Covid-19, States and Societies

By the time the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, a number of countries were already well into preparing their emergency responses. Some countries have been exemplary in their handling of the pandemic while, at the other end of the spectrum, other countries have elicited concern for the shambolic manner in which governments have reacted or not responded at all.

There are countries in which governments have successfully persuaded citizens and residents that they are coordinating the best response the country can undertake – from getting the best available scientific advice through deploying state resources optimally to respond to the public health crisis and the economic disaster that lockdowns have occasioned. There are also countries in which combinations of factors, including political wrangling, top-down approaches by governments and the ineptitude of public institutions have resulted in populations that have been unpersuaded by the governments of their countries and hence have exhibited some measure of resistance.

Some commentators are declaring the outbreak of the pandemic a moment of the return of the state following decades of globalisation that had seen markets and global trade take centre stage in geopolitics. Indeed, many states, especially in the developing world, seemed to have come to play a support role to multinational corporations that could influence, and even dictate, policy direction. The Covid-19 moment is also being increasingly seen as the return of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and structural adjustment programmes as countries seek funding for their Covid-19 responses.

In many countries, there had already been growing disconnects between governments and citizens as demonstrated by widespread discontent with electoral processes as well as protests. The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have dramatically shifted the need for the state in many places as populations have looked to governments to direct crisis responses. Some governments have implemented lockdowns, at times adopting measures that have been contested as undemocratic.

Purpose

In this series, we aim to gather preliminary insights into how states have interacted with populations in their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to begin to identify some of the key factors that have contributed to/impaired the success of the different responses. While the pandemic is an exception, we aim to begin to understand its structural and systematic impacts in different countries. In particular, we want to ask the following questions:

- Have governments managed to persuade populations that the actions they are taking (lockdowns, curfews, etc.) or not taking are the right thing to do? What modes and devices have been used for public deliberation/persuasion, e.g. daily or occasional briefings (by which parts of the state or which experts?)
- How have populations responded?
- How has the form of the state prior to the Covid-19 outbreak and how it related to society informed/affected the state's response and people's responsiveness to the state's interventions?
- Has Covid-19 initiated potential long-term changes in state-society relations as some critics are suggesting? What are the prospects for democracy, state capacity and state-society relations as revealed by an analysis of the states' pandemic responses and civil society's responses to the pandemic and to the state?

We seek brief papers (1500-2500 words) written in an accessible style for a popular audience to be published on a website and, potentially, in book form at a later stage.

This series is aimed at stimulating discussion about the spectrum of pandemic responses by states and the respective populations' reactions to those responses. It is an attempt to lift our gaze beyond the nation-state even as some leaders retreat to nationalism and scapegoating other countries and global bodies.

Context
We are commissioning these papers from South Africa in order to put our country's response in comparative perspective with what is happening in other parts of the world. What we have observed in South Africa were initially high levels of acquiescence when the country went into a hard lockdown in March 2020. The government appeared to be moving quickly to ramp up the capacity of public health facilities, taking advice from medical experts convened into a Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) advising the Minister of Health. It also deployed the army, on a scale we have not seen on the streets since the end of apartheid in 1994, to enforce the lockdown alongside the police. Clusters of government ministers gave frequent televised briefings announcing interventions ranging from unemployment relief to food and water provision. There were frequent briefings by the President, the Health Minister, and many radio and television interviews by the MAC members, especially the Chairperson. There were also massive efforts by civil society and business bodies to respond alongside the state to a starvation crisis facing many people whose livelihoods had abruptly ceased. Coordinating bodies were set up rapidly and announced in the briefings. Regulations were published regarding everything from which shops were permitted to operate to who was permitted to be outside their homes and under what circumstances.

However, the cessation of economic activity caused serious hardship. The fact that South Africa is the most unequal country in the world became plain for all to see as precarious workers and unemployed people tipped into dire hunger in a matter of days. Gradually, frustration, disillusionment and anger began to creep in as cases of police and army brutality were reported and some of the regulations looked increasingly arbitrary and unnecessary. Court cases mounted as regulations and government actions were challenged by different parts of society, including citizens, political parties and parts of business. Moreover, people started acting in defiance of the government's directives, often putting at risk community members (such as the current decision by sectors of the taxi industry to fill minibus taxis to 100% capacity due to disagreements with the state over support measures, in defiance of the published regulations).

The government has gradually relaxed the lockdown through what it calls a 'risk-adjusted strategy' that has five alert levels ranging from the most severe lockdown at level 5 to no restrictions at level 1. The country is now at level 3 where business activity has largely resumed under strict health and safety guidelines, movement between places is no longer as heavily restricted, although there is no consensus on this decision.

We aim to put South Africa's trajectory alongside those of other countries. The countries listed below have been selected as the initial sample. They represent a geographic spread and a cross-section of approaches by states.

Bolivia
Brazil
The United Kingdom

Tanzania
India
China
New Zealand
Italy
Sweden

Deadline: 31 December 2020

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The Public Affairs Research Institute is a Johannesburg-based organisation that studies the effectiveness of state institutions in the delivery of services and infrastructure. We generate high-quality research to better understand the drivers of institutional performance in the public sector, and improve implementation of policies in relevant fields. We study the state and the relation between the state and society in order to advocate for improved institutional design and performance for better policy implementation to benefit impoverished and marginalised people.

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