



The changing South African political landscape and impact on public-sector unionism

South Africa is undergoing political change. The national and provincial elections on 29 May 2024 are expected to be a watershed, with a possibility of a national coalition government being likely. The wave of coalitions is far from ebbing, after its turbulent start in 2016 at mega cities when no single party gathered enough votes to form a government on its own.

South Africa is, for the first time in 30 years, faced with a possibility of a change of government. The posture of any government towards unions, especially public-sector unionism is uncertain. Coalitions, by nature, are negotiated settlements, with sacrifices and casualties in the process. Will unions be the sacrificial lambs and casualties in the coalition negotiations and wrestling for power?

The concerns and anxiety of many public-sector employees are what will become of gains, especially in the area of collective bargaining? Will the new government take an adversarial or a collaborative approach towards public-sector unions? The question is whether public-sector employees and their unions should be neutral or take a stand to support or oppose any political party? Should unions get involved in politics?

Manifestos and political parties' posture towards the public service

Election season is an opportune moment to gain a better understanding of political parties' stances on various issues. There is no better place to get their posture on issues than their manifestos. Assessing what political parties promise they will do in the public sector offers a glimpse of their approach and a feel of whether they will be antagonistic or cooperative in their approach towards unions.

There is no doubt that the public service is the engine of any incumbent government. Thus, it is to be expected for the public service to be in the crossfire of criticisms about the performance of a sitting government. But like in a car, the performance of any engine depends on the driver and how much care is given to that engine.

With elections fast approaching, a number of political parties have promised large-scale public-sector reforms. Some have frowned upon the increasing public-sector wage bill, whilst others have promised to professionalise the public service and to conduct skills audits. There are major differences between the promises made by different political parties. These are mainly on the diagnosis of the problems that beset the public service and some areas of emphasis.

Whilst not much has changed over the past two national elections, the current Government places emphasis is on improving state capacity by building a capable and developmental state. They see the public service at the centre of that agenda. The official opposition, on the other hand, laments cadre deployment as the source of public-sector inefficiencies and promises to restructure and downsize the public service. Another party is calling for an end to the tender system and promises to insource major services. Various other parties differently word their promises around professionalisation, skills audits, and arresting public-sector corruption.

It would seem, therefore, that based on these promises, any possible coalitions that may arise may require sacrifices and compromises. The PSA trusts that the public service will not be compromised in the process. Issues such as insourcing, cadre deployment, and downsizing of the public service are expected to be highly contentious in coalitions negotiations.

Political parties can choose 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. The gains made since 1994 cannot be reversed by a change of political parties in government.

Should unions get involved in politics?

The PSA previously argued very strongly about the Union's independent and non-alignment stance on party politics. The PSA's position remains that politics affects the social and economic lives of people. Politics determine taxes. It affects the price of bread. It determines access to healthcare and education and affects the fortunes of an 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. They would prefer the election into office of public office bearers who believe in their cause. To gain this influence, unions either enter into alliances with political parties or deploy their representatives to serve in the leadership structures of political parties, especially governing parties. In some countries, unions engage actively in the formation of pro-labour parties to contest political power.

Yet, maintaining political influence whilst also retaining independence is a test few unions pass. The independence of unions from political manipulation is a crucial ingredient in the maintenance of union legitimacy. Union leaders who sacrifice their members' interests on the altar of political expedience risk eroding the legitimacy of their unions. Whilst in many countries union leaders have earned political clout, many have been unable to turn political clout into fortunes for union members. Proximity to political parties has not yielded labour-friendly outcomes. Some union leaders use their access to political power to pursue selfish interests.

Union that do not work in the interests of its members, especially in the public service, can compromise the integrity and independence of unions. It can be viewed as selling out and going to bed with the enemy – the employer. However, it would also be naïve to think that political parties are passive organisations, waiting for unions to influence them. They too, seek to exert their influence over unions. When they enter into alliances with unions, they are motivated by the same desire to hold sway in the union movement.

There are several advantages – political and economic – for a political party to have a harmonious relationship with a trade union. It is even better if the trade union is dominant in the public service.

Politically, it is advantageous for a political party – especially a governing party – to be aligned with a trade union. Unions are better organised structurally. This can be useful for electoral campaigning. With the increasing role that unions play in society as the sword of justiceⁱ and a voice of reason, political parties seek endorsements from unions to boost their gravitas in civil society.

Unions are training grounds for leadership and hotbeds for ideas. It is true that “the political power of labour does not lie only in its strategic location in the workplace and its capacity to organise, but also in the power of its ideas.”ⁱⁱ This is another reason why political parties actively seek association with unions.

In most countries, individual unions or federations of unions are the single largest membership organisations, surpassing political parties. It is risky for a governing party not to enjoy the support of dominant trade unions. It is risky if the governing party does not enjoy the support of the dominant unions in the public service. As Bargo observes, public sector unions have the potential to become a “shadow political party”ⁱⁱⁱ in opposition to the governing party. Political parties are alive to this reality. For this reason, all governing parties desire to have greater control of the trade union movement.

Political parties expect unions to exert discipline over their members to guarantee stability in the economy. To achieve this, political parties have adopted different strategies to placate unions and their leaders. In some cases, union leaders are co-opted into the leadership of the political parties or into positions in government.

It is also economically beneficial for a political party to have the support of trade unions. Trade unions are self-sustainable organisations with capacity for fundraising. The subscription fees and pension schemes that they own are to political parties cash cows waiting to be milked. In some countries, political parties look to trade unions for funding their political campaigns. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, when political parties battle to capture and control trade unions.

The relationship between unions and political parties is a two-way affair. It is a relationship driven by the mutual desire to influence each other. From this relationship, unions hope to achieve one thing – labour-friendly outcomes in government and the economy. On their part, political parties expect many things – assurance of economic stability, electoral support, and financial benefits.

Union-party relations can erode the right of members to freely make political choices. When a union enters into a relationship with a political party, it imposes its will on its members. 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 members as enshrined in the South African Constitution. The PSA will never its members like a political herd. Members are allowed to 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 requires unions to abstain from party politics. Union-party alliances jeopardise unions’ capacity to serve the interests of members as it limits union autonomy and erodes legitimacy. It can be worse in the public service, where the governing party is *de facto* the employer. By forming alliances with the governing party, the union is *ipso facto* in bed with the employer. As Beckman and Sachikonye observe, there is a high risk of “built-in conflict between being part of government ... and negotiating a collective agreement on behalf of your members.”^{iv} For this conflict to be resolved, either the interests of the governing party will be fulfilled at the expense of members of the union or *vice versa*. It is impossible to serve two masters with different expectations.

Professionalisation of the public service

The changes that are unfolding in the South African political landscape require a public service that is independent and politically non-aligned. More than ever, South Africa needs a professional bureaucracy that can work with any political party that gains power, whether through coalition or by popular mandate from an election.

The PSA understands that in a developmental state, the public service is the engine that propels the state machinery into motion. As in motoring, if the engine is un-serviced, the wish to arrive at a desired destination cannot be guaranteed. Similarly, the realisation of South Africa's developmental aspirations will depend on the extent to which the public service is capacitated and motivated. This will, therefore, require a critical look at the current state of the public service, with particular focus on competence, motivation, and work culture. Human resources are the most critical drivers of development. Through their work, the state is able to make important interventions to improve the lives of the poor, harness entrepreneurial energies of individual and collective citizens for economic growth, and to develop society. To achieve this, the South African state will require a highly trained, well-motivated, and energetic workforce. Parties that aspire to govern must aim to inspire, not to antagonise, let alone demonise the public service.

Many reforms have been undertaken since the dawn of democracy. Some of those have put South Africa on a positive trajectory. There may not be a need to reinvent the wheel. There are many progressive reforms such as already advocated in the Public Service Charter, which political parties must review, adapt, and even embrace. For instance, the Charter states its objectives categorically and clearly about professionalisation. Amongst others, it seeks to "acknowledge and reward excellent performance, professionalise and encourage excellence in the public service, enhance performance, facilitate a process to define service standards in various sectors, strengthen processes and initiatives to prevent and combat corruption."^v These objectives are noble. Parties that will coalesce to form national government do not need to reinvent the wheel, but to build on the national consensus that already exists between government, business, and labour. The Charter is one such example.

The PSA noted that even as parties' manifestoes differ on their approach to public service, all parties contesting the 2024 elections agree that South Africa needs a professional public service and a developmental state to address the plight of South Africans. The PSA is alive to the fact that aspirations towards a developmental state require a fundamental shift in the collective mind and attitude of the workforce in the public service. Workers will need to embrace a new ethos and culture of service that puts people first - *Batho pele*. This new ethos would also need to be accompanied by a culture of hard work, informed by a heightened consciousness of social responsibility. Whichever party in government must also know that it bears the principal responsibility to ensure that the work environment is as conducive as possible to make workers feel the need to work harder and adopt positive attitudes. This cannot be achieved through negativity and posturing.

The professionalisation of public service must be about the promotion of good ethics, rewarding excellence, and shunning of mediocrity. The PSA has been firm in its call and support for professionalisation of the public service. The PSA calls upon its members to register and affiliate with professional bodies in their different professions. This helps in ensuring that people adhere to the ethics and conduct of their profession, failing which leads to loss of certificate of practice. The PSA also calls for the harmonisation of frameworks that regulate human resources on national, provincial, and local government level. This harmonisation must facilitate human capital mobility and standardise remunerations and conditions of service.

PSA approach to coalition governments

The PSA has a legacy as a professional and independent union in the public sector. A non-aligned and independence stance towards party politics enables the PSA to remain principled and focused on safeguarding the interests of members, irrespective of which party is government. The outcome of the elections, whether it be the retention of the *status quo*, or a new government 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 interests of members, and advance the plight of South Africans.

References and endnotes

ⁱ Flanders Allan, 1970, *Management and unions*, London: Faber.

ⁱⁱ Beckman Bjorn and Sachikonye Lloyd, 2010, *Trade unions and party politics in Africa*, Pretoria: HSRC Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bargo Jr. Michael, 2013, *Public Sector Unions are a Shadow Political Party*

http://www.americanthinker.com/2013/11/public_sector_unions_are_a_shadow_political_party.html#ixzz2tqscIKUR

^{iv} Beckman Bjorn and Sachikonye Lloyd, 2010, *Op cit.*

^v *Public Service Charter*