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Cebelihle Mbuyisa and Margaret Zulu on behalf of the Campaign for Free Expression

### **The Campaign for Free Expression condemns assault of protesters in eSwatini**

Since Eswatini's political unrest of 2021, incidents of human rights violations in the country have been on the rise. And it is the right to freedom of expression, assembly and association that has suffered the most. The Royal Eswatini Police have continued to use an inordinate amount of force to disperse crowds and break up protests, and in many cases leading to serious injuries. There is no indication that these incidents, which includes random raids in people's homes, will stop soon – as long as the political problems that led to the unrest remain unattended to.

Even though King Mswati's government announced that there would be a dialogue in early 2022, after the Southern African Development Community (SADC) intervened, there has been no signs of commitment by the government. While the state tries hard to deny that there is a political crisis in the country, as it paints a picture of normalcy and back-to-business-as-usual there are signs of ongoing political dissatisfaction and unrest. The victims of the state's violence have been mostly activists who belong to various organisations in the mass democratic movement.

For example, a young male from Lomahasha, who requested that we conceal his name was detained at a traffic stop between Maphiveni and Lomahasha in early July, "because one officer there knows me personally and he questioned me on my Facebook posts critical of the king".

He says he was put in handcuffs, thrown into a police van and taken to Lomahasha police station. "I was so shocked that one can get detained and treated like a criminal just because of a Facebook post

On 18 July, two members of the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), Tshepo Gamedze and Njabulo Masilela, were detained by the Lomahasha police for attempting to put up signs in honour of Sigubhu Nyoni and Mpostoli Masilela, activists who were killed by a police officer in July 2021.

The two were released without charges, in the evening of the same day.

According to Siboniso Mkhabela, "Njabulo was heavily assaulted with claps, fists and kicks by Mncina, Samampela Simelane and Maseko – all Lukhozi [police officers] from Siteki."

It was reported that on Wednesday, 10 August, the Royal Eswatini Police heavily assaulted and injured activists who had gathered in Mbabane for a protest in support of two jailed pro-democracy members of Parliament (MPs) who were appearing at the High Court in Mbabane.

Nkhululeko Dlamini and Muzi Lungelo Gwebu, both members of the Swaziland Liberation Movement (SWALIMO), allegedly sustained serious injuries and had to be treated at the

Mbabane Government Hospital. Dlamini's leg was broken and is now in a cast, according to SWALIMO spokesperson Thantaza Silolo.

Silolo said: "The police came and attacked the protesters who were mainly SWALIMO members. They discharged teargas and stun grenades. In the skirmish they held two members of SWALIMO and beat them up severely, using a taser on one comrade and also beating him up with batons."

eSwatini has been in a state of political unrest since May 2021 when Thabani Nkomonye died, allegedly at the hands of the police. Protests demanding police accountability soon ensued, with many across the country delivering petitions to their MPs demanding democracy and an accountable government. However, in June 2021 acting Prime Minister Themba Masuku issued a decree banning the delivery of these petitions. Widespread protests would ensue in June and July, leading to the injuries, arrests and deaths of [many](#). By mid-August 2021, the Foundation for Socio-Economic Justice had tallied at least over 70 deaths, while the government's Commission on Human Rights and Public Administration insisted on only 36.

On 25 July 2021, two members of the House of Assembly, Bacede Mabuza of Hosea and Mthandeni Dube of Ngwempisi, were arrested for calling for democratic reforms. They have been denied bail a number of times, remain in jail. A third, Mduduzi Simelane, fled to neighbouring South Africa. He remains in exile, and a warrant for his arrest is still out.

The police continue to persecute protesters. On 15 August, they violently dispersed a crowd in Mbabane that had come out to support Mbongwa Dlamini, president of the Swaziland National Teachers Union, who the government is accusing of misconduct. On 7 August, Dlamini warned teachers against going to school as there were [reports](#) that there would be attacks by an organisation called the Swaziland International Solidarity Forces.

Articles 24 and 25 of the Eswatini Constitution provide for freedom of expression, assembly and association. The Campaign for Free Expression condemns any attacks on freedom of expression in Eswatini and calls upon the Eswatini government, especially the police, to operate within the ambit of international human rights law and the country's Constitution to enable its people to exercise their right to free expression.

*The Campaign for Free Expression (CFE) is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation dedicated to protecting and expanding the right to free expression for ALL and enabling EVERYONE to exercise this right to the full, whether it by speaking out, by protesting, by revealing information, by blowing the whistle on wrong-doing, by arguing, debating, writing, painting, composing or just by shouting out an opinion.*

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