



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, March 2021

Protests during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa

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Abstract

Mobility restriction in South Africa led to protests by health workers, taxi drivers, NGOs and others against job loss and government corruption.

Keywords

Protests, immobility policies, COVID-19, Lockdown

To be quoted as:

Tardzenyuy Thomas, Mengnjo. 2021. Protests during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.8077

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The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has been met with strikes and protests in spite of policies against such crowd gatherings. This has been the case of South Africa ever since the first case was reported on March 5, 2020². On March 23, the President declared a 21-day national lockdown³.

This lockdown, in particular, was marked by protests in some places around the country, such as Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Most protests during this time were over allegations of corruption and mismanagement of funds linked to the fight against COVID-19. An average of eight protests per day occurred in South Africa in July 2020, the highest in a single month since 2013. These protests — organized by health workers, NGOs, minibus drivers, and everyday citizens — exposed the socioeconomic problems resulting from poor implementation of policy measures. It is against this backdrop that Patel Riyaz, writing for theSouthAfrican.com, concluded:

*“The country is currently caught in myriad corruption scandals linked to politically connected people stealing funds meant to help tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. So we can expect to see increasing numbers of angry South Africans taking to the streets to express their frustration and disgust at a political elite believed to be out of touch with the plight of ordinary people.”*⁴

Protest by health workers

On September 3 2020, health care workers rallied in Pretoria and Cape Town⁵. In Pretoria, they demonstrated in front of the office of President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Unions Building. They carried placards which read, “*Thank you frontline workers*”, “*Remove corrupt officials*” and “*we demand the full employment of community health workers*”⁶.

These demonstrations called out poor working conditions and alleged government corruptions in the procurement of COVID-19 equipment⁷. This protest was led by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers, an organization composed of 200, 000 public workers. They demanded that health care workers who tested positive with the virus be allowed to stay home until they were fully recovered and receive danger payment⁸, and that new cases be informed of at health facilities.

² Bafetane, Vusi. 2020. SA coronavirus case came via Dubai to Durban: Mkhize. MSN. 6 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.msn.com/en-za/news/national/sa-coronavirus-case-came-via-dubai-to-durban-mkhize/ar-BB10QnRG?li=BBqfP3n>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

³ Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa On Escalation Of Measures To Combat Covid-19 Epidemic. 23 March 2020. Available online at: <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2020/cram0323.pdf>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

⁴ Patel, Riyaz. 2020. Rise in mass action across South Africa should serve as a warning to government – ISS. *The South African*. 18 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/rise-in-mass-action-across-south-africa-a-warning-to-government-iss/>. Last accessed 09 October 2020.

⁵ McCoy, Stephen. 2020. South African health care workers strike as opposition to ANC government mounts. WWSW. 9 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2020/09/09/safr-s09.html>. Last accessed 09 October 2020

⁶ Siphime, Sibeko. 2020. South Africa healthcare workers protest, threaten strike. *Aljazeera*. 3 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/3/south-africa-healthcare-workers-protest-threaten-strike>. Last accessed 23 December 2020.

⁷ McCoy, Stephen. 2020.

⁸ There were allegations that some managers forced their workers back to work before they have even finished the mandatory quarantine or isolation time.

Protest by minibus taxi drivers

On June 22, 2020, in the wake of lockdown easing measures, South African mini-bus taxi drivers affiliated with the South Africa National Taxi Council organized a protest in Johannesburg against what they believed to be insufficient government's relief offered to the transport sector⁹. They decried the 70% carrying capacity authorized by the government as negatively affecting their income, and the limited number of working hours allocated to them to work per day during lockdown¹⁰. They rejected the government's allocated relief fund of 1.1 billion rand payment to registered taxi operators amounting to about 5,000 rand (\$287) per driver by claiming that the amount was too small compared to the losses they had incurred.

In the course of protest, they blocked roads and refused to transport passengers to various destinations.

Protest by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

NGOs in South Africa organized protests in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as well. A glaring example is a silence march organized by the South African Council of Churches in Durban and Pietermaritzburg in front of the offices of Premier Sihle Zikalala. It comprised of leaders from a broad range of denominations, who prayed for an hour, by rotating between 4 to 6 people after every 15 to 20 minutes in adherence with social distancing regulations. Some posters read "*The corrupt belong in jail*" and "*Corruption is not my heritage.*" Their main demands linked corruption regarding food vouchers, PPE, provision of field hospitals, clinics and other public care facilities to limited assistance for small business and informal traders¹¹

Protests by the citizens

Citizen-organized protests were led by workers in the hospitality sector, such as chefs, waiters, winery workers, hoteliers and tourism operators. Those in the hospitality sector marched to parliament in Cape Town. Their claims were essentially focused on lock-down regulations, which had forced businesses to close and threatened thousands of jobs. Some of their placards conveyed messages like "*Let us do our jobs*"¹².

In September, disgruntled community members from the Booyens squatter camp, an informal settlement, blocked several roads with burning tires and rocks. They claimed that they had not

⁹ Magome, Mogomotsi. 2020. South Africa's Minibus Taxis Go on Strike, Hitting Workers. *U.S. News*. 22 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-06-22/south-africas-minibus-taxis-go-on-strike-hitting-workers>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Singh, Karen. (16 September 2020). Church leaders protest against Covid-19 graft. *IOL*. 16 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/news/church-leaders-protest-against-covid-19-graft-1bbc22c0-15f3-4d7b-8aab-73022acfd190>. Last accessed 23 December 2020.

¹² The Associated Press. 2020. South African police disperse protesters over lockdown pain. *Washington Post*. 24 July 2020. Available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/south-african-police-disperse-protesters-over-lockdown-pain/2020/07/24/7b17a6e4-cdc8-11ea-99b0-8426e26d203b_story.html. Last accessed 23 December 2020.

received food from the government during lockdown. Many stores were looted and dozens of arrests made¹³.

Government's response to the protests

The government responded repressive and responsive, albeit in a piecemeal manner.

Police and military were dispatched to crack down on protesters for violating COVID-19 social distancing measures. This was the case with protests organized by citizens and minibus taxi drivers, where water cannons were used by the police to disperse them. In Pretoria, for instance, there were reports of police using rubber bullets to disperse protesters.

Yet in addition to repressions policy measures were taken in the health, transport and welfare sectors. In the health sector, the government stepped up hygiene in health facilities by scaling up on its Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) elements of good hygiene practices, such as hand hygiene, use of PPE, and cleaning and disinfecting equipment and environment¹⁴. The president's spokesperson, Khusela Diko, was forced to step down after being linked to irregular procurement of PPE. Her husband's company also allegedly charged more than five times the regulated amount for surgical masks and sanitizers. In a similar case, the Gauteng Provincial Health Minister, Bandile Masuku, stepped down as well following irregular purchase of health supplies. A special investigation unit noted that it was investigating more than 20 cases of corruption related to the award of contracts to provide health supplies to the government¹⁵.

In the transport sector, Minister of Transport Fikile Mbalula announced revised regulatory policies in the public transport sector. These policies were concerned with the number of passengers to be ferried per ride by mini-buses¹⁶. Vehicles where passengers were not putting on face masks were to reduce their carrying capacity by 70%, while vehicles where passengers wore face masks were authorized to load at full capacity¹⁷.

With welfare, the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) Support was created with the sum of more than R3,000,000,000 to financially bail out vulnerable businesses. Additionally, the Solidarity Fund¹⁸ which was independently administered through professional managers and organizations in the private sector to alleviate suffering and distress caused by COVID-19 through care, support, prevention and detection, was established. As was the Small, Micro and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMMEs) Support Intervention, which provided a debt relief fund; a COVID-19 loan guarantee scheme of R200, 000,000,000; a social relief and economic support package of R500 billion on

¹³ Pijoo, Ivan. 2020. Protesters break lockdown rules, block roads over food parcels in Joburg. *Sowetan Live*. 28 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-28-protesters-break-lockdown-rules-block-roads-over-food-parcels-in-joburg/>. Last accessed 23 December 2020.

¹⁴ World Health Organisation. 2020. *South Africa steps up hygiene in health facilities to protect against Covid 19*. 12 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/south-africa-steps-up-hygiene-in-health-facilities-to-protect-against-covid-19>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

¹⁵ McCoy, Stephen. 2020.

¹⁶ South African Government. 2020. *Transport on revised directions regulating public transport operations during Coronavirus COVID-19 lockdown period*. 1 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.gov.za/speeches/transport-revised-directions-regulating-public-transport-operations-during-coronavirus>. Last accessed 9 November 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid.

households; and a special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRD) of R350 a month for six months to people who were unemployed¹⁸.

It is evident that the 21 days of lockdown declared in South Africa to halt the spread of COVID-19 on March 23 led to a number of organized protests by health workers, minibus taxi drivers, the civil society and the citizens. The protesters at various levels decried the government's handling of the COVID-19 funds, and its inability in meeting their socio-professional and economic needs. The government response to these protests was both repressive and piecemeal. Besides employing the forces of law and order to disperse protesters, measures were also taken in the public health domain by augmenting the working conditions of health workers, while a number of financial assistance was made at the disposal of South Africans in the economic and social domains.

¹⁸ Dhever ,Sushila and Andricia Hinckemann. 2020. COVID 19 Relief for the most vulnerable: Increase in Social Grants and the provision of Social Relief of Distress Grants. *Lexology*. 30 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=25186006-2018-458c-b36b-22c58158c468>. Last accessed 9 November 2020; Haroon, Borat and Tim Köhler. 2020. Lockdown economics in South Africa: Social assistance and the Ramaphosa stimulus package. *Brookings*. 20 November 2020. Available online at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/11/20/lockdown-economics-in-south-africa-social-assistance-and-the-ramaphosa-stimulus-package/>. Last accessed 28 November 2020.