

The Anatomy of the Human, Political and Social Dimensions of the Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa

The Country's Challenges, Responses and Lessons for the Future

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Dear Comrades and Friends,

Let me begin by expressing my heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity to offer my input on the crucially important issue of COVID-19 on your international platform. It was humanly impossible not to accede to this call to offer my perspective on a pandemic which threatens humanity's devastation. This platform is vital for all our comrades to reflect on their experiences with COVID-19 to make it possible for the global community to develop a shared response and solution based on global experiences.

The personal, social and economic impact of COVID-19 on South Africans is far greater and far worse than anything we have experienced since the dawn of our democracy. In some senses it bears a resemblance to the devastation that black people experienced under apartheid. The comparison may sound absurd but the mayhem caused by the pandemic on people's lives is similar in some ways. But there is no denying that this pandemic is unique in its impact and unpredictability.

The pandemic unfolds at the time when the peace-loving global community is in search for an alternative to the current global system of unequal socio-economic and political power relations that continues to threaten world peace, stability and justice. At the core of this unequal global power relations are skewed patterns of production, distribution and accumulation regimes that continue to enrich the few elites at the expense of the poor, vulnerable and weak who constitute the majority of global humanity.

The single most defining feature of these unequal global power relations is the current trade war between China and the United States which has far reaching implications for developing economies. This is particularly so with Africa, and South Africa in particular which shares trade relations with both China and the United States.

This war continues to find articulation in the midst of this lethal pandemic through persistent accusations and counter accusations between China and the United States of America – and this has the potential to weaken the global efforts against the pandemic.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic also coincides with the period when South Africa's economy is at its lowest peak since the 1994 democratic dispensation.

This has over the recent past been accompanied by massive job losses, the decline in foreign direct investment and the subsequent contraction of the national revenue which limits the capacity of the state to fulfil its developmental agenda.

Despite the contraction of the national fiscus there continues to be massive public investment in the evolving system of comprehensive social security in the form of child support grants, school nutrition programmes for children from indigent families, disability grants, old age pensions, free water and electricity supply, education, free health care, and free housing for the poor and the indigent. This massive public investment which is in line with the ruling African National Congress' commitment to create a better life for all has its own challenges.

Key to these challenges are competing imperatives for the improvement and expansion of the public infrastructure like roads and rail, telecommunications, and public health and the legacy of apartheid spatial and human settlement development planning. The concentration of many Africans in densely populated and undeveloped settlements and the declining state of public health infrastructure are among the glaring examples of this challenge which is made more acute in the wake of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The integrated national response through the declaration of a national disaster and the Lock-Down Level 5 in March 2020, and later the easing of the Lock-Down to Level 4 beginning 1st of May 2020 was informed by the need to balance the need to save human lives and the enabling of economic recovery. This first phase of national Lock-Down (level 5) came with a huge negative impact on the national economy as most companies could not afford to pay their workers due to the stalling of production and other companies had to completely shut down with massive loss of income by the majority of the people in the context of the existing reality of mass unemployment in the country.

Despite the Lock-Down and the need for social distancing, government has continued to function reasonably well and parliament has become increasingly active in fulfilling its constitutional mandate to oversee the national executive, especially in its management of the response to Covid-19.

The executive operational model to lead, monitor and oversee the national efforts against the pandemic has been reconfigured with the establishment of the National Central Command Team lead by the President and including key Cabinet Ministers and experts. This has enabled coherent leadership and communication of coherent messages to the public.

The government, under the leadership of His Excellency, President Cyril Ramaphosa has announced an integrated socio economic relief package that seek to alleviate the impact of the pandemic and the Lock-Down on business, workers who are laid off due to non-operation of companies, individual households and the unemployed.

The outbreak of this pandemic in our country has witnessed the resurgence of common patriotism, unity and solidarity that is unprecedented with across political parties, civil society organisations, organised labour and business rallying behind government efforts. According to the latest survey by the Human Science Research Council, more than 85 percent of South Africans understand the dangers of the pandemic and support government efforts towards its mitigation.

In many senses we have brought this pandemic upon ourselves by the way we have been treating our environment and by failing to adequately address social inequalities. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the lives of the super rich and dirt poor are inter-related. This pandemic has spared no class, race, gender, religion, ethnic group or any other social strata. And the super rich cannot live on this planet safely if the dirt poor do not have access to basic health care and other basic needs. The pandemic has become a leveller. And it points to the need for us to address the obscene disparities in wealth globally and within our countries. We need to learn the lessons together from this pandemic and work together, like never before, to address our climate and developmental challenges.

While our hope has and continues to triumph over despair, as a nation and country, we are confident of victory against this pandemic. The common national patriotism, solidarity and the spirit of Ubuntu that characterised this period should be consolidated for the battles ahead in the post-Covid-19 era.

United We Shall Triumph, Divided We Shall Fall, The Future is in Our Hands and It Will be What We Make of It!!!

Mr Seiso Mohai, ANC MP

And the Chief Whip of the National Council of Provinces in the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa