



By Wachira Maina



What is Kenya’s strategy against the Coronavirus? Kenyans had hoped to get an answer when President Uhuru Kenyatta’s addressed the Nation last Monday. What they heard instead was a sanguine speech full of moral exhortation and equivocations.

The President announced some tax measures but these were the same middle-class sops that he had offered a fortnight earlier. He spoke expansively on the sacrifices that frontline staff make but gave no carrots that might actually enthuse them to make even more sacrifices, as they must in the coming months. He placed imperious restrictions on how and when people can move in Nairobi, Kilifi, Kwale and Mombasa but left vague much that really matters. His handlers have since been scrambling, trying to finesse his meaning. The President called for Kenya to tap “into the creativity of our people” but left it unclear what the country’s state of readiness for COVID-19 actually is. What, in other words, is the context for the exercise of creativity?

Mr. Kenyatta won’t say what budget re-alignments his government will make to free resources for the crisis. He won’t disclose what, if anything, his epidemiologists have told him about the evolution of the disease in the next few weeks. He won’t say what diplomatic efforts are underway to get help. He won’t reveal the status of our national stores: for food; for antibiotics and for drugs to manage COVID-19 symptoms. If restrictions are meant to make testing easier, Mr. Kenyatta gave no hint whether Kenya has adequate testing kits.

Mr. Kenyatta gestured faintly to the needs of the vulnerable but the paltry Kshs 2 billion shillings from anti-corruption earnings that he has set aside is a desperate drop in an ocean of destitution.

What other monies he offered is laughably inadequate: Kshs. 10 billion for cash-transfers to the elderly and Kshs 100 million to musicians and artists, perhaps to lift the national mood out of COVID-19 gloom. Reviewed most charitably, President Kenyatta's speech was like a fire-bell in a Stygian black-out of hopelessness: Kenyans have no idea whether the fire-brigade will come to the rescue; whether the fire-trucks have water to douse the flames and whether they themselves are safer inside their homes or outside.

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Even worse, the President's measures are dangerous as well as weak and ineffectual. They are dangerous for giving the public false hope that there is meaningful action underway. And they are weak and ineffectual because none of what Mr. Kenyatta promises can be enforced. Landlords will puff out their chests with pride at the President's praise but "compassion and understanding" are not incentives enough for them to forego rents. It is praiseworthy that the President has asked the Nairobi Metropolitan Service to supply water to all and to see to it that water vendors aren't selling water to the needy. But what are the destitute to do if the vendors ignore Mr. Kenyatta's pleas? The President has done well to request the Kenya Power and Lighting Company to indulge consumers in default. But what legal right does a presidential 'request' give those whose supply KPLC disconnects?

Mr. Kenyatta has two problems, both of his own making. One, since the crisis broke he has treated it as medical problem and farmed it out to Mr. Mutahi Kagwe, the Minister for Health. Two, Mr. Kenyatta appears to think that his government can fight this epidemic without a strategy. He is wrong on both fronts: the crisis he faces is one of governance not medicine and to lead on it is his job, not the health minister's.

There are only three medical elements to this crisis: tests, treatment and quarantine. Everything else that is necessary to contain the disease: restrictions on movement; contact tracing; kiting out places of quarantine and testing; keeping supply chains for essential goods open; providing essential services in lock-down; protecting the vulnerable; managing food reserves as well as identifying food deficit areas and organizing logistics to supply food where it is needed; enacting special purpose laws for the crisis, say emergency appropriations; tax exemptions for critical businesses; measures to keep the general economy going; how and when to deploy the security forces, including the army; closing or opening borders and arteries of commerce, and much else besides, are all governance issues. The countries that have beaten back the coronavirus understood this from the very first.

And so to Mr. Kenyatta's second problem: trying to manage the epidemic the way he has managed dissimilar crises in the past, that is, by winging it. He will fail and Kenyans will die needlessly. As a governance problem, Kenya's effort to fight COVID-19 fragments into many moving parts that span the boundaries of the bureaucracy. Yet ministries are often goal-incompatible: the one for industry might disagree with that for environment where factories should be built, for example. When there is goal-conflict or a problem calls for all of government to act- as COVID-19 does- it is the President's job to make sure that all work to a common purpose. There must be clarity and co-ordination. That means that the President must set clear goals and frame objectives for his ministers that are clear and achievable. He must define the right actions to achieve the objectives, fund those actions, assign them to someone and make it clear to officials how they will be held to account. Thereafter, his job is to track progress against the targets and results that he wants and, if needs be, to knock laggards on the head and sack persistent failures. In short, Mr. Kenyatta must have a strategy. But, and this is

the problem, Mr. Kenyatta acts as if he does not.

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That, unfortunately, is a deadly tryst with fate. If he is not sure what to do, he has piles of excellent ideas from his impressive Ghanaian peer, President Dankwa Nana Akufo-Addo. Mr. Kenyatta gets apoplectic when western examples are held to his eye but the experiences of a comparable African nation should give him pause. Like Mr. Kenyatta, Mr. Akufo-Addo initially failed to grasp the mortal danger posed by the Coronavirus to the health of his people and the economy of Ghana. Since he learnt the peril that Ghana faced, Mr. Akufo-Addo has shaken his government out of its torpor. He now provides decisive and visible leadership; keeps focus on the mission; constantly reminds Ghanaians of his five anti-COVID-19 objectives and gives regular updates on his efforts. Since the 10th of March he has made five national addresses, all of them matter-of-fact affairs admirably free of moral dross.

Mr. Akufo-Addo's is clear where the buck stops and he explains it plainly: "The oath of office I swore on 7th January, 2017 demands that I dedicate myself to the service and well-being of the Ghanaian people. It is my job to protect you, and I am determined to do just that." He has had his missteps. Some Ghanaian lawyers have, to give one example, questioned the constitutionality of the Imposition of Restrictions Act, a recently enacted law that Mr. Akufo-Addo has used to impose a mini-lockdown - apparently copied by Mr. Kenyatta- on the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area. Even so, Mr. Akufo-Addo has been careful to justify, plausibly, all the measures that he takes.

It helps that Mr. Akufo-Addo has framed a clear goal and spelt out some luminous and achievable objectives. His goal is to build the resilience and self-reliance of Ghanaians so that they can beat back COVID-19 and minimise its impact. He has five objectives to that end: to limit or altogether stop the importation of the virus; to contain its spread; to provide adequate care for the sick; to limit the impact of COVID-19 on the social and economic life of Ghana and to expand domestic capabilities to cope with its ravages as well as deepen Ghana's self-reliance.

To meet the first objective, he closed down all of Ghana's international borders on the 21st of March. But the numbers of the infected continued to press upwards still, particularly in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area, and so, on the 28th of March, Mr. Akufo-Addo imposed a two-week, geographically limited restriction on movement. The point was not just to halt the spread of the virus- which is critical- but also to scale-up contact tracing, ease testing and, as necessary, find out who to quarantine for observation and who to isolate for treatment.

Though Mr. Akufo-Addo expected everyone in the named area to stay home for a fortnight, the measures were carefully calibrated. People can still shop for essentials. Inter-city traffic is prohibited but not transport of essential cargo and for critical services. Members of the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary are exempt from the restrictions as are those who produce and sell food and medicines. Certain sectors of the economy are excluded too: road and railway construction workers; petrol station staff; miners; fisher-folk and staff of Utilities: power, water, and telecommunications.

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President Akufo-Addo understands that without frontline staff, his best efforts will fall apart. He is implementing an array of impressive measures, first to keep frontline staff safe and second to fire up their motivation. As of last Sunday, when he made his latest national address, Ghana had purchased and distributed large stores of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs): 350,000 masks; 558,650 examination gloves; 1,000 reusable goggles; 20,000 cover-alls; 7,000 N-95 respirators (for close-fit facial and efficient filtering of airborne particles); 500 waterproof gumboots; 2,000 reusable face shields; 2,000 gallons of hand sanitizers; 10,000 100ml pieces of hand sanitizers, and 500 shoe covers.

To cope with anticipated staff shortages and ease communications, Ghana will recruit an additional one thousand community health workers and one thousand volunteers and provide a hundred pick-up trucks and two thousand, five hundred tablets.

Mr. Akufo hopes to keep frontline staff motivated: each health professional will get additional insurance for a total assured sum of US\$60,000. Health workers won't pay income tax for April, May and June. For four months starting in March, they will get 50 per cent of their basic pay as top-up. Contact tracers will be paid a daily allowance of US\$25. Throughout the restriction period, the government will provide buses to transport medical staff to and from work.

There is more. Starting this week, Ghana will support local industry to produce Personal Protection Equipment - facemasks, head-covers, surgical scrubs and gowns. This will offset local needs against a growing global shortage. The plan is to produce 150,000 masks a day for a target of 3.6 million.

These measures are being implemented in lockstep with safeguards for livelihoods. This, the Ghana Coronavirus Alleviation Programme, has three aims: offset the disruptive effects of COVID-19; relieve hardships, and rescue and revitalize industry. Treasury will immediately release US\$ 175 million to households and businesses. There is a soft loan programme to lend up to US\$100 million to Ghana's Jua-kali sector with one-year moratorium and two-year repayment. And now, the President said on Sunday, there is a US\$500 million facility to support industry in the works.

Businesses in the airline and hospitality industries will be grateful for the 6-month moratorium on their loan repayments as well as the 2 per cent reduction in interest rates effective 1st April 2020 that all will enjoy. Amidst a still-growing crisis, many Ghanians will be happy that tax-filing dates have been moved from April to June. Mr. Akufo-Addo has also set up a private COVID-19 Fund, managed- as in Kenya by an independent board- but Ghana's is chaired by a former Chief Justice Sophia Akuffo.

To give the poor some relief, Mr. Akufo-Addo has ordered utilities- Ghana Water Company Ltd and the Electricity Company of Ghana- to ensure stable supply and not to disconnect anyone in default. The government will pay all Ghanaians' water-bills for April, May and June. Water tankers - whether public and private- must supply water to all vulnerable communities.

It is all a very impressive example of clear thinking backed by concrete action. Mr. Akufo-Addo has realised that Ghana faces an existential threat from which it may not emerge. The point, it seems, is that Mr. Akufo-Addo is like Mr. Kenyatta: He, too, can make a fine speech. The difference lies in this: that as Mr. Kenyatta makes all the right moral pitches, Mr. Akufo-Addo canvasses all the right responses. If only Mr. Kenyatta would reach for the phone and give President Akufo-Addo a call.

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