

Can we start recovering from the epidemic of corruption in South Africa?

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Introduction

Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres' call for 2022 to be the 'year of recovery for everyone' can be seen as idealistic and unrealistic through a socio-economic and political lens of South Africa. Not only do we have the COVID-19 pandemic to deal with, but we also have a local epidemic of deeply rooted corruption and divisions in our own government. This continues to hinder us from socio-economic recovery and obstruct the road that leads to the return of normality.

Corruption related to the COVID-19 pandemic

In 2020, the ANC-led government, working closely with the private sector, organised labour, community and central bank, directed a COVID-19 support package of R500 billion at the then contracting economy and intense rise in unemployment (Lukani 2020). President Ramaphosa promised that R20 billion of this would go towards financing healthcare efforts (Beauregard Tromp 2020). Additionally, this support package was intended to be used to distribute food parcels for those in need and increase the social grants of more than 16 million beneficiaries. It was also meant to be used for the Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (TERS) to aid those individuals whose salaries were affected by lockdown regulations and the pandemic (Corruption Watch 2020). The end goal was to boost the economy and support the people of South Africa.

Corruption Watch warned us in March of 2020 that the relief package of R500 billion presented the perfect opportunity for corrupt and greedy politicians and officials to pocket more money meant for the South African people (Corruption Watch 2020). They were

correct. Government officials garnered a suspected R14.8 billion, into their own pockets by doing business with opportunistic companies pretending to help the people (Heywood 2021). For example, companies that normally operated as IT service providers, engineering firms and building contractors suddenly ‘supplied’ personal protective equipment (PPE). Conveniently, these companies were the ones chosen as suppliers of PPE to aid the fight against COVID-19 (Corruption Watch 2020). It has also been found that the TERS was also grossly abused on a grand scale by private firms and companies that claimed relief on behalf of unknowing or deceased employees (Corruption Watch 2020).

Acknowledgement of corruption by the ANC

During the ANC’s annual statement in 2021, President Ramaphosa himself acknowledged the rampant corruption in his own party. President Ramaphosa said the ANC had been ‘weakened by corruption, resistance to renewal and controversies involving ANC leaders’ (Harper 2021). This statement bears witness to the great divisions within the ANC itself and the disastrous effect it has on the government of the country. To specify, these divisions point not only to physical divisions in the party but also to corruption. President Ramaphosa has faced backlash from other members of the ANC because his ‘clean-up’ plan threatens to expose corrupt officials, leading to greater internal divisions and conflict. We can see the far-reaching consequences of these divides in actions such as Minister Lindiwe Sisulu’s attack on the party, the Constitution and the judiciary stating, ‘The most dangerous African today is the mentally colonised African. And when you put them in leadership positions or as interpreters of the law, they are worse than your oppressor. They have no African or Pan African inspired ideological grounding. Some are confused by foreign belief systems’ (Sisulu 2022) showing a major lack of self-awareness on her part. Other divisions are between the supporters of former President Jacob Zuma and the current President Cyril Ramaphosa, which has caused conflict and slowed the efforts of corruption clean-up. This was evident during the recent riots and looting in many areas across the country. The riots were caused by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma. The imprisonment sparked outrage among the citizens of South Africa and the large faction within the ANC that supports and sympathises with Zuma, even after the allegations, investigations and reports of corruption and state capture. It must be noted, however, that it was not just president Zuma that was the subject of investigation by the Zondo commission with regards to corruption and state capture. Former Director-General of Correctional Services, Linda Mti, and former health minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize, as well as other well-known government officials still left over from the Zuma era, have been exposed as having succumbed to corruption (Magome 2021).

The divide inside the ANC can further be seen in the fact that there are essentially two centres of power within the ANC, one is residing at the ANC headquarters and the other

in the state presidency. We know that the Secretary-General of the ANC, Ace Magashule, has been involved in constant revelations and scandals that tie back to corruption. This is potentially why he and other members of the party have spoken out so strongly against President Cyril Ramaphosa because of his efforts to 'clean-up' government-owned enterprises. Ace Magashule is also a known Zuma supporter and this then further widens the divide present in the ANC. The other problem is that Ace Magashule is the Secretary-General of the ANC and has a major influence on what happens in the party (Suttner 2019).

These phenomena are all side-effects of the great divide within our government, a divide that runs deep with apathy and corruption and an astonishing lack of solidarity, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. It is clear that this divide has caused not only a disconnect within the party itself but also with the people of South Africa, as we saw the ANC losing their 50% majority for the first time since 1994 during the November 2021 local elections.

Record high unemployment

The unemployment rate of South Africa reached a record high in the second quarter of 2021 according to data from Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS). Discouraged employment-seekers increased by 5.9% and persons who were economically inactive for reasons other than being discouraged decreased by 4.5% between the two fiscal quarters of 2021. This resulted in a net decrease of 386,000 people in the population who were not economically active. As such, unemployment rates went up from 32.6% in the first quarter of 2021 to 34.4% in the second, reaching a record high since the start of the QLFS in 2008 (BusinessTech 2021).

These figures reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigation steps taken by the government. Instead of stimulating job creation and increasing social grants and providing sufficient stimulus checks, the R500 billion was pocketed by government officials who did dubious deals with opportunistic companies, further dividing the already enormous wealth gap we have in South Africa. The ANC should make serious reforms inside the party, and get rid of known corrupt officials and those who are not capable of doing their job. The seriousness of security around government funds and the regulation of tenders and grants should be emphasized and more secure measures for prevention of theft, fraud and corruption should be put into place.

Conclusion

While it may seem that the majority of the world can see some form of hope for recovery and a return to civility as we knew it, the undeniable truth for South Africa is this:

We still have a long way to go to reach OUR year of recovery.

We saw corruption on a grand scale, political divisions of extraordinary proportion which led to the inevitable downfall of the government's COVID-19 relief strategies, resulting in unequipped hospitals, unemployment of historic proportions as well as a widening wealth gap.

The sentiment of the UN Secretary-General is an idealistic one at best for South Africans in 2022. We first must irradiate the epidemic of corruption before we can recover from the pandemic of COVID-19.

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