



100 days of Government of National Unity: Should labour celebrate or worry?

A government must be assessed on the basis of the promises it made on its installation. With the South African Government of National Unity (GNU) having reached a 100-days milestone since it was installed in June 2024, there is a raging debate about the prospects of its success. Yet, 100 days is too limited a period to make a fair assessment on the workings of a government. However, it is the few steps taken, the tone set, the posture on key issues that reveal a lot about the direction a government is taking and its prospects of successfully delivering on its promises.

100 days later, what are the milestones achieved by the GNU do date and what should labour read from the actions, posture and decisions taken by the GNU? Put differently, does labour have a reason to celebrate or worry? To adequately reflect on these questions, we must go back to the founding document of the GNU and the inaugural speech of the President to review the actions and decisions taken thus far against the promises made. First, we must place the GNU in proper context.

Context

The formation of the GNU generated a mixture of reactions from different political parties, organised labour, the media, and the general public. Different experts and commentators have drawn parallels between the 1994 and 2024 GNUs. The explanation provided for by University of the Western Cape researchers is most lucid. They observed that “the 1994 GNU was formed when South Africa was transitioning into democracy, under constant threat of violence and disorder, and facing a mammoth task of restructuring society. The 2024 GNU may have been formed in a time of dire socio-economic circumstances, but it is hard to maintain that the crisis is as profound as it was in 1994.”ⁱ

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that the concept of the GNU sent tongues wagging amongst political opponents and commentators. Following the unbanning of political parties, the release of political prisoners in the early 90s and the official end of institutionalised apartheid in 1994, there was an urgent need to build a new, united South Africa. The formation of a GNU in the aftermath of the historic 1994 elections was logical, sound, and necessary.

Noe, 30 years later, the proposal to install a GNU was to some political opponents and commentators nothing more than an attempt to subterfuge the public. The GNU was, to the naysayers, a euphemism for a grand coalition between two previously opposed foes – then governing party (the ANC) and then official opposition (the DA). Calling it a GNU was, to them, disingenuous.

However, a contrary view must also be made to explain the stance taken by those parties opposed to the formation of the GNU. Those parties that did not accept the invitation (e.g., MKP and EFF) to be part of the GNU had hoped to be the kingmakers and that they will wield a lot of influence on the content and structure of the new government. Yet, “By opting to form a GNU, in which the ANC cooperates with the second largest party (the DA) and other political parties, the ANC effectively diffused the kingmaker status of smaller parties and built an inclusive government.” The stance of parties opposed to the GNU must, therefore, be taken with a pinch of salt. Their hopes were shattered, and their influence was naught.

Meanwhile, organised labour was also concerned that the GNU may reverse some of the gains labour has made in the last 30 years. These concerns were genuine and based on the fact that then official opposition had taken a posture and a tone of a free-market enterprise, de-regulation of the labour market, a *laissez-faire* environment where employers could hire and fire as they please. Organised labour feared that the new government might take an adversarial posture towards it, create conditions for unfair labour practices, thus cultivating the grounds for labour strife and instability.

However, based on the founding principles and programme of priorities, was labour justified to share such concerns? This question will be dealt with after outlining the principles and priorities of the GNU.

Founding principles

Following the ANC's call for to form a GNU, a founding document was drafted. All parties that accepted the invitation to be part of the GNU were required to pledge their allegiance to the foundational principles and sign the founding document. Initially drafted and agreed to between the ANC and the DA, the document instructed that all parties to the GNU must “commit to uphold the following fundamental principles:

- 8.1 Respect for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights in its entirety, a united South Africa, and the rule of law.
- 8.2 Non-racialism and non-sexism
- 8.3 Social justice, redress and equity, and the alleviation of poverty.
- 8.4 Human dignity and the progressive realization of socio economic rights.
- 8.5 Nation-building, social cohesion, and unity in diversity.
- 8.6 Peace, stability, and safe communities, especially for women and children.
- 8.7 Accountability, transparency, and community participation in government.
- 8.8 Evidence-based policy and decision-making.
- 8.9 A professional, merit-based, non-partisan, developmental public service that puts people first.
- 8.10 Integrity, good governance and accountable leadership.”

Basic Minimum Programme of Priorities

11. As Parties to this GNU, we agree that the 7th administration should focus on the following priorities:
 - 11.1 Rapid, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, the promotion of fixed capital investment and industrialization, job creation, transformation, livelihood support, land reform, infrastructure development, structural reforms and transformational change, fiscal sustainability, and the sustainable use of our national resources and endowments. Macro-economic management must support national development goals in a sustainable manner.
 - 11.2 Creating a more just society by tackling poverty, spatial inequalities, food security and the high cost of living, providing a social safety net, improving access to and the quality of, basic services, and protecting workers' rights.

- 11.3 Stabilizing local government, effective cooperative governance, the assignment of appropriate responsibilities to different spheres of government and review of the role of traditional leadership in the governance framework.
- 11.4 Investing in people through education, skills development, and affordable quality health care.
- 11.5 Building state capacity and creating a professional, merit based, corruption-free and developmental public service. Restructuring and improving state-owned entities to meet national development goals.
- 11.6 Strengthening law enforcement agencies to address crime, corruption and gender-based violence, as well as strengthening national security capabilities.
- 11.7 Strengthening the effectiveness of Parliament in respect of its legislative and oversight functions.
- 11.8 Strengthening social cohesion, nation-building and democratic participation, and undertaking common programmes against racism, sexism, tribalism, and other forms of intolerance.
- 11.9 Foreign policy based on human rights, constitutionalism, the national interest, solidarity, peaceful resolution of conflicts, to achieve the African Agenda 2063, South-South, North-South and African cooperation, multilateralism and a just, peaceful, and equitable world.
12. Parties commit to an all-inclusive National Dialogue process - with parties, civil society, labour, business, and other sectors - to discuss these and other critical challenges facing the nation. The National Dialogue process will seek to develop a national social compact that enables the country to meet the aspirations of the National Development Plan.
13. The parties to this GNU Statement of Intent shall, following the formation of the GNU, hold a Lekgotla (Strategy Session) develop an agreed policy agenda, which shall include policy priorities for the GNU."

Taking his cue from the founding document, in his inaugural speech, the President emphasized that "the formation of a government of national unity is a moment of profound significance. It is the beginning of a new era." The President also drew comparisons with the 1994 moment and said that "As the leaders of this country came together in a government of national unity 30 years ago to forge a common future and build a united nation, the parties in the government of national unity of today have agreed to work together to address the most pressing challenges before our nation." He reiterated that "The parties have adopted a Statement of Intent, in which they have committed to pursue rapid, inclusive and sustainable economic growth; to create a more just society by tackling poverty; to safeguard the rights of workers; to stabilize government and to build state capacity."

It was strategic and necessary for the President to reassure the public in general and workers in particular that their rights will be protected. This signaled an appreciation of the anxiety, concerns, and fears of organised labour that this GNU should not reverse the gains made over the last 30 years. Even as reassuring as the specific mention of the rights of workers may have been, it must be noted that the new government needed something to appease workers and get their buy-in to support the new government. Thus, the assessment must be on their actions, rather than solely rely on the sweet sound bites.

The intent of the founding document is noble, and its ideals are lofty. The President's inaugural speech was punctuated by echoes of sincerity and genuine commitment to rebuild South Africa. However, it is from their actions and not from their words that we should assess the progress towards and commitments to deliver on their promises.

National unity cannot be fostered on a foundation of exclusion

In their document titled *Unpacking the 2024 Government of National Unity in South Africa: Challenges, opportunities and lessons for Stable Coalition Governance*, researchers from the Dullah Omar Institute at the University of the Western Cape explained the general foundational basis of a GNU. They observed that "GNUs are generally formed with the aim of bringing together the broadest possible spectrum of political interests in response to a crisis.

GNUs are formed to achieve national interests such as nation-building, social order, and peace and stability.”ⁱⁱ If the rationale for the GNU is based on the intent to foster nation building, social cohesion, and national unity, how is the GNU fairing on this score?

Firstly, the fact that the national elections did not produce an outright winner was used as the rationale for a GNU. By not giving one party a mandate to govern, it was assumed that the electorate was sending a message – a clarion call – for different parties to work together. Yet, negotiations towards the formation of the GNU started on a wrong footing of exclusion. The fact that some parties placed conditions and demands that they would not be part of a government if this or that political party is a part of it, was a missed opportunity to foster national unity and nation building. The reality is that national unity cannot be fostered on a foundation of exclusion.

Hence, on the score of fostering national unity, the GNU has not fared well. 100 days later unity remains elusive for both the nation and government itself. South Africa is a racially polarised nation; gripped in the jaws of poverty and a sense of despair inspired by a worsening economic exclusion, an unabated crisis of unemployment and an ever-yawning gap of inequality. Social cohesion is occasional and worryingly temporary.

Teething challenges ahead of GNU

Governance stability

Stability is the cornerstone of any successful government. Instability wreaks havoc. The recent experience at local government does not inspire confidence about stability of coalition governments. The absence of legislative framework guiding the workings of coalition also creates an environment in which the stability of a government is dependent on the whims of politicians. Whilst the adoption of the founding document of the GNU and its signing by parties involved is encouraging, the experience at local government shows that the enforceability of these agreements can be a challenge as there is no enforceable legal recourse when there is a breach of such agreements. This calls for a process urgently to legislate and regulate the coalition arrangement in the form of the GNU. Without such a regulatory framework parties can jump in and out of the GNU as they please, which will not augur well for the stability of government. Creating stability in all spheres of government should be the priority of the GNU. Frivolous motions of no confidence can only come to a stop if there is a regulatory framework providing guidance on the frequency of motions and criteria for eligible motions to be tabled. Workers want to work in a stable environment, not in a state of flux.

Policy differences

The GNU is an amalgamation of parties that come from different ideological backgrounds. Their policies and approaches to governance are different. It was expected therefore that there will be friction on some of the major policies in the pipeline and those implemented in the past. The recently signed *National Health Insurance* and *Basic Education Transformation Amendment Bills* are perfect examples of the discontentment that has characterised the GNU. These have also shown the need to strengthen the mechanism for management of dispute and consensus building in the GNU. Professional public servants do not want to second guess their leaders on policy implementation. They want clear direction. Workers cannot be expected to take sides when there are differences of policy amongst key political role players. As a Union with a conscience, representing workers who serve at the coalface of service delivery, the PSA does not want to see the beneficiaries of public policy suffer whilst political players squabble over policy. The PSA urges the GNU to find consensus on matters of policy and give workers who are the implementers of public policy and the public – beneficiaries of public policy – clear direction.

Public Service reforms

The GNU was installed amidst a raging public discourse on the size and shape of the public service.

Some parties that form part of the GNU tagged their electioneering campaign on the promise to downsize the public service, to effect mergers of departments, and dissolve some of state-owned enterprises. This created a lot of anxiety in the public service as many workers feared they might lose their jobs or be rendered redundant if the wishes of politicians who led these campaigns were realised. However, negotiations and subsequent composition of the GNU necessitated that the cake be spread widely to create the space for all parties to partake.

Whilst the voices that spoke loudly about the above reforms are now silent, it will be a grave mistake for labour to construe the silence as the total abandonment of the campaign to reduce the size and shape of government. That conversation may be continuing in whispers and some of those voices may be waiting for the right timing to effect their wishes. Labour must be vigilant to ensure there is transparency, proper consultation, and that the rights of workers are not trampled.

The PSA is, however, encouraged by the continued reassurance that heard from the Minister of Public Service and Administration on the GNU's commitment to the principles of accountability, transparency, and inclusivity. Addressing the Annual Conference of the South African Association of Public Administration and Management's 23rd gala dinner in Johannesburg on 26 September 2024, the Minister said that "The 7th Administration, which is the Government of National Unity, has placed at its core the principles of accountability, transparency, and inclusive governance. These are the very ideals that our predecessors embodied - and it is upon this very same foundation that we must build." The PSA will hold the Minister accountable to his words and will be vigilant to safeguard the interest of the Union's members.

Wage negotiations

One of the first hurdles the GNU will need to overcome is wage negotiations at the Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) as the current round of salary negotiations for the public service has just started. How the GNU will approach these negotiations, its posture and tone during the negotiations, will tell a lot about the kind of relationship the GNU would like to develop with labour. This will be the first test for the GNU to prove its commitment to protecting the rights of workers and if there is no intention to reverse the gains for labour made in the last 30 years.

Whilst there have been concerns from certain quarters about the rising wage bill, currently at R700 billion plus, there has not been a concomitant enthusiasm to curb rising inflation and the cost of living, which are eroding the value of workers' salaries. Under a GNU or any government, public servants will be within their right to demand and increase of the housing allowance. The PSA will be on their side in fighting for this right and benefit to be realised. If there was a lesson to be taken from the outbreak of COVID-19, it is that the work environment has become more precarious, dangerous and workers are exposed to health and safety risks on a daily basis. Thus, the danger allowance is not a privilege but a necessity for workers. Casualisation of workers, such as the prolonged contracts for teacher assistants and community health workers, must come end and these workers must be absorbed permanently as their continued contracts imply there is a demand for their service. To perpetuate their temporary status is to exploit them and borders on unfair labour practices. These are the issues that the PSA expects the GNU to address and redress to prove its commitment to protecting the rights of workers.

Meanwhile, labour must demand clarity on what exactly the Minister of Finance, Enoch Godongwana, meant when he intimated that government was exploring other measures to be tabled in the bargaining council as part of a broader discussion on containing wage bill growth. While the PSA must appreciate the general good will and public support that the GNU has received thus far, the Union must caution the powers that be not to abuse it to strangle and suffocate labour. As we approach these negotiations, labour must demand that these negotiations must take place in an environment of openness, transparency, fairness, and good faith. Hence, it is expected for the Minister to provide his clarity upfront and not ambush labour during negotiations.

Improving infrastructure of state institutions

It is further imperative that the quality of state institutions must improve to ensure that all public servants can work under safe and conducive conditions to support productivity.

Conclusion

No government can effect economic and social transformation in 100 days. However, a government that is led by a focused and dedicated leadership that has a plan and a leadership that is united and speaks with one voice, can make significant strides and giant leaps towards achieving its strategic objectives. There is little to be celebrated in the first 100 days of the GNU. If anything, we must worry about the long-term stability of government, policy coherence, and the current round of salary negotiations. The posture taken by the GNU suggests that labour must be prepared for serious wrestling on various issues that may impact on the livelihood of workers. Some of the statements made by government are meant to appease and must not lull us into believing that this government will be pro-workers and that everything will be smooth sailing. There will be storms along the way, and we must be ready. The PSA will remain steadfast and vigilant to safeguard the interest of its members and will not let its guard down.

References and endnotes

ⁱ By Jennica Beukes, Tinashe Chigwata & Jaap de Visser, 2024, *Unpacking the 2024 Government of National Unity in South Africa: Challenges, opportunities and lessons for Stable Coalition Governance*, Cape Town: Dullar Omar Institute

ⁱⁱ *Op cit.*