

# THE STATE, ELECTIONS AND HIDDEN PROTEST

## *Swaziland's 2008 Elections*

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### ABSTRACT

*In many African countries elections are accompanied by conflict emanating from the concerns of different sections of the population. The continent has experienced numerous protests over election results or the manner in which electoral processes have been conducted. Yet while protest by organised groups has been admirably analysed by some scholars, their analysis falls short of providing a comprehensive picture of some of the more obscure reasons for the discontent. For a comprehensive understanding of sources of conflict around elections there is a need to look beyond the actions of organised groups into the realm of the not-so-spectacular hidden forms of protest by rural communities. Such research reveals not only the extent of unhappiness with existing electoral processes but also the extent to which voices of dissent are suppressed under pseudo-democratic dispensations. This article focuses on protests in Swaziland against the electoral process, adding the dimension of hidden forms of protest as they unfold in some rural communities.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important themes in the study of democracy is the holding and conduct of elections. Consequently, theories of democratic transition and consolidation have highlighted elections as one of the important pillars of democratisation (Carothers 2002, p 7). Writing during the first half of the 20th century Joseph Schumpeter (1942) argued that elections are the very heart of democracy. Some scholars have pointed out that holding regular, free and fair elections is one of the most important signposts of democracy (McQuoid-Mason,

Mchunu, Govender, O'Brien & Curd-Larkin 1994; Harrop & Miller 1987; Katz 1997; LeDuc, Niemi & Norris 1996).

These over simplistic assertions assume that an election provides people with the opportunity to vote and decide what happens to the future of their country (Heywood 2002). They give the impression that elections equal democracy, but that is an academic terrain with many landmines. They also give the impression that there is general agreement on the functions of elections, when, in fact, that is a highly contested issue. For instance, conventionally, elections are seen as a mechanism through which politicians can be called to account and forced to introduce policies that somehow reflect public opinion. However, a more radical view is that elections are a means through which governments and political elites can exercise control over their people, making them more quiescent, malleable and, ultimately, governable (Ginsberg 1982; Liebenow 1986; Mazrui & Tidy 1984). It is clear that the discussion of elections remains a contested terrain, with no simple issues. However, in spite of the numerous controversies surrounding their study there is a strong case for a continued analysis of elections as they take place in different countries.

Most analysis of African political history remains unbalanced, concentrating on the actions of formal political organisations (Beinart & Bundy 1987, p 2). The agency of rural communities in political and social developments has remained neglected and outside the historical record. Some scholars have attempted to address this imbalance (Marks 1970; Bozzoli 1983; Beinart, Delius & Trapido 1986), but the views and actions of rural communities remain, somehow, on the edges of scholarly analysis.

For instance, in some African countries there are no data on the responses of rural communities to recruitment and registration for elections except as affiliates of one political party or another. To acquire a better understanding of how elections are shaped and the way election registers expand or contract, it is important to move from the known and well documented to the less obvious and unpublicised. This enables scholars to reconstruct the conduct of elections for a better understanding of the dynamics that lead to non-participation in the electoral process.

Swaziland is an example of a country in which formal reactions to the electoral process are dominant, while very little is said or researched about the reactions of unorganised rural communities. Since the country embarked on its version of democratic elections in 1978 different scholars have highlighted protests from segments of the population. Richard Levin (1997) analysed the Swaziland democratic movement, showing how there has been an upsurge in protests against the failure to democratise, especially the refusal to hold elections under a multiparty democratic framework.

The same approach is seen in the work of Stephen Rule, who has argued that there was widespread protest in the early 1990s by the political opposition against the traditional political framework (Rule 2000). Similarly, Michael Neocosmos (2002) detailed the struggle for democratisation in Swaziland, showing how organised political groups have protested against elections since 1973. These writers have been impressed by organised protesters, whose views have been highlighted in the local media and echoed in regional and international fora. Formal protests have been chronicled, albeit in journalistic fashion, and have entered the historical record.

There is no doubt that the attention given to formal protests against elections in Swaziland has contributed to our understanding of the struggle for democracy in the country, but the analysis would be even more rewarding if it went beyond formal protest into the realm of the personalised and unorganised. These hidden protests, which are not televised and do not find their way onto national radio, give an indication of the sentiments of rural dwellers, who account for about 70 per cent of Swaziland's population and remain a reality for most of the rural areas of Swaziland.

Observer missions during the 2008 Swaziland elections declared that the elections were free and fair. The African Union (AU) Observer Mission concluded that 'we did not come across any form of intimidation of voters' (AUOM 2008, p 2), while the SADC Election Observer Mission stated, 'The overall conclusion of the SADC Electoral Observer Mission is that the elections were free, peaceful, transparent and credible' (SEOM 2008, p 5) and the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries concluded that 'a conducive environment existed for the electorate to exercise its will freely'. It was only the Commonwealth Expert Team that picked up on the intimidation that occurred at the time of registration and concluded that 'We cannot therefore conclude that the entire process was credible' (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008, p 26).

The aim of this article is to show that the 2008 elections in Swaziland were accompanied by a great deal of intimidation in the rural areas during the pre-registration and registration periods. The article points out that the intimidation was a response to the hidden protests of some rural communities that manifested themselves in a reluctance or outright refusal to register. There were also threats that scholarships and other forms of state assistance would be withheld from potential students who, or whose parents, refused to register.

In some cases the protests were against the political system in general. The article argues that protest against the traditional political system and the electoral process that accompanies it is not restricted to organised political groupings but is also present in the rural areas, albeit in a different form. It uses the registration process for the 2008 legislative elections to show how rural communities have

protested against elections and that such protests have been followed by different forms of intimidation perpetrated by state officials in an attempt to legitimise the *tinkhundla* political system.

#### METHODOLOGY

The chapter relies heavily on qualitative research conducted in some rural areas, mainly in the southern part of the country. Unstructured interviews allowed the interviewees to express their feelings about the elections. Simple purposive sampling was used to identify people to be interviewed. Because of the economic and labour history of southern Swaziland it was natural that many of those interviewed had a history of involvement in cross-border migration. This resulted in a bias in favour of this group, whose thinking, perceptions and attitudes are possibly shaped by their experience. However, they remain members of rural communities and their views demonstrate a departure from conventional wisdom based on the assumption of total loyalty to the traditional system of governance. Their views remain important as indicators that rural communities are involved in protest against unfavourable electoral practices.

The subject of the paper is sensitive, especially in a repressive political system such as that of Swaziland. Those who were willing to be interviewed and express their views insisted that their identity not be revealed. Consequently, the names used in the paper have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewees.

#### THE FOUNDATION OF HIDDEN FORMS OF PROTEST IN RURAL SWAZILAND

An analysis of hidden forms of protest in rural communities against the 2008 elections should be contextualised within the broader framework of the way in which the Swazi leadership has deconstructed and reconstructed spaces for political participation. This calls for an analysis of the manner in which country's leaders have invented their own form of democracy, which systematically suppresses opposition and voices of protest in general. It is also important that hidden forms of protest should be understood within the context of political control as it affects rural communities in Swaziland.

The colonial period was the golden age of the participation of Swazi rural communities in the electoral process. Two elections were conducted during this period, one on 23 and 24 June 1964, another on 19 and 20 April 1967 (Rule 2000, p 287). During this period the colonial government permitted the formation of political parties for an all-inclusive process of political participation. Political parties multiplied, indicating an appreciation of multiparty democracy.

Some of the parties were too small to survive, but competitive politics allowed them space for self-expression. What was fascinating here was not the ideological sophistication of the parties or the lack thereof but the freeness with which people in the rural areas were given an opportunity to listen to different agendas and decide which party best addressed their concerns. Rural dwellers were sometimes subjected to intimidation at the hands of some parties, especially King Sobhuza II's Imbokodvo National Movement (INM).

In spite of the intimidation there is no indication that rural communities were engaged in hidden forms of protest, probably because the political process at this time allowed open criticism. In other words, in spite of colonial dictatorship there were still open spaces for political dissent, especially during the decades of decolonisation. Both elections affirmed the popularity of the traditional political system, especially the centrality of the monarchy, because the Swazi were united against an identifiable and common enemy – British colonial rule.

The era of tolerance of political dissent or a version of it continued for about four years after the country gained its independence in 1968. The traditionalists, under the leadership of King Sobhuza II, grudgingly permitted political dissent because the Constitution, inherited from the British, allowed it. Those who held different political views could still register their protests through the ballot box, and therefore had no reason to employ hidden forms of protest. In the run-up to the first elections after independence, freedom of expression was allowed and protests took the democratic form of supporting one party against another. Members of rural communities, in common with everybody else, were free to shift allegiance from one party to another.

During the run-up to independence Sobhuza II and his traditional allies were concerned about the growing strength of the opposition. For instance, in the elections of 1964 the Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (NNLC), the main opposition party, won only 12.3 per cent of the vote, while in 1967 it won 20.2 per cent (Rule 2000, p 287). The elections that took place on 16 and 17 May 1972 proved to be crucial to Swaziland's political process as the NNLC confirmed that it was a threat to the hegemony of the traditionalists.

While it is possible that between 1968 and 1971 the traditionalists were plotting to overthrow the Constitution it was the result of the elections that seem to have been decisive. Dr Ambrose Zwane, leader of the NNLC, defeated an INM candidate in the Mphumalanga constituency, while two of his colleagues, Thomas Ngwenya and Madonki Masilela, did the same in other constituencies (Levin 1991).

This meant that for the first time there was an elected official opposition (Rule 2000, p 288), confirming to the traditionalists that the NNLC was growing in strength and was a threat to the survival and reproduction of traditional politics.

The elections also pointed to the growing political strength of industrial workers and the urban population who constituted the majority support for the opposition parties (Libby 1987).

The immediate response of the traditionalists was to purge the opposition. On 25 May 1972 Ngwenya was declared an illegal candidate as it was argued that he was born in South Africa (Kuper 1978) He was then deported to South Africa (Levin 1991). The results also prompted the traditionalists to conclude that the Swazi were adopting 'foreign' political doctrines (Matsebula 1972). The final assault on democracy came with the repealing of the independence Constitution and declaration of a state of emergency. King Sobhuza II was given the power to rule the country by decree. Most importantly, all opposition political parties were banned. This was the beginning of a closing down of the spaces for political dissent and protest and the majority of the Swazi were left to engage in hidden forms of protest that operated mainly at an individual level.

From 1973 the political landscape in rural Swaziland changed completely. Although this was the case with all population groups in the country the situation was worse for rural communities because they could no longer be mobilised or organised. While urban groups benefited from secret meetings organised by political parties, which were now operating underground, no political motivation or mobilisation was taking place in the rural areas, all of which were once again being sucked into the realm of traditional politics, which had a huge democratic deficit. Also, while urban areas were to benefit from limited trade union activities, rural areas were left on the margins. Rural communities remained the backwater of even the limited political modernisation that was taking place.

In 1978 the rural areas were brought back into the realm of political activity through the establishment of *tinkhundla* – regional constituencies. Of the 55 that were created more than 80 per cent were in rural areas. The new system ensured that political organisation and elections could only take place under the traditional system, with all other forms of participation disallowed. This indigenisation of the electoral process excluded and marginalised all groups that believed in alternative forms of political participation.

Political participation no longer took place in terms of multiparty democracy, as had been the case before 1972. This time, rural communities were not mobilised by political parties, instead they were required to vote for individual candidates from their communities, through whom the monarchy entrenched its control over the general population. Under this system elections do not change the leadership or the governance system but are reduced to a ritual carried out every five years. Leaders and policies are not contested but remain forever in the hands of the king, princes, and traditional chiefs. Any form of protest is met with severe suppression. However, suppression has not eliminated protest against the



traditional political system and the manner in which elections are conducted. Protest in rural areas takes hidden forms, as was demonstrated in the registration for the 2008 elections.

There is evidence of growing unhappiness with the country's electoral process (Rule 2000) because elections under *tinkhundla* imply a denial of freedom of choice, as multiparty democracy has been eliminated. Rural communities are compelled to vote within a structure predetermined, controlled and manipulated by the country's leaders. Consequently, the people they send to Parliament have no power because Parliament is controlled by the monarchy. For the five years they are in office, they are not accountable to the voters because the voters have no power to recall them – Swaziland's Constitution has no recall clause. The electoral process simply assists King Mswati III to form a government, which he heads, and to have a Parliament he controls and manipulates. Rural communities are not blind to the limitations of this process and some do not support the *tinkhundla* system, hence the hidden forms of protest.

Rural communities in Swaziland are more obliged than urban populations to engage in hidden protest. The reason is that, according to Swazi law and custom, all land in the rural areas is under the control of the king. Through regional chiefs the king allocates homestead land and retains the power to evict occupants if he feels it is necessary. This enables him to exercise extreme political control over rural communities through land control, a fact that has forced these communities to avoid open protest against the monarchy or institutions created by the monarchy.

#### RURAL COMMUNITIES AND PROTEST AGAINST THE 2008 ELECTIONS

There is no documented evidence of the views of rural communities about elections under *tinkhundla*. The media hardly cover the sentiments of these communities, probably because they are not formally organised and there are no spokespeople to articulate their views. The general assumption is that most rural dwellers support the monarchy and are happy to participate in elections under the *tinkhundla*.

Some of these conclusions have been the result of a failure to conduct research in rural communities. Pushing the frontiers of analysis beyond the easily accessible gives us an indication of what these communities feel and an indication of the sustainability of the present Swazi electoral process. The only way to do this is by means of person-to-person interviews. The testimonies used below to reconstruct the feelings and attitudes of rural people about elections in Swaziland are not meant to be nationally representative. Instead, they are intended to indicate

alternative views to the conclusion that all rural communities support elections under *tinkhundla*. This is very important for those interested in the extent of protest against the electoral process and the future implications of this protest.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that there is simmering discontent and hidden forms of protest against elections under *tinkhundla* among rural dwellers. These forms of protest are not organised or publicly articulated and therefore can only be brought to the surface through personal testimony. One of the major views among these communities was that the elections are nothing but a royal ritual with no relevance to the quality of life of the citizens.

Velaphi Mhlongo, a resident of Nyamane, in Southern Swaziland, stated:

Things have changed in Swaziland as the king now travels to all parts of the world and hears other leaders talking about elections as an indication of people's participation in politics. The problem is that in our case the elections are built on a system that is against change. We are allowed to participate in elections, but only as far as they do not challenge the power of the king. What is important is that we have been having these elections for years, but our lives have not changed. It is useless to participate because my vote will not change anything.

Interview, 21 July 2008

It appears that a negative attitude to the elections is not based on any form of philosophical consideration or subscription to the ideas of any political party, it is a reaction to the inability of the system to respond to people's needs.

This was revealed in the testimony of Mzwandile Myeni of Nyamane:

I wonder why we are called to vote every five years because nothing changes. The poor of this country are as poor as before and *tinkhundla* have done nothing to improve their lives. If you look at the situation today more Swazi stand in long lines waiting for food aid than before and we have a large number of people who go without a meal every day. Economically, all rural communities are worse off, but we continue every five years to vote for a system that is ineffective and non-responsive to the needs of the people. I do not think we should be voting any more, we should just let the king appoint his chosen people.

Interview, 21 July 2008

Some of the respondents focused on the non-democratic nature of the elections. It is interesting to note that some of the commentators on democracy were former



migrant mineworkers who were comparing what they saw in South Africa with what was happening in Swaziland. Even though they are poorly educated, they seem to have learnt from the electoral process in South Africa.

Somuzi Dladla of Makhosini, who has been a migrant labourer since 1995, said:

The elections that we are registering for in Swaziland are very difficult to understand. Why do we vote for people who do not belong to parties? What kind of voting is it that does not have political parties contesting the elections so that we can choose the party that we feel promises to make our lives better. There is absolutely no choice here and you are never sure what you are voting for. All these years we have been called upon to vote for the king's men, who have no meaning to our lives.

Interview, 23 July 2008

It would be interesting to follow the impact of cross-border migration on Swazi attitudes to the country's electoral process. This is especially the case now that more and more educated Swazi are engaged in such migration. It is possible that expressions of concern about the country's electoral process may increase.

One of the most interesting testimonies came from John Ngozo of Mahlandla, who subscribes to a kind of conspiracy theory:

I have been observing the elections in Swaziland for some time now. I have come to the conclusion that they have nothing to do with improving the welfare of the people. Instead, it is something that was introduced by the leaders of this country to allow their friends to share the riches of the country and use the poor people as a vehicle to such riches. For most of the people we elect to Parliament it is a story of rags to riches. They are allowed to make laws that enrich themselves and hardly think about the poor. Once they are in power they forget about the people who voted for them and they become very good at singing the praises of the king. The whole elections thing is a ploy to make some people rich, it is all a process of plundering the riches of the state.

Interview, 23 July 2008

The scenario that emerges from the above testimonies is that some rural communities see the electoral process as having no relevance to their daily lives and doing nothing to improve their wellbeing. The failure of the *tinkhundla* process

to address the plight of rural communities in terms of economic wellbeing has resulted in a negative attitude to elections in the country. It is an attitude that leads to non-participation, as indicated by the low numbers who registered in the initial stages of the 2008 elections. The views expressed above indicate a form of hidden protest based on individual assessment of the country's elections and an inclination to retreat from the electoral process. This shows that much as rejection of the elections has been a hot issue among organised political formations it is also embedded in the feelings of some rural dwellers, though it has not yet crystallised into open protest.

While the above views are recognised there is a need to conceptualise correctly the meaning of elections in Swaziland. Swazi elections are founded on royal absolutism and not on democratic principles. The country has experienced considerable pressure from regional and international communities with regard to its failure to democratise along with other Southern African countries. In an attempt to reduce criticism of the country's absolute monarchy an electoral process based on a traditional political structure was put in place. In doing so the country's leaders were appeasing the international community, particularly donor organisations and institutions, while ensuring that the absolute monarchy remained intact. Swazi elections, therefore, are intended to nourish the monarchy and not to address the plight of the citizens through better and more efficient service delivery. It is understandable that rural communities are beginning to question the relevance of the electoral process to their everyday struggle to survive.

### HIDDEN PROTEST AND INTIMIDATION

The Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC) described voter registration for the 2008 elections as smooth. At the end of the registration period the commission announced that about 400 000 people had registered, but the validity of this figure is questionable. Deeper research indicates that, as was the case in other African countries (Kadima, Leonard & Schmidt 2009; Leonard & Owuor 2009) registration was characterised by low intensity conflict and protest.

Evidence suggests that failure to register was the initial form of protest. This was indicated by the fact that at the start of the process few people turned up to register and in most of the rural areas registration officials spent long hours doing nothing.

As Mbovane Masuku described it:

I was employed as one of the competent witnesses in my *Umphakatsi*. From the beginning to the middle of registration people were coming out in very small numbers. We spent some days doing nothing as there

were no people to register. We were aware that people were just staying at home but we did not know the reason behind such a reaction.

Interview, 24 July 2008

This was corroborated by the testimony of Maxwell Dlodlu, who said:

I have heard people of this area talking among themselves, saying they were not eager to register for the elections because Swazi elections have no meaning in their lives. They claim that the elections have no relevance to their lives because the people they vote for have no power because they listen only to what the king says. They also claimed that past elections have shown that those who are elected are not capable of bringing meaningful economic changes to the area. It appears that refusal to register is some form of protest against the whole system.

Interview, 29 July 2008

In some *imiphakatsi* (headquarters of chiefdoms) registration officials, forced to change strategy as a result of the disengagement of rural communities, decided to create mobile registration centres.

According to Thulani Bhembe:

Up to the middle of the registration exercise it was not clear what we were doing in our registration centre. People were not coming out to register. There were instances when, for the whole day, we registered only three people. We were forced to think of the best way to attract people to registration. We decided against staying in one area but to move from area to area, literally sending the registration centre to people's doorsteps. We ended up registering people in 11 more areas as against one as per our initial instructions. It was only at the end of the registration period that people began to come out.

Interview, 25 July 2008

The Embilaneni Umphakatsi, located in the southern part of the country, was one of the areas where the strategy of providing mobile registration centres was adopted. Robert Ntuli, who was one of the representatives of the chief of the area in the registration process, had an interesting explanation for the reluctance of the residents to register. He said:

At the beginning of registration we encountered a problem of reluctance by people to come out for registration. It was like they were boycotting

the registration process. I think the main reason for such reluctance is that the people in this part of the country have an identity problem. I feel that they are not sure whether they are Zulu or Swazi. This makes them not loyal to the Swazi king and, as a result, they were reluctant to register for this important activity sanctioned by the king. I also feel that they are not loyal to Swaziland as their country of birth. I hear that many of them are officially citizens of both countries.

Interview, 28 July 2008

With rural disengagement continuing, stories of intimidation perpetrated by government officials began to circulate. Intimidation took different forms, but all of them revolved around threats to prevent access to government services for those who refused to register. Evidence indicates that another threat was the denial of a government study loan or scholarship.

At present, the Swaziland government offers study loans to all Swazi students admitted to a university or college either within the country or outside it. While this has proved positive for skills development it has also been used as a control mechanism for both students and their parents. Recipients of the loans are systematically coerced not to criticise the monarchy or the government for fear of being deprived of study facilities. Parents are also required to toe the line where the monarchy is concerned in fear that their children may be denied access to the loan. The result is a forced docility on the part of both parents and children through manipulation of the scholarship fund. The politics of patronage are well utilised, with critics likely to be punished and supporters rewarded. Evidence that this instrument was dangled as a threat against those who were reluctant to register for the 2008 legislative elections was highlighted by Sibusiso Shabalala of Ngelane:

It appears that there was concern that people were not coming out to register for elections. A story started circulating that all those who were above 18 years and completing high school but did not register were not to be granted government scholarships to go to university or colleges. It was also reported that children whose parents did not register for the elections were to be denied government scholarships to go to university and colleges. Some of those who had not registered quickly went to register so that their children could be eligible for government scholarships.

Interview, 25 July 2008

Another form of intimidation was to portray registration as an instruction from

the king that should be complied with. Some rural communities were informed that all those who were not registering for elections were against the king and were refusing to follow his instructions.

This emerged from the testimony of Vuyisile Ndlovu:

My original intention was not to register for the elections. I have voted twice before and I did not benefit anything. When there were three days left for registration I was told by some members of my community that all those who had not voted were in trouble. We were told that we were against the king by not registering. I was told that after the elections we might be evicted from Swaziland. Hearing this, my husband ordered me to go and register immediately and I did so.

Interview, 25 July 2008

The thrust of this intimidation strategy was to capitalise on the traditional Swazi belief that any instruction from the king has to be complied with because failure to do so will bring punitive measures against all concerned. Out of fear of the king and the absolute authority he wields over everybody in the country many people were coerced into registering.

The strategy also contained a material component that was bound to influence rural dwellers. Traditionally all rural dwellers in Swaziland occupy land as a privilege dispensed by the king (Libby 1987). Consequently, they all live under threat of being dispossessed of the land they occupy. Their fear is very real because the monarchy has indeed dispossessed people who refused to follow the king's instructions. For instance, in 2000 the chiefs of Macetjeni and kaMkhweli, together with their supporters, were evicted from their territories because they refused to follow an instruction from King Mswati III to renounce their chieftainship and territories in favour of his older brother, Prince Maguga (Simelane 2010).

Intimidation also took the form of the politicisation of food and cash aid. With the escalation of poverty in the country about 400 000 people are currently dependent on aid. At the beginning of the century it was estimated that 60 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line (Swaziland Government 2000). That proportion has now risen to 70 per cent (*Swazi Observer*, 7 July 2009). Such high rates of poverty mean that the majority of rural dwellers are dependent on food handouts either controlled by or whose distribution is under the influence of the state. The politicisation of food distribution has enabled the state to use it as a tool to force rural communities into loyalty and acquiescence.

According to some sources, a few days before the deadline for registration

a rumour circulated to the effect that those who did not register would receive no aid. This appears to have hit a nerve for most people.

Khethiwe Zulu related her story:

It is always difficult to think about registering to vote and voting if the whole process has failed time and again to make a difference in one's life. This time I had told myself that I was not going to waste my time registering. In fact when the registration began I went to Piet Retief to visit some family friends. I had intended to stay there for the whole of July because I was also selling some articles. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June I received a call from my husband telling me to come back to Swaziland to register for the elections. I came back with two days left and my husband told me that they had received information to the effect that all those who did not register would not receive food or cash aid.

Interview, 27 July 2008

The most interesting story came from Duma Dlamini. It was about a friend who was intimidated by being left out of the food distribution. Duma said:

My friend Vusumuzi stays about two kilometres from the area of registration. Because our area is next to the border to South Africa he sometimes spends some time in Pongola, South Africa. He came back to Swaziland on the last day of registration and it was after lunch when closing time at the registration centre was 5 pm. Vusumuzi is 63 years old. It was only when he arrived home that he received the information that those who did not register were to be left out of food distribution. Only one and a half hours was left to closing time. He started running from his home and when he reached the registration station he was sweating and his clothes were wet. The police officers and the registration officials allowed him to lie down and rest because he was not even able to speak coherently.

Interview, 27 July 2008

It is not clear where the intimidation originated. The Elections and Boundaries Commission has condemned the allegations of intimidation, stating that it stands for free and fair elections. Its spokesman maintained that 'The allegations are, therefore, meant to water down the smooth and peaceful voter registration process and we, therefore, urge the perpetrators of this evil act to desist from making such unfounded allegations' (*Swazi Observer*, 24 June 2008). The testimonies of some



rural dwellers indicate that the stories of intimidation were real and could not be contested. It is the source of the intimidation that remains unresolved. It is also a fact that, for purposes of legitimacy, King Mswati III and his government were looking forward to a high turnout during the registration period. The slow and low turnout at the start of the process must have been a source of concern that called for corrective strategies to be put in place.

## CONCLUSION

The electoral process in Swaziland has always been accompanied by controversy as some groups have contested the legitimacy of the elections. This has been the case because, in the absence of multiparty democracy elections, have been conducted under the auspices of a traditional political system characterised by patronage and the nourishment and reproduction of royal absolutism. It is, therefore, natural that voices of protest should be heard from different sections of the Swazi population. Currently only the voices of organised groups in urban areas are heard. Those of rural communities have not been brought to the forefront. This article has shown that rural communities are using hidden forms of protest. Their reluctance to register for the 2008 legislative elections is an indication of such protest.

In spite of assumptions that Swazi rural communities support elections under *tinkhundla*, oral evidence indicates otherwise. These voices may not be very loud, and may not be well articulated, but they are there. Their main concern is that elections in Swaziland bring no improvement in the quality of life of the majority of the people. They have become a ritual for choosing the king's men and have no relevance to the economic wellbeing of rural communities. The electoral process is intended to improve the image of the monarchy in the international community while contributing very little to the democratic transformation of the country.

Rural protest against the electoral process in Swaziland has not been overt, but is still based in individual reaction. In 2008 this reaction took the form of disengagement or retreat from the system, with individuals deciding that they would not register and would therefore not participate in the elections. This forced some registration teams to adopt strategies to attract people to register. One such strategy was to create mobile voting stations which would go where the people were. The impact of this strategy is difficult to determine, but it must have assisted in increasing the number of registered voters.

Protest through disengagement appears to have been effective, as intimidation was employed to force eligible citizens to register. Anecdotal evidence indicates that there was a close relationship between the circulation of rumours of intimidation and the improved turnout during the final days of the registration period.

Oral evidence indicates that elections under *tinkhundla* do not run as smoothly as the nation and the international community have been led to believe. Elections are punctuated by different forms of intimidation, much of which is not brought to the notice of regional and international communities.

The presence of hidden forms of protest against the electoral process in Swaziland has serious implications for the future of the country, indicating that there is a simmering conflict that may explode at any time. While suppression of the voices of protest appears to be successful at present its sustainability is highly questionable. There is a need to put in place a mechanism to defuse the tension. The most plausible mechanism is to fast-track the democratisation process, which is presently showing a huge deficit compared to what is happening in other Southern African countries.

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