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Everyone likes flattery; and when you come to Royalty you should lay it on with a trowel.

Bizarre behaviour: is the king okay?

While Zwelithini has become a figure of ridicule, his power-mongering ways are no joke

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WORD has it that shortly after the Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture delivered by former U.S. president Barack Obama in July, there were complaints from Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini's entourage that his seat was the same height as all the other guests in the VIP area.

This, they said, was clearly unacceptable as it meant that His Majesty had to spend the entire time on the same level as mere mortals. Whether the king himself was upset or whether it was just his support staff being obsequious is unclear, but it added to the pattern of bizarre behaviour coming from that quarter. The sort of behaviour that compels one to wonder whether the king is okay.

Zwelithini's offbeat antics are nothing new. For much of his four decades on the throne, he has been a bit of an oddball.

But that's quite a normal trait among royals. Britain's Queen Elizabeth and her son Prince Charles are a case in point — Charles has extensive chats with plants, while Elizabeth is known to form close bonds with deer. However, they pose no harm to Brits, other than as parasites sucking on the fiscus. Aside from being national mascots, they wield no power and have little influence.

The randy guy in the kingdom next door is a classic case of a royal dimwit with real power. He uses it to fleece and suppress his people while robbing young women of their youthful innocence.

In the kingdom by the coast, we have someone who believes he should have institutional power outside the ambit of the Constitution. He has stated that "the Constitution is bad", and that "it pains me to note I am a ruler, yet there are some who are above me".

So sure is he that he is above the constitutional order that he believes any politician or political party that wants votes from his subjects next year must first come and kneel before him "and commit that [they] will never touch [his] land".

We have someone who believes he has the power and the right to mobilise his armies should the need arise, as he has repeatedly warned when the issue of the Ingonyama Trust comes up.

This man has boasted that he earlier this year warned South Africa's constitutional head of state, Cyril Ramaphosa, that nobody should dare "make the mistake of taking away the land of the Zulus because all hell will break loose". He has said that if this matter is not resolved by the end of this year, "even Zulus from Germany or the U.S. will come back and fight for their land".

The king has even threatened secession, saying if he continues to be provoked, he will take "me and my nation to live on our own and develop on our own".

The Ingonyama Trust, the monarch tells us, is to Zulus what Jerusalem is to the Israelis and Palestinians, and what Mecca is to all Muslims.

Do not laugh, dear reader, the man has



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publicly said these things and it seems as if he believes them.

Zwelithini is the paradox of hilarious and dangerous. He is a funny farmonger, as strange as that sounds.

Which is perhaps why we should really be afraid. The ideal of entrusting the tiniest amount of power to someone who is capable of making us laugh without him realising that he is cracking jokes is perilous.

Several developments of late have raised alarm bells around the wellbeing of the king. When the year started, Zwelithini announced an ambitious initiative to build a legal fund to defend the Ingonyama Trust. He announced at the opening of the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Legislature that he would be collecting R5 from

every "legitimate" Zulu so he could defend the trust all the way to the Constitutional Court (presumably using the Constitution as a defence).

Accounts would be opened at all four major banks, as well as at Capitec and Ithala. At the time of the speech, VBS Mutual Bank had not yet opened branches in KwaZulu-Natal, so it did not get a mention. Just as well.

Just imagine the sight: snaking queues of Zulus with R5 coins in their hands standing outside bank branches wanting to make a deposit. Or Zulus sitting on their phones and computers doing EFTs of R5 each. Imagine the nightmare for those "legitimate" Zulus in the U.S. and Germany, converting R5 into dollars and euros. Well, to Zwelithini, this all made

practical sense.

Then the king hooked up with AfriForum, the proud home of South Africa's unrepentant racists. First, he invited them to the annual Reed Dance, where they got to view bare-breasted black maidens strut their stuff. Then he formed an alliance with "AfriForum of the boers", as he called them. Little did it occur to him that his new friends view him the same way they view all others who look like him.

He didn't realise that South Africans, including most Afrikaners who wouldn't be seen dead in the company of unrepentant racists, were shaking their heads and asking if the king was okay.

The bromance between Zwelithini and AfriForum has sparked jealousy

among his strange collection of friends. Black First Land First leader Andile Mngxitama, who so badly wanted to be the king's blue-eyed boy that he swore to defend the Ingonyama Trust, is now confused about the king's embrace of racists. Unable to condemn Zwelithini, Mngxitama justified the king's stance by saying: "Thieves [AfriForum] are misleading the king after anti-black politicians [the ANC] threatened the Ingonyama Trust."

To count Kallie Kriel and Mngxitama among your closest fellow travellers is quite a feat. But that is Zwelithini for you.

We cannot but ask if the king is okay when he was conned by fraudster Ishwar Ramlutchman into co-hosting the annual Diwali celebrations at his palace in Nongoma recently.

Ramlutchman, who generously describes himself as a philanthropist and a humanitarian, was in 2013 convicted on 21 counts of defrauding the KwaZulu-Natal Public Works Department during a tender process. He escaped lightly with a R500 000 fine after pleading guilty to forging tender documents.

Described as a fast-talking con man who is always alert to opportunity and prone to taking short-cuts, Ramlutchman had within three years of his conviction, convinced Zwelithini to upgrade him to become a full Zulu after 15 years of apprenticeship. He was given the name Mabheka Zulu. He was also made the head of the Inyosi regiment, the most senior in the Zulu army since King Shaka Zulu's days. Zwelithini even describes him as his adopted son, which has seen him being referred to as Prince Mabheka. The shrewd businessperson from Richards Bay has made full use of his new status.

This month's Diwali celebrations perfectly fit this pattern. While the national cohesion aspect of a Zulu king hosting a holy festival is refreshing, doing this in conjunction with this pungent individual and corner-cutter defeats the purpose. It begs the question, is the king okay?

Ramlutchman is not alone. Plenty of other businesspeople who want a slice of the wealth beneath Ingonyama Trust land sidle up to him in the same fashion and gain his trust.

In recent years, Zwelithini has rightfully become a figure of national ridicule and the butt of many jokes. His bizarre behaviour certainly gives the impression of a somewhat unhinged individual.

However, it is a big mistake just to laugh and write him off as someone with the unimpressive aptitude of a typical royal. There could be something more to it. And that is a scary thought given his power-mongering ways and what he could potentially do with the influence in his hands — both in terms of his threats and in terms of the favours he could do for unscrupulous and greedy hangers-on.

Which is why it is pertinent that we ask the question, is the king okay?

— City Press.