

REPORT ON THE NSI HYBRID WEBINAR HELD ON 08 OCTOBER 2025

On 8 October 2025, the New South Institute (NSI) hosted a hybrid webinar themed *"South Africa at a Turning Point: Building a Capable and Accountable State"*. This webinar and others previously hosted by the NSI continuously present a platform for the discussion of public sector reforms. A strong consensus among stakeholders was that the Public Service Amendment Bill (PSAB) and Public Administration Management Amendment Bill (PAMAB), which both focus on administrative reforms, are an indispensable step towards building a meritorious, ethical, citizen-focused public service. Around 400 participants took part in the event across virtual and in-person platforms. They were drawn from local and international civil society partners, organised labour, state institutions and academia. Particularly notable was the participation of a many higher education students, particularly those studying public administration/management, public policy and political science studies.

The webinar is part of the efforts championed by the NSI and civil society partners to build momentum, clarify concerns, and work jointly towards a stronger, more transparent, and citizen-focused public service, as the legislative processes unfold in Parliament. These engagement opportunities facilitate inclusive and citizen-centric governance and enable continuous civil society participation in an organised manner. This is vital in ensuring the success of the reform agenda and holding implementing government institutions publicly accountable.

OBJECTIVES FOR THE WEBINAR INCLUDED TO:

- Clarify what the Bills seek to improve and/or change within the current public service framework.
- Provide a progress update on the administrative reforms' legislative process.
- Facilitate active participation of current and future public servants in the reform agenda.
- Connect the Bills' objectives to the everyday concerns of South Africans, such as fairness in recruitment, efficiency and corruption prevention.
- Consolidate civil society as a united force advocating for public service reforms.
- Establish a working group to get more involved in the process, to foster a sense of ownership among civil society groups around the principles of the Bills.

The NSI Public Service Reform programme Head, Ms Yoliswa Makhasi, facilitated the webinar and gave brief opening remarks. These were followed by a keynote address by the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU) Parliamentary Coordinator, Mr Matthew Parks, focusing on the strategic role of organised labour in driving public service reforms and professionalisation. He highlighted the participation of COSATU, and the inputs they made in the amendment process in Nedlac and other consultative processes that unfolded. Additionally, he conveyed COSATU's endorsement of both Bills, affirming support for reforms that enhance transparency and service delivery while safeguarding workers' rights.

A panel consisting of participants from academia, civil society, and the Public Service Commission (PSC) shared various reflections and analyses:

- Prof. Onkgopotse Madumo, Associate Professor at the School of Public Management and Administration at the University of Pretoria, spoke on the topic of Public Service Reform: a capability to modernise the public sector.
- Ms. Nicole Fritz, Executive Director of the Campaign for Free Expression addressed Public Service Reform and the South African citizen, from policy to practice, from promises to action. Ensuring and enforcing citizen-centred (Batho Pele) governance through legislative changes.
- Prof. Mashupye Maserumule, Chief Editor of the Journal of Public Administration, Professor of Public Affairs and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the Tshwane University of Technology shared his thoughts on the topic of Institutional capacity, accountability, and the future of public sector reform.
- Adv. Shukrat Makinde, Director: Litigation and Legal Services Office of the PSC, reflected on Building Trust through Reform: How the Public Service Commission Bill strengthens professionalism.

The panellists agreed that successful transformation requires a "shared sense of ownership across society". Expert analysis from Prof. Madumo, Prof Maserumule and Ms. Fritz highlighted the Bills' importance in strengthening accountability, ethical governance and insulating public administration from undue political interference, a central theme aligned with the goals of the National Professionalisation Framework. Adv. Makinde gave a detailed presentation on the Public Service Commission Bill, which is currently being consulted in provinces by the National Council of Provinces. A facilitated question and answer session with participants ensued, with panellists fielding most of the questions. Unfortunately, there was limited time to respond to questions shared on the Teams platform.

The webinar surfaced five interconnected themes, highlighting the urgent need to restore state capability and legitimacy through the PSAB. Fundamentally, the debate hinges on systemic reforms and depoliticisation, aiming to insulate administrators from undue political interference by shifting key administrative management powers from Executive Authorities to Heads of Departments. This change is critical to supporting the broader goal of developing institutional capacity and professionalising the public service, which requires strict merit-based appointments, integrity assessments and strengthening internal systems.

For this autonomy to work, it must be paired with rigorous accountability and oversight mechanisms, including citizen scrutiny and enhanced internal guardrails to prevent the rise of an unaccountable technocracy. The discussion also acknowledged the need for reform to address institutional culture, capacity bottlenecks and political influences, not only at the national level but also, critically, in provincial and local government. There is a need to strengthen oversight capability by maintaining the PSC's authority, statutory functions, autonomy, and resource allocation to effectively enable its role as a guardian of administrative fairness and ethics. Finally, the reforms must respect the institutional and constitutional context and address the concerns of organised labour, who supported anti-corruption measures while demanding that the process ensures fairness, redresses wage disparities and protects the rights and morale of frontline workers.

Balancing the protection of professional staff from partisan manipulation with democracy's call for accountability and oversight will be critical in determining the constitutional and democratic limits of insulating bureaucracies from political interference. Such reform efforts face practical operational challenges, such as inadequate resources, pushback from political administrative interests, and resistance from the reform proponents due to the risk of reform fatigue. A multi-dimensional conversation on structured reform, the order of legal changes, capacity building and how to help develop organisational resilience at national, provincial, and local levels is also required. Furthermore, there is a risk that adopting new formal rules will increase the threat of symbolic compliance, allowing the formation of a new patronage network.

Various observations were made and may require further attention. Firstly, successful public service reform plans must have a unified strategy that recognises the unstable governance context and extraordinarily vulnerable operational environment in which the public service currently operates. Secondly, there is a persistent lack of political will to prioritise and drive professionalisation, as witnessed through delays in legislative amendments, inadequate funding and fragmented coordination between government and civil society structures. Thirdly, swift action and a commitment to cooperation by stakeholders outside government are required to push for reforms and strengthen governance. Fourthly, there is a need to embrace good governance and accountability in advancing professionalisation at all levels of government, bringing community participation to the centre. To achieve impactful outcomes, oversight bodies like the PSC, the Public Protector and the Auditor-General must be empowered and adequately resourced. Finally, reform should be anchored in ethics, integrity, trust and accountability. Civil society is key in ensuring that the public remains engaged and informed.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The process for senior management appointments must be independent and transparent. Appointments must be merit-based.
- Regulatory measures to strengthen the independence and effectiveness of oversight must be introduced to ensure accountability.
- Performance contracts must cover not only the "what" (output and impact), but also the "how" (integrity, ethical conduct, respect etc).
- Whistleblower protection must be guaranteed.
- Culture change must be a focus in the implementation strategy of these Bills. This will require effective leadership, capacity building for employees and fit-for-purpose management systems supported by appropriate digital infrastructure.
- A "phased-in" approach should be taken with a view to scaling once successful mechanisms and systems are identified.
- To ensure the establishment of legitimate, strong institutions, the implementation process must be consistent with constitutional principles (protecting workers' rights and strengthening intergovernmental coordination), anchored in active stakeholder engagement (including unions and civil society), and incorporate continuous review and adaptation through embedded feedback loops.

In conclusion, the webinar represented a vital convening point in South Africa's public service reform trajectory. Breaking the inertia of institutional decay, political capture and capacity erosion requires sustained engagement. Webinars like this one contribute to building coalitions and inject expert scrutiny into policy debates. The dialogue concluded with a firm commitment from government, civil society and labour participants to deepen their collaboration to ensure these governance reforms are passed and successfully implemented, in order to achieve tangible improvements in service delivery, which will enhance trust in the public sector.