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Zondo Commission – Zuma didn't root for Montana's return, says Peters

Former president Jacob Zuma did not lobby for the reinstatement of Lucky Montana to his position as CEO at the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa) in 2015, as the agency's former chairperson Popo Molefe said before the state capture commission last year. This was revealed by former transport minister Dipuo Peters who appeared before the commission on Monday.

Peters confirmed her presence in an August 2015 meeting called by Zuma at his presidential residence in Pretoria, to discuss the strained relationship between Montana and the board led by Molefe.

It was she who initially asked Zuma for advice on how she should intervene, said Peters, as Molefe and Montana were engaged in a public spat over the state of affairs at Prasa. Montana had resigned in June 2015, but had had a change of heart and wanted his job back, much to the irritation of Molefe's board. His resignation came while serving an extended term on his initial five-year contract with Prasa, on the request of the board.

Not long afterwards, Montana began a public campaign to clear his name, and to challenge an investigation that Molefe and the rest of the board had by then decided to establish into the allegations. It was at this point, said Peters, that she sought counsel from Zuma on what to do.

"I had an opportunity during the period after the resignation of Mr Montana, and the acceptance of the board of the resignation of Mr Montana, [to intervene] as a member of the executive responsible for transport," said Peters.

"Out of courtesy I informed the president, but I also said to the president, I have made a request to both Mr Montana and Mr Molefe to stop their public spats, because they were going back and forth in the public space."

The president suggested that while she works on bringing in the board, she should ask Jeff Radebe to talk to Montana, given that the two had a working history. Montana had worked as one of Radebe's advisors when the latter was transport minister, said Peters. The August 2015 meeting was thus arranged under these circumstances.

In his evidence before the commission in March 2020, Molefe described how an insistent Zuma praised Montana's skills at the meeting in question. "In my view he [Montana] should not be lost to the country and some solution must be found to allow him to continue applying his skills in this important organisation," said Zuma, according to Molefe. But Peters refuted this, saying Montana did most of the talking on the occasion, and gave a two-hour presentation detailing his experience in the rail transport field, and his part in Prasa's modernisation programme.

"If you were sitting there listening, you would have realised that you're sitting with somebody who is building a case for why that organisation needs him," she said.

To her recollection, a visibly exhausted Zuma hardly took part in the discussion, even falling asleep at some point. His only contribution to the meeting was to welcome everyone present.

Further refuting Molefe's version, Peters said Zuma never gave the impression of wanting Montana back at Prasa. If anything, it was Montana who may have given Molefe the impression that a separate discussion had occurred elsewhere at which the matter was discussed prior to the meeting. "In his reply to something Mr Molefe had said, he [Montana] said 'if I go back', which was something I dispelled in that particular meeting," said Peters.

She told the commission of Montana's relentless lobbying to get his position back, and the push back he got from Molefe.

The circumstances around Montana's resignation, according to Molefe, were such that his term was to end in March 2015, and he had indicated to Molefe's incoming board months before that he would indeed be vacating the position. When the board asked him to stay on longer on the basis of their own need to familiarise themselves with the operations of Prasa, Montana signed on for a further six months, which would start in April. By June however, several allegations of irregularities implicating him had emerged, and he was asked to vacate the post, according to Molefe.

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