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SONA 2019

It is enticing to interpret President Cyril Ramaphosa's SONA as just another election pitch to the electorate a few months before the general election, now to be held on 8 May. A closer look is, however, warranted, as there are some interesting elements that may indicate a different approach and a stronger emphasis on the need to correct what has gone wrong in the last nine years - call it a glimmer of a post-election Ramaphosa.

He begins by emphasising growth, renewal, the fight against corruption and the need to advance the values of the Constitution in addressing the needs of the poor, unemployed, marginalised and dispossessed. His choice of the "five most urgent tasks at this moment in our history" is telling:

- Inclusive growth and employment;
- Improving the education system and developing the skills for the future;
- Improving the conditions of life for all South Africans, especially the poor;
- Stepping up the fight against corruption and State capture; and
- Strengthening the capacity of the State to address the needs of the people.

Although none of these is new, the choice of these show a realism and urgency that was lacking from the Presidency before 2018. This public acknowledgement by the President is therefore welcome.

A number of other issues stand out as positive progress:

- The re-establishment of a National Security Council, chaired by the President, to reign in the intelligence mavericks.
- The establishment of an investigating directorate dealing with serious corruption and associated offences in the office of the NDPP (reminiscent of the Scorpions).
- Focusing on key parts of the economy that are labour-intensive, including agriculture, tourism and the ocean economy.
- Land reform is mentioned in passing as part of supporting agriculture.
- An emphasis on tourism and especially a world-class eVisa regime.
- Supporting Eskom's balance sheet, but also the first signs of possible partial privatisation in establishing three separate entities - Generation, Transmission and Distribution - under Eskom Holdings.
- Migrating the responsibility for ECD Centres from Social Development to Basic Education; and proceeding with the process towards two years of compulsory ECD for all children before they enter Grade 1.
- The establishment of a Human Settlements Development Bank that will leverage both public and private sector financing to aid in housing delivery.
- The introduction by the National School of Government of a suite of compulsory courses, covering areas like ethics and anti-corruption, senior management and supply



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chain management, and deployment of managers to the coal face to strengthen service delivery.

- Strengthening the outlawing of public servants doing business with the State and enabling government to deal more effectively with corrupt activities.
- An emphasis on the need for curbing racism and racialisation.

One can and should remain concerned with other aspects of the SONA. These include the reference to expropriation without compensation, the enthusiasm around the catastrophic NHI Bill, and the idealistic notion to provide every school child in South Africa with digital workbooks and textbooks on a tablet device in the next six years.

In his final paragraphs the President does indeed point to a future that all South Africans can identify with: where every man, woman and child should be provided with the opportunity and means to make a better life for themselves - no pure entitlement here. And he talks about a South Africa that acknowledges the problems of the past but looks firmly to the future - no harking back to apartheid as an excuse for the problems of today. And finally, he made a slight but discernible swipe at his predecessor and his cronies: we want a South Africa whose leaders are bold and courageous, leaders who remain servants of the people - and for whom fulfilling their duty is the highest, and the only, reward.

President Ramaphosa sounded as if he was delivering the State of the Nation for the whole nation and if he was speaking as President of all South Africans. He also sounded as if he has already made a start on the work awaiting him - and all South Africans - after 8 May. The obvious questions are whether he could win the battle in a party that is still at war within itself and if he could repair a State that could support him. For now, those are the big uncertainties.

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