

We're all being bullied – Cyril too – by a virtuous trio

In Woody Allen's 1971 movie *Bananas*, he joins a rebel group led by the charismatic and thoughtful Esposito in the Latin American republic of San Marcos. When they take the capital, Esposito changes. Power has gone to his head and he strides out to the top of the stairs of the national assembly to address the cheering crowd below.

"I am your new president," he announces. "From this day on, the official language of San Marcos will be Swedish. Silence! In addition to that, all citizens will be required to change their underwear every half-hour. Underwear will be worn on the outside, so we can check."

I was reminded of completely arbitrary rules and total power by the way President Cyril Ramaphosa and his cabinet are handling the coronavirus lockdown. At first it seemed reasonable, but the plot is being lost. Police and soldiers behave with impunity and the rules change constantly. Today you cannot transport alcohol. The week before you could transport it for export. Add Prohibition rules and the lockdown is rapidly losing the only thing that keeps it together – its legitimacy.

That's because Ramaphosa cannot balance the health and economic sides of the dilemma he is in. And in the face of his indecision (a cabinet meeting on Wednesday failed to decide anything) the rats are out to play. Much, but not all, of it revolves around the lockdown bans on the sale of cigarettes and alcohol.

With the rest of the world in lockdown, these bans are unique. They are the work, primarily, of three ministers – Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma who we know has a thing about smoking and drinking, Bheki Cele, who prefers policing a country where no-one can move, and Ebrahim Patel, who loathes big business anyway.

As the lockdown hardens (nothing this week loosened it) and testing (we are assured but can't see) "ramps up", Ramaphosa is nowhere to be seen. He is being bossed by the trio. By now we should have a clear map to exit the lockdown, a clear plan to boost and to open, in whatever reasonable way we can afford, the economy, and clear explanations of why citizens are being subject to the equivalent of Prohibition on alcohol and cigarettes.

Oh yes, people behave and drive badly when they drink and hospitals are much quieter now. I get the empty hospital now we are locked down. But the government says the lockdown so far means the virus will only peak in September, *five months* away. Why



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then can't I buy a bottle of wine to drink, still locked down, when I shop tomorrow? I didn't hear Ramaphosa saying he was going on a drive to stop smoking and drinking when he announced a state of disaster last month. He said it was to stop the spread of Covid-19 infections. Does he feel no burden of proof?

Instead we have capricious and sanctimonious ministers infantilising the rest of us with orders which have absolutely nothing to do with halting the spread of the virus. In fact, the chief adviser to the government on this epidemic, Prof Salim Abdool Karim, was at pains on television last Sunday, sitting next to the health minister, Zweli Mkhize, to say that *nothing* we can do will stop the virus spreading. In Asia they smoke like chimneys yet China, South Korea and Taiwan have come through Covid-19 intact.

I don't know whose dad smoked himself to death or whose drunken uncle behaved unspeakably when people weren't looking. But cabinet ministers are supposed to be adults. Why, for crying out loud, must Woolworths stop selling cooked chicken? What about processed meats? Or biltong. Hurry, hurry, more loopholes.

I've watched more than one video of Bheki "Mad Hatter" Cele barking at queues outside shopping centres and separating people to the right distance while *his entire entourage* right behind him bunches together like giggling wedding guests waiting for the bride's garter.

I support the lockdown, but we are taking it to extremes. There's already a price being paid in illicit distilling and brewing. What is being lost here is the fact that the economy pays for the health service. There is no binary choice to make, simply a balance to find. Even in the UK, where alcohol remains on sale, domestic abuse cases have doubled, as they have in SA. But the thing in common is the lockdown, not the drink.

We have a huge crisis on our hands and inventing spurious ways to keep companies and the economy shut while we wait until September for the virus to peak is obscene. Almost 2-million people will lose their jobs. People are starving. My village is feeding a thousand people a day because the government can't.

So whose future are we stealing here? The president should wake the bloody hell up.