

Fees, fights, foes and chums... the blood of an elective battle

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President Jacob Zuma sprung an early morning surprise at the weekend when he announced the provision of fee-free higher education for the poor and working class, hours before the ANC's 54th national elective conference started at Nasrec.



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The conference will enter into a crucial phase this week, during which a new party head will emerge, as well as a national executive committee. The committee election will be crucial for whomever comes out on top because the support of the structure will determine how much power a new party president will wield.

In terms of Zuma's fees statement, the Treasury "noted the announcement" in a short statement on Saturday.

The R12bn surprise was met with mixed reactions, with Banking Association SA MD Cas Coovadia cautioning that the announcement could be "unfortunately a way of fooling South Africans by adopting unaffordable populist policies in the name of the poor without the ability or even the political will to deliver".

"The impact of this policy on public finances requires that it should have been presented to the standing committee on

finance in Parliament and ultimately tabled in the National Assembly before adoption. Sneaking it in - as the president has done - can only be viewed with suspicion," the association said.

Universities SA, the organisation representing public universities, said the announcement had come as a surprise and questioned its sustainability in the absence of a credible plan.

Universities SA CEO Ahmed Bawa questioned Zuma's announcement in an opinion piece published in *Business Day's* sister publication, the *Sunday Times*, asking whether it had been an act of reconciliation or political expediency. The fees announcement was made on the Day of Reconciliation.

Alliance partner Cosatu said the announcement was long overdue, while affiliate the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) welcomed the move, but said it hoped "that the money to fund free education will not disadvantage other key and essential government expenditure priorities like the implementation of the National Health Insurance".

During his political report to party delegates on Saturday, his last official address as ANC president, Zuma said his fee-free higher education plan would be introduced in a "fiscally sustainable manner".

The *Sunday Times* reported, however, that Zuma had blindsided many and his plan had not been tabled at Cabinet nor presented to the presidential fiscal committee.

In terms of the conference programme, a new national executive committee will be announced on Wednesday, after which the new president will deliver closing remarks.

Source: Business Day

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