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More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Political Science Insights from the political management of COVID-19

It is often said that crises reveal who we truly are. This is as true for societies as it is for individuals. COVID-19 has revealed the bipolarity of South Africa; its deep inequalities and the schizophrenic character that this engenders. The society aspires to and revels in being recognised as world class, politically sophisticated, and socially caring. When this is rendered asunder by the structural realities of our social and economic context, the society quickly degenerates, manifesting in polarised political divides and reflecting embittered social actors embroiled in accusatory and ideologically laden contestation.

When COVID-19 arrived on our shores, our political authorities quickly assembled the medical fraternity's best minds to advise them on how to respond. The President very quickly engaged in consultations with opposition parties and with social actors including business, labour and civic players like religious leaders. A private-public partnership in the form of a Solidarity Fund was announced, and a number of billionaire families including the Oppenheims, Ruperts and Motsepes pledged a billion rand each. This was rapidly followed by government's decision to impose one of the most rigid and extreme lockdowns announced anywhere in the world. We collectively beamed at this decisive, world-class response. We bathed in the praise of the World Health Organization, of the recognitions of our public-private partnerships, and in the realisation that the political responses of our President and government were based on evidence, data and world-class science.

Then COVID-19 exposed the crude underbelly of South Africa. The lockdown exposed our deep economic divides which manifested in starvation, food riots and increasing incidents of malnourishment in the hospitals, while the affluent retreated into secluded suburbs or fled to their holiday homes. The President's leadership and the government's decisive action were quickly unravelled by the skills-compromised civil service and its acute inability to execute decisions like, among others, the payment of social support grants and the distribution of food parcels. It was also undermined when overzealous police and soldiers abused residents. The social pact itself began to erode as businesses closed, workers lost their jobs, and a variety of stakeholders, including academics and scientists, began to advocate for the opening up of the economy. As all of this occurred, the political consensus within the state and among the ruling and opposition parties quickly disintegrated.

Much has been written about these successes and failures. Yet little has been written about the thinking around the political management of these challenges. To be fair, there has been some public puzzlement about, and maybe even derision of, some of the actions of the state and its regulations on what can and cannot be bought, or when one is allowed to exercise. But beyond criticism at the silliness of some of these regulations, there has been very little attempt to understand what is going on and why it is happening. In a sense we seemed to have assumed that this is simply the result of the idiocy of individual ministers and government officials.

But is a deeper understanding not warranted? Is this not the result of the challenge of politically managing a pandemic in a deeply unequal society? The problem is that pandemics have differential effects in unequal societies. Managing it therefore will also have unequal consequences, thereby making government vulnerable to charges that its actions are more prejudicial to the poor than it is to the middle classes and the rich. This is a serious political conundrum in a politically polarised society, especially for a party that derives much of its support from the poor and marginalised.

One solution to this challenge is to be seen to be imposing as many penalties on the rich as is inflicted on the poor. This was particularly explained to me by Garth Stevens, academic psychologist and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). As Stevens puts it, you cannot manage the pandemic in local townships without closing the shebeens. But to do so, while allowing middle-class persons to sip on their chardonnays in their suburban homes, is politically unpalatable. The political response is therefore to impose a comprehensive purchase ban of alcohol on all citizens. Similarly, enforcing social distancing in townships without acting against suburbanites is again politically unpalatable. The result was a comprehensive ban on exercise and then its limitation to between 6:00 and 9:00. Regulation after regulation, however irrational, begins to take on a more significant meaning if it is understood from the lens of mitigating the political consequences of managing the pandemic in an unequal society.

But the challenge of managing the unequal effects of the pandemic is not limited to the politicians of the ruling party. It also infects the understandings of a variety of other stakeholders. This was brought home to me recently as we tried to shift to emergency remote learning at Wits so as not to lose the academic year for our students. This was quickly opposed by student leaders at Wits and nationally and even by some academics and politicians. In their view, social justice requires that if everyone cannot learn, no one should. This, in a sense, was the advancement of a vindictive populist politics of impoverishing all, very much akin to that advanced by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or that entertained in China during its Cultural Revolution.

The problem with this strategy of comprehensive imposition of penalties is that it provokes resistance across the board. Government is then forced to make concessions which are then perceived by some political stakeholders as capitulating to entrenched privileged interests. It therefore would be far better if government and other stakeholders adopted a more pragmatic, yet progressive, strategy to manage the pandemic. This would hold that social justice does not require a reversion to the lowest common denominator. Instead, it would hold that social justice requires an awareness of inequality, and a conscious attempt to mitigate its consequences through addressing the inequities. One example of this is how Wits and other universities established a computer loan facility, dispatched computers to thousands of students who did not have a device, and arranged 30G of data for students at no cost to themselves. Another is the ZAR500 billion stimulus package – which is in fact a relief measure – that the President announced with



the lockdown. This, in a sense, is a political agenda of constructive social justice that is directed to building the capacities of and lending a helping hand to disadvantaged communities, rather than advancing a vindictive populist politics of impoverishing all.

Another element of such a pragmatic yet progressive strategy is harnessing the managerial capacity of the private sector to effect decisions. One of the central challenges in this pandemic is the almost non-existent capacity of the state to deliver and execute decisions. Yet the one feature of highly unequal societies like South Africa is that capacity exists, but that it is not in the public but rather in the private sector. Would it not make sense to harness this managerial and logistics capacity of the private sector for the execution of decisions on the pandemic? Could the enormous logistics capacity in the private sector not be used to distribute food parcels, or should the technological and managerial capacities of the financial sector not be deployed for the payment of social grants and implementing other elements of the relief package? Separately, could the procurement and production capacities of the domestic and international pharmaceutical companies not be deployed for the purchase of testing kits and for the production of drug therapies and vaccines as and when these become available? Could our private hospitals not be enlisted to treat public patients on a cost basis? What is being suggested here is for the state not to be obsessed with centralising the administration and management of the pandemic in a context where its execution capacity is so limited. Rather it would be more prudent for it to harness the distributed capacities in the public, private and civic sector to enable an efficient execution of programmes to manage the pandemic.

The additional benefit of harnessing private sector managerial, logistics and technological capacities is that it could become the kernel of the social pact that the President has spoken of for so long. Social pacts are not always realised in grand negotiating forums. Rather they sometimes evolve in the actual practise of small day-to-day multisectoral partnerships in the heat of a crisis. This is what would in effect occur in this case. More importantly, such a social pact is going to be absolutely necessary if we are to manage the after-effects of the pandemic. Its economic, fiscal and

ultimately social consequences are likely to live with us for some time, and it is important that we be able to bring together the collective capacities and energies of South Africa to undertake the trade-offs that are going to be required and to manage the consequences thereof.

Finally, if this pragmatic but progressive agenda of change is to be successful, it cannot be undertaken by stealth. We cannot articulate in public a 'populist politics of impoverishing all', and then implement by stealth a pragmatic constructive social justice agenda. This kind of duplicitous political engagement of saying one thing in public and another in private has to come to an end. The President and those around him have to lead with courage, packaging an agenda of constructive change in a language that the broader citizenry would understand. They would have to also openly challenge more populist interpretations of social justice that seem to prevail in both the opposition and ruling parties. The executive leadership and stewardship of this pandemic must thus involve a politically educative and consciousness raising element as much as it would entail a management and execution of decisions that have been decided by the appropriate authorities.

South Africa and the world are in a challenging moment where a virus has not only brought life as we know it to a standstill, but has also exposed the dark underbelly of what we have become as a nation and a world. If we are to come through this with our collective innate humanity intact, then we have to manage this pandemic with less rigid ideology, and a greater pragmatism. This does not mean that we need to abandon our desire for social justice. Rather it requires a recognition that we operate in a world that does exist, rather than one we wish existed. It requires a constructive social agenda of lending a helping hand, rather than one of impoverishing all. Most of all, it requires managing the pandemic in a manner that enables it to serve as a bridge of praxis that would help us to reimagine and rebuild our country and our world in a more inclusive direction. Are these after all not the central lessons we need to learn from both the heroic social justice struggles of the last century and the more recent enriching, yet simultaneously marginalising, experiences of our contemporary era of globalisation?