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# **Lockdown 2.0 - South Africa's COVID-19 Response Has Been Brutally Anti-Worker**

Monday 26 July 2021, by [FOGEL Benjamin](#) (Date first published: 6 November 2020).

**What exactly did South Africa's government do with the time they gained through the two-month COVID-19 lockdown, except to brutalize its people?**

**South Africa has imposed one of the world's most draconian COVID-19 lockdowns, slapping hundreds of thousands of mostly black and working-class people with criminal charges. The authoritarian response highlights again the lost promise of the post-apartheid government and the deep disparities that still plague the country.**

Collins Khosa was killed for the temerity of enjoying a beer on his stoop. He was beaten to death and humiliated by South Africa's security forces who poured beer on his bruised and battered body to send a message to those who dared question their right to enjoy a cold lager during a difficult and stressful time. South Africa banned alcohol and tobacco sales at the beginning of its COVID-19 lockdown; alcohol sales are back as of June 1, but tobacco sales remain prohibited. South Africa has charged more of its citizens for lockdown violations than any other country in the world, over 230,000 of them.

Now the government responsible for Khosa's death and the pathetic whitewash of an investigation, which cleared those responsible soldiers from the South African Defence Force (SANDF) of all charges, has suggested that the slain Khosa got what was coming to him due to gender inequality (he lacked respect for two female soldiers they claim), and is launching its own Black Lives Matter campaign in solidarity with another black man who lost his life at the hands of the police — George Floyd. Khosa wasn't alone — thirty-six others were killed between March 26 and May 5 alone (ten in lockdown-related operations).

I don't think I really have the capacity to process this level of dishonesty and hypocrisy, but I'm going to try to offer some thoughts: we should not let revisionist accounts which divorce Khosa's death from the authoritarian, militarized prohibitionist lockdown, which saw hundreds of thousands of mostly black and working-class South Africans facing criminal charges, dominate.

I returned home to South Africa about a week before our lockdown started from Brazil, where I was living and working. President Cyril Ramaphosa's initial speech explaining the scale of the crisis and how he planned to address the pandemic won my and the overwhelming majority of South Africans' support. What a relief this calm, measured address and clear plan was compared to the homicidal lunacy of Jair Bolsonaro.

Now some months later, I along with many other South Africans are asking, what exactly did the government do with the time they gained through the lockdown? We know now that only 207 additional intensive care beds and 350 ventilators were added to public hospitals. We know that the government failed to provide emergency grants to those who urgently needed them, and then

boasted that they saved a measly R16 million (about US\$1 million) by knocking those “ineligible” from the roster. We know that millions went hungry as not enough food packages arrived, and those that did get fed were overwhelmingly done so by civil society.

We know that tens of thousands were arrested for daring to calm their nerves with a smoke or a beer during this unprecedented crisis. We know that Police Minister Bheki Cele boasted about the arrest numbers — no other country that I know came anywhere close to criminalizing that proportion of the population.

We also know those countries and regions in the developing world with the most effective responses to the pandemic — the Indian state of Kerala and the nominally communist government of Vietnam — were precisely so successful because they had high degrees of buy-in and mobilized their populations to work collectively to limit the havoc caused by COVID-19. Even if all of the criticisms against South Africa’s government don’t stick — as they almost certainly won’t — I don’t believe you can deal with the invisible enemy of a virus by criminalizing a huge part of the population.

In what seems sadly predictable, the virus has now reached and continues to transmit itself through all the places that continue to define South Africa’s brutal legacy of racialized inequality from the mines to the townships, and packed taxi ranks. We know that food prices have increased dramatically, and we also know that the price of a taxi ride has increased at a staggering rate. It has never been more expensive to be poor in South Africa. We also know that cabinet members tried to block NGOs from providing food aid during the crisis.

I voted for Cyril Ramaphosa and the African National Congress (ANC) in last year’s elections. And while I still don’t regret my vote, it was not out of any love for the president, but out of despair. Indeed, this despair is reinforced by the realization that although Ramaphosa enjoyed an unprecedented degree of political capital at the start of the pandemic, most of it has been squandered. There is still no real alternative to the ANC in South Africa. The opposition’s lackluster — and I’m saying it nicely — response to the crisis has further demonstrated it.

The Western Cape, where I am currently based, is the epicenter of South Africa’s pandemic. It is governed by the Democratic Alliance (DA). I have no idea why this is the case, but the party has veered from responsibility to political opportunism, to the usual brutality directed against the poor. The City of Cape Town has been dumping homeless people in an overcrowded camp in a lower-middle-class colored suburb where they lack access to infrastructure, far away from the white suburbs closer to the city. It also continued carrying out evictions of people squatting on city land in the middle of the pandemic, despite evictions supposedly being suspended under lockdown regulations.

Ironically, rather than the Left or the trade unions, it was left up to the DA to launch a legal challenge to the government’s failure to provide its promised emergency grants.

As for the Economic Freedom Front, the country’s third-largest political party, they have veered from calling for those infected to be quarantined on Robben Island to criticizing the government because the lockdown wasn’t harsh enough for them. The leaders of the party, well known for their love of expensive liquors, are now ardent prohibitionists.

Parliament doesn’t really exist at the moment; it has performed none of its oversight duties. Once again, much of governing and oversight has been outsourced to our judiciary. While our judiciary has a key role to play, it is a sign of the despair that we find ourselves in that basic duties, such as publishing a list of rules of engagement for the SANDF, were forced upon government by the courts.

We can't continue with the judiciary acting in place of an effective opposition or parliament. It is just not a sustainable political arrangement. This is not to slight any of the lawyers or judges that have done extremely important work. It is rather a sign that the ANC still faces few political costs for its screwups. The opposition doesn't have either enough power or ideas, and so once more basic tasks of government are taken up by the judiciary.

This isn't so much the usual form of lawfare or the judiciary being the preferred political battleground, but rather the judiciary is increasingly taking upon the basic task of government itself. Disbanding broken municipalities across the country is just one of those judicial prerogatives because the ANC simply cannot get its own house in order to get rid of criminally incompetent officials with real power. Until the government faces political costs for its screwups rather than simply legal ones, I'm unsure how much will change as the virus runs its course through South Africa. As always, the poor will be the brunt of it.

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About the Author

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**P.S.**

- *Africa is a Country*.

- <https://africasacountry.com/2020/06/lockdown-2-0:>

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