

Statement on events in eSwatini

20 October 2021

The Campaign for Free Expression (CFE) is deeply concerned about the harsh repression of protest and dissent in eSwatini, and calls on the South African and other governments and regional bodies to take stronger action to prevent further destruction of property and killings.

The CFE this week publishes *Dark Days in eSwatini*, a major report on the suppression of protest and the media in that country. “We hope to shine some light into eSwatini’s darkness and encourage those with power and authority to follow that light by seeking to influence events,” said executive director Anton Harber.

The report includes an eyewitness account of security forces snatching individuals off the street and the pervasive fear felt by emaSwati in the wake of such abuses.

Veteran eSwatini editor and author Bheki Makhubu outlines the history and political events that led to the recent protests, including King Mswati’s role in cutting off avenues of peaceful petition, and the harshness of the security force response. He writes: “The people no longer feel as one with their king, around whom their identity and being have, traditionally, always revolved. By all accounts, neither does King Mswati III think much of his people. That symbiosis, cultivated over many centuries between emaSwati and their king, seems to have disintegrated.”

Journalist Carien du Plessis describes the repressive legal system in eSwatini, and its impact on the media and journalists. Although Mswati has never been a fan of a free media or the expression of dissent, he has stepped up security force action against those who express views he does not like.

The conflict has claimed the lives of between 28 and 80 emaSwati – the former being the official figure and the latter the figure given by opposition groupings, with names listed. The fact that we

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cannot be sure of how many people have been killed, or their names, highlights the effect of the media clampdown.

This week the security forces blocked a march in support of two MPs arrested and charged in connection with the protests, who were due to appear in court. Schools were closed indefinitely. As people take refuge from the rampant security forces, the capital, Mbabane, has become deserted.

The authorities have tried to suppress the news by cracking down on journalists and media. At an early stage, they even shut down the internet to prevent information from spreading. Two South African journalists, Magnificent Mndebele and Cebelihle Mabuyisa, were arrested and tortured; in *Dark Days in eSwatini* they describe their terrifying ordeal.

Yet many of those who have influence over the authorities in eSwatini have hesitated to speak out against the crackdown and press for reform. The African Union and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which have an obligation to take up such matters, have been slow to do so. Pretoria did not react strongly to the torture of two South African journalists by the security forces. Other governments with influence, such as those of the United States and United Kingdom, have been largely silent.

CFE calls for concerted pressure from international bodies, governments, business and civil society to convince Mswati to change direction; to allow his subjects to express themselves; and to heed their demands for change. The alternative can only be more violence, ever-harsher repression and further death and destruction.

For the full report, go to <https://freeexpression.org.za/>

To hear Makhubu and Du Plessis talk about the report, join the webinar with Daily Maverick on Thursday October 21 at 12 noon. Register at <https://bit.ly/eswatiniwebinar/>
CFE is a non-profit organisation dedicated to protecting and expanding the right to free expression for all in southern Africa, and enabling everyone to exercise this right to the full. For more details, see <https://freeexpression.org.za/>

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