



Can the Tenure of the Government of National Unity Enhance Public Accountability in the South African Government? (2024-2029)

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Abstract

The South African government has struggled with public accountability over the past 30 years of democracy. The government has been dominated by the African National Congress (ANC) for 30 years, and this dominance has not enhanced public accountability but has made it worse. It cannot be argued that the government led by ANC has made many strides in advancing the lives of the marginalised people through progressive policies that were designed to address the wrongs made by the apartheid government. Overtime the government led by ANC abandon it principles and values and this is evident as this government high ranking political office bears were mostly caught up in corruption scandals. The state capture masterminds were mostly affiliated with the ANC, and this shows a lack of public accountability, and the bunts are mostly felt by the marginalised people. As the lack of public skyrocketed all spheres and entities of South Africa government this led to poor public service delivery across the public sector. The lack of public service delivery is evident in South African government as service delivery protest takes place more often mostly in the local government sphere which is closer to the people. This paper analysed the prospects of the GNU in enhancing public accountability in South African public sector. The author is of the view that the GNU has the potential to enhance public accountability and service delivery in South Africa, due to diverse political parties working together in cabinet and in the parliament. A desktop approach was used to review recent literature on the phenomenon.



A. Introduction

Public accountability is the foundation of democracy, hence the amount to which the public sector practices accountability is critical. Furthermore, it must be achieved without sacrificing professionalism.¹ The survival of public administration and service delivery in South Africa is threatened by a lack of public accountability, openness, and ethical adherence.² The Republic of South Africa's 1996 Constitution established accountability and oversight as fundamental responsibilities for every sphere of government. The constitutional responsibility to provide public services is imposed on all branches of government.³ The public accountability measures aim to hold the government and officials responsible for their actions. South Africa, on the other hand, is viewed as a country with a lack of effective governance, which impedes the delivery of public services.⁴ Lack of accountability has negatively impacted South Africa's service delivery and economy.⁵ The public administration in South Africa has several challenges, including a deficiency in accountability, openness, and efficiency. Systems for public procurement run by the government have developed into havens for corruption and poor management. South Africa loses billions annually due to unethical government procurement practices. In South Africa, at least 47% of people have paid bribes to engage with the government, making corruption a common practice.

South Africa's public sector lacks accountability and responsiveness. This has had a detrimental effect on service delivery across all government sectors. Corruption, maladministration, and inappropriate consequence management are prevalent in all government spheres.⁶ Lack of accountability among leaders in the public sector can result in poor and inefficient organisational processes and structures, including human resources, risk management, procurement, and finance. Individual or collective chances for corruption lead to personal enrichment and temptation.⁷ For 30 years, the South African government, led by the ANC, has demonstrated a lack of public accountability, which has had a significant detrimental impact on public service delivery. The ANC's reign ended in the 2024 national elections, with the party receiving only 40% of the vote and losing its parliamentary majority. As a result, the ANC has formed a government of national unity with the support of other parties. The premise stated above serves as the basis for this paper's purpose and research question. This paper's research problem: will the government of national unity improve public accountability? The objective is to establish whether the government of national unity will be able to enhance public accountability. The study employed a qualitative research methodology drawn from desktop analysis to gather data.

¹Mfene, P. N. "Public accountability." *Administratio Publica* 21, no. 1 (2013): 6-23.

²Shava, Elvin, and Adrino Mazenda. "Ethics in South African public administration: a critical review." *International Journal of Management Practice* 14, no. 3 (2021): 306-324.

³Munzhedzi, Pandelani H. "Fostering public accountability in South Africa: A reflection on challenges and successes." *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 12, no. 1 (2016): 1-7.

⁴Kgobe, France Khutso Lavhelani, and John Mamokhere. "Interrogating the effectiveness of public accountability mechanisms in South Africa: can good governance be realized?" *International Journal of Entrepreneurship* 25 (2021): 1-12.

⁵Fourie, David, and Cornel Malan. "Public procurement in the South African economy: Addressing the systemic issues." *Sustainability* 12, no. 20 (2020): 8692.

⁶Thusi, Xolani, and Mamahlodi Mashabela. "The role of civil society organizations in promoting public accountability: The perspective of the South African local government." *IAHRW International Journal of Social Sciences Review* 11, no. 2 (2023): 175-180.

⁷Pillay, P. "Ethics and accountability in South African municipalities: The struggle against corruption." (2016).

B. Discussion

1. Conceptualisation of Public Accountability

Public accountability is a key element of democratic governance and public administration in representative democracies. In these systems, elected representatives hold public authority in the legislative and executive departments of government, but are ultimately accountable to the people through the democratic electoral process.⁸ Public accountability refers to the obligation of public officials to provide services and activities that benefit the public and to respond to public inquiries about their decisions and conduct. Public accountability refers to the requirement or moral imperative of public institutions participating in public service delivery to respond to public inquiries about their decisions and conduct.⁹ Public accountability also refers to the accountability of power holders in response to critical questioning and remarks in the public sphere.¹⁰ Public accountability refers to holding officials and politicians accountable for their actions.¹¹ Public accountability is holding politicians and officials accountable for their acts and choices to the public, both through formal institutional systems and informal media channels.¹² In this article, public accountability is defined as the dynamic connection between accountors and accountees.

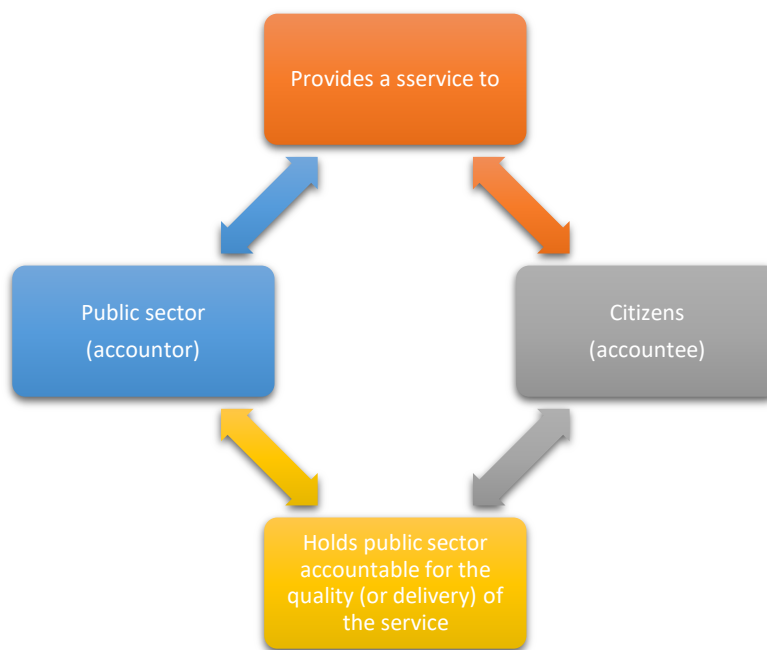


Figure 1. Accountability relationships between the public sector and citizens

Source: Tuna *et.al*, (2019)

⁸Aucoin, Peter, and Mark D. Jarvis. *Modernizing government accountability: A framework for reform*. Ottawa: Canada School of Public Service, 2005.

⁹Van Belle, Sara, and Susannah H. Mayhew. "What can we learn on public accountability from non-health disciplines: a meta-narrative review." *BMJ open* 6, no. 7 (2016): e010425.

¹⁰Steffek, Jens. "Public accountability and the public sphere of international governance." *Ethics & International Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2010): 45-67.

¹¹Thornhill, C. "Accountability." *Administratio Publica* 23, no. 1 (2015): 77-101.

¹²Tasan-Kok, Tuna, Martijn van den Hurk, Sara Özogul, and Sofia Bittencourt. "Changing public accountability mechanisms in the governance of Dutch urban regeneration." *European Planning Studies* 27, no. 6 (2019): 1107-1128.

These relationships are protected by tools and methods designed to control the behaviour of the accountor by the accountee, known as accountability mechanisms. In the context of democratic ideology, public accountability is crucial. It gives people and their representatives the ability to hold public officials accountable for their actions .¹³ Most democratic theory blurs this line and emphasises how crucial it is for legislators and public servants to act in citizens best interests above all else .¹⁴ Democratic theory emphasises accountability and responsiveness in decision-making processes . Accountability is a key idea in democratic theory, as it aims to ensure public policy is responsive to public preferences. Public authorities, whether appointed or elected, should be sensitive to citizens choices and expectations . Democratic theory provides a straightforward and appealing model of good governance by requiring rulers to rule in the people's interests and hold them accountable.

2. Accountable Government Features

Accountable government is an essential component of democracy .¹⁵ To further strengthen the accountability of the government and the public service, parliament must improve its ability to hold political office bearers and public officials accountable.



Figure 2. Features of Accountable Government
Source: Own construction

The concept of accountability raises the well-known inquiries of who is accountable to whom, for what, and how. Additionally, it addresses the methods or procedures for obtaining these accounts and, ultimately, the results or outcomes, including sanctions .¹⁶ While government must be stable, efficient, and accountable, it should also be flexible. Governance procedures should ensure the state provides necessary services and manages public resources responsibly. Holding government officials accountable through political and legal systems can prevent corruption, manipulation, financial loss, and unwarranted risk-taking .¹⁷

¹³Mark, Thomas Schillemans, and Paul T. Hart. "Does public accountability work? An assessment tools." *Public administration* 86, no. 1 (2008): 225-242.

¹⁴Philp, Mark. "Delimiting democratic accountability." *Political studies* 57, no. 1 (2009): 28-53.

¹⁵Dunn, D. D. (2003). Accountability, democratic theory, and higher education. *Educational Policy*, 17(1), 6079.
 Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2021). Accountable government through collaborative governance? *Administrative Sciences*, 11(4), 127.

¹⁶Aldons, Malcolm. "Responsible, Representative and Accountable Government." *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 60, no. 1 (2001): 34-42.

¹⁷Janssen, Marijn, and Haiko Van Der Voort. "Adaptive governance: Towards a stable, accountable and responsive government." *Government Information Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2016): 1-5

3. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 takes on public accountability as the highest law of the land

Section 41(1)(c) provides that "all spheres of government and all organs of state within each sphere must provide effective, transparent, accountable and coherent government for the Republic as a whole". This section emphasises the need for having accountable and transparent sectors of government; political office bearers and public officials are responsible for promoting public accountability in all spheres of government. Section 92 (2) states that "members of the Cabinet are accountable collectively and individually to Parliament for the exercise of their powers and the performance of their functions." Political office bearers in South Africa are frequently involved in corrupt actions, which undermine the constitution's mandate. Section 152 (1)(a)(b) provides that "The objects of local government are— to provide democratic and accountable government for local communities; to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner". The local government sphere is closer to the citizens and public accountability is critical in this sphere as it is mandated to provide essential services to the citizens. Section 195 (1) (f) made it that one of basic values and principles governing public administration is that "public administration must be accountable. Public Accountability is essential as it can enhance democracy and sustainable public service delivery to ensure that citizens enjoy the fruits of democracy and political office bearers, and public officials are held accountable for their actions and decisions in the public sector.

4. Nexus between Public Accountability and Service delivery

Improving public accountability in the public sector is critical to the enhancement of public services. Several countries have implemented measures to improve transparency and accountability in government .¹⁸ Public accountability focuses on whether financing arrangements provide greater value for money and net benefit relative to the optimal public sector delivery model .¹⁹ In their study, Singh and Vutukuru found that a lack of public accountability drives challenges in service delivery.²⁰ One of the key difficulties that South African municipalities face is a lack of accountability and excellent service delivery. Public accountability is crucial for local governance as it encourages community engagement and participation . To improve accountability in the public sector, public officials should prioritise delivering results .Citizens are the primary stakeholders in public service delivery and frequently hold personnel accountable. Furthermore, the accountability relationship prioritises expense minimization, benefit maximisation, and client satisfaction .²¹ Public sector service providers may see organisational change and long-term gains in service delivery performance if they use transparent and easily available citizen-based accountability systems .²² Accountability in public services can be improved by enhancing the interactions between citizens, political authorities, and service providers .²³

¹⁸Alam, Md Mahmudul, and Jamaliah Said. "Public accountability system: Empirical assessment of public sector of Malaysia." *Said, J., Alam, MM, and Aziz, MA* (2015): 225-236.

¹⁹Cameron, Wayne. "Public accountability: Effectiveness, equity, ethics." *Australian journal of public administration* 63, no. 4 (2004): 59-67.

²⁰Singh, Ritesh, and Vinay Vutukuru. "Enhancing accountability in public service delivery through social audits: A case study of Andhra Pradesh, India." *Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi* (2010).

²¹Li, Yanwei. "Is hierarchy the only answer? The accountability preferences of Chinese public employees in public service delivery." *Review of Policy Research* 41, no. 3 (2024): 531-549.

²²Caseley, Jonathan. "Multiple accountability relationships and improved service delivery performance in Hyderabad City, Southern India." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 72, no. 4 (2006): 531-546.

²³Ray, Subhajyoti. "Reinforcing accountability in public services: an ICT enabled framework." *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy* 6, no. 2 (2012): 135-148

5. How ANC dominance impacted Public Accountability in South Africa

The ANC increased its efforts to influence state institutions, especially the judiciary.²⁶ Although the judiciary has remained durable, political involvement has undermined the separation of politics and administration in most democratic institutions. The deliberate breach of the politics-administration boundary has led to a culture of bad performance, including corruption, lack of accountability, and nepotism. Municipal obstacles include budgets, leadership, accountability, and service delivery, but they are also strongly influenced by the deployment of cadres. Delivering goods and high-quality services to clients—hereafter, members of the public—is associated with the idea of service delivery.²⁷ According to Shava and Chamisa, the ANC's cadre deployment programme undermines accountability mechanisms. Local South African government is prone to political favouritism and interference, which hinders equitable service delivery.²⁸ Municipal officials' performance suffers due to political interference, as the council makes hiring decisions. The council nominates municipal managers, and their names are often influenced by the ruling political party.²⁹ The corruption scandals can be linked to complaints about the ANC-led government's poor service delivery performance. In recent years, South Africa has experienced a surge in violent protests due to inadequate service delivery and socioeconomic issues.³⁰

6. The 2024 Government of National Unity (GNU) background in South Africa

On May 29, South Africans went to the polls for what was largely considered as the most important general election since apartheid was abolished 30 years ago. The African National Congress (ANC) is Africa's oldest colonial liberation organisation, now led by President Cyril Ramaphosa. Since Nelson Mandela's ascent to power in 1994, the ANC has lost its outright majority for the first time, receiving only 40.18% of the vote.³¹ The African National Congress' vote share fell to 40%, forcing it to seek coalition partners to establish government.³² Following very successful free, fair, and peaceful watershed elections on May 29, South Africa has now formed a Government of National Unity (GNU) to navigate an election result in which no one party received a majority. To handle the emerging political dynamics and maintain stability, a GNU has been developed.³³ The present GNU is made up of 11 different political parties. These parties include the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), Patriotic Alliance, Inkatha Freedom Party, Good Party, Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, Freedom Front Plus, United Democratic Movement, Al Jama-ah, Rise Mzansi, and United Africans Transformation.

²⁶De Jager, Nicola, and Cindy Lee Steenekamp. "The changing political culture of the African National Congress." *Democratization* 23, no. 5 (2016): 919-939.

²⁷Mlambo, Daniel N. "The Tragedy of the African National Congress (ANC) and its Cadre Deployment Policy: Ramifications for Municipal Stability, Corruption and Service Deliver." *PanAfrican Journal of Governance and Development (PJGD)* 4, no. 1 (2023): 3-17.

²⁸Shava, Elvin, and Shingirayi Florence Chamisa. "Cadre Deployment Policy and its Effects on Performance Management in South African Local Government: A Critical Review." *Politeia* (02568845) 37, no. 1 (2018).

²⁹Masuku, Mfundo Mandla, and Nokukhanya Noqinisele Jili. "Public service delivery in South Africa: The political influence at local government level." *Journal of Public Affairs* 19, no. 4 (2019): e1935.

³⁰Isike, Christopher, and Hakeem Onapajo. "The decline of a dominant political party: the case and future of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC)." *Politeia* (02568845) 36, no. 2 (2017).

³¹Edelman Global Advisory "South Africa's ANC Loses Its Majority: Possibility of Significant Policy Shifts on the Horizon," June 25, 2024

³²Al Jazeera, "South Africa's ANC loses 30-year parliamentary majority after election," *Al Jazeera*, June 1, 2024

³³University of Northwest "Stable GNU together with policy certainty will maximise business confidence," news.nwu.ac.za, July 20, 2024.

7. Prospects of GNU on Public Accountability, Service Delivery & Economy: South Africa

The government of national unity (GNU) might provide a rare chance to accelerate change and create a wealthier and more inclusive South Africa.³⁴ The GNU should concentrate on correcting fundamental structural inadequacies within the state, rebuilding public trust in the government, and increasing foreign community confidence in South Africa. This would lead to a more stable South Africa, allowing for economic progress.³⁵ The GNU may be beneficial to public accountability in the following ways:



Figure.3. GNU can be off benefit to enhance public accountability
Source: own construction

³⁴Ann Bernstein, “GNU: The real work starts now,” CDE - the Centre for Development and Enterprise, July 11, 2024, <https://www.cde.org.za/gnu-the-real-work-starts-now/>.

³⁵Lutendo Tshifura, “Opinion: GNU must prioritise empowering whistle-blowers and strengthening anti-corruption fight,” *University of Johannesburg News*, July 4, 2024, <https://news.uj.ac.za/news/opinion-gnu-must-prioritise-empowering-whistle-blowers-and-strengthening-anti-corruption-fight/>

In GNU, decisions are made by agreement rather than by a single party in charge of executive or final decision-making. A majority decision-making culture, as opposed to a consensus decision-making culture, has been ingrained over the last thirty years by the African National Congress.³⁶ The ANC has battled with several structural difficulties, including corruption, poor governance, and maladministration, which the new GNU will have to deal with. The ANC's dominance over the South African government has negatively impacted governance, democracy, and service delivery, limiting people's capacity to live fulfilling lives.³⁷ GNU provides an opportunity to increase public accountability because political parties in the GNU will act as watchdogs to protect citizens' interests, and decisions affecting citizens' lives will be made in a consensus, which will undoubtedly improve public accountability, democracy, good governance, and public service delivery. One of the foundation principle of GNU statement of intent indicated that accountability, transparency, and community participation in government will be promoted by GNU. To put GNU vision into action, the Democratic Alliance will now step up to provide our unique track record of decent, clean, and accountable governance to the national endeavour.³⁸

The success of a GNU will ultimately be measured by the degree to which it can demonstrate deliverables over time, especially via collaboration with the private sector. The standard for responsiveness and accountability has been dramatically strengthened. The GNU has now established the groundwork for the establishment of a 'delivery state' to service its citizens and businesses on a variety of levels. Ideology apart, the dominating message of the recent election has been an admonition to deliver.³⁹ The GNU commitment to good governance and professionalising the public sector, it will be able to deliver on its agenda, which includes much-needed improvements in service delivery.⁴⁰ The South African public sector has suffered a great deal because of cadre that were deployed by ANC in strategic position, and this had negative impact on public accountability and public service delivery. One of the foundation principle of GNU statement of intent indicated they seek to ensure a professional, merit-based, non-partisan, developmental public service that puts people first. Cadre deployment fosters a culture of impunity and lack of accountability, leading to a breakdown in governance and service delivery. This has significant implications for inclusive development and poverty eradication in the country.⁴¹ GNU must take significant efforts to assess current legal frameworks and whistle-blower protection systems. South Africa's present statutory safeguards are insufficient, emphasising the need for more activism. This should be done via a joint effort that includes civil society, academics, public workers, private persons, and enterprises, and current and previous whistle-blowers.

³⁶Arnoldi, Marleny. "GNU should ensure more consensus, accountability." *Engineering News*, July 12, 2024. <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/gnu-should-ensure-more-consensus-accountability-2024-07-12>.

³⁷Thusi, Xolani, and Kgalema Mashamaite. "The African National Congress and South Africa's Public Service: A Crisis of Dominance and Accountability." *JISR management and social sciences & economics* 21, no. 3 (2023): 73-91

³⁸Democratic Alliance "The DA becomes a party of national government," June 14, 2024, <https://www.da.org.za/2024/06/the-da-becomes-a-party-of-national-government>.

³⁹University of Northwest "Stable GNU together with policy certainty will maximise business confidence," news.nwu.ac.za, July 20, 2024, <https://news.nwu.ac.za/stable-gnu-together-policy-certainty-will-maximise-business-confidence>.

⁴⁰The Institute of Directors in South Africa. "Professionalisation is key to ensuring long-awaited GNU is not a false dawn: IoDSA," July 20, 2024. <https://www.iodsa.co.za/news/676460/Professionalisation-is-key-to-ensuring-long-awaited-GNU-is-not-a-false-dawn-IoDSA.htm>

⁴¹Mlambo, Victor H., Sphephelo P. Zubane, and Xolani Thusi. "Interrogating governance challenges and cadre deployment in South Africa." *Cihan University-Erbil Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2022): 11-18.

C. Conclusions

The South African public sector has been plagued by eroded public accountability, largely due to the ANC's 30-year dominance. Over time, the country has seen a high level of corruption committed by political officeholders. Their actions undermined their constitutional mandate, which is to promote sustainable public service delivery in South Africa across all spheres and entities of government. The ANC's cadre deployment policy created numerous challenges in the public sector by awarding allies of the ANC strategic positions in exchange for their loyalty, even though they lacked the necessary expertise, qualifications, and experiences to be deployed in these positions. This weakened local government's ability to provide public services. Most challenges in South Africa's public sector can be attributed to the ANC's 30-year dominance. The ANC lost its dominance following the 2024 national elections, which saw them fail to win most of the votes. This prompted the ANC to form GNU alongside the following parties: Democratic Alliance (DA), Patriotic Alliance, Inkatha Freedom Party, Good Party, Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, Freedom Front Plus, United Democratic Movement, Al Jama-ah, Rise Mzansi, and United Africans Transformation.

The GNU, formed by a coalition of various political parties, has the potential to enhance the public accountability through consensus-based decision-making. The ANC has signed bills that were not properly researched numerous times, and despite concerns raised by opposition parties, the business sector, non-governmental organisations, and civil society, the ANC ignored them due to their absolute dominance. President Cyril Ramaphosa predicted a new dawn for South Africa, but the GNU's efforts have yet to bear fruit during their 5-year tenure. The GNU could be a beacon of hope for many South Africans living in harsh conditions, as poverty, crime, inequality, unemployment, corruption, and poor public service delivery affect everyone. The sad part is that marginalised people bear the brunt of all issues that arise because of a lack of public accountability in South Africa's public sector. The author contends that the GNU may be the hope for all South African citizens who want to see the fruits of democracy in South Africa, particularly the marginalised population living in harsh conditions.

D. Suggestion

The 11 political parties in the GNU of which includes the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), Patriotic Alliance, Inkatha Freedom Party, Good Party, Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, Freedom Front Plus, United Democratic Movement, Al Jama-ah, Rise Mzansi, and United Africans Transformation, must craft a framework that will outline how this coalition between these parties will work in other to ensure longevity of the government of national unity, political stability and sustainable public sector in South Africa.

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