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Can Ramaphosa keep his eye on the ball?

Can President Cyril Ramaphosa maintain a stern hand on the wheel throughout his second term, or will he again leave his ministers to their own destructive devices? In his reply to the state of the nation (Sona) debate last week, Ramaphosa drew some pretty strong lines in the sand.

The low point of the debate for observers of the state of the new government of national unity (GNU) was the deep enmity between DA and ANC ministers and deputy ministers towards each other in crucial portfolios. A stark example is the tit-for-tat between former public works minister and current deputy minister Sihle Zikalala and the minister, the DA's Dean Macpherson.

Macpherson is tasked with implementing the (not so contentious) Expropriation Act. Zikalala used the opportunity in his Sona reply to lay into Macpherson, who had intimated that he would not implement the legislation. After the signing of the act, Macpherson on social media said there would be "no expropriation of private property without compensation" on his watch.

Macpherson, during the debate in parliament, said there were "some in this House" who wanted his department to fail. He did not name those responsible but said it included ActionSA and the EFF, saying they "seek out paid-for journalists" and spread fake news through AI voice notes and falsified WhatsApps.

Without referencing Zikalala, McPherson spoke about the poor state of the department when he entered it and what he has done to turn things around – an indirect swipe at Zikalala. The beef between the two is not new, and the hostility towards Macpherson from Zikalala has been brewing for months.

At the ANC lekgotla briefing two weeks ago, secretary-general Fikile Mbalula admitted as much, saying Zikalala was "representing what we as the ANC support". He said Macpherson treated Zikalala like a "ball boy", who "must carry his briefcase" and that the pair should talk to iron things out. Clearly that has not happened. The truth is that the petty squabble between Zikalala and Macpherson is a manifestation of how small-minded and provincial SA politics has become.

Zikalala went on record after the cabinet was appointed to express his disappointment at being made to deputise a DA minister he viewed as beneath him – Zikalala has a degree, while Macpherson a matric certificate.

There were two crucial ways Ramaphosa addressed the issues at play in the National Assembly – first, he downplayed the tension between Zikalala and Macpherson.

"It is expected that the 10 parties who make up the GNU, with their very different perspectives and ideological views, will not always agree and will sometimes feel the need, on platforms such as this, to talk to their different constituencies. Now despite these differences, these political parties are working well together in the GNU, whether people like it or not. We are finding ways of mediating our differences."

"Whether people like it or not" was the crucial phrase here – Ramaphosa was talking directly to the GNU detractors, some of whom were in the DA and ANC benches in the House.

It includes, arguably, the face of the anti-GNU campaign inside the ANC, its Gauteng chair Panyaza Lesaffi, who hailed the enactment of the three pieces of legislation at the heart of disagreement between the ANC and the DA – the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act, the National Health Insurance Act and the Expropriation Act – to applause by the EFF and MK party MPs.

Ramaphosa went further, saying: "Together we should be better and weavers ready to build a nation working alongside each other. This is what the programme of the GNU is about. And we will not be diverted from the path that we have set out. I repeat, we will not be bullied from our intent to work together."

While the GNU has its detractors inside the ANC, Ramaphosa went further in addressing detractors in the DA on the Expropriation Act. The party is challenging the legislation in court, arguing that it is unconstitutional. Ramaphosa delivered a strong promise to redistribute land, a crucial, long-neglected policy three decades after the democratic breakthrough. But he was clear that "forced removals", a stark fear by groups opposed to the Expropriation Act, will never be allowed again.

"There are some in this House today who have memories of their families being forcibly removed from their land. There are millions more across the country who still experience the effects of this monstrous crime. The people of this country know the pain of forced removals. That is why we will never allow forced removals again."

Ramaphosa was strong in his inaugural state of the nation debate as leader of the GNU government, arguably stronger than the state of the nation address itself. The key question is will he now take his eyes off the ball and retreat into the corridors of the Union Buildings, as he had done throughout his first term, or keep his eye on the road and his unwieldy cabinet to ensure progress in the coming five years? Time will tell.