

SONA
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GOOD GOVERNANCE AFRICA

Pre-SONA considerations for moving South Africa onto a growth trajectory

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Pre-Sona considerations for moving South Africa onto a growth trajectory

Good Governance Africa (GGA) discusses key considerations for South Africa ahead of the 2025 State of the Nation Address (SONA) to drive economic growth.

Recommendations

- **Address local government service delivery:**
Strengthen citizen engagement through electoral reforms, improve municipal governance, and depoliticize local administrations to enhance service delivery and public trust.
- **Reform State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs):**
Undertake governance redesign for major SOEs like Eskom and Transnet to ensure they provide the necessary infrastructure to support economic growth, mining, and industrial capacity.
- **Defend electoral integrity:**
Strengthen South Africa's regional leadership by ensuring democratic integrity in neighbouring countries, particularly in response to recent electoral crises in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. South Africa should take a more proactive role in SADC, with stronger election observer missions and consequences for electoral irregularities.
- **Strengthen South Africa's regional position:**
The Government of National Unity (GNU) should define a cohesive stance on regional stability, trade agreements (AfCFTA, SADC), and economic diplomacy, while addressing inconsistencies in foreign policy and improving intergovernmental coordination.
- **Enhance SADC's security and economic mechanisms:**
Advocate for an independent SADC Peace and Security Fund to respond quickly to crises, such as the insurgency in Mozambique, with South Africa playing a leadership role in its operationalization.
- **Raise public awareness of regional cooperation:**
Implement a communication campaign to educate the public on the benefits of regional agreements (e.g., AfCFTA and SADC trade protocols) and counter anti-migrant sentiments by highlighting how these agreements contribute to economic growth and job creation.
- **Improve governance and institutional performance:**
Establish a national municipal performance dashboard to track spending, project progress, and service delivery in real-time, enhancing transparency and accountability at the municipal level.
- **Enhance migration governance and social stability:**
Establish a multi-agency border coordination unit (involving Home Affairs, SAPS, SANDF, and SARS) to improve border security and facilitate legal trade and movement, addressing anti-migrant sentiment and social instability.
- **Develop a unified foreign policy stance:**
Articulate a clear and cohesive foreign policy position for the GNU on regional and global matters, avoiding fragmented policies.
- **Strengthen policy coordination across government departments:**
Improve inter-ministerial coordination to ensure consistent diplomatic engagement and policy execution.
- **Restore trust in law enforcement and judiciary:**
Strengthen institutions like the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) and SAPS, insulating them from political interference, combating organized crime, and increasing visible policing.
- **Promote climate action and just transition:**
Operationalise the Climate Change Act by integrating climate goals into fiscal policy and supporting the just energy transition. Foster public-private partnerships to implement carbon reduction measures and shift away from a carbon-intensive economy.
- **Position South Africa as a global leader:**
Strengthen South Africa's role in regional peacekeeping and global climate leadership, addressing shortfalls in past regional interventions, such as in Mozambique and the DRC. Advocate for a lower-carbon future and participate meaningfully in global forums like the G20.



Introduction

Looking ahead to the State of the Nation Address (SONA) and subsequent debates, the good news is that South Africa has gone nearly a full year without load-shedding. Expectations are high that economic growth might reach 2% this year. Some economists also expect that interest rates will continue to come down as inflation continues to ease.

The challenge is that 2% growth, after adjusting for inflation, is negligible real growth. Moreover, GDP growth is not that meaningful a figure for South Africa, as long-run structural unemployment seems unlikely to be dented by real growth of less than 5%. Even then, higher growth rates are not always connected to higher labour absorption. As it is, employment in the non-agricultural has dropped in 2024. Unemployment in the third quarter was 32.1%.

While improved electricity reliability is helpful, impending increased prices are not, as they reduce the country's investment competitiveness. This is especially the case in sectors like manufacturing that could employ more people, as those sectors are invariably the most energy-intensive.

In this context, it is our considered view that a stronger economy is unlikely to materialise unless our political

institutions are sufficiently strengthened. In other words, political accountability needs to take deeper root across our society to create an enabling environment for economic dynamism to flourish.

While the outcome of the 2024 national election was positive in some ways (the majority party lost power peacefully), it was also negative in many ways (low voter turnout and a startling share of the vote to ethno-nationalist and far-left parties respectively). But we are now governed by a grand coalition in which no single party can ride roughshod over the others. South Africa also has a leadership opportunity, as this year's hosts of the G20, to contribute to the ambition of a less polarised multi-polar world.

At the local municipal level, where the effects of poor governance are most felt, elections will be held in 2026. These elections are likely to yield unfruitful results unless more is done to strengthen the sense among citizens that their vote is meaningful. For this reason, we've placed electoral reform at the heart of our ten-point plan that should guide policy prioritisation within the GNU. This is crucial not only for electoral integrity within South Africa but should also inform the country's approach to stabilising the region.



Photo: Luis Tato / AFP

Governance, Elections, and Electoral Accountability

Strengthening South Africa's regional position

The 2025 SONA debate presents a critical opportunity to clarify South Africa's regional strategy, address governance challenges, and strengthen socio-economic priorities. Given the diverse political composition of the Government of National Unity (GNU), a well-defined stance on regional stability, economic resilience, and migration governance is essential.

South Africa must articulate a cohesive foreign policy that aligns with its commitments to regional organisations such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and broader economic diplomacy efforts. Inconsistencies in foreign policy and a lack of intergovernmental coordination have weakened South Africa's ability to lead effectively in the region, necessitating a clear and unified approach to be articulated.

Key focus areas

- **Defending electoral integrity:** As a regional leader, South Africa has both a moral and strategic interest in ensuring democratic integrity in its neighbouring countries. Weak responses to electoral crises in Mozambique (2024) and Zimbabwe (2023) have

undermined SADC's credibility and South Africa's influence. To uphold democracy and stability, South Africa must take a more proactive role in SADC, including stronger election observer missions and consequences for electoral irregularities.

- **Strengthening South Africa's regional position:** Define the GNU's stance on regional stability, trade agreements (AfCFTA, SADC), and economic diplomacy. The government should also address inconsistencies in foreign policy and enhance intergovernmental coordination.
- **Strengthen SADC's Security and Economic Mechanisms:** Advocate for an independent SADC Peace and Security Fund to rapidly respond to crises like the insurgency in Mozambique, with South Africa playing a leadership role in operationalising it.
- **Increase Public Awareness of Regional Cooperation:** Strengthening public awareness of regional agreements such as AfCFTA and SADC's trade protocols is essential to counter anti-migrant sentiment and highlight the economic benefits of regional integration. A targeted communication campaign should be implemented to educate citizens on how these agreements contribute to economic growth and job creation.
- **Governance and institutional performance:** municipal governance remains weak, with persistent declines in audit outcomes and inefficient service



Photo: Marco Longari / AFP

delivery, impacting economic growth and social stability. In response, we recommend institutionalising a national municipal performance dashboard that tracks municipal spending, project progress, and service delivery in real-time, improving transparency and accountability.

- **Migration governance and social stability:** unclear migration policies, weak border management, and growing anti-migrant sentiments threaten social cohesion and economic stability. We recommend that the government establish a **multi-agency border coordination unit** (Home Affairs, SAPS, SANDF, and SARS) to strengthen border security while facilitating legal trade and movement.
- **Develop a Unified Foreign Policy Stance:** The GNU must clearly articulate a cohesive position on regional and global matters, avoiding fragmented and contradictory policies.
- **Enhance Policy Coordination Across Government Departments:** Strengthen inter-ministerial coordination to ensure consistency in South Africa’s diplomatic engagements.

Peace and Security

Following South Africa’s era of state capture under former President Zuma, efforts have been made to reform and rebuild key law enforcement and security institutions, such as the National Prosecuting Authority and the Directorate of Priority Crime Investigations (Hawks). However, few high-profile prosecutions following the [Zondo Commission](#)¹ have been secured and lingering concerns around political interference and continued institutional capture undermine confidence in these reforms.

Notable initiatives by law enforcement include South African Police Service’s (SAPS) [Operation Shanela](#)², targeting contact crime in high-crime areas; the establishment of a [Border Management Authority](#)³ to improve border security; [Economic Infrastructure Task Teams](#)⁴ to address cable theft, illegal mining, and other damage to critical infrastructure; the development of a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence, which provides additional support for survivors of GBV and strengthens criminal justice responses. While all forms of crime remain pervasive, national figures indicate positive

1 <https://www.statecapture.org.za/>

2 <http://www.ldtcs.gov.za/?news=launch-of-operation-shanela>

3 <https://www.parliament.gov.za/press-releases/media-statement-border-management-authority-ready-roll-out-safe-movement-people-and-goods-over-festive-season>

4 https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/Pages/2022/9-october/06-10-2022_NCOP_Ministerial_Briefing_Session/session1/Status_of_Establishment_of_Specialised_Multi-Disciplinary_Economic_Infra-Structure_Task_Teams.pdf

signs in addressing some types of crime. For example, [contact crime decreased](#)⁵ in the 2024/2025 Second Quarter compared to the 2024/2025 First Quarter, indicating tentative promise.

While tentative progress has been made, crime remains a critical issue. The 2025 SONA must outline a decisive plan to restore public trust in the justice system. This should include a renewed commitment to insulating the NPA and police from political meddling, addressing chronic underfunding, and delivering measurable results in combating corruption and organised crime. Additionally, the President must prioritise community safety by fast-tracking security reforms, enhancing visible policing, and fostering partnerships with civil society to rebuild a sense of security for all South Africans.

In the upcoming SONA, the President must reaffirm the commitment to strengthening law enforcement institutions, fighting corruption, and addressing GBV as a national priority. The address should highlight progress, outline plans to professionalise the SAPS further and ensure continued collaboration with civil society and the private sector. Beyond national security, South Africa's defence-keeping role in the region, particularly the DRC, should be reevaluated, considering the continuously decreasing defence budget. South Africa also has an opportunity to lobby for policies that will promote economic benefits and enhance regional integration as it hosts the [G20 summit](#)⁶.

Local Government and Service Delivery

In 2024, Good Governance Africa (GGA) released its biannual [Governance Performance Index \(GPI\)](#)⁷ to assess the functionality of South Africa's 257 municipalities. The report highlighted progress in service delivery, particularly improved access to essential services like electricity and sanitation, though quality remains a challenge.

The findings also indicated that while hung councils may increase political instability, they do not necessarily hinder service delivery. This underscores the importance of depoliticising local administration and the need for legislative measures like the Public Service and Coalition Amendment Bills to ensure a clear separation between political and administrative functions.

5 <https://www.saps.gov.za/services/crimestats.php>

6 <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/government-prepares-g20-presidency-and-summit>

7 <https://gga.org/governance-performance-index-south-africa-2024/>

However, while 2024 had some key successes at the local government level, several challenges remain, which should be addressed in President Ramaphosa's address to the nation.

One of the most pressing issues is the decline in political trust. Citizen engagement is fundamental to our democracy, yet the all-time low voter turnout in the 2024 general election underscores the widespread dissatisfaction towards the political system. This disillusionment weakens our democracy and its institutions.

In his upcoming address, President Ramaphosa should reaffirm the GNU's commitment to rebuilding trust by outlining a clear plan to enhance citizen engagement. This plan should speak to the proposed electoral reforms which aim, in part, to improve trust, as well as the importance of public participation and consultations. Public engagement in democracy begins at the ballot box, but it does not end there; more needs to be done to harness citizens' commitment to democracy alongside their frustration with its current form in South Africa.

Another challenge is the need for a more professional civil service. While the framework for professionalising the public service is welcome, further concrete steps need to be taken to ensure its effective implementation, especially in local government. President Ramaphosa should, therefore, articulate a way forward regarding this key issue and how the GNU aims to support its implementation.

Through sustained efforts to restore public trust and create a more effective and capable state, South Africa can realise its vision as outlined in the Constitution.





Photo: Getty Images

Climate Action and Just Transition

In July 2024, South Africa took a significant step to pass the [Climate Change Act](#)⁸ into law, showing progression and commitment to advance the country’s climate resilience and to see it through achieving a just energy transition. After the May 2024 general elections, this step was highlighted in GGA’s 10-point priority plan as one of the key areas for the GNU to prioritise.

The Act is intended to outline, oversee and enforce South Africa’s approach to climate change. Ahead of assent of the Act, the Climate Resilience Symposium, convened by National Treasury, Presidential Climate Commission and other key partners, further illustrates the great efforts that were made. The symposium aimed to focus on integrating climate goals into macro-fiscal and finance policy and mainstream climate change considerations into the intergovernmental fiscal system.

While the commencement date of the Act is yet to be proclaimed, the role of local government will be integral

in carrying out the municipal climate change response plan which feeds into the intergovernmental system. The intergovernmental fiscal system, particularly at the local level, faces deep-rooted challenges, particularly in financial resource management. In numerous cases, financial provision has been attained through unauthorised and irregular means that have resulted in wasteful spending.

This was the case in the audit results for 202-2023, where [R241.1 billion](#)⁹ was revealed in unauthorised expenditure. Of the 257 municipalities, only 34 received clean audits with a concentration in the Western Cape province. The changing circumstances and environment due to climate change, require local governments to shift gears and adapt, as it is a sphere of government closest to citizens and where negative climate impacts are felt most keenly.

GGA produced [research](#)¹⁰ that provides a roadmap on how the Act can be effectively operationalised to achieve its mandate. One of the ways to achieve this is: by professionalising and reforming the public service. The SONA should strongly point to localising the application

8 https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202407/50966climatechangeact222024.pdf

9 <https://groundup.org.za/article/auditor-general-calls-for-action-to-improve-municipal-audit-outcomes/>

10 <https://digitalmallblobstorage.blob.core.windows.net/wp-content/2024/11/Climate-Change-PB.pdf>



Photo: Getty Images

of the National Framework Towards Professionalising the Public Service.

Part of enacting the Climate Change Act is to support the country's just energy transition to realise a low-carbon economy, and therefore, more active private-public partnerships should be encouraged in implementing the Act effectively. GGA's [Intelligence Report](#)¹¹ highlights what is required to improve enforcement in carbon emissions tracking and reporting as well as internal carbon pricing mechanisms to progressively move away from a carbon-intensive economy.

Conclusion

South Africa is at a critical juncture. Our GNU is internally divided but subject to healthy debate within. Beyond ironing out matters of disagreement on basic education, national health and land redistribution, the coalition is going to have to tackle the arguably deeper issue of rebuilding confidence in the political system. It needs to do so by deepening political accountability through electoral reform and strengthening citizen engagement with democratic institutions between elections.

Moreover, mechanisms need to be established that will stabilise coalition arrangements. As was described in detail above, the President needs to make clear in his

SONA what steps have been taken towards building a more capable state. Our theory of change at GGA is that improved government effectiveness alongside an empowered citizenry holding its government to account will create the space for economic dynamism to flourish. The evidence bears this out. It remains true, though, that government effectiveness cannot improve without a professional public service. Similarly, local government cannot continue to fail citizens by not delivering basic services and wasting public money.

Talking of waste, our state-owned enterprises need to be reformed; this is not going to happen through the creation of a super-SOE either. It requires wholesale governance re-design. The big ones, like Eskom and Transnet, also need to follow a strategy that allows them to provide the basic infrastructure required by investors to expand mining and industrial capacity to effect growth.

Finally, and as detailed earlier, South Africa needs to position itself as a responsible regional and global leader. We have failed to speak out decisively against sham elections in Zimbabwe and Mozambique respectively, at the same time as faltering in our peacekeeping roles both in northern Mozambique and the eastern DRC. Finally, in a world increasingly fragmented and with the US withdrawing from its prior global commitments, South Africa needs to step up and make sure it fully commits to a lower-carbon future.

¹¹ <https://digitalmallblobstorage.blob.core.windows.net/wp-content/2024/11/Decarbonisation-and-Compliance-IR.pdf>

Notes:



Photo: Clive Mason/Getty Images

For more bespoke advisory services on ESG-related matters, contact our Good Governance Africa advisory services team.

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