

# Last lap to multiparty democracy?

## Labour and politics in Swaziland

Swaziland is governed by a repressive monarchy. **Sikelela M Dlamini** tells how this dictatorship has successfully caused splits between formal opposition parties and labour and also within the labour movement itself. He describes however how the disunity in the labour camp is being overcome.

Swaziland is a tiny land-locked southern African state, surrounded by its larger neighbours South Africa and Mozambique to the west and east. Just 17 000km of land, the country was a British protectorate alongside Botswana and Lesotho in the colonial era only regaining its independence in 1968.

While post-independence Botswana and Lesotho experimented with different brands of multiparty democracy side by side with traditional dynasties and monarchies, the rulers of Swaziland saw multiparty politics as a precondition imposed by the British as an instrument through which self-rule would be restored.

As a result, in 1973, King Sobhuza II repealed the Westminster independence constitution and decreed that all executive and legislative authority be vested in himself. This effectively outlawed multiparty politics and affirmed Swaziland's retreat to absolute monarchism.

### ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

Swaziland remains sub-Saharan Africa's only absolute monarchy. The socio-economic ramifications of this political shift have been felt ever since. It resulted initially in

half-hearted agitation for reform which made some gains in the last decade thanks to the sporadic efforts of organised labour. It has, however, proved hard to sustain the push towards socio-political reform in an increasingly murky political milieu.

In 1978 King Sobhuza II introduced *Tinkhundla* (see *SALB 30.1*), a political experiment characterised by a crude fusion of traditional authority and contemporary forms of rule. According to this traditional-modern approach to public administration, parliamentary elections are conducted every five years. Candidates contest seats in a bicameral parliament consisting of Houses of Assembly and Senate based on 'individual merit' and they may not represent a political constituency manifesto or group interest.

Sobhuza's son, King Mswati III, succeeded his father in 1986. After much resistance, Mswati succumbed to the relentless pressure from labour unions and their internal and international solidarity partners to restore a written constitution.

The constitution that was signed into law in 2005, however, only formalised the status quo. For

instance, the king is both above the constitution and immune to prosecution. He appoints more than a third of members of a parliament that is devoid of opposition, all cabinet ministers, judges, and influential portfolios of public office. All are accountable only to the king as the appointing authority.

The constitution also has a Bill of Rights which guarantees peaceful assembly, association, and freedom of expression. On the other hand, the same document forbids political party participation in parliamentary elections rendering political parties ornamental. General elections every five years have nothing to do with regime change save for the routine rotation of powerless faces in a thinly disguised dictatorial government.

Swaziland's political configuration did not come about as an accident. It was a deliberate strategy for the royal rulers to politicise Swazi culture, and to tactically pull at the heartstrings of the general populace who has been warned against active politics because it pits subjects against God-given kingship. Questioning or challenging traditional authority is sacrilege and is, at best, frowned upon as culturally un-Swazi by many Swazi citizens.

An influential prince recently claimed that local journalists would be 'showered with God's blessings' if they stopped reporting about sensitive royal affairs.

### POLITICS AND SPLIT IN LABOUR

The unclear nature of Swaziland's politics is attributable to the unresolved question: which is the driving force for social reform - political parties or labour federations? This is also hardly accidental.

Government has consistently condemned labour unions' dabbling in politics, or condemned political formations for interfering in labour disputes that should only involve workers and their employers. This is a case of the state resorting to the age-old divide-and-rule strategy.

Unions, on the other hand, have always argued that the decisions of politicians over such matters as labour legislation or public expenditure directly affect labour practices and relations. In fact, labour issues and politics are inseparable in Swaziland and attempts at separation are mere political manipulation.

Workers constitute society's think-tank and its generators of wealth. They are also subject to the exploitation of the public-private sector capitalist partnership. In Swaziland where political opposition is officially proscribed, a politicised labour movement is desirable and unavoidable. This is the reason that labour has always been the driving force behind activism for change. It is also this role as the 'official' unofficial opposition that defines strained relations between state and organised labour.

It was organised labour that staged the biggest and longest mass protest in 1997 and demanded, a written constitution that was eventually promulgated in 2005. It

was organised labour too that forced government to amend a restrictive Industrial Relations Act (1996) as a precondition for retaining Swaziland's status in the USA's African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and Generalized System of Preferences (GSP).

However despite these achievements and an emerging enabling environment and global support, labour still fell short of pushing for regime change. The reasons were related to state propaganda.

State propaganda is greatly aided by state monopoly on radio and television, and to self-censorship owing to media restrictions. This propaganda worked tirelessly to drive a wedge between trade unions which felt that the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions' (SFTU) demand for a return to multiparty politics had little to do with bread-and-butter issues they had mandated it to raise with government, and those unions which felt they had the power to change the political situation. The unfortunate outcome was a breakaway faction that gave birth to the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL).

The SFTU-SFL split badly weakened the labour force's bargaining power and was a victory for the state, which for some time has not had to look over its shoulder when making unpopular decisions.

A positive for labour has been its instant realisation of its mistake, resulting in the recent establishment of a Labour Coordinating Council (LCC). Its mandate is to mend fissures between the SFTU, SFL, and the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) and re-negotiate unity. Indications are that the next May Day celebrations will be a

collective event, marking labour's reunion.

Government has wasted no time in exploiting the divisions within labour. It introduced the Public Service Bill in 2009 which prohibits state employees from political affiliation. This legislation means that government has achieved its dream where no Swazi is entitled to engage in political activity. This is one of the absurd contradictions of the new constitutional era.

The Public Service Bill has heightened labour's awareness of how self-destructive and counterproductive the split has been and how it has advanced the interests of the state. This has galvanised labour to seek unity.

An opportunity for labour and political parties to find common ground and to act in rare unity of purpose was the recent death of political activist and unionist, Siphon Jele.

Jele was arrested at a SFTU May Day celebration in Manzini in a People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo) t-shirt. Pudemo is the only recognisable political opposition party which is proscribed in Swaziland in terms of the controversial Suppression of Terrorism Act (STA) of 2008. Jele died while still in police custody. The police claimed he had committed suicide.

Labour federations and their Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF) coalition partners, including banned Pudemo and its youth wing Swayoco, the Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (NNLC), Swaziland National Association of Ex-Mine Workers (SNEMA) staged a protest march to deliver a petition to the prime minister. It demanded an independent inquest into Jele's death and threatened rolling mass action should this not happen.

The Swaziland Democracy Campaign (SDC), an activist-based

joint Swaziland-South Africa wing of the SUDF launched in February 2010 in Johannesburg has since entered the fray. Its mandate is to accelerate Swaziland's return to multiparty democracy. SDC launched a civil disobedience and defiance campaign at the end of June 2010. Mobilisation is already underway as labour and political actors inside Swaziland for the first time are rallying behind the SDC for what is often described as the 'last lap' towards multiparty democracy.

The rolling mass protests will culminate in a global march to coincide with Swaziland's Independence Day on 6 September 2010.

Meanwhile, SFTU, SFL, Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and their international solidarity partners have persuaded the recent International Labour Organization (ILO) Conference in Geneva to institute a formal investigation into human rights violations in Swaziland.

The ILO investigation will coincide with the SDC's series of civil disobedience activities. The political climate inside Swaziland is also increasingly synonymous with a state of emergency where arbitrary police raids, arrests and torture of political activists is rampant.

The ILO investigation will determine, among other things, the extent to which sanctions against the Swazi regime are justified. If sanctions materialise, the Swazi regime may find that it has no further excuse to avoid negotiations with Pudemo to decide on the path that a regime change should take. **LB**

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*Activist Alex Langwenya's house which was bombed by the state.*

### Truth about Sipho Stephen Jele

We knew they were lying  
Through their foul breath  
The explanation they gave  
Was as hollow as a festering carcass  
The picture they tried to paint with your blood  
Congealed and refused to be spread

We knew they were lying  
Through their rotten teeth  
When they hinted an unstable mental state  
That yours were the typical actions of an extremist  
The story they tried to weave  
With the threads of your life  
Snapped and curled in their greasy fingers

We knew they were lying  
Through their swollen bellies  
When they said you did not belong  
And could not be laid to rest  
In the land which was yours  
The land that resonated in all that you did

We knew they were lying  
We knew they were lying

We remember  
Your seriousness  
The endless meetings you sat through  
The resolve after earlier incarcerations  
To carry on  
To keep going  
When so many others did not  
The quiet anger you kept within you  
Alongside the irrepressible laughter  
The mischievous humour  
That undeniable love of life

That's why we know  
They were lying

Steve Faulkner

*Sipho Jele was murdered by the Swazi police while in custody after arrest for wearing a banned t-shirt at a May Day 2010 rally*