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Maseko fired just weeks after he refused to do Guptas' bidding and divert money to them

"My brother, there are these Gupta guys who need your help, please help them."

This is what former president Jacob Zuma told Themba Maseko shortly before he was scheduled to meet controversial businessman Ajay Gupta in late 2010 to talk about government advertising in the *New Age* newspaper. A short conversation, held just as Maseko was making his way to the meeting, sealed his fate. Months later he was fired for not honouring Zuma's wish, and replaced by Jimmy Manyi.

Maseko found out from then minister in the presidency, the late Collins Chabane, that he was no longer CEO of the government communications and information system (GCIS). "He told me that President Zuma had instructed him to terminate my contract, or redeploy me," said Maseko. Zuma, who was at the time out of the country, had apparently told Chabane that Maseko should be out of the office upon his return.

All this emerged during the second day of testimony by Maseko at the Zondo commission of inquiry into state capture on Thursday.

Concerned about meeting the Guptas

Ajay Gupta, the family patriarch, had, some days prior, contacted Maseko to ask for a meeting to discuss government advertising for the media outlets the family would be launching soon. Although he had been reluctant about meeting him, Maseko says he agreed to it on principle, as he had to ensure that he engaged all stakeholders in the media industry in his role.

Asked by commission chairperson Raymond Zondo, South Africa's deputy chief justice, if such a request from the president was the norm, Maseko said it was the first time it had ever been made. "It was too much of a coincidence for me that the president would call me about a meeting I was going to have with Ajay Gupta," he said.

"I assumed Ajay Gupta had called the president to say 'I'm meeting this fellow, call him and let him know you've got our backs,' or something."

Advocate Vincent Maleka of the commission pointed Maseko to the affidavit he made for the Office of the Public Protector, which later released a report that led to the establishment of the commission. In the affidavit, Maseko said that from the point of Zuma's call, he had trepidation about continuing with the meeting, but proceeded with it anyway.

"I was concerned about the Gupta brothers and the media reports about them," Maseko explained. "I considered pulling out of the meeting, but thought if these guys are going to be in the media industry, there is no harm in meeting with them."

Instructed to divert money from departments to Guptas, via GCIS

Once at the Saxonwold home of the Guptas, Maseko said, Ajay did not waste time in getting to the point. He told Maseko that he knows what the state budget was for media advertising, and wanted him to divert this towards the *New Age*. “He told me that they were starting media outlets in print and broadcast, they need the R600-million GCIS is responsible for.”

Gupta added that Maseko’s only job was to transfer the funds and they would work on producing the content on behalf of government. “I was surprised that he knew what the amount of the budget was, because this was not a publicised figure.”

Then came the boastful instruction: “This is how things are going to work. You must go to all the departments, talk to ministers, tell them to transfer money into the GCIS account, and your only job is to make sure that money comes to the *New Age*.”

To this Maseko replied that it was not how government works, and that he could not instruct departments on what to do.

“He said if I had other problems, or difficulties with ministers refusing to transfer money to me, I should let him know and he will call them to order, ‘this is how the system works now’,” he recalled.

Threats from Guptas for being ‘difficult’, then the axe fell

Ajay then went on to say that they were already getting a lot of business through the SABC, with their business breakfasts, hosted periodically by the state broadcaster.

He added that Zuma would speak to any minister who did not co-operate, and that they would be “summoned to Saxonwold and sorted out.”

At this point Maseko stopped the meeting, much to the irritation of Ajay, who seemed angry. The next time the two men spoke was weeks later after he had declined to meet with Tony Gupta over the same matter. Tony had given Maseko short notice to meet, and when Maseko suggested a later time, the phone call ended and minutes later Ajay called him to tell him he was being difficult. He threatened to speak to Maseko’s superiors, and this led to the call ending “unceremoniously.”

Weeks later, he was fired, with the announcement made by Chabane at a cabinet meeting. Chabane then declared that Maseko would be redeployed to the public service and administration department, which was at the time under Richard Baloyi.

Useful links:

[Government Communication and Information System](#) (GCIS)

[Zondo Commission](#) website

Public Protector’s [State of Capture](#) report, released in November 2016