

Publication		
BUSINESS DAY		
Page	Date	AVE (ZAR)
7	Wed 28 July 2021	30357.27



NATIONHOOD

New cabinet and the hyphen between nation and state

Nationhood means different things to different people: in SA we associate it with positive symbols such as the Rainbow People, Nelson Mandela, our flag or national teams, especially when they are winning.

When that is shaken, as it was by recent violent turmoil, we reach for the national Prozac: finger-pointing and loud debates on media platforms, while think-tanks rush to host dialogues and webinars.

Similarly, notions of the state go through vicissitudes:



YACOOB ABBA OMAR

Mandela's cabinet and RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme), when the government could do no wrong; to Thabo "Mr Delivery" Mbeki; to the "New Dawn" of President Cyril Ramaphosa after the detour of the "nine wasted years". When

things go pear-shaped we get into paroxysms about the predatory state, cadre deployment, and even how much better things were under the apartheid state. Lurking, almost unobtrusively, is the hyphen between nation and state, with some suggesting nationalism is that link.

The SA nation, like most nations, is a work in progress. Like most former colonies our boundaries define who makes up this nation: white, black, a variety of ethnic, linguistic groups and more recently émigrés. The relationship between nation and state is best

captured in Italian leader Massimo d'Azeglio's declaration shortly after unification: "We have made Italy. Now we have to make Italians."

Unlike the nation, which is always in flux, a state is expected to be a lot more solid, stable, clearly defined, even muscular, what we refer to as a capable state. But this is not true for all states, with political scientist JP Nettl describing different levels of "stateness".

The hyphen then becomes the glue that connects the nation to the state: as more people trust the state because it proves over time that it is working in

the interests of the nation, the more it will enjoy legitimacy. And the more its writ will hold sway over the land.

The past few weeks' experience brought home how far we still have to go to feel part of a united people, and also exposed the weaknesses of the state. A capable state is required even more in moments of crisis like today.

Therefore, three tasks become urgent. First, we need a process whereby the capacity of the state, and therefore its legitimacy, is enhanced. And that process begins at the centre with the government, and

especially with the cabinet. Ramaphosa embodies the best aspirations of South Africans. Unfortunately, his cabinet is largely sclerotic, alienated from the needs of the majority and insecure in their posts.

As a nation we should send in suggestions for Cyril's cabinet, keeping in mind that there are many capable MPs he could choose from. For a start, he should reduce the cabinet by a third, and ensure ministers are appointed on the basis of their capabilities and integrity. This can bring in the required energy and confidence, and in the political equivalent of trickle-

down, put a spring in the step of public servants, making a difference where it matters – service delivery to the public.

The second task is to have every SA leader, from civil society and the public or private sectors, commit uncompromisingly to fighting hunger as an emergency, instead of making vacuous calls for a "state of emergency". Children going to bed without having had a meal is an emergency we can all do something about. That will be the building block for the third task, social cohesion, not in the "kumbaya" sense of let's-put-

our-differences-aside, but in the sleeves-rolled-up fashion of hard work.

Social cohesion would be the hyphen between the state and the nation, which can only truly emerge when we have made a dent in the poverty and inequalities that divide us, while making communities more resilient. Then we can begin declaring: "We achieved a democratic SA. Now we are creating a nation of South Africans."

● *Abba Omar is director of operations at the Mapungubwe Institute.*