



## Africa Summary

# Lost in Isolationism? Swaziland Elections and Prospects for the Future

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British High Commissioner to Swaziland (1993–96)

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## INTRODUCTION

This document is a summary of an event held at Chatham House on 16 September 2013. This event looked at Swaziland's economic and political trajectories and outlined the country's options for reform.

With an economy limited by an uncontrollable public wage bill and dependence upon sugar production and export, and a population with the world's highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS, Swaziland is on an unsustainable trajectory, argues the Chatham House report *Swaziland: Southern Africa's Forgotten Crisis*.<sup>1</sup> Ahead of parliamentary elections on 20 September, this event launched the report, which lays out the importance of – and options for – regional and international engagement for reversing the decline of sub-Saharan Africa's last absolute monarchy. The report was initially launched in Johannesburg, South Africa on 6 September.

The meeting consisted of two presentations followed by a discussion. The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Vandome, Alex Vines and Markus Weimer (2013), *Swaziland: Southern Africa's Forgotten Crisis*, Chatham House.  
<http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/194142>

## ALEX VINES

Mr Vines discussed the Chatham House report and spoke about the unsustainability of Swaziland's current political and economic trajectories. He also outlined the country's options for reform.

Swaziland's parliamentary elections, to be held on 20 September, have been drawing attention to a country that has often been overlooked by the international community. When launching the report in Swaziland, Mr Vines said he had been asked about King Mswati III's approach to democracy: was the king a reformist, or was he rebranding the traditional Tinkhundla system? Mr Vines said that there was hope in Swaziland these elections would permit a political opening that could lead to reform.

Mr Vines noted that there is no united vision between the political opposition and civil society on what shape reform should take, but there is consensus that the status quo cannot continue. Internal pressure for reform is bolstered by external pressure. Furthermore, the findings of election monitoring teams from the Commonwealth Secretariat and Southern African Development Community (SADC) will be instrumental in informing the trajectory of reform.

The king recently defined his leadership using the term 'monarchal democracy' in a rare press interview. Described as a marriage between traditional monarchy and the ballot box, 'monarchal democracy' appears to be a rebranding of the Tinkhundla system; however the timing of the interview indicates recognition by the monarchy of the sense for reform among Swazis.

Mr Vines stated that Swaziland's economic policies were unsustainable. The main sources of revenue for the country derive from Southern African Customs Union (SACU) tariffs, remittances and sugar exports. If spending by the royal household (including on 13 palaces and regular trips abroad) continues at the current rate, it will account for 45 per cent of Swaziland's GDP by 2018.

A preferential EU agreement on Swaziland's sugar exports is being phased out, which currently subsidizes each Swazi at around €30 per head. Other countries, such as Brazil, are now producing sugar in a far more cost-effective manner. The impact of the resultant economic decline will be felt by the king and the royal household. More accountability over political processes and the business environment is needed in order to help curtail expenditure.

Mr Vines stated that this presents an opportunity for Swaziland, but there are challenges to reform. Swaziland is a conservative country, with high levels of support for the royal family. Civil unrest may lead to demonstrations, but a

national uprising is unlikely. Continued pressure from inside and outside Swaziland are needed to push for reform, but the unsustainability of the country's economic trajectory will be the main catalyst for change.

Mr Vines discussed the role of international partners in facilitating reform in Swaziland. Although the country does not attract strategic interest from the international community, this is changing. South African foreign policy on Swaziland is conflicted, but a R2.4 billion conditional loan remains available, which could be used to incentivize change. SADC faces more pressing issues in Southern Africa; in the DRC and Zimbabwe.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) resident ambassador to Swaziland is the only European diplomatic representation; the British High Commission was closed in 2006. The only other Western representation is the embassy of the United States. This presents an opportunity for EU-based values implementation and for the EU and the United States to work together on governance reform in Swaziland.

Mr Vines noted that the 'good offices' work of the Commonwealth on constitutionalism and judicial processes in Swaziland will be significant, and it will be interesting to see how the Tinkhundla system, which does not recognize political parties, can be reconciled with the Commonwealth's definition of democracy.

Mr Vines concluded that change in Swaziland will be slow, but continued pressure on the king and the executive for economic reform is crucial to avoid the country being dragged down from middle-income status to a state in poverty.

## **KNOX CHITIYO**

Dr Chitiyo stated that parliamentary elections in Swaziland should be seen as both an event and a process, with management of expectations over the elections significant for democracy in the wider region. The role of civil society will be critical, as these elections will usher in a process of dialogue on social change and national identity. Such dialogue is needed to critically evaluate social-contract traditions in Swaziland.

Dr Chitiyo noted that Swaziland has a number of economic strategies to overcome poverty, but these have not been implemented. Swaziland needs to develop a nationally generated fiscal base, as the country cannot depend on continued SACU windfalls. Swaziland needs a genuine national strategy that will increase investor confidence and reduce the national bill. This should

consider support for small and medium enterprises, the reduction of government wages and job creation. However, the political will needed to implement such strategies is lacking.

Swaziland's elections will provide the regional and international community with an opportunity to strengthen electoral institutions in the region, and it is important that SADC and the African Union remain engaged in this process. Dr Chitiyo noted that regional organizations and the international community can facilitate change in Swaziland, but engagement in a dialogue on monarchy and democracy must also come from within the country.

Dr Chitiyo concluded that the link between politics and development must be addressed to assure stability in Swaziland and the wider region.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### Question

Is it possible that in 25 years' time, Swaziland will not exist anymore, having been absorbed into South Africa?

### Alex Vines

Mr Vines stated that the debate on whether Swaziland should be merged into South Africa flared up in the 1930s and again in the 1950s, but was rejected due to South Africa's apartheid regime. South Africa has discussed whether to absorb Swaziland more recently, but this view is not shared by Swazis or by the monarch. Twenty five years is too soon to consider absorption.

### Questions

The report mentions international pressure to reform coming from the EU and the West, but fails to mention similar pressure from the Commonwealth. How can international pressure help build a successful democracy in Swaziland, supported by the freedom of speech and assembly?

If Swaziland accepts the proposed loan from South Africa, will the monarchy allow this money to be utilized appropriately? Will the monarchy accept reform?

### Alex Vines

Mr Vines stated that freedom of expression and association was explored in the report, as was the work of other international organizations engaged in Swaziland, although he noted that the Commonwealth could have been looked at more.

Mr Vines stated that it will be difficult for the monarchy to reform, because of the lifestyle the royal court is used to. The appointment of a new government is an appropriate opportunity for the king to engage in reform, but any change is likely to be benign and marginal.

### Question

The Commonwealth has a specific code of conduct regarding genuine democratic elections. Why has the Commonwealth not highlighted the shortcomings of the Swaziland regime?

### Comment

The Commonwealth Secretariat is extensively engaged with the Swaziland government on processes of constitutional monarchy. This will be the second Swaziland parliamentary elections observed by the Commonwealth. In preparation for these elections, the Commonwealth is looking at the progress made on issues that were raised in the previous elections, such as free speech and political freedoms.

### Knox Chitiyo

Dr Chitiyo noted that civil society in Swaziland must become more effective in its engagement with the regime. This is also a challenge for civil society in the wider Southern Africa region.

### Question

Do you get a sense that Swaziland's leadership accepts there is a crisis? Are political forces in the country willing to enter into meaningful dialogue with those pressing for change?

### Alex Vines

Mr Vines stated that there are a growing number of people who are concerned about Swaziland's political and economic trajectory. There are individuals in the Royal Council who want to see change, but economic necessity will be the ultimate driver of reform. Debate is needed on how to incentivize investment-led reform.

### Question

Although the Tinkhundla system encourages local people to participate in the process of selecting candidates for parliamentary elections, historically the level of participation has not been high. Do you know the proportion of people who registered to vote in the elections?

## Alex Vines

Mr Vines stated that around 415,000 Swazis had registered to vote by the final count, out of a possible 600,000 voters.

## Comments

The report did not analyze why Swaziland has one of the highest expenditures on security in sub-Saharan Africa, or the economic impact of this.

One highlight of the report is the recognition of Swaziland's ever-expanding civil service. Without international investment in Swaziland which could directly or indirectly lead to job creation, the reduction of the civil service may lead to unrest.

The report eschewed comparison between Swaziland and Lesotho, but it is important to work out how to ensure that Swaziland avoids Lesotho's transition from monarchy to democracy: from exile of the royal family to subsequent military coups and the intervention of the South African army.