

POLITICAL WEEK AHEAD

Linda Ensor

Lights, laptop cameras and less action for state of nation

All eyes will be on President Cyril Ramaphosa on Thursday when he delivers his state of the nation address, with business keen to hear what he has to say about the implementation of long-awaited structural economic reforms and how the government plans to revive a Covid-devastated economy.

Another critical event will be the weekend meeting of the ANC national executive committee (NEC), which will be discussing the party's policy on officials stepping aside if they are facing charges of serious crimes such as corruption.

This year's televised state of the nation address will be a low-key event without all the usual red-carpet razzmatazz involving hundreds of invited guests. It will be a hybrid sitting of both houses of parliament with only a maximum of 50 members of the executive, MPs and representatives of the judiciary allowed into the National Assembly. The rest will have to attend virtually because of lockdown restrictions.

Ramaphosa will probably update the nation about the Covid-19 pandemic, the acquisition of vaccines and the rollout of the vaccination programme nationally.

He will also make formal announcements on the policy

decisions taken by the ANC NEC and cabinet lekgotlas that took place in January. This might include the mooted extension of the R350 special social relief of distress grant for the unemployed, which terminated at the end of January but which civil society and trade unions want extended.

Business will want to hear about the government's commitment to structural economic reforms, which have been highlighted as crucial for growth by credit ratings agencies and the IMF. Key in this regard will be a possible announcement on a relaxation of the licensing requirements for small quantities of self-generated electricity – as endorsed by the ANC lekgotla – and the 5G spectrum auction.

Announcements on land reform and expropriation without compensation are also possible, as well as updates on infrastructure development and job creation, particularly the expanded public works programme, which creates short-term job opportunities for the unemployed.

Ramaphosa could also address the issue of restructuring the R200bn loan guarantee scheme, which has had little take-up by business and which was discussed at the ANC lekgotla.

Next Saturday and Sunday, the ANC NEC will meet for its

first ordinary sitting for 2021. The meeting will consider a set of guidelines on the implementation of the "step-aside" rule drawn up by ANC officials before the meeting. This rule will lay down how ANC officials facing serious charges are dealt with by the party and whether they should be required to step aside.

The NEC is also expected to consider a report of the party's integrity commission recommending that secretary-general Ace Magashule – who is facing 21 charges of fraud, corruption and money laundering in relation to a R255m asbestos contract while he was premier of the Free State – step aside. Magashule has refused to step aside unless the NEC instructs him to do so.

The self-declared refusal of former president Jacob Zuma to appear before the Zondo commission of inquiry into state capture despite a Constitutional Court order instructing him to do so is also expected to be discussed by the NEC.

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On Wednesday, the Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Free State provincial governments will hold media briefings to provide details of their vaccination rollout programmes. Mpumalanga is also due to hold a similar briefing, with all the other provinces having already held theirs.

Parliamentary committees will continue with their work in virtual meetings.

On Tuesday, the committee on agriculture, land reform & rural development will be briefed by agriculture, land reform & rural development minister Thoko Didiza on the progress made in the release of state land for agricultural purposes.

On Wednesday, the department of mineral resources & energy will brief the mineral resources & energy committee on adherence to Covid-19 regulations and protocols.

The Minerals Council SA will brief the committee on this as well as possible initiatives relating to the rollout of vaccines in the mining sector.

Also on Wednesday, the standing committee on public accounts will be briefed by the Special Investigating Unit on the outcomes of investigations into allegations of corruption related to Covid-19 personal protective equipment procurement by state institutions.