

FISCAL CRISIS, SOCIAL PROTEST AND STATE VIOLENCE IN SWAZILAND, 2009-2012

Abstract

By 2010, Swazi society was experiencing severe economic hardship since the country was experiencing the worse fiscal crisis in its history. These economic hardships were partly an aftermath of the 2008 world financial crisis, but overall, it can be seen as a product of internal developments. Some scholars analyzed the factors behind the crisis, revealing its intensity and different dimensions.¹ However, these scholars did not reveal how Swazi society reacted to the crisis. This article interrogates this neglected subject by focusing on the protests that took place in the country and the manner in which the state responded to these protests. The main objective is to reveal social agency, showing that the Swazi were not simply passive victims of the crisis, but stood up to express their feelings and preferences. The protests were directed towards the state which was accused of causing the crisis and failing to manage it. The article integrates human agency in the analysis of the crisis in contrast to the predominantly economic approach adopted in the existing literature.

Keywords: Fiscal crisis; civil society; monarchy; protest; change; state; violence; democracy.

Slutelwoorde: Fiskale krisis; burgerlike gemeenskap; monargie; protes; verandering; staat; geweld; demokrasie.



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1. INTRODUCTION

African countries experienced economic problems of different magnitude in different historical periods.² The origins of these economic problems are both exogenous and endogenous

1 See, for example, HS Simelane, "The political economy and historical trajectory of the Swaziland fiscal crisis, 2010-2011", *Journal for Contemporary History* 39(2), December 2014, pp. 250-273.

2 This point is well expressed in most studies on African economic history. For more information see, AG Hopkins, *An economic history of West Africa* (New York: Longman, 1973); JF Munro, *Africa and the international economy, 1800-1960: An introduction to the modern economic history of Africa South of the Sahara* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1976); R Austen, *African economic history: Internal development and external dependency* (London: James Currey, 1987).

as some are directly related to the texture of the international political economy, while others have to do with the internal dynamics of each state. Some researchers argued that dictatorships are more prone to poor economic performance, compared to states that are democracies.³ Economic theorists of different ideological persuasions advanced explanations for the continued economic malaise in Africa. For instance, in the 1980s the African state came under unrelenting criticism, not with undue reason, for being at the centre of Africa's economic failure. Neoliberal scholars and other commentators argued that the state was meddling in the economy, distorting market operations.⁴ The main victims of such criticism were state owned economic enterprises, accused of being inefficient and parasitic to the coffers of national treasuries.⁵ In the context of neoliberal criticism of the developmental state in Africa, the state is portrayed as some kind of a huge "theft machine" that is plunging the African continent into economic crisis.⁶ Irrespective of the correctness or incorrectness of such criticism, it is not an exaggeration to say that some African states experienced economic crisis after economic crisis for most of the post-colonial period. Some of the arguments against economic management by African states were once again used to explain the financial predicament of these states in the aftermath of the global financial meltdown of 2008.⁷ This underscores the point that, much as the economic problems encountered after the capitalist crisis of 2008 were international, some of the difficulties faced by the states were due to internal dynamics.

Swaziland has experienced economic hardship that escalated into a fiscal crisis from 2009 to the present, impacting negatively on Swazi society and economy. No research has been done to show how Swazi society reacted to the adverse economic conditions induced by the crisis. This article shows that the Swazi reacted through several protests that, unfortunately, failed to yield the

3 R Deacon, "Dictatorship, democracy, and the provision of public goods". Working Paper, Department of Economics, University of California, San Diego, 2002.

4 For more detail see, World Bank, *The state in a changing world* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1997); R Bates, *Markets and states in tropical Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); AO Olukoshi, "Democratization, globalization and effective policy making in Africa". In: C Soludo, O Ogbu and H Chang (eds), *The politics of trade and industrial policy in Africa: Forced consensus?* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004).

5 T Mentan, *The state in Africa: An analysis of impacts of historical trajectories of global capitalist expansion and domination in the continent* (Mankon: Langaa Research and Publishing, 2010).

6 T Mkandawire, "Institutions and development in Africa". Paper submitted to the Cambridge Journal Conference on "Economics for the Future", 17-19 September 2003.

7 For more information, see L Ahamed, *Lords of finance: The bankers who broke the world* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); C Gasparino, *The sellout: How three decades of Wall Street greed and government mismanagement destroyed the global financial system* (New York: Harper Business, 2009); P Krugman, *The return of depression economics and the crisis of 2008* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008); G Brown, *Beyond the crash: Overcoming the first crisis of globalisation* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

desired results.⁸ The aim of these protests was to force the country's leadership to adopt appropriate strategies to address the situation. These protests were, however, met with decisive state violence that succeeded in breaking down the momentum of the protesters. The protests increased calls for political transformation, particularly demanding a shift to democracy. The article will, therefore, also analyse the extent to which the protests impacted on political change and economic justice.

2. METHODOLOGY

The nature of the subject under investigation in this article and the period covered, determined that data generation should be done through a combination of desk-top and qualitative research. The main challenge experienced in the desk-top research was the limited scholarly writing on the fiscal crisis in Swaziland, and no scholarly literature exists on how the Swazi reacted to the crisis. The bulk of desk-top data for the study was gathered from local newspapers and newspapers from across South Africa's borders.

The qualitative research provided rich and informative data grounded on the experiences of members of the Swazi society. Interviews were carried out with 57 respondents who were identified through purposive and snowball sampling, but the determining factors for being chosen as a respondent were participation in protests and knowledge of why people were protesting. Some of the interviewees were knowledgeable on Swazi governance and economy. In several instances the responses of these respondents were similar and, as a result, not all respondents are cited in the text. The respondents came from different segments of the protesters in the sense that some formed part of the leadership, while others were grassroots participants. There were no fundamental differences in responses between the different categories. The narratives of the respondents brought out their feelings about the governance system of their country, the economy, and the possibilities of transforming their country for the benefit of all. No attempt was made to come up with a representative sample of the interviewees. The true identities of the respondents (whether they participated or commented) are not revealed and the names used in the text are pseudonyms.

8 The Swazi protests discussed in the article were to a large extent part of a much larger protest movement occurring in different countries globally. However, the purpose of the article is to bring out the Swaziland experience and no attempt is made to relate the Swaziland protests to other protests in different parts of the world.

3. THE NATURE OF THE SWAZI FISCAL CRISIS

As early as the late 1980s, Swaziland's, "gross domestic expenditure constantly exceeded GDP".⁹ It was observed that the country's recurrent expenditure was growing from year to year at the rate of 16,5%.¹⁰ The continuation of such a state of affairs has been accompanied by both internal and external political dilemmas.¹¹ Jonathan Crush noted the declining economic performance of the country and argued that the weakness of the Swazi economy derives from its dependent nature.¹²

In 2011, the country was on the brink of collapse as it faced a fiscal crisis¹³ and experienced "severe liquidity problems."¹⁴ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that, "The treasury balances have been depleted, the gross internal reserves have fallen dramatically and the government is starting to accumulate large domestic arrears on all expenditure items. Continuing on the same trend will lead to higher domestic arrears, including on civil service wages, a spreading of the crisis to the financial sector."¹⁵ The accumulated deficit was expected to reach 13% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the fiscal year 2010/2011,¹⁶ indicating an escalating crisis in view of the fact that the deficit for the 2009/2010 fiscal year was at 7,1%. The situation was not helped by the decision to finance the deficit by drawing government deposits at the central bank, engaging in significant domestic borrowing and accumulation of significant domestic payment arrears. In 2010, real GDP growth was estimated at 2%, while inflation increased to 4,5%.

By the middle of February 2011, government vehicles were grounded and this had a crippling effect on service delivery for many state departments.¹⁷ The Swaziland government failed to pay suppliers of spare parts, exhaust pumps, engines, wheels, brakes and other essential parts, and the debt had gone up to R79 million.¹⁸ Some of the suppliers were blaming government priorities. One of the suppliers stated, "the government should invest where there was [sic] a potential for economic growth [instead of] spending a lot of money on external

9 DFM Mcloughlin and R Mehra, "Swaziland's macro-economic development environment", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26(4), December 1988, p. 663.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 664.

11 For more information, see, J Daniel and J Vilane, "Swaziland: Political crisis, regional dilemma", *Review of African Political Economy* 35, May 1986.

12 J. Crush, "The parameters of dependence in Southern Africa: A case study of Swaziland", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4, January 1979.

13 L Redvers, "Mswati's back to the wall", *Mail & Guardian*, 11-17 November 2011.

14 *Sunday Times*, 27 February 2011, p. 4.

15 Redvers, p. 25.

16 International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Mission of the International Monetary Fund to Swaziland", 2 March 2011.

17 For more information, see Redvers, p. 25.

18 *Times of Swaziland: Sunday*, 12 December 2010, p. 3.

trips and personal costs”.¹⁹ The Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Works played down the situation by claiming that, “the Ministry had spoken to most of the suppliers and confided every financial detail of the ministry so that they would believe that it was not deliberate to delay the payments. Most of the suppliers sympathized with government and assured them of their patience.”²⁰ In the first half of 2011, the government failed to pay salaries for Swazi workers stationed in embassies internationally for three months.²¹

This brief account of the economic crisis in the period under consideration has been outlined and analyzed in the limited literature available.²² For present purposes, it serves to provide background on the reasons for the protests.

4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CRISIS

Research on the impact of the crisis on society and economy cannot be conclusive at the moment because some of the repercussions will be unveiled overtime. However, a United Nation (UN)’s rapid survey conducted towards the end of 2011 shows that Swazi households experienced different shocks as a result of the fiscal crisis.²³ The crisis took place at a time when Swazi society was negatively impacted upon by poor economic performance, as the Swazi economy had, for over a decade, grown at a rate of less than 2%. This translated to an unemployment rate of 29% in 2010 and the worse affected group was the youth whose unemployment rate rose to 52%. Poor economic performance left 29% of the population food insecure. At the same time, Swazi society was (and still is) ravaged by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The country has the highest infection rate (26,1%) in the world, with the prevalence rate highest among the age group of between 15 and 49 years.²⁴ In the context of these issues, the dimensions of the socio-economic impact of the financial crisis are understandable.

Swazi households, both as social and economic units, have been hard hit by the financial crisis. One of the major impacts of the crisis was an escalating level of food insecurity that forced households to change their consumption patterns. This development should also be viewed in the context of a country that was last self-sufficient in food production at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁵ The impact of the financial crisis is evidenced by the fact that, “half of adults and about one third of children consumed two or less meals per day in

19 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

20 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 5.

21 *Times of Swaziland*, 5 April 2011, p. 3.

22 See Simelane.

23 United Nations, “Rapid assessment of the impact of the fiscal crisis in Swaziland”, March 2012.

24 Mark Tran, “Explainer: Why are people protesting in Swaziland?”, *The Guardian*, 9 September 2011, p. 5.

25 For more information, see HS Simelane, *Colonialism and economic change in Swaziland, 1940-1960* (Manzini: Jan Publishing Centre, 2003).

early November 2011”.²⁶ Both urban and rural areas’ households seem to have cut their food consumption. The changing consumption pattern was influenced by several factors which became more pronounced by the second half of 2009. One crucial factor has been a marked increase in food prices.²⁷ Food inflation impacted negatively on the purchasing power of households and decreased the purchasing power of the poorest households, as food accounts for a huge share of their consumption basket. Urban households, who are largely dependent on purchased food, were affected more severely than rural ones who are sometimes cushioned by subsistence production. A survey conducted by the United Nations in 2011 concluded that approximately 29% of urban households named high food prices as a shock that affected them in 2011.²⁸ The figure was much lower for rural households. The difficulties caused by food inflation on household economies, especially livelihood dynamics, were highlighted by Senzo Zungu, “I think Swaziland has been severely affected by the global economic crisis that unfolded in 2008, and also by the present fiscal crisis. Its main impact has been an escalation in the prices of food commodities. May be it is worse for us because we import most of our food commodities from South Africa. Food is so expensive that the majority of us can not [sic] afford to buy sufficient food. This means that our consumption patterns should change. I have five kids and now we are not able to have enough food to have three meals per day. It is better for all of us to have two meals per day but that is very difficult for the kids. There is nothing I can do because my income no longer affords a comfortable consumption pattern. I wish our government could find a solution to this problem.”²⁹

Another factor that has contributed to food insecurity and the need for households to change their consumption patterns revolved around the labour market. From 2010 some households experienced reduced income due to things, such as cuts in wages, reduced employment hours, and loss of employment. From that year Swaziland experienced an unprecedented number of job losses as a result of retrenchments and closure of some of the leading companies. For instance, the closure of Sappi Usuthu at Bhunya and Peak Timbers in Piggs Peak played an important role in the loss of employment for many Swazis.³⁰ These were companies that had played a crucial role in expanding wage labour in the country and contributing to household income.³¹ The testimony of Alex Nyoni, who was retrenched after working for Sappi Usuthu for seventeen years,

26 Ngozo Siboniso, “Fiscal crisis: families and coping methods”, *Swazi Observer*, 22 March 2012, p. 5.

27 Helmo Preuss, “Swaziland crisis: Development under threat”, *Sunday World*, 18 March 2012.

28 United Nations.

29 Interview, HS Simelane – S Zungu, Matsapha, 3 November 2015.

30 Bheki Makhubu, “Our country in now a failed state”, *The Nation*, March 2011.

31 HS Simelane, “Cross-Border cattle rustling and its socio-economic impact on rural Swaziland, 1990-2004”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 23(2), 2005. See also, HS Simelane, “The state, governance, and the political economy of the fiscal crisis in

was very revealing, “This year has been a bad year for my family and myself. The survival of my family was highly dependent on income from my work. I have three wives who are not employed and were fully supported by my income. My situation is made worse by the fact that I have thirteen children. It was difficult to live through income from my employment, but loss of this employment will tear my family apart. My eldest wife was telling me this is not unique to our family but true of all the workers who lost their jobs. This is true, but how does it help my situation, my family is in serious trouble, may be the government should take responsibility for all this.”³²

The impact of the financial crisis on consumption is bound to have a lasting effect on the affected households and may result, over time, in a decrease in people’s capabilities due to malnutrition. The case of a woman in the Lowveld who ate cow-dung in order to take her ARVs was revealing and pointed to the level of desperation people are driven to as a result of the inability to afford food. The state failed to support such individuals due to its cash-flow problems.

Swazi households have also been hard hit by the failure of the Swazi state to finance the education of vulnerable children. In September 2011 a large number of Swaziland’s primary and secondary public schools were not opened for the third term of school because the government failed to settle the outstanding education fees for Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC). Commenting on the situation, a member of the Swaziland National Union of Teachers (SNAT) said, “Last week government assured us that when schools opened for the third term, money for the outstanding fees would be paid for the OVCs. This did not happen. The schools have no money to operate.”³³ This was a significant because over 200,000 children were affected. Commenting on the plight of the OVCs one school principal said, “They [OVCs] are the innocent ones in all this. The first and second graders were promised that their fees would be paid by government as per the national constitution. The OVCs in higher grades are so many now, and schools cannot operate without government assistance paying their fees [sic]. We are at our wits end. The children are absolutely devastated. It is painful for educationists and it is a tragedy for the children”.³⁴

In this respect the failure of the Swaziland government to pay for the education of Swazi children has extended to tertiary institutions where the government has introduced a new policy that provides scholarships only to students in selected programmes. The impact of failure to educate the Swazi child is bound to be felt more in the future when certain skills deficits are

Swaziland, 2010-2011”. Paper presented at the School of Politics Seminar Series, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2011.

32 Interview, HS Simelane – A Nyoni, Nhlangano, 11 January 2015.

33 IRIN Africa, “Swaziland: Financial crisis forces schools to close”, 15 September 2011, p. 1.

34 *Ibid.*

revealed. Again, the most concerning issue is a decrease in the capabilities of the Swazi population.

The impact of the fiscal crisis on the education sector has also been felt in tertiary institutions, especially on the training of teachers in different Teacher Training Colleges. In February and March 2011 some of the colleges were not able to complete the supervision of students on teaching practice; a requirement for the student's teaching qualification. One lecturer from a Teacher Training College stated, "This year the government completely failed to provide us with cars claiming that government has no money to get its cars running or to hire cars for this important academic activity. This leaves us in a very compromising position because by the end of the teaching practice period some students had not been supervised and by implication they cannot be able to graduate at the end of the academic year. The financial crisis afflicting the government has serious implication some of which will come to haunt the country in the future."³⁵

Another college lecturer indicated some unconventional practices committed by lecturers to make sure that they have a grade to submit, "No cars are provided and no lecturer is willing to use his/her car for teaching practice because the government announced that it will not be paying claims for personal cars. Some of us resolved to have contacts in the school who could supervise on our behalf so that at the end we have a grade we can submit. Some of the teachers we get to do this for us are sometimes not specialists in the subjects. This situation has deteriorated to such a low level that all that matters is a grade and issues of quality and professionalism are thrown out the window."³⁶ The preliminary indication is that the quality of teacher training education has been compromised.

Preliminary research indicates that the Swazi health sector was hard hit by the present financial crisis, as government failed to provide money necessary to sustain the lives of some vulnerable groups. Social expenditure delays affected organizations, such as the National Emergency Response Council for HIV/Aids (NERCHA), which in August 2011 received only R8 million out of the budgeted R20 million.³⁷ As a result, in the second half of 2011, HIV positive Swazi on ARVs financially supported by the government only received medication for seven days, instead of a month.³⁸ This, furthermore, subjected them to difficult financial conditions as they were forced to make more than one trip to clinics per month. Their situation became even more desperate as transport expenses forced them to deprive themselves of food at times. Most importantly, some of them were forced to stop their medication. The situation was made desperate by the fact that many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were closing down, leading

35 Interview, HS Simelane – I Dlamini, Manzini, 28 March 2015.

36 Interview, HS Simelane – Z Msibi, Manzini, 28 March 2015.

37 United Nations.

38 L Redvers, "HIV-positive Swazis protest over sick service", *Mail & Guardian*, 29 July-4 August 2011.

to a reduction of community based testing and support networks.³⁹ The negative impact of the financial crisis on the Swazi health sector was also shown when some maternal health services were interrupted and a national HIV prevention campaign was put on hold due to lack of funds.

The disruption of this sector has also affected the work of medical doctors. This was particularly the case with overtime allowances and medical doctors were threatening not to respond to emergencies.⁴⁰ One doctor pointed out, "The government owes us large sums of money in unpaid allowances. For the month of November I am one of the doctors whose allowance was not paid. This is a difficult situation because if the government fails to pay us, we have no option but not to respond to emergencies and that plunges the health sector into a crisis. The country has cash-flow challenges, but government continue spending serving political ends of the royal family."⁴¹ The Director of Health Services responded, "*Sabacela kutsi abacondze kutsi live libhekene nensindzabetjatsi* (we requested them to understand that the country is facing a big problem) – the country is facing a financial crisis, we asked them [doctors] to ensure services are not interrupted, the claims are now with the ministry of public service."⁴²

The intensity of the negative impact of the crisis on society was bound to provoke reaction of Swazi society.

5. FINANCIAL CRISIS AND SOCIAL PROTEST

The Swaziland financial crisis and the manner in which it impacted on the general population, especially the poor, gave birth to a social movement that waged a series of protests since the beginning of 2011. Political activists, democracy advocates, civil society, labour unions and grassroots people joined forces to constitute themselves into a social movement to fight for economic justice. In fact, most segments of the Swazi population were represented, except Cabinet Ministers and the monarchy. The target of the social movement was the Swaziland government which was accused of being responsible for the crisis because of its financial indiscipline. However, the monarchy was not spared as accusations of wasteful spending were levelled against it.

Charles Tilly defined social movements as, "a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others".⁴³ On the other hand, Sidney Tarrow defines social movements as, "collective challenges [to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes] by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with

39 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

40 *Swazi Observer*, 9 December 2010.

41 Interview, HS Simelane – M Maseko, Manzini, 28 March 2015.

42 *Swazi Observer*, 9 December 2010: 6.

43 C Tilly, *Social movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder: Paradigm Publisher, 2004), p. 3.

elites, opponents and authorities”.⁴⁴ Research indicates that the aim of the Swazi social movement as it erupted in 2011 was twofold. Firstly, to force the leaders of the country to solve the financial problems facing the country. Secondly, to bring about political transformation in the form of democratisation. The Swazi social movement at this time became a voice, expressing discomfort with the financial situation in the country.

The fiscal crisis in Swaziland escalated into a social crisis demonstrated by numerous protests that erupted in the country between 2010 and 2012. In March 2011, the Swazi were engaged in a protest march that involved about 8 000 participants.⁴⁵ At the forefront of the protest were labour unions, such as the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT) and the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU). Several issues served as reasons for the protest, such as the student scholarship policy and Mswati’s Silver Jubilee Celebrations – the budget of which threatened to bankrupt the country even more – Circular No. 1 of 2010, which allowed Cabinet Ministers and their wives huge pay-outs at the end of their term of office, and government expenditure patterns. What seems to have triggered the protest march was the presentation of an austerity budget that was threatening to cut or freeze salaries for civil servants. This budget made it clear to workers and other social groups that government’s expenditure on social services was to be severely reduced and thus it affected the economic reproduction of all social groups. This made people to question the ability of the state to provide economic services to the public. Members of the Swazi society began to reflect on the economic difficulties they were experiencing in terms of food provision, shelter and health services, as well as the education of the youth, which the state was failing to provide.⁴⁶

While this protest was impressive in terms of the number of people who participated, the end result was no different from what had happened in the past. The Swaziland government did not change any of the austerity measures that had been introduced through the budget, and it continued to progressively limit spending on public goods, while there was no observable end to the lavish lifestyle of the king, his wives and the royal family in general. The leaders of the country also made no move towards effecting political changes that would usher in a new democratic dispensation.

Following in the footsteps of the above protest, Swazi trade unions, band political parties and other social groups campaigning for democratic change in the country embarked on another protest that was meant to last for three days, starting on 12 April 2011. Although the main focus of this protest was

44 S Tarrow, *Power in movement: Collective action, social movements and politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 37.

45 M Nkambule, “Friday’s march in the eyes of the international community”, *Times of Swaziland*, 20 March 2011.

46 Redvers, “Mswati’s back”, p. 5.

democratisation, it was sparked by the failure of the Swaziland government to solve the financial crisis. April 12 is a significant date in Swazi political history, because it is the date on which, in 1972, the Constitution of the country was abrogated and a state of emergency was declared, allowing Sobhuza II to rule the country by decree. On this date, all political parties were banned, and the multiparty democracy inherited from British colonialism in 1968 was destroyed. The decision to begin the protest on this date was politically significant and clearly pointed towards the direction the protests were going. Some of the people who were involved in the organisation of the protest were radicalized against the undemocratic nature of the Swazi state and its failure to solve the financial crisis. One of the protesters said, "The problem is the monarchy. Our aim is to remove the king and make sure there is multiparty democracy. We need to dismantle the system".⁴⁷ Another protester argued, "We are facing financial meltdown and government corruption is rife, but there is no accountability because we do not elect our leaders. We need a multiparty political system to hold government accountable. After all, it's our money, not the king's".⁴⁸ To some extent, such anti-monarchy statements contributed in shaping the reaction of the state.

The response of the state to this protest was swift, decisive, and brutal. It began on Tuesday 11 April, the eve of the protest, when all the leaders and organisers of the main labour unions were arrested.⁴⁹ This was followed by the deployment of security forces on the streets of the major cities of the country. Describing the streets of Manzini on Wednesday, 12 April 2011, Sydney Dlomo said, "On this particular day Swaziland, particularly Manzini, was dominated by a huge presence of the security forces. The country was really a police state because you could not turn a corner without encountering members of the security forces armed to the teeth. It appears that the government had been informed that the protesters were going to take over the state. The problem is that such police presence brought fear to everybody including those who were not participants in the protest. It was the first time for me to fear that the country was on the verge of a conflict."⁵⁰

The security forces did not stop at simply patrolling the streets, but went on to assault members of the public who were suspected of being part of the protest or of being sympathetic to it. On the day of the protest, the police also stormed the offices of the Swaziland United Democratic Front, brutally attacking people inside.⁵¹ Spongile Dlamini, one of the victims, related her ordeal, "We were inside the office getting ready to participate in the protest. About fifty police officers

47 Quoted in L Redvers, "Policy of peaceful protest divides Swazi activists", *Mail & Guardian*, 21-28 April 2011, p. 9.

48 Quoted in Niren Tolsi, "Defiant protesters speak out", *Mail & Guardian*, 15-20 April 2011.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

50 Interview, HS Simelane – Sydney Dlomo, Manzini, 3 June 2015.

51 S Dlamini, "April 12th change upon us", *The Nation*, May 2011.

stormed into the building asking us where Sikelela Dlamini was. They said they want to show him what it means to disrespect the king. When they could not find Sikelela they started beating us using their batons and also kicking us. A friend of mine hurt on the head and he started bleeding profusely but the police continued to beat him. Some people were being kicked while they were on the ground. It was my first time to experience such brutality at the hands of the security forces. What made me to be angry was that we actually had not done anything wrong. The Swazi state has resorted to brutality and I am just happy that nobody was fatally wounded on the day.”⁵²

Such cases of violence were reported in both Manzini and Mbabane where citizens were brutalized as the security forces declared a curfew in all urban areas. Police brutality continued, even after the April protest. When the Swaziland Democracy Campaign organized protests during the week of democracy, from 5-11 September 2011, in a bid to influence the government in addressing the country’s democratic deficit and poor financial discipline, the state responded with violence against the protesters.⁵³ It was reported that during that week, “the streets of Mbabane have been occupied by a range of different people, including workers, students, the legal profession, community and church activists, and all marching in unison and toy-toying for freedom”.⁵⁴ As the protests spread to the smaller towns of Siteki and Nhlngano, the state deployed the riot squad who fired rubber bullets and teargas, particularly against students, many of whom had to be taken to hospital after sustaining serious injuries. Trade unionists were locked up and a march of more than one thousand people was scattered by teargas and a water cannon. Anyone wearing a red t-shirt (associated with the COSATU uniform) became a special target.⁵⁵ Nozipho Simelane, a student of the University of Swaziland who was a victim said, “A large number of students joined the protest and our main concern was the new government scholarship policy that is depriving a large number of us access to university education because our parents cannot afford to pay university fees. When we were marching in Mbabane the police attacked us using teargas, water cannons, and rubber bullets. I got injured on my head and I fainted. Fortunately, some of my friends saw what had happened to me and they carried me to hospital. So cruel were the police that they did not bother to use government vehicles to take those who were injured to hospital. I was in hospital for a week and I cannot forget the pain and trauma I suffered.”⁵⁶

52 Interview, HS Simelane – S Dlamini, Manzini, 7 June 2015.

53 Mike Marqusee, “Swaziland: Thousands defy monarchy in second global week of protest”, *Links International of Socialist Renewal*, 2011.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

55 Sun Reporter, “Swazis feel iron fist: Police and the army bust the big protest”, *Daily Sun*, 13 April 2011.

56 Interview, HS Simelane – N Simelane, Matsapha, 8 June, 2015.

However, the brutality and general harassment was not limited to Swazi protesters, but was extended to South Africans who had crossed the border to support Swazi protesters. These were the members of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Over fifty members of COSATU went into Swaziland to support the Swaziland Democracy Campaign in September 2011.⁵⁷ A female member of COSATU stated, "They were calling the women I was with whores and other insults and they kept saying they did not want to arrest us because that would cause trouble, instead they would just beat us".⁵⁸ Police brutality continued against protesters in Swaziland throughout 2011. Swazi police denied brutalizing the protesters and the Swazi police spokesperson, Superintendent Wendy Hleta, said, "There was no beating anywhere. I think they are just trying to create propaganda over this issue".⁵⁹

The staging of protests continued into 2012 and the grievances continued to revolve around fiscal problems and democracy. During the week of 12 April 2012 students, trade unions and pro-democracy groups geared up for protest and pledged to bring the country to a standstill. However, this was not to be as the Swazi government once again flooded the streets of Manzini and Mbabane with police, correctional services personnel and soldiers. For the duration of the week, Swaziland was turned into a military state again as the security forces were using every means to prevent protestors from marching in the streets. From daybreak on the Thursday of that week, soldiers were patrolling the streets of the major cities and police mounted roadblocks on all major roads. The government also filled the local media with threats and warnings about the illegality of the demonstrations. The security forces on the streets, "were described as brutal and they interrogated, intimidated and insulted detainees."⁶⁰ Diliza Shabalala who was one of the protestors said, "I left Steki [located in the North-east of the country] early on the Thursday to join the ranks of the protestors in Manzini. Along the road we encounter four roadblocks and in each one of them we were checked and had to explain where we were going and why. Some people had made the error of wearing Cosatu colours and they were not allowed to go through. A lot of force was used as some people were against being turned back. When we reached Manzini, the situation was worse, as there were police and soldiers in every corner monitoring the actions and movements of everybody. The whole day was dominated by police brutally and the protest failed to take place in a meaningful way."⁶¹

57 Sam Gole and Lungile Dube, "Bailout business route may lead back to king", *Mail & Guardian*, 9-15 September 2011.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

59 *Ibid.*

60 G Nicholson, "Annual protest against Swazi king", *Daily Maverick*, 21 May 2012.

61 Interview, HS Simelane – D Shabalala, Siteki, 26 April 2015.

The violent reaction by the armed forces resulted in the arrest of most of those suspected of planning to participate in the protest. It is not clear how many people were detained, but the arrest of 15 leaders of the unions to prevent them from attending the protest was confirmed. As has been the case before, the state was able to counter the protest and continued to depoliticize the masses through various strategies. The result was that very few protestors were able to participate in action on the streets. Realizing that the forces were stacked against the protestors and that the protest was losing momentum, an observer said, "In the absence of a significant game changer, the immediate aftermath of [the] April protests may be limited to boosting the movement's awareness campaign and 'monarchy-naming and shaming'".⁶² However, unionists refused to accept this as a real victory for the state. One unionist, Mduduzi Gina, said, "Perhaps it is a victory for the government this time, but it is only a short term victory and it is unfortunate for the people of Swaziland that this is how the government chooses to act. We will be planning more action and more activities and we appeal to the international community to see what is happening here and how the government treats people".⁶³ Another unionist argued that this was not an indication of the failure of the protests, but proof of state brutality against people who attempt to express their views.

The protests continued right into the second half of 2012 and a teachers' strike virtually paralyzed the country's education system as it went on for almost two months. Explaining the reasons behind the protests is not as simple as it might appear. For some commentators, the protests are simply about bread and butter issues arising from the fiscal crisis and resultant economic breakdown in the form of government failure to invest in public good, as well as the poor performance of the economy, resulting in loss of jobs as some companies closed down and others scaled down their operations. Emphasizing economic causation, Mark Tran said, "It's the economy. The current crisis for the landlocked country began in 2009 when South Africa went into recession. That triggered a collapse in revenue from a regional customs union dominated by South Africa that has historically accounted for two-thirds of Swaziland's budget. Swaziland has refused to cut spending – especially on the royal household or military – causing its budget deficit to swell to 14% of GDP, a figure comparable to Greece."⁶⁴

Another commentator stated, "The economy is under major threat. Soon there will be no cash for wages. The government is literally bankrupt. Things have been mismanaged so badly everything is depleted and there is nothing left. The government is unable to pay local creditors like construction companies

62 Quoted in Nicholson, p. 3.

63 Quoted in L Redvers, "Swazi unions unfazed by protest flop", *Mail & Guardian*, 20-25 April 2012.

64 M Tran, "Why are people protesting in Swaziland?", *The Guardian*, 9 September 2011, p. 7.

or people supplying equipment to schools, prisons and hospitals”.⁶⁵ Although these assertions can be accused of some form of economic reductionism, they remain an acceptable explanation. However, it must be noted that the economic explanation must be integrated with other factors for the purpose of gaining a comprehensive understanding of what informed the protests.

The Swazi protest movement “speaks” in two languages that are obviously interconnected. The first language is that of economic hardship, deriving from government’s implementation of austerity measures as outlined above. The second is that of political change, especially democratization that has been absent in the country since 1972. Swaziland is the only country in Southern Africa that has failed to undergo a democratic transformation, leaving an absolute monarchy governance system in a strong position. Large sections of the Swazi population believe that the country is in a fiscal crisis because of its huge democratic deficit. In all the protest marches, therefore, there are calls for both economic and political reforms. In 2011 the pro-democracy groups organised themselves into, what is called, the Swaziland Democracy Campaign (SDC), calling for political change and the introduction of multiparty democracy. The birth of this grouping has been an addition to other pro-democracy groups, such as The People’s United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), the time tested Ngwane National Liberation Congress (NNLC), and several other smaller ones. These political groupings joined forces with labour union groups, such as SFTU and SNAT. Consequently, the social protests that engulfed the country up to now somehow resonate with the past.

6. SOCIAL PROTEST AND FAILURE

All the protests that took place in the country failed in achieving the ultimate objective, that of having the state addressing the grievances of the protesters by bringing about economic justice and political change. The protesters lacked the necessary strength to force the state to transform the political climate of the country that would, eventually, lead to better economic management and economic justice. This is particularly important because the prospects of better economic performance without political changes are very slim. As research on other regions of the world has shown, there seems to be a relationship between economic growth/development and the type of governance system that is in place.⁶⁶ However, one of the most interesting issues is to identify the factors behind the failure of the protests in Swaziland.

65 Quoted in L Redvers, “Swazi unions plan another showdown with government”, *Mail & Guardian*, 17-23 June 2011, p. 28.

66 For more information, see R Lopez, “Structural adjustment and sustainable development”. In: Ramon Lopez and Michael A Toman (eds), *Economic development and environmental sustainability: New policy options* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); R Deacon,

The role of the state has been one of the issues raised in explaining the failure of the protests in Swaziland between 2010 and 2012. Some commentators have argued that the state in Swaziland is used as an institute of violence against any form of protest that is viewed as undermining the power of the monarchy and the traditional leadership in general. Particular emphasis has been placed on the violent nature of the response of the state to social protests. Zinhle Magwaza argued that, "Since the outbreak of the financial crisis in Swaziland, members have attempted to voice their views and rejection of state policies through protests that have become a common feature of the country. The violence with which the state has responded has made it impossible for the protests to yield positive results. One may actually conclude that the main purpose of the security forces in the country is to brutally suppress opposition to the traditional system. As long as the pro-democracy groups and the labour unions have no strategy to counter state violence, all their efforts will end up in failure."⁶⁷

The argument about the state and its brutality is useful as there is evidence that, throughout 2011 and part of 2012, the state responded with violence against protesters, systematically suppressing opposing views by means of violent intimidation. Even before 2011, the Swazi state has been violent against its political opponents. This was highlighted by a member of the Ngwane National Liberatory Congress, "At times we fail to identify the most obvious things and try to complicate our explanations. There is no denying that the Swazi state has used violent means to silence opposition. The history of such violence is as old as the independent Swazi state. From 1972 up to now the Swazi monarchy has brutally suppressed protests and we have evidence of people who have died in police cells and flimsy explanations advanced. The main problem is that the international community has been deceived to think that Swaziland is a peaceful country, but there can be no peace in a country that is governed through state brutality."⁶⁸

Much as the explanation of state brutality is plausible, it cannot be the only reason to explain the failure of Swazi protests. It is also important to interrogate the movement itself and push the frontiers of analysis beyond state brutality. The Swazi social movement needs to be organizationally, structurally and ideologically sound, before protests can yield positive results. This is particularly the case, because the fiscal crisis is intertwined with monarchical accumulation that has continued since independence.⁶⁹

There is also the question of how deep these protests were in the context of Swazi society in general. Almost all the protests took place in the major urban

"Dictatorship, democracy, and the provision of public goods", Department of Economics, University of California, San Diego, 2002.

67 Interview, HS Simelane – Z Magwaza, Mbabane, 7 June 2015.

68 Interview, HS Simelane – M Shongwe, Mbabane, 27 July 2015.

69 For more information on monarchical accumulation in Swaziland, see HS Simelane, "The colonial experience, indigenous leaders and the capitalization of the Swazi monarchy", *New Contree* 72, July 2015, pp. 21-42.

areas of Manzini and Mbabane, and at times some minimal action occurred in smaller urban areas, such as Steki and Nhlngano. Throughout 2011 and the first half of 2012, the rural areas remained untouched by the protests. This is in spite of the fact that about 70% of the Swazi population that can offer meaningful support to the protests, reside in the rural areas. The failure to integrate the rural population in the protests compromised the success of the protests. In some rural areas the protesting groups are viewed as some form of social nuisance. This attitude was highlighted by Mbhekeni Shongwe, "We have heard that some people in the cities are protesting and are demanding many things but I am not sure how what they are doing can help us here. Their demands are meant to benefit them not us. All they are doing is just causing trouble for the king and the country. In fact, these people have no respect, and no morals".⁷⁰

The control of the monarchy over the rural areas is highly pronounced, thus limiting the mobilization of rural dwellers for protest. Regional chiefs are used to entrench the control of the monarchy, much to the exclusion of groups that are considered to be progressive.⁷¹ Advocates of economic justice and political change contend that they are not able to mobilize the rural population due to the suppression by the monarchy through traditional chiefs. Clifford Mabuza argued, "I agree that without the mobilization of rural communities our struggle for political change in the country will be a very difficult one. We are not in command of mass support that can push sufficient pressure for political transformation. The major challenge is that at the moment it is extremely difficult to build the conscious of the rural population because they are under the grip of the monarchy that is willing and ready to use whatever means available to prevent its opponents from accessing these communities. If you were to do so you would be imprisoned in no time. Most importantly, the rural people themselves will not engage with you in fear of reprisals from the traditional system, particularly chiefs."⁷²

The mobilization of rural communities remains one of the most important ingredients for the success of the protest movement in Swaziland. At another level, the failure of the Swazi protest movement is due to ideological fragmentation amongst the protesters. For purposes of this article, ideology means a coherent and comprehensive set of ideas that explain and evaluate social conditions, help people understand their place in society, and provide a programme for social and political action.⁷³ The protest groups in Swaziland do not have a coherent set of ideas that is consistent and capable of driving the protest movement forward. As a result of the existing ideological rift and the nature of the rift, the

70 Interview, HS Simelane – M Shongwe, Manzini, 11 June 2015.

71 For details, see J Crush, "The colonial division of space: The significance of the Swaziland land partition", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 3(1), 1980; HS Simelane, "Landlessness and imperial response in Swaziland, 1938-1950", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17(4), 1991.

72 Interview, HS Simelane – C Mabuza, Nhlngano, 21 June 2015.

73 T Ball and R Dagger, *Political ideologies and the democratic ideal* (Boston: Longman, 2011).

protests are a truncated liberal project that does not have clear direction and strategic robustness.

Ideological fragmentation comes out very clearly in their viewpoints on the place of the monarchy in the process of moving for change or in the aftermath of political changes, if they are realized. The protesters had divergent views on the monarchy and this tended to shape the manner in which they push for political transformation. Some protesters argue that the monarchy is a symbol and custodian of Swazi culture and defines the identity of the Swazi nation and, therefore, in any process of change it should not be interfered with. Consequently, the activists in this camp view the present economic problems of the country and other failures as a product of the failing government that can be separated from the operations of the monarchy as an institution. The ultimate vision of this camp is a process of political change that will not transform monarchical privileges and power, but will effectively “kill all the messengers”, and then hope that the monarchy will preside over a new government that will presumably be responsive and sensitive to the needs of the people. According to this camp, therefore, the trajectory of economic breakdown in Swaziland is one of economic mismanagement at government level below the machinations of an absolute monarch that is deemed to be benevolent. This position was well expressed by one activist who said, “I strongly believe that Swaziland needs political change because it is clear that the government has failed to run the country for the benefit of all. This government is systematically undermining all the efforts of the king to improve the quality of life of the people. Most of the time the king is visiting developed nations to request for assistance, but the problem is that whatever he brings back, is misused by the government. Through their mismanagement they make the king look bad and they want us to rebel against him. The kingship is what we are, and while I support change, that change should have nothing to do with the king. The sooner we realize that, the better we will be able to build a progressive Swaziland.”⁷⁴

The pro-monarchy camp has strong support in the rural areas where the majority of the Swazi population is residing. If and when the issue of the monarchy and political transformation enters the public domain for debate, one wonders if the democratization process will not be scamped.

Contrary to the above views on the monarchy, there is another camp that contends that the political transformation of Swaziland hinges on the position of the monarch and its absolute power. Members of this camp argue that the monarchy is actually at the root of the country’s economic problems as it is not accountable and drives the government to expenditure that is not justified by the economic ability of the country, nor by the revenue generation capacity. This camp argues that the monarchy is depleting the financial resources of the country through unchecked expenditure on the royal household and on national

74 Interview, HS Simelane – Z Zondo, Manzini, 22 June 2015.

functions that reproduce the monarchy.⁷⁵ Solomon Hlanze argued, “Any view that disengages the monarchy from the present crises is really misguided. It is actually the institution of monarchy that has destroyed the economy of the country and driven it to a financial crisis. This is the case because the Swazi monarchy has been too capitalized and the king is more of a business person than a protector of the interests of the Swazi as dictated by custom. The monarchy is now more interested in capital accumulation at the expense of the entire nation as shown by the fact that it controls more than 25 companies under Tibiyi TakaNgwane. There is also evidence to show that the expenditure of the royal family is unchecked and is shown by the high expenditure on building mansions for the many wives of the king, not forgetting their annual expenditure on clothing overseas.”⁷⁶

According to this camp therefore, the calls for economic justice and political change in the country are about a total transformation of the governance structure, including the dismantling of the institution of monarchy. For the activists and protesters in this camp, the monarchy is not just part of the problem, it is actually the problem and any political change should involve the removal of the monarchy from power. Zanele Ndlangamandla, a member of one of the banned political parties said, “There is no question about the fact that the monarchy is an indigenous institution that resonates with Swazi culture and Swazi identity. However, we cannot be blind to the fact that this institution has been transformed by British colonialism and the penetration of capitalism in the Swazi economy. The institution is now a far cry from what it was during the pre-colonial period as it is now parasitic to the Swazi economy and it is no longer relevant. What is needed is to rebuild Swaziland under a new context and democratic dispensation. Power should be rested in the people and not on an individual who wields absolute political power. Therefore, what we need is a new system [which] does not include absolute authority”.⁷⁷

The above mentioned views on the monarchy are serious and raise a question about the ability of the protest movements to bring about the desired redress of economic imbalances in the country. It also has a bearing on the extent to which the present protest can be radicalized.

In addition to the above, there is disagreement on the strategy that should be followed in an attempt to bring about change. Some of the protesters and activists advocate peaceful protest and disassociate themselves from any kind of radical action. On the other hand some of the activists are advocating for responding with violence against state brutality. This was clearly shown when, prior to one of the protests in 2011, one of the groups announced that the protests were a “Swazi uprising” that was prepared to use radical means, including violence, to bring about political change in the country. However, some social

75 For more information, see Simelane, “The capitalization”.

76 Interview, HS Simelane – S Hlanze, Manzini, 14 June 2015.

77 Interview, HS Simelane – Z Ndlangamandla, Mbabane, 12 June 2015.

groups disassociated themselves from the radical techniques. For instance, the Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civic Organizations (SCCCO) declared that, “An uprising cannot be acceptable to us. An uprising has violent connotations of an overthrow, which is not what we are about. Even if the state can choose to be violent against us, we would not decide to retaliate by employing violent tactics as well”.⁷⁸ It appears that as long as the activists do not agree on the strategy to be employed in the protests, united action may not be possible and the success of the protest movement will be compromised.

The paradox of the protests is that both camps are in action, yet there is no synergy on what they want to achieve. One wonders as to how they will continue working together before the disconnection erupts. Already, the failure of the protest movement up to this point can be explained by the fact that the protesters are ideologically in conflict.

7. CONCLUSION

From about 2010 Swaziland was caught in a serious economic crisis that manifested itself largely in an escalating budget deficit that renders the government unable to finance the provision of public goods. While this development is related to the global economic breakdown of 2008, its origins are largely internal. The article has briefly shown the dimensions of the financial crisis and the manner in which it paralyzed government operations. Almost all government departments are unable to operate fully and efficiently as government failed to pay for services rendered. The factors behind the financial crisis are contested as some commentators and analysts emphasize the reduction of revenue from the Southern African Customs Union, while others give prominence to the country's political economy that revolves around the wasteful expenditure of the government and the monarchy.

The article has shown the different ways in which the financial crisis has impacted on Swazi society. Preliminary research indicates that household economies, health services and the education sectors have been hard hit as the government continues to fail in funding services in these sectors. Of particular significance has been the failure of the government to pay school fees for orphaned and vulnerable children, and also the failure to finance organisations that are providing health services to HIV/AIDS patients. These are serious problems for the country, because they reduce people's capabilities and this is bound to have future repercussions. Evidence indicates that both urban and rural households experienced numerous shocks in the wake of the financial crisis. The major shocks that have been observed relate to food insecurity and optimal operation of the labour market.

78 *Times of Swaziland*, 28 February 2015.

It is inevitable that the impact of the financial crisis, especially the socio-economic dislocations, would produce a reaction from the general population. The main reaction has been the eruption of social protests, beginning in 2011. From this year onwards, definite social movements, anchored either in labour unions, pro-democracy groups, or a combination of both, became a common feature in Swaziland. The protests called for both economic and political reforms. An important characteristic of the protests is that they were suppressed with a high level of state violence. In both 2011 and 2012, state brutality against the leadership of the trade unions and pro-democracy groups has been widespread and a large number of protesters have been hospitalized after assaults from the armed forces. According to some commentators, police brutality compromised the success of the protests in such a way that, although there has been a series of them, they have not achieved the desired outcomes.

One of the intriguing issues is accounting for the failure of the protest movement to bring about economic reforms and political change in Swaziland. The article has shown that conventional wisdom points to the repressive and brutal tendencies of the Swazi state. This view is supported by concrete evidence that shows that from 2011 into 2012, the action of the Swazi state in dealing with the protests has been characterised by acts of violence by the state. Evidence shows that, each time the state responded with violence, the momentum of the protests was lost. However, this article argued that the role of the state in the failure of the protest movement does not provide a comprehensive explanation and called for an internal interrogation of the protest movement as a conglomeration of different social groupings purporting to bring about fiscal reforms and political change. The article also show that the Swazi protest movement was not deep enough to integrate rural communities. As a result, it lacked popularity and, consequently, the critical mass to apply pressure on the Swazi state. The Swazi protest movement is ideologically fragmented, especially in its views on the monarchy. Such ideological fragmentation undermined the ability of the protest movement to engage in unified action for a unified goal.