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The Reed That Lies Low in a Flooded River: The Case of Swazi Resistance to South African Reform Diplomacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy briefing examines the extent to which South Africa has used its economic clout to influence political developments in Swaziland since 1994. The analysis is made through a foreign policy and economic diplomacy lens covering how South Africa engages with Swaziland through traditional bilateral diplomatic institutions and the use of non-state actors and regional institutions such as the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC).

RECOMMENDATIONS

South Africa should

- render conditional assistance to Swaziland to alleviate its economic difficulties, in tandem with the reform of SACU towards developmental regionalism;
- raise the issue of Swazi political and economic reform at a regional level;
- utilise its JBCC with Swaziland to influence the political and economic situation constructively; and
- support a genuine civil society-led process of civic education through state and non-state engagement and assistance.

INTRODUCTION

Swaziland is usually referred to as Africa's last absolute monarchy.[2] While this reference to absolutism has acquired a negative connotation, it is also a sign of Swaziland's distinctiveness in the current African political landscape, based on its governance system.[3] Swaziland is a former British protectorate and gained its independence in 1968, after which it became a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system. In 1973, King Sobhuza II suspended the constitution and declared Swaziland an absolute monarchy. He acquiesced to nominal reforms in 1978 when a constitution was adopted introducing a unique electoral system (the *tinkundla*). The king retained many sweeping powers, which were also retained by his son and successor, King Mswati III. Under the current dispensation the monarch dominates the legislature, judiciary and executive, thereby perpetuating a repressive and arguably clientelistic political-economic system. As a result, civil liberties in Swaziland are almost non-existent or severely curtailed. This governance approach stands in stark contrast to that of South Africa, which has a constitutional democracy anchored in human rights, freedom and equality. South Africa has one of the most liberal and human rights-based constitutions in the world.

This policy briefing traces how post-apartheid South Africa has sought to engage Swaziland against the background described above. It finds that

South Africa's engagement strategy has been tempered by reluctance on the part of the Swazi government to countenance reform initiatives that tally with the evolution of South Africa's more progressive political and economic governance system.

SOUTH AFRICA AND SWAZILAND

It is to be expected in foreign relations terms that South Africa, in its dealings with Swaziland, would seek to reflect its value system. While South Africa's engagement with Swaziland has varied over the three post-apartheid presidencies, on the whole its approach could be described as reactive rather than proactive. Under President Nelson Mandela, South Africa's foreign policy was dominated by his persona. This period was characterised by a human rights-based foreign policy following the peaceful transition to democracy in South Africa. Mandela tolerated the actions of the Swazi monarch to a degree, and one positive outcome of his administration was the commissioning and construction of the Maguga Dam in Swaziland. Under the Mbeki administration foreign policy was premised on the concept of the African renaissance, but the Swazi question was not targeted in this approach.

Under the current administration, the ongoing issue of reform in Swaziland has triggered mixed responses. However, according to respondents interviewed during the course of this study there is also an opportunity to adopt a more pro-active approach. Firstly, President Jacob Zuma enjoys a close personal relationship with Mswati. Secondly, Zuma is a patriarch by orientation, which resonates positively with the king's own world view. Thirdly, as a Zulu he is culturally closer to the Swazis, given the similarities between the Swazi kingdom and the Zulu monarchy. Finally, and most importantly, Swaziland will very likely again experience economic difficulties during the second term of the Zuma administration, offering South Africa an opportunity to engage it on the assistance package that has been on the table since 2012.

South Africa's foreign policy is pursued through both bilateral and regional channels.[4] At a bilateral level, South Africa's arrangements include bi-national commissions, which operate at a strategic heads of state level. At a lower level, bilateral co-operation is conducted through a Joint Bilateral Commission for Co-operation (JBCC). South Africa–Swaziland relations are dealt with at the level of a JBCC. Swaziland is also an active member of and participant in regional and continental bodies, which provide an additional avenue for South African engagement with the country. It is first and foremost a member of both SACU and SADC, but it is also the only SACU member to hold membership of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. With reference to all the aforementioned regional affiliations, South African–Swazi relations are most significantly determined by their joint membership of SACU.

Swaziland's economy is heavily dependent on the receipts provided through the SACU revenue-sharing formula, with some estimates indicating that 60% of government revenue is earned from SACU receipts. The SACU revenue-sharing agreement disproportionally favours the four smaller members (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland), with South Africa transferring the bulk of its customs duties to them. The revenue-sharing formula has historically been a bone of contention and there is an undercurrent of discontent in Manzini, based on a perception that the terms are not as beneficial as they ought to be.

Most importantly, Swaziland is uncomfortable with the South African view that the SACU receipts are disguised aid. Some South African ministers have advocated for the receipts to be dispatched in support of regional development projects, through a radical revision to the revenue-sharing mechanism. This is in line with the Zuma administration's emphasis on developmental regional integration through the creation of enabling regional infrastructure. South Africa's proposal has faced resistance from all its SACU partners, for obvious reasons.[5] This united front will be tested in 2014 when South Africa is again expected to push for reform of the revenue-sharing formula. The increasing burden of the current arrangement on the South African fiscus came to the fore most prominently during the fall-out of the 2008 financial crisis.

SOUTH AFRICAN LOAN OFFER

Like much of the world, Swaziland also faced an economic crisis following the 2008 global financial crisis. In 2011 it approached South Africa for financial assistance when negotiations failed with the International Monetary Fund and African Development Bank. South Africa agreed to the request but attached political and economic governance conditions to the loan, which included instilling fiscal discipline and governance reforms. The Swazi establishment rejected the conditionalities attached to the loan, arguing that at least two reasons militated against the inclusion of conditionalities. Firstly, the entire premise of conditionalities was considered problematic given the country's cordial relations with South Africa and the expectation that its role in the anti-apartheid struggle should secure it political traction and economic leniency. This view was reinforced by South Africa's status as 'the new kid on the block', which implied that it was not in a position to dictate to others in the region. Secondly, the loan was to have come out of the SACU receipts, transferred in advance, and not the African Renaissance Fund or a separate South African budget line. Swaziland argued that South Africa was thus not in a position to dictate conditionalities. Following prolonged negotiations there was a convenient windfall in SACU receipts, which obviated the need for the loan. To date it has not been taken up by Swaziland.

THE PARADOX OF ZUMA–MSWATI RELATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY

There are close political and cultural ties between South Africa and Swaziland, rooted in Swaziland's support of the ANC during its anti-apartheid struggle. Sobhuza II was a card-carrying member of the ANC and Zuma operated from Swaziland during the 1980s as an underground member of *Umkhonto weSizwe*, the ANC's armed wing. It was at this time that he developed close political and familial ties with the Swazi royal family. According to inteviewees this close personal relationship has many dimensions, including Mswati's alleged financial support to Zuma. Interviewees in Swaziland noted that Mswati had found a great companion in Zuma in dealing with political adversaries and managing an inflated family system characterised by multiple wives and numerous children.

The vexing question in analysing the Zuma–Mswati relationship is the extent to which it translates into a similar relationship at a bilateral country level. The extent to which Zuma can and is willing to use his friendship with Mswati for foreign policy objectives is ambiguous. It is also unclear how Mswati would react to attempts by Zuma to capitalise on their personal relationship to lobby for more democratic space in Swaziland.

Furthermore, contributing to president Zuma's tenuous position in pursuing a more assertive foreign policy towards Swaziland is the fact that the king has little respect for tenured leaders such as Zuma. Mswati lies low like a reed in a flooded river, knowing that all South African leaders will eventually become victims of contractual incumbency and leave office. This is how he dealt with the Mandela and Mbeki presidencies and how he will probably deal with their successors.

While the close relationship between the two leaders could have provided an opportunity for a more robust engagement, it seems that it will have the opposite effect. The least that the Swazi people could have expected from South Africa – encouraging the monarchy into dialogue with progressive Swazi forces – has proved elusive even under the leadership of Zuma, who has experience in resolving political conflicts.

OTHER CRITICAL ROLE PLAYERS

In analysing South Africa's foreign policy approach towards Swaziland it is important to look at the other actors in play. There are three groupings in the reform debate in the kingdom itself. The first consists of the monarch's unconditional supporters, and the second of those advocating for a constitutional monarchy. The third consists of Swazis who want to do away with the monarchy altogether.

It is difficult to locate South African foreign policy in any of these strands as, at least publicly, it does not seem to pursue a coherent approach towards Swaziland. While the South African government cannot put Swazi reform on its agenda, at a party level the ANC uses its alliance partners as change agents, particularly the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). However, this approach is fraught with difficulty as its secretary general, Zwelinzima Vavi, who has made it his personal crusade to champion the Swaziland question, is facing significant challenges. The awareness of the need for reform was also apparent when Blade Nzimande (a member of the South African Communist Party and thus not a sympathiser of the monarchy) was used as a negotiator during the loan process.

ECONOMIC LINKAGES

As noted earlier, Swaziland is heavily reliant on SACU receipts that accrue through a common external tariff that South Africa manages based on an agreed formula.[6] In addition, the Swazi economy is dominated by South African corporates, including state-owned enterprises and Chancellor House, the ANC investment arm. Some of these firms operate in joint ventures with Tibiyo Taka Ngwane Investments, the Swazi equivalent of a sovereign wealth fund. The latter is owned and managed by the monarch and held in trust on behalf of the Swazi people. Tibiyo Investments owns almost half of every investment in Swaziland in sectors ranging from agriculture, services, manufacturing and mining to tourism, and is tax-exempt.

Indigenous Swazi businesses play a peripheral role in the broader economy given the lack of financing and the fact that Tibiyo Investments crowds out smaller private players.

The presence of South African companies and state-owned enterprises could provide much-needed political and economic leverage to ensure greater tolerance of diverging views. The threat of their withdrawal would directly affect the Swazi establishment. However, South Africa either pretends to be unaware of its economic clout or decides to turn a blind eye, further eroding the moral capital built up during and after its transition to democracy. Interestingly, unlike other repressive systems such as Zimbabwe, Swaziland mainly confines the rule of law to a denial of civil liberties, and not proprietary rights. As a result, South African businesses and government do not have an economic incentive to act with urgency in encouraging political and economic reform.

CONCLUSION

South Africa faces a catch-22 in advocating political and economic change in Swaziland. This challenge is similar to the difficulties it encounters in the rest of the SADC region. Firstly, South Africa's hegemonic economic and political leadership is contested in the region. Secondly, South Africa needs to maintain a semblance of economic stability in Swaziland since a meltdown would lead to an influx of Swazis and further socio-economic pressure on South Africa's neighbouring provinces. Thirdly, South Africa has commercial interests in Swaziland and would not wish to jeopardise these. Finally, a push for political reform in Swaziland must be balanced with concerns related to sovereignty and non-interference in the affairs of other states – key principles enshrined in South Africa's foreign policy. However, despite these challenges, South Africa has the means to influence events in Swaziland. One of the key channels through which it can attempt such positive change is SACU.

It is generally expected that Swaziland will continue to experience economic difficulties because of the lack of underlying economic reform. South Africa could rise to the occasion with assistance linked to economic and political reform conditionalities.[7] In addition, Pretoria could ensure that the Swaziland question is raised at SADC level, thereby ensuring that it becomes an item on the bloc's regional agenda. It could also use the JBCC with Swaziland more effectively to integrate its political and economic values into their dealings.

The Zuma administration hopes to leave an enabling regional infrastructure development legacy. In the case of Swaziland, this agenda could be pursued through the clusters of the JBCC. It is also imperative that South Africa attaches conditions to its development aid, which will in future be managed by the South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA). Finally, and most importantly, serious reform in Swaziland will only come about through the efforts of its citizens. The Swazi people have been denied and therefore lack broad-based political education. South Africa should find a way to increase levels of political consciousness in Swaziland. This can be pursued at the regional level, through SADPA or non-state actors such as COSATU.

ENDNOTES

1 Azwimpheleli Langalanga is a research assistant with EDIP at SAIIA and a visiting doctoral fellow at the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo.

2 Vandome C, Vines A & M Weimer, *Swaziland: Southern Africa's Forgotten Crisis*. London: Chatham House, September 2013.

3 Motsamai D, 'Swaziland's Non-Party Political System'. Institute for Security Studies, Situation Report, 15 August 2013, http://www.issafrica.org/publications/situation-reports/swazilands-non-party-political-system-and-the-2013-tinkhundla-elections.

4 See South Africa, Department of International Relations and Co-operation, 'Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu', February 2012.

5 SACU transfers constitute between 50–70% of the revenue of countries such as Swaziland and Lesotho and between 15–30% of Namibia and Botswana. See Vickers B, 'Towards a new aid paradigm: South Africa as African development partner', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 25, 4, 2012, pp. 535–556.

6 See World Bank, 'Swaziland: Country at a Glance', http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/swaziland.

7 See African Development Bank, 'Kingdom of Swaziland: Country Strategy Paper 2013–2018', November 2013, http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/2014-2018_-_Swaziland_Country_Strategy_Paper__Draft_Version_.pdf.

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