



Harsh Economic Times, Political Uncertainty...and Now Corona

By Dauti Kahura



*Our lives were ruined among the leaves,
We decayed like pumpkin in a mud field*
~ Mazisi Kunene, South African anti-Apartheid poet

They say when it rains, it pours, and calamity comes with its brother. The revelation that the dreaded coronavirus had, about two weeks ago, finally found its way into Kenya threw the country into a state of pandemonium. Until then, Kenyans viewed the virus as a devastating but “alien” disease.

It was not until the quasi-lockdown was ordered by the government that Kenyans realised that beyond the confusion and panic, a much worse situation was threatening to compound and exacerbate an economic meltdown they have been experiencing for the last 20 months or so. The “alien” ailment has not only brought with it bewilderment, but is threatening to lock them down, literally, to starvation.

The virus, of the genus corona, was first detected in Wuhan Province in China in December 2019, hence the name COVID-19 (coronavirus disease of 2019). Three months later, when Kenyans first heard about a disease that was killing the Chinese quicker than flickering fireflies, they brushed it

off as one of those phenomena that occur in far-off countries in the East.

The disease could not have come at a worse time for Kenyans. Experiencing harsh economic times and political uncertainty, many Kenyans concluded that the gods have conspired to punish them. “For how else do you explain the disease coming to Kenya at a time when we are faced with the toughest of economic hard times?” posed a woman.

That plane from China

“This is the modern Armageddon, the end of times is nigh because we’ve deviated from God’s ways. It is a message from God who is angry with us. We’ve sinned too much and this is a sign from God who is asking us to turn from our wicked ways and repent of our sins,” prophesied a street vendor in Nairobi selling tree tomatoes, popularly known in Kiswahili as *matunda damu*. But after this revelation of a messianic message, the woman admitted that the hint of a complete lockdown by the government was a sure way of strangling the livelihoods of people like her.

“Ndiraikara mucii nacio ciana irie ke?” You’re asking me to stay at home, what will my children eat? *“Ako corona niguturaga, reke tukuire guku bara-ini”*. If the coronavirus is going to kill us, let us then die on these streets, hustling. President Uhuru Kenyatta’s government has already killed our businesses, now he is asking us to stay at home – *tumurie kana twikie atia?* We feed on him? Or how does he propose we should fend for our families?

The vendor was angry that the president exhibited a laissez-faire attitude towards battling the deadly virus. “Why didn’t he stop the plane that came from China? If he had done that, we wouldn’t be in this bad situation and our livelihoods would not be threatened.”

The plane that she was referring to was a China Southern Airlines flight that was allowed to land at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) on 26 February 2019. The flight had arrived in Nairobi despite a directive forbidding flights originating in China to land in Kenya due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. Kenya Airways had also by that time suspended all its flights to and from China. This particular plane carried 239 passengers, many of whom were Chinese nationals. The airport employee who posted a video of the plane landing was suspended (and later reinstated through a court order), which suggested that the plane had the government’s permission to land. The reference to this plane and the anger it has generated among the people I talked to was evident throughout all my interviews.

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The weekend before the quasi-lockdown decreed by the government on Monday, 23 March 2020, I was in Nakuru County. My first stop was at the Java House located in CK Patel House in central Nakuru town. It was 10.00 a.m. and there was absolutely no customer. I found the manager sipping her coffee latte. “What’s up?” I asked her. “There’s no one in the house”.

The nonplussed manager said the coronavirus was bad for business. “Look, it is mid-morning, a peak time when customers should be flocking in for their refill, yet we’ve an empty house.”

The coffee house closes at 5 p.m., which is normally a peak hour when commuters wait for the traffic jam to ease off before heading home. “This is not a harbinger of good times,” said one of the lady

waiters. "If this situation persists long enough, who knows, the management could easily send us home...this, by the way, is not good at all."

"The incompetence of this government and President Uhuru is mindboggling," said a lady I was meeting in Nakuru town. "Why, in God's name, did he allow the plane from China to land at JKIA?" she furiously wondered aloud. "He should have ordered the plane to turn back, the way it came and never to allow the passengers to disembark. Do we know how many of those passengers could have been infected all the way from China? Do we know how many people they, indeed, could have infected once here in the country? Who knows where those people are and which corner of the country they are in? Did the government ever track them down?"

The lady was convinced that if the government had refused the landing of that plane, it is probable that we would not be so afraid now and there would not really have been a case for a (quasi) lockdown.

"The government now is all over issuing edicts - it must always do the wrong thing first before it turns around to sound the alarm bells," she said. People seem to be impressed by the new Cabinet Secretary for Health, Mutahi Kagwe, I'm not. What ordinary Kenyans want to know is how, in the event of a complete lockdown, they will earn a living. Period. Endless press conferences threatening us with damnation are neither here nor there. The President recently threatened us, saying the government will crack down on anybody not adhering to the stay-at-home edict. This is uncalled for as well as unhelpful. Does he have any concrete plans for ameliorating the situation and ensuring Kenyans who live from hand to mouth are cushioned?"

Later in the evening, I was at Garden Villa, located on the western side of town as you head to Shaabab residential area. It was completely empty and the waiters were just lounging around. Garden Villa is an expansive nyama choma eatery, as well as a "watering hole" with appropriate cushioned-seat cubicles for groups of people or couples. It was glaringly in its emptiness.

Beatrice, our waitress, was not amused by coronavirus coming to Kenya: "It is no longer a death scare; it has come to actually destroy our livelihoods. I've three children - two in university and one is finishing high school. My job has really sustained me, I've been able to educate my children so far with the tips that I collect here and there from patrons like you. When there are no customers, we are finished. I'm really worried. If this situation continues like this, we'll all be declared redundant. What will happen to my children?"

Back in Nairobi, I went to one of my usual Java House haunts. The security guard was forthright: "*Hii kitu itauwa watoto wetu. Sijui leo nita peleka nini nyumbani.*" This thing called coronavirus will kill our children. Today I don't know what I will take home.

The main work of security guards like one at Java House is to ensure that patrons enjoy their house coffee without probing eyes and disturbance from the city centre's "undesirables", and to usher patrons inside the coffee house. They help customers find car park spaces and guard the automobiles from hoodlums. They will also offer concierge services to patrons, such as carrying stuff to their vehicles. At the end of the day, they have enough pocket money to pass through the supermarket and buy some milk and bread for tomorrow morning's breakfast. He told me the lack of patrons meant that he would go home empty-handed. "*Mungu asaidie afukuze hii coronavirus, kama siyo hivyo tumeisha.*" The almighty should intervene and clear this coronavirus as quickly as possible, otherwise we're all finished.

Prayer warriors

In the city centre, at the famous Jevanjee Park, I met a group of four middle-aged women. They were talking with each other. On the day the government ordered the people not to leave their houses after 7 p.m., they disobeyed and trooped to town. "I'm staying in the house and then what happens?" posed one. "Are my children going to feed on me?"

The women were "professional" casual labourers. Lately they have been getting manual jobs from the Nairobi County as grass cutters and street sweepers.

"We live on a day-to-day basis" said one of the women. "How on earth does the government expect us to survive?"

"Tell you what," ventured one of the women, "yesterday I went to church because our pastor had sent word around that we must not fail to go church." She told me she attends a Kenya Assemblies of God (KAG) church. Their pastor told them that coronavirus had come to Kenya to remind Christians that, indeed, these were the last days.

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"Coronavirus is not going to be defeated by worshippers staying at home," claimed the pastor. "It is going to be wrestled down to the ground by prayer warriors. We must condemn the evil-doer, we must never doubt our faith. We must never doubt our God, Is this the time to let our able God down? Are we doubting Him?"

"I'm a Catholic and we went to church. The parish priest, through *jumuia* [small community groups], sent word that we must all be in church on Sunday without fail," said one of the woman. "The priest said the body of Christ is asking us, 'Are you not going celebrate with me? For is this the time to forsake me?' It is always fundamentally important to remember to keep the faith."

"The churches cannot, even for once, pretend that they care for our welfare," said another woman. "In these times of economic turbulence and the coming of the corrosive coronavirus, all what the churches can tell us is to still go and congregate in congested spaces. And all what this government can tell us is to sanitise our hands. The church and the government's work is to fleece us, the people."

In the evening, I caught up with the same quartet outside Charlies' restaurant that faces City Hall. It was now past five and they were hungry and angry. "How are we going home?" asked one of them in concealed desperation. All of them lived in the sprawling slums of Nairobi. Seated on the stone bench of the restaurant, they resorted to begging money from any passing man they thought they could remotely recognise.

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The following day, I found myself in bustling Kawangware, where the coronavirus threat is real. Kawangware was deserted – many businesses were shut and the human commotion that is usually associated with the sprawling residential area was absent. I dropped in at Sakina's *kibanda* (food kiosk-cum-shed) in the Coast area (Mombasani) where she sells very pocket-friendly fresh food to construction workers, bachelors, spinsters, and all manner of casual labourers. Sakina shared the *kibanda* with her mother, but her mom was not there on that day.

“Where’s your mother?” I asked Sakina.

“She took the kids [her four children] to shags [her rural home],” she responded. (Sakina’s rural home is right in the middle of Nyeri town, at Meeting Point.) “Business is slowly grinding to a halt and we didn’t want to take chances. At least at *cucu’s* [grandma’s] place, there’s food to eat...this coronavirus has dealt us a huge blow...but alhamdulillah, it is going to be defeated by Allah.”

In times like this, said Sakina, it’s important to be steadfast and to anchor your whole self in the great faith.

A disease of the rich

At Zambezi trading centre, 19 kilometres from the city centre on the Nairobi-Nakuru Road, Nyambura, a chicken legs and liver vendor, was preparing her foodstuff for her evening customers.

“Are you not afraid of the coronavirus?” I asked her.

“Indeed I am,” she replied. “But can I eat fear? Can my children eat fear? I cannot stay in the house. I must get out to fend for my family. My husband is a salaried worker. He has to wait for 30 days to be paid his paltry pay. We cannot wait for that. It is my responsibility to supplement the ugali he brings home,” said the lady with a great chuckle.

“[President] Uhuru doesn’t care about us small farmers. He has been careless and is playing dice with our lives. After ruining our lives, he has now let this coronavirus invade our country. Why couldn’t he stop that plane from China? Its good coronavirus is infecting the rich and the powerful. They should all perish. They have caused us enough agony,” said Nyambura.

“But trust me, this coronavirus is not going to finish us because our Lord Jesus Christ is on the throne. In the name of Jesus, I condemn the disease,” she added.

She said coronavirus, like the most incompetent government she had lived through, had conspired to kill the spirit of Kenyans. “Yesterday, I paid 100 shillings from 87 to here. Can you imagine? Ordinarily the matatu fare from 87, just after Uthiru to Zambezi, is 30 shillings. For how long can one afford that kind of fare?” She said that from the Old Nation House roundabout stage to Zambezi, passengers were being charged 150 shillings. I hooked up with my freelance tout friend Davy to confirm whether it was true.

“What do you expect when the matatus have been ordered to carry half the seating capacity of their vehicles?” said the freelance tout. (The government has directed that public transport vehicles observe social distancing among their passengers, which means that these vehicles are forced to carry fewer passengers per trip.) Davy told me that many matatu proprietors had grounded their vehicles. “*Hakuna haja ya kufanya kazi ya kirai*”. It’s pointless to engage in an unprofitable business.

From the city centre to Zambezi, the fare is ordinarily 80 shillings during peak hours and 50 shillings during off-peak hours. “Think about it,” explained Davy. “The matatus that have chosen to be on the road are being fair.”

A 33-seater is now carrying 16 passengers. So passengers are paying 150 shillings instead of 80 shillings in normal times. The Nissan shuttles that ferry 14 passengers are now having to carry just 8 passengers. Davy said if the government was considerate, it would, at least for now, reduce the price of fuel. That way the matatu owners would not be forced to adjust the fares.

“How many people can afford to be paying 300 shillings every day to town?” asked Nyambura. “What is it then you are working for? You’ve not even eaten. And President Uhuru, instead of telling us how the government can come up with ways of helping us alleviate this burden, has gone on air to tell us about the merits of 4G Internet speed. (On March 23, President Kenyatta addressed the nation live on air, extolling the virtues of the business deal between Telkom Kenya and Google Loon, which would now allow for faster speed and easy interconnectivity.)

In the political sphere, Nakuru residents believe that the coronavirus appeared just in the nick of time to save President Uhuru and the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) team the embarrassment of a looming contest and showdown that was to take place in town at Afraha Stadium. On 21 March 2019, BBI had organised a rally to popularise its agenda. But every indication showed that this was not going to be a walk in the park for the BBI mandarins.

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“This coronavirus has just given the president some reprieve,” said a Nakuru boda boda (motorcycle rider) from Maili Sita trading centre (popularly known simply as Sita) on the Nakuru-Nyahururu Road. The rider opined that had the BBI rally taken place, the William Ruto wing of the Jubilee Party would, most certainly, have upstaged the BBI brigade. It was going to be battle a between BBI and the deputy president’s “Tanga Tanga” band of supporters.

When on 28 January 2019 President Uhuru was in Nakuru town to open a cement factory in Rongai, he detoured to Bahati constituency, where at Sita he lambasted the area MP, Kimani Ngunjiri. As he was castigating him, Ngunjiri was several metres away from the president’s motorcade. “When he left, the boda boda riders came to Ngunjiri and they were high-fiving him and laughing excitedly,” said the boda boda rider. “They promised him that when BBI lands in Nakuru, they would show President Uhuru who ruled Nakuru.”

With all the laments, speculation and tantalising gossip, it is still not clear what impact the coronavirus pandemic will have on the lives of ordinary Kenyans. Many are in still in disbelief and more worried about their livelihoods than about falling ill or dying. But what is clear is that Kenya after corona will not be the same again.

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