

Swaziland shrugs off attempts at isolation

By: Mail & Guardian Online

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Calls for international isolation of Swaziland's King Mswati III have had little effect as the monarchy remains a pillar of national identity.

Africa's last absolute monarch in May calmly rubbed shoulders with other royalty from around the world at a reception to mark the diamond jubilee of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle while his country's arts festival hosted record numbers.

The queen's invite was giving legitimacy to Mswati's "despotic rule", said banned opposition party the People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo) as the Swazi diaspora expressed its outrage.

Even a cultural boycott last month was relatively unsuccessful, with more than 17 000 people attending a music fest to hear artists from around the world perform in an idyllic valley just a few kilometres from the royal palace outside the capital Mbabane.

Few artists cancelled their performances at the Bushfire Festival, despite calls by the South Africa-based Swaziland Solidarity Network (SSN).

Yet "boycott" was the catchphrase amid the sugar cane fields.

'Dynamic debate'

"It's a very dynamic debate. Everyone is for a better governance and a transformation in Swaziland," festival organiser Jiggs Thorne said.

"The idea of the organisers this year was to try to create a platform to tell the people who boycotted, 'come talk'," said Laurence Amigues, of festival partner the Alliance Francaise cultural institute.

The main sponsor was Swaziland's state telecoms company MTN, partly-owned by Mswati.

The US embassy, one of only four in the tiny mountain kingdom, brought a few artists from the US to take part.

Washington appreciated "that Swazis need every opportunity to come together to express themselves freely," said spokesperson Molly Sanchez Crowe.

All the same, a few key acts from neighbouring South Africa pulled out.

'More dialogue'

Soul singer Lira explained her absence to call for "more dialogue and resolution around the challenges that befall Swaziland", while up-and-coming acoustic songwriter Zahara also cancelled.

Protest has grown since 2011 in this traditionally peaceful kingdom bordered on three sides by the continent's economic powerhouse South Africa.

Feeding the unrest is Mswati's lavish lifestyle while 60% of his subjects live on less than two dollars a day and his refusal to implement democratic reforms.

While the monarchy forbids protests, students seen as troublemakers are driven into exile and the courts follow government orders, the SSN is adamant to “expose the hidden reality of brutality of Swazi society,” it said.

But such efforts to increase pressure on the 44-year-old monarch have met several obstacles.

The small country is not first priority on the international agenda, the opposition is divided and often operates from outside the country and the Swazis are deeply attached to a monarchy that led them to independence in 1968 and is the main preserve of traditions that go back generations, say commentators.

‘People are afraid’

“A lot of Swazis see that the decision of boycott is imposed and they don’t want someone talking for them,” said Mbongeni Mbingo, director of independent newspaper the *Times of Swaziland*.

“There are a lot of insults against the king and people are afraid. The SSN attacks the monarch directly. If they would attack the issues they want to see changing, they would have a different outcome.”

The opposition’s lack of common goals hampers its protest, said South African poet Philippa Yaa De Villiers while invoking her country’s struggle against white minority rule.

“In a way, they are not united. In South Africa we had a united organised front. The main aim was to end apartheid, it was easier, we had a single enemy.”

Protest against the royals was also undermined in a country whose sense of being revolves around its king, she said.

“Here the king is a traditional leader. It goes with the sense and the heart of the identity of people. People have to be able to see themselves outside of his identity so they can interrogate his rights to be there.” – AFP

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