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Moment is Zuma's to seize. But can he?

With the ANC in hand the president has a chance to deliver, says *Caiphus Kgosana*

IT is not often that a president oozes such an aura of power — least of all a head of state as scandal-prone as President Jacob Zuma.

Last year was an *annus mirabilis* for the South African leader, a year in which he outplayed almost all his competitors and adversaries.

So powerful has Zuma become that he even seems to have shrugged off a damaging exposé of a R200-million upgrade to his rural retreat in KwaZulu-Natal, a scandal not many presidents would have survived.

He has become something of an expert at playing the numbers game. In December, he limited his challenger and the former ANC deputy president, Kgalema Motlanthe, to an embarrassing 25% margin in the race for the leadership of the ruling party.

Six months earlier he had held his home affairs minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, by the hand and walked her into the chairmanship of the African Union Commission.

His growing confidence is evident in his improving diplomatic skills. Two

South Africans want a bold leader who is not afraid to step on toes if it gets things done

weeks ago at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Zuma was convincing in his assurances to the investment community that South Africa was a safe destination for their money (even if, just as Zuma was sweet-talking international investors, ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe and Minister of Mining Susan Shabangu were threatening to revoke mining licenses as they scolded a major platinum producer for placing 14 000 mining jobs on the line with its plans to mothball unprofitable shafts).

At home, the ANC's national executive committee — its highest decision-making structure between conferences — is now almost exclusively made up of Zuma allies and praise singers.

But, unfortunately for Zuma, immeasurable political power, influence and charm are not a cure for pressing national problems or a tonic for ailing government delivery.

On Thursday evening Zuma will give his fourth state of the nation address at a joint sitting of the National Assembly.

He will try to paint a glowing picture of government delivery during his

tenure and outline plans to plug existing holes. He will attempt to reassure us that South Africa is in good hands.

What Zuma cannot do, however, is deny reality. He cannot gloss over the growing inefficiencies of a bloated and unproductive civil service, the damaging impact of violent strikes — especially in mining and agriculture — and the stubborn unemployment rate, or that our education and healthcare systems are hamstrung by decaying infrastructure and a lack of skills, will and commitment despite the billions poured into fixing them. He cannot, with a straight face, tell us that South Africans are feeling safe in their homes.

Much of the goodwill afforded Zuma in his first year in power evaporated amid pregnancy scandals, his polygamous marriages, spy tapes, the arms deal, the info bill and Nkandla.

A man with his reputation was always going to find it difficult to fill the shoes of his two predecessors, Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. To carve a separate identity, Zuma opted to wager his entire legacy on growth, planning and an ambitious infrastructure development programme.

He established the presidential infrastructure coordinating commission, made up of experts from the government and key sectors, to advise him on which projects to spend the R4-trillion that the government has set aside over the next 15 years for major building programmes.

The projects identified last year include integrating rail, road and water infrastructure around two main areas in Limpopo — the Waterberg and Steelpoort — and Transnet alone is spending R300-billion on infrastructure development.

His commission has produced its first progress report. Senior bureaucrats say although the report will show that progress has been made on some of the major projects, a shortage of funding and a lack of technical skills and political will are slowing down work on the ground.

The national development plan, the government's new policy and planning bible, is now an official ANC document. As the plan's head midwife, Zuma must move heaven and earth to ensure it does not gather dust. Ministers and senior civil servants who do not follow the well-thought-out recommendations of this guide book must be shown the door.

The plan is frank in its assessment of South Africa's problems, and bold and pragmatic in its suggestions for how to fix the rot. Zuma is also aware of the challenges. He has outlined them in detail, but it is the fixing part that is



POPULAR ANGER: Zuma cannot gloss over the the damaging impact of violent strikes — especially in mining and agriculture
Picture: GALLO IMAGES

proving to be a headache.

Unemployment, fuelled by the global economic crisis, seems to be on a slow rise despite government interventions to boost the work rate. The uptake on the R9-billion jobs fund and a R20-billion tax incentive scheme to encourage manufacturers to build new, labour-absorbing plants is low.

Desperate to get more young people working, it seems Zuma has run out of patience with his union allies' balking at the idea of a youth wage subsidy. The word coming out of Luthuli House is that he is ready to outline how the subsidy, which rewards companies for employing younger workers, will function. It has been three years in the making and was stalled by bickering at Nedlac, a forum where government, labour and business thrash out economic policies. The Treasury has set aside R5-billion for it and this is the one year in which Zuma can afford to risk the ire of labour federation Cosatu and give the green light to its implementation. He has no party election to worry about and the general elections are still 16 months away.

Against the backdrop of the death of 43 protesting miners at Marikana and the destruction caused by farmworkers unhappy about low pay, Zuma must repeat the assurances he made to investors at Davos if South Africa is to attract new investments. But he has to

balance those reassurances with a reminder that the government will flex its muscle and intervene when workers draw the short end of the stick — as witnessed with the new sectoral determination in the agricultural sector.

What about the big, fat beast in the room: Nkandla? Can he afford not to reassure the nation that spending R206-million to upgrade a private residence — even if it is the home of a president — is unacceptable, or is he happy to let his ministers take the fall for him? Either way, South Africans want answers.

They also want a bold leader who is not afraid to step on toes if it gets things done. Zuma has won the political numbers game. It is time that he used the same strategy to tackle low government delivery figures. The opposition is regrouping and luring new supporters. New parties are springing up, all with the aim of chipping away at ANC support. Delivery, rather than historical relevance, is now the trump card for parties hoping to lure voters who are growing increasingly fickle.

Can he deliver?

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