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**STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (NDI) MAY 11-13, 1998,
PRE-ELECTION ASSESSMENT DELEGATION TO SWAZILAND**

I. THE DELEGATION AND ITS WORK

This statement is offered by a three-member international pre-election assessment delegation organized by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI). The delegation visited the Kingdom of Swaziland from May 11-13, 1998. The purposes of the delegation were to demonstrate the interest of the international community in the democratic development of Swaziland, to gain an understanding of the current political situation in Swaziland in the run-up to the August 1998 local government elections and to apply the lessons of the November 29, 1997 special election in Manzini. The delegation also considered a number of issues related to national parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for later this year.

The delegation's work was part of NDI's election-related activities in Swaziland, which, among other things, may include an observer delegation to the August local government elections and an international assessment mission after the local government elections. Previously, NDI conducted a program to assist the Manzini local government special election in 1997. This election program consisted of a series of voter education activities, candidate training and polling station staff training. NDI staff will remain in Swaziland until the final results of the elections are determined. NDI will evaluate its continued activities in the country at that time.

The pre-election assessment delegation consisted of election experts from Africa and NDI staff members. All members of the delegation were familiar with Swaziland and have been involved in countries undergoing democratic transitions. The members of the delegation included: Bob Kandetu, Dean of Students at the University of Namibia and Chair of the Council of Churches Monitoring Efforts; Adrian Muunga, NDI Program Officer in Malawi with previous experience on election-related projects in the Gambia, Zambia and South Africa; and Patrick Henry, NDI Program Officer representing NDI in Swaziland. The delegation's work was also assisted by NDI staff in Johannesburg and Washington, D.C.

The delegation was charged with assessing the state of preparedness of electoral authorities for the local government elections, the political environment surrounding the elections and the degree to which the public is being notified about the electoral process. The delegation did not seek to interfere with or to certify the election process, and it recognized that ultimately it is the people of Swaziland who will judge the fairness of the elections.

The pre-election delegation conducted meetings in Mbabane and Manzini with members of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development including the Minister, the Principle Secretary, the Director of Urban Government and the eight Returning Officers for the local elections; leaders of civil society including the Coordinating Assembly of NGOs, the Women in Law and Development, the Swaziland Federation of Employers, the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions and Sebenta (Adult Literacy Program); and progressive forces including the People's United Democratic Movement and Ngwane National Liberation Congress.

II. FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

The delegation noted positive aspects of Swaziland's local government election process and recognized the August elections are part of a political process aimed at advancing democracy at the local government level. At the same time, the delegation had serious concerns about issues that could affect public confidence in the political process and attitudes about the elections. Among the delegation's findings and observations are the following:

- Administrative preparations for the local government elections, while not without problems, appear to be on course for election day.
- The local government elections allow for a variety of candidates with divergent political views. Political parties, however, are banned by law, and the denial of full freedom of association clearly affects the overall political environment in which the local government elections will take place. While local government elections are contested on a non-party basis in many democracies, the ban on parties and other restrictions on the freedom of citizens to associate in support of candidates diminishes the democratic character of these elections.
- There is significant interest among civil society organizations to engage in the local government elections. However, there is substantial confusion among civic leaders and potential candidates about the differences in rules between the local government elections and upcoming national legislative elections.
- While there is an interest in the local government elections among citizens, there is a pressing need for voter education, voter mobilization and candidate training. Elections have only been conducted three times in Swaziland by secret ballot - nationally in 1993, locally in 1995 and in the Manzini Town Council elections of 1997. Turnout for registration and for voting has been extremely low for these elections.

The delegation noted that the government is undertaking a series of economic, political and social reforms. The initiative is headed on the economic and social front by the Office of the Prime Minister. The political reforms are being managed by King Mswati III.

The principle vehicle for political reform created by the government is the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC). The CRC is charged with collecting submissions that will lead to a new constitution sometime after the year 2000. The CRC process has been criticized by some for being cumbersome and time consuming in its attempts to gather input from around the country, and it lost a significant degree of support among reform-minded groups commonly referred to in Swaziland as "progressive forces," when several members resigned last year in protest over what they claimed was interference by the King and others in the CRC's activities.

Dissatisfaction with the pace of constitutional reform negotiations and the continuing ban on parties have led the main political opposition groups to call for a boycott of the national parliamentary elections. However, many of the same groups view the local government elections as distinct from the national parliamentary elections and report that they intend to support candidate participation and voter participation in the local government elections.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The delegation observed that there may be an increasing level of frustration in Swaziland between the government and groups pushing for political transformation. The positions of each of these actors may be hardening, and avenues of dialogue need to be established to avoid further tensions. The local government elections pose an opportunity for dialogue among various sectors of Swazi society. If a positive electoral environment is established for these elections, if they are well administered, if the population learns of the importance of the elections, and if participation is significant and the results are respected, then these elections can serve as an important step in the country's democratic development. The local government elections could thereby set the stage for further democratic advances. With these possibilities in mind and in the spirit of international cooperation, the delegation offers the following recommendations:

- 1) Administrative preparations should provide adequate time for voter registration, candidate qualification, preparation of electoral materials and their distribution, training of election officials down to the polling station level and other important tasks in election administration. Sufficient public resources must be made available so that the technical aspects of the election process can be accomplished.

- 2) An election campaign environment should be established that allows candidates to freely communicate their messages and platforms to the electorate and allows the electorate to receive sufficient information about the candidates in order to make free and informed choices at the ballot box. This should include adequate and equitable access for all candidates to the mass communications media and fair treatment of candidates in news coverage of election-related matters.

- 3) The legal recognition of political parties and permission for political and civic organizations to mobilize freely and to support candidates and inform voters is a prerequisite for a democratic political order. It is hoped that there will be genuine progress on this important issue.

4) Steps should be taken to ensure that candidates and their supporters are free to move about the country and to have access to the electorate in all localities in order to campaign for their votes.

5) Large-scale voter education efforts should be mobilized, using all appropriate and available mediums (i.e. mass media, town and village meetings, posters and booklets), to encourage citizens to register and to vote. The voter education campaign should address the nature and importance of the local government elections, as well as where, when and how to register and vote. The information (and the training of polling officials) also should address problems identified in the Manzini Town Council and other previous elections, such as the senior male of a family casting ballots for the entire family.

6) Special orientation sessions should be organized for civic and religious leaders and others who could play an important role in encouraging participation in the local government elections. These sessions can help to promote public confidence in the local government election process. The sessions could address questions concerning the nature of the local election process, distinctions between the local government elections and the upcoming national legislative elections and reasons why it would be important to help mobilize public participation in the process.

7) A number of the groups with whom NDI consulted requested training and orientation programs focusing on how to become a candidate in the local government elections and how to conduct an election campaign. It is NDI's intention to provide such training.

The delegation would like to express its sincere appreciation to all of those with whom it met for taking time to meet and provide information and insights concerning the political process underway in Swaziland. Without the generous cooperation of these persons, the delegation could not have conducted its work

As noted above, the local government elections present an important opportunity for advancing the democratic process in Swaziland. NDI presents this statement of its pre-election delegation in the hope that it will be of assistance to those who are working to create open and transparent elections in the country. The Institute plans to conduct several activities in Swaziland in the period leading to the local government elections to help address a number of the delegation's findings, observations and recommendations. Future reports will be part of these efforts.

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