

Zuma must plan with the poor, not for the poor

OF COURSE President Jacob Zuma's state of the nation address this week represented yet another attempt to redeem the promissory note of neo-liberal utopia. Zuma's address confirmed that his presidency does not herald a new dawn in the annals of our politics.

Its context-transcendent idealisation of an "inclusive society", an "inclusive economy" and constant use of "we" obfuscates and covers up the important political and power asymmetries, divided public spaces, fractured collective will and lack of democratic citizen solidarities which continue to define the realities of South Africa.

The inequalities that occasioned the need for the liberation struggle continue unabated in myriad forms; you cannot obscure them in order to solve them.

On the other hand, the president's noble intention not to polarise South African society and thus impede the development of a sense of "mutuality", superficial as it is, came out clearly from his speech.

But the president needs to understand that a society that has no shared public philosophy to which all its citizens subscribe is not likely to have the capacity for collective actions. Hence the need to invest



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Voters judge policies by their immediate impact

in a national reconfiguration of collective public will which transcends the constituencies of ANC supporters.

Zuma's state of the nation address is very easy to simplify – he talked about the government's response to the international economic crisis, public sector investment in infrastructure development, creating job opportunities, improving education and health, supporting small businesses, women, youth and people with disabilities, fighting crime and corruption, improving the

transport system, agriculture and rural development and, most importantly, improving the capacity and performance of the state.

All these initiatives are located within the government's medium-term expenditure framework.

The speech by the president attempted to cover everything South Africans are concerned about. There was nothing really "Left" or "Right" in the speech. It confirmed the vacuity of ideology in ANC politics and a pragmatic orientation of post-ideology politics.

The president's speech was cast as a messianic a priori; a promise which even though it does not clearly define itself as such is seen and regarded as a promise by many.

The major question is: Will the Zuma administration deliver on all its plans? Will it meet the expectations for improved implementation and better service delivery?

To anticipate possible failures, Cosatu has jumped to the fore and is flaunting "a non-negotiable" second term.

So far Zuma's administration has displayed positive signals and intentions to control and manage the business of government better.

The reconfiguration of the Presidency and creation of new ministries promises delivery even though the benefits of

the costs are yet to be seen. However, it is becoming a trend in ANC-led governments that in order to address problems affecting ordinary citizens some political elites must benefit first – a structure has to be created and to legitimise it, the moral clout of the poor has to be invoked.

How is Zuma's administration going to deal with the burden of expectation and exhausted patience among the poor majority?

Seemingly the plan is two-pronged – on the one hand there will be short-term state handouts through public infrastructure projects. These have immediate electoral payoffs. On the other hand the government will constantly search for symbolic issues that can draw together constituencies of voters. Otherwise most voters judge the effect of policies on their wellbeing, not really in terms of future aggregate impact but in terms of immediate benefits.

The challenge for the new administration is to make poor people the starting point in the definition and implementation of government priorities.

These priorities should be jointly defined with them rather than for them.

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