

Public Service Reform must be at the Centre of South Africa's National Dialogue

By Yoliswa Makhasi

The public sector is burdened with systemic challenges. These range from alleged political interference, alleged politicised recruitment, institutional capacity inequalities, funding constraints and poor performance oversight to weak accountability. These hamper adequate service provision and present challenges to the original social contract of post-apartheid South Africa, based on dignity, equality and development. The visible arm of the state, the public sector, is at the centre of this crisis. The Department of Public Service and Administration has a critical mandate to drive administrative reform and translate the state's development aspirations into a capable, responsive, citizen-centred bureaucracy. Professionalising public service is concerned with, among others, strengthening institutional meritocracy and the talent pipeline, promoting human capital formation efforts to enhance the state's capacity, and stabilising the political and administrative interface. A professionalised public service is constituted by public professionals responsible for driving institutional performance and the service delivery agenda. Former Minister for the Public Service and Administration (MPSA), Noxolo Kiviet, defined the desired effect of professionalising the public service as "accelerating service delivery, addressing poor performance and skills among some senior staff, and improving retention levels in the public service". Therefore, the impact of a professional public sector is that the people of South Africa can access quality services from government institutions.

The recent 2025/26 Budget Vote of the MPSA clearly articulated the mandate and policy regime in place. The MPSA focused, among others, on progress in implementing the professionalisation framework as approved by Cabinet in 2022, governance, accountability and ethics, digitisation and citizen engagement. He reflected on the MPSA portfolio amendment bills currently in the NCOP process, and it is hoped that these bills will be concluded within the current financial year. The speech covered familiar administrative reform policies, some dating back to the dawn of our democracy. For instance, professionalising public service has been a central theme in administrative reform efforts since the early years of South Africa's democracy. The National Development Plan (NDP) later reframed professionalisation as essential to building a capable, developmental state, leading to the Cabinet's approval of the Professionalisation Framework in October 2022.

Deputy Minister Pinkie Kekana complemented the high-level policy focus with an update on execution, partnerships and people-centred interventions. She focused on several interventions by the department, including employee welfare, innovation and collaboration, accountability and transparency, and the National Dialogue as an engine for reform. While appreciating the progressive policy regime and progress articulated, all state institutions must be nudged to reflect on visible, measurable reform delivery on an ongoing basis. It is pivotal to use data and evidence to showcase progress and account for the government's performance in general; in this instance, the contribution of administrative reforms in shifting institutional culture and restoring the state's developmental character. The MPSA reflected that as part of implementing the Professionalisation Framework, the human resources management and development directive was issued in 2023/24 for implementation by all provinces and national departments. Several implementation-related questions may be asked, including how the provinces and national departments have performed against this directive; how are those HoDs failing to implement held accountable? By sharing preliminary successes using data and evidence, the government will demonstrate the work being done to improve service delivery and contribute to building trust.

The MPSA Portfolio has done well in promoting ethics and rolling out lifestyle audits since its introduction in April 2021. Recently, there have been reported successes on lifestyle audits in Gauteng province, the resultant consequence management announced by Premier Lesufi, and the expanded rollout to 400 high-risk officials within the Department of Public and Infrastructure. However, a question must be asked: Are these ethics frameworks and training programmes changing the behaviour of public servants? If so, how is such behavioural change tracked, and what is the impact on organisational culture?

So, where to from here?

The deputy minister stated that the DPSA leads the public service pillar of the planned National Dialogue. This is welcome as it elevates public service reform initiatives from being a recluse of an elite group in government to a national agenda. This will ensure that all sectors, including the government, oversight structures, academia, organised labour, civil society structures and the people of South Africa, actively rebuild the state's integrity and capability.

Recently, Deputy President Mashatile hosted the 'Roundtable on Strengthening the Political Administrative Interface in the Public Sector', and a commitment was made that the outcomes will be integrated into the national dialogue process. The roundtable brought together the best minds from the various sectors to explore ways to strengthen the link between political leadership and public administration to support implementing the NDP 2030. Key thematic areas impacting reforms discussed included leadership turnover in government, the political administrative interface, political interference and organisational culture. Therefore, the national dialogue must place building a capable, professional and ethical public service that is responsive to the needs of people and grounded in constitutional values at the forefront. Central to this is implementing the professionalisation framework and amendment bills once finalised, holding the bureaucracy accountable for the performance of their departments, and strengthening governance and accountability systems.

South Africa has no shortage of visionary policies; the democratic government is celebrated globally for progressive policy leadership and establishing institutional frameworks and legal instruments. However, there is a lack of political courage, administrative resolve and a sense of urgency. The national dialogue will fail the people of South Africa who depend on government services if it does not place the administrative reform agenda at the centre and contribute to improving public services.

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