

# NATIONAL CRISIS CALLS FOR A NEW AGENDA

By *Ben Turok*

The dismissal of Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene and the resultant crisis in the South African economy may turn out to be the most ill judged decision of Jacob Zuma's presidency.

The fallout in financial terms has been huge, but the loss of confidence in his judgement has been even greater. Nene had started his parliamentary career in 1999 as a backbencher and joined the cabinet as deputy minister of finance in 2009. The leadership saw him as a safe pair of hands who could be trusted to conform with official policy. Although Nene's replacement of Pravin Gordhan in 2014 came as a surprise, his orthodox, cautious temperament was well suited to managing the turbulence that affected the economy, and business was comfortable with him. Hence the shock at his dismissal on 9 December 2015, especially given the external economic shocks already on their way.

*New Agenda* believes that this crisis is part of a continuing trend of bad governance, mismanagement, and the appointment of incompetent people in the public service and state-owned enterprises. Questions have been raised about the potential risk of state capture for the purpose of looting through elements of the private sector. The malfunctioning of the state can

be traced back to the fact that the ANC won political but not economic power in the transition to democracy, with the economic powerhouses of the apartheid era left intact. Government performance in the economy over the past twenty years has been inadequate.

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It has failed to address the growing inequality and create meaningful jobs. As a consequence, South Africa remains the most unequal country in the world. Leaders of big business extract extraordinary profits while the majority rely on social grants.

The optimism of the early years of democracy has been displaced by deep pessimism. The goals of building a

decent society have been replaced by greed and conspicuous consumption, fed by pervasive corruption in both public- and private-sector institutions. Cronyism rules the day. The once proud organisations that led the struggle for freedom are wracked by infighting (as witness the demonstrations by ANC members against ANC leaders in the streets of Durban) and noted more for noisy rhetoric and bombast than reasoned argument.

*New Agenda* hopes that the crisis will lead to a new national conversation about where we are going. This journal is committed to developing a deeper analysis of the social, political and economic structures of society in order to understand the way forward and take corrective action. The aspirations of the liberation movement, developed over many decades, cannot be allowed to be lost or forgotten. South Africa and the world expect far better from a movement that was once respected everywhere. **NA**

