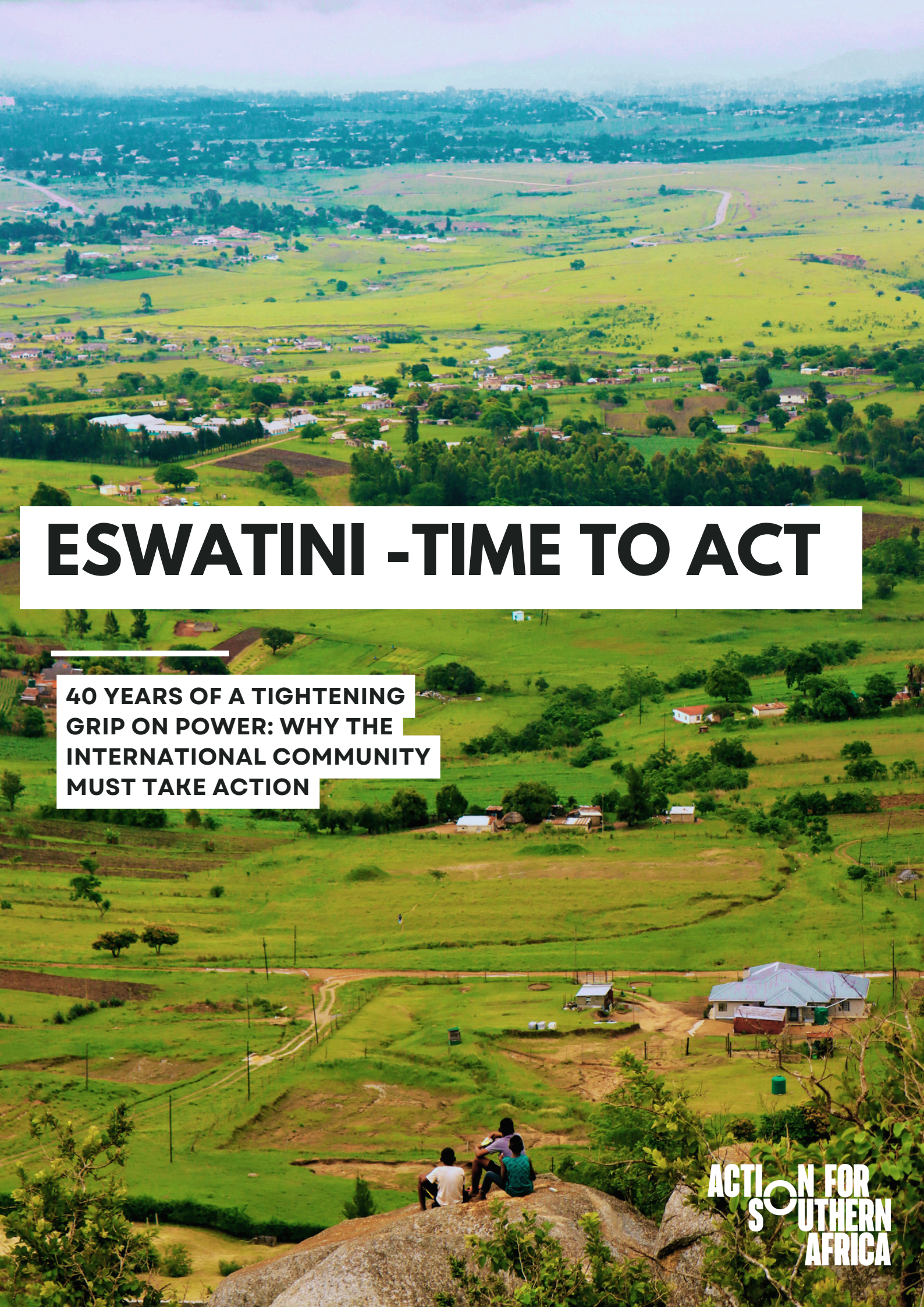


ESWATINI -TIME TO ACT

40 YEARS OF A TIGHTENING GRIP ON POWER: WHY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST TAKE ACTION

ACTION FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA

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YOUNG ESWATINI MAIDENS OBSERVING THE ESWATINI TRADITIONAL REED DANCE CEREMONY.
PHOTO BY: SPHIWE CLEMEMTINE MKHABELA

ACTION FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About This Report.....3
Executive Summary.....4
40 Years of Absolute Power, Five Years Without Justice..... 5

Democracy and Political Repression..... 6
Constitutional Crisis, Weaponised Laws and the 2021 Uprising..... 6
Civil Society Under Siege..... 9

Women's Rights & Gender Justice..... 12
Women and the Law: A Dual System, Unequal Rights..... 12
Gender-Based Violence: An Emergency Denied..... 13
LGBTIQ+ Rights: A Community Under Attack..... 16

Unemployment, Poverty & Inequality.....17
Workers' Rights, Unemployment, Poverty and Inequality.....17
Public services at crisis point..... 19

Recommendations..... 22
Conclusion: why the time for international solidarity is now..... 24



ACTSA WRITES TO DAVID LAMMY REQUESTING URGENT ATTENTION ON DETERIORATING POLITICAL SITUATION

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was researched and written by Melusi Simelane and Mbali N Dludlu, with support from Sticks Nkambule in June 2026. Court documents, legal correspondence, and civil society reports were reviewed and are cited in footnotes at the end of the report.

Owing to time and budget constraints, the worker survey informing Section Three did not include interviews with government officials, trade union leaders, or employers; its findings are illustrative testimony, not a representative survey, and are presented alongside independently sourced reporting throughout.

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Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA) is the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. It campaigns for justice, democracy, and human rights in Southern Africa.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2026 marks 40 years of King Mswati III's rule, 21 years since Eswatini's Constitution came into force, and five years since the 2021 pro-democracy uprising. These milestones expose a persistent gap between Eswatini's constitutional commitments and the reality experienced by its people.

The 2005 Constitution guarantees fundamental rights including freedom of expression, assembly and association, yet political parties remain prohibited and dissent continues to be criminalised. During the 2021 uprising, at least 46 people were killed, 245 injured and 235 arrested, according to the government's preliminary report. Five years later, there has been no final public report and no state official has been convicted.

The consequences extend into everyday life. Unemployment stands at 35.4%, rising to approximately 50% among young people aged 15–24. Some 54% of the population lives below the lower-middle-income poverty line, while income inequality remains exceptionally high. Eswatini has also ranked among the ITUC's ten worst countries for workers for five consecutive years.

Women and girls face widespread gender-based violence and barriers to justice. LGBTIQ+ people face criminalisation, discrimination and hostile rhetoric. Public services are under severe pressure, with more than 600 health workers reportedly emigrating in 2026 and major shortages affecting hospitals and essential medicines.

Across these areas, the report identifies a common pattern. Rights and protections exist on paper, but political and economic power remains highly concentrated and accountability remains limited.

As a Commonwealth member, Eswatini has committed itself to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The UK also has a longstanding historical relationship with the country. The evidence presented in this report therefore raises a fundamental question for Eswatini's international partners, "what meaning do these commitments have without accountability and sustained action?"

Five years after the 2021 uprising, 21 years after the Constitution and four decades into the current reign, the time for international solidarity is now.

“The 2005 Constitution guarantees fundamental rights including freedom of expression, assembly and association, yet political parties remain prohibited and dissent continues to be criminalised.”

KING MSWATI III OF ESWATINI ATTENDING THE TAIWAN NATIONAL DAY. PHOTO BY: 總統府

40 YEARS OF ABSOLUTE POWER, FIVE YEARS WITHOUT JUSTICE

Melusi Simelane, lead report author

Forty Years of Absolute Power,
Twenty-One Years of Broken Promises,
Five Years Without Justice

These anniversaries are not coincidental; they form the architecture of a contradiction. A monarchy that signs human rights treaties to signal international legitimacy yet deploys colonial-era sedition laws to silence dissent. A constitution that enshrined freedoms of assembly, expression, and association, while the courts upheld laws that criminalise them. A state that promised development while allowing poverty, inequality, and unemployment to deepen over four decades of uninterrupted royal control.

As the late Mario Masuku, veteran leader of the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), described the Tibiyo Taka Ngwane sovereign wealth fund, a royal economic instrument operating without parliamentary scrutiny, paying no tax, and returning no dividends to citizens.

The report draws on original research, court records, interviews with human rights defenders, lawyers, workers and survivors, and published records from international monitoring bodies. The report is intended for Eswatini's international partners, particularly the UK and other fellow Commonwealth member states, who must decide whether the obligations they share under the Commonwealth Charter are compatible with continued silence about what is happening inside the kingdom.

Eswatini has been a Commonwealth member since its independence in 1968. The Commonwealth Charter commits all members to democracy, human rights, freedom of expression and assembly, the rule of law, and non-discrimination. As Commonwealth Secretary-General Shirley Shirley Botchwey noted at the Law Ministers' Meeting in Fiji in February 2026, attended by Eswatini's Attorney-General, the rule of law "gives a young person a voice in democracy" and "gives a worker her dignity at work."[1]

Those words rang hollow for Emaswati, who continued to be unable to join or vote for a political party, and to witness trade union leaders being assaulted, LGBTIQ+ students being expelled from school, and MPs being sentenced to decades-long terms for making speeches.

This report hopes to bring together for international and UK decision-makers the data gathered by civil society organisations fills the gap left by the state's silence.



ESESWATINI AUTHORITIES BLOCK PROTEST UTILITY TARIFF HIKE. PHOTO: CIVICUS



PROTESTS AGAISNT EVICTIONS
PHOTO: ACTSA WEBSITE

DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL REPRESSION

Eswatini's political system remains dominated by the monarchy, despite constitutional guarantees of democratic rights and fundamental freedoms. Political parties remain prohibited, dissent is criminalised, and those who challenge the political status quo continue to face repression, while accountability for the violence of 2021 remains unresolved.

Constitutional Crisis, Weaponised Laws and the 2021 Uprising

When King Mswati III was crowned on 25 April 1986, he inherited an absolute monarchy consolidated by his father, King Sobhuza II, through Proclamation 12 of 1973. The Proclamation abrogated the 1968 Constitution, banned political parties and political activity, and concentrated political authority in the monarchy. It has never been formally repealed.[1] There remains no mechanism for citizens to elect a Prime Minister directly through political parties or to remove an executive they did not choose.[3]

The 2005 Constitution appeared to establish a new framework, guaranteeing freedom of expression, assembly and association, gender equality and other fundamental rights. Yet it retained the prohibition on political parties and concentrated significant executive, legislative and judicial powers in the monarchy.[2][3]

In 2018, the country was renamed Eswatini and the political system was declared a "Monarchical Democracy".

The tinkhundla system continues to require candidates to contest parliamentary seats without party affiliation.

The SADC Electoral Observer Mission described the tinkhundla system as being at the centre of the tensions that culminated in the 2021 uprising.[16]

The contradiction between constitutional rights and political practice is reflected in the country's international commitments. Eswatini has ratified major regional and international human rights instruments, including the African Charter and its Women's Protocol, and is a signatory to seven of the nine core UN human rights instruments.

> **It would have helped if they had admitted what happened. Because now it's like you're telling someone this did not happen — yet your son died like that.**
>
> - Mental health activist interviewed for ACTSA report

Yet political parties remain prohibited, political expression is restricted and dissent is routinely met with arrest, prosecution or intimidation.

Demands for political reform predate the 2021 uprising. At the 2012 and 2016 Sibaya, citizens called for the direct election of the Prime Minister. When similar demands were later advanced through petitions and nationwide protests in 2021, the state responded with lethal force.[15]

Colonial-era laws have provided a legal basis for suppressing dissent. The Sedition and Subversive Activities Act 1938 criminalises speech or conduct that brings the government or monarch "into hatred, contempt, or disaffection", with a maximum sentence of 20 years.[4]

The Suppression of Terrorism Act 2008 has also been used against political organisations and activists. PUDEMO, its youth wing SWAYOCO, Umbane and others have been designated terrorist organisations.[6]

These laws have been used against individuals for political expression. Sipho Jele was arrested in 2010 after wearing a PUDEMO T-shirt at a May Day rally and died in custody. Mario Masuku spent more than five years cumulatively in detention across successive arrests without being convicted. Mpandlana Shongwe was arrested for shouting "Viva PUDEMO" and has never been tried. Menzi Bongeka Bhembe has been held under the Suppression of Terrorism Act since 2024 without a fair trial.[4][6]

The same legal framework was central to the prosecution of former MPs Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza and Mthandeni Dube following the 2021 uprising. Both were charged with sedition and terrorism, among other offences, over speeches calling for the direct election of the Prime Minister. In July 2024, Mabuza received an effective 25-year sentence and Dube an effective 18-year sentence. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch condemned their convictions and sentences.[5] [6]

> **The state still operates with the undertones of the 1973 Decree, making it more difficult for the Constitution to deliver on its promises.**
>
> - Human rights lawyer interviewed for this report; a sentiment echoed by other human rights lawyers.

The 2021 uprising followed the death of student Thabani Nkomonye and allegations of police brutality. Protests spread nationwide, with demands for democratic reform and the direct election of the Prime Minister. The government banned demonstrations, authorised the use of lethal force and imposed an internet shutdown. Its own Commission for Human Rights and Public Administration recorded at least 46 deaths, 245 injuries and 235 arrests. No final report has been published.[7]

Civil-society organisations documented a higher toll. VOVCOF and Solidarity Eswatini recorded 67 people injured or killed by live ammunition fired by security forces, including nine-year-old Nkosephayo Lukhele, who was shot in the abdomen. The Swaziland Rural Women's Assembly documented nine women killed, 35 women with gunshot wounds, 97 incarcerated and three miscarriages following alleged police beatings. Sexual assault of women detained in military facilities was also documented.[8][9]

Children were among those detained. Court records from the Manzini Magistrates' Court document at least 57 defendants from the 2021 period, including minors treated as adults, without social workers or age assessments and with bail set as though they were adults. Civil litigation has continued over the violence.[10] [11]

The repression did not end with the 2021 protests. In November 2022, Mhlonishwa Sifundza was shot approximately 16 times and remained unable to return to work at the time of his interview with ACTSA. In May 2026, security forces conducted raids in Mbabane townships including Mahwalala and Corporation. Residents interviewed by ACTSA described beatings, forced entry into homes, property seizures and the use of municipal vehicles alongside unmarked vehicles. [12][14]

Five years after the uprising, no state official has been held accountable for the 2021 killings. The Commission's final report remains unpublished. The continuing use of security operations against communities and the prosecution of political dissent leave the central political crisis unresolved.[7][11][12]

Key facts

- 1973: Political parties and political activity banned.
- 2005: Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, assembly and association, but retains the prohibition on political parties.
- 2021: At least 46 people killed, 245 injured and 235 arrested, according to the state's own preliminary human-rights report.
- 2024: Former MPs Mabuza and Dube received effective sentences of 25 and 18 years following speech-based convictions.



A MARCH ORGANISED BY THE SWAZILAND NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS WAS JOINED BY MEMBERS OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND TRADE UNIONS, AND IT TURNED VIOLENT. PHOTO: AIHS VIA ACCORD

Civil Society Under Siege

Civil society in Eswatini operates under severe restrictions. Organisations that challenge the monarchy or advocate political reform face barriers to organising, recognition and public activity, while journalists, lawyers, trade unionists and human rights defenders face intimidation and legal pressure.

International monitoring reflects the extent of these restrictions. The Human Rights Monitoring Index's 2026 assessment rates Eswatini's protection against arbitrary arrest, forced disappearance, extrajudicial execution and torture and ill-treatment as "bad" or "very bad". It also rates government respect for freedom of assembly and association, opinion and expression, and participation in government as "very bad".[17]

The Ibrahim Index of African Governance ranks Eswatini as the least free country in Southern Africa and identifies it among the African countries experiencing the greatest deterioration in overall governance between 2014 and 2023.

Eswatini also recorded the lowest score among Southern African countries in the Index's rights category, ranking 48th of 54 African countries.[18]

The restrictions extend across civil society. Political and pro-democracy organisations have been targeted, while trade unions have faced restrictions on their ability to organise.

Eswatini has appeared among the International Trade Union Confederation's 10 worst countries for working people every year since 2022, including in its 2026 Global Rights Index.[19]

The media operates in a similarly restricted environment. Journalists face threats and pressure, while laws such as the Sedition and Subversive Activities Act and the Suppression of Terrorism Act contribute to self-censorship and restrict expression critical of the monarchy.[4][6] Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation have also emerged as a concern. A 2025 assessment by the Southern Africa Litigation Centre and Media Institute of Southern Africa Eswatini identified the use of defamation law against journalists and civil society actors as a growing threat to freedom of expression and press freedom.[20]

> **Whatever your challenge is... the undertow means you're challenging the King. The person that you are bringing to court is, in a sense, the King.**
>
> **- Human rights lawyer**

The shrinking civic space is compounded by the weakening of regional oversight. In August 2024, the 44th SADC Summit endorsed King Mswati III's request to remove Eswatini from the agenda of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation.[21]

The consequences for human rights defenders are particularly stark. Thulani Maseko, a prominent human rights lawyer and chairperson of the Multi-Stakeholder Forum, a coalition of civil society groups and political parties campaigning for democratic reform, was shot and killed at his home on 21 January 2023 in front of his wife and two children.[22][24]



THULANI MASEKO, HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER AND ACTIVIST, LOOKS ON AS HE GIVES AN INTERVIEW TO AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE IN LOBAMBA, ESWATINI. PHOTO BY GIANLUIGI GUERCIA / AFP VIA GOOD GOVERNANCE AFRICA

> **On the ground now, they did a very good job at shutting down CSOs. Everybody is dead silent... Anybody that is active is responding to social problems, but not the substantive issues.**
>
> **- Human rights lawyer**

Human Rights Watch reported that Maseko's killing heightened fear among human rights activists, with fellow human rights lawyer Sibusiso Nhlabatsi telling the organisation that lawyers were considering leaving the country.[22] UN and African Union experts called for an impartial investigation into the killing.[24]

Hours before Maseko was killed, King Mswati III had warned those calling for democratic reforms that mercenaries would deal with them. Human rights activists subsequently accused the government of involvement in Maseko's killing, allegations the government has denied.[22] The circumstances of his death therefore remain contested, but the failure to identify and hold those responsible to account has become a major concern for Eswatini's human rights community.

One year after the killing, Human Rights Watch reported that Maseko's killers had not been apprehended and that there was no indication of a credible government investigation. The organisation also reported that the government had made accusatory statements against Maseko's widow after she publicly called for answers about her husband's death.[25]

The wider environment for human rights defenders has continued to deteriorate. The International Commission of Jurists' April 2026 submission to the UN Human Rights Council raised concerns about judicial independence, the independence and safety of lawyers, repression of dissent and protest, and failures to investigate human rights abuses. It warned that the chilling effect on human rights defenders remained at a point of crisis.[26]

The result is a civic environment in which constitutional rights to expression, association and participation exist formally but are increasingly difficult to exercise in practice. The restrictions affect not only political organisations, but also the journalists, lawyers, trade unions, activists and community members needed to scrutinise state power and demand accountability.[2][17][18][19]



MEMBERS OF VARIOUS HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER (HRD) GROUPS HOLD A PROTEST AGAINST THE BRUTAL KILLING OF RENOWNED HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER, THULANI MASEKO AT HIS HOME IN THE KINGDOM OF ESWATINI. PHOTO: CIVICUS

CIVIC SPACE AT A GLANCE

48.7%
of respondents said Eswatini was "not a democracy" in the 2025 Afrobarometer survey.

48th of 54
Eswatini's ranking among African countries in the Ibrahim Index's rights category.

5 consecutive years
Eswatini has appeared among the ITUC's 10 worst countries for working people, from 2022–2026.

2023
Thulani Maseko was assassinated at his home. No one has been convicted of his murder.



BUGANU FESTIVAL OF ESWATINI.
PHOTO BY: SPHIWE CLEMENTINE MKHABELA

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER JUSTICE

Women in Eswatini have constitutional protections, but those rights remain unevenly realised in law and practice. Discriminatory customary structures, gender-based violence, barriers to justice and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people expose a wider gap between formal rights and the lived experience of women and marginalised communities.

Women and the Law: A Dual System, Unequal Rights

Eswatini's women's rights are shaped by two parallel legal systems: Roman-Dutch law and Swazi Law and Custom. While the Constitution provides for equality and women's rights, customary law continues to influence decisions concerning land ownership, inheritance, marriage and family life, creating a persistent gap between rights on paper and their exercise in practice.[2][27]

The gap is longstanding. In 2010, Mary-Joyce Doo Aphane successfully challenged restrictions that prevented married women from owning property in their own names or jointly with their husbands, leading to an amendment of the law. The case nevertheless illustrates a wider problem, women are often required to challenge discriminatory practices individually through the courts rather than being protected proactively by the legal system.[27]

Land remains a particular concern for rural women. Zakithi Sibandze, Coordinator of the Swaziland Rural Women's Assembly, identified land ownership as one of the most pressing issues facing rural women.
Although the Constitution provides for rights relating to land ownership, women continue to face difficulties securing land and using it for commercial farming, limiting their economic independence and participation.[28]

Women also remain under-represented in political decision-making. Section 95(2) of the Constitution provides that nominated members of the House of Assembly should be appointed by the King so that at least half are women.[2] Yet a 2014 assessment found that only four of the 65 members of the House of Assembly were women, representing approximately 6%. Only one had been elected, while the other three had been selected by the King. Women's political representation was subsequently criticised in assessments of the 2023 elections.[29]

The problem extends beyond formal political representation. Sibandze described instances of women being sidelined in community decision-making and facing resistance when they enter positions of leadership. For rural women, customary authority can further constrain their ability to assert formal rights, particularly where challenging established expectations risks social exclusion or marginalisation.[28]

The result is a persistent gap between formal equality and lived experience. Constitutional protections have not consistently translated into greater economic security, political voice or control over decisions affecting women's lives.[2][28]

Only four of the 65 members of the House of Assembly in 2024, were women, representing approximately 6%.


OPINION ...Refresh What You Think!

Girls leading the way

...WITH COLANI HLATSHWAYO

One Billion Rising for Justice campaign - Swaziland Co-ordinator

THERE has emerged a Powerful grassroots girls' club which is coordinated by another Powerful young woman by the name of Nokuhle Hlatjwako at Emblangeni.

Members of the club range between 12 to 18 years. Emblangeni is a community situated under the Lamgabhi Inkhundla in the Manzini Region.

their circle on 11th October, where we discussed some of the violations that girls are subjected to. It was a really emotional discussion to hear these innocent angels sharing some of the challenges that girls are subjected to.

About Gender Based Violence

Gender based Violence remains one of the biggest barriers of gender equality in Swaziland ranking as the major human rights violation amongst women.

There are escalating incidences of gender based violence in the country in general as per the Surveillance on Violence report of 2011 which

are common. The marriageable age for girls under Swazi Law and Custom is not defined and it is believed that puberty is used to determine that a girl can be a wife.

The prevalence of this violation of rights is stemmed from a turbulent socio-economic status of women and girls in Swaziland. In the past decade of Swaziland's political and socio-economic history a lot of disparities have made women and girls much more vulnerable to gender based violence resulting in its upsurge. Socio-economic indicators such as education (formal

home and their security status.

Gender Based Violence transcends the possibility of girls and women having a stable and nurturing socio-economic status in any community.

The basis of disseminating knowledge on GBV is contained in exploring knowledge around gender perspectives which certain societies believe or hold firmly to as norms that determine whether girls and women are safe or not in a community. As such indicators of the socio-economic status such as income, occupation and education are normally used as variables to analyse the context in which GBV is occurring. These will be used as the basis of the background in question.

Education is important for the development of any individual and this is why it is a priority for the girl child. As such, the trend on the communities in which this project was implemented seemed to show that girls who are out of

AN OPINION ARTICLE ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ESWATINI BY FEMALE ACTIVIST ORGANIZATION, ONE BILLION RISING SWAZILAND. PHOTO: ONE BILLION RISING

Gender-Based Violence: An Emergency Denied

Gender-based violence is widespread in Eswatini and disproportionately affects women and girls. Statistics compiled by the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse indicate that approximately one in three girls experience sexual violence by the age of 18, while almost half of women experience sexual violence during their lifetime. Intimate partners, including husbands and boyfriends, are identified as the most likely perpetrators of sexual violence against women.[30]

Afrobarometer's January 2025 survey found that gender-based violence was identified by Emaswati as the most important women's-rights issue for government and society to address. Forty-three percent of respondents considered violence against women and girls to be somewhat or very common in their communities.[31]

The available figures are likely to underestimate the scale of the problem. The International Commission of Jurists and SWAGAA have documented significant under-reporting of gender-based violence, while the CEDAW Committee has raised concerns about low reporting, a culture of silence and impunity, and insufficient information on whether reported cases are investigated and prosecuted.[32]

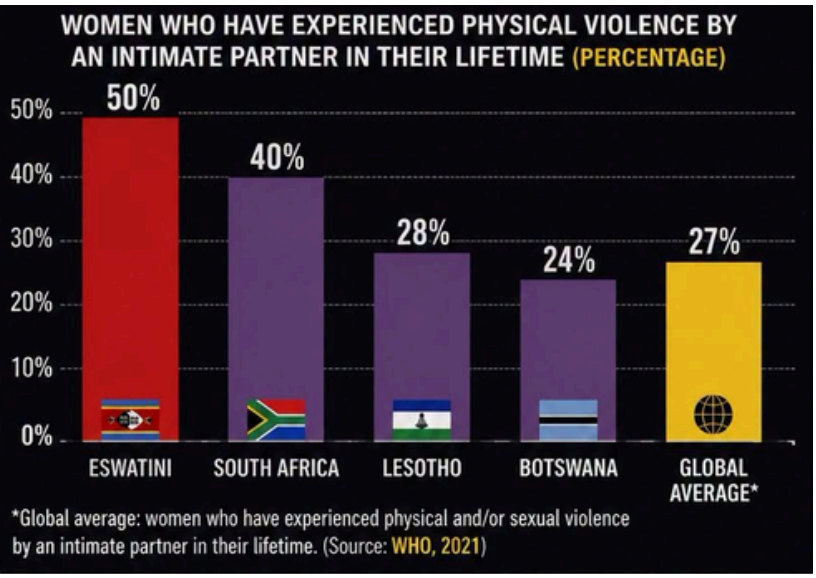
Eswatini has strengthened its legal framework. The Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act was enacted in 2018 following years of advocacy by women's rights organisations. It criminalises sexual activity with children under 18 and does not allow marriage or another relationship to provide a defence to offences under the Act.[32]

The existence of the legislation, however, has not eliminated the gap between legal protection and women's lived experience.

Child marriage and sexual exploitation continue despite these protections. A July 2026 study reported by the Eswatini Observer found that in some rural communities around 93% of girls surveyed had become mothers by the age of 18. The study also recorded limited control over reproductive decisions, linked in part to financial dependence and unemployment.[33]

The barriers facing women experiencing violence extend beyond the law. ICJ and SWAGAA have documented difficulties accessing police, medical, psychological and shelter services. During the COVID-19 lockdown, SWAGAA's toll-free line recorded 70 new cases in its first week, while support for women experiencing domestic violence was initially not classified as an essential service. As of August 2020, Eswatini had no shelter for adult survivors of domestic violence.[32]

Gender-based violence also intersects with political repression. During the 2021 uprising, sexual assaults by security forces were documented. The Swaziland Rural Women's Assembly recorded nine women killed, 35 with gunshot wounds, 97 incarcerated and three miscarriages following police beatings. It also documented sexual assault and other abuse of women detained in military facilities.[9]



The monarch's word may be law today, but the universal right to dignity is the only law that will endure.

- Melusi Simelane

Women affected by the 2021 unrest also experienced longer-term economic consequences. Zakithi Sibandze described women arrested in the textile-producing areas of Matsapha who struggled to return to work after securing bail.

The textile sector employs tens of thousands of workers, more than 70% of whom are women, leaving women particularly exposed to the economic consequences of arrests, injuries and disruption during the unrest.[28]

The experience of women in the royal household has also raised questions about accountability for gender-based violence when the alleged perpetrator is a member of the royal family. In 2022, the Mail & Guardian reported allegations that Inkhosikati Sibonelo Mngomezulu had been assaulted by King Mswati III, while also documenting earlier allegations made by the late Inkhosikati Nothando Dube. The allegations were not adjudicated in the report, and the King's spokesperson declined to comment.[34]

These cases illustrate the broader challenge: legislation can establish formal protections, but those protections depend on women being able to access institutions capable of enforcing them. Where reporting is low, services are inadequate and accountability is limited, legal rights remain difficult to realise in practice.[32]

When the lawyers were able to get bail for the different women, they tried going back to work. They were told to prove that you did not steal... Businesses were compensated; five years later we see rebuilt, better structures. The lives of the women... are still in the ashes, and there was no compensation, no accountability for what was done by the state security forces.

- Zakithi Sibandze



SECOND ESWATINI PRIDE. PHOTO BY: COSPE-SWAZILAND VIA MAMBAONLINE.COM

> **I am queer. Still, when I get home, I'm still needing to live this life... For me, there is no other solution but to fix the system.**
>
> ***- Queer Activist interviewed for ACTSA report***



SECOND ESWATINI PRIDE. PHOTO BY: COSPE-SWAZILAND VIA MAMBAONLINE.COM

> **After seven years, coming from the Supreme Court with a beautiful judgment, they've taken us back. We are literally in the process of filing again — meaning we're looking at another seven years.**
>
> ***- Queer Activist interviewed for ACTSA report***

LGBTIQ+ Rights: A Community Under Attack

LGBTIQ+ people in Eswatini face discrimination within a legal and political environment that provides limited protection for their rights. Same-sex sexual activity between men remains criminalised, while Human Rights Watch reports that criminalisation contributes to stigma, discrimination and prejudice against LGBT people.[35]

The political climate has become more hostile in 2026. In April, King Mswati III publicly rejected the promotion or recognition of same-sex relationships and marriage, stating that gay and lesbian people would not be accepted in Eswatini while he remained King.[36] Melusi Simelane, founder of Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities (ESGM), has described the relationship between royal rhetoric and subsequent institutional action as a "Rhetoric-to-Policy Pipeline", in which statements by the sovereign can influence state conduct.[37]

The consequences have been visible in education. In early 2026, the Minister of Education faced criticism over reported statements concerning LGBTIQ+ pupils. In March, six pupils were expelled from Dvokolwako High School following allegations concerning same-sex relationships.[38] . A queer activist interviewed for the report says they were returned to school after ESGM took the case to the Human Rights Commission. The case illustrates how hostility towards LGBTIQ+ people can extend beyond public rhetoric and affect children's access to education.

LGBTIQ+ organisations also face institutional barriers. ESGM has been involved in a prolonged legal dispute over its registration as an organisation.

In June 2023, the Supreme Court found that the Registrar of Companies had acted unlawfully and unconstitutionally in refusing ESGM's registration application and ordered the responsible Minister to reconsider the application. The organisation was still challenging a subsequent refusal to register it in 2025.[39]

The case is significant beyond ESGM itself. It demonstrates the difficulty organisations can face in securing recognition even where courts have affirmed their constitutional rights. The continued dispute also illustrates the gap between judicial protection and implementation by state institutions.[39]

For LGBTIQ+ people, discrimination therefore operates across several levels: criminalisation, social stigma, hostile public rhetoric and barriers to organising and obtaining institutional protection. The issue is inseparable from the wider question of civic space and the rule of law in Eswatini. Where people cannot organise freely, challenge discrimination or obtain effective legal protection, constitutional rights remain vulnerable to the exercise of political and institutional power.[2][35][39]

LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS IN ESWATINI

SAME-SEX ACTIVITY REMAINS CRIMINALISED
Criminalisation contributes to stigma, discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQ+ people, according to Human Rights Watch.

2026
King Mswati III publicly rejected recognition of same-sex relationships and marriage and said gay and lesbian people would not be accepted in Eswatini while he remained King.

6 PUPIL
Six pupils were expelled from Dvokolwako High School in March 2026 following allegations concerning same-sex relationships. The pupils were later reinstated following intervention by Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities (ESGM).

2023
The Supreme Court found the refusal to register Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities unconstitutional and unlawful, and ordered the responsible Minister to reconsider the application. ESGM was still challenging a subsequent refusal in 2025



THE ACTING PM ISSUED A DECREE BANNING THE DELIVERY OF PETITIONS, CLOSING THE ONLY OUTLET FOR THE FRUSTRATION OF CONCERNED CITIZENS. PHOTO: GARRY KNIGHT VIA ACCORD

UNEMPLOYMENT, POVERTY & INEQUALITY

Eswatini's economic crisis is closely connected to the concentration of political and economic power. Workers face persistent restrictions on their rights, unemployment and poverty remain high, and unequal access to income and public services continues to shape people's ability to build secure livelihoods.

Workers' Rights, Unemployment, Poverty and Inequality

Eswatini's workers have substantial legal protections on paper. Section 32 of the Constitution guarantees the right to form and join, or not join, a trade union, collective bargaining and representation. The Industrial Relations Act, 2000 and Employment Act, 1980 reinforce freedom of association and assembly, while Eswatini has ratified six core ILO conventions covering freedom of association, collective bargaining, wage protection, minimum wage-setting and labour inspection.[40][41]

In practice, these protections are routinely undermined. Eswatini has appeared among the International Trade Union Confederation's ten worst countries for working people every year since 2022, including in the 2026 Global Rights Index. The 2026 assessment documented continued repression of trade unions, political violence and the dismantling of workers' rights.[42]

The Trade Union Congress of Swaziland (TUCOSWA) has repeatedly faced restrictions on its right to organise.

In December 2024, the government banned a planned TUCOSWA march to Lobamba against electricity and water tariff increases. The official justification was that the march would place additional pressure on security resources, while reporting at the time indicated that the timing of the King's Incwala ceremony was also a factor.[43] On International Workers' Day in May 2026, the government again prevented TUCOSWA from holding its annual celebration, which the ITUC characterised as interference with democratic trade union rights.[42]

Union leaders have also faced arrest and physical violence. On 18 February 2025, SNAT Secretary-General Lot Vilakati and other union executives were assaulted by police while visiting the Ministry of Education in connection with a court order concerning outstanding wages. On 23 April 2026, Vilakati was again arrested and, according to SNAT and Education International, beaten and left in a forest while delivering a petition to the Prime Minister's office.[44]

In October 2021, police fired tear gas and live ammunition at a bus carrying teachers travelling to a protest in Mbabane.[45] In November 2022, armed forces opened fire on transport workers protesting the arrest of five colleagues, hospitalising three with gunshot wounds.[46] Transport worker Sabelo Dlamini was shot and killed by police during protests in Malkerns in 2021; no accountability action has been taken against the officer responsible.[47]

These cases sit alongside a broader failure to secure effective labour rights. Trade union density was approximately 23.9% in the latest ILOSTAT-based data, while collective bargaining coverage was approximately 28.4%.[48] The textile and apparel sector, one of the country's largest private employers, supports around 22,000 jobs and is overwhelmingly female.[49] This makes restrictions on collective action particularly consequential for workers whose livelihoods depend on low-wage and often vulnerable employment.

ACTSA interviewed ten workers from the health, security, transport, teaching and textile sectors across Eswatini's four regions, aged 24 to 54. Sixty per cent belonged to a trade union, but all respondents, unionised or not, said the government was not doing enough to protect workers' rights. About three-quarters reported having no disposable income after essential monthly expenses. Three-quarters said that the Constitution, 21 years after its adoption, had not improved their lives, while every respondent called for political change, including the legalisation of political parties. The sample is illustrative rather than statistically representative.[50]

The weakness of workers' rights is compounded by an economy that has failed to generate sufficient employment or distribute income equitably.

Eswatini's 2023 Integrated Labour Force Survey recorded unemployment of 35.4%, while unemployment among young people aged 15–24 was approximately 50%. A further 11% of those classified as employed were underutilised, working fewer than 35 hours a week while available for more work. The European Union has also identified a structural "employability" problem linked to skills and education gaps.[51]

Poverty remains widespread. The World Bank's 2025 Poverty and Equity Brief estimates that 54% of the population lives below the lower-middle-income poverty line of $4.20 a day.

The Gini coefficient of 54.6 places Eswatini among the countries with the highest levels of income inequality, while life expectancy is estimated at 58 years.[52] The African Development Bank identifies severe concentration of wealth among a small political and economic elite as a key driver of inequality.[53]

This concentration is also reflected in the country's economic institutions. The Tibiyo Taka Ngwane sovereign wealth fund, established by royal decree in 1968, operates without parliamentary scrutiny. Its structure and distribution of benefits have long been criticised by civil society, with the late Mario Masuku describing it as a "feedlot for the king and his inner circle".[54]



REFORM NEEDED ESWATINI. PHOTO BY: FLICKR, BROOK WARD VIA THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The distribution of income is further illustrated by the Wages Orders published in January 2026. In the public sector, the lowest-paid civil servant earns SZL 3,451.50 a month, compared with SZL 101,008.16 for the highest-paid category, a ratio of 29.1:1. In the private sector, the minimum wage is SZL 1,605, while the highest category covered by the Orders is SZL 9,042.87.[55] Workers in the transport sector have also reported payments as low as SZL 200 and violations of minimum-wage requirements.

The result is an economy in which high unemployment, low wages and concentrated wealth reinforce one another. Workers seeking better wages or conditions face restrictions on collective action, while those outside formal employment face limited opportunities to enter the labour market. The consequences are particularly severe for young people and women, including the tens of thousands of women employed in the textile sector.[49][51]

The economic picture therefore cannot be separated from the political one. The same restrictions that limit workers' ability to organise also limit their ability to challenge economic conditions. For many Emaswati, the constitutional promise of economic and social rights has not translated into secure employment, adequate income or meaningful economic participation.[40][50][52]

> **[There was] a deep frustration among citizens, particularly young people, regarding issues of unemployment, inequality, governance, the shrinking civic space, lack of opportunities for participation... They were already facing unemployment and poverty before 2021.**
>
> *- Youth organisation director interviewed for ACTSA*

Public services at crisis point

Section 60(8) of Eswatini's Constitution requires the state to "promote free and compulsory basic education for all" and to "take all practical measures to ensure the provision of basic health care services to the population." Twenty-one years after the Constitution came into force, the gap between these commitments and access to public services remains substantial.[56]

In education, secondary schooling remains costly, while primary schools continue to face funding and quality constraints. UNICEF identifies high dropout rates, particularly after primary school, with pregnancy, poverty and the inability to pay additional school fees among the contributing factors. It also identifies unequal educational outcomes between households and a persistent mismatch between education and labour-market needs.[57] The World Bank reports that children growing up in Eswatini today will reach only a fraction of their productive potential and estimates that improving the quality and length of schooling could increase future earnings by more than 16%.[58]

UNEMPLOYMENT, POVERTY & INEQUALITY

Unemployment 33.5%
of the labour force was unemployed in Eswatini in 2025.

Living in poverty 54%
of the population lived below the World Bank's $4.20-a-day lower-middle-income poverty line in its 2025 estimate.

Public-sector pay gap 29.3:1
The highest public-sector salary was about 29 times the lowest, based on the 2026 wage figures in the report.

Income inequality 51.2
Eswatini's Gini coefficient, as reported by the World Bank. A higher score indicates greater inequality.

These pressures are also felt by teachers. The Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) has repeatedly raised concerns about staffing, funding and job security, while the continued use of fixed-term contracts contributes to insecurity and makes it harder to retain experienced teachers.[59] UNESWA has faced persistent funding shortfalls, receiving on average only 40% of the government funding it requested, according to reporting on the Auditor-General's findings. Recent cuts to humanities funding have raised concern among academics and civil society about the impact on higher education and the space available for critical analysis and civic engagement.[60]

The crisis is equally visible in public healthcare. In February 2026, King Mswati III publicly acknowledged persistent medicine shortages and directed that they end immediately.[61] Four months later, nurses appearing before a parliamentary committee investigating conditions at Mbabane Government Hospital reported preventable deaths associated with shortages of medicines, equipment and personnel.[62] In June 2026, the hospital, the country's largest referral facility, was closed for two days amid medicine and staffing shortages. Eswatini has also reportedly lost at least 600 health workers to emigration in 2026 alone, further reducing capacity within the public system.[63]



THEESWATINI SCHOOL KIDS LINED UP FOR FOOD. PHOTO BY: BILL'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURES

The medicine shortages are not simply a question of supply. An April 2026 investigation by the Daily Maverick found that an administrative failure within the Ministry of Health contributed to a prolonged interruption in the supply of controlled medicines. The ministry suspended the only official authorised to sign import permits for controlled medicines in November 2023 without appointing a successor or delegating the authority.

Stocks of medicines including morphine, fentanyl, pethidine, phenobarbital and haloperidol subsequently reached zero, and no replacement signatory was appointed until September 2024. Patients requiring treatment for severe pain, epilepsy and psychiatric conditions were consequently affected.[64]

EDUCATION

16%+

Potential increase in future earnings from improving the quality and length of schooling, according to the World Bank.

HIGH DROPOUT RATES

UNICEF identifies pregnancy, poverty and additional school costs among contributing factors.

-⅓

UNESWA reportedly receives only around one-third of its requested budget.

HEALTHCARE

600+

Health workers reportedly lost to emigration in 2026.

2 DAYS

Mbabane Government Hospital closed in June 2026 amid medicine and staffing shortages.

67%

of Afrobarometer respondents attributed shortages of medicines and medical supplies in public facilities to inadequate government funding

The broader pattern is longstanding. Eswatini's own 2022 Voluntary National Review identified shortages of medicines and medical supplies and deteriorating health infrastructure as key challenges facing the country's health system.[65] In 2025, Afrobarometer found that two-thirds of Emaswati attributed shortages of medicines and medical supplies in public health facilities to inadequate government funding.[66]

Parliament's 2026 investigation into Mbabane Government Hospital further demonstrates that the problem extends beyond individual shortages to staffing, procurement, infrastructure and the management of public resources.[62]

These failures have consequences beyond individual services. Poor access to education restricts young people's ability to acquire the skills required for employment, while shortages of health workers and medicines undermine the health of the population and contribute to further emigration of skilled professionals.

The result is a cycle in which inadequate public services reinforce poverty, unemployment and inequality, while the people most dependent on public provision have the fewest alternatives.



THE KING'S CHILDREN ARE ALL FUNDED BY THE PUBLIC PURSE. PHOTO BY: SWAZIBRIDGE.COM

The crisis in public services therefore cannot be separated from the wider economic and political conditions documented in this report. Constitutional guarantees have not consistently translated into accessible education, functioning health services or adequate public provision. The question is not whether Eswatini has made commitments to its citizens. It has. The question is whether those commitments are being implemented, funded and subjected to effective public accountability.

> **Do you realise, when you look at the Constitution, it identifies us as participants during elections. We are recognised as citizens only every five years.**
>
> **- A young man at a community dialogue, as relayed by a youth organisation director**



HOMELESSNESS ESWATINI. PHOTO BY: BORGENPROJECT.ORG

RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence in this report shows that international partners have long understood the scale of Eswatini's political and human rights crisis. What is now required is sustained action, accountability and pressure for meaningful reform. The recommendations below set out practical steps for the UK Government and the Commonwealth to strengthen accountability, support democratic reform and ensure that Eswatini's international commitments are matched by action.

TO THE UK GOVERNMENT

- **Press for Commonwealth scrutiny and accountability.** Use diplomatic influence to press the Commonwealth Secretary-General and member states to scrutinise Eswatini's violations of Commonwealth principles and establish clear benchmarks for progress on democracy and human rights.

- **Press for democratic and electoral reform.** Use bilateral and Commonwealth relationships to press Eswatini to lift the prohibition on political parties and reform its electoral framework to enable genuine political participation and democratic accountability.

- **Press for the release of political prisoners.** Use diplomatic influence to press the Commonwealth Secretary-General and member states to demand the unconditional release of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

> **The UK Government needs to publicly support consideration of Eswatini by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and press for clear benchmarks against which progress can be assessed.- *ACTSA***

TO THE COMMONWEALTH

- **Demand the immediate, unconditional release** of MP Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza, sentenced to an effective 25 years for political speeches and recognised by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience.

- **Demand the immediate unconditional release** of Menzi Bongeka Bhembe, held in arbitrary detention under the Suppression of Terrorism Act.[6]

- **Lift the restrictive conditions** imposed on former MP Mthandeni Dube following his release on 5 November 2025, including bans on political activity, media engagement and public speaking, and the requirement to surrender his passport. Any breach of these conditions could result in his return to custody to serve the remainder of his sentence.[67] These conditions curtail his fundamental rights to free expression and political participation years after his conviction.

The continued imprisonment of Mabuza and Bhembe, and the restrictions imposed on Dube, are incompatible with the values of the Commonwealth Charter and the basic principles of the rule of law.

THE TIME FOR PASSIVE COMMENTARY IS GONE.

ACTION FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA (ACTSA)



"Commonwealth Secretary-General calls for immediate end to violence and an inclusive national dialogue for peaceful resolution in the Kingdom of Eswatini." - The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth (October 2021)



President Ramaphosa and His Majesty King Mswati held discussions on a broad range of matters relating to the political and security situation in the Kingdom. The deliberations resolved that the Kingdom of Eswatini will embark on a process that will work towards the establishment of a national dialogue forum.- Statement issued by President Cyril Ramaphosa, November 2021



"I call on the authorities in the Kingdom of Eswatini to ensure a prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigation is held into his killing, in accordance with Eswatini's constitution and international human rights law, and to hold all those responsible to account in fair trials."- Volker Türk (January 2023)



"The Secretary-General underlines the importance of enabling all Emaswati to exercise their civil and political rights peacefully and urges the security forces to exercise utmost restraint."- Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for António Guterres, UN Secretary-General

CONCLUSION - WHY THE TIME FOR INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY IS NOW

Rachel Palma Randle, Director
Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA)

In the forty years of King Mswati III's rule, the gap between Eswatini's constitutional commitments and the reality experienced by its people has grown immensely.

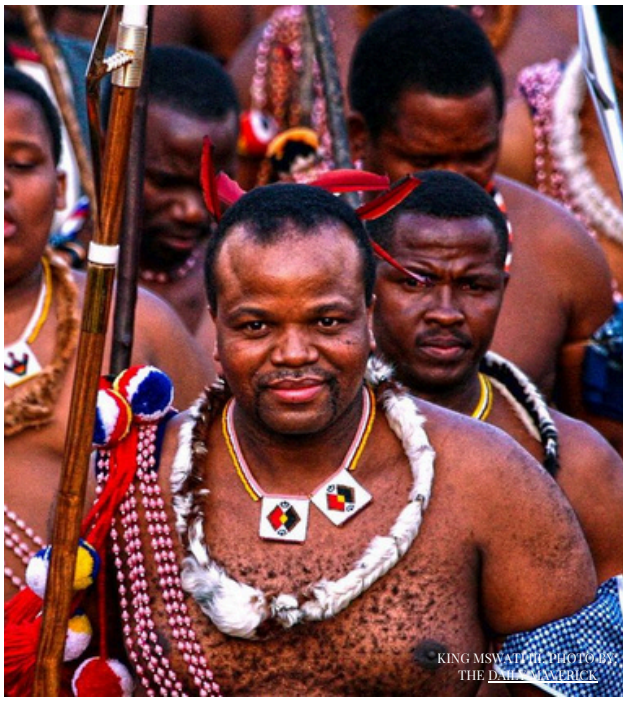
- Political parties are banned
- Political opponents and human rights defenders face attack and repression
- Freedom of speech is gagged.

The 2023 assassination of human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko demonstrates the price paid by those challenging status quo.

Women, workers and underrepresented groups feel the brunt of the repression but no one is excluded other than those in power.

- UNAIDS' 2024 estimates put HIV prevalence among adults aged 15–49 in Eswatini at 23.4%, including 28.1% among women and 18.4% among men. [72]
- One in two women report experiencing physical violence by a current or former intimate partner. [73]
- A study cited by the US Department of State found that 60% of LGBTQI+ people surveyed in Eswatini reported experiencing violence in their lifetime. This is a finding among survey respondents, not necessarily a representative estimate for the entire LGBTQI+ population. [74]
- 66% of employees in Eswatini are not affiliated with any workers' organisation, limiting the reach of worker organisation and representation. [75]

This occurs alongside persistent restrictions on workers' rights and exceptionally high levels of unemployment and poverty.



KING MSWATI III. PHOTO BY THE DAILY MAVERICK

It is the cliché of absolute rule repression and poverty go hand in hand with corruption. Here the King's influence also extends beyond its borders.The Swazi Secrets investigation, based on more than 890,000 leaked records from the Eswatini Financial Intelligence Unit, identified Eswatini as a potential conduit in Southern Africa's illicit economy. It documented millions of dollars moving from South Africa through an Eswatini gold-refining operation to Dubai, while highlighting weak anti-money-laundering controls and the involvement of individuals close to the royal family. [68]

This makes what's happening in Eswatini of international concern and not just a domestic state issue. The financial flows documented by Swazi Secrets raise questions about illicit finance, regulatory oversight and organised economic crime across Southern Africa. The investigation also showed the extraordinary influence of the King and his allies in matters involving financial institutions and regulators. [68] Seen through this lens, it becomes, perhaps clearer why there has been no regional or international action beyond, pledges and statements.

The United Kingdom, bears historical responsibility. Britain administered Swaziland from 1903 until independence in 1968 and played a direct role in the country's constitutional development and administration. Independence ended colonial rule, but not the UK's relationship with Eswatini as a Commonwealth member. [69]. Ironically those colonial laws used by the British and fought against by the Eswatini people are now once again being used against them, this time by the monarch.

The Commonwealth therefore has both a relationship and an obligation to act. Its Charter commits members to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

In February 2026, Commonwealth Law Ministers adopted the Nadi Declaration, committing member states to strengthening democracy, protecting human rights and strengthening the rule of law. Eswatini's Attorney-General participated in that process. [70]

There is also a precedent for international solidarity producing change. The 1994 general strike contributed to a constitutional process in which the Commonwealth played a significant role, ultimately leading to the 2005 Constitution. Following the 2021 uprising, the SADC Organ Troika secured agreement with King Mswati III to establish a national dialogue process, although that commitment has not delivered the inclusive political reform that Emaswati have demanded. [71]

The international community has therefore not lacked information or opportunities to act. What has been lacking is sustained political attention.

The 2021 uprising should have triggered accountability. The assassination of Thulani Maseko should have intensified international scrutiny.

Instead, repression has continued and the absence of accountability risks becoming normalised. Fear, repression and poverty is the lived experience of Eswatini citizens.

2026 and beyond offers the international community an opportunity to change that. Five years after the uprising, 21 years after the Constitution and 40 years into King Mswati III's reign, the UK and Commonwealth must use their diplomatic relationships to press for democratic reform to protect citizens urgently. International solidarity must mean more than statements of concern. It must support those in Eswatini demanding change and translate Commonwealth commitments into concrete ACTION.

The time for international solidarity is now.

> **We can't even cry about money because we have a government that flaunts it, and there are countries that need the money... It's not even about money, but visibility. See us. See Swaziland.**
>
> **- Queer Activist interviewed for ACTSA Report**



LIVING CONDITIONS ESWATINI. PHOTO BY: BORGENPROJECT.ORG

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ESWATINI – TIME TO ACT

ACTION FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA



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