

# Facing unexpected challenges

## INTERVIEW WITH HM KING MSWATI III

HEAD OF STATE OF THE KINGDOM OF SWAZILAND



**KING MSWATI III** was educated at Sherborne School in England before returning to Swaziland to ascend to the throne in 1986 following the death of his father King Sobhuza some years earlier. The Kingdom of Swaziland is a landlocked country in Southern Africa, bordered by South Africa and Mozambique which celebrated the 40th anniversary of its independence in 2008. The economy is dominated by agriculture, the service sector and tourism.

### **How important is CHOGM to Swaziland?**

I think that it is very important to have a time and a place where all the members of the Commonwealth can meet, discuss, share ideas and experiences. In this way one finds that different people tackle problems in different ways and if you hear their experiences, it is always very useful. When there is a discussion at CHOGM it is all about supporting each member and looking out for each other when there are difficulties. So I find the Commonwealth really very useful indeed and I hope it will continue to be a very strong organisation.

### **Do you think the CHOGM prioritise the right issues?**

CHOGM does cover a wide scope of issues but at the same time when there are situations happening in the individual countries, the Commonwealth will always give its own opinion on that. If we are going to develop it is very important that we have very strong structures in place regarding stability as this is one of the principles the Commonwealth promotes. It promotes the idea that when there are difficulties, at the very least, people should sit around a table to discuss the issues and come to a compromise at the end of the day. Whether this concerns large or small countries, it is easier to develop solutions because you have a well-established structure in place and this is the benefit of CHOGM.

### **Are there some particular issues you would like to focus on at the upcoming CHOGM in Perth?**

Yes, in particular this year, all countries in the world are faced with either a political situation or a financial crisis. In our case, Swaziland is faced with a financial crisis and I hope this will be in the agenda as one of the top priorities. This financial crisis also affects the strong economies in Europe and America. We have seen strong international organisations going to the most affected countries to implement programmes with a view to improving the situation there. I hope that the Commonwealth will decide to do something similar. I would like to see the strong Commonwealth countries playing that role and looking into how they can support the weaker countries in difficulty. These are things which I believe we can tackle within the Commonwealth as an organisation, supporting and implementing programmes to help each other. In our case, with the financial difficulties, an international organisation has provided advice. When you are implementing decisions you have to take into

consideration the social aspect because you cannot predict the reaction of the people. Sometimes you find that people react very differently to a situation and this must be managed to avoid problems. It can happen that you may try to implement a programme which results in social disturbances. We are trying to put things in order in this country and while we are doing that we have people within the country who are saying 'wait a minute, what you are doing is wrong and therefore we will not agree with the way you are doing things and we will just go out in the street and cause mayhem'. When this happens the damage can be significant and a problem which was not so big at the beginning can turn out much bigger because of the implementation. So it is very important to know how to deal with the situation, especially when you are in a financial crisis because if you make a mistake, things can turn nasty very quickly.

### **I take it that you are not talking about Greece, but about Swaziland?**

Yes indeed, although I am also referring to the experiences of other countries where implementation of programmes designed to help resulted in other huge problems. Our prayers are that as we undergo this process we should avoid situations which will cause the nation to be worse off than it is now. We are learning valuable lessons from countries that are implementing austerity programmes which are meant to address the financial crisis issues. What has happened in Greece should not happen in Swaziland and we can learn from the experiences of what the people of Greece are going through to avoid it. Unfortunately whether it is Greece or Swaziland, the recipe of the IMF is always the same.

### **What is the situation faced by Swaziland today?**

Today we are faced with the unexpected because for a long time the Kingdom has been doing very well. We have never had any problems of this financial nature but since last year we started to see a decline in the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) receipts which then started bringing the effects of the financial crisis to us. Within a year these problems started affecting many things including the government budget. This has been a very big and sudden change, and the shortfall of receipts has really caused a lot of damage for the budget. But we are now looking at ways and means of returning to financial health. We are looking at SACU of course,

but also going beyond SACU. We are looking at what else we can promote as a country such as investment. We are working on operationalising the mines that we have, particularly coal and gold and the other potential mines such as iron ore. We plan to bring in the private sector companies to form joint ventures with our people to create employment and generate income for this country. We are also looking at how we can improve our agriculture. Recently we were discussing this issue with the people – we have a smart partnership dialogue where we discussed at length a number of issues, how to promote agricultural activities, how to become much more effective, creating jobs either in manufacturing or small and medium enterprises, or anything of that nature. We have also created a lot of new structures, for instance in the collecting of funds for the Revenue Authority.

So there are so many challenges which we face and we have created an Economic Recovery Strategy Committee to face them. This Committee is working day and night to see how we can improve things because we really must – we need to maximise the economy. The crisis has been an eye opener forcing us to look at things differently. But there is a saying that when there is a crisis there are also opportunities. So this is our turn to look at the opportunities. I think it has been an eye-opener because when things are moving in the right direction one often does not give them second thought. So to always be alert is very important.

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**Some of the international press coverage has focused the problem faced by the Kingdom on yourself rather than the economic situation. How do you respond to that?**

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Well it is a great pity that the international press has not, perhaps, done their research by coming to Swaziland to see the reality on the ground. In our case the press has been saying “oh the King this and the King that,” and so on regarding the Royal family, which has created all the negative perceptions about us. I always wonder whether this is just sensationalist reporting or is part of some strategy. As a human being you are entitled to live a normal life but you also have to organise yourself. That is how I want to live, managing myself properly and at the same time putting the right structures in place for the country.

One thing many people internationally do not understand is the Swazi people, how they live and how they want to be governed. It is very important to understand this from grass roots level. Many people talk of certain systems which are appropriate for developing countries. The people of Swaziland understand that these systems, including multi-party, exist in the world, but they would prefer a system which is home grown and allows parliamentarians to come from their constituencies

and be voted straight into parliament. Many people in the world are fixated on one type of system and say that this is the system which every other country must now adopt. Unfortunately the world does not give itself the time to delve deeper to ask the Swazi people about their system and if they are happy with it, if they have problems with it and if it delivers for them. If you go to the Swazi people and you ask about what they want in a system, they will reply that today, through the system we have been using, we have managed to achieve a great deal, including a management strategy for development and a constitution. However, we want the world to really understand us because sometimes one finds a few individuals, who perhaps have access to international media, who say the Kingdom does not practice this and still does that. The world, unfortunately, believes these individuals without giving themselves time to find out the reality. For instance, if we talk about women, there is a myth that all the women in Swaziland are being mistreated yet this is patently not the case. I hope one day many people can give themselves time to come here because it is very important to understand the people and understand how they prefer to live. In the world we live in, there is an expectation that everyone should live in a certain way. The Swazis have decided to say that we prefer to live our own way and grow the country our way. But we are often criticised for this by people who say the whole world is moving in a certain direction so we should also go in that direction. They tell us we must conform. So the real problem is the failure to fully comprehend the Swazi way of life as many still ask “why do you wish to live this way? You should be living the same way as the rest of the world.” For example, in Swaziland I normally wear traditional dress. Some people ask me ‘why are you wearing these clothes?’ I say, well I am comfortable like this. However, some think that wearing this traditional dress is a problem.

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**How is the Swazi – British relationship today?**

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The relationship with Britain goes back to the time of Queen Victoria when King Mbandzeni reigned. Since the time of the British arrival in the Kingdom the relationship has always been very good. When Britain needed support from us we have been there and when we needed help from Britain, Britain also has been there. It is good to see that even today the relationship continues to grow and we hope that in years to come we will maintain such a good relationship. There are many British tourists who come to visit us today. Previously there used to be many British companies in Swaziland but when Britain started scaling down, the corporate presence also scaled down. We do have companies such as Cadbury-Schweppes here and a number of other lesser known ones. We would like to see more British companies in Swaziland and we would warmly welcome them. E

**The Swazis  
have decided  
to say that we  
prefer to live  
our own way  
and grow  
our country  
our way**