



Response

February 19th, 2018

The State of the Nation Address

Apart from the fact that the EFF sat quietly and listened to the speech, was this year's SONA noticeably different from those of recent years?

Yes. Right at the end, in the sixth last line, President Ramaphosa said:

"We are at a moment in the history of our nation when the people, through their determination, have started to turn the country around."

There is a lot in that sentence. Firstly, not since 1994 has a President found it necessary to talk of 'turning the country around'. Previous SONAs have assured us that we were moving in the right direction, though possibly not fast enough and not without encountering obstacles and opposition. To speak of 'turning around' is to concede quite explicitly that we were in fact heading for the rocks.

Secondly, it is 'the people, through their determination' that started the turnaround. Not the ANC; not the alliance; not the government. It is the resilience of our people, expressed in myriad ways, from street protest to radio talk-shows, from investigative journalism to court applications, from withholding their votes to changing their loyalties, that has counted. The people saw through the lies and dissembling of Jacob Zuma and his cronies, and sent a message. Just about enough of the delegates to the ANC's December conference understood the message.

Thirdly, Mr Ramaphosa correctly identified a 'moment in our history'. We have been through an era marked by mendacity and betrayal. We now have the chance to put that behind us and shake off the cloying taint of the Zuma years. Many commentators have drawn comparisons with the euphoric days that followed President Mandela's accession in 1994; apart from the fact that we are more sceptical now than we were then, the comparison is not out of place. Apartheid robbed the majority of our people of their dignity and material well-being. Jacob Zuma's ANC, by embracing corruption, by subordinating the public interest to the personal enrichment of the elite, and by selling out to commercial and foreign patronage, did exactly the same.

So: that one sentence was sufficient to set this speech apart. But so was much of the rest of what Mr Ramaphosa said. Granted, there were the usual references to achievements (3.2million work opportunities since 2009; 3.5million households receiving free basic services; 1million children now in

Early Childhood Development facilities; etc.). And there were the usual broad aspirations and vague promises:

“Radical economic transformation requires that we fundamentally improve the position of black women and communities in the economy, ensuring that they are owners, managers, producers and financiers.”

“We have taken decisive measures to address concerns about political instability and are committed to ensure policy certainty and consistency.”

“... we are determined to build on these achievements, confront the challenges we face and accelerate progress in building a more prosperous and equitable society.”

But there were also numerous examples of problems diagnosed and clear remedies prescribed:

“Social grants remain a vital lifeline for millions of our people living in poverty. We will urgently take decisive steps to comply with all the directions of the Constitutional Court. I want to personally allay fears of any disruption to the efficient delivery of this critical service, and will take action to ensure no person in government is undermining implementation deadlines set by the court.”

“We will change the way that boards [of State-Owned Enterprises] are appointed so that only people with expertise, experience and integrity serve in these vital positions. We will remove board members from any role in procurement and work with the Auditor-General to strengthen external audit processes.”

“We will urgently attend to the leadership issues at the National Prosecuting Authority to ensure that this critical institution is stabilised and able to perform its mandate unhindered.”

“We will also take steps to stabilise and strengthen vital institutions like the South African Revenue Service. At the request of the Minister of Finance, I will shortly appoint a Commission of Inquiry into Tax Administration and Governance of SARS, to ensure that we restore the credibility of the Service and strengthen its capacity to meet its revenue targets.”

We now have a President who acknowledges that Minister Bathabile Dlamini has been undermining the deadlines set by the Constitutional Court; that SOE board members have been leveraging their positions for personal gain; and that the Zuma-appointees Shaun Abrahams and Tom Moyane have destabilized the NPA and SARS respectively. Such candour would have been unthinkable from Mr Zuma or, for that matter, from Mr Mbeki before him.

And there was more. A slightly vague promise to review “the configuration, number and size of national government departments,” which has been interpreted to mean that the Ramaphosa cabinet will be smaller than that of Mr Zuma. A number of summits will be held: one on jobs and another on investment, both within months. There will be a “social sector summit to improve the interface between the state and civil society.” And civil society will also feature in an envisaged ‘Digital Industrial Revolution Commission’ and a new ‘Presidential Economic Advisory Council’. Never before has civil society been so embraced in a SONA; and Mr Ramaphosa will know that civil society will hold him to his word.

So much for the content of the speech. What about the delivery, the feel, the form? Comparisons that highlight Mr Zuma’s rather stilted manner and his lack of facility with complex phrases and numbers are

churlish; given his lack of formal education, due to poverty, his command of English – not to mention African languages other than Zulu – is excellent.

No, the real difference was about trust and integrity. There was no disconnect between what Mr Ramaphosa said and what he has done, unlike in the case of Mr Zuma, who could happily talk about good governance while selling off the state to the Guptas and Vladimir Putin. Mr Ramaphosa comes across as calm, serene, confident, firmly in charge, and clear about what he has to do. Not conflicted, not corrupt, not compromised.

It is said that Nelson Mandela wanted Cyril Ramaphosa to succeed him as President. On the strength of his first SONA, we can understand why.

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