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ESWATINI: AUTHORITIES ESCALATE CRACKDOWN ON DISSENT

Eswatini authorities have escalated their crackdown on human rights, continuing their assault on human rights, the rule of law and justice. The government often uses force to quash opposition and dissent to suppress dissent and legitimate concerns of the people.

On Friday, 23 September 2022, the Times of Eswatini [reported](#) a physically violent attack on two members of parliament detained on charges of contravening the Sedition and Subversive Activities Act and Suppression of Terrorism Act by members of the prison security forces. The MPs were woken by blows of fists and batons from the assailants. When fellow inmates, waking up to the chaos, tried to intervene, they were also assaulted.

The attack on the members of parliament, which happened in the early hours of Thursday, 22 September 2022, comes days after the house belonging to the People's Democratic Movement, PUDEMO, president Mlungisi Makhanya was damaged from an attack with military-grade explosives in what might have been an assassination attempt.

Within the same week, the country's leading trade union, the Trade Union Congress of Swaziland, TUCOSWA, was [denied a permit](#) to hold a constitutionally protected protest march with demands including the review of the Free Primary Education and the Orphaned and Vulnerable Children's Grant scheme.

This coordinated assault on the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the country's Constitution, the Commonwealth Charter, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and numerous treaties and conventions that eSwatini is a party to symbolizes the government's latest efforts to suppress human rights.

The Eswatini government has demonstrated commitment to silencing dissent through force over the years. In what increasingly seems like a state-sanctioned assault on human rights, justice and the rule of law, the situation in Eswatini has deteriorated recently. The Southern Africa Development Community, SADC, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the African Union, and the United Nations must condemn the onslaught on fundamental rights and freedoms in Eswatini.

SALC and Amnesty International are calling for the following measures to address the human rights decline in Eswatini;

- The Eswatini government to institute an independent investigation and decisive action on recent suspected human rights violations, including the attack on detainees, against the perpetrators. The state must affirm and protect the inmates in custody and take measures to ensure that this is not repeated.
- The MPs held on politically motivated charges are released immediately.

- SADC to follow up with the government of Eswatini on the implementation of the SADC Troika Fact-Finding Mission of 2021, in particular, instituting a national political dialogue to resolve the political turmoil.
- Commonwealth Secretariat to look into the situation in Eswatini and ensure that the country aligns with the Charter, significantly Articles 1, 2, and 4 of the Commonwealth Charter.
- The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to transmit an urgent appeal to authorities in Eswatini and follow this up with the adoption of a resolution at its forthcoming 73rd ordinary session condemning the onslaught on fundamental rights and freedoms in the country and urging the authorities to respect Eswatini's obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Background

In July 2021, Eswatini saw one of its bloodiest protest actions. The country's Human Rights Commission reports about 46 people who died, while Amnesty International reported almost twice the official government figures. What started as a call for political reforms, through the delivery of petitions to members of parliament in their respective constituencies, was met with force and brutality at the instruction of the country's leadership. Firstly, the Speaker of Parliament suggested it was 'unSwazi' to have petitions delivered. The then-acting Prime Minister ordered a stop to all petitions and unleashed the armed forces on the citizens.

In May 2021, a student was killed mysteriously at the hands of the police, which created a more peculiar situation as students demanded an explanation from the police. At the time, SALC [raised the alarm](#) about the human rights violations, noting the background to the political upheaval in Eswatini dating back to the King's Decree of 1973.

By the end of July 2021, three Members of Parliament were announced to be wanted by the police for calling for democracy and political reforms. Two were arrested, and one has been in hiding ever since. Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza and Mthandeni Dube have been incarcerated since with bail denied by the Supreme Court.

The country continues to experience sporadic violent attacks on businesses linked to the monarch and armed security personnel in retaliation for the killing and maiming political activists. SALC and Amnesty International have raised concerns about the deteriorating state of human rights and the lack of protection for the same in such a tumultuous time in the kingdom's history.

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