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#WhatSACanBe

100 DAYS TO UNLEASH ECONOMIC GROWTH AND GET SA BACK ON TRACK

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: REWARD SKILLS, DELIVER FOR CITIZENS

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Introduction

For the first time in three quarters of a century, South Africa is not a one-party dominant state. The era of predictable and inflexible holds on government power is over. In its stead, South Africans now find themselves in a new era of politics – one that must be defined by pragmatic, pro-growth policy. It is in this spirit that the South African Institute of Race Relations (IRR) has decided to publish #WhatSACanBe: 100 days to get SA back on track, a series of nine short papers each focusing on a different key policy area. Taken together, these papers offer a dynamic program of action for the Government of National Unity (GNU) as its sets out its aimed objectives and starts its work to earn the trust of South Africans.

The 2024 elections drew the fundamental dividing line in our politics between the country's pro-growth coalition – in the main represented in the GNU – and the pro-poverty parties, which have been excluded from the levers of government power.

But this arrangement is precarious. For democratic consolidation to succeed, the GNU must record notable governance wins in the short term. The policy proposals in this publication series show how a GNU can initiate crucial reform, quickly.

Embarking on a hundred-day period of catalysing reform will make maximum political capital available to the GNU and its members. Public sentiment tracks upwards in the slipstream of economic improvements. A period of one hundred days following the first full meeting of the new GNU forms a natural timeframe within which pragmatic, constructive and meaningful government action will ensure an environment of good faith towards the GNU.

The responsibility to grasp this moment with a proactive, pragmatic plan of government lies heaviest on the leaders of political parties that find common cause in constitutional democracy, the rule of law, and good faith to remedy past failures and build on past successes. If the GNU is willing to do more together to rescue South Africa, this historic moment will be the rebirth of a hopeful rainbow nation.

Parties that occupy the pro-growth mainstream of South African politics based on the common ground of an economic system built on thriving businesses and job creators of all sizes able to operate in a fair, free and responsibly regulated economy; that believe in the ability of individuals and communities to find solutions; that acknowledge the fundamental role and dignity of secure ownership of property and the repudiation of historical crimes against South African property owners; that seek to protect and promote the rule of law; and that hold true to the non-racialism of our Constitution – these parties, as a single constellation hold between them the capacity to give South Africans hope again. At the core of these convictions lies the critical matter of economic growth – the catalyst for upward social mobility through jobs and a reliable welfare system. Achieving economic growth is the primary challenge and opportunity for the GNU.

Five tests for any reform proposal

The GNU needs a set of policy solutions that satisfies at least five key criteria:

1. Multiple GNU partners will have to support the proposed policies;
2. Labour interests, workers, entrepreneurs, businesses, markets, and investors should be left in no doubt that fundamental and positive changes are being made in the policy environment;
3. External stakeholders will have to be brought on board or ways found to address their opposition;
4. The policy solutions will have to make a substantive, tangible change in the lives of ordinary South Africans in the short, medium, and long term; and
5. The policy solutions have to be popular with the electorate in outcomes and these should be clearly communicated by the GNU.

The #WhatSACanBe policy reforms are therefore assessed on the basis of five simple questions:

1. Will voters support it?
2. Will economic stakeholders welcome it?
3. Will GNU partners buy into it?
4. Will the media support it?
5. Will opponents derail it?

Context of crises

Amidst the euphoria of taking office, the new administration must be under no illusions regarding the scale of the challenge. Some of the crises the GNU faces are, in no particular order:

1. An ineffective, bloated, and politicised civil service;
2. An overburdened judicial system that risks losing public trust in justice;
3. A decline in the general standing, independence, and fairness of judicial officers;
4. An ineffective police force likely antagonistic to reform;
5. A small and shrinking tax base under immense strain;
6. Increasing water shortages across the country;
7. Violent crime, especially violent crime against the most vulnerable, running rampant in sub-middle-class areas;
8. A local currency of fluctuating reliability;
9. High levels of government debt;
10. Consistently high unemployment and youth unemployment rates;
11. Failing and unreliable road, rail, and port infrastructure;
12. Mass blackouts of power in large parts of the country due to a national power grid functioning at close to 60% capacity; and
13. Child malnutrition in rural and inner-city areas.

With the above as the context, proper consideration can be given to setting out a viable and successful path forward. Great as these challenges would be to any incoming government, a pragmatic and outcomes-focused program of government will ensure a drastic turnaround and the introduction of pro-growth policy consensus.

Priorities of the people

Polling by the IRR over the last decade has repeatedly emphasised the key priorities of South Africans, exposing surprising unity across demographic divisions. The most recent survey indicated the following priority problem areas:

- Unemployment and job creation
- The abuse of women or children
- Corruption
- Electricity or load shedding
- Housing
- Water and sanitation
- Education
- Poverty
- Inequality, including gender and racial inequality
- Health care

Economic growth forms the foundation of all solutions in these priority areas. To earn maximum political capital from the initial policy actions and announcements of an incoming multi-party government, it is advisable that policymakers focus on economic growth as the key to meeting public demands on these priorities, ensuring that the holistic agenda of government is unambiguously pro-growth.

From the above, one of the policy categories or areas most likely to effect change and generate political capital for the new government is public administration. Therefore, this first paper in the *#WhatSACanBe* series focuses on reforming the public administration to reward skills and delivery for all citizens.

Public administration: Reward skills, deliver for citizens

What should the GNU do?

The GNU should depoliticise the civil service, require competitive entrance examination to become a civil servant, bring in the private sector to improve services, ensure that human resource departments can manage disciplinary processes swiftly, and make senior civil servants report back regularly to the media.

Why should the GNU make this change?

The goal is to create an effective civil service that renders services across all levels – whether issuing passports or mining licences – promptly and effectively. The focus will be on 'professionalising' the civil service.

Imagine a customer-facing government department that is clean and welcoming, whose staff are knowledgeable and able to deal with complicated problems, who treat the public with respect and helpfulness, and business as an asset?

A competent, efficient state is essential to managing the demands of a complex modern society; it is also an asset for development and economic growth. The state of administration is all too often deficient, a point that has been made by numerous official documents (such as the National Development Plan), and even the president.

Improving the standard of administration will, however, be a long-term process, but with some quick wins possible. The civil service is a huge organisation with a vast range of responsibilities. Marginal gains may be recorded in the short-term for individual citizens (perhaps 'better' service, as in faster resolution of queries...). It is unclear how much public recognition this will gain in the short term, and it is important to persevere over the long term. For business, it will mean an increasing ease of doing business, if for no other reason than regulatory requirements might be more efficiently implemented. Note also that there are enormously influential vested interests within the state that are invested in the status quo.

Over the medium to the long term, it will mean a state that is able to encourage, facilitate and even drive a developmental agenda, that will be a prudent steward of resources and that can form productive partnerships with the private sector.

How should the GNU make this change in terms of laws, regulations, etc.?

Depoliticisation: The strongest argument that the GNU can make is that it will not practice cadre deployment. In legislative terms, the Public Service Act will be amended to limit the latitude politicians are given to employ senior public servants. Rather, these appointments will be done by way of open interviews in which the Public Service Commission will be prominent, assisted by independent experts along with the relevant executive. The goal is to ensure professional competence and continuity as well as distance from politics, while still recognising that communication between the political and the administrative realm is necessary.

Skills: Deficiencies in skills and knowledge are a universally acknowledged problem. The selection process for entry to the career civil service will be governed by entrance exams, in addition to any other requirements (professional qualifications, degrees etc., all of which must be checked and verified). A series of such exams will be designed and administered based on the employment level that applicants intend to enter. The purpose of this is to ensure minimum established competencies on the part of public servants upon entry. For the lower levels, this might be confined to numeracy, literacy and communication skills. For more advanced placements, problem solving and planning skills would be included. And so on.

The exams will carry NQF accreditation. People will be able to sit them, irrespective of whether they intend immediately to apply for a civil service position or not. Such a qualification may be used at a later point in making an application. Passing exams will also be a precondition for advancement. This will ensure ongoing monitoring of competencies as people progress through the system.

Public-private partnerships: A relatively quick win can be achieved by upgrading the quality of operational management, building on such initiatives as the issuing of passports and identity cards by banks, or the payment of accounts at supermarkets. Where possible, public-facing services will be made available through private sector operators. Staff might be seconded from state departments to private sector outlets to do this. This will hopefully elevate the work culture.

In addition, the secondment of managers from the private sector will be encouraged following agreements with firms interested in participating in this scheme. Such arrangements have previously been suggested by the private sector, and there would likely be a positive response. The three key objectives would be to improve the provision of services to the public (individuals, households and firms); customer service experience; and financial management. Other specific roles, such as project design and management, could also be filled in this way where necessary.

A quick win would be to use this strategy as a pilot project in a strategic sector. Introducing private sector skills in the top tier of the national and provincial departments, as well as in some municipalities (stressed, though initially not completely dysfunctional ones). The obvious candidate here is water provision, something of immediate concern to ordinary people and to business and which is recognised as a major strategic challenge.

Discipline: Human resource units must be capacitated to ensure that disciplinary processes are swift, decisive and fair. In addition, the Public Service Commission will provide higher level legal support in dealing with significant cases.

Transparency: Senior civil servants will avail themselves to the media regularly to communicate the work they are doing and to field questions. The goal will be to popularise the notion of professionalism and the importance of a capable civil service. Simultaneously, it is intended to stimulate public attention on public servants to encourage pride and diligence (the 'esteem economy').

Will it fly?

Will voters support it?
There may be a period of indifference at first, but growing appreciation of the benefits as it becomes easier and more pleasant to interact with the state.

Will economic stakeholders welcome it?

Business will be highly sympathetic to these reforms, especially if it can see the contribution to the ease of doing business.

Will GNU partners buy into it?

There exists a broad consensus across the country that that the public service is not operating well. As such, broad support for reform is highly likely. However, given the way the state has been used as a tool of patronage by nefarious political interests, there is every likelihood that these interests will expect to benefit from state positions and resources even after the implementation of reforms. Support will, in other words, be variable. (6/10)

Will the media support it?

Variable. Recognition of the distressed state of the public service is widespread, and credible reforms are likely to be welcomed. Expect the practicability and sincerity of this initiative to be questioned as 'anti-transformation' or 'anti-poor'.

What's the downside?

Will opponents derail it?

There are numerous vested interest groups within the public service that will fight rapid and effective reform this tooth and nail. Bear in mind that it seeks to disrupt a key element of extensive political patronage machinery, and to reverse the deliberate politicisation that has been fostered. Ultimately, success will hinge on changing the culture within the public service, which will be a long, tough task.

Conclusion

The GNU's success will depend on the rapidity and effectiveness with which it can implement important changes that will markedly improve the lives of South Africans and speak to their core priorities. This paper sets out how to approach the issue of public administration to ensure that merit and skills define interaction with the state and delivers for citizens.

The State of the Nation Address of 2025 will trigger a window of opportunity that the GNU must grasp to fully action the democratic expectations of its electoral mandate, the collaboration set out in its founding framework, and the objectives to be defined at the National Dialogue. This period, likely to last approximately one quarter of the year or 100 days, a useful and understandable marker that the public will understand, will be the GNU's moment of maximal impact to deliver for South Africans the reforms needed to get the country back on track.

#WhatSACanBe: 100 days to get SA back on track sets out a series of reform policies that the GNU can refine and reach agreement on as pragmatic and mainstream proposals as basis of the upcoming National Dialogue that will map out the governance agenda. It should galvanise thinking around which practical reforms can be implemented, what concrete steps are required to do so, and what support and opposition should be expected from society.

To this end;

1. The public administration must be depoliticised. Eliminate cadre deployment and prioritise merit-based appointments. This will ensure government employees have the necessary skills and qualifications to turn, what has been a lack-lusted attempt at customer service into a competent, efficient state that can manage the demands of a complex modern society.

2. Establish more public-private partnerships. This will drive innovation and efficiency across government sectors.

3. Enforce a culture of discipline and transparency - if a public administration, that foster accountability and public trust, is to be formed at all, this is non-negotiable.

Even though the measures proposed here represent just a small slice of all conceivable reforms, they represent the most critical areas that need urgent attention for the success of the GNU. If they are competently addressed and some early successes achieved, this can help to turn around the negative narrative on South Africa while also giving the GNU parties achievements to celebrate and forge closer ties over.

Through these reforms, pragmatic in motive, practical in implementation, and focused in outcome, the GNU will establish a strong foundation that will ensure that any subsequent policies are balanced and effective, and reflects the collaborative strengths of the unity government. Day 101 and beyond depend on the precedents set in this critical early period – it will determine the long-term success and the overall improvement of governance in South Africa.

South African Institute of Race Relations