



Response

12th June 2025

Operation New Broom

In its statement of 28th May, the Cabinet welcomed the launch of 'Operation New Broom' by the Department of Home Affairs. At one level it is part of a five point promise made by the Minister at the end of 2024, which included an acceleration of digital processes to boost efficiency in the Department. This efficiency included control over undocumented persons.

Operation New Broom is a nationwide, technology-driven strategy aimed at tightening and increasing the possibilities for arrest, conviction and deportation of undocumented immigrants occupying public spaces. It uses biometric verification technology to detect fraudulent documentation and to confirm the immigration status of those suspected of immigration infringements. The technology includes fingerprints and facial recognition scans. Amongst other possibilities, this technology reduces reliance on paper-based documentation which is easily corrupted through forgery, counterfeits, illegal reproductions and the like. Such corruption has long been a curse of DHA operations. The Minister was quoted as saying that this process was in line with the rule of law. "It is a commitment that both motivates us to do more to combat illegality and to uphold due process and legal compliance in the process." He emphasised that this capacity would also be available to entities associated with DHA such as the Border Management Authority. The launch of the operation came with a strong warning from the Minister that those in South Africa illegally should 'self deport' now or face arrest and the prohibition of attaining legal status in the country. The Minister confirmed that, in its initial phase, twenty five people were arrested in District 6, Cape Town, using this technology.

In cautiously welcoming the biometric-verification system, the Public Service Association noted that this could not be a replacement for feet on the ground, but acknowledged that it would streamline valuable processes, including "strengthening the legal framework for addressing illegal immigration." They also pointed out – an important issue – that the department had not clarified matters pertaining to privacy and the security of personal information and data. They went on to say: "It is important to ensure that robust data protection measures are in place to safeguard what is personal."

It was interesting to note that, when addressing the issue of Operation New Broom and its function as identifying undocumented persons in her cabinet report back, Minister in the Presidency Khumbodzo Ntshavheni said that the operation would help the government fight crime. Whether inadvertently or not, she conflated undocumented persons with crime, thus strengthening a dangerous stereotype – that undocumented foreigners are prone to commit crimes.

This system has been used in other parts of the world for a while already. It has proven to be useful for mobile people to validate their identity where they have no other documentation, and it has also been useful in mapping out aid responses and preventing fraud with regard to documentation. Yet, as Ashraf Farraj points out, "the application of bio-metrics to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers raises several concerns including violation of privacy, stigmatisation, the potential to block

meritorious asylum applications and misidentification.” It thus behoves those applying such technology, especially in a society such as ours where xenophobia, corruption and prejudice is so rife, to be particularly cautious in protecting an already vulnerable demographic.

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