

MEDIA RELEASE	Elections 2024: PSA position remains firm
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South Africa is undergoing intense political change. National and provincial elections on 29 May 2024 are expected to be a watershed, with a possibility of a national coalition government being most likely. The wave of coalitions is far from retreating, after its turbulent start in 2016 at mega cities when no single party gathered enough votes to form a government on its own. Will unions be the sacrificial lambs and casualties in coalition negotiations and wrestling for power?

The concern and anxiety tormenting many public-sector unions is what will become of their gains, especially in respect of collective bargaining. Will a new government have an adversarial or collaborative approach towards these unions? Burning questions are whether public-sector employees should be neutral or take a stand to support or oppose any political party and should unions get involved in politics?

Election season is an opportune time to gain a better understanding of political party stances on various issues. There is no better place to get their posture on issues than their manifestos. By assessing what political parties promise to do in the public sector, a glimpse is gained of their approach towards unions.

The public service powers any incumbent government. It is thus to be expected that it will be in the crossfire of criticism about the performance of a sitting government. The performance of the public service is, however, dependent on how much care is given to it.

A number of political parties have promised large-scale public-sector reforms. Some condemn the increasing public-sector wage bill. Others have promised to professionalise the public service and conduct skills audits. There are major differences between the promises by different political parties. These are mainly on the diagnosis of the problems that beset the public service and some areas of emphasis. Some political parties emphasise improving state capacity by building a capable and developmental state. They see the public service at the centre of that agenda. Other political parties lament cadre deployment as the source of public-sector inefficiencies and promise to restructure and downsize the public service by reducing the number of employees. A significant political party is calling for an end to the tender system and promises to insource major services to be done in-house, in line with public-sector unions' demands for insourcing and decent work.

Based on these promises, any coalitions that may arise from these parties may require sacrifices and compromises. The PSA hopes that public-sector unions will not be compromised in the process. It is expected that issues such as insourcing, cadre deployment, and downsizing of the public service will be highly contentious in coalition negotiations.

Political parties are free to choose what to put on their manifestos. The PSA, however, calls for caution as the public service is not an enemy but an enabler of any sitting government. Antagonising the public service is not the

best option. Any public-sector reforms must be conducted in a responsible and consultative manner. Union's gains since 1994 cannot be reversed by a change of political parties in government.

The PSA has continuously argued for the Union's independent and non-alignment stance in respect of party politics. The PSA's position remains that politics affect the social and economic lives of people. Politics determine taxes. It affects the price of bread, determines access to healthcare and education. It affects the fortunes of the entire nation. Union-party associations do not guarantee that the voice of workers will prevail. Political parties and some individual union leaders are the major beneficiaries from such relations at the expense of workers.

All unions wish to influence institutions that regulate labour relations and determine the price of labour. Maintaining political influence whilst also retaining independence is a test many unions have failed. The independence of unions from political manipulation is crucial in maintaining union legitimacy. Union leaders who sacrifice their members' interests for political gain risk eroding the legitimacy of their unions.

The relationship between unions and political parties is driven by the mutual desire to influence each other. From this relationship, unions hope to achieve labour-friendly outcomes in government and the economy. Political parties expect, amongst others, assurance of economic stability and electoral support.

Political choice is a decision individuals should make without being dictated to by group thinking. The PSA firmly believes that engaging in party politics would limit the political rights of its members as enshrined in the South African Constitution. The PSA will therefore never treat its members like a political herd. Members should freely exercise their democratic right to make political choices.

In the prevailing era of coalition, the independence of public-sector unions is crucial. The fragility and instability of coalitions require unions to abstain from party politics. Union-party alliances jeopardise unions' capacity to serve the interests of their members as it limits union autonomy and erode legitimacy. In the public service, the governing party is *de facto* the employer. It is impossible to serve two masters with different expectations.

The PSA, as a professional and independent public-sector union. Its non-alignment and independent stance towards party politics enables the Union to remain principled and focused on safeguarding the rights and interests of its members, irrespective of which party is government. The outcome of the elections will not change the PSA's position. Similarly, the PSA expects that the gains made since the dawn of democracy must not be reversed by a change of government. The PSA will seek to defend the collective agreements that are in place, protect the interest of its members, and advance the plight of South Africans.

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