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### **RA Reviews' Editorial Voice:**

Public Leadership and Civic Agency's Role in Shaping Africa's Response to Covid-19 And the Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

By Mphutlane wa Bofelo: a South African poet, essayist, and political activist.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war between Russia and Ukraine on human social, political and economic development necessitate local, regional, and global responses to these crises. It is, however, important to recognize that the impact of every crisis is likely to be more devastating and challenging in the developing countries of the Global South. This is because these countries are already bedevilled by high levels of inequality, poverty, inadequate political institutions, and related processes as well as the poor capacity of both authoritative and non-authoritative structures.

Within the Global South, the African continent consists of several relatively new democracies that are still grappling with state-building, institution-building, and their respective transformational agendas. Consequently, African countries are bound to find it more difficult to mount an effective response to the challenges wrought by Covid-19's effects as well as the violent, ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine on their economies and politics. Many of these countries are already experiencing the problem of mixed and incongruent political messaging and inconsistent discourses and trajectories in their domestic and foreign policies. For an example, policy confusion and lack of clear leadership on issues of public policy and good governance are some of the key reasons that rating agencies have given many African countries such as South Africa relatively low scores.

In reflecting on Africa's responses to the two main crises that are currently the focal points in global politics and economics and how they impact upon African agendas of transformation, development, and justice, it is important to note that the developmental agendas are shaped by both the quality of the leadership and the quality of the civic agency. Leadership and civic agency are two interdependent and complimentary coordinates that are central to either entrenching or rolling back the institutional arrangements behind social, political,

economic, gender, and environmental injustices and all sorts of crises facing humanity today.

Since the state remains the most important locus of power and is responsible for the legal and policy framework that informs the activities of all role-players, it is important to specifically focus on public leadership. In democratic societies, even in sham democracies, the legitimacy of governments and public leaders is based on their claim to be representatives of civil society. Therefore, one cannot critically engage with the quality of public leadership without a critique of the quality of public participation and civic agency.

This is more relevant in the African context where the poor performance of government, public institutions, State-Owned Enterprises, and parastatals or quasi-governmental institutions is attributed to a crisis of leadership, poor oversight structures, weak opposition parties, and repressed civil society organizations. The leadership crises in particular entails the increasing social distance between the socio-political and corporate elites and the under-classes, and high incidents and indices of neo-patrimonialism, presidentialism, clientelism, empire-building, kleptocracy, the capture of state by private interests or the turning of the state into a personal purse or property of the social, political, and corporate elites.

The outbreak of the Corona virus in Africa took place in an environment wherein there is a huge discrepancy between anti-corruption speak and political action and a chasm between findings of misconduct and disciplinary action or consequence management. In many African countries there is more likelihood of those who expose corruption being persecuted than those who are guilty of it being prosecuted. This means that the decisive leadership that is required in times of crisis is a scarce commodity in many African countries. On the other hand, state repression puts a leach on the civic agency required to hold governments to account and to redirect the policy and development trajectory of governments. Nothing highlights the fact that the crisis of leadership or the paucity of ethical, transformative, and decisive public leadership is a hindrance to proper response to a crisis. In this regard, South Africa may be referred to as an important example since it is a major nation-state on the continent.

In South Africa, it has been reported that, a significant portion of the money allocated to Covid-19 interventions such as Personal Protective Equipment disappeared ended in the pockets of the political, social, and corporate elites associated with the ruling party. By September 2021, the Special Investigating Unit (SIU) reported that between April 2020 and June 2021, total Covid expenditure by government agencies exceeded R138 billion (\$9 billion), and a

ten percent of this amount (i.e., R14.8 billion (\$0.94 billion) was being investigated by SIU. Furthermore, a total of 4, 302 contracts to 2, 421 service providers have been or were still under investigation, and a total of 214 cases had been referred by SIU to the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) for investigation.

To boot it all, the former Health Minister, Zweli Mkhize, who had become the public face of what was internationally hailed as South Africa's pragmatic and decisive response to the Covid-19 pandemic, got embroiled in an embarrassing scandal. On top of that, the fundamental issues behind both the Covid-19 crisis and the Russia-Ukraine conflict got lost in point-scoring sectarian battles between ruling party (the African National Congress [ANC]) and opposition parties and intra-party squabbles within the ANC. The tug-of-war between the currently dominant faction of the ruling party that has affinities with capital from Global North and western governments and a faction of the ruling party that has ties with Asian capital and the governments of Russia and China also contributed to mixed messaging within the ANC on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

While the South African government abstained from a United Nations (UN) vote condemning Russia and adopted a non-aligned stance that tout negotiation as the best approach to dealing with the conflict, the so-called Radical Economic Transformation (RET) forces within the ANC openly expressed support of Russia and blamed the conflict squarely on the US and the West. On the other hand, civil society organizations, including labour, civic, and social movements and NGOs and development organizations in South Africa and the rest of the continent, seem to be disinterested and mute on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In contrast to other incidents where civil society organizations exerted pressure on their governments to condemn or support one or other side, civil society groups in Africa have not taken to the streets to push their governments towards any specific position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The most visible and audible public action taken by South African civil society in this regard is the petition, initiated by the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) and signed by 27 000 South Africans, calling on the South African government to refrain from getting involved in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. While the South Africans who have expressed the view that South Africa cannot opt to stay out of the conflict because of its connection with Russia through BRICS, there has been no public action putting pressure on government to adopt this position.

Whereas in the case of Covid-19, civil society played a pivotal role in urging their governments to treat the crisis with urgency and in calling out the excesses and shortfalls of government in dealing with the pandemic, it remains relatively muted on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In other words, while in the former situation, civic agency mediated the response and actions of government and public leaders, in the latter scenario, the mixed messages from the African governments and the indecisiveness of public leadership worked in harmony with the relative indifference of civil society organizations and/or the lack of a civic voice or civic agency on the issue. This highlights the importance of a symbiotic relationship between public leadership and civic agency in dealing with the crisis continentally.

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