

# Mozambique and Covid-19: is government transparency on the rise?



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For Mozambique, one of the poorest countries in the world, the coronavirus pandemic is an additional stone in already tight shoes. In what has been dubbed as a perfect storm, the country is dealing with two foci of violence, one in the centre of the country and one in the north. It is reeling from a sovereign debt acquired illegally, without the approval of the parliament, which has plunged the country in a recession, and made it lose foreign investment and much needed support to the national budget from

its main donors.

To compound onto all other crises, cyclones Idai and Kenneth ravaged the central and northern region of the country in March and April last year, leaving in its aftermath over a thousand dead, the infrastructure of the second largest city in the country nearly destroyed, and hundreds of people displaced.

After an election marred by violence and allegations of electoral fraud in October last year, the government is facing weak legitimacy and fierce criticism of all its decisions. The Catholic Mozambican Conference of Bishops warned that the irregularities fuel contestation by the opposition, and seriously compromise the chances of peace and reconciliation. Civil society was particularly critical of the alleged role of the National Election Committee in facilitating the electoral fraud.

Up to now, the preferred way of addressing the public has been presidential rallies, even outside election campaign periods. The ongoing conflict in the resource-rich Northern province of Cabo Delgado has been dealt with a heavy-handed military response and a gag on information reporting. This has resulted in the imprisonment and alleged torture of journalists and researchers who have tried to cover or study the events.

## **A different attitude**

However, in the Covid-19 crisis, the Mozambican government seems to be turning over a new leaf, opening up the possibility that its image will improve and much needed legitimacy will be

gained. The country's authorities have showed calm and sobriety, and reacted gradually but timely to the pandemic, with frequent messages to the public, something rarely seen in the recent past.

On 6 March this year, after the first case was reported in South Africa, President Filipe Nyusi urged Mozambicans to follow the preventive measures set by the health authorities. Borders were reinforced for monitoring potential infection cases.

On 14 March, before any case had been detected in Mozambique, the president gave a televised address to the nation, and declared that gatherings of more than 300 people were being suspended, as were non-essential state visits. Mandatory quarantine was enforced on travellers coming from high-risk countries. All arrivals into the country were to be screened. People with serious symptoms had to go in isolation.

This transparency has not prevented criticism. On social media, some said that the measures were not strong enough, others thought that they were too vague and could not realistically be implemented. There were rumours about people paying to circumvent checks at the airport, or arriving from high-risk countries and not staying in quarantine.

It is true that the government does not have the means to follow up on quarantined people, despite its best efforts, and has to rely on people's self-restraint and compliance with the health authority measures.

But the situation is also the historical result of structural

adjustment programmes carried out in the 1980s and 1990s that have severely hampered the state's capacity to protect the health of its citizens. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank imposed harmful neoliberal policies that led to major cuts in public budgets, including health, and the liberalisation of the economy in favour of foreign corporations.

## **State of emergency**

On 20 March, with the number of infections increasing in South Africa, the president again addressed the nation and announced new measures. These included the suspension of issuance of visas and cancellation of existing visas. Quarantine was extended to all inbound travellers, irrespective of origin. Public and private schools were closed, and gatherings of more than 50 people banned.

Additionally, a technical committee was created, which is chaired by the Minister of Health. This time, people wondered about measures regarding those who did not require a visa to enter Mozambique. The omission of measures regarding public transport was also voiced as a concern.

To fight rumours and misinformation, the Minister of Health committed to updating the public regularly. This has been done daily since 21 March. The National Health Institute has also set up a phone line, as well as a website with information and updates about the situation in the country, which was widely applauded.

The governments of Portuguese speaking Angola and neighbouring South Africa have been used as a reference for more

forceful action. Angola closed its borders on 20 March, before it had any recorded case. On 15 March, with around 60 cases, South Africa closed most of its borders and declared a national state of disaster.

Thousands of Mozambicans returned from South Africa, before all borders with the neighbouring country were closed. This number has not been added to the number of people in quarantine on the official website, despite authorities saying that they would monitor these new arrivals.

Soon after President Nyusi declared a state of emergency in Mozambique for 30 days, starting from 1 April. In an unprecedented gesture, the measures to implement the state of emergency were discussed in parliament, where the ruling party could have simply used its majority to ignore the opposition.

The latest regulations add several more steps to curb the spread of the disease, without embarking on a full lockdown. All public and private events, including religious gatherings, have been banned. Mobility has not been restricted, but plans are in place to curb movement if the cases increase exponentially.

Businesses are open, but have to guarantee social distancing and hygiene and disinfection measures. Schools remain closed, and are now joined by universities. People have been advised to stay at home as much as possible.

Staff of public and private offices alike are required to alternate office hours, to avoid crowding and to maintain social distance.

Larger buses can circulate only at a third of their capacity, and minibuses can only operate at capacity – in normal times, the latter often embark more passengers than they should. Motorbike and bicycle taxi services were initially banned, but this was reversed after protests. Markets' opening times have been shortened.

The president called this situation level three out of four in the response to the pandemic. Phase four would be a full lockdown.

Actions have been taken on the economic front as well. The governor of the Central Bank started by cutting the benchmark interest rate to help the economy, and then added additional measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. However, issues of inequality remain unaddressed, with a lack of clarity regarding the informal sector, where people survive on daily earnings and have no safety net.

## **A path to transparency and trust**

The much feared first infection case was announced by the Minister of Health on 22 March: a man over 75 who had recently arrived from the UK. Speculations abounded about the Covid-19 status of the mayor of Maputo, who was pictured seating next to Prince Albert of Monaco in the UK, who tested positive for coronavirus.

When two more cases were detected, one of them identified herself as the mayor's spouse. The mayor was then criticised for allegedly not respecting quarantine and potentially infecting other

people. These debates also fuelled the perception, as in other countries around the world, that the rich and privileged might behave irresponsibly, and not take into full account the damage the virus can inflict on poorer and less privileged citizens.

In the past, the government often deployed its supporters to attack critics, but this time they are not doing so, and they seem to be taking the protection of freedom of expression more seriously.

On 24 March, the Islamist guerrilla in Northern Mozambique attacked and took over Mocímboa da Praia, a town with some 30.000 people. It was the first time they attacked a major town, having previously targeted small and remote villages, or organised ambushes of vehicles on tertiary roads. Several major attacks followed in the subsequent days.

In an unprecedented gesture, the police spokesperson admitted that the town had been captured by the insurgents. Previously, official statements had either been boastful of government victories, or had denied the gravity of the situation. The Defence Minister seemed to be finally open to speaking with journalists about the conflict.

As the president swore in three new members of the National Commission On Human Rights, he also acknowledged the challenges posed by the government response to the armed attacks and to Covid-19, and invited the commission to investigate violations.

The work of the commission will be all the more important, given the extraordinary measures that have been taken to counter the

spread of rumours and fake news during the state of emergency. While these measures are needed to counter disinformation campaigns that could have tragic consequences on people, civil society needs to be watchful that these policies are not used to curb legitimate critical voices.

Criticism of government decisions and actions will inevitably continue. There is still limited confidence in the government's ability to contain the spread of the virus or deal with a potential outbreak. The government needs more resources to expand their testing capacity and detect as many cases of Covid-19 as possible.

Despite this, social distancing and home isolation have been greeted with favour by many sectors of the population. The major religious denominations have found digital ways to connect and continue worship. The number of people on public transport has gone down, and handwashing facilities have been installed in bus terminals.

Many businesses, especially in the tourism and hospitality industry, have started to feel the negative economic effects, and decided to close. Still, the government warns that not enough is being done to contain the virus, and it is possible that the state of emergency will be extended.

An uncontrolled spread of Covid-19 could have tragic consequences for Mozambicans, and the state needs to continue doing everything it can to avoid such a scenario.

Yet, this crisis also offers an opportunity to government to

consolidate its newly-found transparency and openness, in ways that can increase legitimacy and public trust in the long-term, beyond the pressing issues brought about by the pandemic.

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