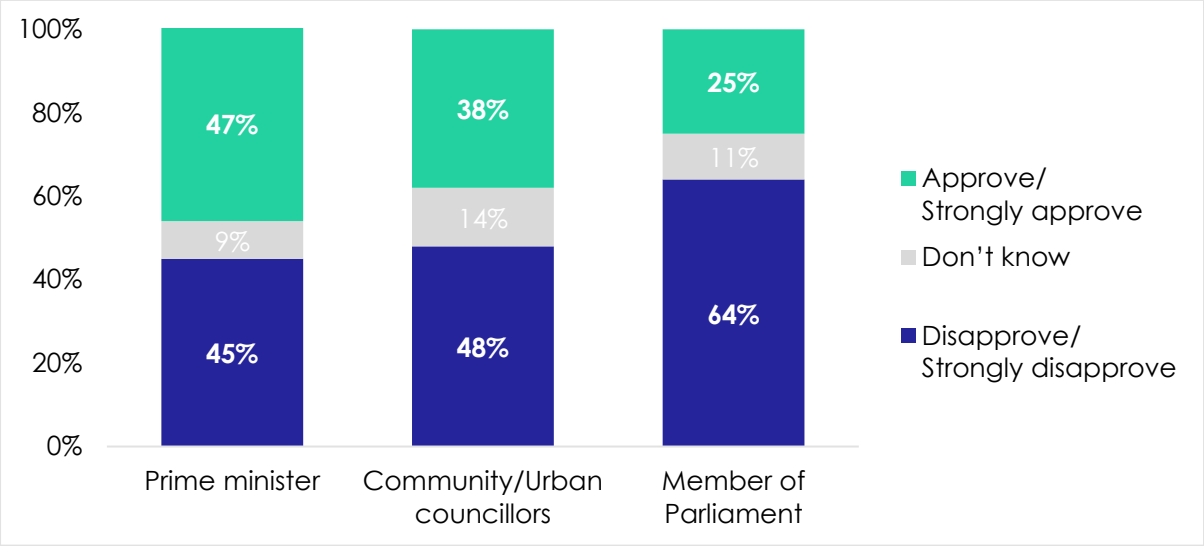
Figure 16: Approval rating of the elected leadership | Lesotho | 2024



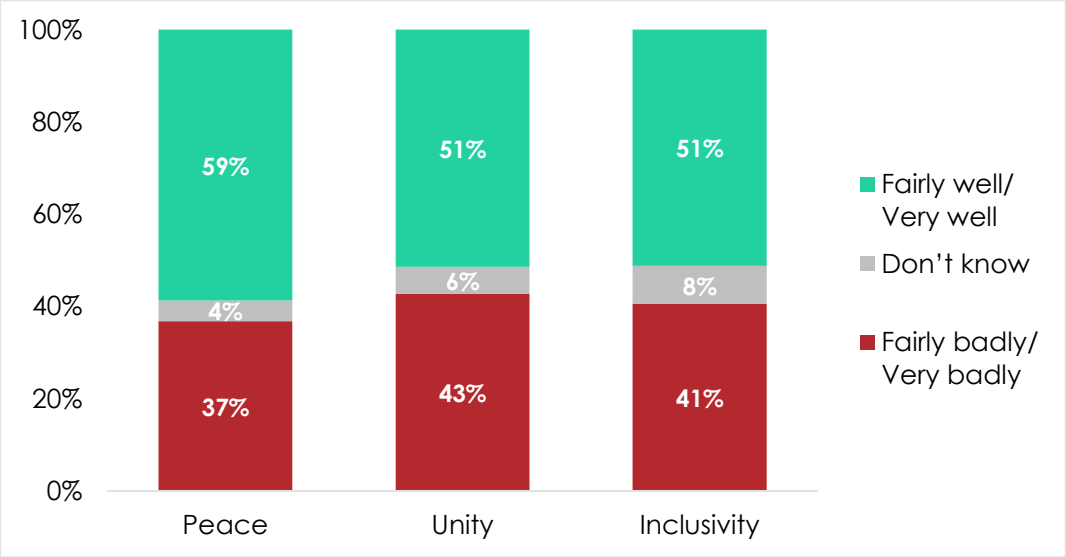
Respondents were asked: *Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*

Government performance in adhering to the nation's founding principles

King Moshoeshoe's ethical leadership was built on core values, including unity, inclusivity, and peace. How do Basotho see the present government performing in advancing these values?

Assessments are fairly mixed: About six in 10 (59%) say the government is doing well on promoting peace, while about half rate the government positively on promoting unity (51%) and inclusivity (51%) (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Government promotion of the nation's founding values | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Now I would like to discuss with you a few questions about the country's 200th-anniversary celebrations. Thinking about the founding tenets of our country, how well or badly would you say the current government is performing in advancing the following areas, or have you not heard enough to say: Peace? Unity? Inclusivity?*

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Conclusion

As they celebrate 200 years of nationhood, Basotho express pride in their nationality as well as their ethnic heritage, and show continuing loyalty to the king, who is a direct descendant of the founder of the Kingdom, King Moshoeshoe I.

However, they also voice concern about the direction their country is taking as it grapples with poverty and a weak economy. Current political leaders enjoy less public trust than traditional and religious leaders, and popular assessments of their job performance are mixed at best.

Bringing the founding father's vision of a just, prosperous, united, inclusive, and peaceful nation to life will require renewed respect for the nation's values and principles to enable ethical leadership to come forth and thrive.

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Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation via the World Bank Think Africa Project, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminate, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 837 | 21 August 2024

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