

# Gordhan's budget speech compels government to (re)define its leadership role

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Anis Karodia

Ahmed Shaikh

Paresh Soni

Zaheer Hamid

*Academics and policy analysts argue that Gordhan's 2016 budget speech compels the South African government to adopt a leadership style that is oriented toward being inclusive, collaborative, of service to society at large, and the overall national development goals.*

The recent global and national political and economic crises have demonstrated the complexity and stresses of the milieu in which governments function. In South Africa, the financial and political failures, corruption, cronyism, crime, the #feesmustfall campaign, service delivery strikes, poverty, gross inequalities, government deficits and indecisive leadership are causing severe challenges and disruptions. It would seem that over the last two decades the country has gone from crisis to crisis with no hope of respite.

For example, on 10th December 2015 President Zuma fired the Finance Minister and replaced him with a relatively unknown in the finance world, a Mr Dennis van Rooyen. This triggered a further slump in the rand as it dropped by 5.4 percent to R15 and placed the country in a precarious position, *vis-à-vis*, global investor confidence. Reacting to a backlash from all and sundry, globally and nationally, President Zuma replaced Van Rooyen and ushered in former Finance Minister, Pravin Gordhan - all of this was enacted within a matter a few days. South Africa was horrified and soon found itself on the brink of being classified as 'junk status' in the investor world rating system. Investors, locally and internationally lost billions of rand in a space of a week. As much as it seemed like a comedy of errors, it was no laughing matter. The country was precariously balanced in terms of global economic and political standing.

Our first reaction to these crises was to think, "Let's find a leader to save us." However, we now realise that these political and economic catastrophes require more comprehensive, collaborative and widely diverse and distributed responses that address the great complexities of the country, specifically given our struggle for emancipation and the legacy of Nelson Mandela. In the interim those who had finally lost hope began to leave the country seeking greener pastures elsewhere.

The series of rumbling crises have left many feeling somewhat battle-weary. Morale is low and draining the energy out of ordinary people. The state of despondency has left individuals, families, communities and other non-governmental organisations flabbergasted. The majority of the population is just focusing on survival. The dream of a hopeful rainbow nation seems to be a fleeting one. The promised dawn never seems to come.

In the light of the above, it is quite obvious that much of the quagmire the country finds itself in is largely due to poor leadership, especially on the part of government and its executive leader. In this context it is necessary to re-evaluate what we mean by *leader* and *leadership* and how best to proceed in these challenging times.

In the new globalised political economy the terms "leader" and "leadership" are being redefined. Experts, who have been studying leaders and leadership for many years, have come to an important conclusion: leadership begins with individuals in leadership positions, but it doesn't end there. The ability of an organisation or institution, whether public or private, to accomplish its goals does not depend solely on the force of will of a single leader, or even upon the effectiveness of the organisation's or institution's chain of command. These things are important, but don't in and of themselves help us understand why some succeed where others fail.

Rather, as research has shown, we must understand political leadership and leadership culture, as defined by the collective actions of government and civil society acting together to influence governance success. It is not simply the number or quality of individual leaders that determines success, but the ability of government and civil society to pull together in the support of national goals that ultimately makes the difference. Thus, when we speak about leadership here, it is both the government and civil society and the relationships among them that are being discussed.

Within this perspective an interdependent leadership culture becomes critical. Leadership thus becomes a collective activity that requires mutual inquiry, learning and a capacity to work with complex challenges. The mindset tends toward collaborating in a changing world so that new governance models and structures can emerge through collective work. Interdependent leadership cultures work effectively across boundaries, value openness and candour and see synergies across governance structures.

There is a vast literature identifying desired leadership qualities. International research clearly indicates that the one factor that will determine an organisation's or institution's fate is the quality of leadership. Without proper leadership, even the best and boldest strategies perish. As a result, it is important to know how people in leadership roles need to work with others, understand what the organisational challenges are that might require radical rethinking and repositioning, and what are the barriers preventing the organisation or institution from achieving its goals and objectives. Indeed, this is a very different way of thinking about leadership with serious implications for leadership development. If organisations or institutions are to succeed then they need to develop an effective collective that can lead change. Leadership development is not about an event or a series of events – and it is not about purely developing people in your own image – it's an ongoing process.

In true national participatory leadership, the collective has to be given the permission and freedom to experiment. And if their experimentation does not always lead to success, leaders then have to accept that any failure is a shared failure – not the fault of an individual. It's about being brave enough to allow people to have their voice – it may not work – but it could also lead to the 'next big thing'.

Consequently, participatory leadership means winning the hearts and minds of not just ordinary people but also the youth who are the future. What is absolutely clear is that we will need a much wider leadership toolkit to engage our people in the years ahead, especially given our government's poor leadership. For the new leadership, the ability to negotiate complex alliances and manage complex networks of win-win relationships is becoming increasingly important.

In this new paradigm, government leadership needs to be oriented toward being inclusive, collaborative, and of service, to individuals, the social good, and the overall development goals of a nation.

**Professor Anis Karodia** is Senior Faculty and Policy Analyst at Regent Business School.

**Ahmed Shaikh** is an Executive Member of Management and Senior Academic at Regent Business School.

**Paresh Soni** is Manager of Institutional Research and Policy Analyst at the Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA).

**Dr Zaheer Hamid** is Director of the Graduate School of Business and Senior Faculty at the Management College of Southern Africa.

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