Rhetoric is not enough

Zuma must accept that the buck stops with him, writes Brendon Boyle
HE place that President Jacob Zuma's 2011 state of the nation speech takes in history might be determined as much by his handling of five emerging challenges facing this country as by the action he takes on the five priorities declared by his party and the government.

The build-up to today's 7pm broadcast points to a focus on the priorities he has repeatedly identified: jobs, health, education, rural development in the context of land reform, and crime.

The latest news on jobs is promising. Tuesday's statistics show that the number of people with jobs had climbed from 12.97 million in the third quarter of last year to 13.1 million in the fourth, driving formal unemployment down by 1.3 percentage points to 24%.

Those figures exclude discouraged work seekers, who push the jobless rate over 36%, and do not reflect the brutal reality that faces under-educated young people trying to get a foot on the career ladder. Zuma is expected to say this evening that wages-subsidies for people working for the first time will be introduced.

There is also a glimmer of hope in the crime statistics (those that we are allowed to see). Murders, though still averaging about 45 a day, were down last year, and there was a reported reduction in six of the seven "contact crimes" tracked by the police. Only common assault was slightly up. Zuma's message is likely to be more of the same, and then some, when it comes to crime prevention.

A green paper setting out options for land reform and rural development has been repeatedly delayed by disagreements within the cabinet about reportedly far-reaching plans to redefine land ownership, limit foreign investment and force white farmers to share what they have.

Health and education have defied 17 years of searching for a formula that would give everybody what whites had under apartheid instead of what blacks didn't. Zuma will speak about these issues, including a recommitment to, and possibly a slight delay in the launch of, national health insurance.

The government's response to all these priorities will depend on how Zuma tackles five of the many challenges emerging after 17 years of democratic rule.

The first challenge is to control the relationship between the government and its allies in trade union federation Cosatu and the Communist Party. If Zuma is not ready to take personal responsibility for his leadership — as DA parliamentary
leader Athol Trollip has challenged him to do — responses to the country's challenges might be impossible to implement.

The education crisis, for example, cannot be resolved until the government takes on the dominant teachers' union, Sadtu, with a zero-tolerance approach to unwilling and inadequate teachers. Zuma needs to make it clear that those who refuse to see that teaching is all about children are removed. More committees, studies and training won't do. Zuma needs to stare the teachers down.

A similar relationship underpins the second challenge, which is to define the parameters of job creation. If Zuma does not put himself on the line in the debate about "decent work" the programme will stall.

It's not a binary choice between the DA's devil-take-the-hindmost approach and Cosatu's all-rights-for everyone demand. There are many grades between exploitation and a job for life with benefits.

Zuma needs to state that the public and private sectors can create jobs in parallel, that decent work is a goal, but not a pre-condition, and that the government, not the ANC's allies or its youth wing, run the country.

He needs to say it will be so, and how he will make it so

The third challenge is to rescue South Africa's international reputation with a clear signal that security of tenure is an irrevocable principle of the government.

The nationalisation debate being driven by ANCYL leader Julius Malema has pushed South Africa to the back of the queue for mining investment, rumoured plans for land reform have stalled foreign investment that requires land, and the unresolved debate about the price of expropriation is taking land out of production. The ANC can debate a state role in mining, and it could be a big one. The government can impose conditions on foreign land ownership. All Zuma has to do is to promise a managed transition by stating as an absolute that new rules will apply to new deals, but existing rights will be respected.

The fourth challenge is to start to refurbish and maintain the infrastructure inherited from white rule. It is not unreasonable that so much attention has been placed on building infrastructure in the black areas apartheid refused to service, but the infrastructure that came with the keys to the Union Buildings is dangerously creaky after nearly two decades of neglect. As the black middle and upper classes expand, this infrastructure is less and less a preserve of white privilege. It will cost much more to rebuild than to maintain.

This applies to the pot-holed streets of Gauteng, the water and sewerage treatment plants breaking down, and to the looming crisis of poisonous water seeping from abandoned mines.

The final challenge is increasingly sophisticated corruption, nepotism and cronynism at the highest levels of public and private life. The government's anti-corruption rhetoric is ample and commendable, but focuses increasingly on those who have little and want a little more, such as police officers taking small bribes, officials drawing child support to which they are not entitled, and low-level public servants selling services, such as passports and benefit registration.

Zuma needs to say and to show that presidents, cabinet ministers, premiers and directors-general will live within their means, support their families themselves and shun any relationship that could compromise their public service. He needs to say it will be so and how he will make it so.

It has been Zuma's misfortune to be in charge when the easy work is done and reality overwhelms rhetoric.

Wish him luck.