



## God Save the King Letter from Swaziland

Zoe Samudzi  
Staff Writer

### Abstract

Swaziland has for the past 300 years been subject to royal rule. The ruling monarch, King Mswati III, has been living in disconnect with his subjects and has failed to modernize the monarchy. In the midst of this regime that is still dictatorial and fails to abide by the constitution, unrest is slowly brewing in the tiny and mountainous country. With the present political climate of long-standing rulers being toppled, are the king's days numbered?

**Keywords:** *Swaziland, Mswati*



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On June 6, 2010, I finally arrived in Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland. Mbabane is a beautiful, hilly city with its own third world charm partially encircled by the Drakensberg mountain range. Its inhabitants, like most other Africans, are warm and friendly, fully embracing the spirit of *ubuntu*, the philosophy of compassion and humanity. But beyond the country's stereotypically "African" characteristics, there was a political climate that I had yet to discover.

Claiming the title of Africa's last absolute monarchy, the tiny Kingdom of Swaziland is led by His Majesty King Mswati III, born Makhosetive Dlamini. He was crowned king at age eighteen after the death of his father, King Sobhuza II, in 1986. On paper, Swaziland is a "unitary, sovereign, democratic kingdom"; however, politics differ greatly in practice. Constitutionally, the king's powers are extensive. He may select and remove key members of the government, including the Prime Minister, cabinet secretaries, the Attorney General and chief civil servants, among others.<sup>1</sup> Like in the United States, there are governmental checks and balances to ensure that the king does not abuse his powers. Unfortunately, these constraints are somewhat ineffective, and Mswati frequently acts with immunity because his rule is absolute. The political process is extremely opaque because the governmental power lies in the hands of a limited number of people, and despite constitutional reforms in 2005, little has changed.

The supposed democracy is, at best, an oligarchy, but it often resembles a political hegemony. In 1973, Mswati's father King Sobhuza II, believing that growing political opposition was a nationally destabilizing force, declared a state of emergency. He suspended the constitution, effectively banning all

political opposition and ensuring that the power of the monarchy was uncontested and absolute.<sup>2</sup> Although the 2005 constitutional reforms were intended to limit the power of the king and allow for opposition, parties are still outlawed and the king's rule remains absolute.

As an example of this crackdown on rival parties, an opposition leader and engineering student, Siphoshe Jele, was arrested and killed last year allegedly while in police custody. Police forces first arrested him for illegally wearing a shirt supporting the People's United Democratic Movement, one of the banned political parties. Government-run Swazi newspapers, such as the Times of Swaziland, reported the death as a suicide.<sup>3</sup> His supporters and human rights organizations, however, are unconvinced that he hung himself while in prison, comparing his death to some of the "accidental deaths" that occurred during the days of South African apartheid.<sup>4</sup>

King Mswati's lavish lifestyle befits his status as royalty. While driving home from working at Swaziland's tuberculosis hospital, we passed a large gated mansion surrounded by armed military and security personnel. My coworker told me that this was one of King Mswati's smaller estates. I was surprised that his home was only a mile or two from a tiny slum village. This bears some resemblance to the adjacency of government buildings in many other cities to some of the area's poorest neighborhoods. The Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya, for example, is only three miles from the city center. There are about 170,000 residents, most of whom have very limited or no access to potable or running water, electricity, adequate health care, education, and proper sanitation.<sup>5</sup> Though the capital cities in developed and developing nations are not readily comparable to the squalor of Kibera or some areas of Swaziland, there is a large disparity between the wealth of many leaders and the poverty that exists within their countries.

A tradition called the King's Crawl illustrates Mswati's disconnect. According to the story, Mswati wanted visiting diplomats to kneel before him. Knowing they would refuse, he made the entrance to the meeting hall particularly low so that when visitors

entered, they were forced to crouch or appear to be kneeling. He routinely spends millions of dollars on family vacations around the world while the populace lives in poverty. In newspaper articles, a discussion of a slight economic downturn would be followed on the next page by color photos of the royal family vacationing in Italy following Princess Sikhanyiso Dlamini's graduation from Biola University in California. Mswati also renovates his palaces, often at public expense. When there were calls for cuts to the royal family's spending because of a government budget deficit, Mswati increased the royal budgetary allocation by 24 percent to \$31 million, \$8 million more than the government's funding to HIV/AIDS programs.<sup>6</sup> In 2008, *Forbes* magazine ranked the king as the world's fifteenth richest monarch, with a net worth of \$200 million. This figure does not include the \$10 billion trust fund left by King Sobhuza.<sup>7</sup> The disparity between the king and the majority of the Swazi population (more than two-thirds of which live on less than \$1 a day) is compounded by the fact that the king is exempt from paying taxes, giving him no legal obligation to be charitable.

There is not only a tremendous wealth disparity between the king and his subjects, but there is also a contradiction between the lifestyle he espouses and the one that he maintains. Swaziland suffers from one of the world's highest rates of HIV/AIDS, with an estimated 40 percent of the adult population infected, and one of the lowest life expectancies of 46 years. After largely ignoring the epidemic, the king finally declared AIDS a national disaster after it had begun to cripple the Swazi population. In 2001, he reinstated the *umchwasho* chastity ritual, which called for all girls under 18 to be abstinent for five years and for all girls to wear tassels around their waist, effectively displaying their virginity.<sup>8</sup> It was widely criticized, namely because the king ignored his own policy by becoming engaged to a seventeen-year-old girl during this time—an act he punished himself for by giving her family one cow, the standard punishment for men who had sex with young girls under the rite of *umchwasho*. The practice ended prematurely in 2005.

Part of Swaziland's HIV awareness campaign includes an emphasis on monogamous relationships, because polygamy and sex with multiple partners are both widely practiced. The king himself has thirteen wives and twenty-three children, not including his extra-marital affairs, which are not widely known and rarely discussed. The Reed Dance, a ceremony involving thousands of unmarried girls and women, is a cultural practice where the main objective is to aid the king in selecting another wife that is still practiced. Although Parliament is empowered to pass legislation, their politics and rhetoric mirror those of the king, as he appoints the majority of Parliament members.

The problem of improper economic management by the monarchy recently came to a climax when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned of potential economic collapse. Economic growth is very near zero and little revenue is generated from taxes, leading the IMF to report that "government revenue collections are insufficient to cover essential government expenditures."<sup>9</sup> The programs that will be most affected by the financial troubles are health and education services. People newly infected with HIV will be temporarily unable to acquire medication through government programs, and those already on ARVs will receive their medicines on a monthly basis. Swaziland does offer free primary education, an increasingly popular program that benefits thousands of orphans and vulnerable children. With the massive economic downturn, however, the government has been unable to pay school fees for these children, thousands



Photo: Zoe Samudzi

of whom face expulsion.<sup>10</sup> Considering the intimate link between education and economic success in the developing world, the long-term effects of these expulsions will be devastating, as the corruption within Mswati's inner political circle could lead to a further entrenchment of the Swazi people in poverty.

In April 2011, thousands of people protested in Mbabane for democratization and social reform.<sup>11</sup> This movement has been relatively small in scope, especially compared to the mass protests during the Arab Spring. Yet, the Mbabane protests were significant because they marked one of the first times that people have vocalized their opposition. Similar protests organized by union leaders and opposition parties took place in September 2011, but crowds were met by teargas and violence from Swazi security forces.<sup>12</sup> Although the constitution guarantees citizens the "enjoyment of the freedom of peaceful assembly and association," people have remained silent out of fear of arrest or violent retaliation.<sup>13</sup> Opposition organizers like Maxwell Dlamini and Musa Ngubeni, both of whom have been jailed since April 2011, are often arrested, charged with fabricated offenses, and imprisoned.<sup>14</sup>

But there may be change on the horizon. The king continues to have a fair level of popularity within the country because the people have been taught to honor the royal family, but disillusioned and relatively educated citizens are now beginning to vocalize their opposition to royal politics. Dissenters are tentatively emerging from the bush, and even though the Swazi people have been habituated by monarchical rule, it seems as though other forms of governance may one day be an option. Slowly but surely, disappointment with the crown is growing, suggesting that its days are numbered.

#### Author

ZOE SAMUDZI is a sophomore studying political science and global studies. A first-generation American child of Zimbabwean immigrants, she maintains a personal interest in the well-being of the entire African continent, to which she hopes to return after finishing her studies.

#### Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Michael Marquese, "Swaziland: The days of absolute monarchy are numbered," *AfricaFiles*, August 25, 2010, Internet (accessed October 3, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Timothy Simelane, "Sipho Jele committed suicide, says Coroner," *Times of Swaziland*, March 5, 2011, Internet (accessed October 2, 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> "Was Sipho Jele murdered in a Swazi police cell?" *Amnesty International UK Blogs*, May 11, 2010, Internet (accessed October 2, 2011).
- <sup>5</sup> Muchiri Karanja, "Myth shattered: Kibera numbers fail to add up," *The Daily Nation*, September 3, 2010, Internet (accessed October 18, 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> Alex Perry, "How Swaziland's King is Out of Step," *Time Magazine*, October 3, 2011, Internet (accessed October 2, 2011).
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- <sup>8</sup> "Swazi King sex ban," *BBC News*, September 17, 2011, Internet (accessed October 2, 2011).
- <sup>9</sup> "Swaziland's economy near collapse, says IMF," *Mail and Guardian Online*, November 16, 2011, Internet (accessed November 16, 2011).
- <sup>10</sup> "Swaziland AIDS orphans 'owed \$10m' – IMF," *BBC News*, November 16, 2011, Internet (accessed November 16, 2011).
- <sup>11</sup> "Crackdown in Swaziland as unrest grows," *Al Jazeera English*, April 13, 2011, Internet (accessed October 2, 2011).
- <sup>12</sup> "Swaziland: Police Fire Teargas on Protesters," *Swazi Media Commentary*, September 7, 2011, Internet (accessed October 3, 2011).
- <sup>13</sup> Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland, Act 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> "Swazi political prisoner Maxwell Dlamini suffers stroke, denied treatment," *Pambazuka News*, July 13, 2011, Internet (accessed October 18, 2011).