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Zondo commission – Mufamadi kicks off intelligence evidence before Zondo

The commission of inquiry into state capture resumed its hearings on Monday after a week's break, with the testimony of former cabinet minister Sydney Mufamadi. He painted a picture of a dysfunctional special operations unit within the State Security Agency (SSA) that allegedly prioritised former president Jacob Zuma and minister David Mahlobo ahead of the interests of the country.

Mufamadi appeared in his capacity as former chairperson of a high-level review panel put in place in 2018 by President Cyril Ramaphosa to look into the state of affairs at the SSA during Zuma's term. He said the panel found evidence of several special operations projects – secret in nature and run by the unit headed up by Thulani Dlomo – that deviated from procedure, spending money that was not accounted for. Because of the projects, funds were often moved from the SSA without any accountability, and often in cash, to fund operations that were kept secret, even from the auditor-general, and did not form part of the SSA mandate.

Project Commitment, for instance, ensured that Zuma received monthly cash payments from the SSA, according to testimony heard by the panel. "We were told that the project involved providing then President Zuma with R2.5-million per month in the 2015/16 financial year, and this amount was increased to R4.5-million in the 2016/17 financial year," Mufamadi said.

The money was given to Mahlobo, but neither the SSA nor the panel sought evidence to substantiate the claim that it went to Zuma. "We have no basis to say it was given to former president Zuma or it was not."

Another, Project Justice, was established to counter the influence of members of the judiciary perceived to be hostile towards Zuma. This happened in the context of Zuma repeatedly receiving judgments against him. Again Mahlobo was said to be the conduit between the SSA and the members of the judiciary, "sources" who would be paid monthly bribes.

"Information provided to the panel indicated that amounts of R1.2-million and R4.5-million were routinely given from SSA and provided to minister Mahlobo whom, it is said, was responsible for handling these sources," said Mufamadi.

"The panel was told that this project was motivated by a perceived need to counter the influence of judges hostile to president Zuma."

Mufamadi noted that as much as South Africans need not be gullible enough to expect that the judiciary could not be easily corrupted, it was worth noting that the obsession with secrecy at the time of the operation meant that nothing could be proven or disproved.

Other projects, the panel was told, were created with the goal of countering influence from civil society organisations and protest movements such as Fees Must Fall and Zuma Must Fall. In the case of the latter, a planned protest ahead of Zuma's state of the nation address in 2016 was allegedly compromised when the movement's leadership was intercepted, and the protest action toned down from an initial 5 000 protesters to around 50, as a report of the associated operation declared.

Mufamadi found in particular that a change in the oath of allegiance that operatives have to take when enrolled in the secret service was a cause for concern. The old oath put emphasis on the obligation to protect the country and its interest, while the new one specifically mentions consideration for the authorities of the minister and president.

"To insist that employees of the state must swear this kind of allegiance, is tantamount to saying you must express loyalty to your god, your creator, and immediately after your god, me."

Asked what he thought of the criticism in the public discourse of intelligence information being shared publicly before the commission, Mufamadi said there was no danger if the information shared was in a retrospective context and did not involve current operations. In any case, South Africans should be afforded the opportunity to learn what intelligence decisions are being made on their behalf.

"It is when we become obsessed with secrecy that we actually disempower our people from playing the role that they must play to protect their own dispensation which came at a heavy price," he said.

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