

'SwaziLeaks' looks to shake up jet-setting monarchy

August 29 2014, by Neo Maditla

As WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange prepares to end a two-year forced stay at Ecuador's London embassy, he may take comfort in knowing he inspired resistance to secrecy in places as far away as Swaziland.

In this small African kingdom a group of citizens have started a social media movement called "SwaziLeaks", which aims to expose the lavish lifestyles of the country's ruling royals.

SwaziLeaks members—who refuse to say who or where in Swaziland they are, for fear of being targeted—started a Twitter feed a year ago.

They regularly post photos of royals purportedly abroad: partying in Los Angeles, enjoying a luxurious suite at London's Heathrow airport or at other opulent locations.

"We wanted to try and expose some of the exploitation and corruption of the rich and powerful," SwaziLeaks told AFP.

Swaziland is an absolute monarchy ruled by King Mswati III. The government is frequently accused of stifling dissent and jailing opponents.

The king has an annual household budget of around \$60 million (45 million euros) in a country where about 60 percent of the population live on less than \$1 a day.

"We get information and pictures from people who know or work for them," SwaziLeaks said. "We have never told anyone what we do and try and not put anyone in jeopardy due to the information we have."

But determining fact from fiction can be tricky.

"Swaziland is a small country and there are a lot of rumours and half-truths with very little to back them up."

"We try and not tweet information that we feel has no basis."

The government did not respond to repeated requests for comment about SwaziLeaks and the veracity of its claims.

A third world country

But Mlungisi Makhanya, secretary general of Swaziland opposition party PUDEMO, is not convinced about the impact of the group.

Makhanya explained that most Swazi people do not have access to the internet and that because the country was a "third world country in every sense of the word."

He also warned that the Swazi government will be ruthless in dealing with them.

A PUDEMO party member was recently arrested for wearing a t-shirt with the party's name on it.

"They do anything humanely possible to make sure we do not critique the government."

SwaziLeaks admits that responses to their work have been mixed.

"We are followed by many Swazi journalists and even a few politicians and people within the royal sphere, which amused us."

"There are some people who seem angry with what we're doing, you can see the exchanges on our tweet history."

"Though they don't seem to actually live in the country and seemingly come from privileged backgrounds, so we can understand that what we share is uncomfortable for them."

Although SwaziLeaks has not been contacted by the King directly, his close associates have warned in direct messages that they are being watched and would soon be exposed.

But the group says it is not worried.

"The message that royalty and their friends live off us, the people, like parasites will spread and be supported by evidence and not rumour. In this we hope that people will start demanding what is due to them."

"Many, many Swazis think that their lives are the way they are due to forces beyond their control and that the King has their best interests at heart, we hope to show them that this is not necessarily true."

They believe the recent arrest of Bheki Makhubu, editor of the Nation magazine, for writing "scurrilous" articles shows that Swaziland's media is limited in what it can do.

They say that Assange's WikiLeaks was a big motivation for them to start their movement because some of the diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks related to Swaziland.

"They showed some of the alliances the ruling elite had with [the late

Libyan president Muammar] Gaddafi and other dictators, which allowed some Swazis to see inside the ivory tower that is the monarchy."

The controversial Australian might find some succour in that as he ponders an uncertain future.

Assange sought asylum at the Ecuador embassy in London in June 2012 to avoid extradition to Sweden, where he faces allegations of rape and sexual molestation, which he strongly denies.

He fears extradition to Sweden could lead to him being transferred to the United States to face trial over WikiLeaks' publication of classified US military and diplomatic documents.

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