

Wearing a T shirt with slogans a terrorist act in Swaziland

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Wearing a T-shirt or chanting slogans are considered supporting terrorism in today's Swaziland. On Saturday 18 July two men, Norman Xaba and Mphandlana Shongwe, became the latest victims of the draconian Suppression of Terrorism Act (STA), a law that is being used to suppress freedom of speech in Swaziland. The arrests took place during a civil society gathering, the People's Dialogue, in Manzini where Xaba was charged for wearing a T-shirt in support of the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), and Shongwe was accused of chanting "Viva PUDEMO, Viva SWAYOCO". The event, which called for the repeal of the country's constitution in favour of a new inclusive supreme law, was organized by the Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civic Organizations, the Trade Unions movement, the Council of Swaziland Churches and other civil society organisations.

Both PUDEMO and SWAYOCO (Swaziland Youth Congress) are considered as terrorist entities and have been banned, along with all other political parties in Swaziland. Specifically, Xaba and Shongwe are alleged to have "unlawfully and knowingly" given support "to terrorist groups," as stated by the charge sheet, and they risk up to 25 years in prison under the STA. The police have also revealed that all the activities and speeches at the civil society meeting were recorded by a plain-clothed police officer in a video that will be used as evidence in court. Organisers pointed out that the aim of the meeting was not to challenge the power of the state, yet it was condemned by supporters of the Swazi government because it was seen as an alternative to the official 'smart partnership' meeting due to take place next month, which will be attended by the king and the prime minister.

Several international and human rights organisations have already criticised the Swazi anti-terrorism act, which was introduced last year by the government to suppress any form of criticism of King Mswati II, the only absolute monarch in sub-Saharan Africa. ACTSA has joined civil society and trade unions in calling for the act to be repealed since it was introduced in May 2008. More recently Amnesty International has condemned the use of the act and the International Labour organization (ILO) has recently published a critical report on the issue, urging the Swazi Government to release all people jailed for exercising their civil liberties. One of these people is Mario Masuku, the president of the banned political party PUDEMO, who has been in prison since November 2008. The T-shirt worn by Xaba at the time of his arrest called for Masuku's release.

Xaba and Shongwe appeared at the Mbabane High Court on July 20 and they were both granted bail for 3,000 Emalangeneni (same as 3,000 Rand; approx £237).