



Response

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Scapegoating Foreigners

Across the world, politicians and elected officials of all stripes seem to be vying with each other to make the most outrageous, offensive, dismissive and exclusionary statements about migrants and refugees. The recent comments of the MEC for Health in Limpopo province must in this context be among the worst. Dr Phophi Ramathuba, herself a medical doctor with a pharmacology specialisation, was caught on camera berating a patient, believed to be an undocumented Zimbabwean, for having crossed the border in order to receive medical attention, thereby 'abusing' South Africa's strained health care system. Her comments went viral and unleashed a tirade of responses, some defending her and adding to the offensive arguments, while others took strong exception to her remarks and called for her dismissal.

At the heart of what one newspaper called her 'tongue-lashing', the MEC made the point that when she visited Canada she had to assure the Canadian government that she had sufficient funds to cover medical bills should she fall ill while there. Conversely, Zimbabwe contributed nothing to her budget and thus could not expect that its citizens should be given medical attention in Limpopo.

"You know he [Zimbabwean President Emerson Mnangagwa] doesn't give me money to operate? You are killing my health system. When you guys are sick, I'm hearing these days you just say, 'Let's cross the Limpopo River, there's a MEC there that's running a charity department'. That is why when my people of Limpopo want health services, they can't get. That is angering the community." She ended with a flourish, instructing the hospital officials to bill the patient. The tone and the body language of the MEC emphasised her negativity.

Later, the MEC defended herself, claiming that the clip had been misinterpreted, and that she was not xenophobic or "anti-illegal", as she put it. She also said that "nobody will be denied medical service. We have been doing that and continue to do that whether you are Zim or not."

Be that as it may, the MEC's comments have exposed a dangerous tendency – which is growing in the public sphere and in political narratives in particular – that attempts to shift the blame for our own governance failures onto vulnerable mobile communities.

It is sadly ironic that the MEC's outburst coincided with the first anniversary of the assassination of whistle-blower Babita Deokaran, who exposed gross corruption, fraud and theft at a hospital in Tembisa. While it is true that those revelations concerned a different hospital in a different province, it is also true that a picture has emerged across the country of a health-care system that is under strain not because of foreigners, but because of all the pathologies of governance that we see rampant across South Africa. Scapegoating will do nothing to resolve the deep-rooted problems in our country, but will instead continue to stoke dangerous xenophobic tensions. When figures in authority give credence to the reckless rhetoric of populists and expedient politicians, such as we see in Operation Dudula, it has the effect of normalising deeply insidious ideas.

Prof Alex van der Heever of the Wits School of Governance summed it up well: "Ramathuba's rant is basically a distraction that's used to create a xenophobic response as if that's the cause of the problem.

The cause of the problem is the government failing to create a coherent strategy and plans for solving difficult problems.” What was needed instead was proper mapping of the movement of people in order better to define catchment populations, a better organisation of financial systems, and the employment and deployment by the government of leaders with integrity and competence. He added: “The failure of those departments is because of the government’s failure to act and lead – not because of migrants.”

The Health Department issued a tepid response to the incident, saying that the Minister was out of the country and that full details were being gathered to give him a full report on his return. It alluded to stresses in the health-care system and to the fact that care for foreigners must comply with the Refugee Act and the Health Act, as well as with the demands of the Hippocratic Oath. It indicated that some of these issues were being discussed by the SADC partners.

As discussions continue and ideological positions harden, the already vulnerable groups in our country continue to carry the burden of being scapegoated, and their daily lives continue to be made more miserable. On 25th August, Pope Francis spoke to an international group of legislators reflecting on the call for justice in the public sphere, and reminded them of their duties: “Yours is the challenge of working to safeguard and enhance within the public sphere those right relationships that allow each person to be treated with the respect, and indeed the love, that is due to him or her.”

The Pope extended his thoughts towards the poor, migrants and refugees, the sick and elderly, victims of human trafficking and those “who risk being exploited or discarded by today’s throw-away culture”. It would serve our politicians and elected officials well to reflect on the Pope’s sentiments.

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