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ESWATINI

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION SUMMIT

LEVERAGING FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION TO
PROMOTE A HUMAN
RIGHTS CULTURE IN A
CHANGING ESWATINI



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REPORT ESWATINI FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION SUMMIT 2023

15 June 2023

The George Hotel Conference Centre
Manzini, Eswatini

Leveraging Freedom of Expression
to promote a human rights culture
in a changing Eswatini

Programme Director:
Khulekani Msweli



Khulekani Msweli, artist and social justice activist, who directed proceedings during Summit 2023

Executive Summary

The Campaign for Free Expression in collaboration with the Canadian High Commission, UN Eswatini British High Commission and the Coordinating Assembly of Non-Governmental Organisations (CANGO), on Thursday June 15, 2023 held the Second Eswatini Freedom of Expression Summit, in Manzini, Eswatini.

The summit was a follow-up to the inaugural summit at the same venue in October 2022. A total of 120 delegates drawn from across the Eswatini political, economic, human rights, civil society, social and cultural landscape attended this year's summit.

Delegates were drawn from political parties, the media, the diplomatic corps, multilateral organisations, civil society, government institutions, the private and public sector, youth and women's organisations, cultural and artistic players, environmental activists, faith-based organisations, and academia, among others.

The objectives of the meeting were set out as to:

- Highlight important issues affecting or influencing the way emaSwati enjoy the right to freedom of expression (FoE) and access to information.
- Build a loose, widely represented coalition of organisations and people willing and prepared to defend FoE in the country.

- The need to take the conversation into communities.
- The need to achieve transparency and accountability in the public sector by enhancing freedom of expression and access to information through effective policy setting.
- The need to build the capacity of individuals to be media literate, which enables them to separate propaganda from facts when consuming the news.
- The need to balance fundamental freedoms such as the right to FoE with observing ethics and responsibilities.

The delegates kicked off the summit by observing a moment of silence for the slain human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko and all the victims and survivors of the June 2021 Massacre.

Mr Clerico Constantino, the representative of the Canadian High Commission, and Ms Laila Nazarali, Senior Human Rights Adviser: United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office – Kingdom of Eswatini were among the high-profile international delegates who attended the summit.

Extensive deliberations were held regarding the future of Eswatini, and how to promote human rights, the rule of law and transition into a just society. The summit came at a time when the country was preparing to go to the polls in September 2023, and amid a cloud of controversy following the State's actions to dig in its heels when it came to hosting the promised and long-awaited national dialogue



Delegates from Eswatini's political and civil society listening to presentations during the summit

The summit was held under a cloud of tension coming from the different political parties and political players, as they are at loggerheads on how to move the country forward. Some openly called for a complete overhaul of the current administration presided over by King Mswati III. The country is run under the Tinkhundla system, which is based on individual merit for consideration to public office. Political parties have been banned by law in Eswatini since 1973 following a Proclamation by King Sobhuza II, King Mswati's predecessor and father. The section of delegates calling for a complete overhaul of the Tinkhundla system are agitating for the unbanning of political parties.

Another faction took a more moderate stance of calling for reforms to the political and governance structure of Eswatini, with the king assuming the role of a constitutional monarch. Unlike those who are also against participating in the general elections of 2023, they advocate for full participation in the polls so that they can fill the seats in parliament with pro-democracy candidates.

The third faction advocates for maintaining, if not further strengthening, the status quo, with King Mswati being given more powers to rule the kingdom.

It came as no surprise that there was a level of heckling, intimidation, intolerance and near violent confrontation in the highly charged room, with the summit being occasionally derailed from the substantive freedom of expression issues.

A number of speakers also accused the government of stifling freedom of expression when it comes to the growing protestations by the citizens that government was using intimidatory tactics to silence those calling for change, decrying the state of poverty faced by the majority, or opposed to what they labelled a sham election.

The issue of a free media also came up as being the crucial catalyst for emaSwati to

strengthen access to, and enjoyment of, freedom of expression. Delegates lamented that as media practitioners they were oppressed, and the media cannot express itself freely.

They called for solutions on how to free journalists from this situation.

However, as the summit came to its conclusion there was general consensus that the people of Eswatini needed more time and space for dialogue, so that they would find each other and then together map the way forward for the country they want. There was also a consensus that there should be decentralisation of the discussions and engagements to the community level, and villages.

The following are highlights of the issues discussed:

- How to navigate the political, economic and social headwinds for a united, prosperous Eswatini.
- How to move towards an inclusive, free and prosperous Eswatini.
- Forging a united, inclusive approach to address freedom of expression issues, particularly for marginalised groups such as people living with disabilities, the LGBTQI+ community, and women and children.
- Youth seizing the moment to amplify their voices over the manner in which the country is governed.
- The role of business on the journey to the Eswatini we want.
- The state we are in as emaSwati: What got us here, what we need to do to turn our situation around.
- Strengthening international cooperation to promote democracy in Eswatini.
- Achieving free expression for all.

Summit Deliberations

Professor Anton Harber, the executive director of the Campaign for Free Expression, welcomed the delegates and thanked them for their participation in the summit.

Professor Anton Harber, Campaign for Free Expression: FoE is central to the enjoyment of all human rights

Harber said that FoE was a basic right that enabled other rights, and that is why it was central to the discussion. He expressed grave concern at the lack of free expression in all its forms including the rights to protest, to gather and to meet, for journalists to report freely on events and for citizens to campaign freely in elections.

Mr Clerico Constantino, Canadian High Commissioner: FoE is essential to the full enjoyment of human rights

Constantino emphasised how the promotion and protection of democracy were the cornerstones to foster development in any country, to help build societal resilience, and to enhance the enjoyment of rights within peaceful, just, accountable, and inclusive societies. He said this must include the right of everyone to hold opinions without interference and the right to freedom of expression as reaffirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – which this year is celebrating 75 years.

Constantino said freedom of expression was essential to the full enjoyment of human rights.

“Sadly, these rights are increasingly endangered worldwide. Violations of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression continue to occur around the world on a daily basis, including restrictions on digital content. By celebrating freedom of the press today, I want to ensure that you continue working collectively to ensure a freer, fairer, and equal society,” Constantino said.

“This includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, whether orally, in writing or in print, or through any other media of choice. This freedom of expression must also be equal for all – regardless of gender, ethnicity, or religion.”

He expressed condolences following the tragic death of Thulani Maseko.

“Canada echoes the encouragement of international partners, including the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, for the Government of Eswatini to adopt an independent and impartial investigation into his death. The right to freedom of opinion and expression, association and peaceful assembly are cornerstones to safe and prosperous societies.”

The proponents of democracy and human rights who were part of the audience asked Constantino to assist by appealing to the Canadian Government to put pressure on the king and his government to pave the way for a free and fair na-



Anton Harber, Campaign for Free Expression



Laila Nazarali, UN Senior Human Rights Adviser



Emmanuel Ndlangamandla, Multi-Stakeholder Forum



Clerico Constantino, Canadian High Commission

tional dialogue on the political direction that the country is to take.

In response Constantino said the Canadian Government believed in democratic values, the rule of law and added that everywhere where Canada is present, it upholds those values.

Ms Laila Nazarali, UN Senior Human Rights Adviser: One tweet can change the world

Nazarali said freedom of expression underpins all other human rights. If we cannot express ourselves freely, Nazarali said, we cannot talk about freedom of association or assembly, or right to health, food, water, and adequate standard of living.

“We all have a role to play to protect human rights in Eswatini. We have different roles to play as stakeholders: as religious leaders, women’s groups, traditional leaders, students, the youth, and all other groups. Eswatini has ratified multiple human rights treaties. All human rights are inherent and inalienable. There must be tolerance for opposing different views as well as protection for marginalised groups.”

Ms Nazarali requested that the rights of persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+, human rights defenders, journalists, women, and all other groups, be protected.

“Let us work together to fight the many social and economic challenges. Do not underestimate the power you have to express yourselves. Your words in poetry, song, print and social media have meaning. Knowledge is power. You have the power and responsibility to change the narrative; to speak truth to power and be a voice to the voiceless. One tweet can change the world,” she said.

“I conclude by remembering the late Thulani Maseko. When he was in prison, he wrote a letter and the letter, while in isolation, went viral in the world. ‘When freedom is taken away it becomes

the onerous and supreme duty of men to reclaim it from the oppressor. Giving up freedom is tantamount to giving away one’s right to dignity. One has no dignity without freedom. Without freedom, we are a people without a soul.’”

Nazarali noted that some of the issues raised by the participants of the summit were very concerning and amounted to serious human rights violations. She made an example of assertions by some participants that people were threatened with being denied access to scholarships and other services if they did not resist for the elections.

“The right to vote cannot be linked to the right to access scholarship,” Nazarali said.

Other violations on human rights that were raised by the participants included asking the UN in Eswatini to act upon concerned rights to minorities, informal sectors, and the LGBTQI+ community.

“The plight of rural women, and gender-based violence (GBV) must also be addressed. Why do we still have to talk about GBV in this time and age? It has been said that one in three women experience GBV.”

Nazarali pointed out that the UN has 190 member states, and how at times it is difficult to reach consensus from such a high number of member states. On the question of tough stances against Eswatini, Nazarali pointed out that the UN is governed by the Security Council. Unless there is consensus on the UN Charter, Nazarali said, their hands were tied in holding governments accountable.

“The Office of the Council of Human Rights has taken tough actions in the past on some countries. For instance, in Uganda early this year, we closed the office after the country’s stance on LGBTQI+. It must be noted that we are here at the invitation of the government, which can also ask us to leave.”



Tiphelane Simelane, UN Human Rights Project Officer

Mr Emmanuel Ndlangamandla, Multi-Stakeholder Forum: All human beings aspire to enjoy life in its fullest

Ndlangamandla represented the Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF), which was formed in May 2021 against the background of widespread protests sparked by the death of UNESWA student Thabani Nkomonye. He called upon civil society organisations to strengthen their role and fill the gap that currently exists in the country concerning good leadership.

Ndlangamandla acknowledged that the right to freedom of expression was at the heart of all efforts to ensure that emaSwati enjoyed all human rights. Ndlangamandla noted that there were numerous impediments for emaSwati to access and exercise these rights, calling on the local human rights defenders and the international community to strengthen efforts to ensure that all

emaSwati access and enjoy the right to freedom of expression.

He said the MSF represents a collective interest of the struggling and marginalised emaSwati who are pushing for political, social, and economic freedom.

“You will agree with me that all human beings aspire to enjoy life in its fullest. Jesus, when he was on earth, said I have come that people may have life in abundance. The enjoyment of rights is inherent in every human being. We all aspire for a society that respects human rights, the rule of law and opportunity for all, not what is currently obtaining. Our vision is to see a united multiparty democratic country based on the rule of law.

“Our mission is striving to organise the full participation, mobilising in unity all emaSwati in pursuit of multiparty democracy, based on the

participation of all emaSwati in an economy and governance paradigm.”

He said as the MSF they understood that the problems of Eswatini were a symptom of a governance crisis.

“MSF believes the path to a prosperous country requires an all-inclusive, facilitated political dialogue.”

He listed a Five Point Plan as a basis for a national dialogue:

- All-inclusive national dialogue which will be coordinated by a neutral structure. We are a country so divided that no one in our midst is equipped to lead this process transparently and in an accountable way.
- Total and unconditional unbanning of all political parties.
- Setting up of a transitional authority.
- Coming up with a new democratic constitution.
- Creation of a new dispensation under a multiparty dispensation and peaceful resolution.

“We believe there must be an honest reflection on the state of the nation. There are security threats, lack of delivery of basic services, shortage of drugs in hospitals and affordable education from primary to tertiary level, and a high level of unemployment, to name but a few. Therefore, we call for a peaceful resolution of our crisis through the political dialogue that was promised by the Head of State,” Ndlangamandla said.

“We are facing an election whose outcome is not going to bring change to people’s lives but is going to be a continuation of the status quo. It is a lie that only a minority needs change in this country. All of us, including the leaders, need change.”

He appealed to the media to uphold the ethics of journalism, to be impartial and not choose sides, but be accountable to the truth and facts.

**Ms Sibongile Mazibuko, Ngwane
National Liberatory Congress: We’ve
been calling for a national dialogue for a
long time**

The president of the Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (NNLC) called for concrete resolutions from the summit to address a government that uses poverty as a tool of oppression.

Mazibuko said prodemocracy proponents have been calling for a political dialogue for a long time, but the authorities were not willing to talk. Mazibuko touched on allegations that the establishment had brought in mercenaries from the apartheid era who are said to have abducted freedom fighters and killed them. She also alleged that the Russians had been brought in to train the Swati army.

“Who are they training to kill except the people?” she wondered.

“People have sleepless nights as they are dragged out of their homes. People are coerced to go and register for the elections. We should discuss a way of stopping these things. Jesus has come that we may have life and have it more abundantly, but people eat from dustbins. Is this the kind of country that God wants? Tinkhundla is a one-party state that is worse than apartheid.”

**Mr Wandile Dlodlu, People’s United
Democratic Movement: Freedom of
Expression is for a chosen elite in
Eswatini**

Dlodlu, deputy president of the People’s United Democratic Movement, decried the institutionalised state of poverty in the country which he said exacerbates the stifling of freedom of expression.

Dlodlu said the poor majority do not have access to, nor do they enjoy the right to freedom of expression. He said the citizens were brutalised in state-sponsored violence when they tried to exercise their right to freedom of expression and to



Fundiswa Magagula, Traditional Healer

protest the lack of freedom and democracy in the country.

He also touched on the thorny issue of the alleged abduction of the leader of so-called underground forces that were said to have perpetrated violence and killings as a response to the authorities’ refusal to implement democratic changes. The “Commander” of the Solidarity Forces was allegedly abducted from his hiding place in South Africa and is currently facing terrorism charges in Eswatini.

Dlodlu wondered what the response of the international organisations that were represented in the summit was to the alleged abduction. He described the incident as undermining South Africa’s sovereignty, and a callous breach of international law and human rights.



Sibongile Mazibuko, Ngwane National Liberatory Congress

**Ms Fundiswa Magagula, Traditional
Healer: Amplifying the voice of
traditional healers**

Magagula is a sangoma by spiritual calling and a project manager by profession. She noted that traditional healers struggle when it comes to freedom of expression.

“I took the journey of spiritual healing because we struggle to express ourselves as healers. We are told to hide our true identities and calling in order to be accepted by society,” Magagula said.

She added that the platform provided by the summit will help their efforts to be treated as equal partners to the rest of society and to be accepted for themselves and for their role as important to a functional society. Society, Magagula said, feels that a lot of traditional healers should be excluded from the westernised society.

“But we play a major role in the political and economic setting. I am also a teacher and a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. I have been called to speak not only for tangoma (traditional healers) but for all other voiceless people.”

Magagula responded to a question from the floor about the negativity attached to traditional healers and how they deal with this as they educate society to accept them as they are.

She acknowledged that in many parts of society tangoma were hated because people feed on the negative aspects of what they do.

“People do not understand our work. Even in church, there is a dark side to religion. For us to be able to help people to overcome fears, we need to educate them on what bungoma or budloti (ancestral belief) is. People think budloti is about dead people, yet it is spirituality and not about dead people. To get that knowledge out there is essential. I have tried to get organisations to sponsor us to educate people about our work. My job is to teach people what spirituality is, so we can be able to accept each other.”

Ms Nombulelo Motsa, Political Parties Assembly: People must express themselves without interference

Motsa, representing the Political Parties Assembly, pointed out that freedom of expression was a means for people to express themselves without interference. She lamented the arrest and detention of pro-democracy members of parliament, Bacede Mabuza and Mthandeni Dube, who have been convicted under controversial suppression of terrorism laws.

Motsa said emaSwati had a serious challenge with exercising free expression as the local media was controlled by the state.

“Not every media house can write freely as some are pushing the propaganda of the current regime. We have Members of Parliament in prison for speaking their minds when calling for

a change of governance. In this country, you cannot say anything that will oppose the king. Government has taught us that if you speak out against oppression, you will land in jail,” she said.

“On Good Friday 2023, it was said every church should seek consent before making an announcement for Easter services. That was stifling freedom of expression and religion. Are the national authorities equating themselves to God?”

Motsa told the audience that emaSwati were very much oppressed, claiming that everyone was afraid that they may be imprisoned anytime for speaking out.

“Just recently, the authorities announced that anyone who would speak ill of the elections would be jailed. No one wants to go to prison, especially for just voicing one’s views. We are silenced and no one can change that unless we unite and free ourselves from the current system. Anyone who believes in change must stand up and speak out against these atrocities by the government.”

Her remarks were echoed by other young participants who lamented the state of the youth sector in Eswatini and wanted a solid way forward.

They noted that the youth carry the brunt of a collapsing economy, health, and education system. The general feeling was that the country was headed to much worse conditions, yet the voice of young people was not taken into consideration.

“Even after June 2021, women were tortured and harassed. Now we are being intimidated by security forces with guns. As we approach elections, the high number of people who have registered is largely attributed to intimidation and fear. How do we move forward as a country where we are subjected to such suppression of information?” wondered one of the youths.



Bongani Makama, Federation of the Disabled in Swaziland; Pastor Phetsa Dlamini, Mangololo Eswatini; and Mphandlana Shongwe, Pudemo

Pastor Phetsa Dlamini, Mangololo Eswatini: EmaSwati are here freely expressing themselves!

The pastor is one of the founders and chairman of the pro-establishment party Mangololo Eswatini. This controversial pro-monarchy group was formed in July 2021.

“We came together as emaSwati that were concerned about our beloved country. We wanted to understand why there was so much chaos in the land. After we made our analysis, we decided that it was time for us to stand and defend what we believed was correct. As an organisation, the number one priority for us is to ensure that what we do must be in line with our laws, constitution, and our practices as a people,” Dlamini said.

He told the gathering that Mangololo supports all the efforts that are being contributed by all the

different sectors in our society to take the country forward.

“We want to promote tolerance. We believe in freedom of expression and its importance in society, and that this goes hand in hand with tolerance of other people’s beliefs and opinions. We want to see everyone being respected for their opinion. No matter how loud you shout, you cannot silence us. We believe every human being, whether you are from Canada, Gambia, black or white, was created by God. We all are the right people to occupy this planet. We want you to be able to express your own opinion.”

Thantaza Silolo, the secretary general of the Swaziland Liberation Movement (SWALIMO), asked if Mangololo had taken time to analyse the wrong things in the governance of the country, or

whether it supported the ruling regime whether it was wrong or right?

Phetsa said as emaSwati, they saw all the good and the negative that was happening in the country.

“The only difference with us is that we still practise the respect that we were taught as young people when it comes to dealing with issues affecting the country. When we see something wrong, we approach the authorities the right way. We do not publicise the negative thing because that is not the ultimate motive. The main aim is to correct that which is wrong.”

Hynd Shongwe, a member of the clergy representing the Swaziland Concerned Church Leaders, was of the opinion that Mangololo and some of its leaders misrepresented the Kingdom of God.

“There is a God-given right, which is the right to life. Mangololo says it was formed in July in response to civil unrest in Eswatini. We will recall that emaSwati were butchered and killed. If those who died had committed crimes, then justice must prevail and not the barrel of a gun. What about the right to life of those people that died?”

Mr Bongani Makama, Federation of the Disabled in Swaziland: Persons with disabilities have rights and they must be fully adhered to

Makama is the president of the Federation of the Disabled in Swaziland (FODSWA), formed in 1993 by organisations of disabled persons in Eswatini to coordinate the issues of persons with disabilities and empower them and the nation as a whole. A non-governmental organisation, it does not align itself with any political party.

Makama called for the strengthening of processes aimed at enabling people with disabilities to enjoy freedom of expression in all aspects of life. He said this was crucial to ensuring that people with disabilities participate in efforts to

forge inclusive strategies that will increase and strengthen opportunities for them to participate in the country’s democratic processes.

According to the 2017 census, 13% of the country’s population comprises people with disabilities, about 150 000 people. The Constitution seems to be silent about representation of people with disability in the legislature and other arms of Government. The Parliament Act also requires scrutiny regarding the representation of people with disabilities.

“As the nation we need to come together to scrutinise these laws to ensure that they are inclusive and meet all the international standards for the promotion of the rights of people with disability, and all sectors of society.

“Another matter that needs attention is that of the Disability Act, 2018. The law was passed, and the regulations finalised. All that is missing is implementation.”

Makama said persons with disabilities have rights but faced the serious challenge of having them respected.

“We are facing the same challenges faced by emaSwati. It is our wish to have freedom of expression. Otherwise, we are deprived of all the other rights as we are faced with a lot of discrimination. The forms of discrimination we face are attitudinal, environmental, and constitutional discrimination. Even the environment we live in is discriminatory for persons with disability. Some of the discrimination is constitutional. We have the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act of 1938 which deprives us of the right to stand in the court of law. Persons with disabilities are also deprived of the right to vote. There are no means to help those with disability.”

He added that they had multi-intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. “Freedom of expression is a major need for us.”



Sibongile Manyika of the women’s league of the Swaziland Liberation Movement

Makama said persons with disability are eager to actively participate in national development and to get news in an accessible format.

“There are no Sign Language interpreters in most media. We do not have access to information like the rest of emaSwati.”

Ms Nontethelelo Nkambule: Youth lament that the country is ruled by the barrel of a gun

She represented the youth voices and expressed concern that the country seems to be ruled by the barrel of a gun, with the three arms of government being controlled by the king. Nkambule said this resulted in the Suppression of Terrorism Act, which was used to lay charges against political prisoners for expressing their right to freedom of expression.

She also cited the matter of MPs Mabuza and Dube, saying they were found guilty of contravening this law, just for expressing themselves on the governance issues of the country.

“Their sin was just to say that the people were calling for change. Government is sidelining the youth and women in the country. During registration for elections, the target is women and the youth, but people who go there to stand for elections go on individual merit. Tinkhundla has created a poverty situation for the youth, and we are stifled when we exercise our right to freedom of expression on these matters,” Nkambule said.

“We have resources, but our government is misusing these resources, something that led to hyperinflation as citizens are drowning in poverty. It is only through freedom of expression that we can effectively articulate these challenges

with the view of finding lasting solutions to them,” she said.

“The youth is forced to search for means to survive as our government has sidelined us. Journalists like Zweli Martin Dlamini are in exile for writing for the people. In like manner, Stufuza We Country is always on the run because he writes that people want change. We don’t know what will happen as soon as we walk out of this door.”

She said the youth had correctly identified the Tinkhundla as a business entity for the elite.

“As we speak, hospitals have no medication, students are forced to seek means of funding themselves and many are on the verge of dropping out of learning institutions because of lack of money. As young people, it is very difficult to survive in this country. Some youths have resorted to stealing copper to survive.”

Mapezu Kunene, Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities: By virtue of being a human being, you are entitled to human rights

She spoke on behalf of the Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities (ESGM), which represents the LGBTQI+ community. Kunene said the doors to freedom of expression for them were long shut in Eswatini, and they were facing an uphill battle to open them.

“The LGBTQI+ community faces human rights violations, from physical assault to emotional abuse, on a daily basis in this country. Even efforts to have us registered were being stifled. By virtue of being a human being, you are entitled to human rights. We have all the rights to express ourselves and our right to dignity,” she said.

Lucky Dlamini, United Democratic Front: The greatest violator of freedom of expression is the King’s Government

Representing the Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF), Dlamini urged participants

to take the matters of freedom of expression forward through actionable solutions. He emphasised two points:

- The greatest violator of freedom of expression is the King’s Government. We need not shy away from this truth. We must face the greatest violator. Currently, we have a situation where we have a Minister of Housing and Urban Development, Prince Simelane. Whatever he says becomes law. He banned petitions in cities. Themba Masuku [the Deputy Prime Minister] also banned the delivery of petitions in Tinkhundla Centres on June 24, 2021. No one is addressing that. These rights have been taken away since 1973. How do our partners assist these vulnerable people of Eswatini to reclaim these rights from the violators?
- What is the view of the UN on the issue of human rights? There is a Human Rights Commission report that was compiled after the June 2021 upheavals, but no one is implementing it.

Vusi Kunene, Council of Swaziland Churches: The church has a crucial role to play in promoting freedom of expression

Kunene represented the Council of Swaziland Churches, noting that the Church has a crucial role to play in promoting freedom of expression as it accommodates both progressives and conservatives.

“It is important to stick to what the scripture says. Life is in abundance where people are physically catered for – traditionally, politically, socially, and otherwise. You will find the council also speaking to political economic and social issues because we care about the person holistically. We adhere to the Proverbs 31:8-9 ‘Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor,’” he said.

“For people to enjoy all rights, freedom of expression should be allowed. There is an answer. EmaSwati like to say *kubindvwa kubonwa* (keep quiet, even when you see something wrong). That is the bad attitude that we have. We like to keep quiet as long as our comfort zones are not disturbed. We must look at the right to express one’s self as a very important right. Even politically, we will differ, but that does not make us enemies. The issue is how then do we engage on those differences. We need to discuss our differences. We need to talk.”

Kunene added: “The media is the medium through which we receive information. If we control the media, that will determine whether we get the right information or not. Should the church keep quiet? The Bible says people die for lack of knowledge. The issue is how we express opinions. We need to have robust discussions with respect for each other. If we fail to do that, we open room for the state to come in and seek to regulate the people.”

He also touched on the conundrum between suppression of terrorism and suppressing freedom of expression. Kunene said in many instances the State will come in and claim to be suppressing terrorism, yet it is suppressing freedom of speech. He urged all concerned to be cautious of the language they use.

“Public security likes to claim that they are clamping down on freedoms in the interest of State security. That is a way of dealing with certain views and ideas that those in authority are not in agreement with. For us to develop our economy, we need to engage. Allow the people to say yes or no to a project. At Lubhuku, people were against a project, but government continued with it. Should we as a church keep quiet and let it be?”

Participants felt that the issue of the church was very serious when it came to freedom of expression. They noted that Martin Luther King Ju-

nior took centre stage in the struggle for civil liberties, and wondered if the Church in Eswatini could amplify its voice regarding such issues. The resounding notion was that the Church must fight injustice. Prayers, the participants said, were not enough, but supporting the struggle for freedom was essential.

Mary Pais Da Silva, African Initiative on Women Human Rights Defenders: We are included only when it’s time to tick the boxes

The African Initiative on Women Human Rights Defenders is an organisation for women by women. Da Silva pointed out that women were normally excluded when it came to matters of freedom of expression.

“We are included only when it’s time to tick the boxes. I don’t mean we are denied the right to speak. There are many women who find themselves in meetings but are not able to speak up. We must always be purposeful and mindful on the voices of marginalised groups. We need to make sure that no matter how diverse, the people should be included and have a sense of belonging in all that we do.”

Group discussions

How can we raise consciousness of freedom of expression in our communities?

GROUP 1

Right to food, life, security, and health

1. We cannot express ourselves if we do not enjoy these rights first.
2. A lot of vulnerable groups are being violated. These include the disabled, LGBTQI+, sex workers, informal traders, human rights defenders, and political activists. These rights must be protected and defended. The leading violator is the Government of Eswatini.
3. To teach the society their rights. We need to teach them the universal human rights.
4. We need the church to be relevant to the needs of society. It must stick to the core mandate of the scripture.

How we will do this

- We will go back to the community and our constituencies. We will target social gatherings, sports activities, and student activities. We need also to identify the various groups and identify those among us who are best positioned to relate to them.
- We need to develop a tool for engaging these facilitators and capacitate them for the task.
- We need to tolerate each other as we have diverse and different views.

GROUP 2

1. Despite our diverse views and backgrounds, we still need to respect the right to freedom of expression.
2. There is more work to be done to attain freedom of expression in Eswatini. Freedom of expression is also linked to freedom of association and assembly.
3. Organisations should also educate membership in respect of the right to freedom of expression.
4. Self-discipline is also essential to freedom of expression.
5. We demand all-inclusive engagement at national level to attain democracy. Consider diversity and equity. We need to involve even the minority groups in this endeavour.
6. There is a need for change of attitude, as members of progressives, even when our identity is not recognised.

GROUP 3

1. Focus must be on the media and the impact it has up to this far. We need an alternative media that will adhere to the ethics of journalism. A media that will be nonpartisan and reliable to report accurately for the international community.
2. We need to start campaigns in communities on the significance of the media and to educate the public on how they can tell the difference between a "real story" and "fake news".
3. Mobilise people to join political parties.
4. There must be community programmes to help people know what the struggle (for democracy) is and what we hope to achieve.
5. A uniform module/tool on freedom of expression and how it relates to the communities we live in.
6. The Mass Democratic Movement must have institutions. Lack of such institutions weakens the struggle in terms of coordination.
7. Since the right to assembly is being suppressed, we must use community gatherings.

GROUP 4

1. There must be tolerance in that people from different walks of life must work together towards a common goal of freedom of expression.
2. We must include the disabled in everything that we do.
3. EmaSwati are on their own in that international institutions have less power to hold member states accountable if they violate rights.
4. We will use art, poetry, music, drama, and radio to teach people about freedom of expression. We will use churches and soccer teams.
5. We will use organisations, schools, and soccer teams, to name but a few activities in communities, to promote freedom of expression.

GROUP 5

1. Freedom of expression is a constitutional right.
2. Right to participate in the formation of government, such as the elections.
3. We need to teach communities tolerance of dissenting views.
4. No political party has the right to dictate whether people should participate in elections or not.

Way forward

Towards the Eswatini we want and how to get there

The summit concluded with a unanimous decision to hold follow-up events at constituency level to implement the views expressed during the summit. There is the need to discuss how people can continue such dialogues in the various communities, in a smaller set-up. The participants noted that the reason there is intolerance of views when it comes to issues of freedom of expression was that there were very few restricted platforms for emaSwati

to express themselves on issues affecting their lives, particularly when it comes to matters of human rights, democracy, and governance.

The Campaign for Free Expression should facilitate mini-dialogues in the constituencies on a quarterly basis. The partners including the Canadian Government, UN Eswatini, British High Commission and CANGO should consider availing financial and technical solutions for mini-dialogues in the various constituencies in the country.



Delegates at the summit confer in groups

