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Zondo Commission: Guptas were privy to presidential decisions regarding cabinet posts, says Vytjie Mentor

It was during a state visit to China in late August 2010 that ANC MP Vytjie Mentor first encountered the now infamous Gupta brothers. What was clear at the time for the former ANC member of Parliament was that the three brothers, originally from India, wielded a lot of power and seemed to have been delegated roles that would otherwise be allocated to senior government officials, despite this being a state trip.

As the commission of inquiry into state capture resumed its hearings on Monday, Mentor's testimony was led by evidence leader Mahlape Sello, and for the most part provided context on how she came to allegedly be approached by the Guptas, who wanted to offer her the position of minister of public enterprises.

On a connecting flight to Dubai, en route to China, Mentor first met Duduzane Zuma, the son of former president Jacob Zuma. Duduzane was with a man she later came to believe was Rajesh Gupta, the middle sibling of the three brothers.

Observing their interactions with the rest of the South African delegation at the China event – meant for cementing ties between the two countries' state-run entities – she noticed that all three brothers held a more elevated role in the proceedings than other delegates they had travelled with.

"They were milling all over. They were in charge. They wore tags around their necks that officialised them – as far as I'm concerned – in a weightier manner."

She added that while many of the other delegates wore one or two tags, they had three. "From time to time Minister [Rob] Davies would defer to one of them to address the audience, during his opening remarks." This, she said, was at the group's first meeting, where the two delegations were introduced to each other. Davies is the minister in the Department of Trade and Industry, which was the lead department in terms of the China trip.

What struck Mentor even more, however, was the cold reception that she received from Davies and Maite Nkoane-Mashabane, who at the time led the international relations portfolio. "Minister Nkoane-Mashabane and I were very close. I had previously travelled to Tunisia with her, but her reception of me in that meeting was extremely cold." She continued with the business of her trip for the rest of the day.

Summoned by the head of state

Later, while relaxing in her hotel room, Mentor says she received a call from one of the Gupta brothers, who referred to himself as leading the advance team of the state visit delegation, and told her that former president Jacob Zuma wanted to meet with her. As far as she could tell, she told the commission, the brother in question was Ajay Gupta, as she had been told in the Dubai flight by Rajesh Gupta that his older brother had travelled ahead to China as he was leading the advance team.

“He told me that he’d been sent by President Zuma to drive me to the Chinese state guest house, where the president was putting up,” she said. “He told me that the president would like to meet me before he heads out to the state banquet.

“I told him that I would not allow a man I have never met to purport to me that he would drive me to meet the president in a foreign country.”

He threatened to tell the president that Mentor was refusing to drive with him, so she relented. “In my mind I was thinking I have been wanting to meet the president on South African soil, so it was very strange to me, and discomfoting to think I would only get the opportunity when on foreign soil.”

Mentor told the commission that she was frightened and unnerved at this point, and issues of her security frightened her a lot. “In addition, the sun was setting. As a woman, I was not going to President Zuma, who had then a reputation with females.”

Zuma only interested after the Guptas had intervened

Feeling a sense of not being welcome in China by senior members of the South African delegation, Mentor cut her trip short and returned home. A few weeks later, Mentor was invited to Johannesburg for a meeting with Jacob Zuma by his then advisor, Lakela Kaunda. According to Mentor, she had made several attempts to meet with Zuma prior to the China trip.

This meeting, however, would only happen after the Gupta brothers had interjected and facilitated meetings with her, first at the offices of their Sahara company in Midrand, and later at the family home in Saxonwold, Johannesburg.

Mentor was shocked by the boldness of Ajay Gupta in which he described his reason for meeting with her. “He told me that President Zuma was planning to reshuffle his cabinet soon,” she recalled, “and one of the people he was going to remove was Barbara Hogan.” Hogan was at the time minister of public enterprises. “He told me SAA (South African Airways) was burning money, and if I facilitated the abolishment of the SAA Johannesburg-to-Mumbai route, I could become minister of public enterprises.”

When she expressed shock at this news, Mentor says Ajay then added that they could put in a good word on her behalf with President Zuma, before adding “we normally do.”

Mentor continues with her testimony on Tuesday.

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