



3 April 2020

First Term Review of Parliament (28 January to 20 March)

The first term of Parliament was an action-packed and eventful period. The major highlights during the eight weeks of parliamentary activity include: SONA and the subsequent debates; delivery of the Budget Speech and its processing; oversight, legislative and committee work and urgent debates on matters of national public importance, including COVID-19.

The first two weeks saw Parliament easing into the New Year by embarking on a Members' Training programme. An annual meeting of Presiding Officers and Speakers from both the national and provincial legislatures also ushered in the new term.

State of the Nation Address (SONA)

The highly eventful [SONA](#) and the ensuing debates mid-February were highlights of the term. SONA was marred by numerous point of orders, heckling, skirmishes and verbal attacks on former President FW De Klerk and Minister Pravin Gordhan by the EFF hogged the limelight on the day. The EFF's actions were referred swiftly to the [Powers and Privileges Committee](#) for processing. The subsequent [debates](#) also received their fair share of publicity after accusations of domestic violence were levelled against political leaders.

Budget Speech

Another key highlight of the term was the [National Budget Speech](#) on 26 February. Dubbed one of the toughest budgets to be delivered, Minister Tito Mboweni outlined the state of South Africa's finances, and where the government will spend its money in the year ahead. The speech left many South African taxpayers pleased by the implementation of tax relief on personal income tax, but disappointed those liable for payment of sin taxes. It was hoped that despite a plethora of local and global challenges stifling growth, the R1.95 trillion Budget would restore the confidence of the public, grow the economy and improve the employment and education challenges in South Africa.

Oral and Written Questions

Parliamentary questions, and the subsequent replies from members of the executive are a rich source of information for citizens. Oral Questions and Answer sessions were held in both chambers in this period. The Deputy President David Mabuza, as leader of government business, appeared twice before Parliament to reply to questions. Meanwhile, select Ministers in the Social Services as well as the Peace and Security clusters were probed on a variety of issues during Question Time sessions.

[Questions for Written Reply](#), which is largely a tool used by the opposition, is another mechanism for achieving government accountability. 69 questions were posed by MPs in the NCOP*, and 36 replies were received during this term.

*PMG could not confirm the figures for the National Assembly at the time of writing.

Legislation

On the legislative front, a total of 31 [Bills](#) (including the draft Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Bill) are under consideration by parliamentary committees. During the first term of 2020, five Bills were introduced to Parliament including a Private Member's Bill (the DA's [Fiscal Responsibility Bill](#)).

13 Bills were sent to the President's desk for assent.

The National Assembly's Portfolio Committee on Health spent the better part of the term in the provinces rounding off public hearings on the [National Health Insurance Bill](#). The hearings were followed up by a presentation of the Evaluation Report of Phase 1 of National Health Insurance pilot districts aimed at health systems strengthening interventions by the Department of Health.

The Ad Hoc Committee to Initiate and Introduce Legislation amending Section 25 of Constitution criss-crossed the country to solicit public inputs on the amendment. The Committee visited six provinces and had to postpone hearings due to the Coronavirus outbreak. The hearings were largely characterised by high turnouts and saw citizens from diverse backgrounds expressing a motley of views on the proposal to expropriate land without compensation. The Committee was supposed to conclude its work and report back to Parliament by the end of March but was given an extension until the end of April. However, given this unprecedented time, it is inevitable that another extension will be sought.

Committees

In the committee corridor, MPs considered policy, scrutinised the work and expenditure of government departments and entities, and processed legislative proposals. 227 meetings were held: 174 by the National Assembly and 35 by the NCOP.

The Portfolio Committees on Justice & Correctional Services and Cooperative Governance & Traditional Affairs convened the most meetings, 13 and 10 respectively. Economic cluster committees dedicated a bulk of their time on the processing the Budget and accompanying legislation.

The Portfolio Committee on Home Affairs met with stakeholders and Minister Aaron Motsoaledi in an effort to break the refugee impasse in Cape Town this term. In early October 2019, about 300 foreign nationals, including asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, staged a sit-in and subsequently camped in the Cape Town CBD, demanding that the South African government transport them to the countries of their choice, preferably, according to them, Canada and the US. A consensus was reached in the meeting that the only way forward was reintegration of the protesters back to communities in which they were staying before embarking on the protest action.

The crisis affecting state-owned enterprises such as Eskom, the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) and South African Airways (SAA) were also in the spotlight as Parliament's watchdog, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts (SCOPA), tried to get those entities to account.

Petitions

Four petitions were submitted to Parliament in this term.

The Portfolio Committee on Employment and Labour considered the Elder Care Leave Petition on amending Section 27 of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act to include or provide for elder care leave. It was the petitioner's view that if employees could be allowed to take time off to take care of their children, they should be allowed to take care of their parents, adoptive parents or grandparents, because the Constitution afforded everyone the right to equality and dignity. During the deliberations, the Committee sought clarity about who would pay for the proposed leave; the implications the proposal would have for the socio-economic status of the country; and whether other countries had implemented such legislation.

COVID-19 pandemic

On 6 March, sponsored by Ms Siviwe Gwarube (DA), the National Assembly held a debate on the Coronavirus and South Africa's readiness to deal with the pandemic. The debate provided an opportunity for MPs, on behalf of South Africans, to express views on the novel virus and to interact with government Ministers directly on this urgent matter of national public importance. The debate came shortly after confirmation of the first case of the virus in South Africa. [Several committees also discussed the impact of the virus](#). In the final week of the term and as the crisis grew, Parliament took precautionary measures such as limiting and suspending business, restricting access to the legislature and made hand sanitisers available throughout the precinct.