

Profit vs public health: the crisis of liberal democracy and universal healthcare in Africa

Christopher Isike¹
Department of Political Sciences
University of Pretoria, South Africa
Christopher.isike@up.ac.za

Introduction

A notable feature of a pandemic is that it quite quickly becomes common knowledge within national and global populations, and the novel coronavirus popularly known as COVID-19 is no exception. Indeed, even little children all over the world know of coronavirus/COVID-19 given its devastating impact not only on national economies, but also on all aspects of human existence. For example, it has impacted mainstream politics, governance, education, and social life generally. However, its economic impact has been more far-reaching given its effect on the workforce, an essential component of the productive sector which is the main source of a country's wealth, as we have always been made to believe. This is until COVID-19 made it more clear that the source of a country's wealth is its human well-being, not its economic well-being.

As the virus infected and demobilised all sectors of the populations of every country irrespective of class, race, gender, age or religion, most resorted to lockdowns, which also brought national economies to a standstill. Businesses were compelled to downsize, lay off workers or even close shop completely (Dodd 2020). As a result, the gross domestic product (GDP) of many countries all over the world fell, shrinking their economies with a good number, such as the United States and South Africa, going into a recession, with a growth rate of -51% for the latter. In a nutshell, the economic impact of COVID-19 forced national governments to choose between lives and livelihoods, or at best to balance both in their various responses to the public health security threat posed by the virus. However, as mentioned, this raises the question of what is more important between human well-being and economic well-being, and which should be the foundation of a prosperous society and state. This question is at the heart of the perennial debates between socialism and capitalism on how to achieve the common good, and *ipso facto* the best form of political system (social or liberal democracy) that is suited for attaining the common good, however defined.

What is clear is that irrespective of the economic or political system in place, a sound public health system is critical to the core national interest of any state; to its survival. Therefore, protecting and maintaining public health and safety is critical to the survival of a state including its economic and political systems. Studies show that states that practice social democracy, which focuses on social needs (i.e. quality education, universal public health), and values (social justice, equality and inclusivity) tend to do better in managing pandemics than liberal democracies which focus on individual and minority (elite) interests and prioritise profits over social needs (Wolff 2020). This is because social democratic states are usually better prepared for pandemics, as their social state system enables them to produce and stockpile everything

1. Christopher Isike PhD is a professor of African Politics and International Relations at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

needed for a viral pandemic such as tests, masks, ventilators, hospital beds, trained personnel, to manage dangerous viruses (Wolff 2020:1). This is not the case in liberal democracies where such medical and personal protective equipment are produced by private capitalist enterprises whose goal is profit. As such, in the case of the US, Wolff argues it was not profitable to produce and stockpile such medical products, nor did the U.S. government produce or stockpile them. Apart from President Donald Trump's poor leadership response to COVID-19, this is another major reason the US, in spite of its wealth, has failed to contain the pandemic, and is the worst affected state globally, with the odious record of having the highest infection (15.5 million) and death (over 293, 000) rates in the world relative to population.¹ This compares poorly with its social democratic neighbour Canada, which has 429, 035 infection cases and 8,547 deaths with far lower infection and death rates per million of its population to the US. A few other examples of social democracies that have done better than liberal democracies in managing and containing COVID-19 include New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland. Is liberal democracy therefore in crisis, and will it serve the Global South, in this case Africa, better to devise and practice a social variant of democracy?

The crisis of liberal democracy

The history of democracy is one of crisis which predates the era of modernity. The ancients Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were no friends of democracy. Its final collapse in ancient Athens affirmed their reservations. In early modern times, this crisis manifested in the twin revolutions in England,² the American and French Revolutions, and democracy's struggles in an ideological rivalry against Nazism, Fascism, and Communism in the twentieth century – and its eventual victory after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. In liberal circles, this victory was referred to as “the end of history” (See Fukuyama 1992), which saw the global diffusion of a democratic form of governance with its free-market enterprise (capitalism) aggressively pursued by Western governments with the support of democracy promoting institutions. As a result, some observers have argued that “capitalism and democracy have proven themselves the most successful systems of economic and political order” (Merkel 2014:110). With China's unprecedented and phenomenal economic feat using a “state capitalist” approach, liberal democracy's “free-market” component became the global template for how best to order an economic system to achieve economic growth.

However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars started observing cracks in liberal democracy. Larry Diamond, a renowned political sociologist, revealed this prognosis quite trenchantly when he posited that “one can view the last decade as a period of at least incipient decline in democracy ... and the decline in the functioning and self-confidence of the world's established, rich democracies” (Diamond 2015:100). This was further compounded by the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the US which ushered in the global economic meltdown of 2008 that required massive state bail-outs of private financial institutions and businesses with taxpayers' money in liberal democracies. This state interventionist act by government did not only reveal how incapable the famous “invisible hand” of the market can be in a time of economic crisis, it also revealed the contradiction of capitalism in *privatising profits* when the economy is in good shape and *socialising losses* when it gets bad.³ The unfairness in this contradiction is seen in the growing social inequality in many liberal democracies. This triggered a series of protests in the US, Greece, and Spain after the 2008 global economic meltdown. These were reminiscent of the

1. See <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>, accessed 09/12/2020.

2. The Revolutions in 1640 and 1688.

3. Privatizing profits and socializing losses is the practice of allowing shareholders to benefit from company earnings, while making society responsible for their losses. See <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/privatizing-profits-and-socializing-losses.asp>.

tensions generated by the economic crisis of the 1960s and 70s that challenged the legitimacy of the Western liberal capitalist model which prioritised profit over human security (see Toplisek 2019). Over 40 years later, these tensions continue to mount and are causing disenchantment with liberal democracy across the world as, for instance, studies show that across North America and Western Europe people are increasingly expressing deep reservations regarding democracy in large numbers (Mounk 2018), with implications for the idea of the Westphalian state and its relevance. Simply put, at the heart of challenges to liberal democracy is the question of how much the state should be involved in providing public goods such as education, health and social security to its citizens. In essence, how thin should the state be? What are its responsibilities to citizens, and *ipso facto*, what is the essence of the state? Lastly, should the state assume more social responsibilities to make it more meaningful for the vast majority of citizens; what democratic system will be best for such a social state?

Africa's need for the social state, social democracy and universal healthcare

Apart from the centrality of a sound public health system to the economic well-being and survival of a state, another significant lesson COVID-19 has forced home is the connectedness of the human race. That a virus emanating in Wuhan, China in December 2019 could spread to the entire world in four months by March 2020 and cause a complete shutdown of the world by April 2020 is testament to the connectedness. It is clearly foolhardy for the wealthy states, who constitute only 14% of the world's population, to engage in vaccine nationalism by already purchasing over 54% of vaccines which they will hoard for themselves at the expense of poorer states who are in the majority. The lack of complete knowledge of how COVID-19 presents itself makes this vaccine nationalism more untenable. This is why French President Emmanuel Macron's comment that "there will be no effective response to the pandemic unless it is a global response"¹ is apt. To this end, the G20 resolved that it "will spare no effort to ensure the affordable and equitable access for all people to coronavirus vaccines worldwide, and support poor countries whose economies have been ravaged by the crisis".² However, beside this kind of support from the wealthy states, Global South states themselves, especially the poorer ones in Africa, need to commit to making public healthcare a right for all citizens and not a privilege of the elite few. This will require governments on the continent to rethink and redesign their state systems to make them better oriented to social service delivery and thus make them more meaningful to citizens. As presently constituted, the state in Africa is perverse, as it was never designed by its colonial designers to be an instrument of development in the same manner that the state in Europe was designed to be. Rather, the colonial state was designed specifically as an instrument of legitimising the colonial exploitation and oppression of African resources and peoples. That perverse idea of the state produced a perverse notion of public governance which was inherited at independence and continued to manifest long after colonialism. This explains the absence of development on the agenda of many Africa states: as Ake (1996) puts it, the looting of state coffers and personalisation of the state by political operators masquerading as leaders. It explains their political assassination of opponents to get power, and the mentality of Christian politicians, for instance, going to church for thanksgiving celebrations after winning elections instead going to God for wisdom to serve, as King Solomon did in the bible. Governance is not understood as an opportunity to serve but as an opportunity to self-enrich. With this perverse notion of state and governance, it is also no surprise that Africa continues to dominate the wrong end of the human development ladder as it is worse plagued by human security challenges such as poverty, hunger, illiteracy and disease which are root causes of

1. President Macron made this comment on 21 November 2020 in the wake of the G20 summit hosted by Saudi Arabia.

2. G20 leaders pledge fair distribution of coronavirus vaccine. See <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-g20-equitable-access-coronavirus-vaccine.html>.

armed conflict and civil wars prominent in the continent. Although no state in the world was quite prepared for the sudden stress COVID-19 put on their public health facilities, the full depth of decay of Africa's public health infrastructure was further exposed by the pandemic even though the continent was far less hit by COVID-19 than initial prognosis. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA 2020), Africa's health care system is the weakest in the world, with an average of 1.8 hospital bed space per 1000 people. This is made worse by its "Out-of-Pocket Model" of public health where "the rich get medical care, and the poor get sick and die" (Reid 2009:18). These are signifiers of a public health decay which is a consequence of neglect and underfunding by "democratic" leaders who have always sought healthcare for themselves and their families abroad.

Conclusion

Amongst others and in the context of this article, the novel coronavirus pandemic has taught us two important lessons. One, human well-being is foundational to the economic well-being of a state; and two, the connectedness of the human race. It is evidently unhelpful to prioritise profits over public health anywhere in the world, as a health injury to one will eventually amount to an injury to all given how interdependent the world has become. In the face of the failure of liberal democracies to provide universal healthcare for their citizens, the idea and practice of a social variant of democracy becomes appealing, especially given its value for containing pandemics. However, this is a challenge for developing states such as those in Africa where the state is perverse both in its conception and manifestation as we have seen in its decayed public health system. Therefore, to arrest the decay in public health infrastructure in Africa, its leaders now need to commit to rethinking why the state and government exist, and for whom. Human security for all citizens needs to be the vision of the reimagined and redesigned state in Africa, and this includes health security as a right of all citizens. Such a social state will require a social democratic system to prioritise and deliver healthcare for all citizens, as human well-being is the foundation of economic well-being, not vice versa. This is why for states such as South Africa that have some semblance of a social contract with its citizens (CODESA),¹ the National Health Insurance (NHI) is important and its implementation should be fast-tracked. As a public health financing system designed to pool funds to provide access to quality affordable personal health services for all South Africans based on their health needs, irrespective of their socio-economic status, the NHI will help to ensure universal health coverage for South Africans and give meaning to the idea of a developmental state to which the country aspires.

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1. The Convention for a Democratic South Africa was a negotiating forum established in 1991 to negotiate the transition process from apartheid to a new democratic South African state including the formation of the interim government of which responsibilities included the election of the Constituent Assembly based on a one-person-one-vote basis in a united South Africa. The representative Constituent Assembly then drafted and adopted the democratic constitution which became the basis of the new democratic South Africa.

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