SWAZILAND

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Synopsis

The article describes the dire socioeconomic conditions in Swaziland which are rooted in the patriarchal social structure typified, and amplified, in the 34-year old monarch, King Mswati III. The king’s inattention to the country’s problems and his indulgent lifestyle have alienated foreign investors, appellate court justices (who resigned in protest), and labor unions. Both cash crops (sugar cane) and sustenance crops (maize) are failing due to a two year drought. Even worse, the country has rampant HIV infection (33%); a consequence of the social practices of polygamy and widow inheritance. Swaziland women have no social standing and are basically their father’s or husband’s property. Again, the king exemplifies this problem with his ten wives – the tenth was an 18-year old student who was abducted from her schoolyard to marry the king. Onlookers fully expect him to equal or exceed his father’s tally of 100 wives before his death.


Background

Swaziland has a strange appearance on the map of Africa since it is completely encased within South Africa. Characteristic of much of Africa, modern national boundaries often represent the legacy of an imperialist political/economic regionalization over ancient tribal cultural regions. This is exactly the case with Swaziland and South Africa. The Swazi people descend from ancient tribes that occupied Southern Africa. The kernel of modern Swaziland was only settled around 1770 and reached a maximum spatial extent under King Mswati II in the early to mid 1800s.

After the mid 1800s the Swazi steadily lost territory and political autonomy to the Boer republic and British imperial presence. Their interest in Swazi territory was intensified with the discoveries of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1871. From 1906 until the 1940s Swaziland was a colony of the British Empire and didn’t reemerge as an independent nation until 1968. Under independence the kingship was restored and the king (Sobhuza II b. 1921, d. 1982) subsequently repealed the constitution and adopted most aspects of the traditional government which predated the imperial dominance. Under that system the king has wide ranging powers; for instance, he has the authority to appoint all cabinet members and the prime minister. Sobhuza II tended to be a benevolent ruler and the country enjoyed substantial gains in development – education, economic growth, and health. The current king (Mswati III) was installed in 1986 after a five year power struggle.

The economy of Swaziland is split between subsistence activities and intensive mining and manufacturing industries related to processing raw materials. Mining activities focus on asbestos and diamonds. The country is also heavily dependent on foreign aid.