



Renewal in the face of a crisis:

SA's active state and public response to COVID-19

Introduction

The South African government has faced heavy criticism in the last two decades about its capacity to deal with the country's challenges and so, with the global emergence of the pandemic known as COVID-19, there were warranted fears about how it would cope in dealing with the outbreak. The lack of faith in the incumbent administration's ability to deal with the pandemic was not surprising given the South African experience in dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic that hit the country hard in the early 2000s. What's more, if the COVID-19 pandemic could pose such a challenge to developed nations that have been ravaged by the disease (including but not limited to China, the USA and the UK), how would South Africa fare?

The scepticism has certainly changed over the past few weeks, which saw the government take various drastic emergency measures to control the spread of the virus and thus flatten the curve of the pandemic. As is now well known, these measures started with the closure of schools and institutions of higher learning, followed by a nationwide lockdown prohibiting all recreational and economic activities except the movement of essential goods and essential service workers, and lastly the rolling out of basic services to rural and informal settlements. Certainly, this pandemic, as much as it has proven itself an unprecedented obstacle for South Africa, has also compelled a renewed unity between the South African government and its citizens, a renewed level of trust in the government and a renewed level of patriotism among both the government and the public.

With obvious negative impacts on the dwindling economy of the country compounded by the downgrading to 'Junk status' by Moody's and Fitch ratings

agencies, it remains to be seen what can be done by the minister of finance Tito Mboweni to resuscitate the weakened economy. Despite the negative impacts, the pandemic has also revealed a few positives and potential positives. A major one, already referred to, is how capable the incumbent administration has proven itself to be at such a time when it was thought to be incapable of handling the outbreak and calming the nation in the midst of the chaos. Apart from exploring the positive and negative impacts of the pandemic on the country's economy and politics, I also recommend a few measures, in the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, that the country could take moving forward.

Covid-19 and its impacts on the politics and economy of South Africa

The USA, with the largest economy of the world, has become the epicentre of the outbreak, having surpassed Italy and Spain, with France, Germany and the UK following. These countries' struggles in dealing with the pandemic, despite their obvious technological advancements in the healthcare sector, have sent shockwaves through the rest of the world, especially regions that are not nearly as advanced, technologically, medically and economically.

The silver lining at the moment is that case confirmation and death tolls in most developing nations (such as South Africa) and less developed countries (LDCs) are quite low and almost stagnant when compared to those of first world nations. However, the fear is of what might happen should there be uncontrollable exponential spread in these nations. How will these countries be able to deal with the pandemic and to what extent will their economies be affected by it?

The South African government has up

to this point demonstrated that it has the capacity to be efficient and capable in handling this health crisis. With that being said, there is no doubt that the pandemic and the nationwide lockdown have taken a toll on the economy of South Africa. An estimated 370 000 to one million job losses are predicted and the economy is expected to shrink by 4% to 6% in the second quarter of 2020, sending some of its largest industries into a "policy-induced coma", according to the South African Reserve Bank and leading economists.

Moreover, the social aspect of this is that South Africa, as a young democracy, is not used to enforced social distancing and isolation at home, and hence some might complain about a 'para-militarisation' of the lockdown, and warranted concerns about some incidences of police and military brutality on citizens. These reports are really worrying given that the SANDF was ordered to assist SAPS patrol the streets to ensure lockdown regulations are adhered to.

Amid indications of a dark and bleak period for the country, the government has taken several drastic measures to flatten the curve of the pandemic and control the spread of the virus among the populace, especially in poor rural and informal settlements which are densely populated. These measures include the relocation of the homeless to designated shelters in and around the country, particularly in the overcrowded urban centres such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban.

Unsurprisingly enough, the homeless have welcomed these shelters as they also fear for their lives. Furthermore, government has rolled out long overdue basic services such as emergency water tanks in many rural and informal settlements across the country.

The government has set up the



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Solidarity Fund, to which organisations and individuals can donate, and established a relief fund for small business owners and small-scale farmers. It has rolled out 60 mobile laboratory units to help improve the daily testing capacity of government laboratories, while the departments of health and water and sanitation have announced the provision of water tanks and sanitisers in public spaces such as taxi ranks, train and bus stations.

Among the least popular lockdown measures are the ban on the sale of alcohol and nicotine products, which a significant percentage of the population consumes.

Generally speaking, there has been widespread adherence to the lockdown, which symbolises a sense of patriotism among both the government, and the public. By patriotism, I do not mean loyalty to the nation-state, but rather a devotion from all involved parties to fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

This, after years of criticism of government over a lack of service delivery and accountability for corruption, the current mood appears to mark a significant turning point in the people's faith in the government with regards to the measures taken in combatting covid-19. To further demonstrate this patriotism, various civil society organisations and private individuals have shown tremendous unity by working together with the government to distribute food parcels to the needy and poor across the country.

Coupled with the measures implemented by the government, these developments not only demonstrate the state's capability in dealing with a major crisis but also South Africa's character of being unified in times of great challenge and struggle.

In terms of the economy, even before the pandemic, the finance minister was advocating for "deep structural reforms"

before it is "game over" for the South African economy.

Whether he will be given the go-ahead for structural reform is not yet known, but if it is, this could mean significant cuts in the public sector (either of jobs or funding). While most negative impacts of this have been focused around the economic implications, the political aspect has received less attention. Politics have also taken a backseat to the COVID-19 outbreak: parliamentary debates were postponed as a means of sticking to lockdown regulations.

An interesting question is what role opposition parties can play during this outbreak. How can they remain significant as all eyes are on the governing party, and as things stand, the ANC seems to be rising to the occasion in fighting this pandemic? What does this mean for the next national elections, and can we say that the COVID-19 global pandemic has further put opposition parties in crisis?

We have seen two main opposition parties attempt to reclaim relevance and bring the political into the fight against COVID-19. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) laid a criminal charge against suspended minister of communications, telecommunications and postal services Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams for violating lockdown regulations by visiting former higher education and training deputy minister Mduzuzi Manana. The Democratic Alliance (DA) has proposed a "smart lockdown phase" alternative, which would ease the restrictions put in place by the lockdown policy.

Surely these questions warrant further theoretical investigation.

Lastly, it would seem that in adhering to social distancing and lockdown regulations, businesses and institutions have been compelled to go virtual. So then, what does this mean for the fourth industrial

revolution (4IR) in South Africa? I would say that developing countries are compelled to go into an involuntary 4IR prototype phase where organisations are forced to make use of technology advancement and human capital enhancement.

We have also seen the diversification of companies' production output to include making ventilators and other personal protective equipment (PPE).

Certainly, one of the most notable things during these tough times, at least at the time of writing, is the level of transparency practised by the government to make the public aware of any and all developments made regarding the pandemic. This has included publicly broadcast briefings by the minister of health and noted experts to make sure the public knows how decisions on combating the pandemic are reached.

Looking ahead

In terms of the economy, perhaps this is the time for proposed structural reform so adamantly advocated for by the minister of finance, although more light has to be shed on these reforms.

Meanwhile, the education sector seems to be gearing up for e-learning as the country cannot afford to pause the academic programme in hopes that vaccines will become available in the near future. There have been outcries about how some do not have access to the internet or devices that can access the media. For these citizens, the state had proposed implementing learning programmes on television channels and radio programmes.

The education and business sector should embrace this 4IR as it seems to be the only appropriate alternative to continue operating now and in the uncertain times ahead. This period of lockdown could be taken as a trial phase to know what works and what does not. Let us make use of this time to do so. ☀