



A student's vow to overthrow one of Africa's last ruling monarchs faces a roadblock: his own father, a soldier sworn to protect the throne.



By [John Eligon](#)

Photographs by [Joao Silva](#)

John Eligon and Joao Silva spent weeks in Eswatini documenting the fight over the king.

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The riot police appeared out of nowhere, charging furiously toward the young protesters trying to oust King Mswati III, who has ruled over the nation of Eswatini for 38 years. The pop of gunfire ricocheted through the streets, and the demonstrators started running for their lives.

Manqoba Motsa, a college student, and his fellow Communists quickly slipped into disguise, pulling plain T-shirts over their red hammer-and-sickle regalia. They ducked down a sloped street and raced away, thinking that, somehow, they had escaped.

Then Mr. Motsa's phone rang: A close friend at the protest had been shot. They found him splayed on a bed in the emergency room, a bloody bandage around his torso, a tube in his arm.

"We can't stop fighting," the wounded protester, Mhlonishwa Mtsetfwa, told the dozen red-clad Communist Party members surrounding his hospital bed. "We'll do this until our last breath."

Across much of Africa, that anger is palpable in restless young activists, like Mr. Motsa, who are pushing, protesting and at times risking their lives to remove long-reigning leaders they view as barriers to the continent's true potential.

While the world grays and nations worry about [collapsing without enough workers](#) to support their aging populations, [Africa — the youngest continent](#), with a median age of 19 — sits at the opposite end of the spectrum. It boasts ample young people to power economic growth and [global influence](#).

But to the [frustration of its youthful population](#), Africa also has some of the world's longest-serving leaders, who often place their own personal gain and political longevity above the welfare of their nations, experts on the continent's politics say.

At least 18 heads of state in Africa have held power for more than two decades in the post-colonial era, and many have left legacies of poverty, unemployment, unrest and a wealthy ruling elite far removed from the everyday struggles of their people.



"We can't stop fighting," said Mhlonishwa Mtsetfwa, in hammer-and-sickle shirt. He and other members of the Communist Party of Swaziland placed a flag outside the courthouse in Nhlengano, Eswatini, in May.



An anti-monarchy activist, Manqoba Motsa, arguing with Sibusiso B. Dlamini, the secretary general of the African United Democratic Party, who says the monarchy and democracy can coexist.

Age is a huge political dividing line. The 10 countries with the biggest differences in the world between the leader's age and the median age of the population are all in Africa, according to data from the Pew Research Center. The widest gap is in Cameroon, where President Paul Biya, who took office in 1982, is 91. The median age there is under 18 — a difference of more than 70 years.

Many African youths feel their governments are rotten to the core, and are demanding something far beyond tinkering with traditional politics.

“Any African leader today is very aware that young people can come out and cause trouble, serious trouble,” said Alcinda Honwana, a visiting professor at the London School of Economics from Mozambique, where young people accusing the governing party of rigging elections flooded the streets last October.

The Arab Spring in 2011, when young people helped to overthrow leaders in Egypt and Tunisia, set the stage for other youth uprisings in Africa, Dr. Honwana said.

That same year, rappers in Senegal formed [a youth movement known as “Fed Up,”](#) which helped oust the president in elections. His successor, Macky Sall, has not fared much better with the country’s youths: They led fierce [street demonstrations last year](#) demanding that he not pursue a third term. He eventually [said he would not run,](#) but then recently [postponed the elections](#) by 10 months, prompting more protests.

Musicians in Burkina Faso started a similar movement that fueled enormous demonstrations in 2014 and forced out the longtime president. And [in Sudan, young demonstrators also helped to lead the charge](#) to [oust President Omar Hassan al-Bashir](#) in 2019 — and they stayed on the streets to protest the regime that replaced him, with hundreds killed and thousands more wounded in crackdowns by the military.

In few places have the youth uprisings been as surprising as in Eswatini, a kingdom of 1.2 million people that [shed its colonial name](#), Swaziland, in 2018 on the order of the king.

The map locates Eswatini in southern Africa. It is bordered by the country of South Africa to the north, west, south, and southeast.



By The New York Times

King Mswati, 55, the last ruling monarch in sub-Saharan Africa, took the throne as a slender, baby-faced teenager in 1986 — making him one of the world’s longest serving leaders. His place in the nation’s culture is so revered that, traditionally, people hoping to address him in one of his palaces approach by crawling.

But the king presides over a country where [youth unemployment is a suffocating 58 percent](#). [Many of the nation’s children are orphaned](#), mostly because their parents have died of AIDS.

Yet, to many young people, the king seems to almost flaunt his indifference. Critics said he showed up at a traditional ceremony [wearing a watch](#) that sells for 13 times the annual income of most of his subjects.



King Mswati III greeted young women at a traditional reed dance ceremony in October in Nhlanguano, Eswatini. He has been criticized for wearing expensive watches and jewelry while many of his subjects live in poverty.



Women gathered at the gates of the royal residence for the reed dance ceremony. Many in Eswatini revere their monarch and believe he has special powers.

Thousands of citizens, most of them young, erupted in furious protests at his stifling reign in 2021, lighting up the skies with the flames of ransacked businesses, many connected to the king. Soldiers and the police responded with bullets, [killing dozens](#).

The king's father, King Sobhuza II, banned political parties from elections in 1973 and gave himself absolute power. A Constitution adopted in 2005 put some checks on the king, but political parties are still banned from elections, though individuals can run on their own. All laws must get the king's approval, lawmakers cannot override his decisions, he appoints the prime minister and he can dissolve Parliament at his pleasure.

Mr. Motsa, a 28-year-old college senior struggling to scrounge enough tuition money to graduate, regrouped with activists last year for the 50th anniversary of King Sobhuza's decree, vowing to cause enough chaos to press an admittedly ambitious demand: They wanted a democracy.

Short of that, they hoped people would at least boycott last year's national elections, arguing that voting merely gave the appearance of credibility to a bogus system.

"There will never be a situation that will come that will make us give up the fight," Mr. Motsa said.

Even his own family cannot seem to stop him, a sign of how wide the generational chasm can be.

Mr. Motsa's uncle says his activism will get him killed. His mother fears it will get the rest of them killed, too. And they are aghast at his treasonous demands to abolish the monarchy.

After all, his aunt is one of the king's many wives, and his father is a soldier in the king's army, sworn to protect the throne against all threats — including his son.

Now, the government is hunting him down.

This month, the police pulled a Communist Party leader into an interrogation room and told her that Mr. Motsa had better watch his back.

He was wanted, they warned. For terrorism.

'On Your Way to Death'

Mr. Motsa recounted the day he said his father threatened to kill him.

Dozens had gathered to bury Mr. Motsa's grandmother on a bushy slope near the family homestead. The local chief's representative was supposed to speak, but Mr. Motsa, who showed up at the funeral with his Communist allies, shot down the idea, calling the envoy a symbol of a tyrannical regime.

As the mourners stood by the grave, Mr. Motsa said his father was enraged at the gall, demanding of his son, "Who are you?" and threatening to kill him.

"It won't be easy," Mr. Motsa recalled responding. "I am also a soldier. I am a member of the people's army."

His father, Samuel Mahlatsini Motsa, 55, said he never made any threats, adding that his son and the other Communist Party members at the funeral were drunk.

Father and son barely talk anymore, their relationship icy, their differences symbolic of a national rift made violently clear during the unrest more than two years ago: While many demand radical change, others ardently embrace tradition and the monarchy.



Manqoba Motsa near his grandmother's grave in Matsapha, where, during her funeral, he said that he and his father had a bitter argument.



Mr. Motsa's father, Samuel Mahlatsini Motsa, is a soldier in the king's army and is loyal to the king. The family lives in Luve, in central Eswatini, in a modest cinder-block home where the tap has run dry.

As Mr. Motsa recounted the clash at the funeral, he sat across from his father on the floor of his parents' living room, a shell of his ordinary self. Usually boisterous and blunt, his body stiffened and he spoke softly, barely looking in his father's direction.

He was once an "obedient" son, his father said.

Mr. Motsa, in fact, almost followed his father's path. After high school, he took an uncle's advice and went through a ritual to become a member of the regiments that

are duty bound to protect King Mswati. He thought it would help him get a job, perhaps as a police officer or, like his father, a soldier.

Instead, Mr. Motsa found himself in a position all too familiar to young Africans: He could not find work. Data from the African Development Bank Group shows that 15- to 35-year-olds on the continent are [vastly underemployed](#) or do not have stable jobs. The effects can be devastating, sometimes forcing them to migrate, turn to crime or even to extremist groups.

In Eswatini, “We have a lot of educated people that are unemployed, and they are frustrated,” said Prince David, a half brother of King Mswati’s. “They are young, educated, unemployed and not knowing what to do.”

Mr. Motsa ultimately found a job in a very different sector of the economy — as a laborer on an illicit marijuana farm, where he earned enough to pay for his first year of university.

He was struck by how many people struggled to buy food, despite working hard, while the king’s lavish life unspooled before them all on social media and in the news: [photographs of a smiling royal family](#) standing next to elaborate, multilayered cakes at birthday parties in any of the king’s dozen or so palaces.

Opposition figures publicly accused the king of buying [19 Rolls Royces](#) and 120 BMWs for his large family, while public servants protested for better pay. Headlines recounted the royal family’s [multimillion-dollar trip to Las Vegas](#) and the [\\$58 million spent on the royal plane](#), a decked-out Airbus measuring nearly three-quarters of the length of a football field.



Officials waited for the return of King Mswati III at the airport named after him. His royal \$58 million Airbus plane is nearly three-quarters the length of a football field.



King Mswati is also the chancellor of the University of Eswatini. Students went on strike there last year, and later professors and staff struck, too, over wages and working conditions.

A government spokesman, Alpheous Nxumalo, said the king had fairly inherited his wealth and put profits from businesses controlled by the royal family into scholarships and other programs to alleviate poverty.

“The king is not a cause for poverty, but a solution,” Mr. Nxumalo said.

Mr. Motsa’s opposition to the monarchy stiffened when he started at the University of Eswatini in 2019 and joined the Communist Party.

Even by the standards of the king’s most fervent detractors, the Communist Party is seen as radical. It calls for the total abolition of the monarchy, while most democracy advocates would accept a largely ceremonial role, like in England. Many Communists embrace violence, if necessary, to oust him.

At his family’s rural homestead, Mr. Motsa began describing the king as selfish and out of touch — views that his father, after three decades of protecting the throne, considered untrue.

King Mswati, the elder Mr. Motsa said, had paid his medical bills when he fell ill. He recounted how an aide once urged aggression toward dissidents, yet the king refused. “Why should I?” he recalled the king saying. “They also have babies.”

Political party leaders were “the worst dictators,” the elder Mr. Motsa said.

Now his son was one of them.

“Once you join any political organization,” he said, “you are on your way to death.”

‘True Leaders Die Young’

Loved ones repeatedly told Mr. Motsa that his activism would bring death — and not only for him.

“This will cause people to kill us,” said his mother, Badzelisile Mirriam Motsa, 48, worrying that her son would turn the whole family into a target.

“You get a bullet and die,” warned his uncle Thando Dlodlu, 55.

Even Mr. Motsa’s comrades often painted their struggle as a path to an early end.

“We’ve got to commit suicide,” a veteran activist, Mphandlana Shongwe, told Mr. Motsa and dozens of other students before a planned protest at Parliament on the 50th anniversary of King Sobhuza’s decree.

Mr. Shongwe, 63, belonged to the country’s largest political party — the People’s United Democratic Movement, or Pudem — but the government banned it, calling it a terrorist organization. As a young man, he was arrested and accused of trying to overthrow the government. But this new generation has advantages, he said — namely technology and a country much more openly dissatisfied with the king.

Still, the monarchy would not surrender without a fight, he said, so students needed to step into the line of fire.

“True leaders die young because they are a threat,” he told them.



Student activists dancing and chanting the day before a protest in front of Parliament, where they were planning to deliver complaints about the lack of funds for higher education.



The first woman elected president of the national student union, Gabisile Ndukuya, sat at the organizers' table as Mphandlana Shongwe, a veteran of the anti-monarchy movement, told students that they must be ready to face a violent government response.

The message did not faze the activists in the room, many of whom had dodged bullets during the uprising three years ago.

The upheaval had begun with mourning: a memorial service for a law student found dead on the side of the road. Many suspected foul play by the police. After a scuffle between students and officers outside the memorial, the police invaded the service, firing tear gas at the mourners.

Mr. Motsa said he and other activists struck back, throwing stones at a nearby police station. Some protesters tried set it on fire, he said, and gathered tires to burn in the streets. When the police swooped in, local residents blocked the officers, enabling Mr. Motsa to get away.

The rioting across Eswatini's lush, mountainous landscape peaked in June 2021. Gruesome pictures and videos of young protesters with holes in their bodies circulated online. A top Communist Party official reported being [tortured by the police](#) at a roadblock. Mr. Motsa described joining a crowd rioting outside a grocery store and helping carry a young man who had been shot in the stomach by security forces.

The unrest was a release of simmering discontent. Surveys in 2021, shortly before the uprising, found that 69 percent of people polled were [unsatisfied with the way democracy worked](#) in their country, according to Afrobarometer, an independent research network.

Beyond the 27 deaths reported by the government — activists argue [the actual number was more than 70](#) — the upheaval caused about \$160 million worth of damage, according to King Mswati.

"Something like this is pure evil," the king said after the unrest. "You cannot say the country must burn to the ground because there is something you want."

Mr. Nxumalo, the government spokesman, said the king had no problem making changes and pointed to the Constitution, drafted with the king's blessing nearly two decades ago after citizens raised concerns. What the king would not tolerate, Mr. Nxumalo said, were young activists acting like insurgents.

"No government negotiates with terrorists," he said.

The fires of the uprising cooled and the ransacked businesses were spruced up, but the anger remained. Mr. Motsa and his fellow student activists wanted to keep up the pressure by handing a petition directly to Parliament last year, bracing for a violent crackdown.



Mr. Motsa and fellow student leaders staging a night rally to encourage people in Eswatini to protest the monarchy on the 50th anniversary of the royal decree that banned political parties from competing in elections.



Communist Party members use a modest one-room flat in a rugged community on the outskirts of the industrial city of Matsapha as their home base. The police have raided it several times.

"This is the year to determine the democracy we want," said Gabisile Ndukuya, a Communist Party member and the first woman to be elected president of the national student union.

"We are here, comrades, ready for anything," she added, thrusting a fist into the air.

When the moment of truth arrived in April, on the anniversary of King Sobhuza's decree, Mr. Motsa was pacing in a panic.

It was 9:30 a.m. and the students were already 90 minutes late. They had hit the most basic and exasperating snag: They could not get a ride.

It turns out, others wanted to protest the monarchy, too — and the national transportation union's way of doing that was to go on strike. The bus company the students had hired suddenly bailed out.

Mr. Motsa feverishly made calls to try to salvage the students' big moment, but the bad news kept coming. Soldiers and police officers were everywhere, searching cars at roadblocks. Bus drivers were too scared to ferry around a group of radicals. The students gave up and went home.

"Where have we failed?" one student asked himself and others. "Just by not having enough buses?"

'I'm a Problem'

Mr. Motsa's mother feels sick — physically, emotionally, mentally.

"My hands are not working good because of the depression he caused me," she said of her son. "I have pain in my heart."

"I'm a problem in your life," Mr. Motsa said, visiting home after the failed protest.

"Yes you are," his mother replied.



Mr. Motsa's mother, Badzelisile Mirriam Motsa, said that his activism against the king caused her physical and mental distress. "I have pain in my heart," she said.



Mr. Motsa, center, uses a taxi to travel to his parents' rural homestead in central Eswatini. He hardly visits anymore because of tension over his stance against the monarchy.

His mother, a chicken vendor who attends church every Sunday, despises his political activity so much that she would rather he work in the illicit marijuana business, like his older brother does. At least with marijuana he would earn a living.

The Motsa family might be loyal to King Mswati — and even related to him — but their lives are far from the glossy palaces and luxury motorcades of the monarchy. The family homestead consists of modest cinder block structures with no running water. A tap out front, once used by the whole community, has been mostly dry for years.

Mr. Motsa's parents live in a square, two-bedroom unit with a corrugated tin roof. Inside, a large calendar with King Mswati in a military suit greets visitors. Next to that hangs a small framed picture of the king flanked by three men, one of them Mr. Motsa's father, from his more chiseled days.

"The king's world is given by God," Mr. Motsa's mother said. She noted that the heads of state in most countries live much more comfortable lives than their constituents do.

The modern kingdom of Eswatini began around 1750, when the Nkhosi-Dlamini clan arrived in the region and absorbed other clans. The kingdom generally avoided direct battles with other nations. At times, it tried to appease white settlers by working with them to defeat other African kingdoms, according to the national museum, but its people never earned the reputation of warriors like their neighbors, the Zulus.

What made the country special today, many supporters of the king said, was its peacefulness. That is why, to many, the unrest has been so jarring.

“Why would you go to the extent of burning stuff?” said Simiso Mavuso, 20, who also performed the ritual to join the king’s regiments, just as Mr. Motsa had.

“When you want change,” Mr. Mavuso said, “do it in a respectful way.”



Simiso Mavuso, 20, standing among the thatched huts where he and others participated in a ritual to join the regiments sworn to protect the king. He believes the monarchy is good for the country.



A traditional shield used in a ritual by men and boys pledging their loyalty to King Mswati.

Even Mr. Motsa has moments of doubt. Trudging through the green hills near his home village, he came to a clearing. Neat rows of marijuana plants sprung up near a creek — the business enterprise of his older brother.

Marijuana farming looked enticing. The university, facing a multimillion-dollar deficit, was enduring its longest closure yet. First, students went on strike to protest the lack of scholarships. Then, the faculty went on strike to demand higher wages.

Mr. Motsa, a fourth-year student in economics and statistics, said he was \$97 in debt and needed another \$162 to register for classes.

He scraped by with a few bucks from the occasional odd job, borrowing from friends or asking his parents. He felt he could get by on about \$2.50 per day, but it was never guaranteed.

He bent over one of the plants and rubbed a leaf. This single plant could sell for more than \$40, his brother's business partner said.

Mr. Motsa's eyes lit up.

He can riff endlessly about Marx and Mao and Lenin and the Bolsheviks. He dreams of a world of shared prosperity where everyone gets what they need.

But, sometimes, theory meets real life — and Mr. Motsa has to confront his choices.

“You are creating wealth over here,” he told his brother. “I need to join you.”

‘He Is Still My Son’

About eight police officers surrounded Ms. Ndukuya, the student union leader, in a dark room at police headquarters this month, pelting her with questions and threats of arrest, she said.

They held a printout of the statement she and Mr. Motsa released this year on behalf of the student union, urging students to “violently remove Mswati and his cronies from power.”

Mr. Motsa had better go into exile, she recalled an officer saying.

“Once we catch him, he'll never be out of jail,” Ms. Ndukuya said the officer warned.

After seven hours of interrogation, she was released, she said. But the message stuck.

“We don't feel safe,” Ms. Ndukuya said.



Despite calls among young activists to boycott Eswatini's national elections, many citizens turned out to vote anyway.



In the village where Mr. Motsa spent part of his youth, some people openly expressed their displeasure with the king, scrawling graffiti that said, “Mswati Must Fall!!”

A few months earlier, a squad of officers had barged into the concrete room that the Communist Party used as a base, carrying rifles as a helicopter hovered overhead, witnesses said.

Before that, [one of the king’s most vocal critics had been shot dead](#) inside his home in front of his children. The government vehemently denied involvement; many, including the European Union ambassador, called the killing an assassination.

Now, Mr. Motsa worries he could be next.

The police say they are seeking him for the burning of an Eswatini flag and an empty police truck on Sept. 30, 2022. Hundreds of students had gathered that day to demand scholarships, but they scattered when tear gas and rubber bullets began to rain down, protest organizers said.

Some took cover at a nearby hospital, where they found a police pickup truck sitting in the parking lot, like a plum waiting to be devoured. Students set upon the vehicle, bashing and torching it, witnesses said.

Since then, the chaos of that day seemed to fade — one of many violent flare-ups between the young rebels and king’s security forces.

Or so the Communists thought.

Last month, the police arrested a party member and charged him with terrorism in connection with the burning of the truck and the flag.

Then, the police went to another party member with a list of people wanted for the vandalism.

Mr. Motsa was one of them.

He went into hiding, trying to figure out his next move in what seemed to be a losing battle against the king.

The government was bearing down, while he and his comrades barely had enough money to pay their cellphone bills, let alone hire buses for protests. Peace had largely returned to the country, despite their best efforts to stoke chaos. Thousands of people had lined up to vote in last year's elections, ignoring their calls for a boycott.

"If you don't vote, it's like you are saying, 'Yes,' to what is happening," one voter, Fanelo Magagula, 23, said as he left a polling station.

Sure, Eswatini was run like a dictatorship and the king sometimes abused his powers, he said, but voting was the only way to do something about it.

The activists also have failed to get other world leaders to back their demands for change.

Last June, the United States [gave the king two awards](#) for Eswatini's progress in treating people with H.I.V. and AIDS.

Then, in September, King Mswati took to the podium before the United Nations General Assembly and declared himself a defender of democracy.



In a speech before the United Nations General Assembly in New York last September, King Mswati said that he and his nation are defenders of democracy. Credit...Dave Sanders for The New York Times



At a private school in the town of Matsapha, students are taught to revere the monarchy.

More than 95 percent of eligible voters in his country had registered, he said, in “a ringing endorsement of the support for the system of government.”

The words did not match the mood back home.

[An Afrobarometer survey](#) released in 2022 found that more than 80 percent of respondents said the country was headed in the wrong direction. Approval of the government’s management of the economy had plummeted to 12 percent.

Mr. Motsa takes heart in some shifts, notably the willingness of people in his country to complain openly about the government, which he considers a step toward democracy.

There is hope for his relationship with his family, too. His father occasionally calls him and offers support, like a box of food he gave his son around election time.

“He is still my son,” the elder Mr. Motsa said. “I’m still ready to mold him and show him the right way.”

But that will have to wait.

With the police after him, Mr. Motsa caught a ride to the border and walked into South Africa this month, he said, hoping to continue the struggle in exile.

“We have not left because we fear the regime,” Mr. Motsa said, presenting his predicament as an opportunity — “to organize better, and organize with some anger, some anger necessary for us to gain the freedom we desire.”



Even as young activists continue to take to the streets to push for democracy and an end to the monarchy, they are short of funds and appear to be fighting a losing battle.

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