

To South Africa ... with love



Much expected from the president's State of the Nation address on Thursday

MARIANNE MERTEN
Political Bureau

BARELY a month into 2013, the promise of a new year has begun to wear a trifle thin, with South Africans facing financial pressure amid skyrocketing petrol and food prices, looming electricity hikes and the customary business and union rumblings.

All eyes are on President Jacob Zuma to see if he can conjure up a bouquet of goodies that will address some of the country's most pressing issues in his Valentine's Day State of the Nation address.

Indications are that job creation, particularly providing young people with skills and training, will feature prominently in the president's speech, which marks the opening of parliament.

Education, infrastructure development and ways to boost economic growth are also topics likely to receive the president's attention.

This year's State of the Nation address takes place against a lacklustre outlook for economic growth at home and abroad. And following last year's series of downgrades by international ratings agencies, the government will have to work hard to overcome dampened investor enthusiasm.

This week's unemployment statistics did not lift the mood: for the first time, jobs were lost in the festive season-dominated last quarter of last year when businesses usually take on more workers, even if only on a casual basis. Also up, is the number of discouraged jobseekers, those who have simply given up hope of employment, which now stands at 2.3 million South Africans among the 15 million described as "not economically active". There are 33 million people of working age – between the ages of 15 and 65.

Labour discontent on mines and farms is also expected to revive: several mines start their biannual wage negotiations soon and there are reports that farmers are retrenching workers following the introduction of a new agricultural minimum wage of R105 a day.

It is a tough environment for Zuma to provide a clear message on his government's plans.

It is anticipated that key among these will be an outline of a package of measures to encourage youth employment as well as how the government will encourage better teaching practices.

Both issues are potentially explosive.

Teacher unions across the political spectrum have rejected the call from last week's ANC national executive committee (NEC) lekgotla to make teaching an essential service as unconstitutional and unworkable.

In law, being an essential service – already declared as such are doctors,

police officers and soldiers – means not being able to strike, a right teachers' union Sadtu is particularly adamant it will defend.

However, since the initial tough talk announcement, the ANC has signalled that what it actually meant by teaching becoming an essential service was more about forging a social compact than legal definitions. This would be in line with the Mangaung ANC conference resolutions which simply highlight education as a "national priority" to be protected against disruptions from industrial action and service delivery protests, while stressing that action is urgently required to uproot ill-discipline, vandalism and "unsavoury relations" between teachers and pupils.

While the notion of making teaching an essential service emerged during conference discussions at Mangaung, the resolutions in the end called for a presidential commission to review salaries and working conditions in the education and health sectors in order to protect these sectors as "national priorities".

Two years after the youth wage subsidy was announced in the 2011 State of the Nation address, expectations are high that the government will announce a comprehensive package of measures to break the back of youth unemployment, critical since those aged 15 to 35 make up well over 70 percent of the army of unemployed.

Discussions before the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) stalled over trade union federation Cosatu's opposition to a business subsidy for young workers amid concern that older workers would lose their jobs. Cosatu's stance received backing from the Progressive Youth Alliance, including the ANC Youth League, Young Communist League and Congress of South African Students.

Nedlac is discussing an accord on youth employment which may be finalised before Zuma takes to the podium on Thursday.

No doubt, Zuma will highlight the government's delivery achievements. Millions more South Africans have gained access to safe water, sanitation, electricity and state-subsidised housing. South Africa is just a fraction of a percent

short of universal Grade 1 enrolment and has seen more matrics pass the school-leaving test last year than before.

The system of social grants has been extended to some 15 million South Africans over the past few years, and provides a crucial safety net to the poor. More South Africans than ever are on antiretroviral treatment amid a successful testing campaign which by mid-last year saw around 20 million South Africans knowing their HIV/Aids status.

The question remains whether South Africans will be presented with anything fundamentally new.

Buoyed from its Mangaung conference, where Zuma was overwhelmingly re-elected as party president, the ANC has set the tone for doing things differently to achieve results. This was reinforced after the party's NEC lekgotla – attended also by its cabinet ministers, who met separately at this week's cabinet lekgotla – where the emphasis was on practical interventions to achieve results.

This means this year will be the test of whether the government can implement its plans, many of which we have all heard before.

After all, it's not the first time that the quality of education has been highlighted: the so-called "triple Ts" – teachers, textbooks and time in class – were stressed in the past two State of the Nation addresses, as was the government's mega, multi-billion infrastructure development programme.

Already in place are youth employment programmes like the Rural Youth Development Corps,

aimed at ensuring at least one person a household is employed as a "para-professional", and state-driven, state-funded job schemes focusing on youth and women, such as the Expanded Public Works Programme.

Last year the Limpopo textbooks debacle hit the courts and headlines; this year thousands of pupils have returned to learn in mud schools or under trees despite the government having vowed to eradicate such uncondusive learning environments, since as far back as former President Thabo Mbeki's 2004 State of the Nation address.

Talk of renewing South Africa's rail infrastructure has made the rounds for at least two years, as have infrastructure development projects in road networks, dams and the like. While progress may have been made behind the scenes – the presidential infrastructure co-ordinating commission last year identified and secured funding for 17 turnkey projects – there's been no news yet on delivery or sod turnings.

Perhaps, following the ANC NEC lekgotla's rejection of Eskom's request for a 16 percent annual electricity price hike over the next five years, following an average of 25 percent hikes since 2008, there will be some good news on that front.

Thursday will show if Zuma can woo not only parliamentarians and political parties, but all South Africans.

