

Transcribed Interview with Mamosebi Pholo, Election Commission of Lesotho

00:00

Austeria: Hello and welcome to International IDEA's session on budgeting and financing of elections. My name is Austeria Letholetseng Ntsike. I work at the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of Lesotho. Here with me today I have the commissioner Mamosebi Pholo from IEC of Lesotho.

Q (Austeria): Commissioner Pholo, before we begin with the questions, could you please let the audience know how long you have been with the commission and what your professional background is?

A (Mamosebi): Thank you Director. Like you said, my name is Mamosebi Pholo. I am one of the three commissioners of IEC. I have been with the commission for five years; this is my fifth year. My background is that I am a lawyer.

Q (Austeria): Okay. Could you please describe your role and the EMB institutional arrangement that exists in Lesotho?

A (Mamosebi): The main role of the commission is to run elections as we know. The commission has to ensure that the EMBs finance adequately to be able to carry out its mandate effectively.

Q (Austeria): Thank you. Could you please describe how the commission get its funds and what processes it follows when negotiating the budget for ongoing costs, in specific election costs?

A (Mamosebi): The commission is funded by the government of Lesotho, for all types of purposes. However, partners to Lesotho do from time to time give support in terms of technical support. In order to get our funds, the commission prepares the annual budget with a ceiling. This budget is then presented to the ministry of finance; which includes revision on the budget. It is then sent to the parliament whom justifies each and every budget item. The parliament may approve the budget as presented or suggest some budget cuts, but this is not common. So for the election-related costs, the process is still the same except that there is no ceiling set. Also, normally the cuts are not insisted upon.

Q (Austeria): Okay. That is interesting. Could you please describe the auditing process for the commission's finances?

A (Mamosebi): As an institution that is fully funded by government, it is audited annually by the auditor general and has no say on the ... set by the auditor general. When it comes to audit, it comes to IEC and when it pleases. So the process is followed that it is no different from auditing of any other institution. The IEC finance section prepares primarily documents and submits them together with the budget of the year and the audit tool, to the office of the AG. If there are some variances of qualifications, every variance that is positive or negative, needs to be accounted for because the parliament needs to know why these variances exist.

Q (Austeria): What does AG stand for?

A (Mamosebi): It stands for 'auditor general'.

Q (Austeria): Thank you very much. I wanted the audience to know that AG is an abbreviation of 'auditor general'. Could you please describe the senior management structure IEC? Who is responsible for financial management and budgeting?

A (Mamosebi): IEC's management structure, as the head of election secretariat, it has five sections and directors. The directors cover: operations, civic and voter education, finance, ICT and cooperate services. Each director is responsible for preparation and management of his own budget, but the director of finance is responsible for consolidation of the overall budget and its management.

Q (Austeria): Okay. Thank you very much. Could you tell me, are there any separate process for obtaining funds?

A (Mamosebi): No, there is no separate process, unless an item was not budgeted for. Later it can then be a separate budget requested in regard to that specific item.

Q (Austeria): Okay. How is the budget for the commission developed? In particular the methodology.

A (Mamosebi): The budget is prepared between September and October. There is a call for ... following which the management of IEC will prepare the framework for the budget. The framework of the budget is discussed even before the detailed budget can be prepared. So, once the framework has been approved, then IEC will be asked to give a detailed budget. The first draft of the budget will be put together before the finance, the finance will then look into it and advise accordingly. The preparation of the budget accompanies each and every manager because each and every one has to budget for its own section. So, the commission's plan always includes: budget preparations, consolidations and presentation.

Q (Austeria): That is interesting. We only have two questions left. What are the main challenges in budgeting and financing of elections faced by EMBs, and how do you approach these challenges?

A (Mamosebi): Financing in general has many challenges, but I will only pick a few. One of the main challenges in regard to the current budget, is the off-set limit that I have talked about. We are not allowed to exceed that limit. If we do, it has to be for a special reason and that then has to be looked into. This limits us from having a professional staff or even to develop our existing staff. The second problem is that the approved budget does not go into the commission as on a quarterly basis. This means that for a quarter, you have to do certain activities and other will come in the other quarter. If you happen to finish your activities early on, you have to wait for the next quarter. This is very serious because while we wait for the quarter to end so that we can get more money, if the government feels like using that money, it will. A very heated example is an example from the year of 2016 where we were supposed to hold local governmental elections. We could not hold this election because our budget was taken because the government thought that there were other more important things than the election. This hampers our work as the electoral commission. What we have realized when we face these hampers or problems, is that we can't change our own budget methodology. Like I said, we budget incrementally. We would like to budget using the activity-based method, which means that budget will be based on the activities that we have and include costs as they come. The method we have now is not that easy because we use the government's method of budgeting. All these challenges can only be addressed by legislation. There is no way we can change them by ourselves, because even the commission's own legislation goes through parliament. The only solution to the problem would be through changing the legislation.

Q (Austeria): Okay. What would you say are the most expensive processes for an EMB? From a practical point of view.

A (Mamosebi): From my perspective, those events that have a high cost but are not necessarily expensive, are the ones of electoral-related violence and disputes between citizens in regard to elections. Because of this I need to use my choice of the words costs and expenses selectively.

Otherwise, the budget for ballot papers and indelible ink is very high. Also items such as electoral equipment, machines and EVVs. These are very expensive because they also need to be maintained from time to time; so their cost is frequently going up. These costs are also expensive because we don't produce any of this material on our country; we have to import everything. Other expensive processes include trainings of both staff and management, as well as consultants; because people may be consultants but do not necessarily know much about electoral processes. Temporary staff salaries are also very expensive. Indeed like I said, apart from training and salaries, everything is imported from elsewhere.

Austeria: Thank you very much commissioner Pholo. The phrase 'if you think elections are expensive, try not to finance' is a very good phrase that I will take with me. Thank you very much again commissioner for taking part in this session on budgeting and financing of elections, and thank you to the audience for listening.

The interview was carried out in November 2018.

This transcript has been lightly edited to enhance readability and clarity without changing the sense of the points made by the discussant.

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