

A Time for Optimism. Is fundamental reform on its way?

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Last week the Office of the Public Service Commission, the National School of Government, the Department of Public Service and Administration and the United Nations Development Programme met to discuss how to professionalise the public service. The Auditor-General was there, so were representatives from the South African Local Government Association and the Presidency. The event felt historic.

The PSC retreat on professionalising the public service is not the kind of event that attracts much interest. Yet it should, because whether current plans succeed or fail, will shape the trajectory of South Africa for a very long time.

At the heart of many of South Africa's current problems are institutional failures borne not so much of the personalities that run them (good, honest vs bad and corrupt), but of the way that they have been designed and structured. Post-apartheid public administrations are overly politicised in a very specific way. The Public Service Act grants politicians wide discretion over operational decisions in state organs and in the recruitment of public servants. The situation is even worse at local government level where the politicians *are* the administrators. Cadre deployment is possible because the law allows politicians to appoint officials.

In the first decade of democracy, such political control was used to build effective and capable institutions, in the second it was used to capture, repurpose and ultimately weaken them.

There are concrete plans on the table to rebalance power relations between politicians and public officials. In the first place, the Public Service Amendment Bill will reduce the discretion of politicians to recruit staff and to interfere in operational matters. It will give departmental officials more space to hire the kinds of people that they believe will get the job done and to come up with workable plans to move from plan to action.

In the second place, a new professionalisation framework will set limits on who can become a public servant (there will be a pre-entry test) and impose stricter requirements for specialist roles and for senior managers. In the metaphor of the National School of Government, we want pilots in the cockpit not general managers. Hopefully, it will be accompanied by measures to fire delinquent or corrupt officials more easily.

These are fundamental reforms that will go a long way to build capable public institutions, which can provide basic services (water, electricity, ID books) and deliver on large economic projects.

We have been on the edge of progressive change before. In 2008 the Department of Public Service and Administration developed the Public Administration Management Bill, which

would have replaced the Public Service Act. It is an excellent piece of legislation that had it been passed would have moved South Africa in the right direction. It was only passed in a truncated form. The hallmark of the Zuma years, indeed, the defining characteristic of state capture, was not corruption, but of halting and reversing such momentum. Radical Economic Transformation is a reactionary politics that favours patrimonialism.

The political landscape has now changed. The ANC's poor performance in government has caught up with it. Political meddling in recruitment and operations weakened and in some cases wrecked state organs, including those vital for poor and working households. The rich and the middle classes have largely been able to self-provision (from private security, to private health, to private education). Even if the ruling party wins the 2024 election, it will be diminished, and opposition parties and coalitions will likely govern in provinces beyond the Western Cape. It is unlikely that the ruling party will want opposition parties or coalitions to have the kind of influence in administrations that it has enjoyed. Moreover, the fact of unstable coalitions having discretion over bureaucratic appointments is something that nobody wants. In other words, the political environment is propitious for change.

Meanwhile, talented officials in government and in the bureaucracy have been learning and reacting. They have launched several initiatives that if they succeed will be historic. This is why the PSC's recent retreat felt like an important moment. It even had a whisper of the 1990s, that South Africa was on the verge of something momentous. Civil service reform could be a defining legacy of the Ramaphosa administration.

Opposition to these reforms is currently weak. Resistance is likely to come from the regional political factions that will lose their control of local administrations and even councils. Political appointments in senior management positions will also become insecure if things go ahead. They will fight hard to preserve their powers and positions. Currently, however, they have no compelling arguments to defend the status quo. Time is of the essence. The problem is that there are no political champions for reform either, unless, we the public become their advocates. We have a decisive power, our vote. Let public service reform become an electoral issue. Which political parties have compelling views on change?

These reforms must be supported by business and by the unions. Civil society activists must help create an unstoppable momentum. It is a time for optimism and engagement.

South African history unfolds very rapidly indeed. It took the United Kingdom until the late 19th century to begin such a process (with the Trevelyan reforms), nearly 200 years after the founding of the state. The United States passed the Pendleton Act in 1883 but only started undoing Tammany Hall politics in the 1920s. Kenya and Zambia are now moving in this direction. Nigeria too is trying to build an autonomous civil service. China established a class of professional administrators during the Qing dynasty in the 17th century, though with antecedents long before that. In a mere 30 years, South Africa is on the cusp of historical change again.