

budget 2021 **overview**

POLITICS

Slow and not so steady

Mboweni bought Ramaphosa more breathing space, but the president still can't shake off his party's shackles

Peter Bruce

● Long before finance minister Tito Mboweni stood up to deliver his 2021/2022 budget, President Cyril Ramaphosa had moved on.

Normally, the budget would reflect some of the promises the president made in his state of the nation address a few weeks earlier.

But Ramaphosa didn't give Mboweni very much to hang a budget on. In an effort to signal how different the world has become under the threat of Covid-19, the president said he was focusing on four broad objectives, none of which he could easily be held to and none of which could easily be budgeted for – confronting the pandemic, accelerating economic recovery, creating jobs and inclusive growth and strengthening the state to better fight corruption.

Politically, Ramaphosa is on a very long leash.

His survival can sometimes seem impossible, tempting even the most hardened commentators to predict his fall and the eventual presidency of flagrant robber rivals such as ANC secretary-general Ace Magashule.

In the heat of SA politics, though, it is easy to forget that the two main threats to Ramaphosa, Magashule and former president Jacob Zuma, both face criminal trials. Indeed, Zuma faces imminent arrest and imprisonment should he continue to defy the Zondo commission.

On our TV screens, it is often the howling of anti-Ramaphosa activists in the streets or remarks by Zuma or Magashule that spread like wildfire on social media that dominate the discussion.

But whenever danger is near, the ANC behaves as if it has woken up in a bed of red ants. Elections and conferences are typical periods of hyper-tension in the party. Both are on the cards – local government elections by November and a possible national general

Cyril Ramaphosa

council later this year. An ANC elective conference is around the corner too – Ramaphosa's first term as ANC president ends next year.

The wider truth though is that state power far outweighs party power, and even Ramaphosa's fiercest critics would be hard pressed to sustain the argument that he is not in control in the party.

Zuma on the other hand faces the sternest of tests. The Zondo inquiry, faced with his continued refusal to testify, has petitioned the Constitutional Court to order his immediate imprisonment for two years. If Zuma fails to testify, it is hard to see him escaping arrest.

The scariest thing for Zuma is that the commission's request to the highest court takes the decision to arrest him out of the political realm. It will simply now be executed.

And what will the consequence be? Nothing. Or very little.

A lot of noise but also a quiet realisation among the many fragments of opposition to Ramaphosa that times have changed. Almost without question, Zuma will testify rather than go to jail. As it is, he faces a grim fraud trial, starting this May, into crimes committed during the arms deal of the late 1990s.

Magashule, Zuma's proxy inside Luthuli House, goes on trial with others in August on multiple counts of fraud and corruption relating

to his premiership of the Free State.

The National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) claims it is "trial ready". It is simply unthinkable that between them, right now, Zuma and Magashule can dodge these processes. Far more likely is that they will both be found guilty and will spend much of the rest of their lives appealing and objecting and appealing again.

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The thing about Ramaphosa though is that he plays his own guitar. Where Zuma stuffed the ANC national executive committee with supporters, Ramaphosa doesn't have that luxury. So he has instead strengthened institutions such as the NPA and the Special Investigating Unit. It is true that they are slow and that the police still seem rooted to the spot, but the president has performance agreements in place and he governs by requiring those reporting to him to explain missed targets and poor standards.

On Wednesday Mboweni bought Ramaphosa a little more breathing space than he might have thought he had six months ago. Revenue collections are stronger than expected and we will be able to comfortably pay for the vaccines we need to extract ourselves from the pandemic.

Some fiscal consolidation appears possible,

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