COVID-19 and Governance in Zimbabwe

By:

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As with virtually every country within the global community, Zimbabwe is fighting the effects of COVID-19. As of Friday, 24 April 2020, Zimbabwe had recorded 29 confirmed cases, 2 recoveries and 4 deaths. Amongst the deceased was a prominent journalist, Zororo Makamba. Makamba's death in a local hospital spoke volumes as it shed light on the state of Zimbabwe's health sector in fighting this deadly virus. Since the early 2000s, Zimbabwe has faced a tumultuous period which has seen the country go through dislocating economic challenges. These economic challenges have harmed the country's institutions with the health sector suffering the most. Several outbreaks such as the 2008 Cholera Outbreak clearly demonstrated that the country's health sector had all but collapsed. That has not been very different for Zimbabwe's politics that have been dominated by two political parties Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) who serve as the ruling party and the opposition respectively.

Since the 2018 elections the opposition, MDC, led by Advocate Chamisa has refused to recognize the Presidency of Emmerson Mnangagwa's. The opposition accuses Mnangagwa of having rigged the election. This political stalemate has contributed greatly to the dire economic state in the country. It is on this basis that Zimbabwe battles COVID-19. The governance systems in Zimbabwe pose a considerable challenge to the Southern African country's ability to weather the COVID-19 storm. In this essay, I draw on the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s definition of governance as being a "broad concept covering all aspects of the way a country is governed, including its economic policies and regulatory framework, as well as adherence to the rule of law." Zimbabwe's polarized political culture is crucial to understanding its politics. This polarization has adversely affected Zimbabwe's ability to deal with COVID-19.

Thus, when Makamba succumbed to COVID-19, his family issued a strongly worded statement that spoke to the challenges that the family went through in trying to receive treatment. The family's statement observed that a visit to a hospital in Zimbabwe would be tantamount to a death sentence. One of the key vehicles to curbing the spread of COVID-19 is washing of hands. This requires citizens to have access to potable water. Within the Zimbabwean context, water has been a scarce commodity, and this was one of the reasons that contributed to the cholera outbreak in 2008. In the capital city, Harare, the City Council in September 2019, stopped pumping water to residents because they had run out of chemicals to treat it. This meant that several citizens were forced to find alternative sources of water.

The Zimbabwean Constitution in section 77 states that "every person has a right to safe, clean and potable water and the State must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within the limits of the resources available to it, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right." The Zimbabwean government's failure to provide citizens with water makes it difficult to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the water being of paramount importance in the fight against the pandemic social distancing has also been mooted as a method through which the disease can be curbed. This is almost impossible within the Zimbabwean context because queuing for essential commodities is a frequent occurrence. Due to shortages of fuel, basic commodities and hard cash citizens are stand in long winding queues to gain access to these essentials. Ironically, citizens in many areas have had to stand

in queues for water as well. These challenges have made social distancing almost impossible in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, most of the population is employed in the informal sector. This compounds to the challenge of social distancing since informal work requires close personal interactions. This makes it more likely that the pandemic is likely to spread at an alarming rate. These challenges if analysed deeper are as a result of governance within Zimbabwe. The state of governance in Zimbabwe is best summed up through the manner the lockdown was implemented by Mnangagwa. To curb the spread of the pandemic the President implemented a three-week lockdown The lockdown exempted only essential services required to combat the pandemic. This exemption however only served to expose the government's lack of preparedness. Firstly, the government had not put in place measures to assist the workers within the informal sector. Secondly, the government had not been clear about how it would curb the disease during these three weeks. In neighbouring South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa was clear that the government aimed to test as many citizens as possible. In addition, the South African government has been transparent in reporting COVID-19 cases. This is not to say that South Africa had an excellent model (indeed, there have been criticisms about South Africa's preparedness), but I want to draw attention to the fact that South Africa had a relatively better plan to cater for its citizens whilst Zimbabwe seemed to have simply implemented a lockdown without taking into consideration the challenges that the general populace is facing.

Poor planning is further confirmed by the fact that the Zimbabwean government reopened Harare's busiest market, Mbare. The market was opened a few days after the President had implemented a lockdown. Worryingly, images from the reopened market showed that there was no social distancing again raising fears that the disease would have huge ramifications for the community at large. This example shows that the Zimbabwean government had not planned accordingly concerning implementing a lockdown. These images also suggest that it is difficult under the circumstances of crowded markets to exercise social distancing without a lot of public cooperation and discipline. Globally, the countries that have been, to a certain degree, able to effectively deal with the COVID-19 pandemic have done so through meticulous planning and execution. This has been lacking from the Zimbabwean government. It seems as if in many cases the Zimbabwean government can be

seen to be using a kneejerk reaction without actually taking into consideration the challenges that the country continues to face.

The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) filed an urgent court appeal after a citizen, Lucia Masvondo had been allegedly beaten up by both the military and the police. It is believed that the military and the police broke into her house whilst she was cooking, set dogs on her before assaulting her. Earlier in this article, the importance of understanding political culture in Zimbabwe was brought to the fore and this applies in this instance. Over the last few years, the culture of violence which dates back to the country's fight against colonial rule has continued to rear its ugly head as this case has shown. Irrespective of the crisis at hand, the security sector has maintained its brutality at a time when they needed to assure the masses that they are protected during an uncertain time. This is a clear indictment of Mnangagwa's presidency which has continued to use violence as a method of controlling the citizenry. One of the challenges in Zimbabwe concerning COVID-19 is the lack of trust that exists between the citizenry and the government. Zimbabweans do not trust the government, be it the results of an election or the use of state funds or the inflation figures in the country. This poses a challenge as managing the COVID-19 pandemic is based on data. The Health Ministry's data so far have been far from reliable. Since the lockdown, the opposition has called on the government to carry out mass testing to better understand where the country stands with the outbreak.

Even more concerning about the Zimbabwean government is that there has been a strong reliance on the private sector as a vehicle to fund the fight against COVID-19. In 2018 ZANU PF spent a considerable amount of money purchasing vehicles for traditional chiefs. The rural electorate is essential to the party's power retention, so this investment was geared towards that. It is almost mind-boggling that the party has failed to garner the same resources for COVID-19 and it has had to rely on several donations from philanthropists such as Strive Masiyiwa. It is clear where the ruling party stands, it only reacts when it involves its survival. If this is not the case, the party would rather wait for external support in the face of a crisis that could of epic proportions.

What is needed for Zimbabwe right now, is a unified approach by President Mnangagwa and opposition leader Chamisa. These two garnered more votes

than any other opponents in the 2018 elections. A show of unity by these two would go a long way in the fight against COVID-19. The two leaders have been at loggerheads with each other and this would be a good opportunity to come together to fight this crisis. Examples can be drawn from South Africa where the opposition was consulted. Julius Malema stood next to Ramaphosa when he addressed the nation to the outbreak. Such political maturity is what Zimbabwe currently needs to deal with COVID-19.

In his state of the union address, Chamisa noted that the government "must pursue a path that saves lives and protects livelihoods, preventing our economy from collapsing and serving our people during this trying moment." This remains pertinent to the survival of the Zimbabwean populace. Mnangagwa, before implementing a lockdown, should have consulted with all relevant stakeholders but did not do so and it is highly unlikely that the lockdown is going to yield positive results for Zimbabwe. The centralised notion of power that characterizes Zimbabwe and that has bypassed consultation with the opposition and the country at large is ill-suited in the fight against COVID-19.

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