



Monday, 13 March 2023

THE SIZE AND FORM OF GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE GUIDED BY THE COUNTRY'S NEEDS

Dear Fellow South African,

Since I announced changes to Cabinet last week, there has been much discussion about the size of the executive. This is an important discussion and I welcome it. But much of the commentary misses the point.

The discussion has unfortunately been reduced to a head counting exercise. It is argued by some that any decrease in the number of Ministers is good and any increase is bad.

At the start of this administration in 2019, we reduced the number of ministries from 34 to 28. There was therefore much criticism when, last week, we increased the number of ministries for the remainder of this administration to 30. Yet there has been little analysis of why we made these changes and whether they were necessary.

The new ministries I announced last week respond to our current specific needs. As I explained in the State of the Nation Address, we need a Minister to coordinate and drive our response to the electricity crisis. This is a temporary position and the Minister will remain in office only for as long as it is necessary to resolve the crisis. The second new ministry, for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, arises from an appreciation that we need a dedicated focus on ensuring that government effectively implements the programmes that underpin our priorities and is able to fix problems as they arise.

In considering the size of the executive, the question we should be asking is how best should government be organised to meet the country's needs.

At this moment in our country's history, when we have vast urgent and pressing developmental needs, when we have to undo the devastating and enduring legacy of apartheid, we need an active and capable, developmental state. It needs to have the resources and ability to tackle challenges like poverty, joblessness, homelessness, illiteracy, lack of social infrastructure and a significant burden of disease.

Countries with developed economies that do not face these problems may well not need such an active state. The size and design of their governments may be very different to ours.

When it comes to building a capable and developmental state, the foremost consideration is how to organise every part of government, including the executive, to effectively implement the electoral mandate.

The country's needs will change over time and we will learn from our lived experience. Therefore, government has to adapt and be responsive.

By way of example, at the start of this administration we combined the ministry of human settlements with the ministry of water and sanitation. This made sense. The provision of water is closely tied to developing human settlements.

However, as the burden on the country's scarce water resources continued to increase, with competing demands from a growing population, agriculture, industry and other economic sectors, we decided in 2021 to once again separate the ministries. This is because water is a service and commodity that cuts across all sectors of our economy and goes beyond only human settlements.

While this increased the number of ministries, it has had a beneficial effect on the work of both departments. There has been improved policy alignment and focused implementation. What would have been described as a bad thing by those who count the number of ministries has been good for the provision of vital services.

While the state needs to be configured to meet the country's needs, account needs to be taken of available resources. Where it is possible to rationalise ministries, departments and other state entities without affecting outcomes, we should do so.

In 2019, we combined a number of ministries. For example, we combined Trade and Industry with Economic Development, Higher Education and Training with Science and Technology, Environmental Affairs with Forestry and Fisheries, Agriculture with Land Reform and Rural Development, among others.

Now we want to go further, to take a deeper look into where there are opportunities to rationalise, merge or separate government departments, entities and programmes. In the State of the Nation Address, I announced that the Presidency and National Treasury would work with other departments to develop a proposal that could be implemented over the next three years.

The Presidential State-Owned Enterprises Council is undertaking a similar exercise. It is conducting an in-depth review of all key SOEs. The Council is guided by the needs of the country and the efficient use of available resources.

We are forging ahead with the process we embarked upon at the start of this administration to build a capable state with entities that add value to government's programme of action.

In all this work, we are informed by evidence, experience and the availability of resources. We agree that we need an efficient and lean government, but if we become fixated by head counts, we may lose sight of the point of having a capable state in the first place.

With best regards,

Cyril Ramaphosa



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