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STATE OF THE NATION

# Ramaphosa's social-compact countdown has started

To grow our economy, create jobs and combat hunger we have given ourselves 100 days to finalise a comprehensive social compact, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced in his February state of the nation address.

But what is meant by a social compact and how can it be achieved?

The road to a social compact crisscrosses two other pathways – that of restoring the existing social contract and that of achieving social cohesion.

The National Development Plan refers to the social contract as “an agreement that outlines the mutual rights and



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responsibilities of citizens, their government, and other institutions in society”. Given the government’s ineffective response to the July unrest, many of us have asked whether the social contract has been broken.

The founding of our democracy on a negotiated constitution is our social

contract, and it has been threatened by attacks on the constitution, violent unrest and the inability of the state to protect its citizens.

When it was launched in 2017, the Indlulamithi Scenarios Project tried to answer the question: what would social cohesion look like in 2030?

By social cohesion it referred to “the levels of integration and inclusion in communities and in society at large”.

For every outbreak of tension such as the recent incidents at the Hoërskool Jan Viljoen, we come across efforts at addressing the persistently difficult notion of social cohesion. These endeavours

include courageous conversations mediated by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba with the mining houses, and workshops facilitated by Wilhelm Verwoerd and Riaan de Villiers of the NG Kerk with the Grootse Kerk congregation.

It also includes the generosity shown by the public to the Solidarity Fund in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the equally generous efforts of Gift of the Givers.

We can all contribute to social cohesion by helping to combat poverty and building bridges across various divides.

A 2015 Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection

(Mistra) report prepared for the National Planning Commission saw social compacts as “collective agreements between important social partners in society about how to address major issues requiring their collective contribution”.

The search for a new social compact has become ever more urgent given the challenges to our social contract, the apparent inability to attain social cohesion, and the dire socioeconomic disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ramaphosa signalled his commitment to a social compact from the very beginning of his administration,

calling in his 2019 inaugural speech for the forging of a compact “not merely as business and labour, not as those who govern and those who are governed, but as citizens and patriots of this great nation, free and equal and resolute”.

In his 2022 state of the nation address, the president spoke of building a consensus around the Economic Reconstruction & Recovery Plan (ERRP), which was unveiled in parliament in 2020 and emerged from an intense Nedlac-led process.

The ERRP came in the wake of other attempts at social compacting such as the response to the financial crisis of

2008 and more recently, the 2018 Jobs Summit. Several lessons have been drawn from these experiences, especially:

- Agreements that make up the compact must be concrete, measurable, and monitored regularly;
- Parties to the compact must be willing to make compromises and trade-offs, which should be communicated to their constituencies;
- Voices of the unemployed, the self-employed or survivalist enterprises, which are hardly ever invited to such talks, should be heard; and
- Government ministers have tended to arrogate the authority to implement agreements,

claiming they are in the business of governing.

Given institutional capacity and leadership weaknesses identified, not just in government but also the private sector and labour movement, it will be important for all parties to take responsibility in effecting the compact.

South Africans should start monitoring the 100-day countdown: this is one of the last few remaining hopes for lifting our country out of the nightmarish scenarios we are descending into.

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