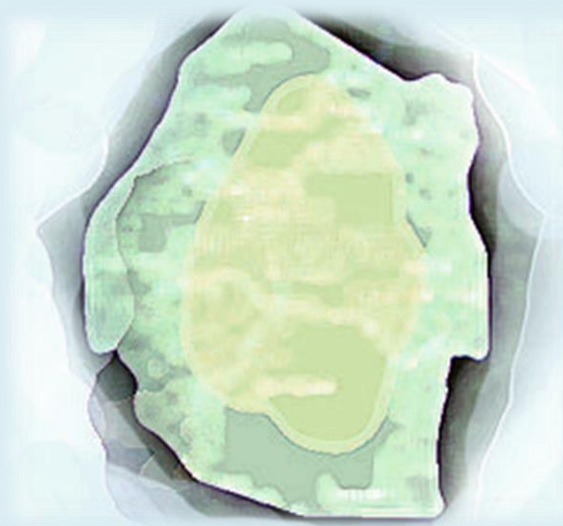


Swaziland's Elusive Path to Democracy:



What role for SA and the Region?

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Just as with the South African struggle against apartheid, while internal pressure is essential, international solidarity, especially by the regional community, plays a key role in a potential democratic transition. In this article Klaus Stig Kristensen discusses the opportunities for South Africa and the region to support democratic transition in Swaziland in 2015.

Swaziland is Africa's last absolute monarchy. Political parties are not allowed to participate in elections, labour union meetings are disrupted by the security forces and political opposition figures are arrested. The space of political mobilization has been shrinking over the recent years. However, despite the recent lack of protests on the streets of Manzini and Mbabane, there is some political momentum gathering in Swaziland. In 2011 thousands of Swazis expressed their discontent by flooding the streets of the country's two largest cities, Manzini and Mbabane. By 2015 the struggle for democracy in Swaziland had moved to the courtrooms. The previous year, human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko and Nation magazine editor Bheki Makhubu were each sentenced to two years in prison for contempt of court. Their real crime was publishing an article criticizing Swaziland's Judiciary, in particular Chief Justice Michael Ramodibedi. The second high-profile court case of 2014 featured the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO) President Mario Masuku and youth leader Maxwell Dlamini. They were arrested following their 1st of May Workers' Day speech at the Salesian Sports ground in Manzini for shouting "Viva PUDEMO Viva"¹. Both Masuku and Dlamini are still held at Remand Centre, awaiting trial with a potential 15 years jail term for a guilty verdict. Mario is diabetic and since his incarceration his health has deteriorate rapidly and now reported to have pneumonia². Dlamini was denied the right to write his university final exams. There are allegations that Dlamini has been tortured in previous encounters with the authorities³.

In Swaziland, it is not just democracy and oppositional figures that are under attack but also the economy. The decision by the US to discontinue the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in protest over human rights violations by the monarchy will affect the economy adversely. But economic elites of the country, who are close to the royal family, are unlikely to feel the impact as their assets are not tied in the directly affected textile industry. Unemployment and poverty, currently at 40% and 80% respectively are likely to increase. Swaziland's non-specialized labor force, fragile economy, autocratic government, the perceived lack of significant natural resources and lack of investment make it extremely difficult to re-create the job opportunities previously supported through AGOA.

South Africa's potential for positive influence

Of all countries, South Africa is in a unique position to positively influence Swaziland towards democratic change. Swaziland's economic prospects largely hinge on South Africa. 90% of the country's imports come from South Africa, and 70% of its exports go across the South African border⁴. In 2011, South Africa agreed to assist Swaziland's cash crisis with a 2.4 billion rand loan. Requirements of political dialogue with the opposition and economic reform were attached to the loan, which made the Swazis apprehensive. Representatives of the Swazi government officially declined the loan in 2013. Unconfirmed rumors suggest that Swaziland has obtained loans from countries in the Middle East⁵. As Swaziland's national economy is struggle again, it is not unthinkable that the monarchy will have to look for another loan soon. If the coffers from the Middle East are closed, South Africa might once again be an unwelcome but necessary lender, providing South Africa with a real chance for playing a huge role in the democratization. One option is to alter Southern Africa Customs Union's (SACU) revenue distribution. Swaziland is heavily reliant on revenue from SACU, which

¹ Kenworthy, P. "Charged with terrorism for shouting "viva PUDEMO"", *stiffkitten*, retrieved from: <https://stiffkitten.wordpress.com/2014/08/25/charged-with-terrorism-for-shouting-viva-pudemo/>

² Kenworthy, P. "Denmark Questions Mswati On Human Rights", *News Time Africa*, retrieved from: <http://www.newstimeafrica.com/archives/36051>

³ Sherriff, L. "Maxwell Dlamini, Swaziland NUS President, Imprisoned And Tortured For 'Peaceful' Campaigning", *Huffingtonpost*, retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/04/30/free-maxwell-dlamini-swaziland-nus-president-tortured_n_3185129.html

⁴ SADC Trade, *Intra-SADC Trade Performance Review 2006*, Retrieved from: <http://www.sadctrade.org/>

⁵ King Mswati III is known for entertaining relationships with governments in the Middle East, and his notorious jet plane is said to be a gift from Kuwait.

accounts for 75% of its national budget.⁶ It was the drop in SACU revenue in 2011 that forced Mswati to look for a loan in the first place. Any regional discussions on SACU are therefore an arm-twister on Swaziland. Economic pressure seems to be the only language that King Mswati understands. The recent criticism of the Swazi Monarchy and call for the release of Mario Masuku and Maxwell Dlamini by the African National Congress (ANC) is a positive signal but needs to be complemented by some economic pressure.

The Position of Regional Bodies

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has largely been quiet on events in Swaziland. The 2013 SADC Electoral Observer Mission declared the Swaziland elections as “*orderly and peaceful*” and noted how the constitution granted freedom of association. While freedom of association is granted by Swaziland’s 2005 constitution, parliamentarians are subject to prior screening by the chiefs before they can be voted for. Unlike SADC, the African Union (AU) has openly criticized the Kingdom’s 2013 election, calling for the government to review the 2005 constitution, respect freedom of expression, association, and assembly. However, the continental body holds little, if any, direct political sway and the statements are purely symbolic. SADC’s active role is thus more important.

SADC’s peacefully resolution of crises in Madagascar and Lesotho shows what the regional body is capable of. However, SADC is compromised to take a strong principled stand with some member states facing challenges of democratic deficit at home. Unless regional stability or one of its major members’ interests are at risk, SADC it seems will remain passive. While the AU has limitations, its statements are not worthless and the more electoral observer missions articulate the undemocratic status of Mswati’s regime the better.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, democratic change in the Kingdom rests on the shoulders of the Swazis themselves. The loss of AGOA, the consequential loss of employment, and the economic downturn of Swaziland, could be the spark that ignites the fire within Swaziland. Previously less affected segments of the population will be hurt and be possibly radicalized thereby increasing pressure on the regime. The very likely economic downturn might also force Mswati to take another trip to the Middle East to find cash. If further loans cannot be obtained there, it’s not impossible that the King will once again turn to South Africa. As with the 2011 loan requirements from South Africa, a loan in 2015 should also come with requirements of democratization. The economic downturn of Swaziland might therefore prove to be the drop that breaks the dike.

⁶ IRIN, “LESOTHO-SWAZILAND: A customs union to prevent failed states”, retrieved from: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/90208/lesotho-swaziland-a-customs-union-to-prevent-failed-states>

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