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### **Zondo commission – Guptas were familiar in Free State government circles**

The Guptas were no strangers to the structures of the Free State provincial government and were known to many officials who worked there – so much so that a mid-2010 executive committee meeting discussing a proposal to advertise in, and subscribe, to their *New Age* newspaper gave the administration the green light to do this.

Former MEC of finance in the province, Elizabeth Rockman, is currently testifying before the commission of inquiry into state capture in Johannesburg. “They were in the environment, it was not like they were not known,” she said, when asked to give insight into when she had first started engaging members of the family and their associates over provincial government business.

Rockman was the director-general in then premier Ace Magashule’s office from 2010 to 2013, before assuming the role of head of the provincial treasury. She was asked by Magashule to meet up with Rajesh Gupta in Bethlehem in July 2010 to discuss the details of the business relationship. Magashule excused himself from the meeting, explained Rockman, in which Gupta proposed advertising opportunities in the soon-to-be-launched national newspaper. The proposal, it seemed to her, was a standard one that was used to pitch the same idea to other provinces.

The administration was already months into its official financial year, and would thus have to revisit their budget to see if they could accommodate this new venture. Rockman recalled having a sense that the pricing and other details contained in the proposal had been previously discussed, but did not elaborate by whom.

According to Rockman, the proposal managed to satisfy the appetite of the political leadership in the province because it addressed a “niche market” for the province’s media work, with the *New Age* being the only daily English newspaper through which they would be able to advertise.

The format of the newspaper was such that it had a page dedicated to each of the nine provinces in the country, and therefore allowed for province-specific coverage and where available, advertising.

“It was dedicated to Free State news, it would not necessarily be only provincial government news,” Rockman explained. “If the provincial government doesn’t have any news for a specific day, they would fill the page with Free State news whether it was sports or private sector, it doesn’t matter what.”

In addition to the advertising, Gupta proposed a subscription programme for the provincial government, for a total of 4 000 units of the newspaper to be delivered daily. Rockman could not say how much was allocated for this service, but conceded that through a deviation process the province entered into a

three-year contract with the *New Age*. The contract was extended at the end of the first term, and it was during this extension that the *New Age* was sold by the Guptas to former government spokesperson Mzwanele Manyi's *Afro Voice*, and continued to operate under this name. *Afro Voice* closed down in late 2018, and the Free State government's last payment for subscriptions, said Rockman, was months before this happened.

Rockman continues to testify and is expected to provide more information on the provincial government's role in the Estina dairy farm project that lost millions in public funds.

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