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Zondo Commission – I removed the Prasa board, not ANC, says Peters

Former transport minister Dipuo Peters has stuck to her guns on the matter of her decision to fire the Prasa board in March 2017, saying it was her decision, and not a result of pressure from the ANC, which had been implicated in the agency's corruption investigation. Peters appeared before the state capture commission on Thursday.

She conceded that it may have been irrational to remove the board, led by Popo Molefe, three months before its term was meant to end, but it was necessary. Her difficult relationship with Molefe made it hard for her, she said, and her patience had been tested for years as Molefe's operational style was a cause for conflict between the two.

"For me, it's one of the things I could not tolerate because you can't have a situation where you meet with somebody, tomorrow there's a press briefing, then you've got to have your own press briefing because you have to respond. The media wants you to respond," said Peters.

The board was fired on 8 March, soon after an appearance before the transport portfolio committee in Parliament, where an investigation into several Prasa contracts revealed possible kickbacks to the ANC by one of the suppliers. The Swifambo contract, valued at over R3-billion, was emerging as a possible source for around R80-million paid to the ANC.

Committee chairperson Joe Maswanganyi appeared disturbed by the revelations, according to the version of fellow committee member Manny de Freitas, whose affidavit was referred to by evidence leader Advocate Vas Soni for Peters's comment. De Freitas said after the announcement of the removal of the board, the ANC members in the committee appeared eager to hold an inquiry as requested by the board. At the same time they were angry with Molefe for bringing the party into disrepute before Parliament.

Several days later, on 14 March, when the committee met again, things had changed, and the support for an inquiry was no longer there. De Freitas also noted that it appeared Molefe and his board had been used as a scapegoat for the troubles at Prasa, when it was actually the party wanting to shut down any further probing of its benefits from Swifambo.

Soni asked Peters if she knew of the dynamics De Freitas was referring to. "I understand what the question relates to, but what I can say is that I was not a member of the committee. I did not give the concurrence. I understand the context that is raised here according to Mr De Freitas," she responded, adding that she never got wind of the committee's decision to not institute an inquiry.

Peters's own removal on 30 March by former president Jacob Zuma, just three weeks after the board was removed, came as a surprise to her, although her instinct had told her it was coming.

"It was the 30th of March. That evening I was in the ministerial residence with the ministerial team, the Road Traffic Management Corporation team, and the Western Cape team of transport to plan

for Easter road safety campaign the next day. At the end of the meeting we got to hear that the president was to make an announcement.

“Every time there is going to be announcement by the president, everyone who is in the executive gets that jittery [feeling], not knowing what is going to be announced and what is going to be said.”

Commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo asked Peters if she ever questioned Zuma on why he removed her. “I never took it to him to ask why did you remove me from this responsibility,” she said. Her thinking was that because she never asked at the time of her appointment, she should not ask when removed.

But the unceremonious move on Zuma’s part spoke a lot to how he operated. For instance, said Peters, ministers sign performance agreements when appointed, but never undergo performance appraisals and are never reviewed by their peers. Even small protocol matters in meetings were never an issue.

“If I had a meeting with the president, there was no note taker. Somebody who could keep a record so that the next time I come they could say, Minister, the last time you said this to the president, you seem to be backtracking, or you seem not to be following through on those particular things,” said Peters.

Taking her back to the events of early March, Soni questioned Peters on whether the decision by the portfolio committee to abolish the establishment of an inquiry was linked to her own removal and that of the board, particularly Molefe.

“The inquiry could not have been the reason the board was removed. Already at that particular stage, there was an investigation that was happening, that I made reference to, and between Mr Molefe and myself we would reconcile forensic information.”

Maswanganyi replaced Peters as minister after the 30 March cabinet reshuffle, and oversaw the establishment of an interim board.

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