

South Africa's pandemic resurgence fuels opposition to the ANC government

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The African National Congress (ANC) government of President Cyril Ramaphosa has been forced to implement partial lockdown measures as Africa's most industrialised country faces a third wave of the pandemic.

It takes place amid mounting anger over the ANC's handling of the public health crisis and vaccine rollout, systemic corruption within the ruling party and the escalating economic crisis.

South Africa has reported more than 155,000 new cases in the last week, double the number of the previous week, as the official total of deaths approaches 60,000 following two earlier waves of the pandemic that peaked in July 2020 and January this year. This latest surge has already affected four of the country's nine provinces and is likely to be far worse than the first two, coinciding with the onset of the southern hemisphere's winter.

South Africa has been the worst hit country on the African continent, even according to official figures that are widely believed to be a gross underestimate given the lack of testing and standardised reporting procedures for registering deaths. Excess mortality figures indicate that another 100,000 people, if not more, have died directly or indirectly due to the pandemic.

Gauteng province, the economic powerhouse of the country that is home to South Africa's two most populous cities, Johannesburg and Pretoria, is the centre of the latest surge, accounting for 60 percent of new cases. Speaking on Monday, David Makhura, Gauteng's regional premier, said, "The house is under fire" and hospital admissions were rising rapidly.

Ramaphosa was forced to admit the country's healthcare system is collapsing when introducing a few totally inadequate restrictions that include the closure

of non-essential establishments such as restaurants, bars and fitness centres by 10pm, a one-hour extension of the curfew, a 250people limit on outdoor gatherings and 100 indoors, and a ban on alcohol. He said, "Our priority now is to make sure there are enough hospital beds, enough health workers, enough ventilators and enough oxygen to give the best possible care to every person who needs it... The massive surge in new infections means that we must once again tighten restrictions on the movement of persons and gatherings."

One large hospital was forced to close earlier this year after a fire, while other large facilities have had to close due to a shortage of trained staff, with doctors making dozens of telephone calls to secure a bed for their critically ill patients.

The army's medical personnel are to be deployed to Gauteng province to help healthcare workers and carry out community testing and contact tracing. Last year at the start of the outbreak, the ANC government deployed more than 70,000 soldiers to enforce one of the world's strictest lockdowns with extreme police brutality in a bid to stem the fall in corporate profits and the country's pending insolvency.

Like most African countries, South Africa has suffered from the global shortage of vaccines. This has been exacerbated by the World Trade Organization's refusal, at the behest of the US, UK, Germany, France and Sweden on behalf of Big Pharma, to lift patent restrictions on vaccine production, as well as the "vaccine apartheid" whereby the rich countries bought up most of the available doses and far more than they needed.

With only about 500,000 people of the country's 60 million population vaccinated, mostly healthcare workers in a trial for Johnson & Johnson, the

government is belatedly trying to vaccinate 5 million people by the end of June with the Pfizer-BioNTech jab and 40 million people by the end of 2022.

South Africa has fallen behind many poorer countries, including neighbouring Zimbabwe and Angola as well as Ethiopia, after suspending the use of the Astra Zeneca vaccine in February and the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in April—over exaggerated safety concerns—while exporting vaccines manufactured under licence in the country. This was compounded last week by the need to discard two million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine manufactured in the US due to contamination of one its components, following a ruling by the United States Food and Drug Administration

Public anger is mounting over the endemic corruption of the ANC. Funds intended for the victims of the pandemic have been systematically looted by the party and its allies. Earlier this month, Health Minister Zweli Mkhize was forced to resign as an investigation into his alleged “impropriety” in the awarding of Covid-19 contracts gets under way.

Last November, Ace Magashule, the ANC secretary general and, as one of the party’s top six most important members, Ramaphosa’s main rival, appeared in court charged with corruption, money laundering and fraud in relation to the looting of public funds under former President Jacob Zuma. Some \$32 billion was reportedly stolen during Zuma’s period in office, with Magashule implicated in several other corruption scandals. Zuma is facing corruption charges over a 1999 deal arms deal brokered when he was deputy president.

Ramaphosa, the billionaire and former trade union leader who was elected president in 2017 making noises about opposing corruption, has overseen an escalating transfer of wealth from the working class to the top layers of society. The pandemic has exacerbated South Africa’s already serious economic recession that has hammered the mining and manufacturing sectors.

While the economy was in recession before the first coronavirus wave, the pandemic has vastly exacerbated the crisis, forcing five to six million people (15 percent of adults), mainly manual workers, to leave the townships and go back to their home villages. Many households ran out of money for food, doubling the rate prevailing in 2017, even as the government’s special

grant, set up to help those without social security, expired in January.

The economy contracted 7 percent last year amid the impact of the global recession, the fall in demand for minerals and raw materials, South Africa’s main exports, and lockdown restrictions. It follows a years-long decline in GDP per capita as growth failed to keep pace with the increasing population. The government’s budget deficit for 2020-21 reached 11 percent of GDP, with more than a fifth of the budget going to servicing debt that has reached nearly 65 percent of GDP.

With one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, South Africa’s most affluent 20 percent of the population take more than 68 percent of income. Income per capita in Gauteng is almost twice that in mostly rural provinces like Limpopo and Eastern Cape. According to government statistics, around one third of South African workers are now unemployed, trapping millions in poverty and contributing to the obscene levels of inequality that persist nearly three decades after the end of apartheid and the start of ANC rule in 1994.

The government faces a militant working class that is vehemently opposed to its pledge to freeze public sector wages—one of the conditions it must meet to reduce the budget deficit and secure new loans—with the courts upholding the government’s decision not to pay out a wage increase due from April 2020 under the 2018 three-year agreement. This is the subject of ongoing talks with the trade unions that, like their counterparts elsewhere, act to police the working class in the interests of the financial elite. The ANC itself faces industrial action as its staff picket offices throughout South Africa, with staff walking out in protest over the late payment of wages, insurance fund arrears, and the lack of a pay increase.



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