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Zuma will not appease allies, opposition in his address



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THE CLOCK is ticking towards countdown for the next national and provincial elections, a factor likely to loom large over the work of the national legislature and government, amid a slew of new draft laws and legislative amendments.

But when President Jacob Zuma takes to the podium to deliver the keynote State of the Nation address on Thursday, he is in an enviably strong position. His overwhelming re-election as party president at the ANC's Mangaung conference ended, at least publicly, the bruising factional battles that racked the ANC over the past two years.

Now the president, in his State of the Nation address, must identify his government's priorities and plans, juggling a list of outstanding tasks and a not-insubstantial to-do list. The ANC will want to fulfil its previous election promises of delivery ahead of the 2014 election, which will be fought under the banner "Zuma for president".

With a second, and last, term as president of the country almost certainly on the cards, Zuma has no real need to appease party or alliance bigwigs. And he may just decide to push ministers like never before – not least because a heightened number of service delivery protests and last year's wave of unprotected strikes have lifted the lid on simmering discontent in the country which has replaced Brazil as the most unequal in the world. (see article on page 13).

Zuma's administration has been battered from the word go by a tough global and domestic economic climate, a factor which has constricted the public purse strings' ability to stretch to fight poverty, inequality and unemployment. While this has not changed – economic growth is forecast at a modest

from Zuma. "He should explain to South Africa... He has failed to deliver on anything he promised. He has yet to account to South Africa's people why this failure occurred and what he's going to do about it," said DA parliamentary leader Lindiwe Mazibuko.

Others agreed. "How will he deal with the NDP integration into the agenda? It's the same old rhetoric and empty promises and lack of implementation of all his lofty ideas," said United Democratic Movement leader Bantu Holomisa. "It looks as if the campaigning has started early."

Cope's acting chief whip, Dennis Bloom, said unemployment was a "serious, burning issue", but questioned about the impact of the government's programmes remained. "If he does not address unemployment... There can be very good plans, but over the years very different emphases were made."

IFP veteran MP Mario Oriani-Ambrosini said the country was set to remain on the same course. "The ball is in his (Zuma's) court, but he delivers the same speech every year. The country remains on the same course," he said.

Independent Democrats parliamentary leader Joe McGlulwa remarked: "We want to see implementation, nothing else."

Since Zuma's first State of the Nation address, unemployment and job creation, infrastructure and education have regularly featured as key themes, alongside the fight against crime and corruption, improving health services and rural development. But there has been a time lag between announcements and implementation.

Last year was declared the year of infrastructure delivery, but in fact Zuma first talked about such a "massive programme to build economic and social infrastructure" in

2009 and, a year later, put a R787 billion budget to it. In the 2011 address, infrastructure again featured large, but it took six months before a presidential co-ordinating commission was established to drive these programmes.

Last year it emerged that funding had been secured for 18 key infrastructure projects, many of them headed by state-owned enterprises.

The president was already talking about "non-negotiables" in education back in 2009: "Teachers should be in school, in class, on time, teaching, with no neglect of duty and no abuse of pupils." By 2012 this had boiled down to the "triple Ts" – teachers, textbooks and time in classrooms.

As for job creation, a similar trend is discernible – Zuma spoke of creating 500 000 jobs by the end of 2009 during that year's State of the Nation address and subsequently aspired to creating five million job opportunities by 2014. In short, the set pieces of Zuma's administration have stayed much the same.

Given the pressure on the ruling party to fulfil its 2009 election promises – the recent ANC NEC Iekgodia called for practical interventions for maximum results – the ANC in Parliament is set to play its part in the push for action.

"We have been doing oversight for the sake of doing oversight. This time, the president and the ANC, have come up with a clear implementation strategy. There's a direction... the country must go," said ANC chief whip Mathole Motshhega.

He said that the State of the Nation address did not set out a plan that belonged only to the majority party, but was a plan for everyone. "(It's) a report to the nation of what has been achieved so far, so the nation can begin to interrogate what this government has done, so

we don't wait for the elections to start from scratch; 2013 will not be business as usual," Motshhega said.

Talk at the Mangaung conference of discipline could mean an end to truancy among MPs whose rate of absenteeism has been noted publicly. This may just bring interesting twists, and vibrancy, to parliamentary debates. Several opposition parties have indicated their watching briefs will include developments in mining and on farms, youth unemployment, land reform and corruption.

"The situation in the country with all the protests and collapse of service delivery... means we will have a more critical situation that will require the attention of Parliament," said Freedom Front Plus parliamentary leader Pieter Groenewald.

Then there's the president himself. However secure he may be in the post-Mangaung ANC, as head of state Zuma remains controversial. If opposition parties have their way in Parliament, there will be another debate on the R206 million security improvements and operational costs spent at his homestead.

African Christian Democratic Party leader Kenneth Meshoe was one of the party leaders who did not mince his words: "That matter (Nkandla) cannot be swept under the carpet... If he doesn't say anything about it, the political leaders, including myself, will raise it."

Another controversy hanging over the president's head is the ongoing saga of the spy tapes, which remain outside the grasp of the DA as the party pursues a review of the National Prosecuting Authority's decision to drop a bundle of corruption and related charges against Zuma just ahead of the 2009 elections.

Questions are also being asked elsewhere on the governance front:

But topping the list of potentially explosive legislative changes are those related to land, coming as they do during the centenary commemoration of the infamous 1913 Natives Land Act, which displaced millions of black South Africans. Zuma in the ANC's January 8 statement "categorically" stated this act was "the beginning of all the problems we face today, such as landlessness, poverty and inequality".

Legislative changes, which Zuma promised would be in place before year end, are required to replace the "willing buyer, willing seller" principle in favour of "just and equitable" expropriation to speed up land reform and to reopen the logging of land claims which closed in 1998.

In addition, a constitutional amendment may be required to allow for claims pre-dating the 1913 Natives Land Act, the cut-off date set in the constitution.

African People's Convention leader Themba Godi, who is also the chairman of the parliamentary watchdog on public spending, dismissed the ANC rhetoric around land reform as "neo-left wing", but said this was to be expected in a pre-election year.

"There will be very little focus on parliamentary work in the traditional sense. The approach generally will be to try to be as controversial as possible," he predicted.

"The ruling party in all its messages from Parliament will confirm and compliment (the) government and the opposition parties will rubish everything."

Despite such somewhat negative predictions, there is no doubt the nation's eyes will turn to Parliament on Thursday when the president gets the chance to set the tone for the year ahead.

See Page 15

THERE IS UNEASE AMONG THE CHATTERING CLASSES

the intelligence services and the NPA have been led by acting appointments for well over a year, while moves to improve public service performance are overshadowed by public opinion surveys regularly returning damning verdicts of bribery in the police, home affairs, hospitals and elsewhere.

This exposes not only Zuma, but the ANC. There is unease among the chattering classes, if not broadly across civil society, and stinging criticism from opposition parties – the push continues for the DA-sponsored motion of no confidence against the president once the Constitutional Court rules at the end of March.

After the State of the Nation address, the ANC will be under pressure to process a slate of legislative amendments, including proposals to allow for the cancellation of unused mining rights. The Protection of State Information Bill, dubbed the Secrecy Bill, returns to the National Assembly after significant amendments by the National Council of Provinces, which nevertheless have not satisfied widespread calls to entrench transparency and accountability.