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(/)

SOUTH AFRICA

BITTER MEDICINE OP-ED

Covid crisis could be the catalyst for a return to rural revolt in South Africa



📷 From left: Protesters block a major road in Eldorado Park, Johannesburg on 8 May 2017. (Photo: EPA / Kim Ludbrook) | A student at a rural Covid-19 vaccination drive at Duduzile Secondary School in Mpumalanga on 9 March 9 2022. (Photo: Waldo Swiegers / Bloomberg via Getty Images) | Protesters stand near burning barricades in Reiger Park, Johannesburg on 9 March 2017. (Photo: EPA / Kim Ludbrook) | A protester carries a poster during the same protest in Reiger Park. (Photo: EPA / Kim Ludbrook)

By Leslie Bank

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The Covid-19 pandemic has created a biomedical crisis with far-reaching cultural, political and economic implications in rural areas. As in the 1950s, there is a rise in rural crime with predatory gangs of young people moving through rural locations to prey on the weak.

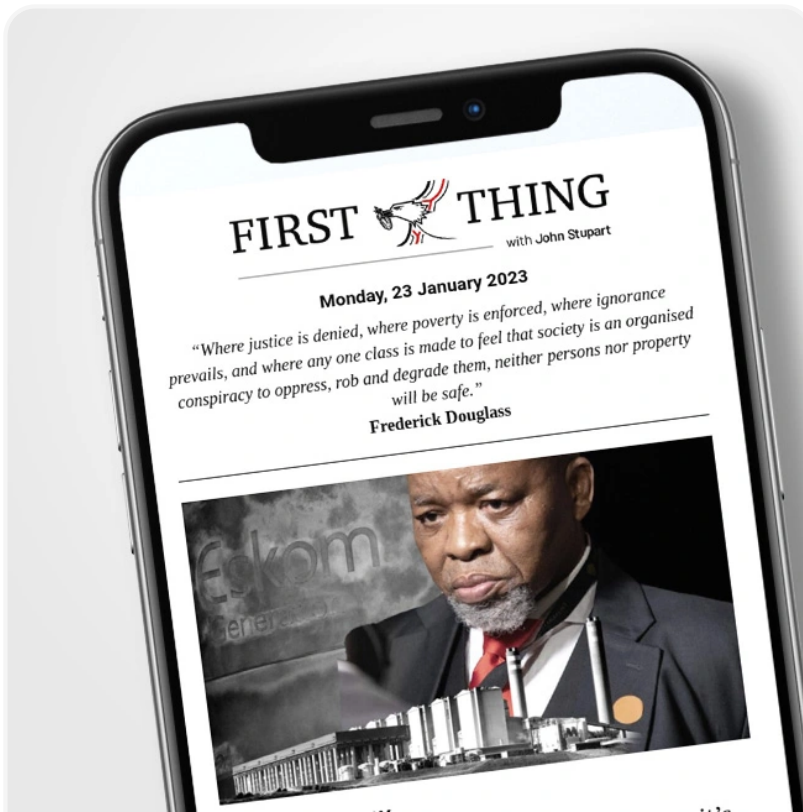
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It has been 70 years since South Africa experienced nationwide rural revolts. Protest action has been a distinctly urban phenomenon in the country since the 1970s and even after democracy, with the rise of urban service delivery unrest. The aspirational focus of liberation politics has been on urban inclusion, rather than rural reconstruction and development.

But with growing reverse migration due to the failure of the urban economy to support jobless young people, chronic rural hunger, shocking levels of Covid-19 deaths, as well as widespread spiritual insecurity due to failed customary practice, the rural social economy and cultural fabric have been shattered.



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How do these conditions compare to those that ignited rural protests in the past? And what might be done to prevent rural revolt and further destabilisation?

In the 1950s it was the introduction of Bantu Authorities and the modernisation of rural poverty through state-sponsored land and village “betterment” planning that ignited political mobilisation and civil unrest. From the Witsieshoek rebellion in 1951 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witzieshoek_revolt)

t) through to the Pondoland revolts of 1961 (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/pondoland-revolt-1950-1961>), the rural landscape was ignited with protests against the apartheid-style tampering with traditional authority, customary power and control over rural resources, including land and cattle.

The protests were largely defensive actions by rural communities and often localised responses to the installation of new chiefs, cattle culling or the fencing of agricultural land. They were a response to a perverse form of rural modernisation driven by the state's control of customary power. Communities felt that their sovereignty and control of local resources would suffer, and they took to the mountains in ways that were not dissimilar to the gathering of miners on the "koppies" around Marikana (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/705445/pdf>) in 2012.

In these cases, it was not white monopoly capital that was the primary enemy, but a state-enforced assault on customary power that provoked a kind of war nationalism from below, led by men who recalled the spirit of primary resistance against colonial dispossession. In the time of Covid, custom has again been brought into question through the imposition of an external, Northern biomedical regime that turned against community practices and customary belief.



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In many parts of rural South Africa, rural communities were angered and confused by the imposition of Covid-19 regulations and came to the conclusion that the state assumed that it was their customs that caused Covid, when they felt they had nothing to do with the spread of the pandemic. They were also angered by the extent to which traditional leaders sided with the state and at the exclusion of community participation in local prevention strategies.

Later, when they were called to participate in vaccination campaigns, the advocates again stressed the dangers of rural cultural beliefs as a bulwark against progress and enlightenment.

In our March 2022 [research on vaccine hesitancy in the former Transkei](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-05-15-vaccines-and-social-grants-are-potentially-changing-the-economic-and-political-face-of-rural-sa/) (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-05-15-vaccines-and-social-grants-are-potentially-changing-the-economic-and-political-face-of-rural-sa/>), we discovered that vaccine uptake was often more a matter of compliance than free will. It was the fear of what might be lost in terms of access to the job market, medical and other basic services and especially social grants that motivated many younger rural residents to avail their bodies for vaccination.

Many also spoke about the influence of family death on their decisions and the fear the pandemic wrought in customary life, and the great difficulties they now face in restoring spiritual security and social cohesion.

There is a frenzy of new ritual activity in many rural areas in the Eastern Cape, amid widespread perception that the cultural and spiritual work of customary practices are proving ineffective. Hunger now stalks the land as families try to reorganise themselves and adopt strategies against deepening poverty. In this context, there is a strong sense that the state has failed to provide support and that traditional leaders have been missing in action.

In our recent survey, only 10% of families said they were prepared to listen to local politicians and traditional leaders on issues related to vaccination and Covid. They displayed a low level of trust in the government and said that they relied most on what they learned from their families, churches and local community groups. Some said they feared vaccination so much that they had agreed

within their families that only one of the parents should be vaccinated, so that if they died, there would still be someone to care for the children.

The low levels of trust in the biomedical regime are less a matter of the deep conservatism of rural communities than they are a reflection of their sense of trust betrayed. The belief that they would be protected, and their families defended against the force of the pandemic, rather than blamed, ignored and even vilified by the state. To be sure, there has been a mammoth effort on the part of the Eastern Cape health department (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-05-15-vaccines-and-social-grants-are-potentially-changing-the-economic-and-political-face-of-rural-sa/>) and the office of the premier to reach out to rural communities in the drive to meet their vaccination targets.

The resistance we encountered is also not the product of a rejection of the power of Western biomedicine, since only 18% of those interviewed said that they did not believe in Western biomedicine. In fact, there were higher levels of trust in the biomedical system than in traditional healers, although by far the largest number preferred to use both clinics and traditional healers. This is, of course, not surprising given the history of disease management in rural communities, including the extended Aids pandemic of the post-apartheid years.

The Covid pandemic has thus created a biomedical crisis with far-reaching cultural, political and economic implications which are reflected not only in the spread of hunger and distrust, but also seen in the torn social fabric. There are deep gender and generational fissures that need repair and increased incidents of witchcraft-related violence,

especially against older women. As in the 1950s, there is a rise in rural crime with predatory gangs of young people moving through rural locations to prey on the weak.

One of the main complaints about the presence of police at funerals in 2020 and 2021 was that they were wasting precious time and resources on activities that were none of their business when they should rather be chasing criminals and providing protection to law-abiding rural citizens. The Covid-induced unravelling of community life, compounded by physical distancing, fear, hunger and customary bans, has further impacted the changing situation.

To constantly present Covid as a health crisis in rural South Africa, or as a crisis of government PPE corruption and vaccination resistance, underestimates the wider social and political shifts taking place in rural areas, and the possibility that the long durée of rural compliance and passivity might be ending.

The politics of threat, such as “you will lose your grants if you vote against the ruling party” or “if you are not vaccinated, you cannot use the clinic”, hold less weight today than in the past. Instead, we noted that young people are increasingly saying that if you want access to our bodies, you need to make sure that social relief grants are paid.

Academics write now about the need to understand the “intersectional precarities” of Covid in Africa — how different aspects of the crisis are interconnected, such as disease, hunger and social isolation. The history of rural politics in South Africa shows that it is precisely this intersectionality that instigates revolt, such as the spread of bovine lung sickness with drought

during the Xhosa Cattle Killing (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/cattle-killing-movement>), hunger with land alienation during the Bulhoek rebellion (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-bulhoek-massacre>) in the 1920s, or the manipulation of customary power with cattle culling (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344036453_Cattle_after_migrant_labour_Emerging_markets_and_changing_regimes_of_value_in_rural_South_Africa) during the rural revolts of the 1950s.

In the distant past, the rural poor have been more easily mobilised through the millenarian vision of prophets, priests and princes promising a brand-new beginning in a world of restored harmony, social health and prosperity, than by the manifestos of secular politicians and political parties. Even in the 1950s, there were still flickering hopes of a world beyond and without whiteness. These are not the visions of the rural poor in a post-colonial African democracy today.

The rural poor today embrace a new kind of politics which is based less on restoration and the defence of tradition than on meaningful inclusion. Rural communities are looking for a new deal that can transcend the colonial oppositions of modernity and tradition and will instigate action toward more participatory rural development.

The politics of threat against compliance holds less power than before in an old order which is ready for change – the kind of change that includes democratic public health and the right to sustainable livelihoods, while also respecting the need for the protection of customary practice. **DM**

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(<https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/covid-and-custom-in-rural-south-africa/>), which is published by Hurst Press.

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"Information pertaining to Covid-19, vaccines, how to control the spread of the virus and potential treatments is ever-changing. Under the South African Disaster Management Act Regulation 11(5)(c) it is prohibited to publish information through any medium with the intention to deceive people on government measures to address COVID-19. We are therefore disabling the comment section on this article in order to protect both the commenting member and ourselves from potential liability. Should you have additional information that you think we should know, please email letters@dailymaverick.co.za (<mailto:letters@dailymaverick.co.za>)."

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