Chief Jonathan . . .
controversial career

Jonathan's gamble

By PATRICK LAURENCE

THE Lesotho Prime Minister, Chief Leabua Jonathan, has taken the most critical gamble in his long and controversial political career by inviting five communist countries, including the Soviet Union and Red China, to open embassies in Maseru.

He has gambled that the pending arrival of communist diplomats will not remove one of the most important pillars of his government — the Roman Catholic Church in Lesotho, which has the allegiance of about 40 per cent of the Lesotho's more than 1.2-million people.

The Roman Catholic Church was a vital factor in the surprise victory of Chief Jonathan's Basotho National Party (BNP) in the pre-independence elections of 1965 which enabled Chief Jonathan to assume power when Lesotho became independent in October 1966.

The BNP was preferred by the Church because of its moderate conservatism and — more specifically — because of its strong stance against not only communism per se, but also against the opening of communist embassies in Maseru.

The Church remained largely supportive — or, at any rate, benevolently neutral — after Chief Jonathan's controversial decision to call off the 1970 general election to avoid defeat at the polls by the then radically inclined opposition Basutoland Congress Party (BCP).

From 1970 onwards Chief Jonathan, who had been favoured by Pretoria as well as the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s for his "moderate pragmatism", began to adopt an in-

creasingly hostile attitude towards South Africa. Associated with that change was a gradual switch in foreign policy, which took Lesotho into the non-aligned bloc of nations and saw the evolution of ties of friendship with communist countries.

The process led to visits by Lesotho students and officials to Moscow and, eventually, to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and Cuba. Although there were signs of concern in the Roman Catholic Church at this, and at the increasingly bloody civil war in Lesotho between Chief Jonathan's followers and those of his arch-rival, Mr Ntsu Mokhehle, the Church remained broadly supportive of the BNP regime.

But the situation has changed in recent weeks, with Chief Jonathan's tour of five communist countries and his subsequent announcement that he had invited the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, Rumania and Yugoslavia to open embassies in Maseru.

Several factors combined to make this a new dimension in Lesotho's foreign policy. Although Lesotho had established diplomatic ties with communist countries earlier, it was through accredited communist ambassadors based elsewhere. The Soviet ambassador, for example, was based in Maputo.

Now, however, they would open embassies in Maseru itself, a critical factor in the view of some Basotho. The opening of communist embassies would, moreover, not take place gradually but with seemingly dramatic suddenness. The Soviet Union, China and North Korea are due to open embassies in the next six months, with Rumania and Yugoslavia scheduled to follow suit next year.

Associated with the apparently reckless haste to consolidate and extend ties with communist countries was the discernible swiftness with which ties with strongly anti-communist countries were severed, notably Taiwan and South Korea.

In what seemed to be calculatedly insulting language to Taiwan, one of the first countries to establish an embassy in Lesotho, Chief Jonathan spoke scathingly about wanting diplomatic relations with "big boys" (China) and not "small boys" (Taiwan).

The Roman Catholic Church has signalled its unease over these developments in its journal, "Moeletsia oa Basotho." The journal purposely highlighted statements by Chief Jonathan when he was still opposed to ties with communist countries.

Another repercussion of the imminent arrival of communist diplomats has been the resignation from the Lesotho Cabinet of the Minister of Broadcasting and Information, Mr C D Molapo. A former Minister of Foreign Affairs and a confidant of the powerful Bishop Paul Khoarai, of Leribe, Mr Molapo labelled communists "apostles of atheism" and lamented that Chief Jonathan, who he regards as a great man, had made a tragic mistake.

There is another and equally important element to Chief Jonathan's gamble. Since 1970 Chief Jonathan has played a skilful game of brinkmanship with South Africa, on which Lesotho is totally dependent economically. But he may now have misread the state of play.

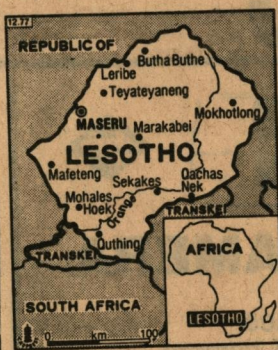
After he aborted the 1970 election Chief Jonathan adopted an increasingly hostile attitude towards Pretoria, partly, his opponents maintain, to give his "minority regime" a degree of legitimacy by hitching it to the anti-apartheid bandwagon.

Chief Jonathan was careful, however, to maintain a delicate balance: He was sufficiently hostile to win international sympathy and financial aid for his impoverished country — but not so hostile as to provoke his powerful neighbour into action which could bring his regime down.

His game of brinkmanship involved cordial relations with the banned African National Congress. It nearly ended disastrously last December when South African commandos raided Maseru and again a month ago when the South African Police imposed a partial blockade in retaliation for the suspected involvement of Lesotho-based ANC insurgents in a Bloemfontein bomb blast.

Since then working relations have apparently been restored following a meeting between the South African and Lesotho Foreign Ministers on June 3.

But Chief Jonathan cannot be sure that the actual arrival of communist diplomats will not shift the balance in the South African cabinet in favour of fresh drastic action — in spite of any assurances South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha may have given his counterpart, Mr Evaristus Sekhon-yana, on June 3.



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