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The Politics of Swaziland

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, is a remarkable country nestled in Southern Africa. It is one of the few remaining absolute monarchies in the world, where a king not only serves as a national symbol but also wields considerable political power. Eswatini's unique blend of ancient traditions and modern state structures have produced a political system unlike any other on the continent, or indeed, in the world. This book, "The Politics of Swaziland: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Swaziland," aims to provide readers with a comprehensive introduction to both the historical evolution and the contemporary practices that define governance in Eswatini.

At the core of Eswatini's political system lies the monarchy, a deeply revered institution enmeshed in centuries of cultural significance and political authority. The duality of power shared by the Ngwenyama (King) and the Ndlovukati (Queen Mother) is both symbolic and practical, reflecting longstanding traditions alongside evolving political realities. Yet, these traditions are not relics; they shape daily governance and the fundamental organization of society, affecting everything from village administration to national policymaking.

Eswatini's political system, particularly since the 20th century, has been shaped by external forces and internal reforms. Colonial intrusion, especially under British rule, left indelible marks on the nation's political development. After gaining independence in 1968, Eswatini faced crucial decisions regarding its future direction—balancing inherited systems with indigenous governance practices. The process of drafting, repealing, and revising national constitutions reflects a country negotiating its identity between the demands of modernity and the imperatives of tradition.

An essential feature of Eswatini's politics is the Tinkhundla system, a form of local governance that underpins electoral processes and defines the participatory nature of the Swazi political experience. However, the coexistence of this system with a ban on political parties and strict limitations on dissent prompts important debates about democratic freedoms, representation, and the prospects for reform. Such tensions play out against a broader backdrop of civil society activism, shifting expectations among the youth, and a growing engagement with global human rights norms.

Throughout this book, readers will encounter the complexities of Eswatini's political institutions, the delicate balance between modernization and tradition, and the persistent debates about democracy, governance, and human rights. The narrative is not merely historical or structural; it is also deeply human, reflecting the perspectives and lived experiences of ordinary Swazis navigating a political landscape that is both

familiar and ever-changing.

By exploring the history, structure, and contemporary realities of Eswatini's political system, this guide seeks to foster a deeper understanding of the forces that define the kingdom today. Whether you are a student of African politics, a development practitioner, or simply curious about the world's remaining monarchies, this book offers a thorough and accessible entry point into the fascinating politics of Swaziland.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Eswatini

Eswatini, a name that rolls off the tongue like a gentle breeze through acacia trees, is a landlocked kingdom nestled in the southeastern corner of Africa. It's a place where the ancient rhythms of tradition beat strong, harmonizing with the sometimes-cacophonous sounds of modernity. Bordered by South Africa on three sides and Mozambique to the east, Eswatini is one of the smallest countries on the African continent, but what it lacks in size, it certainly makes up for in character and a surprising diversity of landscapes and people.

Imagine a country no more than 200 kilometers (about 120 miles) from north to south and 130 kilometers (about 80 miles) from west to east at its widest points. Yet, within this relatively compact area of just over 17,364 square kilometers (roughly 6,704 square miles), you can traverse from rugged, mountainous terrain in the west to low-lying bushveld in the east. It's a geographical journey that mirrors, in some ways, the country's political landscape - a blend of the elevated and the expansive.

The topography of Eswatini is a key player in shaping its climate and, consequently, the lives of its people. The country is broadly divided into four main geographical regions, running in north-to-south belts and primarily distinguished by their altitude. These are the Highveld, Middleveld, Lowveld, and the Lubombo escarpment. Think of it as a staircase descending eastwards towards the Indian Ocean, even though the country itself doesn't touch the coast.

The Highveld, in the west, is the highest and coolest region, characterized by rugged mountains and hills. Here, you'll find the administrative capital, Mbabane, nestled among the peaks. The average elevation here is between 1,100 and 1,400 meters (around 3,500 to 4,500 feet), with the highest point being Mount Emlembe at 1,862 meters (6,109 feet). This area receives the most rainfall, making it suitable for forestry and some agriculture.

Descending eastwards, we reach the Middleveld, a rolling, hilly region at an average altitude of about 700 meters (2,300 feet). This is the most densely populated part of the country and is considered the agricultural heartland, particularly known for sugarcane and citrus fruits. The commercial and industrial hub, Manzini, is located in the Middleveld, a bustling city that provides a contrast to the more relaxed pace of the rural areas.

Further east lies the Lowveld, a much drier and hotter region, characterized by acacia bush and grasslands. With an average elevation of around 250 meters (820 feet), this area receives significantly less rainfall than the Highveld. While historically less

populated due to the prevalence of malaria, it is crucial for large-scale sugarcane production, often relying on irrigation.

Finally, along the eastern border with Mozambique, the Lubombo escarpment rises to an average altitude of about 600 meters (2,000 feet). This narrow strip is marked by a ridge that is cut by river gorges, providing a dramatic landscape. The climate here is transitional between the Lowveld and the areas to the west.

These varied landscapes contribute to a diverse climate across Eswatini, ranging from near-temperate in the Highveld to subtropical and almost tropical in the Lowveld. The country experiences two main seasons: a warm, wet summer from October to April, and a cooler, dry winter from May to September. Rainfall varies significantly between the regions, with the Highveld receiving the most and the Lowveld the least.

Beyond the geographical features, Eswatini is blessed with a range of natural resources. These include coal, diamonds, and gold, although mining's contribution to the economy has been relatively minor, with recent efforts to revitalize the sector. The country also has deposits of asbestos, though its extraction has been a subject of international concern. Hydropower is another significant resource, harnessed from the country's well-watered river systems, which originate in South Africa and flow eastwards.

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of the Eswatini economy and way of life, with a significant portion of the population engaged in farming. Sugarcane is the dominant crop, a major export and a key driver of the economy, particularly in the Lowveld. Other agricultural products include citrus fruits, maize, cotton, and tobacco. Forestry, with extensive plantations of pine and eucalyptus, also plays a role in the economy, providing timber for various uses.

The people of Eswatini, the heart and soul of the kingdom, are predominantly ethnic Swazis. The Swazi nation is a tapestry woven from various clans, with the Dlamini clan, from which the royal family hails, being the largest. While the population is largely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, there are smaller communities of Zulus, Tsonga, and a minority of people of European and Asian descent.

The official languages are Siswati and English. Siswati, a Bantu language closely related to Zulu, is spoken by the vast majority of the population and serves as a crucial element of national identity and culture. English is widely used in government and business, reflecting the country's history as a British protectorate and its engagement with the wider world. While Siswati is the language of everyday life and traditional affairs, English is the language of officialdom and international communication.

The population of Eswatini is relatively small, estimated to be around 1.2 to 1.25

million people in recent years. Despite its size, the country has a youthful population, with a significant proportion under the age of 25. The majority of the population traditionally lived in rural areas, engaged in subsistence farming, though there has been a growing trend of urbanization as people move to towns like Mbabane and Manzini in search of economic opportunities.

Traditional Swazi homesteads, often characterized by a collection of huts and a cattle enclosure, are still a common sight in rural areas. Cattle hold significant cultural and economic importance, serving as a store of wealth and playing a central role in traditional ceremonies. This connection to the land and traditional practices remains a defining feature of Swazi society, influencing everything from social interactions to political structures.

While the major cities like Mbabane and Manzini are centers of economic activity and modern life, the traditional system of governance is deeply intertwined with the local communities, organized around chiefdoms and the Tinkhundla system. This blend of the urban and rural, the modern and the traditional, is a constant theme in understanding the politics of Eswatini.

The physical environment of Eswatini, with its distinct regions and climates, has undoubtedly shaped the settlement patterns, economic activities, and cultural practices of its people. The fertile valleys of the Middleveld support agriculture and a higher population density, while the drier Lowveld has historically been associated with ranching and large-scale irrigated farming. The rugged Highveld, with its cooler climate, offers different possibilities, including forestry and tourism.

Understanding the land and people of Eswatini is the essential starting point for exploring its political system. The strong connection to tradition, the importance of the monarchy, and the structure of local governance are all, in part, products of the country's geography and the historical development of the Swazi nation on this land. It is this foundation that we will build upon as we delve deeper into the political landscape of the Kingdom of Eswatini.

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