



South Africa’s Coronavirus Repression Signals Worse To Come

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On 27 April, South Africans “celebrated” Freedom Day—a national holiday that commemorates the first post-apartheid elections held in 1994—from the confines of their homes. The South African government has instituted one of the world’s most repressive coronavirus lockdowns, under which people are not even allowed out to exercise or walk the dog and the sale of alcohol and tobacco has been outlawed.

In responding to the pandemic, the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the party of Nelson Mandela, is showing just how repressive and authoritarian it can be, signalling a bleak future, especially for the poor. The South African police is using its new powers to control citizens in a most brutal way. The country’s Independent Police Investigative Directorate has confirmed that the police stand accused of killing five people in enforcing the lockdown. So much for saving lives.

“We’ve received reports of disproportionate use of force by security officers, particularly in poor and informal settlements,” says Georgette Gagnon of the UN Human Rights Office. Gagnon also reveals that 17, 209 people have been arrested in South Africa for breaking lockdown regulations. Happy Freedom Day indeed.

These reports should not be surprising when one considers the way South Africa’s president, Cyril Ramaphosa, chose to celebrate Freedom Day. Taking to Twitter, Ramaphosa revealed that he had a conversation with his “Brother, President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela” noting, “Our

two countries share a close and deep historical bond based on friendship, solidarity and cooperation.”

The president also tweeted that he “had a most wonderful conversation with His Excellency President Hassan Rouhani of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Presumably, the only reason Ramaphosa didn’t call Kim Jong Un is because the North Korean dictator has been mysteriously unavailable.

Using Doctors as Pawns

Also on Freedom Day, 217 members of Cuba’s Medical Brigade landed in South Africa and received a heroes’ welcome from President Ramaphosa and his cabinet. The Cuban doctors are supposedly going to treat Covid-19 patients. However, as Dr. Angelique Coetzee of the South African Medical Association pointed out, there are dozens of young South African doctors waiting for placements and being denied the opportunity to work. Moreover, government still refuses to allow the private sector to train doctors and prohibits prospective doctors from completing their community service and medical internships in the private sector.

In sending out its doctors, the Cuban dictatorship has ulterior motives. The communist regime treats doctors like commodities to be traded to earn valuable foreign exchange, a fact pointed out by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo when he criticized the latest medical exchange. World Bank data reveals that South Africa’s public health expenditure per capita of \$579 (measured in PPP-adjusted international dollars) exceeds the average upper middle-income country government health expenditure of \$534 per capita. However, South Africa’s health outcomes are significantly worse than those of its peers.

In South Africa, average life expectancy is 63.5 years, as compared with 75.5 years in upper-middle-income countries. The maternal mortality ratio in South Africa is 119 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared with 43 deaths per 100,000 live births in upper middle-income countries. And the infant mortality rate is 29.6 deaths (per 1,000 live births) in SA, compared with 11.3 in upper-middle-income countries. In short, the South African government spends more taxpayer money per person than its peers but delivers significantly worse health outcomes.

Repression Hurts Human Lives

According to the Heritage Foundation's Economic Freedom Index of 180 countries, Iran (164), Cuba (178) and Venezuela (179) are amongst the most repressive nations on earth. The Cato Institute's Index of Human Freedom, which measures economic freedom and others, such as freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom to travel, and freedom of association, ranks Iran and Venezuela similarly poorly. Given the complete absence of these basic freedoms on the island, the Cato index doesn't rank Cuba.

Perhaps, then, it's no surprise that the ANC has turned to the likes of Cuba and Venezuela. For more than a decade, economic freedom in South Africa has been steadily declining as the government has inserted itself more and more into economic and private life.

As freedom has declined, so has economic growth and opportunity, so that now more than a quarter of the population is unemployed and, thanks to the failing state education system, largely unemployable. When one accounts for all those who have simply given up looking for work, the unemployment rate rises to a crippling 40 percent.

There is now very little doubt that the ANC is failing and presiding over a slowly failing state. Like Venezuela, it seems intent on doubling down on bad policies. One of the most contested issues currently is the government's policy of Expropriation Without Compensation (EWC), which would allow the state to seize land without paying for it, trashing property rights enshrined in the country's constitution. Another is the ANC's move to effectively nationalize health care, even though state hospitals are failing and private clinics offer high levels of care.

The Country Behind the Mask

In responding to this pandemic, governments around the world have been showing just what they're made of. There have of course been many troubling cases of abuse of power in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in other western democracies. There have also been astonishing and inspiring examples of kindness and generosity from ordinary citizens, bravery and fortitude from health-care workers, and innovation from the private sector.

In the United States, the Trump administration is working on removing bureaucratic barriers to testing, treatment, and vaccine development. Think tanks and researchers are working hard to shine a light on just how destructive artificial barriers are in times of emergency. As the Competitive Enterprise Institute is showing, many of these barriers were never needed in the first place. When a law or regulation has to be suspended to save lives, you have to wonder if it was necessary in the first place.

While some democracies are responding positively to the extraordinary challenges posed by Covid-19, the South African government is confirming to the world that it is an enemy of basic freedoms. Unfortunately, South Africans should expect to see more repression from the Ramaphosa government.

Foreign investors are already wary of the country as it toys with EWC, nationalizing health care, forcing investors to pour private money into state-owned enterprises, nationalizing the Reserve Bank, a new wealth tax, among other growth destroying policies. Whatever the reasons for Ramaphosa's actions, there seems little appetite within the ruling elite for the kinds of policies that will deliver growth and secure the civil liberties for which many fought so hard.

The United States provides development assistance to the tune of more than \$450 million annually to South Africa. What sense does it make to send taxpayers' money, some of it borrowed, to a country that aligns itself with America's enemies and seems determined to destroy its liberal democratic institutions?

Let us hope Pompeo continues to speak out against the ANC's policies. It may be one of the few hopes ordinary South Africans have.