



The Kingdom of Whispers

BILL SNADDON REPORTS FROM SWAZILAND, AN AFRICAN COUNTRY OF GREAT POTENTIAL AND QUAIN CUSTOMS; WHERE FREEDOM OF SPEECH CAN NEVER BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED.

“WHO’S THAT WALKING in the door?”

“Oh, that’s just a plain-clothed policeman.”

I involuntarily start whispering. “So...do...the police come to most of the meetings of journalists?”

“Not *all* the meetings, but usually when a group of journalists get together, or when pro-democracy activists are meeting, the police will be nearby.”

I had been in the Kingdom of Swaziland – the bite-sized African country wedged between South Africa and Mozambique – for just a few weeks. The respondent was a seasoned Swazi reporter who calmly sipped on his tea as he answered my increasingly paranoid questions.

I’m a long way from the leafy streets and quaint laneways of Melbourne, I kept thinking to myself. *What am I doing over here? Why am I here?*

Some of the answers were easy. I had gone to Swaziland as part of

an Australian aid program to train journalists and conduct research aimed at assisting the local media. ‘Capacity building’ and ‘skills transfer’, as international development jargon speakers might put it.

What struck me at this meeting was not so much the presence of a plain-clothed policeman, who had come to note who was there – journalists, civil society members, and one ignorant journalist-turned-aid-worker from Australia – but the casual response to the visitor shown by those present.

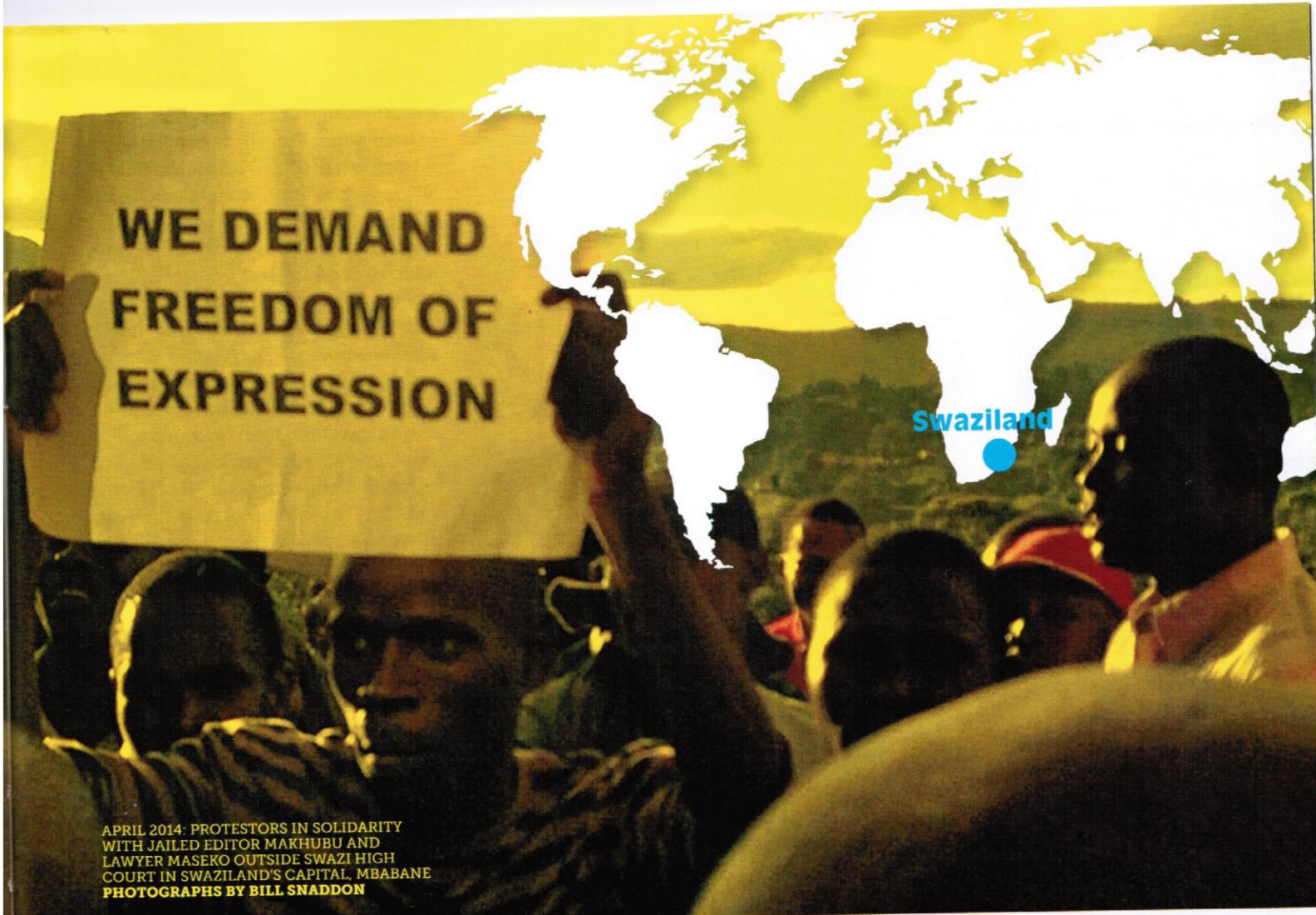
The meeting had been called to discuss the deteriorating state of freedom of speech and (funnily enough) assembly. I wanted to point out the incongruity of a policeman coming to monitor a meeting about freedom of assembly, but had the feeling my new colleagues were beyond such quips. I assumed this policeman wasn’t in uniform so he would blend in. But it was

apparent that everyone at the meeting (except me) knew he was a policeman as soon as he slinked through the door.

It was clear the journalists and activists in that room were expecting the plain-clothed policeman to show up. Evidently, this is normal when you’re in the job of reporting the news or quietly calling for democracy in an absolute monarchy – or ‘monarchical democracy’ as the Swazi rulers like to call it.

Swaziland has a population of 1.2 million people. Its economy is built on a sugar industry, a dwindling textile sector and handouts from a southern African customs union. Coca-Cola also has a significant presence in the country, with a big manufacturing plant to process the sugar for its famous drink. Analysts estimate the multinational company pays as much as 40% of the country’s tax revenue.

King Mswati III has ruled his landlocked kingdom since the crown



APRIL 2014: PROTESTORS IN SOLIDARITY WITH JAILED EDITOR MAKHUBU AND LAWYER MASEKO OUTSIDE SWAZI HIGH COURT IN SWAZILAND'S CAPITAL, MBABANE PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL SNADDON

was placed on his head in 1986. He was 18 years old when he took over, having just arrived home from a few years at a posh English boarding school. Behind closed doors, people will tell you he wasn't the best student.

Mswati's father – the late King Sobhuza II – is remembered for peacefully winning independence from the British in 1968, as well as his impressive virility. In the polygamous culture of Swaziland it is not seen as unusual that the former king had about 70 wives and, by some estimates, more than 200 children. This total doesn't include "the illegitimates", several people told me quietly.

The former king's decision in 1973 to outlaw political parties and criminalise free discussion in Swaziland is regarded as the root cause of many of today's problems, of which there are many. The country has the highest rate of HIV in the world; about a quarter of the population

is living with the virus. If Ebola were to creep down south from West Africa it would place unimaginable strain on a health system that struggles at the best of times. The official unemployment figure is 40%, but a casual glance around the cities and rural areas suggests the real figure is much higher.

It is often difficult, though, to highlight these issues from inside the country for fear of being called 'overly negative', 'unpatriotic' or (in my case) 'just another well-to-do foreigner telling us about problems we are well aware of'. Of course there is a facade of debate on such issues, but you can't *really* question the powerful royals who are ultimately in charge.

King Mswati, with only 14 wives (perhaps 15...more on that later), can be viewed as somewhat of a progressive. He allowed a new constitution, with a liberal-sounding Bill of Rights, in 2005. In reality, however, this new

constitution acts as a mere cover for the royal family and its friends in high places to continue doing as they like.

One petty but emblematic example is that discussion of the King's wives in the media is a big no-no. It becomes less petty when you realise that his wives and the many hangers-on pull a healthy official allowance, while taxpayers and the unemployed fend for themselves. Inside the country, you raise these issues at your own peril. Directly questioning leaders or elders (or anyone in a position of real power) is fraught with danger. Sure, you can criticise the unelected and increasingly powerful prime minister and the typically dodgy politicians, but that is not where the main game is played. To criticise the ruling elite is, in many ways, a crime worse than murder. Indeed, many murderers and rapists are never brought to justice, while those who dare criticise the regime are often thrown in jail.

Not long after the meeting where the plain-clothed policeman showed up, I was in the capital city, Mbabane, having lunch with two friends – one expat and one Swazi. We were sitting at a table next to the car park, and the expat and I were talking rather loudly about the King and his wives, trying to be funny, not realising how stupid we were being. I hadn't been in the country long enough to know to whisper if discussing the King or his wives in public. As the other expat started on another rant about the King's selfishness, our Swazi friend noticed a car pull up next to our table.

"Shhh," she insisted.

"What's the problem?" I replied, sliding into a whisper, my heart rate shooting up.

"Be quiet, both of you. Stop talking about the King."

"Huh?" I was a bit confused, which is a normal state for foreigners in the Kingdom.

"That's one of the King's wives getting out of that car – just talk about something else," she implored through gritted teeth.

It turned out the King's wife had popped down to pick up a soft-serve ice cream, with three luxury cars and 10 bodyguards in tow. This was our first lesson about how dangerous it is to criticise Swaziland's rulers.

There is one monthly magazine, *The Nation*, that shines a light on rulers' excesses. Its editor, the humble and courageous Bheki Makhubu, is now languishing in jail, along with columnist and human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko. Through some creative legal arguments, both were found guilty of contempt of court in July, and sentenced to two years behind bars.

While convictions of this nature do affect people's behaviour, it doesn't stop people talking in the relative safety of their living rooms or at the back of a bus. And, truth be told, the convictions of Makhubu and Maseko have only strengthened the resolve of those Swazis who dare call for a genuine form of representative government and rule of law.

Apart from abuse of power, the royals' excesses are also on the nose for many, who see the King's family as the Kardashians of the Kingdom. If you do a web-search for 'SwaziLeaks' you will see their lavish lifestyle on display; a lifestyle funded by the fact that the King and his companies control about 60% of the economy. In 2010, *Forbes* magazine estimated the King's personal wealth at US\$100 million. About two-thirds of the population, who are forever told there is not enough money for education and healthcare, live in abject poverty.

Political prisoners in Swaziland are detained for crimes such as wearing a T-shirt with the name of a banned political party, or singing a 'seditious' song at a protest rally. Still, to understand the crumbling state of Swaziland, one must grasp the fact that many view the King as a god-like figure. For younger people, however, his shine is beginning to wear off.

If quality education were accessible throughout the country, the royal mirage might be washed away. This could be the reason why education, despite the nice-sounding speeches of ministers, is not a top priority. BMWs, it seems, are generally the number one agenda item. What public education there is is used more as a tool of propaganda, with classes in 'monarchical democracy' being introduced.

The situation is made more confusing to outsiders when you consider the monarchy has its origins in the nation's blend of religious and spiritual beliefs – a baffling mixture of Christianity and ancestral worship. A Swazi friend put it simply when he explained that "some Swazis are not sure whether to worship Jesus in the sky or our ancestors in the ground".

The realm of the spirit world and the supernatural – often referred to as *muti*, which crassly translates into 'witchcraft' or 'black magic' – dominates the thinking of many people, including the King. In its way it is perhaps similar to the popularity of astrology in the West. Such belief systems fill a spiritual void and allow people to join the dots in a way that

suits them, or simply offers comfort in hard times. But when traditional medicine is used and babies then die of HIV, or when magical explanations are offered to explain a huge car crash, the problems become more acute. And they multiply further when leaders exploit the people's attachment to religion or other supernatural beliefs for their own selfish ends.

Despite the country's potential for a thriving economy (pastures and rain aplenty, and tourism untapped), Swaziland's leaders refuse to tackle its big challenges: a closed economy and a polity based on nepotism, corruption and a subservience to the ruling royal elite.

If you published this article in one of the local Swazi newspapers, or expressed similar sentiments on one of the two state-controlled broadcasters, you might be chased out of the country or thrown in jail. Sedition laws, as noted when the King's wife got her soft-serve ice cream, are very much alive.

But the most pervasive censorship comes from within individuals, who tend to practise self-censorship before officials need come into play. People tend to stop themselves as thoughts creep up from below. Those very thoughts could materialise into seditious words. For many, uttering such words – "the King is a bad guy," to give one tasteful example – is not worth the trouble of appearing disrespectful, losing a job or going to jail.

All of this is a lot to grasp for a foreigner spending a few years working at a small non-governmental organisation (making many mistakes along the way), clumsily trying to support journalists and promote free speech in the most respectful manner. The first weeks – in particular, that meeting with the plain-clothed policeman – certainly set the tone for my time in the Kingdom.

The convenor of that meeting, a senior journalist who is no stranger to undercover agents tracking his movements, was clearly not happy with the presence of the policeman in that room. What he objected to was the sly way in which the agent slinked

through the door. Why couldn't the police RSVP and come along in the normal fashion? Why the sneaking around and silly secrecy? These are naive questions, of course, but they seem worth asking. The journalist, in his annoyance, was making the point that the media and civil society members had nothing to hide. The journalist knew that taking the high ground – in a respectful and humble manner – is one way to overcome and expose some of the ruthless injustices ravaging his country.

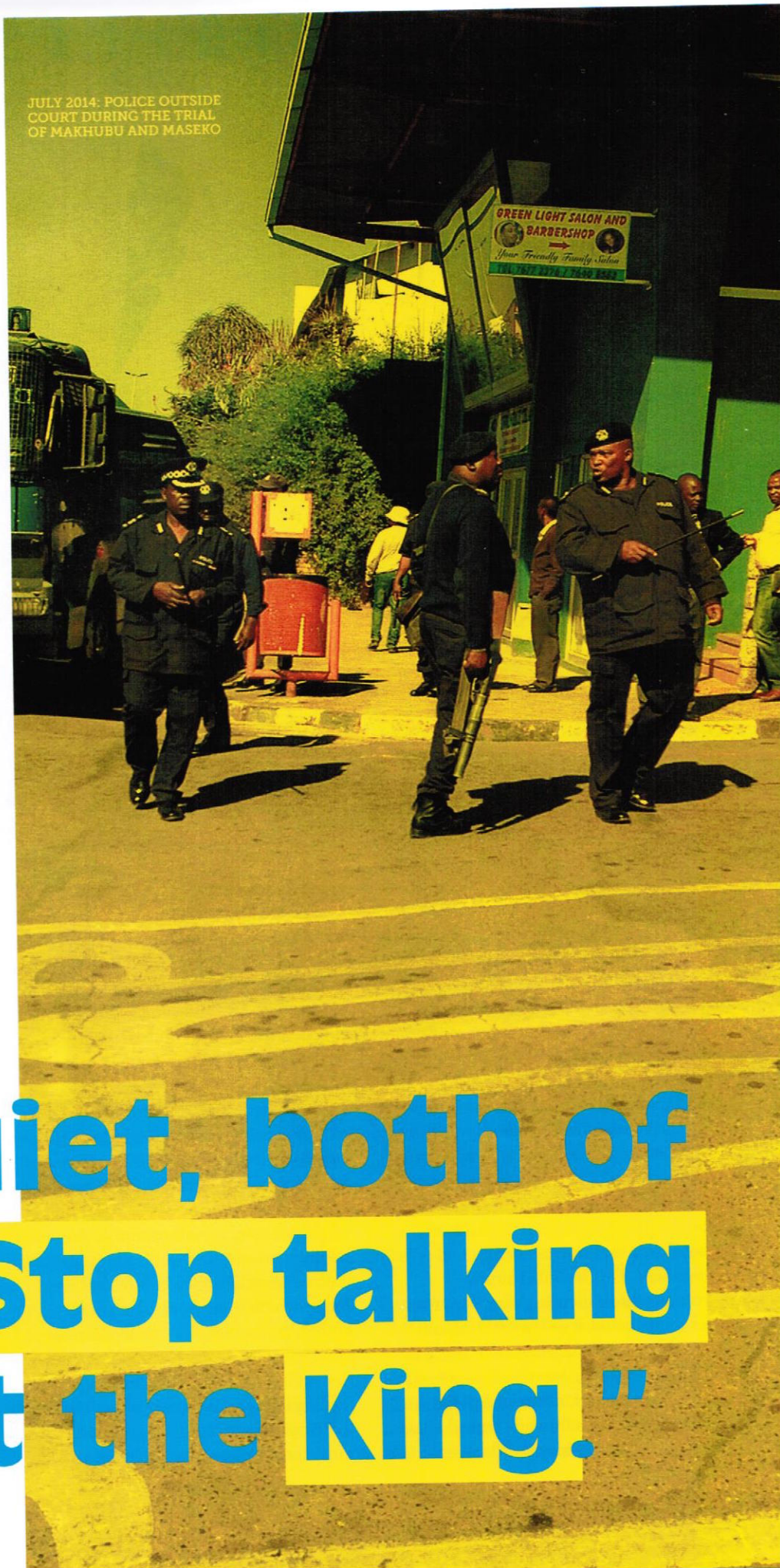
Eventually, the journalist politely asked the policeman to step outside so the participants of the meeting could conduct a show of hands to see who wanted him to stay and who wanted him to leave. After the vote, the policeman was politely told he wasn't welcome. (My uncertain hand had only made it halfway up.)

Later that same week, the journalist who bravely told the policeman to hit the road received a phone call. The very same policeman was just calling to say a "friendly hello".

And so the Swazis' quest for freedom in the beautiful Kingdom continues.

» *Bill Snaddon is a freelance journalist who has worked at the Media Institute of Southern Africa in Swaziland since 2012, as part of an Australian aid program. His last story for The Big Issue, about Tanzania, was in Ed#348.*

JULY 2014: POLICE OUTSIDE COURT DURING THE TRIAL OF MAKHUBU AND MASEKO



"Be quiet, both of you. Stop talking about the King."