

Swaziland

A saga of royalist power mongering

Recently stories of torture and escalating harassment of pro democracy forces have been steadily filtering out of Swaziland. Yet as **Xolani Simelane**, Secretary for International Affairs of the Swaziland Youth Congress explains, brutality and anti-democratic practices have long underpinned this small monarchy.

For many years the People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo) and its youth league the Swaziland Youth Congress (Swayoco) have waged a struggle in Swaziland.

Recently, 16 members of the pro-democracy movement were arrested in Swaziland and charged with high treason, attempted murder, sedition and malicious damage to property following a spate of bombings targeting state buildings. The wife of one of the accused was tortured to death by the Swazi police. A doctor's report showed that she died from damage to internal organs probably caused by heavy blows. She chose death rather than implicate her husband and comrades.

Furthermore, a new constitution has been promulgated by King Mswati 111 which entrenches his rule as the last absolute monarch in sub-Saharan Africa. Below, using clips of historical background, I unpack developments in the struggle for democracy.

PUDEMO'S STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

Colonial rule in the tiny kingdom of Swaziland was defeated in 1968 through militant worker struggles. A Westminster constitution was installed with fundamental rights. In an election that was held in 1972, King Sobhuza 11's party faced a reversal of its previous absolute majority in the legislature for the first time. This shift prompted Sobhuza to issue a decree that banned all political parties, save for his own, the Imbokodvo Nationalist Movement (INM), an alliance of Swazi conservatives and local and foreign capital.

The king now ruled with his brothers and relatives since the decree vested all legislative, judicial and executive powers in himself. This led to high levels of corruption, nepotism and violation of people's rights. King Sobhuza promulgated laws that made the system appear legal and legitimised the regime in the eyes of the people.

The 'tinkhundla' system of government was characterised by a bizarre ideology which rested on myths about culture and the powers of the king. An education system has socialised children into this cultural and royalist identity. An elaborate system of propaganda, censorship and press curbs were put in place in order to control the minds and win the hearts of the masses. King Sobhuza also used a range of religious justifications to augment his power telling his subjects that the Lord had blessed Swazis 'by providing them with a king'.

Inevitably, this system based on lies and deception has lurched from crisis to crisis over the years. In each of these crises the system sought adaptive measures, not to transform but to reform and further entrench itself. With these reforms, the system sought legitimacy for what was in essence the same old oppressive and illegitimate tendencies. Accompanying such reforms went brutal coercion.

In recent times the main victims of this brute force have been the liberation movement Pudemo, Swayoco, students, workers and any rural communities who have challenged King Mswati's authoritarian rule. Some have been evicted from their homesteads of Mkhweli and Macetjeni by Mswati and his family because they have resisted the tyranny. Others have been arrested and charged with treason and sedition for their claims to live in a free country where



Cosatu demonstration in March this year

everyone is respected.

Yet people have shown their desire to be free by supporting Pudemo and the mass democratic movement despite harassment and state terror. The workers of Swaziland have used their collective strength to resist; the business community has united behind the democratic cause; and the youth have been at the cutting edge of struggle despite constant harassment. Many activists have been forced into exile through Mswati's security forces' low intensity warfare against the people but resistance has continued. They are supported by the Swaziland Solidarity Network (SSN), an umbrella body of international activists and sympathisers with the Swazi struggle which has declared that it stands by 'the people of Swaziland' and 'their cause for freedom'.

In May 2004, breaking all diplomatic protocol, the then American ambassador to Swaziland, James McGee, made a public statement for which the Swazi regime will not forgive him. On Workers Day he called on the workers of Swaziland to unite and be committed to bringing change in the country, "You are here today to mould the future of your country, a society that will benefit all those in it, not just a few individuals."

Earlier on McGee had met with the president of Pudemo, Mario Masuku, to discuss the political crisis in the country which the authorities had condemned. Most diplomats in Swaziland have come to recognise Pudemo as a viable alternative to Swaziland's political mess. Pudemo remains committed despite setbacks to the goal of a constitutional multiparty democracy.



Cosatu demonstration outside the Swazi Consulate in Braamfontein, Johannesburg

CONSTITUTION-MAKING PROCESS

Under pressure from the liberation movement, Mswati was forced to institute constitutional reforms, having ruled by decree for three decades. But from the outset the process was flawed as he appointed his brothers, sisters and in-laws to draw up a constitution. Pudemo rejected the process and mobilised Swazis and the international world

to reject the reforms which did not recognise the collective voice of the church, workers, political parties, youth or women's organisations.

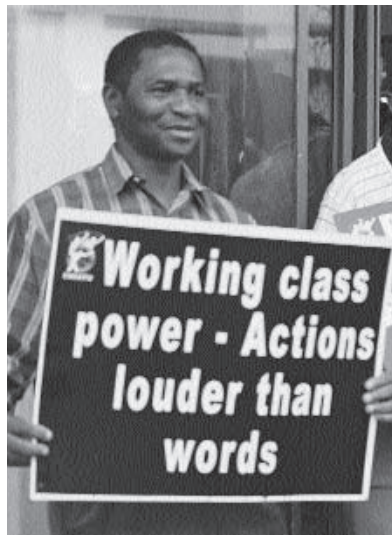
Don McKinnon, the Commonwealth Secretary, however supported and continued to fund the authoritarian monarchy. This was despite the denial of people's basic right to belong to a political party of their choice. Political party participation in national politics is prohibited under The Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland Act, 2005. Dr Jabulani Matsebula, a Swazi exile in Australia wrote that "the Commonwealth Secretariat, a recent major player in Swaziland politics ignored Pudemo's call for a collective peaceful approach to the political crisis. Instead, the Commonwealth under the leadership of Don McKinnon, advised the Government of Swaziland to shut out political parties from the constitution making process."

The new constitution upholds the Tinkhundla parliamentary system with its failure to provide a system of political accountability. Members of parliament, right up to the prime minister, are accountable to the King and the royal family alone through the Swazi National Council.

Citizens in other countries have fought against this 'big man political mentality'. In November 2005 Kenyans overwhelmingly voted against the Draft Constitution which concentrated executive power in the president. Conceding defeat, the Kenyan President, Mwai Kibaki in a Presidential Press Statement, told the public that "this referendum, whose objective was to approve or reject a new constitution, has come out with a clear verdict that the proposed constitution is not

acceptable to the majority of Kenyans. This is a major leap in the consolidation of democratic governance in the country." However, in Swaziland, the monarchy and the Commonwealth Secretariat have denied Swazis the right to test the Draft Constitution in a referendum.

The Swazi government however is not sure how to implement the new royal constitution. In all likelihood the king will decide on the outcome of a judicial disputes



because he has 'constitutional powers' to reverse decisions. In February in the *Times of Swaziland*, Prime Minister Themba Dlamini conceded that he is not sure if political parties are allowed. He thinks they are unlawful yet the constitution says everyone has a right to freedom of association. There are many other clauses of the constitution which are contradictory and inconsistent with statements made by the king and Swazi government to the international community through the state owned media.

The constitutional process has been the most contentious issue in

the history of Swaziland. Never has one issue so completely dominated Swazi politics over an entire decade. There have been general strikes, political rallies and protests. All of these have been forcibly disbanded.

During this period Swaziland has undergone severe economic decline as investors left the country in large numbers because of the political instability. Bombings of state buildings have marked a new period of resistance. In all, there have been over 20 bombings with one killing a security guard at the deputy prime minister's offices. Some see this as the people of Swaziland embarking on a new strategy to force the authorities to listen. Others believe these are acts of 'terrorism'. The government blames Pudemo although the movement disassociates itself from these acts while explaining that it will not discourage other forms of struggle which attempt to bring democracy to Swaziland.

THE LIBERATION MOVEMENT AND BOMBINGS

Recently 16 members of Swayoco and Pudemo were arrested in connection with the bombings. Arrests occurred during December 2005 and January 2006, although targeted harassment of individuals and their families started two months earlier. There have been reports of torture, denial of health care, poor nutrition and general ill-treatment of political prisoners. All this whilst Mswati sings to the world during his endless globe-trotting expeditions, that "Swaziland does not have any political prisoners, or political deaths".

Reacting to these developments, Pudemo's Masuku observed that, "The people are tired of being beaten every time they hold

peaceful meetings and rallies. The state has created so many enemies for itself and it cannot therefore blame Pudemo for the recent bombings. Even though all the accused are members of the movement, Pudemo itself remains a peaceful organisation which seeks to solve the political problems in a peaceful way as demonstrated by its over 20 years of peaceful struggles."

A few days before his arrest, the secretary general of Pudemo, IB Dlamini when addressing a gathering of Swayoco in Mpumalanga, South Africa, because political meetings are banned in Swaziland, said, "the government has imposed a war on us. We are not violent but the state is. We are a peaceful organisation but the state meets all our efforts with arrests, guns, teargas and torture. The people's patience is not unlimited. The people have a right to defend themselves in any way possible".

Recently one of the accused, Mduduzi Dlamini, was tried separately under a cloud of controversy. The media, Pudemo, and his relatives were not informed of the day of his high profile trial on charges of treason, sedition, attempted murder and malicious damage to property. He pleaded guilty to all charges and was sentenced to two years, half suspended on condition he is not found guilty of a similar offence and because he was a first time offender. According to the existing laws treason carries a death sentence. So what happened?

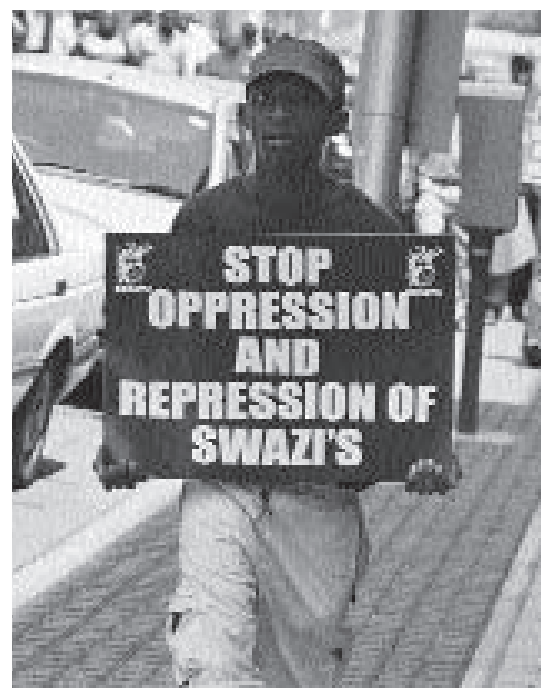
The Director of Public Prosecution (DPP), who is the wife of the attorney general and a sister-in-law to Mswati, did not oppose the lenient sentence. Earlier, the same DPP in a January article of the *Swazi Observer* had strongly

opposed bail applications arguing that the public was afraid of the detainees and that "they will endanger the maintenance of law and order and national security". On 17 January, 2006, the acting director in the DPP's office, Mumsy Dlamini, again opposed bail applications.

Clearly Mduduzi Dlamini was persuaded to become a state witness and possibly give false evidence against the other 15. The state media announced "one of the suspects has agreed to become a state witness", although the state quickly disputed this.

Corruption, misuse of public monies, poor economic performance, neglect of basic public services, the highest HIV infection rate in the world, high levels of poverty, unemployment, mass retrenchments and a multi million scandal in government have badly damaged the government's credibility. It is now trying desperately to hide behind the 'terrorist threat' to avoid dealing with these issues. Through this plea of guilty, the state hopes to tarnish Pudemo in the public's eye.

A day after Dlamini's guilty plea, another member of Swayoco, Scelo Dlamini, filed papers in the high court. He stated that the chief investigating officer Inspector Khethokwakhe Ndlangamandla of the Serious Crimes Investigating Unit (Ukhozi) and a team of about 20 police took him to a feared forest, tortured him throughout the night by suffocating him with a plastic bag and threatening to shoot him if he did not sign a pre-written statement that implicated, among others, the Pudemo president and secretary general, Swayoco president Alex Langwenya, his deputy, S'celo Motsa, former Swayoco deputy president Penuel



Malinga and Swayoco national organiser Kenneth Kunene. Kunene, who skipped the country and another youth, Muzi Phakathi, had their photos displayed throughout the country and on local media as the most wanted terrorists.

The hysterical propaganda campaign against Pudemo makes one believe that the system is projecting its own evils onto the liberation movement. If the international community, especially SADC and the African Union, do not act promptly, a bloody war will erupt in Swaziland.

Progressive organisations in South Africa, notably the SA Communist Party, Cosatu, and the ANC Youth League have condemned the Swazi regime and offered material and moral support to the many Swazi exiles and host meetings of the Swazi progressive movement. Also, the bold declaration by the newly appointed British ambassador to Swaziland in the 16 February 2006 *Times of Swaziland* that "Swaziland must unban political parties" should be commended. It is never too late to engage King Mswati to begin the route taken by many African states in the spirit of Nepad and the African Renaissance.

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