

South Africa's Looming Vaccine Revolt

Lockdown division could destroy the fragile nation

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South Africans will find out this week whether President Cyril Ramaphosa will [consign](#) 60% of them to proxy house arrest by restricting public spaces to the Covid-19 “vaccinated”. It is a fraught decision; one that sets the terrifying powers of Big Pharma and the new class of warrior-scientists against African reality. It also risks the possibility of sparking one of the bitterest of vaccine wars.

Only 40% of the South African population has been jabbed against Covid — a slow take-up which is euphemistically described as “vaccine hesitancy”. It is anything but: it is enraged rejection.

There are a number of reasons why it is so hard to get South Africans to take the *umjovu*, the injection: appalling technical management of the outbreak, a prevailing scepticism towards science, wariness about the Government and a wide-spread apprehension by the poor and marginalised that this is at best another form of repression and at worst witchcraft. It is a dangerous brew in a country already in a state of great political, social and economic instability.

In common with the rest of the world, South African epidemiological estimates of fatalities at the outset of the coronavirus outbreak verged on the fantastical. Initial predictions were for between 87,000 and 350,000 fatalities in the first phase. There were 103. Two years later, with the virus in retreat, fatalities attributed to Covid (but by no means vouchsafed) are only now beginning to touch the lowest initial estimates.

Yet the South African Government imposed one of the longest and most severe lockdowns, supported by a baying national and social media. The decision has proved inappropriate in nature, premature in timing and catastrophic in impact. In a country where many depend on ad hoc daily or weekly subsistence wages, the sudden cessation of economic activity wreaked havoc amongst the poor and self-employed. A failing state was unable to deliver on its promise of subsidies, responsible policing or effective containment.

It took more than a year for the first subsidies to individuals or small businesses to start coming through. And even then they were erratic, corruption-prone, inadequate, and according to many attested [reports](#), distributed on a racially biased basis. Nearly a quarter of small businesses have gone to the wall and unemployment has rocketed.

An entire section of the population was effectively criminalised: in the first four months of the outbreak, 230,000 citizens, 0.4% of the population, were charged with infringement of the Disaster Regulations for breaking the restrictions, 311 of them policemen. All the charges were later dropped: the criminal justice system simply could not cope.

For every reported infection to the end June last year, seven citizens were [arrested](#) for breach of regulations; for every 100 infections, one police officer was [arrested](#); and for every 1,200 infections there was a High Court urgent application. Seven people had been killed in heavy-handed enforcement.

When [two doctors](#) working in a Government hospital were forcibly interned in one of the state's make-shift rural isolation camps, the High Court ordered they be allowed to self-isolate at home: it accepted the doctors' deposition that they stood more chance of dying from the conditions of incarceration than from the virus.

Small surprise, then, that the general population, particularly the poor, headed for the hills. Take-up of the crucial HIV-Aids retroviral dropped from 95% to 30%; [malaria](#) medication showed the same path. Attendances for tuberculosis screenings dropped by two-thirds, while consultations with GPs were down 60% and tens of thousands of [urgent surgery procedures](#) were postponed for the coronavirus patients who never arrived.

Emergency procurement of personal equipment, meanwhile, opened the door to the corruption lurking in every interstice of the State. The heir-presumptive to President Ramaphosa has [resigned](#): a state investigatory agency accuses him of directing a R350 million (£16.6 million) Personal Protection Equipment account to friends. The Gauteng Health Department, industrial heartland of the nation, is embroiled in a R560 million (£26.5 million) fraud inquiry. The female whistle-blower was [assassinated](#) within days of the inquiry's launch.

The begging question, whether President Ramaphosa, a decent man, is presiding over a ruling party in the throes of a Robert Kennedy versus The Mob has at least been definitively answered.

At the same time, a public service already perilously compromised by patronage, corruption, incompetence, and the dismissal of key white personnel for affirmative action reasons, went into a long recess. Two years later it has still not properly returned.

Enforcement of traffic licencing rules have also been in abeyance for 18 months as 500,000 drivers' licences await clearance. Estates cannot be closed, forensic inquiries completed, crimes prosecuted (including culprits in the so-called [State Capture project of former President Jacob Zuma](#)) and property transferred. More than half a million school children have quite simply not returned to school.

As for the burden of this failure of service delivery, it has been carried disproportionately by the poor, mainly black but increasingly also by white citizens, judged by the street corner beggars. There is little doubt that the effect of the containment strategies advocated by

South Africa's warrior scientists facilitated the [July Troubles](#) this year, which claimed 357 lives in a scourge of looting, arson and violence and has directly accounted for the drastic decline in ruling party support in last month's municipal elections.

South Africans have endured, if never condoned, the absurdities and atrocities of this misjudged, exploited and needless panic to date. The ebb and flow of the global debate about the course of the pandemic has been intensely watched here by the literate and online portion of the community.

They have followed, like many others in the world, the way the arrogant scientific certainties that locked up the world are dissolving in the face of measured science and empirical fact. They understand one cannot follow a "science" when the scientists are hopelessly at odds. They are aware of the abuse of both language and statistics, particularly the new phenomena of snatch-stats whereby mortality from other causes is snatched for Covid-19, or the natural path of an expiring virus is used to justify the efficacy of an antidote or Excess Deaths are annexed to justify a lost cause.

They note the irony whereby their government, correctly, tells the world not to be alarmed by the Omicron variant, while it simultaneously contemplates a grievous assault against the rights of its citizens to contain it, egged on by the usual howling suspects who demanded total lockdowns. Citizens have minutely followed recent [reports](#) of how Pfizer arm-twisted their desperate government into signing legal indemnities for its product: who ever heard of citizens being forced to be vaccinated when the supplier is absolved of any responsibility for the consequences?

Most South Africans are not conspiracy theorists but their history teaches them one certain thing: uncontained power always gets one screwed. And many feel screwed now by a confluence of forces (not a conspiracy) that — from Big Pharma, to Big Tech to authoritarian governments — seeks rent from this incomparable tragedy.

But another, far more important constituency of hesitaters and rejectionists exists. Those who take the time to talk to the black poor and marginalised are astonished by the extent to which, scarred by their lockdown experiences, they regard the current scare as yet another means to oppress them. Curfews, liquor and tobacco bans and the outlawing of political meetings under the guise of fighting Covid-19 support their case. And, for many, the *umjovo* is nothing less than *ubuthakathi* or witchcraft.

President Ramaphosa enters dangerous territory here. Take-up of vaccines is higher among the minorities for a variety of reasons and it is a section of the white minority who are the most vociferous supporters of vaccinate-at-all-costs. Banning access to public spaces will instantly translate, as it always does, into a political and racial rumpus. Pieces of paper that permit or restrict certain people's movements have a terrible record in this country's history: a bitter resonance for every black person.

Proven and restless forces in South Africa are today looking for chances to reignite the insurrection of July. These are people who do not protest by way of orderly marches, posters and pram-pushing. They seek only opportunity; the consequences brought by the human attempts to contain the pandemic is a revolution.

But revolutions always eventually consume their children. Time will certainly consume the reputations of the architects of this epochal tragedy: the scientists, pharmaceutical

companies, politicians and media. And if Ramaphosa isn't careful, it could also consume the fragile nation of South Africa.

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