

# TOWARDS A MERIT-BASED SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE:

STRATEGIES FOR REFORM IN SOUTH AFRICA



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# Executive Summary

This policy brief delves into the imperative need for reforming South Africa's Senior Civil Service (SCS) within the evolving landscape of the country's public service sector. It addresses how SCS reform can serve as a cornerstone for the broader professionalisation of public service delivery in South Africa, taking into account its distinctive historical and contemporary challenges.

The proposed reform strategy underscores a well-balanced approach that carefully considers both political discretion and managerial competence. It advocates for initiating limited-scope, high-impact reforms to elevate government efficiency and transparency. These reforms encompass transparent recruitment and promotion processes with a strong emphasis on merit-based appointments.

To bring these reforms to fruition, we propose a pilot proof-of-concept senior civil service system, initially targeting select director-general (DG) positions. This system would entail supervised recruitment by an independent agency, the generation of shortlists for available positions, and the authority to dismiss director-generals. A clear distinction between political appointments and administrative functions is central to this approach.

The multifaceted objectives of these reforms are twofold. Firstly, they aim to enhance the efficiency of public service delivery through transparent processes and merit-based appointments, thereby reducing bureaucratic impediments and enhancing responsiveness to citizens' needs. Secondly, the reforms address the pressing issue of corruption by establishing transparent recruitment and promotion mechanisms, fostering public trust, and upholding ethical standards. Furthermore, they play a pivotal role in fortifying democratic institutions, augmenting their credibility through competent and impartial civil service appointments.



# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The transformation of South Africa's civil service post-apartheid signifies a significant departure from the apartheid-era system's rigid structure (Posel, 1999; Chipkin & Lipietz, 2011). During apartheid, the civil service predominantly served as a tool for racial segregation and oppression, heavily influenced by the National Party's policies of Afrikaner nationalism and white supremacy. This legacy presented the new democratic government with the complex challenge of transforming the civil service into an inclusive and equitable institution.

The democratic transition in 1994 ushered in a wave of reforms aimed at rectifying past injustices and creating a more representative bureaucracy (RSA, 1995). These reforms were driven by the need to integrate the diverse and fragmented civil services of the apartheid era, including those of the independent bantustans and the central government. The primary focus was on democratising the public service and ensuring its alignment with the new constitutional values of equality, non-racialism, and public accountability.

The African National Congress (ANC), as the leading political force in post-apartheid South Africa, has had a profound impact on the civil service's transformation. The ANC's approach has been characterised by efforts to ensure that the civil service reflects the country's demographic diversity, often leading to significant changes in personnel and management practices.

While the democratisation of the civil service was a necessary response to the apartheid legacy, it also introduced challenges related to political patronage. The ANC's strategy, particularly during the Zuma administration, involved appointing individuals based on political loyalty rather than merit, leading to concerns about the politicisation of the civil service and its impact on efficiency and effectiveness (Chipkin, Vidojevic, Rau, & Saksenberg, 2022; Cameron, 2010).

The Senior Civil Service (SCS) in South Africa has undergone significant changes since 1994. The establishment of the Senior Management Service (SMS) in 2001 was a critical step in professionalising the upper echelons of the civil service. Inspired

by models from countries like the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, the SMS aimed to create a pool of skilled managers capable of enhancing public service delivery (Cameron, 2010).

Despite these reforms, the SCS has faced issues of inadequate autonomy and flexibility. The global trend in civil service reform emphasises guiding senior civil servants to work towards pre-agreed outcomes while respecting political directives. However, South Africa's approach has been to delegate administrative responsibilities to DGs without providing them with sufficient autonomy to recruit managers and civil servants (Chipkin, 2016).

The decentralisation of responsibilities for human resource management to individual departments and provinces, as seen in the post-apartheid reforms, has also led to inconsistencies and challenges in maintaining a standardised approach across the civil service. This has implications for the uniformity and effectiveness of public service delivery.

One of the central tensions in the South African civil service has been balancing the need for professionalisation with the realities of political loyalty. The ideal scenario would be a civil service that is both technically competent and aligned with the government's objectives (Cameron, 2010). However, finding this balance has proven to be challenging, often leading to conflicts between these two imperatives.

The reform of South Africa's SCS can benefit from lessons learned in other countries. International experiences suggest that a balance between political discretion and managerial competence, coupled with a merit-based approach to recruitment and promotion, could significantly enhance the effectiveness of the civil service.

The need for a more integrated and comprehensive strategy for reforming the SCS in South Africa is evident. Such a strategy should consider the unique historical, political, and social context of South Africa, while also drawing on successful international models to create a more professional, efficient, and accountable civil service.

# CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT SYSTEM

The current civil service system in South Africa faces a multitude of challenges that hinder its effectiveness and efficiency. These challenges are interconnected and have significant implications for the overall quality of public service delivery.

One of the most pressing issues is the absence of a robust meritocratic framework. Despite efforts to democratise and diversify the civil service, the system often prioritises political connections over competence and skill. This has resulted in a workforce that may lack the necessary expertise to perform effectively, ultimately impacting the quality of services delivered to the public.

Furthermore, the process of appointing senior civil servants has become increasingly politicised. Appointments are often based on political loyalty rather than professional qualifications, undermining the autonomy and effectiveness of the civil service. This politicisation creates a misalignment between policy objectives and administrative capabilities, hindering the government's ability to implement its agenda efficiently.

The high turnover rate of senior officials, driven by changes in the political landscape, contributes to instability within the civil service. This constant churn in leadership leads to a lack of continuity in policies and leadership, making it challenging to engage in long-term strategic planning and maintain consistent policies. As a result, the civil service struggles to adapt to the evolving needs of the country.

Moreover, the current system lacks comprehensive mechanisms for the ongoing training and

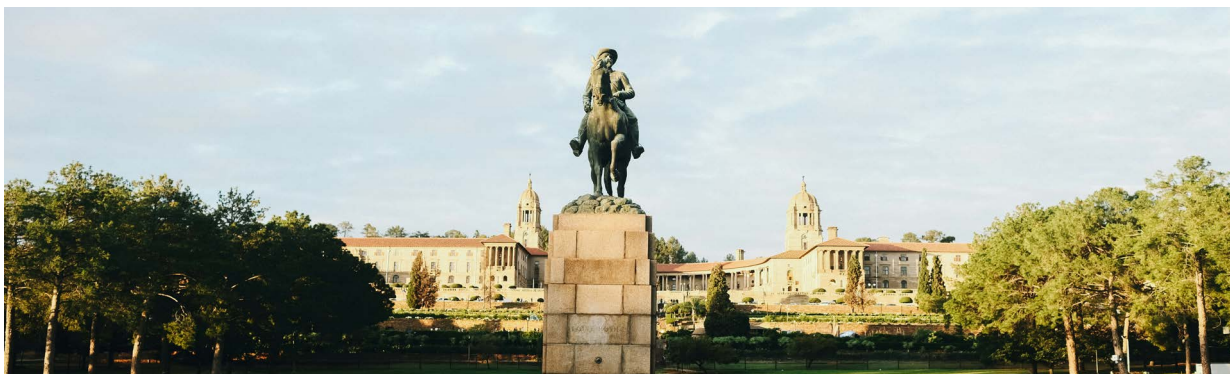
development of civil servants, particularly at the senior level. This knowledge gap limits the ability of civil servants to adapt to new challenges and technologies, hindering their effectiveness in addressing complex governance issues.

The performance management system within the civil service is another area of concern. It is often criticised for being ineffective in evaluating and holding civil servants accountable for their performance. A more robust and objective performance evaluation mechanism is needed to ensure that civil servants are motivated to improve their performance continually.

Addressing issues of corruption and maladministration is another significant challenge. The lack of strong and independent oversight mechanisms allows corrupt practices to persist, eroding public trust in the civil service. This not only undermines the credibility of the government but also hampers the effectiveness of public service delivery.

Additionally, the absence of clear and structured career pathways discourages skilled professionals from entering and staying within the civil service. Career advancement often relies on political favouritism rather than merit or performance, which can demotivate competent civil servants.

Overcoming these challenges necessitates a comprehensive reform effort that addresses their interconnected nature while fostering a culture of transparency, meritocracy, and accountability within the civil service.



# PROPOSED REFORM AGENDA

This policy brief outlines a strategic agenda for initiating impactful yet fiscally responsible reforms within South Africa's civil service. The focus is on introducing limited scope, high-impact reforms that can set the stage for broader changes and enhance government efficiency.

## **Key Proposals:**

- **Limited Scope, High Impact Reforms:** We propose starting with narrow, targeted reforms that have minimal fiscal implications. These initial steps can significantly improve government efficiency and act as catalysts for more extensive civil service changes.
- **Professionalisation Ripple Effect:** Central to our agenda is the professionalisation of specific sections of the civil service. By integrating skilled officials, we anticipate a motivational effect on existing bureaucrats, fostering a competitive and continuously developing professional environment.
- **Filling the Void in Reform Proposals:** We identify a notable gap in concrete, merit-based reform proposals within South Africa's public policy landscape. Our recommendation is a thorough examination of the implementation aspects of such reforms, encouraging active engagement from South African civil society.
- **Targeted Senior Civil Service Reform:** The brief suggests focused reforms at the senior civil service level, tailored to the South African context. These strategic changes are expected to positively influence public administration without imposing significant fiscal burdens, paving the way for more comprehensive reforms.
- **Pilot Proof-of-Concept System:** We propose a pilot proof-of-concept for a select group of director-general positions. This system would be based on three core principles: supervised recruitment by an independent agency, creation of a shortlist for positions, and retaining the authority to dismiss DGs with the president or a designated minister.
- **Bipartisan Agency Supervision:** The recruitment for select DG positions should be overseen by an independent agency with bipartisan input, potentially the Public Service Commission, provided that its member recruitment model gains broader parliamentary support.
- **Structured Meritocratic Appointment Process:** Our proposal emphasises a structured, merit-based process for appointing senior civil servants. This includes clear qualification criteria, open and competitive hiring processes, performance contracts, and the establishment of a governing body to oversee and enforce this framework.
- **Political and Administrative Role Delineation:** The initiative seeks to distinguish between high-ranking political appointments and administrative functions, underscoring the importance of political trust in these nominations. We suggest a tiered system comprising political authorities, SCSs, and intermediate administrative positions, each with specific roles and selection criteria.
- **Enhancing Public Administration Capacity:** The strategy is designed to improve the capacity of the public administration in implementing policies set by politicians. It aims to equip political authorities with the means to recruit qualified professionals, thereby building confidence in the reform process across the political spectrum.
- **Balancing Political Influence and Professionalism:** The overarching goal of the reform is not to eliminate political influence but to ensure that it is balanced with the ability to recruit competent professionals. This approach aims to foster a system where managerial criteria and political discretion are integrated in a harmonious and effective manner.

## **Implementation Strategy**

The implementation strategy for our proposed SCS reform in South Africa is crucial for ensuring the success and effectiveness of the reform efforts. This strategy is designed to address the complex political landscape of South Africa while gradually introducing transformative changes to the civil service. Here is a detailed overview of our implementation strategy:

- **Evolutionary Approach:** Acknowledging the intricacies of South Africa's political environment, we propose an evolutionary approach to reform. This involves implementing reforms gradually, with the flexibility to make adjustments as needed. To start, we recommend initiating reforms in selected departments or sectors before expanding them to the entire civil service. This allows for a tailored approach that considers the unique needs and conditions of each area and facilitates fine-tuning based on real-world feedback.
- **Segmentation and Piloting:** To make reforms manageable and effective, we suggest segmenting the reform process into specific objectives or pilot projects. Each segment should focus on a particular aspect of reform, such as improving recruitment processes or developing performance evaluation systems. These pilot projects serve as experiential learning opportunities and sources of insights for refining broader reforms.
- **Practical Experimentation:** The implementation strategy should encourage practical experimentation within controlled environments. For example, different models of performance evaluation could be tested in specific departments to determine what works best in the South African context. These experiments provide valuable data and lessons that inform future policy decisions, ensuring that reforms are evidence-based.
- **Informal Institutions:** Establishing informal institutions within the civil service can accelerate reform efforts. Cross-departmental committees or working groups focused on specific reform areas, such as talent development or ethical standards, can foster collaboration among civil servants. These platforms allow for the exchange of ideas, collaborative problem-solving, and the development of innovative solutions to common challenges.
- **Balancing Political Discretion and Managerial Competence:** Striking a balance between political discretion and managerial competence is crucial for reform success. Clear criteria for the selection and evaluation of senior civil servants should be established, considering both their managerial competencies and their understanding of the political context. This approach ensures that the civil service remains responsive to political directives while maintaining efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Building Confidence:** Building confidence across the political system in the reform process is essential. Transparent communication about the goals and potential benefits of the reforms is vital. Success stories from pilot projects could be highlighted to demonstrate the effectiveness of new approaches and garner support for wider implementation.
- **Proactive Management of Challenges:** Anticipating and proactively addressing challenges that may arise during implementation is crucial. This includes managing resistance to change, aligning reforms with existing legal and regulatory frameworks, and effectively engaging stakeholders. Regular stakeholder meetings, workshops, and forums can provide opportunities to discuss progress, address concerns, and gather feedback.
- **Continuous Improvement Culture:** The implementation strategy should foster a culture of continuous improvement and feedback within the civil service. Mechanisms for regular feedback from civil servants at all levels should be established, promoting ongoing learning and development. Encouraging innovation within the civil service is essential for addressing modern governance challenges effectively.
- **Evidence-Based Decision-Making:** The strategy should rely on evidence-based decision-making, using data and insights gathered from the implementation process to inform future steps. Monitoring and evaluation systems should be put in place to track the progress of reforms, analyse their impact, and make informed adjustments where necessary.
- **Leadership Empowerment:** Leaders within the civil service should be empowered to drive and implement reforms. Leadership training, clear roles and responsibilities for reform implementation, and recognition and rewards for effective leadership in reform efforts could be part of this empowerment process.

## **A Roadmap to Senior Civil Service Excellence**

Our proposal aims to strengthen administrative capacity in South Africa by piloting a proof-of-concept senior civil service system for a select group of director-general positions. This system should be based on three core principles:

1. (1) Recruitment for selected Director-General (DG) positions should be supervised by an independent agency. Membership to this agency should involve bipartisan input. While the Public Service Commission could potentially serve this role, it would necessitate that its member recruitment model secures the endorsement of two-thirds of Parliament, in contrast to the current majority approval from the Portfolio Committee on Public Service and Administration.
2. The aforementioned agency should generate a shortlist for available DG roles within this proof-of-concept. The president, or the delegated minister, should be mandated to choose from this list or initiate a fresh selection process if the candidates are deemed unsuitable.
3. The authority to dismiss DGs from this pilot remains with the president or the designated minister. Any such action should be accompanied by a documented rationale. While performance-based reasons are preferred, decisions can also pivot on the criteria of political confidence.

Our initiative strives to delineate between high-ranking political appointments and administrative functions, underscoring the significance of political trust in such nominations. We recommend three tiers of positions:

- a) Political Authorities (or Executive Authorities): Reserved for roles primarily tied to political tasks. Trust in political competence is pivotal for

these appointments, e.g., ministers of state and their aides.

- b) Senior Civil Servants (or Department Heads): Comprising professionals tasked with helming organisations or departments that provide public services. These roles answer to the political authorities and encapsulate positions such as DGs.
- c) Intermediate Administrative Positions: Serving as a nexus between upper management and street-level staff within public entities. These roles, which emphasise the oversight of day-to-day operations and carry lesser political implications, should be occupied by career civil servants following rigorous selection procedures.

Our emphasis is on the second category, the senior civil servants. We advocate for a structured, meritocratic appointment process. This entails: (i) Outlining clear qualifications and skill sets; (ii) Adopting an open and competitive hiring process, involving thorough evaluations such as background verifications, psychometric evaluations, and interviews; (iii) Establishing performance contracts that detail objectives, quantifiable metrics, and possibly, performance-tied compensation; and (iv) Crafting a governing body to monitor and uphold the execution of this framework.

We recognise that South Africa may face political challenges in implementing such a system. Nevertheless, our proposal offers a strategy for improving the capacity of the public administration to implement policies set by politicians. The primary objective is not to eliminate political influence, but to provide the political authorities with tools to recruit qualified professionals and to establish mechanisms that build confidence in the reform process itself all across the political system.



## **Potential Impacts and Benefits**

The proposed SCS reform in South Africa carries with it a promising array of potential impacts and benefits that could profoundly reshape the country's public service landscape. At the forefront of these potential advantages is the prospect of significantly enhancing the efficiency of public service delivery (Oliveira et al, 2023). By transitioning to a merit-based civil service, the government can ensure that its administrative machinery becomes more proficient and responsive to the diverse needs of its citizens. This reform stands to streamline government operations, reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks, and ultimately elevate the quality of services provided to the public.

Beyond the realm of efficiency, the reform holds the promise of addressing one of the most pressing challenges in the current system – corruption (Dahlstrom, Lapuente & Teorell, 2012). Instituting transparent recruitment and promotion processes is not just a matter of procedural fairness but a powerful tool for combating corrupt practices within the civil service. Transparency in government operations has a proven track record of deterring corruption, and by fostering such transparency this reform can contribute significantly to the country's efforts to curb corrupt behaviours. In doing so, it not only bolsters the integrity of the civil service but also builds public trust, a cornerstone of effective governance.

Economic growth is another domain where the impact of this reform could reverberate (Evans & Rauch, 1999). A professional civil service, as envisioned in the reform, is instrumental in the effective execution of policies that drive economic development. It can attract investments, manage economic resources judiciously, and create an environment conducive to economic growth. In this sense, the reform is not merely a structural change within the civil service; it is an economic catalyst with the potential to steer the country towards greater prosperity and stability.

Moreover, the reform is poised to strengthen democratic institutions, a fundamental pillar of South Africa's post-apartheid governance. An autonomous civil service operating on the principles of meritocracy and ethical standards is indispensable for upholding democratic values. It ensures that governance remains impartial, fair, and accountable, bolstering the credibility of democratic institutions. This, in turn, fosters a political environment where citizens can place their trust in the system, knowing that it is characterised by competence and ethical conduct. Lastly, the reform carries the promise of cultivating a culture of innovation within the civil service.

In an era characterised by evolving governance challenges, the ability to adapt and innovate is paramount. By encouraging creative problem-solving and adaptability, the reform equips the civil service with the tools needed to tackle modern complexities effectively. It positions South Africa's public administration as not only proficient but also agile, capable of navigating the dynamic landscape of contemporary governance.

In summary, the senior civil service reform proposal for South Africa represents a multifaceted opportunity for positive change. It promises to enhance efficiency, combat corruption, stimulate economic growth, fortify democratic institutions, and foster innovation. These potential impacts collectively underscore the transformative potential of this reform, positioning it as a vital step towards realising a more effective, accountable, and responsive public service in South Africa.

## **Reflecting on Legislative Gaps in South Africa's Senior Civil Service Reform**

The legislative landscape in South Africa currently presents a remarkable dichotomy. On the one hand, there are a number of ambitious legislative projects aimed at transforming various facets of public administration. On the other hand, there is a conspicuous absence of specific focus on reform of the SCS. This gap is particularly glaring in light of the evolving political and administrative complexities facing the nation.

The Public Service Amendment Bill (B13-2023) and the Public Administration Management Amendment Bill (B10-2023) mark important steps towards restructuring administrative power and enhancing transparency. However, their scope largely bypasses the critical nuances of SCS reform. While they address broader public administration concerns, they do not directly address the central issue of strategic development, appointment and training of senior civil servants. This omission is critical, given the increasing need for a skilled and politically insulated senior civil service in a landscape characterised by changing governance challenges.

Similarly, the Public Service Commission Amendment Bill (B21-2015), now enacted as Act 10 of 2019, and the rejected Public Administration Laws General Amendment Bill, while focused on governance and reducing political influence, fall short of holistically addressing the SCS. While important in their respective areas, these bills do not specifically address the professionalisation and development needs of the senior civil service.



This legislative oversight is not just a matter of a policy gap; it represents a missed opportunity in the context of South Africa's current political evolution. The absence of specific SCS reform initiatives within the legislative framework points to a larger issue – the need for a more focused, strategic approach to fostering a professional, effective and politically resilient senior civil service. The development of such legislation would be instrumental in ensuring merit-based appointments, continuous professional development and protection from undue political interference, thereby balancing political responsiveness with administrative efficiency.

While the existing legislative proposals contribute valuable changes to the broader public administration landscape, they underscore the need for increased focus on the unique challenges and opportunities of SCS reform. As South Africa continues to navigate its complex governance terrain, the importance of placing greater emphasis on the professionalisation and strategic development of the senior civil service cannot be overstated. Such a focused legislative approach would not only enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery, but would also play a pivotal role in strengthening the overall stability and responsiveness of the country's governance system. and responsive public service in South Africa.

### **Evaluating the 'National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector'**

The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, developed by South Africa's National School of Government in October 2022 (NSG, 2022), sets out a comprehensive plan to improve the overall quality of the public service, including the senior civil service. This ambitious document aims to create a public sector characterised by skilled, ethical and committed professionals who embody the values of the constitution. It focuses on key areas such as stability in senior management, merit-based reforms, professional development and diversification of skills and qualifications. The framework recognises the detrimental effects of frequent changes in senior management roles and advocates greater stability to improve the performance of government departments. It proposes extending the tenure of senior officials

based on merit and performance, conducting competency assessments, and involving the Public Service Commission in the selection of top officials. These measures are aimed at fostering a culture of integrity and accountability.

The framework also emphasises continuous professional development and the creation of clear career paths for each civil servant. It advocates a public sector with the right skills, professional ethics and commitment to serving the public, which is crucial to building a competent senior civil service capable of effective public administration.

However, while the framework sets out a visionary approach, it faces challenges in practical implementation, particularly with regard to the senior civil service (Leite & Chipkin, 2021). A key issue is the lack of specific enforcement mechanisms. The framework proposes substantial reforms but does not detail how these will be enforced, including the consequences of non-compliance and consistent application across different levels of the civil service.

Furthermore, the document does not adequately address the need for clear accountability structures. Effective reform of the senior civil service requires robust systems to monitor performance and conduct, and the framework falls short in specifying who will oversee these measures and ensure their independence from political influence.

The framework also lacks detailed implementation and monitoring plans, including timelines, responsible parties and resource allocation. Furthermore, while the document advocates a merit-based, depoliticised approach to appointments, it does not provide a clear strategy to insulate these processes from entrenched political influence.

In summary, the National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector offers a comprehensive and ambitious vision for public sector reform in South Africa. It outlines key areas for improving the public service, with particular relevance to the senior civil service. To achieve its goals, however, it requires detailed strategies for enforcement, accountability, implementation and insulation from political influence. Addressing these challenges is critical to transforming it from a visionary document into a catalyst for tangible and lasting change in South Africa's public sector.

## **Coalition Governance and Senior Civil Service Reform**

Amidst the dynamic political landscape in South Africa, there has been a notable shift in governance patterns, primarily due to the declining hegemonic status of the African National Congress (ANC) at various levels of government. This evolving scenario is gradually normalising the formation of coalition governments, potentially including or excluding the ANC, at the municipal, provincial and even national levels. This shift marks a significant departure from the established governance model and opens up new avenues for policy implementation and administrative restructuring.

The increasing likelihood of coalition governments, particularly in provinces such as Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, in the next electoral cycle provides a unique opportunity to implement policies or programmes that focus on insulating key leadership positions from political fluctuations. Such strategies could become crucial elements in the negotiations that form the basis of coalition agreements. This situation provides a crucial moment to adapt and introduce the proposals of this policy brief at the sub-national level, effectively

extending the professionalisation of senior public management to these levels of governance.

This emerging trend of coalition governance introduces a new element into the South African political and administrative landscape. It requires an adaptation of the administrative management approach, particularly in the organisation and governance of these new coalition formations. The proposed reforms to the SCS could be instrumental in this regard. By promoting a merit-based, transparent and efficient approach to senior appointments, these reforms can help to stabilise and streamline the administration of coalition governments.

In essence, as South Africa undergoes this shift towards coalition government, it will be crucial to re-evaluate and adapt governance strategies. The implementation of the proposed SCS reforms at various levels of government could significantly aid this transition by ensuring the professionalisation and effectiveness of public administration within this new political framework. The success of these reforms in the context of coalition governance will be fundamental in enhancing stability, transparency and administrative efficiency in the delivery of public services throughout the country.

# CONCLUSION

Our analysis of South Africa's SCS reform underscores the paramount importance of an evolutionary approach in tackling the complexities of this task. Essential to achieving a more professional public service, this approach requires a nuanced understanding of South Africa's unique political landscape and a concerted effort to balance political discretion with managerial competence. Currently, the SCS system is heavily tilted towards political discretion, often at the expense of necessary managerial skills. Our research shows that strategic and contextual reforms are crucial to significantly improve the professionalisation of South Africa's public service.

The prospect of coalition governments, particularly in provinces such as Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, offers a unique opportunity to implement SCS reforms in a new political context. This shift in governance structures may facilitate the introduction of reforms that focus on professionalisation and meritocracy at senior levels of public administration. Addressing the legislative gap in SCS reform is equally important. The current lack of specific legislation provides an opportunity to introduce new policies that strategically develop and train senior civil servants, balancing political considerations with administrative efficiency.

The National Framework Towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, while visionary in its aspirations, reveals significant gaps in implementation and enforcement. These shortcomings need to be addressed if the framework is to be effective in driving change in the public sector. The refinement and application of this framework will be instrumental in creating a skilled, ethical senior public service.

We believe that the SCS reform offers the government an opportunity for experiential learning, breaking down ambitious reforms into manageable segments for immediate success and broader transformation. This approach not only strengthens leadership and management, but also empowers the

government to effectively transform public administration. It highlights the role of leaders as agents of change and emphasises an adaptive strategy that takes advantage of the evolving political and administrative landscape.

Despite the lack of clear diagnostic assessments and unwavering political commitment, there is growing momentum for reform. Our research advocates an alternative approach that encourages internal pressure for reform within public administration. This can be achieved through practical experimentation, the accumulation of empirical knowledge on the professionalisation of senior management, and the demonstration of benefits to potential beneficiaries. The creation of new informal institutions within the civil service could act as a catalyst for reform by encouraging the voluntary adoption of mechanisms for the recruitment, development and evaluation of senior civil servants.

As these institutions demonstrate their impact on policy implementation, they could inspire policymakers to revise their beliefs and engage in policy learning. This shift towards professional public management would move away from excessive political discretion towards a balanced strategy that incorporates management criteria, promotes experiential learning, and encourages continuous evolution.

In conclusion, our analysis argues for an evolutionary approach to SCS reform in South Africa that recognises the unique political context and aims to bridge the gap between political discretion and managerial competence. This approach, coupled with strategic policy learning, addressing legislative gaps and establishing new informal institutions, paves the way for South Africa to develop a more professional, effective and responsive public service. This journey holds the promise not only of an improvement in the effectiveness of governance, but also of a significant contribution to the social well-being of the people of the country.

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