Swaziland

Ethnicity in Swaziland

Group selection

The kingdom of Swaziland is bordered by South Africa on three sides and Mozambique to the north. It is named after the Swazi, the dominant ethnic group in the country (between 77% and 90% of the population, depending on the source). In addition to the Swazi, there is a minority of Zulu (between 1% and 10%, depending on the source) and Europeans (Englishmen and Afrikaner). Although there is a high level of economic activity in the hands of non-Africans, this has not impacted upon the political power distribution as yet ([4298], 172; [4299]).

[4298] [Levinson, 1998]

[4299] [US State Department, 2007-2010]

The region came under British protection in 1906 and eventually gained independence in 1968. Although Swaziland was granted independence as a constitutional monarchy, the king took control in 1972 and it has remained a monarchy ever since. However, the country also has a more modern regulatory framework and market economy, and a cabinet, appointed by the monarch with a prime minister at the head, has been put in charge of its administration. Limited electoral representation has been in place since 1993, but even the new constitution presented in 2006 still prohibits the formation of political parties and labels them as threats to state security ([4300], 172; [4301]).

[4300] [Levinson, 1998]

[4301] [Polity IV, 2005]

Power relations

According to the EPR coding rules, ethnicity is not politically relevant. No ethnic group is discriminated and there is no political party claiming to represent a certain ethnic group rather than another.

Although various sources claim that some ethnic discrimination has occurred in this period against non-ethnic Swazis (Zulus and White people), who comprise a small percentage of the population - particularly due to legal dualism within the country (e.g. [4302]; [4303]; [4304]; [4305]) - ethnicity remains insignificant within the country's politics. There are almost no ethnic minorities in the government ([4306]), but the same is true for ethnic Swazis outside a very restricted elitist circle centered on the royal family. As shown in the comments on earlier periods, the crucial factor determining access to political duties is not ethnicity but descent form and closeness to the royal family. Therefore, ethnicity is coded as not relevant in Swaziland according to the coding rules.

[4302] [US State Department, 2007-2010]

[4303] [Modiba, 2008]

[4304] [Adinkrah, 1990]

[4305] [Levin, 1990]

[4306] [US State Department, 2007-2010]

Swaziland has remained a relatively homogenous country, and ethnicity does not feature in their political process. Hence, ethnicity continues to be deemed irrelevant to the political structure in Swaziland. While a few cases of societal discrimination based on religion have been reported from the rural areas of the country, they are not reflected in the political process of the government.

In order to cover all bases, some updates on the governance of the country should be given. Governance in Swaziland has come under international scrutiny, due to extensive human rights violations and restrictions on the people's freedoms that have been imposed by the ruling monarch, who holds absolute power. Swaziland is on the path to democracy, and legislative, executive and judicial governance are in place, but they remain under the control of the ruling King Mswati III.

The recent elections conducted in 2013 were viewed as the next step towards establishment of a functioning democracy, which Swaziland is internationally obliged to uphold ([4307]). Conducted in a peaceful albeit not entirely credible manner, the elections did not change the political structure of Swaziland. Low representativeness of the existing government and its lack of effectiveness or willingness to implement change, besides the widespread abuse of power that manifests in gross injustices to the people, are the central political issues that the Swazi people have to contend with.

There has been an upsurge of political tension in Swaziland in the last few years regarding prevalent injustices of the government and calls for change. Pro-democracy demonstrations that date as far back as 2010, are on the rise in Swaziland, and are led predominantly by the banned "People's United Democratic Movement" party ([4308], 2011). This unrest has been forcibly repressed through measures which involve use of unwarranted force under the purview and direction of the government. Rampant abuse of human rights, like the use of excessive force, restrictions on the freedom of speech, press and assembly, and discrimination and exploitation of children and women, are committed by security forces and representatives of the monarch ([4309]). However, neither the injustices nor the demonstrations are ethnically motivated.

It appears that the situation in Swaziland has not changed in recent years: Indicative of this is the denunciation by the charity Oxfam, that it is the "most unequal country in the world". This, according to the charity, is due to the poor respect for human rights, the lack of fair elections and the ongoing ban on political parties ([4310]). Most notably, the decision of the government to ban all Labour Unions in 2014 resulted in a major international outcry ([4311]). The king, King Mswati III, remains in power, in position since the age of 18 and resolutely against democracy ([4312]). No evidence is found to suggest that ethnic identity has become more important or relevant in this period. As with previous times, we find that although there may be tension between the non-Swazi inhabitants and the Swazi, they are a very small migrant minority,

[4307] [African Elections Database, n.d]

[4308] [Keesing's Record of World Events, 2000-2013]

[4309] [Refworld, 2014]

[4310] [Oxfam, 2017]

[4311] [Freedom House, 2014]

[4312] [The Independent, 2017]

which under EPR rules do not enter into the power relations coding decision.

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Political status of ethnic groups in Swaziland

From 1968 until 2017

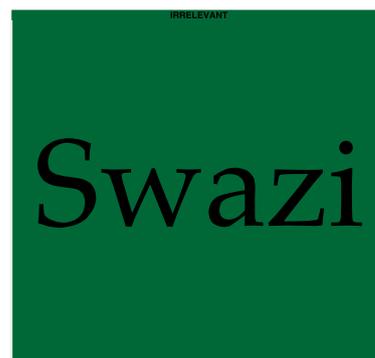| Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Swazi	1.0	IRRELEVANT

Figure 868: Political status of ethnic groups in Swaziland during 1968-2017.