

#DAY32LOCKDOWNSA

Freedom Day 2020: From political freedom to suffering from a pandemic

by

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South Africans achieved political freedom on 27 April 1994 when our first democratic election was held to formally end the previous political system of apartheid. Since then we have celebrated Freedom Day every year. The world praised South Africa for achieving freedom in such a peaceful manner and this success story was often referred to as the “miracle of the rainbow nation” with one of the best Constitutions in the world. As a country we have achieved some successes in taking our nation forward, but today with the Covid-19 pandemic, it is as if we are entering yet another period of extreme pain, suffering, and increased levels of poverty, economic demise and a hopeless future. In 1994 we were voting in long queues celebrating our democracy, today we stand in short queues at shops fearing that we may be infected by the next person in the queue. With the exception of funerals, all public gatherings have been cancelled and we are legally forced to stay home safely.

The Father of Democracy in South African Nelson Mandela said: “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” Now in 2020 as we face the coronavirus pandemic, our individual and collective response requires us to respect and enhance the freedom of others by not spreading the virus to them. In addition to several other challenges facing our democracy, this question is a central issue for us celebrating Freedom Day while being in a lockdown. However, even during these difficult days, weeks and months of the pandemic and extended lockdown facing us as a nation, in many ways our freedom as a people has been limited. Not being allowed to move around, to visit friends and family, to attend a religious event and to go to work for non-essential workers, are all inconvenient but necessary regulations to curb the spread of the virus, while our freedom of movement and interactions has been restricted. Thousands of people have been arrested for non-compliance to the Disaster Management Act regulations and more thousands of people will lose their jobs and income. Moreover, the rights of some people were violated when treated in inhumane ways by law enforcement officers in townships and other places.

Reflecting on Freedom Day also provides us with an opportunity to assess our progress as a free democratic nation. It is 26 years later from our first Freedom Day and it is now clear that the majority of South Africans only achieved freedom in theory. Yes, black South Africans have freedom – they can go to schools of their choice, apply for all types of jobs, buy houses wherever they want, and so forth. The “freedoms” are there, at least on paper. But as we have seen time and time again, while human rights may be in place in principle, it is more difficult to realise in practice. For instance, in theory a black South African family can buy a house anywhere, but if they can’t afford to buy a house in a more expensive neighbourhood, remaining in the township may be the only viable option over the short and medium term, and for many the only option over the long term. Thus, while the theoretical discourse is freedom, the perpetuation of poverty, unemployment and inequality is the practical reality for most black South Africans.

The question arises: Was 27 April 1994 only freedom in theory, while practical freedom remains an elusive dream for most South Africans? The realities below paint a picture of a country in need of a new type of freedom:

- We have one of the highest unemployment rates in the world (29%) and one of the highest youth unemployment (50%+), ironically almost all of these young unemployed were born since 1994 in the post-apartheid era. This high unemployment rate could double as a result of mass retrenchments and the destruction of businesses and the economy by the lockdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic.
- The World Bank confirmed that South Africa is the most unequal country in the world with the highest gap between the rich and the poor. The levels of poverty have again been amplified during the Covid-19 crisis and it was very sad to hear cabinet ministers stating that the virus exposed the levels of poverty, as if we did not know that it existed.
- While the black middle class is growing, and despite the good intentions of the Employment Equity Act and other transformation laws and programmes, the rate of transformation in the private sector in particular is too slow.
- The poor education provided in the majority of schools exacerbates current inequalities. At top private schools and good government schools, education continued and children adapted very quickly to online learning from their homes. The majority of disadvantaged black school children were further marginalised at their homes or shacks in townships and rural areas with limited access to resources, teaching and family support and capacity for online learning.
- Poor service delivery by municipalities, provincial and other government departments affect the poorest of the poor more severely than the privileged sectors of society.

I can go on and on and quote statistics building on the above five points. But rather, let us shift our thinking and energy from statistics to actions in finding solutions. And yes, while fraud, corruption, under-resourced schools and white privilege all exacerbate the current problems, today I want to add my voice to the voiceless and ask for the four major stakeholders in society to step up in accelerating all efforts in achieving real, meaningful and sustainable freedom for all:

1. Government and its institutions must create an environment for growth, build a capable state and execute all its programmes more effectively.
2. Business must come to the party in creating freedom in the workplace and society at large with meaningful programmes delivering impact;
3. Labour needs to ensure that its unique role is leveraged in repositioning labour as a powerful force in creating a more productive and equal society;
4. Civil society has an important role in mobilising citizens in organised and co-ordinated projects advancing freedom and equality in society at large.

Interestingly, now with the coronavirus crisis, there are good signs and many visible examples of these four parties starting to actively work together in tackling the devastating impact of the pandemic. All parties have made huge sacrifices such as accepting salary cuts, creating funding mechanisms and relief funds, and collaborating in assisting the poor to survive this difficult period and these efforts must be intensified. Having said that, this is only a short term solution. The sooner we can resume economic activity, the better, and the relaxation of the lockdown level from level five to four is a good step in the right direction, but it is still not sufficient in getting the economy going, bearing in mind that we also need to deal with South Africa's downgrading to junk status. Extraordinary efforts will be required to deal with the twin problems of Covid-19 and junk status in a lockdown economy. We now need a radical shift towards e-commerce and embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) in

creating a digital driven robotics economy leveraging the full power of technology integrated with meaningful opportunities for humans to thrive from different locations. Massive skills development programmes will be needed to retrain the South African workforce for the 4IR economy.

While it is indeed a fact that the National Development Plan (NDP) has been developed quite some time ago, we have to face reality again by admitting that there is nothing wrong with our theory (the NDP), but we again failed in practice, i.e. its execution, hence the perpetuation of unacceptable levels of poverty and inequality. Perhaps we now need a new NDP for the health sector, i.e. a National Diseases Plan addressing all diseases and health issues. Although 87 people have already died from the Covid-19 virus, a total of 5000 people die every month of tuberculosis in South Africa. Other illnesses and health risks also require national programmes, including HIV/AIDS, cancer, diabetes, malaria, hypertension and obesity. South Africa is already a world leader in HIV/AIDS management, and we can also become a world leader in Covid-19 management if we can manage and control the epidemic in our country.

All four of the above institutions have achieved major successes, albeit in the form of pockets of excellence. Even in responding to the Covid-19 crisis, government has delivered exceptional levels of rapid service delivery not seen over the past 26 years. Water was delivered to areas in need within days, thousands of food parcels distributed and other services provided where needed. The World Health Organization has praised South Africa's efforts in fighting the coronavirus. In addition, South Africa's stimulus package of R 500 billion is the third highest as a percentage of GDP in the world, clearly demonstrating government's commitment to support people financially during the crisis.

Now is the time to replicate these pockets of excellence into well-managed projects that deliver impact. However, we cannot make that happen if we stay on a general level four lockdown as a nation for too long. We now need to kick-start the economy by moving to lower levels of lockdown as soon as possible, without compromising the health and safety of our citizens. Our individual and collective effort to make this happen will be tested.

Getting through the pandemic in addressing all the challenges and problems associated with it, will only happen if we are disciplined and execute better, in other words converting our great theories and policies into practice with real and meaningful actions making a difference to society. We do not have the option of procrastinating on our problems. While the pandemic requires our immediate response, we need to address unemployment, inequality, corruption, poor education, poverty and poor service delivery in a focused, dynamic and integrated way. If we as a nation and government are committed to achieve socio-economic freedom for all people, we also need daily dashboards from the responsible ministers on how much progress we are making in tackling these serious issues threatening our hard-earned democracy.

It is my hope and dream that President Ramaphosa's vision as encapsulated in his "new dawn," and "send me" slogans will be converted to clear practical actions making a difference in winning the war against the virus and all our other major challenges outlined above. There will be days in which we will feel helpless and hopeless. There are times when it appears as if the "new dawn" was derailed. But the goodwill and commitment from most people will inspire us to keep on focusing on the bigger picture and the actions needed to address this socio-economic tragedy. The irony of the different lockdown phases is that the number of infections and deaths will determine the alert level of lockdown at a provincial and district level. In other words, our past freedom of movement has to be limited to prevent the spread of the virus, in addition to a new national culture of safety, health and hygiene behaviours being embedded in our homes, workplaces and other public places. This means that behaviour has become the most important factor in determining the level of risk and freedom you will

experience. This situation is likely to continue for the rest of the year, or longer if we don't get the situation under control.

We also need to bear in mind that our essential workers continue to work on Freedom Day and they have been working throughout the level five lockdown period and will continue to work as we progress to lower levels of lockdown in the near future. Their health is at risk by being at work, and that means that they have less freedom than the rest of us staying at home today. It is essential that government and business invest their energy and resources in ensuring that all healthcare workers and other essential service workers get tested for the virus. It does not make sense to test non-essential workers at employers with 500 employees, while essential workers continue to work without being tested for Covid-19. If we then continue with mass testing, thousands of employees will test positive and go on sick leave. This provides an opportunity to mobilise our huge pool of unemployed people to be employed as temporary replacements, provided that the necessary safety and hygiene protocols be followed at all sites.

Non-essential workers returning to work in May will have less freedom in the workplace. There will be strict safety protocols and it will feel as if your freedom of movement is restricted. All of us will have to learn to be patient and comply with these new emergency regulations, but we must realise that we are doing this to protect one another and to prevent the spread of the virus. From a freedom perspective, we are changing our behaviour to allow our businesses to be opened and to stay open. Put differently, you will acquire temporary freedom to go to work, but this freedom will be withdrawn if we don't maintain our safety levels and we will simply revert back to level five of lockdown. At home, we will continue with the curfew and other regulations being implemented from the 1st of May.

Freedom Day 2020 is totally different to the previous 25 Freedom Days. We have less freedom being in lockdown, but for a very specific reason and that is to fight the coronavirus in regaining freedom for all. During this process of working towards achieving health freedom for all, we also need to tackle the other areas lagging behind such as poverty, inequality and unemployment. Let us all work together in converting our science and policy into practice and advance real freedom for all in the workplace, our homes and society at large.

In his Freedom Day speech President Cyril Ramaphosa challenged us to unite in "solidarity and triumph of the human spirit in these challenging times." He said: "This Freedom Day, let us stand united against the disease. Let us also stand united against poverty, inequality and hunger. We can only overcome this crisis and rebuild our shattered economy if we work together." This challenge requires us to address the paradox of being isolated from others and still being connected to other people in continuing with our work while curbing the spread of the Covid-19 virus. As Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng asserted this morning: "Freedom Day under lockdown helps me remember that circumstances are radically different to that they used to be before the dawn of democracy." We live in a different world requiring new ways of thinking and doing in achieving real freedom for all South Africans.

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