

A chilling sameness to the sound of new Presidency's songs

CITIZENS last week had to come to terms with the passing of a great cultural icon and celebrated popular entertainer. The budget vote of the Presidency is just not the same without former minister in the Presidency Essop Pahad.

In the Pahad era, then president Thabo Mbeki would reflect philosophically on the state of the world and the condition of its peoples. The minister would then detail the government's good works on behalf of the youth, the disabled, and women, who were all humbly grateful for his solicitude. The two men would close every year by explaining that the Presidency itself just had to get bigger and bigger.

This year there have been changes. There are now four office-holders, all male, and they are no longer interested in women (the president having cleverly created a special ministry for women and people with other disabilities). Jacob Zuma's New Improved Presidency nevertheless offers more or less the same central message: it is still all about themselves.

Zuma was determined to perpetuate the comic traditions of the budget vote. He told



Anthony Butler

anthony.butler@uct.ac.za

MPs it was time to "work harder and smarter"; he introduced the "President's Hotline"; and he instructed staff who "interact with the public" to "wear name tags". Aside from these hilarious Zumarian innovations, the content of the address might have been delivered by the Higher Power himself. Mbeki liked to describe the Presidency as the "strategic management centre" of government"; for Zuma and his team it is "the nerve centre".

Like Mbeki, Zuma suffers sleepless nights as a result of "serious gaps in intergovernmental co-ordination" and "different spheres of government acting in a manner that is sometimes contradictory". In previous years, Mbeki delighted citizens with his proposals for

"alignment among the planning instruments across the spheres of government". He also memorably promised "the integration of monitoring and evaluation systems across national departments and in relation to the provinces".

Ministers in the Presidency Collins Chabane and Trevor Manuel, in restoring such plans to centre stage, are thus not innovators.

The substance of their speeches was thought-provoking nevertheless. There is nothing wrong with planning long term and engaging with knowledge networks in the wider society. The co-ordination of government is also an important presidential function.

Green papers have been promised by the two ministers that will give a clearer indication of which new systems can be realistically created and how they might work. Already, however, concerns have arisen.

First, hard decisions about public service reform seem to have been ducked once again. Rather than helping the senior management ranks function better, Chabane proposes to "source outside capacity and management expertise on turnaround strategies".

Second, the Presidency's hugely ambitious agenda threatens to absorb the wider intellectual energies of the society. Manuel's "nerve centre" will supposedly exploit the capacities of "the Development Bank of Southern Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, and other science councils, universities and relevant think-tanks" to address long-term developmental challenges. Like others inside the state, Manuel vastly overestimates the ability of such institutions to contribute more to policy development without losing whatever residual capacity for critical thinking and autonomous research they still possess.

Third, Manuel and Chabane have promised to "unblock institutional blockages" and "ensure that incidents of nondelivery are turned around". We should not forget that behind such technocratic jargon the Presidency's project is profoundly political.

It is difficult to see how the powers these men claim as theirs can be rendered compatible with anything like the allocation of authority set out in the constitution.

Manuel offered Parliament an ill-advised admonition taken from a book on "failed states". Multiple centres of power, he claimed, serve only to "confuse priorities" and to undermine citizens' trust in their government.

This antidemocratic sentiment suggests the Presidency team is starting to view itself as indispensable and infallible, an understanding quite at odds with the participatory philosophy with which the new administration began.

In recent days, many citizens have revisited Michael Jackson's classic 1983 music video for his song Thriller. In it, the central character (let us call him Trevor) reveals to his date that he is "not like other guys".

Once the moon is out, he convulses into a terrifying werewolf. Soon he is joined by dozens of bug-eyed zombies — exhibiting a more-than-passing resemblance to former ministers Pahad, Sydney Mufamadi and Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi — and they advance together menacingly upon ordinary citizens, with cold in their hearts and death in their eyes.

■ Butler teaches public policy at UCT.