

Dissatisfaction with Eswatini's democracy rises

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 495 | Mbuso Dlamini

Summary

In June 2021, protests against police brutality following the death of a law student quickly gained momentum and transformed into a much larger call for democratic reforms in Eswatini (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Protesters (mostly youth) across different constituencies marched to deliver petitions to their members of Parliament (MPs) calling for the unbanning of political parties and the right to democratically elect a prime minister, who is currently appointed by the king (Koogotsitse, 2021).

The government moved to ban the delivery of petitions. What followed was a brief yet unprecedented level of chaos and violence as angry protesters looted and destroyed numerous businesses (Maphanga & Vandome, 2021). Dozens of civilians were killed in the mayhem as security forces, including the army, moved in to suppress the protests (Voice of America, 2021). The authorities also imposed a curfew and restricted access to the Internet.

Over the years, trade union leaders and political activists in Eswatini have routinely clashed with the police. However, the deadly protests of 2021 signaled a turning point in the fight for democracy in the country as several civil-society and pro-democracy organizations, each with its own interests and mandates, converged under one united and sustained call for democratic reforms (Maphanga & Vandome, 2021).

Some five months on from the chaos of June, mediation by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is yet to deliver any meaningful resolution to the impasse. Interviewed in October on CNN (2021), Prime Minister Cleopas Dlamini argued that the protests were primarily in demand of economic delivery as citizens were feeling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with political reforms being secondary. He stated that more than 80% of the country's citizens were in favour of the political status quo and that the protesters represented only a minority of the public.

Following the latest mediation visit by SADC, it was announced that a national dialogue will begin after the annual Incwala ceremony, which typically takes place in late December/early January, with the government appealing for calm in the meantime (Southern African Development Community, 2021).

Earlier in the year, Afrobarometer asked Emaswati how much of a democracy they think their country is and how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in Eswatini. Findings show increasing dissatisfaction with the country's democracy, accompanied by a significant rise in the number of Emaswati who believe that having many political parties would help ensure that citizens have real choices when it comes to electing those who govern them.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8

surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Eswatini, led by ActivQuest, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult citizens in March-April 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Eswatini in 2013, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

- Support for democracy as preferable to all other forms of government increased from 43% of Eswatini in 2018 to 49%.
- Six in 10 citizens (59%) say the country needs many political parties to give voters a real choice in who governs them, a 28-percentage-point increase from 2015.
- Six in 10 Eswatini say people should be free to join any organization they want (59%) and the media should be free to publish without government interference (62%). Both of these findings represent substantial increases compared to past surveys.
- Despite increasing support for democratic rights, only about one-fourth (27%) of Eswatini say their country is "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems," and just 16% say they are "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way their democracy is working. Both assessments have worsened considerably since 2018.
- More than three-fourths (78%) of respondents say people "often" or "always" have to be careful about what they say about politics, up by 14 percentage points compared to 2018.
- While most Eswatini (81%) say they are free to vote as they please, fewer than four in 10 (36%) feel free to say what they think. A similar minority (35%) believe that the media is free from government interference.

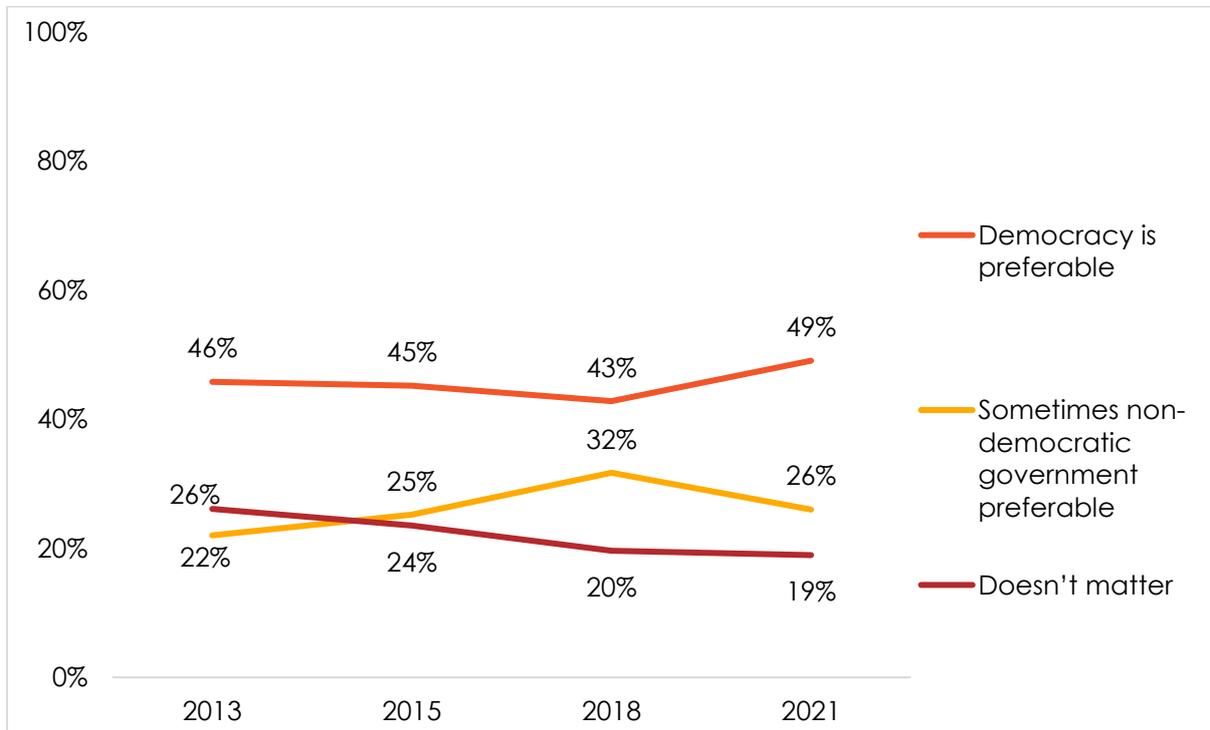
Support for democracy, political competition, and freedoms

Democracy as the preferred form of government

Half (49%) of Eswatini say that democracy is preferable to all other forms of government, a 6-percentage-point increase from 2018 (43%). At the same time, the proportion of respondents who would prefer a non-democratic government in certain circumstances dropped by about one-fifth, from 32% in 2018 to 26% in 2021 (Figure 1).

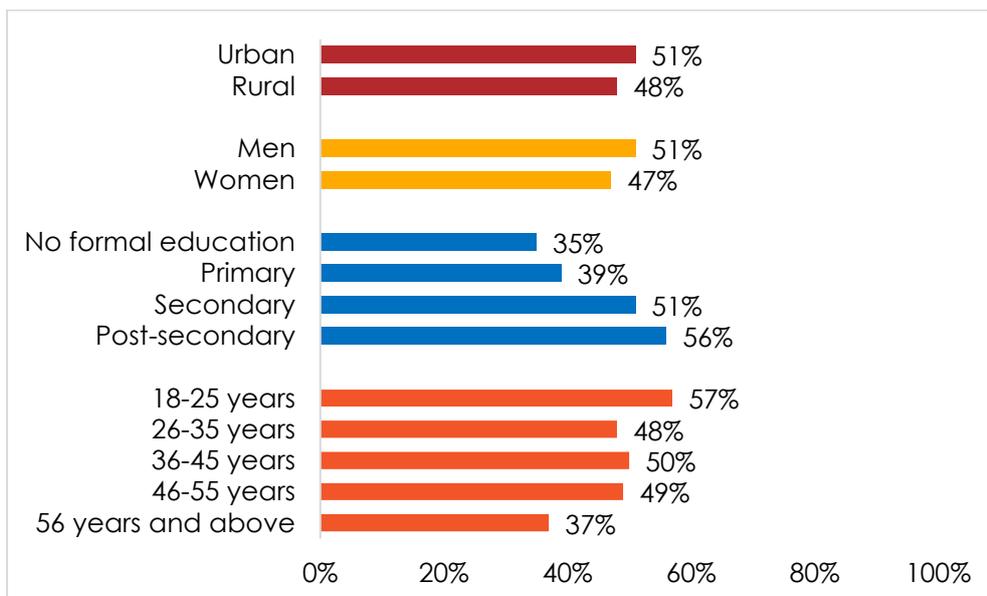
Support for democracy increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 35% among those with no formal schooling to 56% among those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 2). But it decreases with age, from 57% among 18- to 25-year-olds to 37% among those aged 56 and above.

Figure 1: Support for democracy | Eswatini | 2013-2021



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Figure 2: Support for democracy | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021



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 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.
 (% who agree with Statement 1)

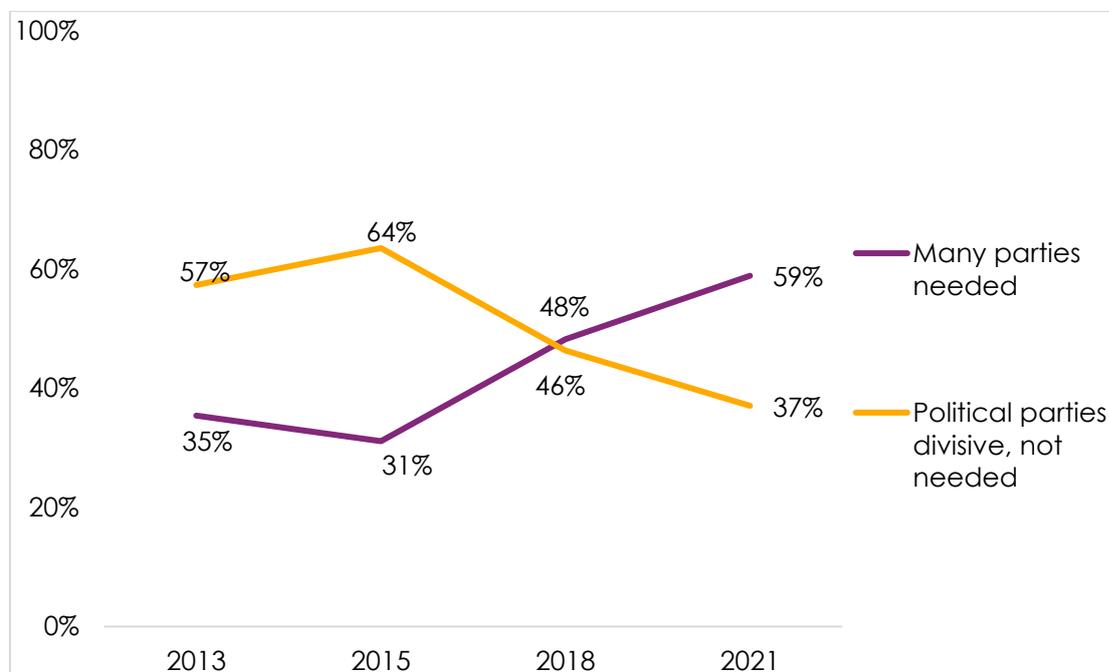
Growing appetite for political parties

While there are conflicting opinions about whether Eswatini's Constitution bans political parties, what is not disputed is that the Constitution makes no provision for political parties to participate in national elections, instead emphasizing "individual merit [as] the basis for election or appointment to public office" (Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini, 2021).

Amid recent calls for democratic reforms in the country, results from the latest Afrobarometer survey reveal that the popular desire for political parties continues to grow. More than half (59%) of Eswatini now say that many political parties are needed in the country to give voters a choice in who governs them, an increase of 28 percentage points compared to 2015 (31%) (Figure 3).

Only 37% maintain that political parties are divisive and unnecessary, down from 64% in 2015.

Figure 3: Political parties divisive vs. many parties needed | Eswatini | 2013-2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

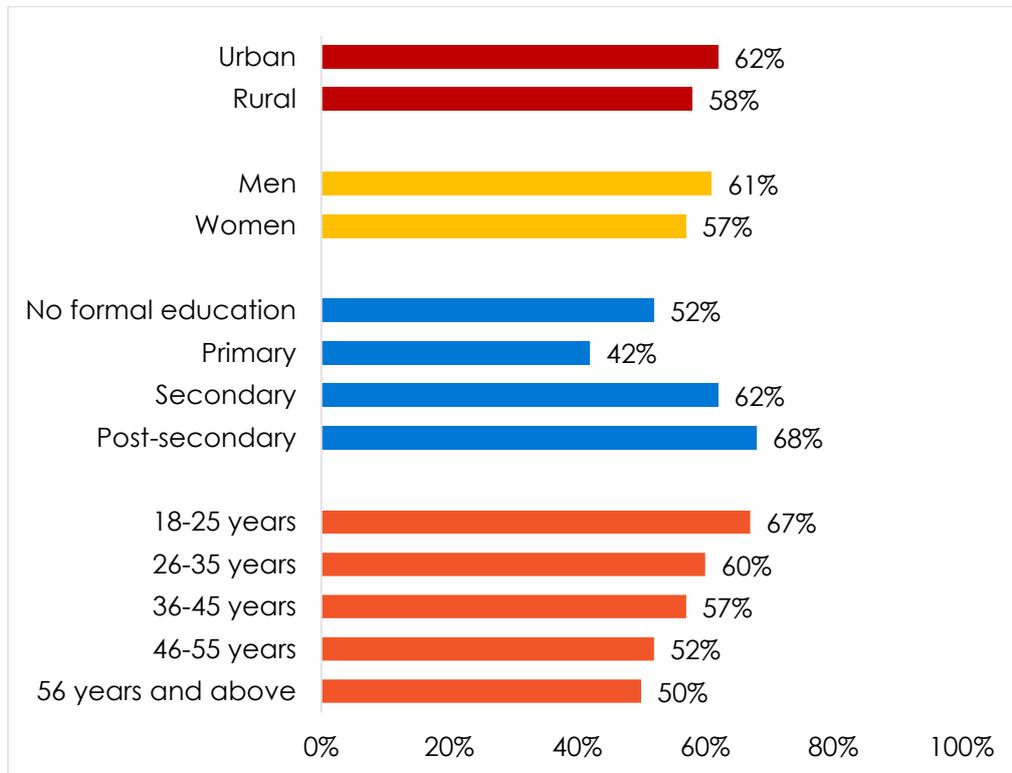
Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Eswatini.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Eswatini have real choices in who governs them.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

While differences by gender and urban-rural location are small, support for multiparty competition is significantly stronger among younger respondents (67% of 18- to 25-year-olds) and among more educated citizens (68% of those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Many political parties needed | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini
 | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Eswatini.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Eswatini have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 2)

Support for freedom of association and media

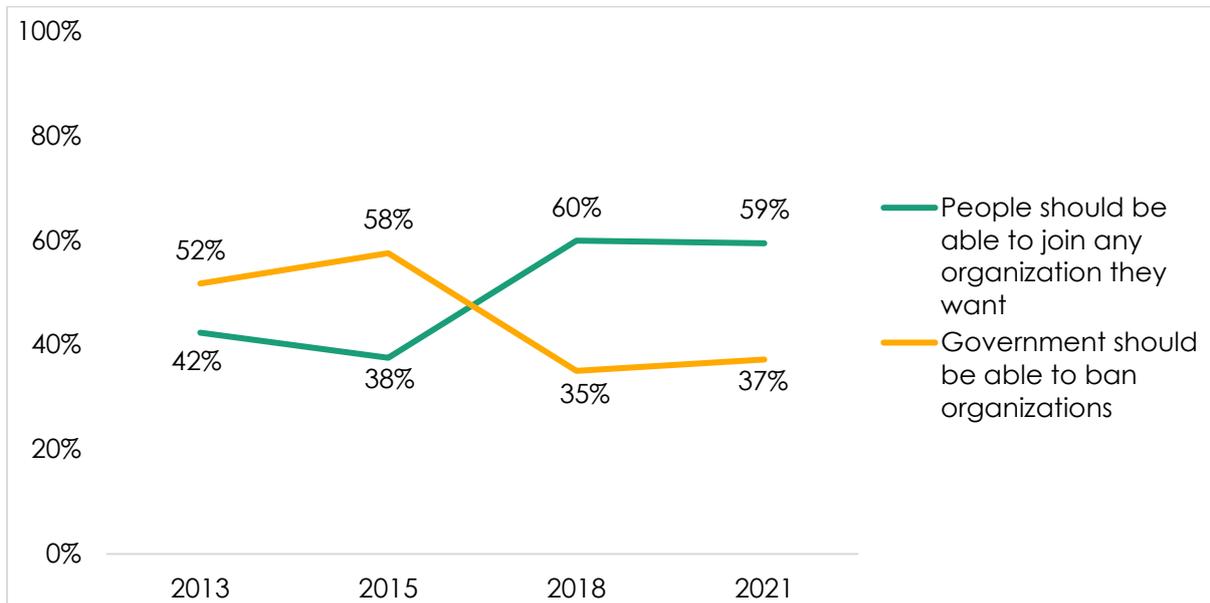
Six in 10 citizens (59%) say they should be able to join any organization they want, regardless of whether the government disapproves of it. Support for freedom of association increased

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by 22 percentage points between 2015 and 2018 and has remained stable since then (Figure 5). Only 37% say the government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies, down from 58% in 2015.

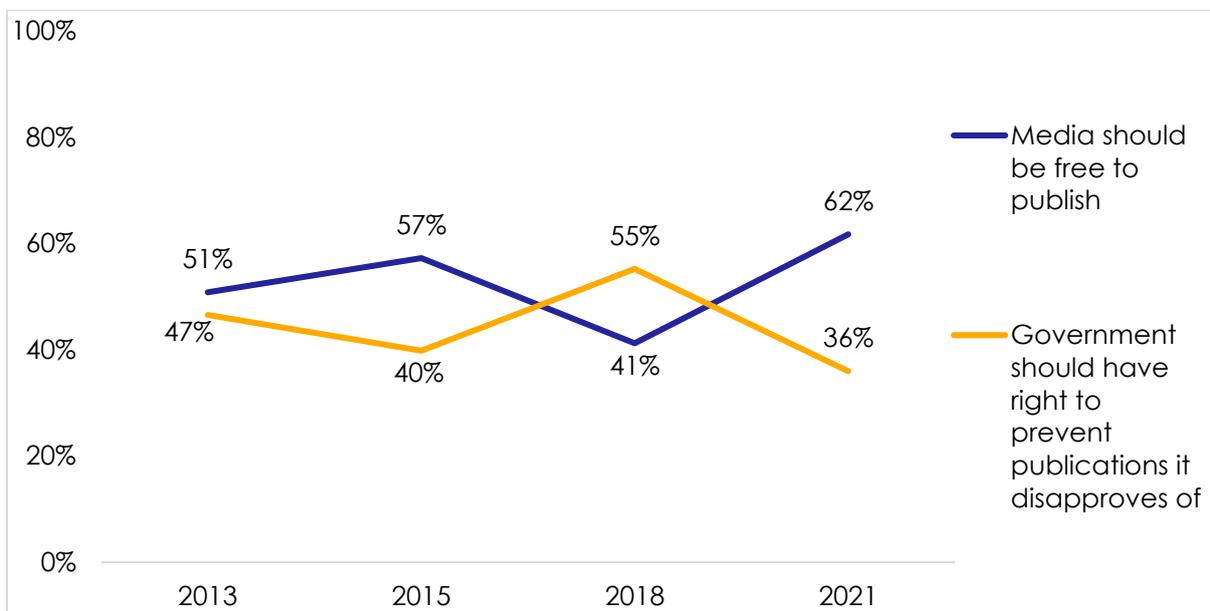
Similarly, six in 10 respondents (62%) believe that the media should be able to publish views and ideas without any form of government censorship or interference, a 21-percentage-point jump from 2018 (41%) (Figure 6). While a majority (55%) of Eswatini said in 2018 that the government should have the right to prevent the publication of material it disapproves of, only 36% feel this way in 2021.

Figure 5: Views on freedom of association | Eswatini | 2013-2021



Respondents were asked: Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.
 Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 6: Views on media freedom | Eswatini | 2013-2021



Respondents were asked: Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Assessments of democracy and freedoms

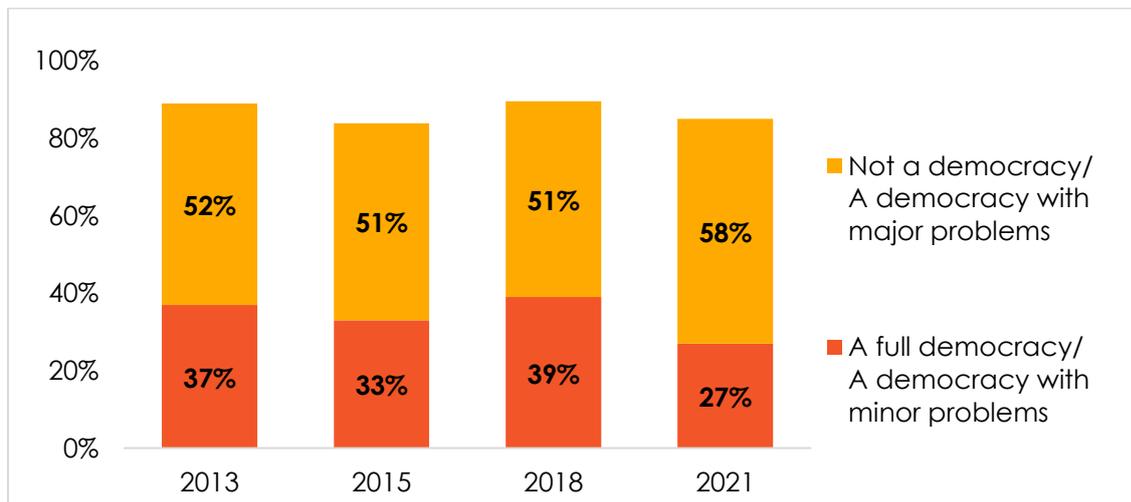
How much of a democracy is Eswatini?

While popular support for democracy, multiparty competition, and freedoms of association and media are on the rise, citizens' assessments of the actual health of their democracy and freedoms are not.

Only about one-fourth (27%) of Eswatini believe that their country is “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems,” down from 39% in 2018 (Figure 7). Meanwhile, the proportion who see the country as “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy” has increased by 7 percentage points, to 58%.

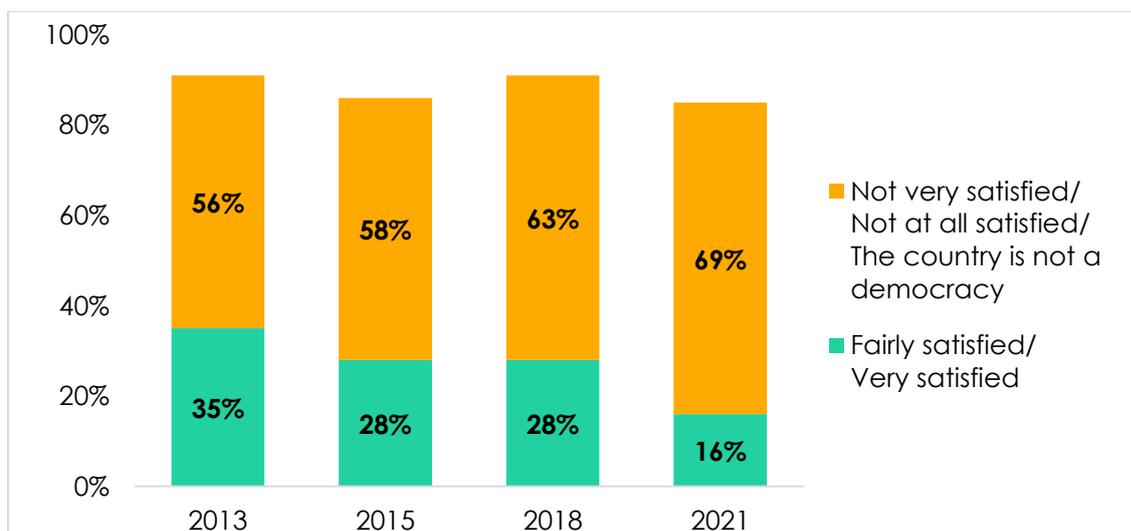
Similarly, only one in six citizens (16%) say they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy is working in their country. This assessment has declined from 35% in 2013 and 28% in 2018 (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Extent of democracy | Eswatini | 2013-2021



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Eswatini today?*

Figure 8: Satisfaction with democracy | Eswatini | 2013-2021

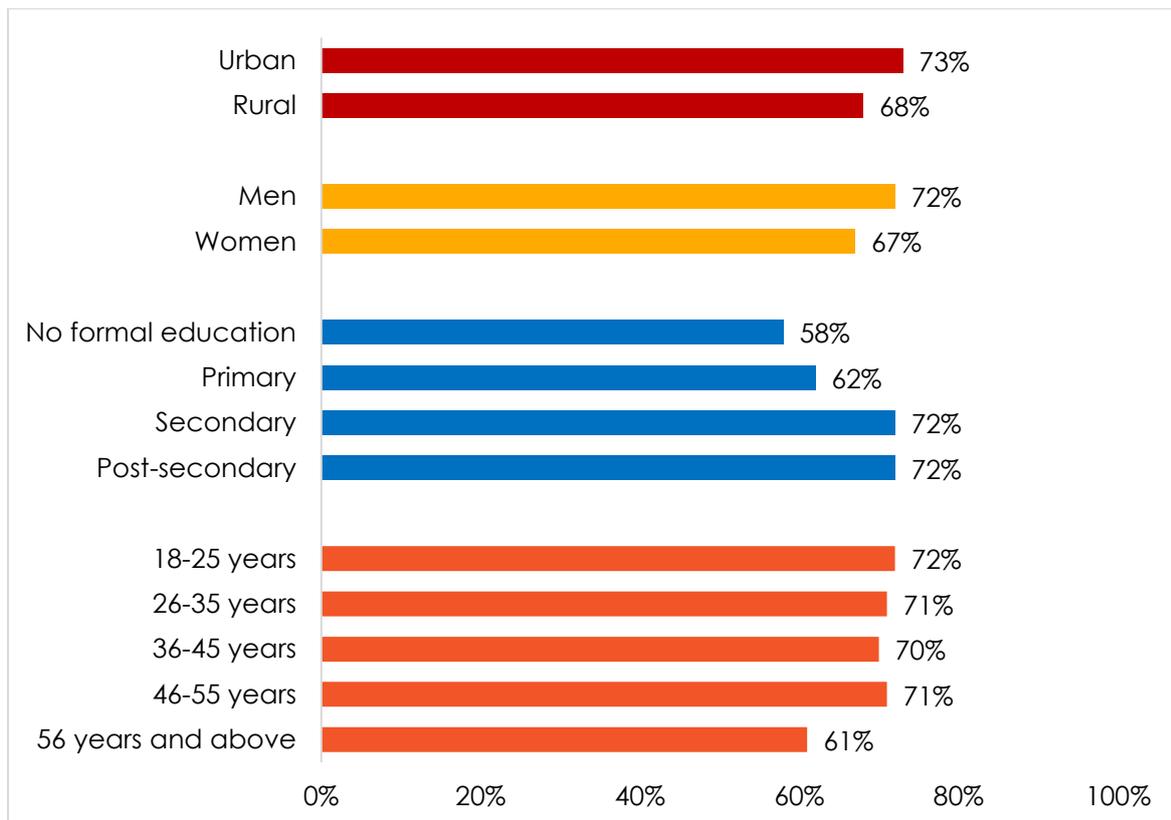


Respondents were asked: *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Eswatini?*

Dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working is somewhat higher among urban residents (73% “not very satisfied,” “not at all satisfied,” or “country is not a democracy”) than among rural residents (68%), as well as among men (72%) compared to women (67%) (Figure 9).

Citizens with no formal education (58%) or primary schooling only (62%) are less likely to express dissatisfaction than are those with secondary or post-secondary (72%). And older citizens (61%) are less dissatisfied with their democracy than younger age cohorts (70%-72%).

Figure 9: Dissatisfaction with democracy | Eswatini | 2013-2021



Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Eswatini? (% who say “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” or “the country is not a democracy”)

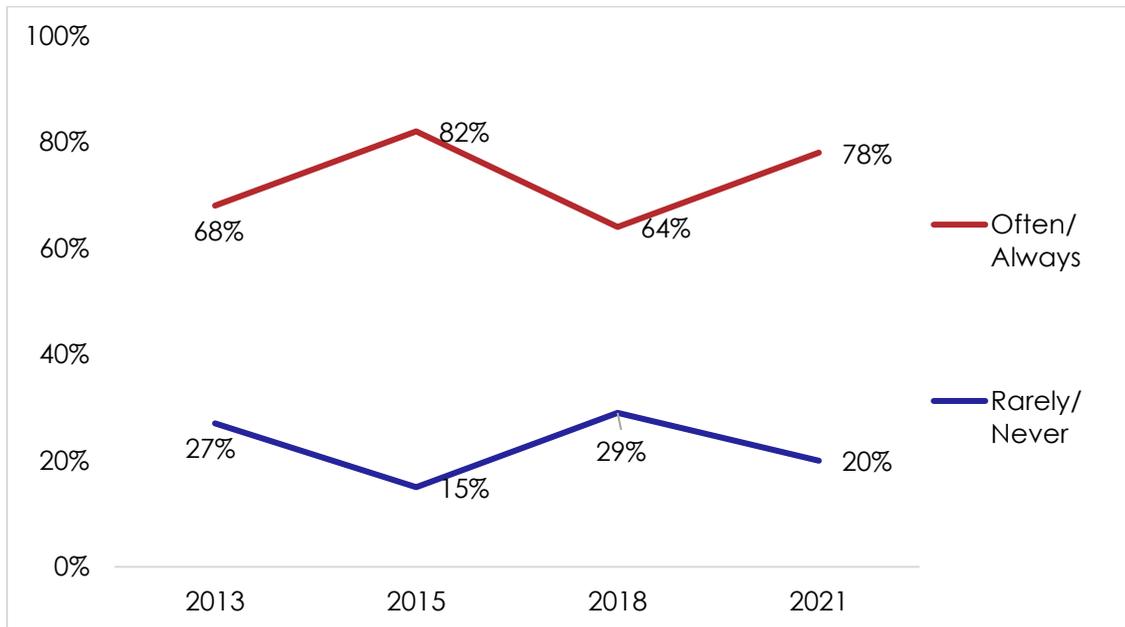
Freedom of expression and media

Afrobarometer data show that more than three-fourths (78%) of respondents say people “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics. That’s 14 percentage points more than expressed such caution in 2018, though it’s still below the 2015 peak of 82% (Figure 10).

Further analysis of data on civil liberties in Eswatini reveals that fewer than four in 10 citizens (36%) believe they are “somewhat free” or “completely free” to say what they think, a decline from 41% compared to 2013 (Figure 11).

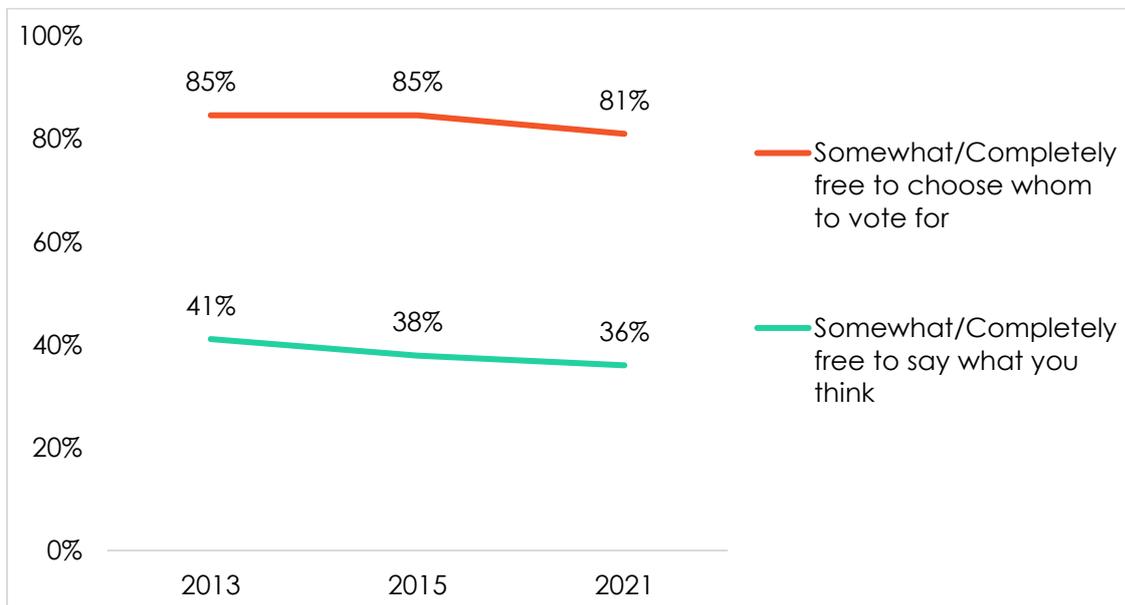
On the other hand, citizens overwhelmingly (81%) say they are free to vote for the candidates of their choice without feeling pressured, though this indicator also shows a modest decline.

Figure 10: Do you have to be careful when discussing politics? | Eswatini | 2013-2021



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?

Figure 11: Freedom to say what you think and to choose whom to vote for | Eswatini | 2013-2021

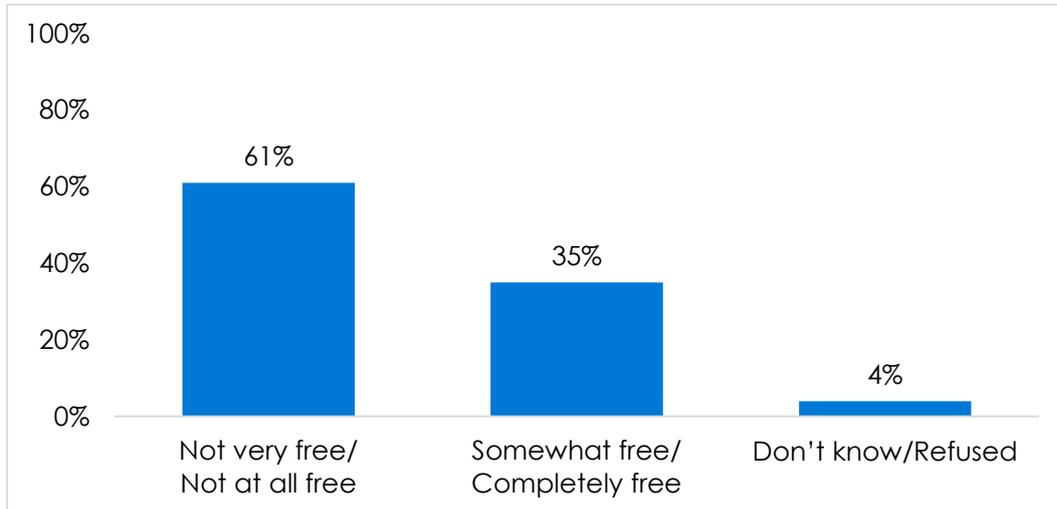


Respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?

Media freedom made headlines in Eswatini with the government's proposed Computer Crime and Cybercrime Bill, which would criminalize the sharing of "fake news." While the government claims the bill is not intended to limit media freedoms, critics view it as being aimed at curbing freedom of the press and expression (Nkambule, 2020).

Six in 10 survey respondents (61%) say the Eswatini media is “not very free” or “not at all free” to report and comment on the news without government interference (Figure 12).

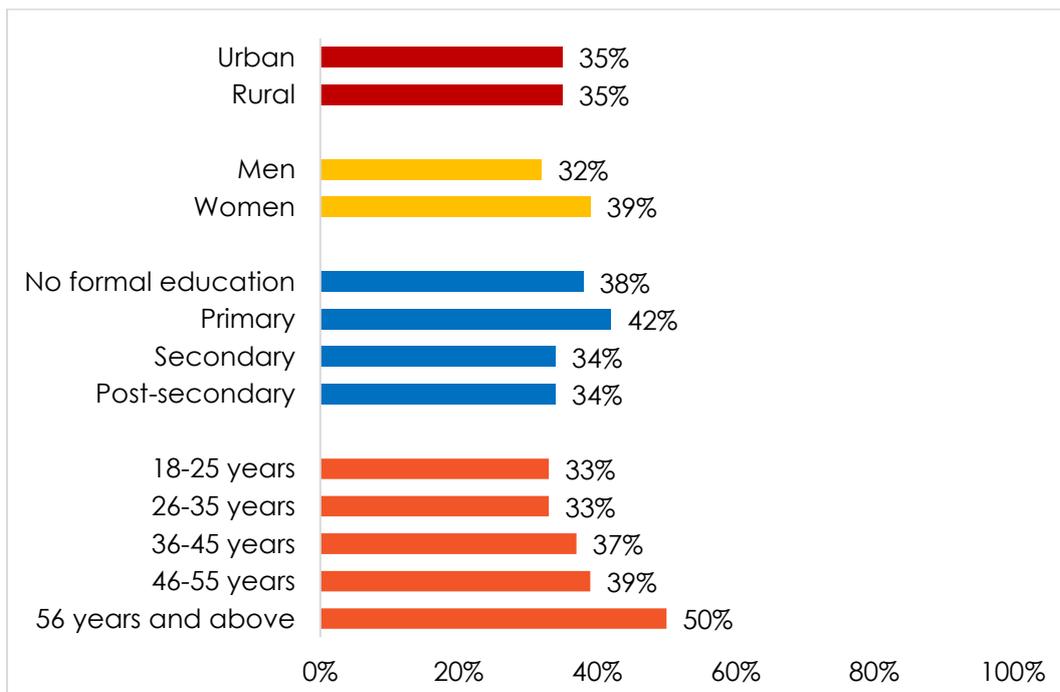
Figure 12: How free is the news media? | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?

The perception that Eswatini’s media is free is more common among women (39%) than men (32%). It is also more frequently espoused by older respondents (50% of those over age 55) and those with primary (42%) or no formal education (38%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: News media is free | by socio-demographic group | Eswatini | 2021



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government? (% who say “somewhat free” or “completely free”)

Conclusion

Afrobarometer findings indicate that Eswatini are increasingly frustrated with the country's system of governance. As the kingdom struggles to recover from the social and economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent political unrest, there is a strong case for government to engage in earnest with increasing calls for democratic reforms.

With a national dialogue scheduled to begin after the Incwala ceremony, the inclusion of pro-democracy groups in this process will be key in crafting a way forward that is supported by most Eswatini.

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