

Government taxes SA's tolerance with pointless rules and shifting goalposts

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Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. Picture: SUPPLIED

When President Cyril Ramaphosa asked South Africans to go into a three-week lockdown, and then extended it for another two weeks, the people heeded his call. The lockdown had only one purpose: to keep people at home to flatten the curve of Covid-19 infections, delay the peak of our pandemic and give our health services time to prepare for it.

The government should go back and reread this purpose, because it seems to have been forgotten along the way. Whether deliberately or not is unclear. But, as my mother taught me, behaviour is truth, and the behaviour of the government is now speaking volumes.

The people of SA did not go into the five-week lockdown for it to be extended in a different guise. We went into lockdown to give our health services time to prepare. No more, no less. Yet we South Africans now find ourselves treated like naughty children, with the government as our self-appointed parents. The ministers of co-operative governance, trade & industry and police, in particular, have overreached their authority with the controls they have put in place.

Any successful democracy relies on a compact of trust between the government and its citizens. Before Covid-19 this compact was already fragile at best. The country had endured more than 10 years of state capture and as yet not one of its perpetrators has gone to jail.

For 10 years those currently in power protected former president Jacob Zuma. Every vote of no-confidence to stop state capture failed. This gave the actors in state capture space to steal more than R1-trillion from our economy.

The results are clear: crumbling infrastructure, decimated state-owned companies and crushing unemployment. Those now in charge of the lockdown regulations had jobs as cabinet ministers and high-ranking officials in the ANC's national executive committee during that period.

This virus and state of disaster has not given them a new moral authority. All it has given them is the right to collaborate with the citizens of this democracy to "flatten the curve" over a five-week period. The entire nation volunteered immediately for lockdown on that basis.

Did the lockdown work? According to health minister Zweli Mkhize, SA has an infection rate of 0.01%, with 98.1% of those infected surviving the coronavirus. By this weekend there were 6,783 confirmed cases, with 131 deaths and 2,549 recoveries.

Of course, the virus can be deadly and the full scope of the pandemic has not been fully measured. Globally there are now 3.5-million reported cases, with at least 247,000 deaths and 1.13-million recoveries.

We need to ask the health department if it succeeded in preparing the country for any future onslaught of Covid-19. This is important because the five-week lockdown has cost SA tens of billions of rand a day. It's important because we now have millions more of our people added to SA's dire unemployment figures.

Yet, after South Africans stoically bore the losses and distresses of the first five weeks of lockdown, the goalposts were shifted. Strange rules about what we could and could not do or buy were announced. Wide-ranging e-commerce is the logical way to stimulate as much economic activity as possible while keeping risks low, but this has been constrained as well.

Finance minister Tito Mboweni was in favour of allowing the sale of alcohol and legal cigarettes, but was overruled. Ramaphosa announced that cigarettes would go back on sale, but he was seemingly overruled by co-operative governance minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma.

Another counterproductive regulation was the exercise window of three hours in the morning, shortened to about 90 minutes by late autumn sunrise. This forced everyone to exercise at the same time and in the same places, yet police minister Bheki Cele expressed anger at the large crowds. These crowds were the direct result of the time and space constraints the government imposed. Allowing the full 10 hours of daylight would have thinned the crowds significantly.

I must emphasise my support for the government's efforts to contain the virus. I admire Ramaphosa and support Mkhize and his chief adviser on the pandemic, Salim Abdool Karim. But it is a mistake to abruptly change the compact the state has with the SA people.

To repeat: this five-week lockdown was purely to give our health services time to prepare. No more. No less. The government needs to understand that fact and work with us to create the best situation, not the worst.

• Abel is founding partner and CEO of creative company M&C Saatchi Abel and M&C Saatchi Group SA. This is an edited version of an open letter to the government he posted on social media.