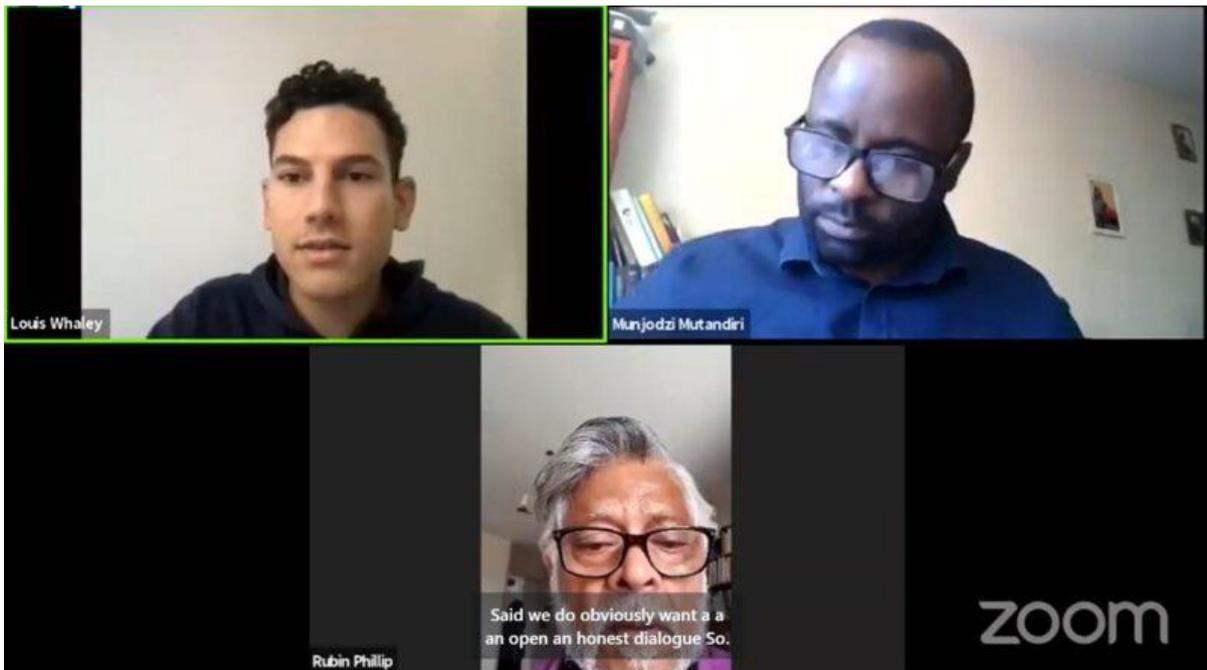


SALO Public Multi-stakeholder Dialogue on eSwatini

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Context/ Importance of the Problem

eSwatini has been experiencing escalating civil unrest and protest since June 2021. By the beginning of November, the civil unrest and protest against the government and the King had left at least 46 people dead and many more injured as security forces continued to use live ammunition to quell the protests. Throughout this period, the Swazi King and his government have continued incarcerating civil society and opposition leaders. In October, one person was reportedly killed and hundreds injured

as pupils and teachers protested against the imprisonment of pro-democracy leaders in the country.

At the centre of the civil unrest and protests are *“the excesses and opulence of the King and his family amid abject poverty [that] is spurring on citizens’ demands for democratisation, civil liberties and greater participation in economic and political affairs of the kingdom.”*¹ The pro-democratic demonstrations in the Kingdom caught the attention of the region and the global community, resulting in several statements of condemnation. Inside eSwatini, the situation continued to deteriorate, and parties and civil society movements such as the banned People’s United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO) and Swaziland Multi-Stakeholders’ Forum (MSF) continued to support demonstrations.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) intervened by engaging the conflicting parties and seeking a peaceful way forward. However, SADC’s efforts yielded little, with King Mswati III showing little genuine interest to engage with his aggrieved citizens.² On its side, the pro-democracy forces had yet to consolidate and present a unified voice.

Against this backdrop, the Southern African Liaison Office (SALO), in partnership with the Norwegian People’s Aid, held a multi-stakeholder public dialogue on the developments in eSwatini. Attended by various structures of society from the region, the public dialogue sought to critically reflect on these developments. Key to this reflection was the need to understand what has happened on the ground, the role of civil society in engaging with the Swazi government and the King, and a way forward to arriving at a common understanding that leaves the Kingdom with greater prosperity. Central to this dialogue was the importance of the church to shape and lead the dialogue amongst all different stakeholders. As one of the contributors stated, SALO *“sees the church leading some of these initiatives because we think that the church is a critical voice in shaping society for the better”*.³

Summary of the Key Issues

The Status of Issues in eSwatini and the Role of the Church

It was indicated during the dialogue that regional church leaders have sought *“to provide solidarity support with the people of eSwatini, conduct a fact-finding mission and [explore] what could be considered the way forward.”* Church leaders are interested in the response of the government concerning the feelings and opinions of the people and finding alternatives to this violent response.

The Eswatini Conference of Churches (ECC) pointed out the need for an inclusive dialogue amongst all stakeholders - including the government - and encouraged the

¹ Liesl Louw-Vaudran and Ringisai Chikohomero. 2021. “eSwatini’s national dialogue mustn’t become a monologue”, *Institute for Security Studies*. 15 November 2021. Accessed on 17 February 2022 from <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/eswatinis-national-dialogue-mustnt-become-a-monologue>

² Ibid

³ SALO Public Dialogue on eSwatini. 12 November 2021

Swazi nation to peacefully submit their petitions in a non-violent manner.⁴ In terms of dialogue to address the current impasse between the pro-democratic movement and the eSwatini government, the church has an important role to play in so far as bringing about healing and reconciliation. Post the uprising, there have been indications that a form of dialogue is starting to take shape.

However, church leaders have been concerned about the slow movement of civil society and trade unions to take critical steps. The current wave of intense repression in eSwatini is not a new phenomenon. Journalists, trade unionists and other activists have been subjected to sustained repression under the rule of King Mswati III, an absolute monarch since he first assumed office in 1986.⁵ With this, there is a long history of solidarity with trade unions in eSwatini and progressive unions in South Africa. The role that civil society and the labour movements are playing remains pivotal to advancing a common voice against the eSwatini government and its conduct.

Regional Solidarity and Labour Movements in SADC

During the dialogue, there was a resounding commitment from labour movements in the region to work with like-minded structures in advocating for a response to what is taking place in eSwatini. The regional labour movement, Southern Africa Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC), further indicated that it would continue to work with the church, religious groups, and civil society on the issue of eSwatini to put pressure on regional bodies.⁶ SATUCC had previously held a Global Week of Action on eSwatini through SADC's tripartite structure. It indicated its continued efforts to put pressure on the Government of South Africa as the head of SADC's Extra-Ordinary Organ Troika on this issue. There is a shared consensus amongst different regional groups (civil society, labour movements and solidarity groups) on the need to build momentum towards placing eSwatini securely on the SADC agenda. Regional labour movements have indicated the importance of speaking in one voice, coming up with collective strategies and raising international solidarity funds to handle such issues.⁷

The role of the Solidarity Movement moving forward is important. People from the region have to take into account that the current issues facing eSwatini are not new and that Swazi citizens have continually appealed for regional support to engage with the government and the King. During the dialogue, emphasis was placed on the need for individual organisations concerned with what is happening in eSwatini to engage collectively and share information and understanding. The church has opened a new door of engagement - what is now required is to bring in other players that have not been engaged on the situation in eSwatini.

⁴ Mhlonishwa Motsa. 2021. "We're Ready to Mediate - Conference of Churches", *Times of Swaziland*, 04 July 2021. Accessed on 15 January 2021 from <http://www.times.co.sz/news/132961-we%E2%80%99re-ready-to-mediate-conference-of-churches.html>

⁵ *New Frame*. 2021. "Oppression and resistance in eSwatini", 6 July 2021. Accessed on 15 January 2022 from <https://www.newframe.com/oppression-and-resistance-in-eswatini/>

⁶ SALO Dialogue, 12 November 2021

⁷ Ibid

The Voices of the Region and Religious Leaders

eSwatini continues to dominate regional agendas regarding the government's treatment of pro-democracy and human rights activists. Civil society groups and activists in eSwatini and South Africa have continued to vow that they would not fold hands while citizens in eSwatini continue to live in constant and persistent fear of prosecution.⁸

The voices of religious leaders are critical in trying to find a solution to the challenges faced by the people of eSwatini. One of the prominent figures in the Catholic Church, the Bishop of Manzini - José Luis Ponce de León - expressed concerns over uncertainties in eSwatini during the period of pro-democracy protests in 2021. He indicated that *"some opposition groups have called to boycott businesses linked (or believed to be linked) to the Royal family in order to put pressure on the government and achieve the very much needed national dialogue"*.⁹ In addition, the security forces in Swazi cities are present and visible on the streets. *"We hope that all interlocutors are able to control the risk that is being taken. Young people are frustrated, tired of waiting and see no signs of a better future"*.¹⁰

The Call for National Dialogue

Analysts and human rights activists viewed the visit by President Cyril Ramaphosa as a type of turning point, because they believe SADC has not dealt with this issue effectively in the past. The meeting between the South African President (the Chair of the SADC Troika at the time) and the King yielded some promising agreements. A declaration was issued by the two governments, confirming that they will engage all stakeholders to set up a platform for national dialogue.

During the SALO public dialogue on eSwatini, civil society groups and human rights activists indicated a slow movement in terms of getting the dialogue process going. It emerged that there is little progress which presents a major concern to the citizenry of eSwatini.¹¹ The general sentiment is that the region and prominent actors like the South African government are not moving at the right pace to address the issues facing eSwatini. The Swaziland Solidarity Network (SSN) voiced its concerns regarding the role that SADC must play in eSwatini, indicating that SADC *"was out of touch with the volatile situation in the Kingdom of eSwatini"*.¹²

⁸ Jonisayi Maromo. 2021. "Ramaphosa's trip to eSwatini welcomed, but activists demand candidness", *IOL*. Accessed on 15 January 2022 from <https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/ramaphosas-trip-to-eswatini-welcomed-but-activists-demand-candidness-965051a8-9bdd-4f5e-a8c7-48215d14c02a>

⁹ Magdalene Kahiu. 2021. "Catholic Bishop of Eswatini's Manzini Diocese Decries Lack of Closure to Country's Protest", *ACI Africa*. Accessed on 15 January 2022 from <https://www.aciafrica.org/index.php/news/4227/catholic-bishop-of-eswatinis-manzini-diocese-decries-lack-of-closure-to-countrys-protest#:~:text=The%20Catholic%20Bishop%20of%20Manzini,of%20at%20least%2050%20people.>

¹⁰ SALO *Public Dialogue*. 2021. "Dialogue on Eswatini". 12 November 2021.

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Molaole Montsho. 2021. "SADC out of touch with the situation in eSwatini, says Swaziland Solidarity Network", 5 July 2021. Accessed on 04 May 2022 from <https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/sadc-out-of-touch-with-the-situation-in-eswatini-says-swaziland-solidarity-network-eab69d74-86e4-5ee8-bee3-620fd8181c2e>

Key Issues and Way Forward

The proposed national dialogue and the envisaged terms of reference are critical entry points to ensure that the dialogue is inclusive and open, and holds the Swazi government and other stakeholders accountable. Given the state of affairs that continues to affect the lives of the Swazi people, this process must be transparent so that it serves the best interest of the people. The people are agitating for social change, - the Swazi citizenry is agitating for a change of governance and a system of multiparty democracy. The current protests against the monarch and government point to the continued politically motivated criminal charges as one of the key issues that the national dialogue must address.

In eSwatini, human rights and pro-democracy activists have been charged under the Public Order Act for looting and arson. They are demanding that these criminal charges are dropped. This also applies to the two parliamentarians that have continued to serve prison time under similar politically motivated charges. Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza and Mthandeni Dube have remained in jail since the 15th of July 2021. Their arrest came as police hardened their stance against pro-democracy movements.¹³ The two were charged under the country's Suppression of Terrorism Act.

Given the status of issues that are currently taking place in the Swazi Kingdom, civil society and other social organisations have expressed the need for SADC to take a firm stance in trying to deal with the political and social challenges facing the country. The regional body must recognise that eSwatini needs a truly inclusive dialogue. If the people of eSwatini are to see justice, peace, and progress, they must be engaged and share their views with the government. The dialogue heard about the need to push SADC to do the right thing. Platforms like SALO dialogues are critical in advancing the voices of the solidarity movement. The role of the solidarity movement is pivotal in trying to find a lasting solution to issues facing eSwatini.

Recommendations

The SALO dialogue indicated that the solidarity movement, both in eSwatini and the region, does not appreciate the silence of SADC on the current issues unfolding in the country. Pro-democratic movements in eSwatini have voiced their disappointment regarding the indifference of the governments in the region and SADC as a regional body.¹⁴ According to PUDEMO president Mlungisi Makhanya, "*what SADC has shown is that it has no interest in the citizens of the region*".¹⁵ He argued that the approach of

¹³ Lenin Ndebele. 2022. "Observer team heads to Eswatini to check on two opposition MPs arrested nine months ago", 13 April 2022. Accessed on 25 April 2022 from <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/observer-team-heads-to-eswatini-to-check-on-two-opposition-mps-arrested-nine-months-ago-20220413>

¹⁴ Nation Nyoka and Ihsaan Haffejee. 2021. "SADC Fails the People of eSwatini", 20 August 2021. Accessed on 20 April 2022 from <https://www.newframe.com/sadc-fails-the-people-of-eswatini/>

¹⁵ Ibid

the regional body toward the issue of eSwatini serves the interests of King Mswati III and his regime.¹⁶

On SADC

- SADC should move quickly to support efforts to carry out democratic and human rights reforms in eSwatini.
- The regional body has a responsibility to ensure that the current situation does not deteriorate further.
- There are general concerns that SADC is not being proactive in finding solutions to the eSwatini crisis and civil society and human rights groups expressed a sense of no confidence in any of the organisation's efforts to address the matter.
- There must be greater encouragement for all regional stakeholders to take a solidarity approach towards the attainment of multiparty democracy and human rights recognition in eSwatini.
- The regional approach must seek to protect human rights by taking decisive action against violations taking place in eSwatini.
- The fact-finding mission, which purported to speak to all "*stakeholders*", ignored eSwatini's banned main opposition party, PUDEMO. It is pivotal that the political opposition engages on addressing the issues facing eSwatini.

On eSwatini Government and Solidarity Movements

- The eSwatini government should ensure that security forces operate within the established laws.
- The government and the monarch must put in place a range of measures to safeguard citizens against violence and prosecute all unlawful use of force by the security forces.
- The latest wave of protests is a wake-up call for the region and the Swazi government to understand the importance of the calls for reform.
- SADC actors must acknowledge and understand the critical element of regional solidarity, which is to press the eSwatini government to usher in a culture of political plurality, accountability, and respect for the human rights of all eSwatini people.

Conclusion

The current wave of intense repression in eSwatini is not a new phenomenon. The kingdom has had many instances where the citizens complain about the abuse of the monarch's rule and the lack of democratisation. Journalists, trade unionists and other activists have been subjected to sustained repression under the rule of King Mswati III. The SALO dialogue heard that under King Mswati III, freedom of speech, assembly and association have all been restricted. In the current state of affairs in eSwatini,

¹⁶ Ibid

dissidents have been subject to arbitrary searches of their homes, arrests, torture and imprisonment.¹⁷ There have been repeated claims of extrajudicial killings.¹⁸

On 2 July 2021, a SADC statement issued by Mokgweetsi Masisi, the president of Botswana, acknowledged the existing challenges facing eSwatini. In his statement, President Masisi called on “*all stakeholders to channel their grievances through the established national structures*”. The regional body had envisaged that national dialogue is necessary amongst all stakeholders to address the issues in eSwatini. Indeed, during the SALO dialogue, civil society indicated the need to engage on “*a dialogue process, to have a multi-party democracy and elect their own leaders.*”¹⁹ The demands were clear - the violence that has taken place is not acceptable. The envisioned national dialogue should realise the fact that people were brutalised, people died, and other people still have bullets in their bodies. The dialogue emphasised the fact that the situation in eSwatini is dire and needs regional attention as soon as possible.

The analysis and recommendations included in this brief do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the brief are the sole responsibility of SALO and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.

About the Southern African Liaison Office:



The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

¹⁷ *New Frame*. 2021. “Oppression and resistance in eSwatini”, 6 July 2021. Accessed on 15 January 2022 from <https://www.newframe.com/oppression-and-resistance-in-eswatini/>

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ SALO *Public Dialogue*. 2021. “Dialogue on Eswatini”. 12 November 2021.

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