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Ramaphosa appoints loyal and unyielding Cabinet

Ultimately, every minister and deputy is on their own to prove their worth

COMMENT



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THE radical nature of President Cyril Ramaphosa's Cabinet appointments on Sunday night has surprised even some of those in his political camp.

Forget the long days of heated exchanges between the ANC and the DA or the DA and the PA on the incongruent interpretation of some critical clauses of the Government of National Unity (GNU) statement of intent that, until the last moment, characterised the build-up to the Cabinet announcement.

Ramaphosa emerged confidently from the process, dispelling doubts that he had the keys to the Union Buildings. Now, he has decided who to invite to join and who to show the door to. He has been skilful in the negotiation process. The unity government statement of intent supporters got the warmest welcome. There was no room for any but the most loyal. It was a warped executive act that restored confidence in his stewardship of government.

This far-reaching announcement demonstrated that this was the Sunday night of the sharp axe, as the number of departures from the Cabinet of prominent ANC leaders was far higher than many had expected. The elimination chased some and spat them into a cleft of former MPs who fell outside the cut-off number of reduced ANC seats.

Just in case President Ramaphosa was under any illusion, his government was already surrounded by a demonstration before it had gone to bed. The protesters on the front door of the Luthuli House might disagree with the idea of governing with the DA and the FF Plus, but ran out of options and watched as a new executive took shape.

John Steenhuisen is the new minister of Agriculture, Solly Malatsi (Communications and Digital Technolo-

gies), Leon Schreiber (Home Affairs), Dean MacPherson (Public Works and Infrastructure), Pieter Groenewald (Correctional Services) – a significant change at breakneck speed. There were promotions for several leaders of smaller parties, including Patricia De Lille (Tourism), Gayton McKenzie (Sport, Arts and Culture), and Mzwanele Nyhontso (Land Reform and Rural Development).

It also looks like a more diverse Cabinet, with more women, youth, and races in top jobs. Some surprises drew mixed public reactions, such as Angie Motshekga (Defence and Military Veterans), Ronald Lamola (International Relations and Cooperation), and Thembi Nkadimeng (Justice and Constitutional Development).

All these ministers will now steer socio-economic and international relations policies with the uncertainties of election outcomes ahead in several strategic countries across the globe. Uncompromising ears on labour law relaxation, the introduction of a visa regime to attract critical skills and prioritisation of trade partner countries that can bring direct foreign investment will be one of the most complex jobs in politics in the hands of some famously combative ministers that might not be too popular with the trade unions. But Ramaphosa will not mind that too much.

The spectators will applaud them all on the way into the corridors of power as President Ramaphosa's first steps in the Union Buildings have proved more bravado than continuity.

It is a Cabinet built to deliver and, according to Ramaphosa, "In casting their votes, the people made it clear that they expect political parties to work together to deliver on a mandate of transformation, growth and renewal."

It also looks like a line-up meant to confront the opponents and maybe take them on should the unity government reach a deadlock in Parliament, leading to another wave of reconfiguration of government at national, provincial, and local levels.

"To give effect to this mandate, it was agreed that a GNU, which brings together parties from across the political spectrum, should be formed. This GNU would be bound by certain fundamental principles and would undertake a basic minimum programme of



PRESIDENT Cyril Ramaphosa has designed his new Cabinet around one goal: pulling the country out of economic stagnation and corruption, says the writer. | JACQUES NAUDE Independent Newspapers

priorities," he added.

In a matter of days, he created a new government and sent the signal that things would be different. They are already looking different, even within days of him taking office.

There is also a sense of commitment from Ramaphosa's Cabinet team that they want to arrive and then shock and awe. The president showed that he is getting on with it. He is making decisions, and he is prepared to ruffle feathers. And he is ruffling some feathers in the ANC alliance. "These men and women we have appointed to the executive are drawn from all corners of our country. They reflect the diversity of our nation. They have a responsibility to work together to serve the people as a whole," he said.

You can hear protesters outside the Union Buildings and the Luthuli House gates. You can listen to rivals around the table. But, in the end, every minister and deputy is ultimately on their own to prove their worth.

Ramaphosa has designed his Cabinet around one goal of pulling the country out of economic stagnation and corruption, and even his critics remain like amber rods around the outer edges of that table and are committed to that goal.

"None of the members of the National Executive has been appointed to serve the interests of a particular constituency, a particular party or a particular section of society," he added. So, team Ramaphosa is taking shape. His is a Cabinet that is as loyal as it is unyielding. There is a new president and a new team around him. But their mission is as challenging as ever.

They say they are all willing to contemplate serving in the cabinet without compromising the basic principles in their election manifestos which are anathema, given the new dimensions introduced to the unity government's landscape in the legislatures by the EFF and other members of the left-leaning opposition parties.

Many people have decided to be in or out of the unity government. But did we ever think Ramaphosa would do all this conventionally and meticulously within a week? Did we contemplate that? Maybe not that confidently. And whether you love it or loathe it, in Sunday's final decision on the Cabinet composition, at least, he is stamping his authority all over this new set-up.

Nyembezi is a policy analyst, researcher and human rights activist