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Parliamentary oversight in South Africa – A crisis in Civil-Military Relations?

Background

The annual State of the Nation Address (SONA) focuses on government achievements and challenges and maps political, economic and social planning for the year ahead. A review of past SONAs reveals that, over the past eight addresses since 2014, direct references to the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) were only made four times. The February [2020 SONA](#), centered on challenges to economic growth and stability, again made no reference to defence. The trajectory of recent SONAs therefore points to an implicit de-prioritisation of defence matters in high-level planning by government. This de-prioritisation is of concern as it has potential negative implications on civil-military relations. Rebecca Schiff's [Concordance Theory](#), for example, emphasises the importance of ongoing dialogue as central to civil-military relations. The question then arises as to how such de-prioritisation of defence came about? At parliamentary level, the impact of the institution's oversight activities on the de-prioritisation of defence is one domain to explore.

Discussion

A correlation between the de-prioritisation of defence and parliamentary activity can be explored through analysing the institution's approach to defence matters and the rigour of such oversight. Four key oversight practices, identified as part of an in-depth [study on oversight of defence in South Africa](#), provide insight into Parliaments prioritisation of defence and, in a sense, act as a barometer of its presence or absence in SONAs and subsequent debates:

Parliamentary activity around defence: The main activities around defence take place at committee level, generally considered the '[engine rooms of parliament](#)'. A review of the activities of the Joint Standing Committee on Defence (JSCD) and the Portfolio Committee on Defence and Military Veterans (PCDMV), between 1998 and 2014, reveal concerning trends. Most significantly, the work of the JSCD has subsided significantly over this period. This is of concern as the constitutionally established committee is specifically tasked with oversight of "the budget, functioning, organisation, armaments, policy, morale and state of preparedness of the National Defence Force..." The PCDMV partially

absorbed the loss of oversight by the JSCD by increasing its activity. Crucially though, this activity decreased after 2011, leaving both committees with a relatively limited oversight activity.

The interest of Members of Parliament (MP) in defence matters: One means of determining the interest of MPs in defence matters is to review their use of parliamentary questions. Between 1994 and 2014, 2 045 questions around defence were posed. While the number of questions increased over time, two aspects bring into question the interest of MPs in defence. First, oral questions, when compared to written questions, decreased significantly over time. This results in limited debate around defence in the Houses of Parliament. It also results in limited opportunities for the Minister of Defence to appear before Parliament, arguably undermining civilian control of the SANDF. Second, questions around defence in the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) subsided significantly. This is, in part, attributed to the inactivity of the JSCD, but may also point to a decrease in interest in defence matters at provincial level.

Special defence inquiries: Special inquiries refer to instances where Parliament engages in in-depth studies on defence-related aspects. This is usually done by the JSCD, PCDMV a sub-committee or an *ad hoc* committee. This approach was used in the immediate post-1994 period to oversee the integration of forces and, to a limited extent, to inquire on the Strategic Defence Procurement Package. Besides these instances, special inquiries were never effectively used to study defence developments. Crucially, inquiries were also not used to study significant operational aspects of the SANDF, including campaigns such as Operation Boleas (Lesotho, 1998) and the Battle of Bangui (Central African Republic, 2013).

Exposure of MPs to military affairs: Exposure to the military is often achieved through oversight visits to military bases and operational areas. This familiarises MPs with challenges on the ground that may require oversight. While some oversight visits occurred in the immediate 1994 period and in the Third Parliament (2004 to 2009), it remained a relatively underutilised tool in relation to defence. Where such oversight visits take place, official reports on these were often only adopted months after the actual visit, limiting opportunities for follow up and hindering broader oversight efforts.

Conclusions

The discussion around the key oversight practices noted above provides insight into two questions. First, it highlights a pattern of de-prioritisation of defence at parliamentary level. Parliament, over a long period of declining oversight, thus failed to foster sufficient dialogue to raise the platform of defence as a matter of national importance. This links to the de-prioritisation of defence in recent SONAs. Second, the limit in dialogue reflected at parliament and in SONAs also affects impact on civil-military relations. Concordance Theory focuses on the levels of dialogue, accommodation and shared values among the military, political elites and society. The concerns raised around parliamentary activities on defence in South Africa bring into question the balance sought according to Shiff's theory. Limited JSCD and PCDMV activity, as well as scarcity of debates in the Houses of Parliament, impact negatively on dialogue between military, political elites and society. Limited exposure of MPs to military affairs and a general low interest (based on the lack of questions posed) are likely to affect shared values around the military between the legislative and the executive. Decreasing parliamentary activity around defence also offers fewer opportunities for engagement between parliament and civil society, external experts and academia. This erosion of cooperation ultimately contributes to a growing civil-military gap in South Africa. Parliament has the potential to be a key nodal point bringing together military role players and society (through its function in a representative democracy). However, regression in oversight activities erodes civil-military relations and ultimately promotes the de-prioritisation of defence in South Africa.

Further Reading:

Heineken, L. (2020) *South Africa's Post-Apartheid Military: Lost in Transition and Transformation*. UCT Press: Cape Town

Janse van Rensburg, W.K. (2020) 'Collecting evidence on the use of parliamentary oversight tools: A South African case study.' *African Evaluation Journal*, Vol 8(1).

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The submission stems from his 2019 [PhD Thesis](#) entitled 'Twenty years of democracy: An analysis of parliamentary oversight of the military in South Africa since 1994'.

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