

Busy doing nothing: Swaziland in 2007

This is the End of Year Statement put together by the Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civic Organisations (SCCCO), which is chaired by the Rt Revd Meshack Mabuza, Bishop of Swaziland.

2007 was the first full calendar year of the new constitution. What has changed in Swaziland as a result? Very little. It is becoming apparent to civil society that the constitution is being used as little more than a fig-leaf to cover the international shame of 33 years of rule by decree. What we now have is a piece of paper that is not being promoted or even defended by the government. The rights and duties that are enshrined in it are not being protected or enforced. This year has seen defenceless suspects killed by the police, public meetings broken up or prevented from happening, union members harassed, property taken without due court processes, newspaper editors intimidated, journalists threatened by government. The people of Swaziland are in the dark about the constitution and their rights and the government seems more than happy to keep them that way.

The kingdom continues to wear two faces, the one it shows to the outside world, a happy, peaceful, united democratic nation. The other face is the reality of an internally riven, politically bankrupt, corrupt and profoundly anti-democratic system that is underperforming economically. Rather than investing the public coffers in relation to areas of greatest need and with the potential for greatest results it squanders them on economically unproductive projects that do little more than stroke, already inflated, egos.

It is the year that many comparative international studies have started to peek behind the veil and show that Swaziland consistently is one of the worst performers in terms of human rights, political participation, civil rights, governance, corruption and use of natural resources. (World Bank, Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Open Society, New Economics Forum, Amnesty International, US MCA) yet these studies are regularly pooh-poohed by our leaders. These are not high flown legalistic issues. Good governance directly affects the country's ability to develop its economy, society and environment and to access the international aid that might just help us out of our multiple and interlinked crises.

We were already aware that Swaziland has the shame of the highest HIV prevalence, lowest life expectancy on earth and with equally appalling infant mortality rates. This year saw the publication of the Whiteside report that put these into a completely different context. The report shows that the deaths that arise as a result of HIV/AIDS are now at a level that is equivalent to

generally accepted definitions of emergency requiring massive international action as is seen in cases of natural disaster, famine and civil war. We were shocked to find out that Swaziland now has more Orphan and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) per head of population than Darfur. The slow and silent nature of the orphans' parents' deaths does not make the emergency any less real, just less newsworthy.

A constitution is more than a piece of paper; it defines the political culture of a country. Enacting it and upholding it are not matters of luck or chance but require energy, skill, resources, practice and passion. We do not see any of these necessary qualities being used at present. Rather we bear witness to the masterly arts of planned and practiced inactivity, prevarication and procrastination. The necessary structures to defend democracy and freedom – Commissions on Human Rights and Public Administration and the Elections and Boundaries Commission are nowhere close to being set up. The Royal Swazi Police Force is not trained in the implications of policing under a Bill of Rights. Women remain in law, and practice, second class citizens to such an extent that the governor of Ludzidzini is able to say with confidence, and in public, that they do not have the right to make decisions on their own lives and should be equated with children, subservient to their husbands as head of the household. As for the rights of children... we'll not even start with that one. Most disturbing of all was the discovery of over one hundred foetuses in a dam near Matsapha. The causes, implications and effects of that particular nightmare are still being worked out. The human tragedies that lie behind these headlines shame us all.

The constitution defines emaSwati as citizens, not subjects. The difference is profound, if enacted. Citizens cede their power to politicians and then call them to account for their stewardship. Subjects do as they are told. The transition from subject to citizen does not happen overnight. It requires a fundamental shift in thinking that must be developed and the people must be educated in. Again, there is masterly inaction on behalf of the government on this. We hold deep reservations about the ability of the Tinkhundla system to support an internationally recognisable democracy, and to promote proper citizenship, especially in relation to elections.

The candidates put forward by the Tinkhundla system are not those with the most to offer, the highest energy, the best minds, the vision of a successful, prosperous and happy nation and the will and skills to bring these about through inspiring, leading and listening. Its candidates do not reflect the wealth and wisdom of this great country. The offerings to the people of this corrupt, petty, and self-serving system are, in the main, the loyal, the blind, the mediocre and the second rate. We need better than that and we deserve

better leaders. The Tinkhundla do not serve emaSwati, they can only serve a small section of us. Prince David had the arrogance to call the people of Swaziland stupid for electing the current set of MPs. Let us remember that he was the chair of the Constitutional Drafting Committee that enshrined the system of their selection. As Democrats, we contend that the people can not be stupid – they are certainly not as stupid as the system that rejects what every African country has accepted as right, proper and normal – multi-party politics. We in civil society will be rolling out as large a programme of civic and voter education as we can gather resources for in time for the expected elections in 2008.

The rule of law debate and the tensions between the ‘traditional’ and ‘democratic’ systems of governance continue to go on. We welcome the final burial of Mizkayise Ntshangase in accordance to the court orders. But we continue to note that there are factions amongst the traditionalists who still felt that they could publicly state that the orders would be defied. We of course, are delighted at the belated insistence of the Prime Minister and the Governor of Ludzizini that the court orders must be followed and the actions of the Police to ensure that this happened. We fervently hope that this remains the rule and not the exception.

All in all, 2007 has not been a good year for Swaziland, the terrible effects of HIV/AIDS, drought, poverty, unemployment, corruption and poor governance continue to unnecessarily kill far too many people and to sap the ability of the country to perform. Our ‘unique’ system and style of governance wastes time, effort, resources and energy that could be better spent on really tackling the issues rather than paying court to labadzala. We say to the democrats in government, reach out, respect diversity of opinion and pluralism, embrace civil society and work with us in partnership. The present system has failed and can only continue to do so. Talk to us, we are listening. Stop being busy doing nothing and wasting your time defending the indefensible. Let us roll up our sleeves and work together to improve the lives and conditions of all of the Swazi people, not just the few.

May you all have a happy and prosperous New Year.