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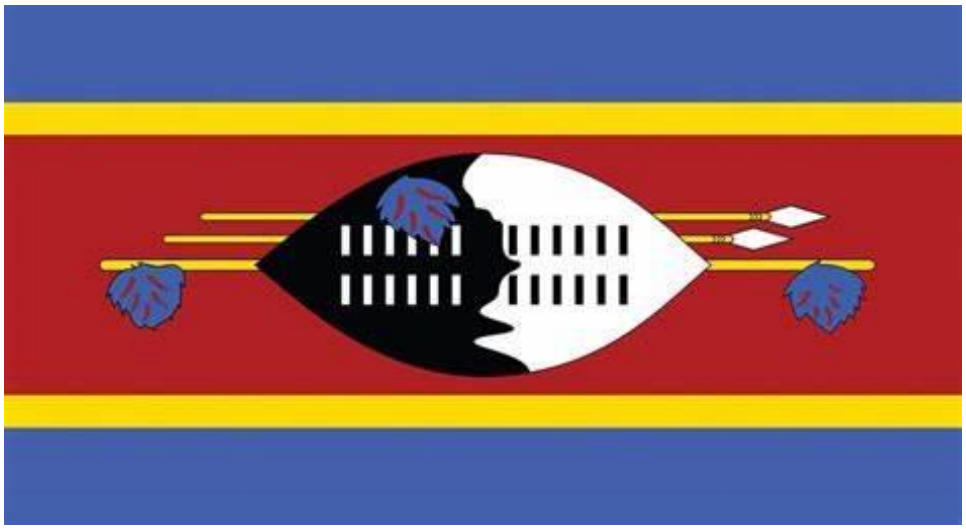
Policy Brief **14 April 2022** **Zoom Online Platform**

Public Dialogue on Eswatini: Building Regional Civil Society Solidarity on Eswatini



By Athenkosi Thoba

Introduction

The Kingdom of Eswatini has experienced a series of protests against the monarchy and the need for democratisation since late June 2021. The country has since seen months of pro-democracy protests. About 100 people have died in the violence, many of them killed by the military and police. The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) held a public multi-stakeholder dialogue to engage on the unrest. Notably, Mary Pais Da Silva stated that "*last year [2021], we had the civil unrest that resulted in the deaths of more than 100 Swazis, the arrests of more than 700 and the injuries and maiming of more than 200*".[1] The crisis has now descended into violent conflict, with the bombing of state institutions and attacks against security forces on the rise. King

[1] Mary Pais Da Silva. 2022. "SALO public dialogue on Eswatini: Building regional civil society solidarity on Eswatini", *SALO Webinar*, 14 April 2022

Mswati III has continued with repressive tactics toward protestors, as well as continued abductions of civil society members.

Thus far, the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) interventions have not resulted in any positive outcomes. In its previous attempt, the SADC Heads of State had mandated the SADC Secretariat to provide terms of reference for Inclusive National Dialogue in Eswatini. During his visit to the kingdom, President Cyril Ramaphosa and King Mswati III resolved that the Kingdom of Eswatini will embark on a process towards the establishment of a national dialogue forum.[2] The agreement emphasised that the SADC Secretariat would work closely with the government of Eswatini to draft terms of reference for that national dialogue forum. The king has not yet provided concrete timelines for the traditional Sibaya engagements, and have not responded to SADC's terms of reference to proceed with a national dialogue.

As of April 2022, nothing had advanced and SADC had not given any indication of the progress for the draft of the terms of reference. In this public dialogue, SALO invited key speakers to give an analysis of the situation in Eswatini, SADC's response to the situation, and what is to be done by not only SADC and SADC member states but also civil society to deal with the current situation. The dialogue also sought to build transnational solidarity networks and solidarity with the people of Eswatini in their engagement with relevant stakeholders to start the process of democratisation in Eswatini.

Contextual Analysis

The existing social and political context in Eswatini is that ordinary Swazis suffer from poverty and repression. The people on the ground have raised their concerns about the situation and civil society groups have sought support from the region and the international community to provide well-needed humanitarian aid. During the current uprising and pro-democracy protests, some of the families whose breadwinners were killed have been left with no food on the table and are further impoverished. While this is taking place, the "*Eswatini government continues to ignore the constitutional provisions on human rights and use law enforcement and legal instruments to crush calls for justice and democratic reform*".[3]

The current situation requires all stakeholders, especially those who are coming from the SADC region, to reflect on how, since the 1973 Decree, the Eswatini people have been living under oppression and suppression, with no political freedom, and no political participation. In April 1973, the Royal supremacy of the late King Mswati the Second banned all political parties and declared the State of Emergency.[4] The

[2] Jonisayi Maromo. 2021. "Ramaphosa and Mswati meeting paves way for national dialogue in eSwatini", *IOL*, 3 November 2021. Accessed on 25 November 2022 from https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/ramaphosa-and-mswati-meeting-paves-way-for-national-dialogue-in-eswatini-ff6260b8-eacc-4427-9888-dc857346ba20

[3] *Amnesty International*. 2021. "Eswatini the System Is Broken". 22 November 2021. Accessed on 1 December 2022 from https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2021/11/eswatini-the-system-is-broken/

[4] *Human Rights Watch*. 2022. "Eswatini (formerly Swaziland)", Country Report, 2022. Accessed on 10 December 2022 from https://www.hrw.org/africa/eswatini#:~:text=A%201973%20decree%20banning%20political,and%20to%20dissolve%20the%20Parliament.

introduction of that 1973 Decree has since witnessed suffering by ordinary people in Eswatini. Over the years, violence and militarisation by the state against citizens have increased rapidly. Whenever Eswatini citizens want to protest peacefully to complain about the issue that is affecting their citizenship and the lack of democratic space in the country, the government and the monarchy respond with violence and further repression.

The Role of Political Party Assemble and National Dialogue

It is critical is to establish a collective political input that would give a robust response to this crisis. So far, civil society groups in Eswatini, including political parties, have started to organise what they call a 'political party assembly'. According to Mary Pais Da Silva (*Multi Stakeholders Forum*), the objective of this assembly is "*to try to speak to these political issues, because it is a political problem, political crisis in nature, and therefore needs a political intervention, a political solution*".[5]

The assembly has created a five-point framework as a strategy, which needs to be achieved to address the political crisis:

1. An all-inclusive, externally mediated political dialogue or a negotiation process. The all-inclusive dialogue must have SADC as a key player and should bring in experts and perhaps respectable members or former state leaders. This is to ensure that everything is done neutrally.
2. The unconditional unbanning of all political parties in Eswatini.
3. The creation of a transitional authority, because the current government has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the ordinary Swazi. This transitional authority will be comprised of all stakeholders and will guide the country through the negotiation process.
4. The writing and adoption of a new democratic constitution, given the fact that the current constitution was written under a process that was not inclusive, and one that side-lined many of the voices of the Swazis. A new democratic constitution must carry the aspirations of the Swazi nation.
5. Lastly, an introduction of a multiparty dispensation founded on the rule of law. It must reflect the principles of equality, non-discrimination and respect for the law.

During the visit of the envoys sent by the SADC Organ on Peace and Security, the Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF) in Eswatini proposed an engagement with SADC about what it called 'talks about talks'. This kind of platform would agree on the creation of a conducive climate and setting up of a table for proper and genuine dialogue. These talks about talks would have signposts and a blueprint of how this will look to ensure that when these 'talks about talks' are conducted, all the political prisoners are unconditionally released. This entails that the government would have to

[5] Mary Pais Da Silva. 2022. "SALO public dialogue on Eswatini: Building regional civil society solidarity on Eswatini", *SALO Webinar,* 14 April 2022

unconditionally withdraw the charges against those political exiles. The key aspect of this for all parties is the need to sit and discuss and agree on the rules of engagement of the process including timeframes.

The Role of the Youth and Civil Society

The current situation is pointing to the fact that the King still wants to continue to be in charge and close down any possible process of democratisation. The kingdom also showed resistance to establishing a platform and agreeing on the key terms of reference for the envisaged national dialogue. Furthermore, the king withdrew Eswatini from an important SADC Troika meeting. Maxwell Dlamini (*Secretary General of SWAYOCO*) stated that the King did not even attend the meeting, nor did he send a representative.[6]

In order to advance the call for democratisation, respect for human rights and individual liberties, it is pivotal that those structures and isolated programmes of action come together. This should also include programmes that involve other solidarity movements like NEHAWU and the EFF in South Africa. Maxwell Dlamini indicated that his organisation continues to do some programmes with NEHAWU and the EFF.[7] This helps to avoid the existing lack of coordination and coordination.

In spite of the existing solidarity programmes in the region, it is also critical that stakeholders assist the people of Eswatini to build strong political parties and civil society movements. This could assist ordinary Swazis to challenge the continued repression under the monarchy. As Dlamini argues, "*this is speaking from the issue that for over 49 years, political parties have been banned, and all civil society organisations, they've been having a heavy clamp down on them*".[8] Therefore, regional solidarity structures can help and assist these organisations. It is critical to capacitate them in terms of strategies and approaches to advance calls for human rights protection and opening up democratic space.

Such a huge task requires a clear mandate from pro-democracy movements that can engage effectively on the key issues facing the Eswatini people. At the centre of such an mandate is the need to also consider the youth perspective. This will help bring the issue of Eswatini back onto the agenda and also into the spotlight since it seems to be losing its momentum. In order to achieve this, there must be a clear strategy to strengthen the Swazi Solidarity Network and revive the Swazi Democratic campaign.

If such approaches do not come with tangible results, the regional solidarity movement should engage on how to create a body that will lead the solidarity programme. This would entail "*bringing the trade unions, the students, the progressive churches, and all stakeholders in South Africa and also in the region so that there could be a very strong and clear campaign for Democracy in Swaziland*".[9] Lessons can also be learned from other regional struggles like the Zimbabwe campaign, especially at its

[6] Maxwell Dlamini. 2022. "SALO public dialogue on Eswatini: Building regional civil society solidarity on Eswatini", *SALO Webinar,* 14 April 2022
[7] Ibid
[8] Ibid
[9] Ibid

peak in 2008.[10] The Zimbabwe campaign was well coordinated and it was able to bring in various organs of organisations and stakeholders to play important roles.

There is an important role that must be played by the youth and the student movement in the region to advance the democratic cause in Eswatini. The student movements in the region like the Southern African Students Union (SASU) could engage other structures and develop a programme of action around students. They can create debates and discussions in institutions of higher learning in order to keep what is happening in Eswatini on the agenda.

In terms of the civic society inside Eswatini, it must be sharpened and assisted by other regional structures so that it can run campaigns and advocacy programmes. The Eswatini civil society must be capacitated so that it can develop programmes of action on its own. A well-coordinated and unified programme of action can challenge the King to come to the table and open negotiations. In all this, it is envisioned that the SADC region could play a key role in stressing the critical issues facing the kingdom. According to Dlamini, NEHAWU has also played a role, "*including those border blockades, fully realising the necessity of money coming in and funding the monarchy in Swaziland*".[11]

The Role of the Regional Solidarity Network

The SALO dialogue also engaged in the importance of transnational solidarity networks. The kinds of solidarity networks that are trying to fight for the plight of the Swazi people are critical. The people of Eswatini fully understand that any efforts for democratisation in their country require regional support. In order for Eswatini to find fundamental reforms, greater appreciation and engagement with regional solidary formations is critical.

It is reported that since the pro-democracy protests started in 2021, many people are still walking around with bullet wounds on their bodies. This is indicative of the work of the security apparatus - patrolling communities and instilling fear amongst people. Therefore, the focus and responsibility of the People Solidarity Network have to be aimed at guaranteeing that everywhere in the region people live in a democratic and rule-based political system.

Regional structures, including civil society, trade unions, youth formations and human rights activists must accelerate lobbying campaigns aimed at multi-sectoral leadership. By providing a common agenda and a credible voice, this structure ought to confront SADC leaders and seek positive action on the Eswatini crisis. Key to this is the issue of transparency regarding the Eswatini case from a regional leadership point of view. Fambai Ngirande reiterated the fact that:

> *"As SADC leaders prepare for their next summit, we do want to see a clear timeline as to when and how SADC leaders will interject on the Eswatini question. But also, when and how SADC leaders will fulfil their promise to guarantee a truly inclusive national dialogue process. So, if attention rightly*

[10] Ibid
[11] Ibid

shifts towards this possibility of a SADC-led national dialogue process, we feel that SADC leaders must do more to secure conditions for those meaningful talks".[12]

The solidarity network inside Eswatini has to faithfully rally behind MSF's call and increase pressure for talks to be held. The important aspect of the pro-democratic movement is the acceleration of people-driven mobilisation campaigns and raising awareness around common goals. The current momentum points to the fact that the people of Eswatini are clear about what they want from the Constitution and the Democratic dispensation in their lifetime.

Diplomatic Pressure in the SADC Region

It is crucial that solidarity networks inside and outside Eswatini provide diplomatic pressure that is much required for SADC leaders and encourage them to confront King Mswati and push him to talk to his people. The dialogue between the king and his people would enable a transition towards democracy. Furthermore, the solidarity movement should emphasise the issue of the humanitarian and security impacts of continued repression in Eswatini. Through putting diplomatic pressure on SADC, there must be a strategic approach to encourage dissenting voices to keep speaking and mobilising around the current humanitarian crisis in Eswatini.

One of the things that need attention is that those who are arrested need legal support and those injured require medical assistance. This means that any work that is done in a collaborative manner should be organised in a way that touches on the aspect of humanitarian impact. It is also befitting to consider that many people in the informal sector and other spaces are not able to trade or benefit from the economic opportunities in Eswatini. These things require a practical solution from the solidarity movement.

Due to the experience of this brutal violence by the Eswatini King towards the country's citizens, there is a high level of polarisation between the regime, organisations and general society. This requires regional organisations and solidarity to weigh in and push for the establishment of national dialogue to address these issues. The current situation on the ground signals significant danger and difficulty to have a comprehensive approach towards democratisation. The expectation so far has been centred around a formal process of dialogue and engagement between solidarity structures and the King. In order to address these issues, SADC should refrain from postponing the key aspects of national engagement.

Venetia Govender (*Solidarity Activist*) stated that South African and Southern African activists need to look at how to engage without being overbearing towards the Swazis.[13] South Africa and regional activists should avoid putting in place projects and programmes that are not commonly shared by Eswatini activists at large. She also

[12] Fambai Ngirande. 2022. "SALO public dialogue on Eswatini: Building regional civil society solidarity on Eswatini", *SALO Webinar,* 14 April 2022

[13] Venetia Governder. 2022. "SALO public dialogue on Eswatini: Building regional civil society solidarity on Eswatini", *SALO Webinar,* 14 April 2022

indicated the fact that *"there is a need for resources inside Swaziland, organizing capacity and skills, but also resources".*[14] The support is necessary as a way of moving forward and trying to resurrect the Swazi democracy campaign. This entails that the regional solidarity movement has to bring on board as much of the information as possible, media attention on Eswatini is also going to be extremely important in this regard.

Possible Avenues for the SADC Summit in August 2022

In terms of SADC, it is important that the regional solidarity movement build national chapters in all SADC states, bringing together trade unions, NGOs, political organisations, students and youth organisations, churches and community movements. This must contribute towards a sustained mass awareness and an education campaign on the situation in Eswatini. Platforms like the media, school curricula, lobby and advocacy campaigns are critical to driving momentum in the quest for democracy in Eswatini. Accordingly, Koogotsitse stated that it would suffice that the regional solidary movement *"prepare for a region-wide action campaign targeting the SADC summit that is coming up in August 2022*". This entails taking advantage of opportunities like an Extraordinary Summit of the SADC Heads of State and Government scheduled for 8th August 2022. Initially, Eswatini had been included in the SADC Extra-Ordinary Organ Troika Summit hosted by South Africa between the 21st July 2022. Its subsequent removal raised a lot of questions since King Mswati III had previously agreed to a national political dialogue to address the crisis in his country during a meeting in 2021 with President Cyril Ramaphosa.[15] According to Moffat (*Mail& Guardian*), "*this meant the process of the national dialogue formation would be included on the meeting agenda"* but the removal of Eswatini from the Troika agenda meant that chances of a national dialogue taking place urgently were slim.

Fambai Ngirande called for the mobilisation of all stakeholders to have a common goal as the region moves towards the summit in August 2022. He argued that the Eswatini issue had to be "foremost in priority in our consideration, bearing in mind that there cannot be regional stability [if] the Kingdom of Eswatini remains unstable". Given the importance of regional stability, Eswatini deserves a constitution similar to those enjoyed by other SADC states like South Africa. Ngirande argued during this dialogue that:

> *"King Mswati must indeed be obligated to pave the way for the democratisation of Eswatini, through a truly inclusive national dialogue process, leading towards the formulation of a popular constitution under which all the emaSwati can enjoy the democratic rights without fear of retribution".*

The state of the continued deterioration of democratic conditions in Eswatini is not good for regional stability and fails to consolidate the needs of the people in the country. Issues like the systematic harassment of dismayed dissenting voices and

[14] Ibid

[15] Craig Moffat. 2022. "Mswati's hand seen in eSwatini's removal from SADC agenda", *Mail& Guardian,* 15 April 2022. Accessed on 2 December 2022 from https://mg.co.za/africa/2022-04-15-mswatis-hand-seen-in-eswatinis-removal-from-sadc-agenda/

human rights defenders have been echoed throughout the SADC region. In solidarity with the people of Eswatini, SADC must recognise that those seeking justice and democracy are merely trying to protect their liberties and human rights. The region cannot allow them to be subjected to ghastly treatments like arson attacks, attempted bombings and other injustices under the climate of fear in Eswatini.

Recommendations

- The process of national dialogue must have an inclusive approach, all stakeholders must be involved.
- The drive for democracy in Eswatini promises a creation of social stability among the Swazi people, as such the SADC region should engage the king on the way forward in terms of democratisation.
- The role of the youth is important in terms of regional solidarity - university students in the region can play a crucial role in advancing the voices of Eswatini citizens.
- Civil Society must engage with the five-point plan as advocated by the Multi Stakeholders Forum

Conclusion

The proposed social dialogue remains an invaluable mechanism for reducing social tensions. The current state of social and political unrest points to an urgent need for inclusive engagement on the future of Eswatini. Such an engagement amongst all parties would pave a path that could bring a lasting solution to the problems facing Eswatini. Indeed, historically, regional trade union formations have always committed themselves to be a part of any interventions that are interested in finding a lasting solution for democracy in Eswatini. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) conducted a "border protest action" in Mpumalanga in 2019 in support of the Eswatini strike.[16] At the time, teachers were protesting against low pay and rising living costs. In its statement, Cosatu argues that "*the workers demand only 7.8 percent salary adjustment while the Mswati regime spends millions of rands for his lavish lifestyle*".[17]

During the SALO dialogue workshop, regional solidarity movements argue that the King has to be persuaded to allow social dialogue. Furthermore, there is also a need to coordinate a global economic boycott and sanctions campaign against all the companies and businesses that are linked to King Mswati and the royal family. The role of the private sector in enabling the continued repression and human rights abuses by the Eswatini government and the royal family is crucial. The money that these businesses invest in the country contributes to the challenges faced by the Swazis. It is critical that regional solidarity movements push SADC leaders to engage with the King in order to voice the issues that Eswatini citizens express are urgent matters that must be addressed by the government.

[16] *The Citizen*. 2019. "Chaos in eSwatini as anti-monarchy protests turn violent". 25 September 2019. Accessed on 14 December 2022 from https://www.citizen.co.za/news/news-world/news-africa/chaos-in-eswatini-as-anti-monarchy-protests-turn-violent/

[17] Ibid

The analysis and recommendations included in this report 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 report 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:

SALO
International liaison, dialogue and research

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.

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