



State of the Nation Address 2019

The State of the Nation Address (SONA) is one of the most important annual events in the calendar of Parliament. It happens every year in February and it is commonly known as “the opening of Parliament”. On this occasion, the President delivers the address (usually referred to as the “speech”) to a Joint Sitting of the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), in terms of the Joint Rules of Parliament.

What is the theme for the February 2019 State of the Nation Address?

The theme is ***Following Up on Our Commitments to the People: Making Your Future Work Better.***

What happens during the SONA?

During the SONA, the President addresses the nation as both the Head of State and Head of Government. He presents a plan to address South Africa’s needs for the year ahead. Since it is a Joint Sitting of both Houses, the Speaker of the NA and the Chairperson of the NCOP host the event. All the three (3) Arms of the State, namely; the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary attend this event. It is one of the rare moments whereby all three Arms of the State meet in one place. As one of the important ceremonies of the state, it is broadcasted live on national television so that the general population is afforded the chance to see it.

When and where does the SONA take place?

During an election year, two State of the Nation Addresses are held; one in February (to mark the final session of the outgoing Parliament) and another after the new Parliament has been constituted. The National Assembly chamber is utilised for the purpose of SONA.

Why is the State of the Nation Address important?

In the address, the President highlights the achievements and challenges experienced over the past year and presents the Executive’s programme for the year ahead. The address covers political, economic and social matters, and considers the general state of South Africa. It reflects on South Africa’s domestic affairs as well as its relations in Africa and abroad. The State of the Nation Address is an important means of the Executive accounting to Parliament and the South African public for what government has delivered over the past year, and to involve the public in the political agenda of the coming year. The State of the Nation Address is also about celebrating our nation and nation-building.

The State of the Nation Address and Parliament’s oversight function

Oversight is a function conferred upon Parliament by the Constitution, in terms of Section 55 (2), to monitor and oversee the actions of government. The State of the Nation Address forms part of Parliament’s oversight function. A true test of a democracy is the extent to which a democratic Parliament can oversee and ensure that government at national,

provincial and local levels remains answerable to the people. Parliament is further mandated to:

- make government accountable to the people
- make government operations more transparent, and
- increase public trust in government

The oversight function is to improve service delivery and to achieve a better quality of life. When performing oversight, a democratic Parliament focuses on:

- how laws are implemented
- how budgets have been applied and
- how government departments are ensuring service delivery to the people of South Africa.

What happens after the State of the Nation Address?

After the State of the Nation Address is delivered, the two Houses of Parliament debate the President's speech. Political parties comment and raise questions on matters addressed in the speech. It is during this debate that matters of national concern and critical importance are highlighted.

After the debate, the President is afforded the opportunity to respond. In his reply, the President responds to the points and questions raised during the debate.

The public is invited to attend and observe the debate.

The State of the Nation Address and Budget

The Minister of Finance introduces the Budget for the coming year, two weeks after the State of the Nation Address. The budget speech is based on the policy objectives and key deliverables set out by the President in his address. These objectives and key deliverables form the basis of what government will need to do. It is the benchmark by which the democratic Parliament holds government accountable to the people for what it delivers and how money is allocated and spent in the next year.

Did you know?

- The State of the Nation Address (SONA) will take place in the evening, on 7 February 2019.
- Members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) line the route that the President takes to Parliament.
- The Military Guard of Honour also participates in the ceremony and the military band plays South Africa's national anthem.
- There is always a 21-gun salute before the President delivers the address. The 21-gun salute is fired in honour of the Head of State, the national flag, the Head of a foreign nation, a member of a reigning royal family and a former Head of State.