Two decades ago, professor Salim Abdool Karim and his former PhD supervisor, Jerry Coovadia, were summoned to a Hilton Hotel suite filled with health officials, among them Zwel Mkhize. There they were branded traitors, accused of being disloyal and told to “shut up and listen” by a bespectacled Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the minister of health at the time.

Their crime: using their scientific and political activist credentials to stem the infectious spread of AIDS denialism advocated by then-president Thabo Mbeki and Tshabalala-Msimang by shaming them at a global gathering of scientists and policymakers – the International AIDS Conference in Durban in July 2000.

Coovadia, who had co-chaired the conference, and Abdool Karim, who was the scientific programme chair, had succeeded in their mission to counter the government position, reinforced by a moving speech by 11-year-old Aids activist Nolo Johnson and closing remarks from former president Nelson Mandela.

Mkhize, who is now health minister and facing a pandemic of his own, was a local government representative in the room on the day. His support would have been with the two men facing the minister’s wrath, men with whom he had common roots at what was then the University of Natal medical school.

It was under Coovadia’s eye that he and Abdool Karim had cut their teeth on virology and immunology, as much as they did on discussing social democracy and apartheid. Abdool Karim, who is known worldwide by his nickname, “Slim”, given to him during his medical school days, has lived up to the reputation associated with the Afrikaans word for clever.

That Abdool Karim knows his stuff in the world of epidemiology and fighting viruses is beyond dispute. His career spans three decades, with experience gained at Columbia and Harvard universities, the South African Medical Research Council, UNAids, the World Health Organisation and now the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA (Capris).

Last year he was inducted into the fellowship of the Royal Society, the prestigious science academy that counts among its fellows Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking.
Work starts at 6am and ends after midnight

This vast experience, coupled with a friendship that has spanned their professional careers, prompted Mthembu to ask Abdool Karim to lead SA’s response to the pandemic.

As chair of the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee, Abdool Karim leads a team of 50 scientists tasked with advising the government on strategies to combat the spread of the disease.

He says South Africans should regard themselves as fortunate to have an enlightened political leadership that is not afraid to confront the novel coronavirus or to prepare for the “invariable Covid peak,” which he said is yet to come.

“I have seen how this crisis, in the form of a little virus that comes from a seafood market, is reaching us about what it means to an arrogant and uncaring world. It has strong, enlightened leadership. I watched the biggest disasters – in this case we have been dealt with in the US and UK – and I think God is in SA.

“We have good leaders who know what they need to do and are not scared to do it,” he said.

Downplaying it, like the Mbeki approach,” he told the Sunday Times from a safe distance in his Cape Town office on Thursday.

Abdool Karim is in a towering presence, intimidating even from a distance, but he has the self-assurance and he has the singular ability to relate as much to an auditorium full of the best scientific minds in the world as to an ordinary person.

As a global statistician and the paper’s best-seller, the SA government was very much like how they have to work with US President Donald Trump right now.

“Somebody who does not understand science but thinks he does and thinks he is correct, and is running the country, is trying to rationally view their viewpoint, is viewed as if you are challenging authority where you are just trying to help the authority to be correct. It is not a political issue but a scientific one.

“Trying to address HIV under Mbeki and Covid-19 under President Cyril Ramaphosa is like night and day. Rabocho has been proactive, he is thinking ahead of the problem, he collects a lot of information and he assimilates information from many sources, and he is considering how he wants to move forward.

“Do not waste time,” said Abdool Karim.

Time, he said, is something that has temporarily lost meaning as he and the team work day and night – analysing data, formulating solutions, coming through research and consulting international counterparts – to advise the government on how to fight the virus.

“Many of the people on the committee are leading scientists, people that I know very well, and I thought it would be an honour to serve but I am not sure if I know how much the work would be, that I would have said yes.

“The work starts at about 6am and finishes at about 9am. There are things to do all the time.

“The work comes in the form of questions from the health ministry that need urgent answers. The scientists formed a collaboration paper.

“Terror has been broken into small groups. When he [Mbeki] gives us questions, we put a small team together and do research to answer, because so little is known about the virus. They will write a report and, based on that report, we will then have a discussion and submit the advice.

“We do high level and detailed questions. Answers have led to things like community screenings, a systematic approach of lifting the lockdown, but we

that are informed by science.

The group met individually – sometimes three meetings in one day. The last meeting the committee had with the minister and provincial health MECs was on Wednesday night and lasted about four hours.

On Thursday, SA recorded its biggest rise in the number of deaths since the outbreak, to take the toll to 48. The number of confirmed cases increased by 99 to 2,605. However, Abdool Karim said that he believes that the lockdown has contained the virus.

“We want those few thousand infections we are seeing to become a dead end," he said.

"Community transmissions are at a low level. The lockdown brought South Africa important time but the way forward will be determined by community transmission.

"A high number will mean a longer lockdown, a low one will mean easing of the lockdown can be considered.

"As soon as we lift the lockdown (transmission) will go up, but we will be prepared," he said.

Preparation for the peak period of the virus included creating space for increased hospital beds to avoid collapsing the existing infrastructure.

"You see, the president is working on a new plan for the country. As soon as the lockdown is lifted, we will have a plan in place to handle the influx of patients. We will have the necessary medical staff and beds ready to receive the patients."

"The South African government has prepared a new plan for the country. As soon as the lockdown is lifted, we will have a plan in place to handle the influx of patients. We will have the necessary medical staff and beds ready to receive the patients."

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One of Abdool Karim’s strengths is that he can call on experts and friends such as the head of the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), George Gao, and US infectious diseases control specialist Dr Anthony Fauci to help him in the South African government’s fight against Covid-19.

"A new team was formed to tackle the new virus. The team included some of the country’s top scientists, such as Mthembu, Moleko and Abdool Karim. The team was formed to tackle the new virus. The team included some of the country’s top scientists, such as Mthembu, Moleko and Abdool Karim."

"We use a lot of their published articles, they have information that almost nobody has. The first thing we do when we get a question, we look at what the Chinese have said. I call him, I e-mail him, Whatever we want him to assist. The minister also arranged a meeting with the CDC in China. It took four hours and went through the numbers they did right, so that we are better prepared."

"Abdool Karim is a remarkable scientist, he has international experience and research, the team’s advice to the government is not to lift the lockdown abruptly. The team’s advice to the government is not to lift the lockdown abruptly."

"Don’t tell people it is ending abruptly, that everybody must go to work tomorrow.

That is true. That will spread the virus and undo all the work. It should be done in a systematic way and they should consider, if it is ending at the end of the month, how do they get to do it to that date?”

"Scientists are catching up with the virus, conducting clinical trials for vaccines and treatments, but there is still no conclusive evidence that re-infection does not lead to getting sick again.

"We know everyone, based on China, develops antibodies. What we don’t know is whether antibodies protect you from getting sick or infected," said Abdool Karim.

"Early information suggests patients had Covid, don’t get sick again. We think there is an explanation, but it does not cause infection."