

Research Briefing

Number 9316

By Louisa Brooke-Holland,
Philip Loft

14 September 2021

Pro-democracy protests in Eswatini

Pro-democracy protests erupted in Eswatini in June and July 2021. Activists say several people were killed during clashes with security forces. The UK Government was among those who expressed concern at the Kingdom's forceful response to demonstrators. This paper discusses what prompted the protests, what this means for the future of the monarchy, and the response of the UK Government.

About Eswatini

The Kingdom of Eswatini is Africa's last absolute monarchy¹ governed by HM King Mswati III, who was crowned in 1986. A former British colony, on the fiftieth anniversary of independence the King announced the country would change its name from Swaziland to Eswatini.² Eswatini has been a [member of the Commonwealth](#) since it gained independence in 1968.

It is a landlocked country bordered by South Africa and Mozambique. Around 60 percent of the 1.2 million population lived below the [national poverty line](#) in 2017. Unemployment was estimated to be at [23.4 percent of the labour force](#) in 2020. UNICEF states that Eswatini has the [highest rates of HIV in the world](#), with an estimated prevalence rate of 27 percent amongst 15-59 year olds.

¹ There are two other monarchies in Africa, Morocco and Lesotho, but both are considered [constitutional monarchies](#), meaning the monarch has limited discretionary power over governance issues.

² "[Swaziland king remains country 'the Kingdom of Eswatini'](#)", BBC News, 19 April 2018.

An absolute monarchy

Executive power resides in the King. The 2005 constitution gives him the right to appoint the Prime Minister, the Council of Ministers, and judges. He also has the power to dissolve the legislature and veto legislation.

The last legislative elections were held in 2018. Because political parties have not been legally recognised since a 1973 decree, all candidates run on a non-partisan basis Both the UK and African Union judged the elections to be “broadly free, fair, and orderly.”³ However, both the African Union and the British High Commission called on Eswatini to lift its ban on political parties.

Calls for reform

“In the last few months the Kingdom of Eswatini has experienced its worst bout of political violence in its postcolonial history.”

Vito Laterza,
University of Agder
August 2021

Signs of discontent with the current state of affairs have been growing in recent years.

King Mswati III has been accused of using both royal and state finances to fund an extravagant lifestyle⁴, including purchasing a fleet of cars for his wives in 2019.⁵ His close circles have been criticised for living opulent lives while much of the population lives in poverty.⁶

Lack of democratic freedoms is also fuelling the protests. Human Rights Watch (HRW) notes that, as well as banning political parties, the judiciary is “severely compromised” and “repressive laws have been used to target independent organizations and harass civil society activists.”⁷

Journalists have been arrested and detained. In 2021, [Reporters Without Borders](#) ranked Eswatini 141 of 180 countries for press freedom. This compared to neighbouring South Africa, which was ranked 32, and Mozambique, which was 108^h.

HRW also says police have “sweeping powers under the Public Order Act.”⁸ There have been particular concerns about the heavy-handed response by police and security forces to demonstrations.

In 2018 the International Trade Union Confederation condemned the “brutality of police violence” against a union demonstration. Police were reported to

³ [PQ 198775 \[Eswatini: Elections\], 11 December 2018. “AU calls for Eswatini to end ban on political parties”](#), News 24, 22 September 2018

⁴ [“King of impoverished Swaziland increases household budget to \\$61 million”](#), The Guardian, 14 May 2014

⁵ [“Swaziland king spends £13m on cars for his 15 wives”](#), The Times, 11 November 2019

⁶ [“As tension prevails, relatives mourn Eswatini crackdown victims”](#), Al Jazeera, 2 July 2021

⁷ [“Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Eswatini”](#), Human Rights Watch, March 2021

⁸ [“Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Eswatini”](#), Human Rights Watch, March 2021

have fired stun grenades and rubber bullets at individuals calling for labour reforms, including a minimum wage, and to protest against the alleged misuse of state pension funds to pay for the King's birthday celebration.⁹

In September 2019 police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse supporters of public sector workers calling for salary increases amid rising living costs. Several people were reported to be injured. The head of one pro-democracy group said the King "loots national coffers to satisfy his personal greed."¹⁰ The UK Government said its High Commissioner "raised the need for [a] proportionate response to protest with senior officials in the Eswatini Government."¹¹

2021 anti-monarchy protests

["Eswatini is at a critical moment."](#)

UK, US and EU missions

15 July 2021

One observer describes this year's clashes as the country's "worst bout of political violence" since it gained independence in 1968. Vito Laterza, an associate professor in development studies at the University of Agder in Norway, questions how much longer the monarchy can resist calls for reform.¹²

A BBC News reporter in Mbabane, Eswatini's capital, observed during the clashes that "[the anger is on a scale rarely seen here.](#)" Young people in particular "feel neglected by the monarchy and the government" with little in the way of job creation.¹³

The protests began in late June 2021, initially focusing on police reform following the death in May of a young man allegedly by the police.

Security forces responded to protests with force, with several people reported to have been killed (numbers vary) and more hospitalised.¹⁴ Unverified footage circulating on social media showed [armed forces firing upon civilians](#).

The Government responded by banning the delivery of petitions to government officials (a popular way of expressing opinions in Eswatini), imposing a curfew and restricting access to the internet.¹⁵ They also accused protestors of looting and vandalising property.

⁹ "[Eswatini police fire stun grenades at anti-government protestors](#)", Reuters, 29 June 2018; "[ITUC condemns police violence against peaceful trade union demonstration](#)", International Trade Union Confederation, 3 July 2018.

¹⁰ "[We have a greedy King' say protestors as anti-monarchy protests in Eswatini turn violent](#)", AFP via News 24, 25 September 2019

¹¹ [PQ 6438 \[Eswatini: Human Rights\], 31 October 2019.](#)

¹² "[Can Eswatini's monarchy recover from the ongoing crisis?](#)", Al Jazeera, 7 August 2021

¹³ "[Why people in Eswatini are protesting](#)", BBC News video report, 2021

¹⁴ On 2 July Amnesty International [reported at least 20 people](#) had been killed. On 17 July Amnesty Southern Africa [tweeted the names of more than 70 people](#) who they say were killed during protests.

¹⁵ "[Eswatini imposes curfew to quell pro-democracy protests](#)", Al Jazeera, 29 June 2021

The lack of an immediate public response from the King sparked rumours he had fled the country. This was denied by the Government.¹⁶ His first public statement after the protests began was on 16 July, when he appointed a new Prime Minister (replacing the previous Prime Minister who died from Covid-19 in December 2020).¹⁷

While the protests died down, towards the end of July two pro-democracy MPs, Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza and Mthandeni Dube, were arrested under the Suppression of Terrorism Act. Freedom House says their arrest is the latest instance of Eswatini's "ongoing crackdown on political dissent and the rights to free expression and association."¹⁸

Regional and international response

There have been many expressions of concern about the political and security situation in Eswatini.

The chairperson of the **African Union** Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, expressed his concern in a statement on 1 July, condemning the violence and calling for calm.¹⁹

On 6 July the **UN Secretary-General** similarly expressed his concern at the clashes between security forces and demonstrators and underlined the importance of "of enabling all Emaswati [Swazis] to exercise their civil and political rights peacefully."²⁰

A delegation from the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)** visited Eswatini in July in response to the clashes.²¹ The SADC, whose members include South Africa, has appealed for calm and [encouraged dialogue](#) between civil society and the Government.²²

The **UK Government** coordinated its response with the **EU** and **US** in series of statements:

- 1 July – the UK, EU and US missions urged the government to "[exercise restraint and respect human rights](#)" and for protestors to voice their concerns through non-violent means. On the same day James

¹⁶ "[Africa's last absolute monarch faces push for democracy as unrest rocks Eswatini](#)", France 24, 2 July 2021

¹⁷ "[King of Eswatini appoints new PM as anti-monarchy protests flare](#)", Al-Jazeera, 16 July 2021

¹⁸ "[Eswatini: authorities should release Parliamentarians and drop charges against them](#)", Freedom House, 26 July 2021

¹⁹ "[Statement of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the situation in the Kingdom of Eswatini](#)", African Union, 1 July 2021

²⁰ "[Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on the situation in the Kingdom of Eswatini](#)", UN, 6 July 2021

²¹ "[SADC fact-finding mission wraps up visit to Eswatini-with mixed results](#)", News24 22 July 2021

²² "[Statement by the Chairperson of the SADC \[...\]](#)", SADC, 14 July 2021

The UK [reopened its resident High Commission](#) in Mbabane in 2019.

The previous High Commission was [closed in 2005](#).

Duddridge, the Minister for Africa, [tweeted his concern](#) and reaffirmed the importance of peaceful protest and freedom of speech.

- 4 July – the UK, EU, US and Taiwan missions [called for all parties](#) to engage in dialogue through the SADC and reaffirmed their previous call to respect fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.
- 15 July – the UK, EU and US missions said Eswatini is at a “[critical moment](#).” The missions explicitly called on the government to make clear the 2005 constitution revoked the 1973 ban on political parties, and to guarantee media freedom and respect for human rights. The statement also called on the King to instruct security forces to exercise “maximum restraint” in the application of force and end military deployments as soon as possible.

Will the monarchy survive?

Laterza observes that opposition to the monarchy appears to be growing, noting that demands for political reform are shifting from wanting to maintain the monarchy, albeit in a ceremonial rule, to calls for a “wholesale dismantling” of the monarchy.²³

High levels of unemployment (in 2020, unemployment in Eswatini was [estimated](#) at 23.4 percent of the labour force) and poverty, coupled with the perception that the monarchy and its associates benefit financially from Eswatini’s resources, are a clear driver of discord. The spokesperson for the pro-democracy Swaziland Solidarity Network has described how the country’s resources “[are systematically confiscated by the king and his entourage](#).”

Mlungisi Makhanya, leader of opposition movement Pudemo, says Swazis want political plurality and a leadership that is accountable to its people. He warns the absolutism of the King [risks escalating calls for a republic](#). Thabani Maseko, a lawyer and activist, says there [needs to be dialogue](#) with all stakeholders to find a consensus. Swazis in exile, like the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Swaziland Kenneth Kunene, says the first step is to [end the ban on political parties](#). Dewa Mavhinga, the Southern Africa Director at HRW, described the 2021 protests as a “[wake-up call for the King... to heed the legitimate calls for reform](#).”²⁴ Fundile Maphanga and Christopher Vandome, writing for Chatham House, warn failure to change risks falling into a “[protracted stalemate between the monarchy and its young urban population](#).”²⁵

²³ “[Can Eswatini’s monarchy recover from the ongoing crisis?](#)”, Al Jazeera, 7 August 2021

²⁴ “[Eswatini: Respect rights while policing protests](#)”, HRW, 1 July 2021

²⁵ “[Eswatini monarchy must address demands for democratic reform](#)”, Chatham House, 25 August 2021

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing '[Legal help: where to go and how to pay](#)' for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)