



Response

13 February 2026

The State of the Nation Address

In President Ramaphosa's long speech, just shy of two hours, certain words and phrases were repeated hundreds of times: 'government will'; 'we are going to'; 'South Africa must'; 'we need to'. All these point to the future, to things that have not happened yet but which, we are assured, are in the pipeline.

The list of these things is a long and wide-ranging one. We are going to end cervical cancer and roll out an exciting new AIDS treatment. New universities will be built. Multi-disciplinary agencies will enforce laws against organized crime and illicit firearms. Whistleblowers will be properly protected. New dams will help to ease the water crisis. The root causes of municipal dysfunction will be addressed. There will be special courts to settle tender disputes. A new era of long-distance rail travel is arriving, including high-speed trains. Ten thousand new agricultural extension officers will be deployed to support farmers. Fourteen million cattle will be vaccinated against foot-and-mouth disease. All sorts of visas, permits and certificates will be digitised and made accessible online. And many more.

The problem is not that these are false promises. In many cases preparatory work to develop necessary policy and legislation is under way, and in all of them the President and the national government he leads no doubt sincerely intend to realise them. The problem is also not that Mr Ramaphosa cannot point to any successes – he can, and he did so last night. Load shedding seems to be a thing of the past. Bulk rail and port performance have improved, thanks to genuine public-private partnership. Operation Vulindlela seems to be making a difference at the heart of economic planning and government efficiency. Inflation is well under control and government debt costs are slowly coming down. There are signs of increased economic growth, and we have worked our way off 'grey lists' and 'watch lists' and even had a small credit-rating upgrade.

The problem, rather, is that there is a disconnect between these many promises and achievements and the reality of the lives of an unacceptably large proportion of our people. The disconnect is caused by various factors, but they are mainly political. This was illustrated with desperate irony in the days before SONA when the Gauteng MEC for Health, Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko, denied that the province's hospitals were short of beds and claimed instead that patients prefer to sleep on the floor. She then went on to say, "I don't want journalists in my hospitals", as if it was only the reporting of the situation, rather than the situation itself, that was problematic.

Not to be outdone, a day or two later the Premier of Gauteng, Panyaza Lesufi, commenting on the province's ever-worsening water infrastructure disaster, assured the public that people in his position did not get special treatment: "In some instances, I had to go to a certain hotel so that I bath to go to my commitments. We also go through the same inconvenience like any other person." As many observers have noted, Mr Lesufi's experience of 'inconvenience' and that of hundreds of thousands of poor residents of Gauteng's townships and informal settlements are not quite the same thing.

For all President Ramaphosa's visions of better things to come, and for each of his sincere intentions, the movement he leads has over the last three decades unfortunately put in place numerous Lesufis and Nkomo-Ralehokos; people who are simply not on the same page as the President when it comes to the duties and functions of government. He may be the conductor, but too many of his choir prefer to sing from hymn-sheets of their own.

As is his wont, Mr Ramaphosa began his speech by recalling the past. This year, he could refer to a number of anniversaries: 70 years since the women's march on the Union Buildings; 50 years since the Soweto student uprising; and 30 years since the adoption of our rights-based Constitution. Throughout the democratic era our Presidents have sought to portray themselves as striding firmly along the path to dignity, equality and freedom pioneered at these seminal moments in our history.

Sadly, however, there is still a gulf between, on the one hand, the demands of the women of 1956, the students of 1976, and the Bill of Rights of 1996 and, on the other, the lived reality of so many women, young people and rights-deprived citizens in 2026. It is that gulf, far more than the vision offered by President Ramaphosa, that defines the state of our nation.

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