

Covid-19 in SA heaps pressure on govt, health minister – analyst – Citizen 5 March 2020

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Health Minister Zweli Mkhize is facing substantial pressure following the confirmation of South Africa's first Covid-19 case in KwaZulu-Natal today.

Political analyst Daniel Silke says Mkhize "is already under fire for huge delivery and efficiency gaps in South Africa's state hospitals, and the coronavirus crisis will physically put a strain on a state health sector already heavily stretched".

"Clearly, the immediate danger of further cases and any extension of the virus beyond imported cases to internal transmission poses extreme dangers to poorer communities in particular."

But there is a political aspect to this that adds even more pressure, Silke says.

"At the same time as Covid-19 arrives on our shores, Mkhize is trying to sell National Health Insurance to South Africa. Amidst a decline in State capacity in public health, the extension of NHI has been controversial with many believing that lack of capacity, skills and infrastructure can derail healthcare even further should it be implemented.

"In the light of this, the Department of Health has to perform. Minister Mkhize has to look in control and thoroughly professional at all times. His message has to be on-point and in-line with global messaging on the unfolding situation. This is critical since any government failure on this matter will set back the ANC's attempts to sell NHI to sceptical observers," Silke says in a statement.

Should Mkhize "preside over a less-than-adequate response which flounders in providing an efficient response, he will find it very tough to sell an enhanced role for state care in the broader South Africa.

"Although Covid-19 is an imported problem for the country and one in which there is little global precedence for its management, the South African government will be fairly or unfairly tested on this matter. And, its vulnerabilities in terms of its existing healthcare deficiencies will be closely scrutinised.

"The pressure is therefore on the Ministry of Health and indeed, President Ramaphosa too, to lead in an exemplary fashion. Should Covid-19 become a real threat to a larger group of South Africans, the political consequences will be felt.

"The presence of Covid-19 is more than just crisis management. It will test both politicians and their policies as the crisis unfolds," Silke concludes.

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