

Nokukhanya Magagula

## **How did Covid 19 and lockdown affect the life of ordinary people and contribute to a rise of activism**

The outbreak of COVID 19 changed most societies socially and economically which in some other countries it contributed to political upheavals from underlying problems. In an economically imbalanced country like Swaziland where a huge chunk of the population lives under the poverty line it was inevitable that the confrontation to the imbalance will be there due to the Covid 19 conditions. COVID 19 came with the introduction of hard lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. This meant some jobs were lost as companies recorded losses when the market declined drastically. Swazis who lived on manual labour and those who are self-employed due to the high unemployment rate were part of those hit hard by the lockdown since they relied heavily on economic activity involving movement of people. Other employers who paid employees based on hours worked also contributed to financial difficulties when they stopped paying them as they were not at work. Societies had more time to meet and discuss their challenges and solutions would be easily implemented in unity as everyone was around and not busy with something. The closure of Schools meant that the provision for basics at family level became higher than usual. The loss of income meant the struggle to provide basics for families became real. The financial hard times cut across rural societies up to urban areas. Economy universally is linked to politics as the two exist side by side and none can survive without the other. In Swaziland the political tensions had been simmering for a long time but because the economic challenges had not hit hard on an overwhelming majority, there was no large, united protesting voices. Most Swazis ignored the economic exclusion because its strain was not worse before the Covid 19 era. The corruption, manipulation and exploitation of national resources to fund royal luxury became clear to everyone such that it was hard to ignore. The failure of the health sector, information & Technology ministry, Education and Social security ministry to rise to the challenges of covid 19 because a lot of money went to royal luxury was the spark that Swazi communities needed. Political discussions from 2019 to 2021 gathered national recognition amongst Swazis. It was no longer a case of a few political activists, but the nation at large stood up. The maximization of technology use by Swazis during lockdown gave rise to social media thus Swazis got an alternative from the captured mainstream media. It was through social media that political discussions matured, and protests became popular. The looting of money from the deputy prime Minister's office that was meant to help in the covid era, the buying of luxurious cars for royalty, the failures of the health ministry to effectively deal with Covid 19 due to financial difficulties and continuous flaunting of wealth by the royal family when the majority of Swazis were struggling fuelled the situation. The education sector struggled from paying allowances of tertiary students, paying fees for free primary education, hiring permanent teachers yet the luxury in royal circles never stopped. The police also used excessive force to enforce Covid 19 regulations. The killing of a tertiary student Thabani Nkomonye by the police when Swazis were frustrated gave a perfect

opportunity for them to launch a united protest against police brutality. The availability of warm bodies due to lockdown made the delivery of petitions in tinkhundla sectors very effective in such a way that government stopped them. The economic and social frustrations opened the eyes of Swazis to the root cause of their suffering which was the political situation where the tinkhundla regime practiced systematic manipulation to benefit a few. This is when Swazis started to question a number of things within royalty and government in large numbers. The government had hoped to use the Covid regulations to clamp down on political dissent that needed gathering in large numbers but its failures to deal practically with Covid 19 became its downfall. You cannot enforce laws without the provision of basics which is your responsibility and expect obedience. The unity because of availability of most Swazis meant that when looting during the unrest started there was an element of response to an economic problem caused by a politically flawed system. The basic demand of political freedom was clear though above everything that happened. When children who prioritize sweets over basics would help each other in carrying a bag of meal mealie, the picture of economic exclusion became clear. The fact that looting continued country wide even though soldiers had shot dead people in Matsapha on the first night showed a dire economic challenge caused by a political problem in our societies. Death did not scare Swazis because they had suffered. The glaring failures of the government in Swaziland were greatly exposed by the challenges brought by covid 19. The arrogance of the royal family, government and brutality from state security touched a raw nerve in a society that had all along been suffering in silence hence the situation culminating into an unrest. Covid 19 through the lockdown therefore exposed underlying problems and gave Swazis the chance to act in unison as most were idle hence there was an unrest that has contributed to a volatile situation that is growing to a serious national problem even today.

