

Lolo Phiri

The June 29 Protests Commemoration

Protests against royal oppression in Swaziland had been going on for a very long time by small pockets of political activists and sometimes in huge numbers occasionally when different sectors came together. In 2021 Young people in SWAYOCO started protesting on 12 April 2021 where they were blocked from delivering petitions in two places and were only successful in one regional office. The protest was against the 1973 April 12 proclamation that banned political parties which is the root cause of the political instability we are having today. The police responded with brutality to peaceful protests as usual and these created a clear picture that the police were against peaceful protests. After the April protest the police killed a tertiary institution student Thabani Nkomonye and tried to cover the murder with false information. That did not stop consistent protests to demand justice for Thabani though.

The campaign against police brutality found societies gathered due to hard lockdown thus they responded in unity to protests directed to the police. The two protests mobilised more Swazis who were not occupied with something to political conscience around the royal oppression they were faced with. The brutal attacks by the police on mourners in Thabani's memorial and the defiant response from young people gave rise to confrontational protesting instead of the usual one where police would easily disperse protesters. When the three members of parliament took the struggle to parliament, the then head of government who was deputy prime minister Themba Masuku demanded to know how and when the electorate had given members of parliament the mandate to raise the issues they were raising. The Political Party Assembly (PPA) that unified political parties had taken a resolution in 2019 to petition members of parliament in tinkhundla (constituency) centers about the way they operate because it served the king than the people who elected them. Although some Swazis had petitioned their members of parliament before this it was then that the nation in unison began delivering petitions in tinkhundla centers. The petitions had genuine needs of the community and issues of national importance with democracy being at the center of the demands. The petition delivery became popular in different areas in such a way that the deputy prime minister then stopped the peaceful protests in fear of being exposed. Out of frustration that peaceful protests to channels that were approved by the tinkhundla government now being closed by the same government, young people started protesting at night about an overhead bridge that had not been fixed in Matsapha which forced the community to cross a dangerous highway on foot. On June 29 since the petition delivery had been stopped Swazis with mainly young people engaged in a night protest in mainly Matsapha where the government allege there was looting and burning. This was the night where the police were not failed to disperse protesters and the army was brought in with the first response coming from Phocweni army barracks. The army first brought a helicopter that hovered over the protesters and went back before it returned with live fire from a soldier in it. This was when the first victim a young man Bhekinkhosi Dlamini from Sigwe constituency in the Shiselweni region lost his life from the live fire. Groups of soldiers who were driving around shot at anyone they suspected was protesting, standing in a group or assisting protesters and that was

where most lives were lost. Ordinary members of the community who were seen buying or carrying paraffin to cook were shot to death. This was the beginning of the massacre. During the protests in Matsapha there was no official report of an injured or dead police officer that warranted the shooting of civilians with live rounds.

The following day innocent people who were either going to work or found standing in public places in groups were shot with live rounds. In Lobamba a place where to the royal residence is people were shot while running their business of selling food while closer to that in Mvutjuni young people were shot for standing in a waiting room. As the protests spread throughout the country the police went around shooting protesters and those who were lucky were brutalized in different ways leaving them with terrible injuries. Some of the protesters were targeted for the shooting because of their political influence. The shooting from the different places in the country led to loss of many lives. The introduction of the state of emergency gave more power to the army and police to shoot to kill. Most of the victims of the massacre were in casual clothes to show that they were not part of protesters. Bodies of young people shot to death had small sticks next to them that didn't warrant live rounds. The shooting left other Swazis disabled as some lost their lives. The primary source of violence was the government that stopped petition delivery in tinkhundla centers where not even a single life was lost. Where peaceful protests have been closed, protesters are forced to use other means of protesting. Pupils in Primary and High Schools protested in their Schools until their Schools were closed. They raised genuine pupil needs and national issues. This created more headache for the government. The government did not say where Swazis should protest when they stopped petition delivery. Protesters were forced by the government to protest at night. Destruction of property and looting was a sign of frustration about failing to find a solution to the political problems they faced. The reason why even today we are still living in a politically volatile situation is because of decisions made by the government. The brutality on civilians has not stopped since 29 June 2021. Currently the government talks of national dialogue to find a solution but their practical actions on the ground shows an intensified brutality on Swazis. This then leaves the situation of peaceful settlement very hopeless.

