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COVID-19's Impact on South Africa's Relations with Africa

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Recommendations

- South Africa must recognise that the impact of its domestic policy on African nationals living in the country is an important indicator of its leadership on African affairs.
- South Africa must comprehensively address institutionalised xenophobia by implementing policies that afford protection to migrant communities, displaced people, asylum seekers and refugees as prescribed by the South African Constitution and the various international obligations to which South Africa has acceded. Failure to do so will negatively impact South Africa's soft power and its ability to lead the continent, while threatening to overturn the many gains it has already achieved.
- South Africa must be vigilant in the face of growing incursions into the civic space by African governments who are using COVID-19 to quash opposition. It should consider the creation of an emergency working group within the AU whose focus is on responding to political crises that escalate as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

South Africa's Africa agenda has always been central to its foreign policy. However, the pandemic has again exposed some of the contradictions within its implementation, as the effectiveness of this policy is determined not only by the government's pronouncements on its commitment to the continent but also by its actions both inside and outside the country.

When South African President Cyril Ramaphosa assumed the chairmanship of the AU for 2020, he announced the country's priorities for the continent as part of the 'African Decade of Action'.¹ In his speech, the president outlined the steps that would be taken to implement the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) to ensure free trade, the 'Silencing the Guns' agenda to end conflict on the continent, and the African Peer Review Mechanism to ensure governance and accountability.²

South Africa's decisive stewardship of the AU this year has been exemplary in pivoting the continent to responding swiftly and comprehensively to the pandemic. While COVID-19 impacted the implementation of the AfCFTA and 'Silencing the Guns', South Africa's response to the pandemic has been a triumph of its commitment to multilateralism.

However, persistent xenophobia threatens this, as the pandemic has accentuated South Africa's deep cleavages. African migrants in South Africa continue to experience institutionalised xenophobia and live in constant fear of a resurgence of victimisation and violence as poverty and hunger worsen.

African solutions for an African pandemic

In the specific case of the pandemic, South Africa as chair of the AU has played an important coordinating role, beginning when Africa still had very low numbers of COVID-19 infections.

As his own country braced for a 'hard lockdown' with severe restrictions on movement and economic activity, President Ramaphosa moved quickly to coordinate continental efforts with the African Centre for Disease Control, the World Health Organisation and the AU Commission.

Regional task forces were established in the continent's five main regions (north, south, east, west and central Africa) with the overall responsibility for screening, detection and

1 AU, 'Acceptance Statement by South African President H.E. Cyril Ramaphosa on assuming the Chair of the African Union for 2020', February 09, 2020, <https://au.int/en/speeches/20200209/acceptance-statement-south-african-president-he-cyril-ramaphosa-assuming-chair>.

2 AU, 'Acceptance Statement by South African President H.E. Cyril Ramaphosa'.

diagnosis, infection and prevention control, and clinical management of infected persons through the African Task Force for Coronavirus.³

Together with the AU Bureau a COVID-19 Response Fund was also established and immediately secured \$12 million in funding. Special envoys were deployed to mobilise economic support for the fight against COVID-19 and by mid-June, largely through the efforts of Strive Masiyiwa, who was appointed as the AU Special Envoy leading global mobilisation of medical test kits and protective equipment for the continent, an innovative procurement platform was established that would serve the entire continent's medical supply needs to respond to the pandemic.⁴ All these efforts have bolstered Africa's preparedness and capacity to contain the spread of the virus.

One of the most important actions taken by the continent, and argued for by President Ramaphosa in the G20 virtual summit in March 2020, was the push for a debt service standstill for low-income countries.⁵ Furthermore, President Ramaphosa appointed Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr Donald Kaberuka, Tidjane Thiam and Trevor Manuel as Special Envoys of the AU to mobilise international support for Africa's efforts to address the economic challenges African countries would face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶

Despite the mammoth task of shepherding its own domestic challenges, rolling out an unprecedented economic recovery package amounting to over ZAR 800 billion,⁷ South Africa's focus on the continental agenda has remained steadfast. It has also refused to allow continental agendas to be derailed, calling instead for continued efforts to address Africa's developmental objectives – including continuing with the implementation of the AfCFTA.⁸

Support for 'Silencing the Guns' and the global ceasefire

Before the pandemic struck the AU's theme for 2020 was 'Silencing the Guns' and creating the conditions for Africa's development. According to Agenda 2063 adopted in 2013, Africa should have ended conflict by 2020. This was rightly recognised as essential, as Africa's development relies on it first attaining peace.

3 Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 'Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Outbreak', March 5, 2020, <https://africacdc.org/download/africa-joint-continental-strategy-for-covid-19-outbreak/>.

4 'Covid-19: AU Hails 'African Jewel' as Continental Medical Supplies Platform is Launched', *News24*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/covid-19-au-hails-african-jewel-as-continental-medical-supplies-platform-launched-20200619>.

5 However, the take-up has been less than expected. Countries are concerned about the impact on their credit ratings and access to financing if they take up the offer.

6 AU, 'African Union Chair President Cyril Ramaphosa Appoints Special Envoys to Mobilise International Economic Support for Continental Fight Against COVID-19', April 12, 2020, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200412/african-union-chair-president-cyril-ramaphosa-appoints-special-envoys>.

7 'COVID-19: Unpacking Treasury, Sarb's R800bn stimulus package', *CNBC Africa*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/africa/videos/2020/04/24/covid-19-unpacking-treasury-sarbs-r800bn-stimulus-package/>.

8 South African Government, 'President Cyril Ramaphosa: 2020 Africa Day', May 25, 2020, <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-2020-africa-day-25-may-2020-0000>.

An extraordinary summit on 'Silencing the Guns' originally scheduled for the end of May was postponed because of COVID-19. However, the AU Commission Chair, Moussa Faki Mahamat, echoed the call of the UN Secretary General for a global ceasefire to allow health and humanitarian workers to contain the spread of the virus. South Africa supported the call and while it lamented the fact that it was only in July 2020 that the UN Security Council finally adopted resolution 2532 that called for a global ceasefire,⁹ its own original objectives of its chairmanship of the AU in 2020 - namely to expand efforts on 'Silencing the Guns' and on the AfCFTA - were also delayed as fighting COVID-19 consumed the government.

South Africa should be careful to step beyond platitudes on the need to keep focus on Africa's peace and security agenda. Its remarkable achievements on COVID-19 illustrate that it can, when there is political will, move very quickly and substantively. In a time when countries have withdrawn and become more insular to address their domestic challenges, South Africa has shown how powerful multilateralism and cooperation can be. South Africa's role in the African response to COVID-19 may be the new benchmark by which we assess South Africa's leadership on the continent.

COVID-19 is introducing new elements to the security debate in Africa. With many countries declaring states of emergency and restrictions on civil liberties to curb the spread of the virus, many African regimes have capitalised on wider acceptance of these practices to enact further restrictions and suppress political opposition. The recent upsurge in state-led violence in Zimbabwe crystallises these trends in South Africa's neighbourhood but warning bells have been sounding in eSwatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania, and resounding as far north as Algeria and Tunisia.¹⁰

If these incursions on civic freedoms are not stopped, they will have serious consequences for political freedom. As states assume greater prominence in rolling out relief to citizens, regulating movement and policing regulations, less altruistic governments are instrumentalising these regulations to quash political opposition and corrode democratic systems.¹¹ South Africa could use its position as the current chair of the AU to highlight these malevolent political consequences of the pandemic by creating a parallel working group on peace and security issues that are directly impacted by the COVID pandemic.

9 Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), 'Statement by Ambassador Jerry Matjila, Permanent Representative of the Republic of South Africa, during the Security Council Video Teleconference (VTC) Meeting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Peace and Security,' July 2, 2020, <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2020/matj0702.htm>; As learnt during a telephonic interview with a DIRCO official on August 18, 2020, South Africa would have preferred the UN Security Council resolution to have included a reference to the need to ease sanctions on countries to help them fight the pandemic, a call that the UN Secretary General had also made in his statement.

10 'Protesters in Southern Tunisia Demand Government-Promised Jobs, Deplore Police Crackdown', *France24*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200624-protesters-in-southern-tunisia-demand-government-promised-jobs-deplore-police-crackdown>.

11 Arnold Tsunga, Tatenda Mazarura and Mark Heywood, 'Is Covid-19 in Danger of Killing Electoral Democracy in southern Africa?', *Daily Maverick*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-05-01-is-covid-19-in-danger-of-killing-electoral-democracy-in-southern-africa/>.

The persistent stain of xenophobia

However, South Africa's commitment to Africa is not only judged by its foreign policy engagements. It is also judged by how the rest of the continent perceives its treatment of African migrants in its own country. This has been a bone of contention for many years.¹²

Persistent xenophobia threatens any gains that South Africa makes in its African foreign policy. Inside South Africa the pandemic has accentuated South Africa's deep cleavages. COVID-19 has highlighted how dangerous unequal access to public goods like healthcare and clean running water can be. Stringent social distancing measures enacted to limit contagion have wreaked havoc in almost every sector of the economy, triggering widespread recession, unemployment, and indigence. African migrants in South Africa continue to experience institutionalised xenophobia and live in constant fear of a resurgence of victimisation and violence as poverty and hunger worsen. South Africa is not only one of the most unequal societies in the world, it is also one of the most violently xenophobic. It has a history of institutionalised xenophobia that prevents refugees and asylum seekers from accessing state resources, securing the right to live and work in the country.¹³

The most recent spate of attacks took place in September 2019 – a few months before South Africa was to assume the Chair of the AU. Backlash for the violence was so severe that even the AU Peace and Security Council condemned it.¹⁴ South Africa for the first time also immediately dispatched special envoys to Africa's capitals to smooth over relations. However, it is fair to say that African leaders are becoming increasingly frustrated with persistent attacks on their citizens and the South African government's inadequate response to stamping this phenomenon out.

Part of the problem remains that South African officials still refuse to admit that the problem is one of xenophobia – blaming criminality instead.¹⁵ Until official policy pivots to address the phenomenon, government responses will continue to be inadequate.¹⁶

There are warning signs that xenophobic sentiment is likely to surge again, risking another outbreak of violence. Warning bells first began to sound when the government, shortly after declaring a National State of Disaster, erected a 40-kilometre-long fence along its border

12 Alfredo Tjiurimo Hengari, 'Xenophobia Trivialises South Africa's Ambitious Africa Policy' (Policy Briefing 150, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, July 2016), <https://saiia.org.za/research/xenophobia-trivialises-south-africas-ambitious-africa-policy/>.

13 'South Africa: Failing Asylum Process is Exacerbating Xenophobia', Amnesty International, October 19, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/south-africa-failing-asylum-system-is-exacerbating-xenophobia/>.

14 AU, 'The 879th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council on Acts of Xenophobic Violence against African Migrants in South Africa', October 29, 2019, <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-879th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council-on-acts-of-xenophobic-violence-against-african-migrants-in-south-africa>.

15 Cuthbert Tagwirai, 'A new word is needed for xenophobia, but it's not criminality', *Business Day*, September 14, 2019, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2019-09-14-a-new-word-is-needed-for-xenophobia-but-its-not-criminality/>.

16 Aditi Lalbahadur, 'Xenophobia Erodes South Africa's Leadership Potential', *SAIIA*, May 27, 2019, <https://saiia.org.za/research/xenophobia-erodes-south-africas-leadership-potential/>.

with Zimbabwe – ostensibly to curb the exodus of Zimbabweans into South Africa. The fence, which is reported to have cost almost ZAR¹⁷ 40 million was erected in April and is being patrolled by South African National Defence Forces.¹⁸

Porous borders proliferate in Southern Africa and are points for cross-border informal and formal trade. Communities in the border regions surrounding South Africa depend on South African retail for their household consumption. Healthcare facilities that provide free primary care to children and mothers would also be closed off.

In the COVID-19 era, a worrying ‘South Africans first’ discourse is also emerging among politicians. In his address to media at the end of April, Finance Minister Tito Mboweni was reported to have said ‘People who want to approach banks or government for funding must demonstrate that they do have a labour market and employment policy that favours South Africans.’¹⁹ This, coupled with new regulations from the Department of Employment and Labour that will restrict the number of foreigners employed in agriculture, tourism and hospitality (including restaurants) and private security – reflects a shifting tone towards foreigners by government policymakers.²⁰ While many countries are adopting ‘support local’ campaigns to resuscitate their flailing industries, implementing regulations on foreign employment as mentioned above is potentially explosive.

Moreover, foreigners have been excluded from recovery measures designed to buffer indigent communities from starvation. As part of his economic recovery package, President Ramaphosa offered a special COVID-19 grant of ZAR 350. Refugees and asylum seekers were prohibited from qualifying for this until human rights activists took the matter to court. On 18 June 2020, the Pretoria High Court declared that the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers from this grant was unconstitutional, compelling government to overturn this policy.²¹

Re-drawing the social contract: Rooting out corruption, building trust

The prevalence of xenophobic violence in township and urban poor communities illustrates how closely it is linked with competition for jobs and livelihoods. As this competition increases in an economy that has already shed 2.9 million jobs since lockdown was

17 Three-letter code for the South African Rand

18 ‘A look at South Africa’s R37 Million Border Fence with Zimbabwe – Built to Stop the Spread of the Coronavirus’, *BusinessTech*, May 11, 2020, <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/396733/a-look-at-south-africas-r37-million-border-fence-with-zimbabwe-built-to-stop-the-spread-of-the-coronavirus/>.

19 Michael Cohen and Prinesha Naidoo, ‘South Africa Must Put Locals First Post Virus, Mboweni Says’, *Bloomberg*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-24/south-africa-must-put-locals-first-post-virus-mboweni-says>.

20 South Africa is Getting a New National Employment Policy – Including Rules Around Hiring Foreigners’, *BusinessTech*, July 21, 2020, <https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/418585/south-africa-is-getting-a-new-national-employment-policy-including-rules-around-hiring-foreigners/>.

21 Estelle Ellis, ‘Special Permit Holders and Asylum Seekers in SA Must Get Covid-19 Grant, Court Orders’, *Daily Maverick*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-19-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-sa-must-get-covid-19-grant-court-orders/>.

imposed,²² (and that is set to contract by 7.1%²³), xenophobic violence is likely to increase. Economic recovery is therefore an intrinsic pre-requisite if South Africa is to hope to comprehensively address the problem.

In his April address to the nation, President Ramaphosa acknowledged that a 'new social compact among business, labour, community and government' would be necessary to ensure inclusive growth and to restructure the economy.²⁴ This call infers the redrawing of the agreement between state, its institutions and functionaries, and citizens and is something that South Africans sorely need in the wake of debilitating corruption scandals that some estimates put at almost one third of the country's GDP: ZAR 1.5 trillion.²⁵ Much like skewed access to healthcare and basic sanitation, corruption has exposed South Africa's vulnerabilities and the pandemic has made this situation more acute.

This is in large part because South Africa has been unable to curb inveterate graft that arguably reached a zenith during the second term of former president Jacob Zuma's presidency – when current president, Ramaphosa, was his deputy. Concerns about the siphoning of money intended as relief for citizens in the wake of COVID-19 have been amplified by news reports of local politicians hoarding food parcels, social security grants being maladministered, money from the Solidarity Fund (the special emergency COVID-19 fund established by government) being improperly allocated, and the flourishing of improper tender deals – one involving the president's own spokesperson, Khusela Diko.²⁶ Curtailing this will require swift action by prosecuting authorities and corruption experts have called for greater transparency over procurement procedures to facilitate this.²⁷

Government's unprecedented ZAR 800 billion economic recovery package includes a recently approved \$ 4.3 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which will expose it to greater international scrutiny.²⁸ To qualify for the loan, which was disbursed from the bank's Rapid Financing Instrument, South Africa has agreed to stabilise its finances. This will entail implementing the decisions taken in its October 2019 medium-term budget to reduce government spending, slash public sector wages and improve management of state-owned enterprises in addition to implementing measures to stimulate the economy.

22 Lameez Omarjee, 'Covid-19 Cuts SA Employment Figures by Three Million, Women Worst Affected – Study, *Fin24*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.news24.com/fin24/economy/covid-19-cuts-sa-employment-figures-by-three-million-women-worst-affected-study-20200715>,

23 World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects: Sub-Saharan Africa* (June 2020), <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/888831588788355661/Global-Economic-Prospects-June-2020-Regional-Overview-SSA.pdf>.

24 'Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on Further Economic and Social Measures in Response the Covid-19 Epidemic,' April 21, 2020, Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on further economic and social measures in response the covid-19 epidemic

25 Marianne Merten, 'State Capture Wipes Out Third of SA's R4.9-trillion GDP – Never Mind Lost Trust, Confidence, Opportunity' *Daily Maverick*, March 01, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-01-state-capture-wipes-out-third-of-sas-r4-9-trillion-gdp-never-mind-lost-trust-confidence-opportunity/#gsc.tab=0>.

26 'Khusela Diko Takes Leave After R125m PPE Scandal Linked to Husband', *IOL*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/khusela-diko-takes-leave-after-r125m-ppe-tender-scandal-linked-to-husband-cfd793c8-99dc-4416-87f0-fd32ef6f18b7>.

27 Caroline James and Karam Jeet Singh, 'Fighting COVID 19 Also Requires Intensifying Anti-corruption Efforts, *Corruption Watch*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/fighting-covid-19-also-requires-intensifying-anti-corruption-efforts/>.

28 South Africa has also been granted a \$1 billion loan from the New Development Bank, and a loan of \$288 million from the African Development Bank. It is also expected to receive a loan from the World Bank. The conditions attached to them could also enhance international scrutiny and public accountability.

An increasingly pressured domestic environment will impact the country's continued leadership commitments to the continent. While it may be tempting to adopt a 'South Africa first' stance, this approach is myopic because of the economic potential that the continent holds for the country's recovery. But to successfully grasp the opportunities, South Africa will have to ensure that it does a better job of protecting the rights and ensuring the safety of members of the African diaspora within its borders. Failure to do so could have catastrophic consequences for the country's ability to reach its full leadership potential in Africa.

Conclusion

COVID-19 once again proves the axiom that crises bring out the best – and worst – in us. The same can be said of South Africa's leadership of the continent during this time. Where there has been strong political will and clear focus, South Africa has modelled collaborative effort, collective action and clear leadership. This has resulted in stunning responses by the continent to coordinate its efforts to address the immediate threat posed by the virus.

However, its leaders must realise how vulnerable it is to the resurgence of xenophobic violence and the further marginalisation of African migrant communities within its borders and act in ways to mitigate this. Xenophobia will remain one of the biggest threats to the country's leadership potential and economic growth prospects on the continent and will persist unless it is adequately and directly addressed.

Given the bleak economic forecast for the country, South Africa cannot afford fumbles that would result in it further losing its foothold. There has never been a more critical juncture for the democratic nation because if it fails, the effects are likely to last many years – if not generations to come. This will impact the twin imperatives to lead the continent and prevent growing instability at home along xenophobic/ethnic lines.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also spawning political crises that the country, as chair of the AU, and as a leader on the continent, is obligated to address. Decisive leadership, reining in political elites who are abusing the pandemic to further their personal agendas at the expense of their people, is what the people of Africa need to help them get through these tough times.

In this way, South Africa can use the pandemic to show Africa and the world the best of who we are.

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Cover image

A foreign migrant sits on his bed inside a boarded up room occupied by two people on the upstairs floor in a building in the Kwa Mai Mai area in Johannesburg, on May 14, 2020. Over 50 people, residents of the same building and mostly foreign nationals are currently unemployed because of the lockdown imposed by the South African authorities to curb the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Dozens of them are unable to feed themselves, as the only charity providing them with food has not brought any in several days (Marco Longari/AFP via Getty Images)

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