

'SILENCE THE GUNS, LET US ALL TALK'

BY KWANELE SIBIYA
Manzini

A wide cross-section of Eswatini came together during a Freedom of Expression Summit in Manzini last week, calling for an end to the violence currently engulfing the country, while urging the nation to embrace tolerance of other people's views and tackle challenges through genuine discussions.

One of the speakers, Hlobisile Dlamini, the programmes manager of Swatini Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), pointed out that the nation has to deal with the challenge of the suppression of political expression.

Dlamini said she was concerned that some people were claiming that they want multiparty democracy, yet they did not tolerate the right to freedom of expression of anyone who had an opinion that was different from theirs.

"We are generally a society that is not keen to listen to the opinions of other people, whether we agree with them or not. We generally have very limited space of tolerance or appreciation of other people's opinions," she said.

Aggravated

Dlamini added that the lack of tolerance for each other's opinions was aggravated by anxieties, frustrations and anger that the nation was currently experiencing and it was rooted in socialisation, which had programmed them to believe that another person's opinion does not matter.

The gathering also shared views regarding the challenges faced by the nation in as far as free expression was concerned and how the country can move forward.

Journalists, artists, activists, lawyers and others attended the summit hosted by the Inhlase Centre for Investigative Journalism and the Johannesburg-based Campaign for Free Expression.

The summit was also attended by British High Commissioner Simon Boyden, who emphasised that with a fundamental right for freedom of expression came a responsibility as citizens, as journalists and as professionals.

Boyden lauded the organisers of the summit and encouraged the nation to promote discussions on the challenges the country faces and come up with lasting solutions.



British High Commissioner Simon Boyden makes his submission during the Freedom of Expression Summit 2022, which brought together stakeholders from diverse sections of society. The summit was held at the George Hotel in Manzini.

"What we see within the scope of the camera is not necessarily what is happening beyond the lens of the camera or even behind the cameraman or woman. This is an argument not only in favour of freedom of expression and opinion, but also in favour of objectivity. This is because with a fundamental right for freedom of expression comes a responsibility as citizens, as journalists, as professionals," Boyden said.

"A responsibility to interrogate, to challenge but not just to interrogate and challenge authorities, the government, our bosses but also to challenge ourselves, to challenge our own opinions or perhaps I should say assumptions and prejudices which form our opinions.

Valuable

"Because emotional engagement, while necessary and valuable, also has a tendency to cloud objectivity."

Meanwhile, the summit called for a free and independent media, for the freedom of all citizens to speak their minds without fear of harassment, for access to the information that was needed of people to participate in democracy and an end to intimidatory lawsuits.

The meeting discussed forming a loose and broad coalition to campaign for freedom of expression and outlined a series of activities to strengthen free expression.

Vuyisile Hlatshwayo of Inhlase said everyone should play their part to uphold the constitution, which in Section 79 describes Eswatini as a partic-

ipatory democracy.

He said freedom of expression was at the heart of the Constitution and should be upheld.

Hlatshwayo decried the threats to withdraw advertising to silence independent media. He said there had been a proliferation of online media since the eruption of the political unrest. He said they had made it easy for the nation to access news, but had also been found ethically wanting.

Threat

"Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), a new trend in Eswatini, and they are a threat to free expression in the country. SLAPPs include an imbalance of power between the person who files the lawsuit and the journalist. They request large damages and include endless pre-trial motions to increase the legal costs," he said.

Anton Harber, director of the Campaign for Free Expression, which operates across the SADC countries, said freedom of expression had become a core issue in the country and the region.

"If you have free expression, you can defend all your rights. If you don't, you can't speak out when your rights are compromised – and then we are all vulnerable.

Free expression is essential to a healthy, thriving economy. "Without a free flow of information, business cannot operate effectively."

He added that there was a need for independent media, but also one that had its house in order, committed to truth, accuracy and professional ethics.



The Panel: From left: Attorney Sibusiso Nhlabatsi, CANGO Executive Director Thembinkosi Dlamini, Inhlase Director Vuyisile Hlatshwayo, Campaign for Free Expression Executive Director Anton Harber, entrepreneur Khulekani Msweli, Journalism lecturer at UNESWA Nqobile Ndzinisa, One Billion Rising Africa Region Coordinator Colani Hlatjwako and Programmes Manager at Swatini Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA) Hlobisile Dlamini.



A section of the participants of the summit.



PARTNERS: Harber and Vuyisile Hlatshwayo sharing a light moment.



CANGO Executive Director Thembinkosi Dlamini with Mangololo Eswatini Chairperson Pastor Phetsa Dlamini.

DON'T COME HERE WITH DIRTY HANDS, DONOR FUND AMBITIONS - MAKHUBU

"HONESTY and the best interest of the entire nation should be the guiding principle for all people, particularly those in the front-line of the current calls for change."

This is the view of veteran journalist Bheki Makhubu, the editor of The Nation magazine.

He was speaking during the Freedom of Expression Summit 2022 held at The George Hotel in Manzini.

About 100 people from across the country's political, social, economic and cultural sphere attended the summit.

Makhubu decried the fact that there were growing instances of dishon-

esty and a compelling urge to amass donor money by some leaders of the transition process, to the detriment of the ordinary Eswatini.

He made an example that Chairperson of the Swaziland Multi-Stakeholder Forum Thulani Maseko wrote an article two months ago complaining about his fellow colleagues whom he said were in the movement that was calling for change in the country, only looking for donor money.

"What exactly do you then expect the King to do when you are dishonest in what you believe in? Do you want the King to take you seri-

ously when all you care about is the amount of money you will receive from donors after submitting a proposal? Let's be honest, if we want to change this country, let us be informed by the honesty of our beliefs, then we will be taken seriously," he said.

Makhubu said if one was to discuss the country and the trajectory it should take, they must look at things holistically, particularly historically.

He urged the nation to stop complaining about the country's Constitution, but to read it because it was a good Constitution.

He said one lawyer, who once represented the late South African President Nelson Mandela, stated that the beauty of the Eswatini Constitution was that, where there were assumptions in constitutions of other countries about certain rights, but the the country's Constitution clarified them in black and white.

He said the Siswati version of the Constitution provided clearly that it was forbidden for one to suppress another person's freedom of expression.

In addition, Makhubu condemned those who were celebrating the death of those who were killed during the

ongoing political unrest.

He labelled those individuals as evil.

”

Let's be honest, if we want to change this country, let us be informed by the honesty of our beliefs, then we will be taken seriously