

The Future Of Eswatini: Progress Towards a Dialogue Process

SALO PUBLIC MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE: THE FUTURE OF ESWATINI: PROGRESS TOWARDS A DIALOGUE PROCESS?
THURSDAY 24 MARCH 2022 11:00 TO 13:00



BHEKI MAMBA TUCOSWA

MAXWELL DLAMINI
SOUTHERN AFRICAN YOUTH SOLIDARITY NETWORK

ZAKITHI ZIBANDZE:
SWAZILAND RURAL WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY

CLOSING REMARKS:
BISHOP RUBIN PHILLIP

SIMLINDZILE MASINGA:
SWAZILAND NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS

MLUNGISI MAKHANYA
PUDEMO PRESIDENT

THABO MASUKU
MULTI-STAKEHOLDERS FORUM

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SALO
International liaison, dialogue and research

- *By Ineke Stemmet, SALO*

Executive Summary

The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO), in partnership with the Norwegian People's Aid, hosted a Dialogue on the future of Eswatini and progress towards a meaningful dialogue process on 24 March 2022. Representatives from civil society, the student movement, trade unions, and the primary opposition in Eswatini were in attendance. This constructive dialogue fostered a deeper understanding within South Africa and the broader region regarding the current state of affairs within the monarchy and the country. The deliberation encompassed an examination of the future, as well as the possibility for a meaningful political dialogue in the country.

Speakers included **Mlungisi Makhanya**, PUDEMO President, **Zakithi Sibandzi** from Swaziland Rural Women's Assembly, **Bheki Mamba** of the Trade Union Congress of Swaziland, **Simlindzile Masinga** from Swaziland National Union of Students, **Barnes Dlamini** from the Multi-Stakeholder Forum, and **Bishop Rubin Philip**, chairperson of the SALO board.

Context/Importance of the Problem

In June 2021, Eswatini erupted in pro-democracy and ant-monarchy protests. Violent clashes between security forces and protestors ensued, and many people lost their lives¹. Since then, there have been ongoing assaults and raids in rural and other areas and the country has become increasingly unstable. Some of the speakers expressed concern over the deployment of a significant number of soldiers to various communities – and an overall securitisation of the public realm.

Last year, President Cyril Ramaphosa, in his capacity as the chair of the SADC security organ, held talks with King Mswati, where they agreed to establish a national dialogue forum. Specifically, "the deliberations resolved that the Kingdom of Eswatini will embark on a process that will work towards the establishment of a national dialogue forum," Ramaphosa stated.² Since this meeting, no dialogue has taken place and SADC has not delivered on its process to establish a dialogue forum.³

While in conversation in the dialogue, participants disclosed that there were accounts of multiple incidents of sexual assault perpetrated by law enforcement officers in dwellings of activists. These alarming developments suggest that the government is not taking the necessary steps towards achieving a meaningful dialogue, which is essential for fostering lasting peace and stability in Eswatini.

¹ Al Jazeera. 2021. Tensions run high in Eswatini as pro-democracy protests continue. 30 June. Available: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/30/tensions-run-high-Eswatini-pro-democracy-protests-continue> [6 April 2023].

² Etheridge, J. 2021. Ramaphosa, King Mswati agree that SADC will 'work closely' with Eswatini govt on national dialogue. 2 November. Available: <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/ramaphosa-king-mswati-agree-that-sadc-will-work-closely-with-Eswatini-govt-on-national-dialogue-20211102> [6 April 2023].

³ Chikohomero, R 2022. SADC needs a firmer strategy for the spiralling Eswatini crisis. 15 August. Available: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sadc-needs-a-firmer-strategy-for-the-spiralling-Eswatini-crisis> [6 April 2023].

Women

In most cases, it appeared that women were not extensively involved in the protests of 2021. The predominant image presented to the public was that of men being affected by the unrest. The Swaziland Rural Women's Assembly conducted an assessment and discovered that some women were affected and required support. They subsequently provided this support and continue to do so presently.

Moreover, it came to light that a total of 110 women were apprehended amidst the unrest. Alarming revelations showed that a few of these women were confined in detention facilities meant for minors. Subsequent inquiries unveiled that four women experienced miscarriages while in custody. One pregnant woman was arrested but was subsequently released due to her experiencing bleeding. Unfortunately, due to police harassment, she was forced to flee her home and is currently on the run.

It was recently observed that some female members of PUDEMO were harassed by the police. This kind of mistreatment of women and other protesters by the police underscores the government's lack of willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue, and prefer to use coercive methods of engagement to ensure that any criticism of the state and monarchy is quelled. The rural women's coalition find that it is apparent that the government is not taking the necessary steps towards fostering an environment of open and constructive communication, which is essential for creating lasting peace and stability in Eswatini.

Continuous Violence in Eswatini

Bheki Mamba, of the Trade Union Congress of Swaziland, began his input thus:

“Our view is that this country in Swaziland is now in a state of emergency - even though it has not been declared - we can see that this country is now in a state of emergency. The reason why we are saying that is because, in terms of our analysis, we can see that the country is now ruled by the police, the country is now ruled by the soldiers who are all over torturing and brutalising workers and the general population in the country.”

The situation in Eswatini is deteriorating, and there is a growing risk of sustained violence in the country. Reports indicate that police have been conducting raids on the

homes of workers and civilians, abducting and torturing them before abandoning them in remote areas, far from their homes. Furthermore, it appears that in many cases, victims are left to perish without any assistance from the wider civic community . These developments are deeply concerning and further underscore the need for urgent action to be taken to de-escalate tensions and foster a more conducive environment for dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The situation for workers in Eswatini is dire, with authorities denying them their basic rights to assembly, association and protest. Even when workers attempt to organise meetings or gatherings, police forcefully disperse these assemblies, in clear contravention of international principles on freedom of speech and assembly. Furthermore, workers are prohibited from wearing T-shirts representing trade unions or political parties. Those who defy these restrictions face the risk of torture and other forms of abuse, and at worst, extra judicial execution.

The Royal Family

The current situation in Swaziland reveals a stark divide between the ruling royal family and the general population. The national budget, which stands at approximately 24 billion Rand, places an undue burden on the country's poorest citizens, as they are required to pay taxes to fund a king who earns a staggering 2.1 billion Rand annually. This income disparity is particularly alarming, with domestic workers and street cleaners earning as little as 4,000 Rand per month, leaving a large portion of the population unprepared for life, lacking proper education, and unable to earn a sustainable living.

Additionally, the king's land evictions and business ventures with private entities are causing widespread protests among affected communities. However, there is no proper system in place for individuals to appeal against the king, as he operates outside the bounds of established laws and regulations. This has led to a feeling of helplessness and frustration among the population, further exacerbating the already unstable situation in the country. Mandla Hlatshwayo expanded on this:

“This situation has reached a stage where we're seeing low levels of armed activity by society, where you are having groups that are fed up with these political parties, or civil society formations who are talking peace because they

are not seeing peace from the state. And this violence that is beginning to emerge is basically being fuelled by a king who says, 'I own you; I own the country, you are my subjects'”

Worker Action

As a federation, TUCOSWA has made efforts to protest against the violations of workers' rights, including taking legal action. Despite a favourable ruling by the court, the government refused to allow the protest to proceed. Nevertheless, workers have been engaged in discussions and are determined to continue pushing for greater democratic principles and adherence to international law that respects the rights of citizens and workers. This determination remains unwavering, and workers are committed to advancing these objectives until they are achieved.

Efforts are being made to engage with employers, who are also affected by the current situation, resulting in income losses. A 'job dialogue' has been proposed to address the impact on jobs, workers, and employers, with the aim of finding ways to intervene and mitigate the effects on workers. By engaging in discussions and finding solutions, all parties hope to address the challenges posed by the current situation and support workers and businesses alike.

Previously, there has been an issue of lack of visibility and support for the Swazi struggle. However, since June, a massive wave of people has risen up against the king and demanded change. Despite this, neighbouring countries have been turning a blind eye to the reality on the ground, which is only serving to push ordinary people who are seeking a decent environment to live in, towards conflict. Mandla Hlatwayo believes that it is essential for neighbouring countries to acknowledge and address the Swazi crisis and to provide support to those seeking change. Ignoring the situation will only exacerbate the problem and further destabilise the region.

SADC and the AU

Bheki Mamba indicated TUCOSWA's disappointment in SADC. The hope was that the fact-finding mission that visited the country late in 2021 and the subsequent announcement of dialogue in February led by the president of South Africa would bring peace and progress to the country. However, the lack of communication from SADC

and the government on the delay of the negotiation process has led to uncertainty among employers, with some intending to close their businesses, resulting in a loss of jobs. The federation still calls for dialogue as a means to find a political solution and bring peace to the country.

“We would appreciate [seeing] the intervention of SADC and the intervention... of the AU and others, who can really be of great assistance to bring peace and stability and put in place a process that will channel everyone into dialogue and debate. That is very important for us to mention that.”

South Africa

Mandla Hlatshwayo believes that there is evidence that some of the military weapons and equipment used in the Eswatini conflict are being bought from South Africa. He mentions that in 1982, there was a decision to prioritise the liberation of South Africa over Eswatini, with the belief that South Africa's liberation would bring positive change to the region. However, he now calls on South Africa to play a role in resolving the conflict in Eswatini. He suggests that political parties and civil societies have come together to develop terms of reference for engaging with the king and political elite in Eswatini, with SADC acting as a mediator.

“We are very much disturbed in terms of the quietness of the ANC as a liberation movement. Because I think the ANC would have stepped up its role in terms of influence in the region...trying to influence the region [to] adopt democratic reforms. But we can see that the ANC is not stepping up to influence the process of Swaziland in terms of it moving forward.”

The Dialogue Process

There is debate in the country and region around whether any potential dialogue should take place within the framework of the Sibaya forum, as outlined in the Constitution. Most civil societies disagree with this type of dialogue:

“For us, we are not viewing the Sibaya forum as the manner in which dialogue will take place because we have a long history [with] Sibaya whereby people are not given the opportunity to express themselves freely, people are not given the opportunity to appraise themselves in terms of the resolutions that have

been taken, there are no ministers that are recorded, and the only person who chairs Sibaya then becomes the King or anyone who is senior within the premises.” – Bheki Mamba

Last year, the Mass Democratic Movement reached a consensus on its position regarding a potential dialogue in Eswatini. The Movement agreed that if such a dialogue is advocated for and facilitated by SADC, it is prepared to engage in it.

“It has to be a dialogue that actually prescribes and conforms to the standards of a dialogue of this nature, not the Sibaya dialogue.” – Barnes Dlamini

The Mass Democratic Movement has drafted its Terms of Reference for the upcoming dialogue and has shared it with SADC and the leadership of the South African government. They are now waiting for a response from SADC, which will include proposals on how the dialogue will take place and when it will be scheduled. The movement is fully prepared to engage in the dialogue process and hopes to bring about positive change in Eswatini.

In order to ensure a genuine and productive dialogue, the workers are calling for "talks about talks" to be facilitated by SADC. During these preliminary talks, fundamental issues can be discussed and an agreement can be made on what forum the negotiations will take place in.

Policy Critiques

- **Lack of transparency and accountability:** The lack of communication from the government and SADC on the negotiation process and delays in the dialogue are creating uncertainty and a loss of hope among companies and industries. The government and SADC should be transparent about the negotiation process and should be held accountable for their commitments.
- **Lack of inclusivity in dialogue:** The debate over which forum to use for the negotiations highlights the need for an inclusive and participatory dialogue that considers the perspectives and needs of all stakeholders, including workers, employers, civil society, and political parties.

Policy recommendations

- Respect for human rights and the rule of law: The government of Eswatini should uphold the rule of law and respect the human rights of all citizens, including workers and protesters. There should be an end to police brutality, harassment, and intimidation of citizens.
- Freedom of assembly and speech: The government should allow citizens to exercise their constitutional rights to freedom of assembly and speech. This includes allowing workers to hold meetings, wear union t-shirts, and protest peacefully without fear of retribution.
- Dialogue and negotiation: The government should engage in meaningful dialogue with workers and other stakeholders to find a political solution to the challenges facing the country. SADC should facilitate the dialogue process and ensure that all parties are represented.
- Unity and cooperation within SADC: This is crucial in addressing the challenges faced by member states, including those of Eswatini. By strengthening SADC's capacity to address such issues, member states can work together towards sustainable solutions and collective progress. Additionally, it is essential to ensure that Eswatini's issues are not isolated, but rather viewed within the broader context of regional challenges.
- Assistance and capacity building: Assistance should be provided to Swazi civil society in terms of legal fees to aid in the frequent bailing out of comrades.
- The church: Given the influential role that the church still holds in the country, they should be engaged and mobilised.
- South Africa's role: South Africa should take a leading role in resolving the conflict in Eswatini: Given the historical ties between the two countries, with Eswatini playing a role in the liberation of South Africa, it is imperative for South Africa to extend a helping hand to its neighbour in need. South Africa's leadership in resolving the conflict can help ensure stability and peace in the region, which can have positive economic and social effects on both countries.
- Talks about talks: These pre-dialogue talks should be hosted by SADC to reach a consensus on the fundamental characteristics of an inclusive dialogue.
- The Terms of Reference: The outline of the terms of reference should include the removal of the army and the police from the homes and streets of Eswatini

as the first step towards creating a climate where dialogue can take place between the population of Eswatini and the Swazi authority.

Conclusion

The political and socio-economic situation in Eswatini requires urgent attention from regional and international actors. The ongoing human rights abuses, lack of political freedoms, and widespread poverty and inequality are major challenges that need to be addressed. Bishop Rubin Phillip, in his closing remarks, stated it thus: *“I think, quite frankly, we need to become a lot more provocative when we are dealing with an oppressive situation, like the one we’ve talked about. There’s no time to sugar-coat the problem that [Eswatini] faces.”*

The Mass Democratic Movement has put forward a set of Terms of Reference for a proposed dialogue with the government of Eswatini, and SADC has a crucial role to play in facilitating this process.

The dialogue recommends that SADC, together with the international community, support and facilitate the proposed dialogue between the Mass Democratic Movement and the government of Eswatini, in accordance with the Terms of Reference. This should include measures to ensure the safety of all participants, the removal of the military and police from the streets, and the provision of legal and financial support for those facing persecution. The brief also emphasises the need for broader regional unity and cooperation to address the challenges facing Eswatini and other member states.

The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy 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:



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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