Outsmartering corona

This is not his first pandemic, but this time Salim Abdool Karim — one of the government’s chief advisers on the coronavirus — is giving counsel to leaders who respect science, writes Zimasa Matiwane

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 Zwelethu Mkhize. There they were handed traitors, accused of being disloyal and told to “shut up and listen” by a boss-faced 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 Tsahabalala-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 Noxol 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 in discussion 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 (CAPRISA).

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.