



3 September 2020

Zondo commission – Mokonyane backtracks on party venue

It was actually a surprise gala dinner for close family and friends, and not a full-on party, for her 40th birthday that was hosted at the Victoria Guest House in 2003, former environmental affairs minister Nomvula Mokonyane told the commission of inquiry into state capture on Thursday.

She returned to answer to new evidence, from the guest house's owner Frederik Coetzee, contradicting her version that no party of hers was ever held at the venue.

Coetzee testified that Bosasa paid for Mokonyane's birthday in June 2003, for which he had to make last-minute arrangements to accommodate double the number of people that he had originally planned for. The party cost over R80 000, as evident in invoices that Coetzee said he sent to the company's former COO Angelo Agrizzi afterwards. Mokonyane, however, told the commission that she never got to find out how it was funded, but knew it to be a surprise that her late husband honoured her with. He, she said, was a successful businessman who could afford to spoil her at that cost.

"Upon reading the statement, I can confirm that I went for a private dinner and not a 'break your leg' [theme]. I can confirm there was a dinner, it was not a party as said by Mr Agrizzi. It was a surprise thing at the venue and it was not my 50th birthday."

Evidence leader Advocate Viwe Notshe wanted to know why the former minister had not mentioned the dinner during her testimony last month, when the matter of her 50th birthday party had been brought up following Agrizzi's allegation. Mokonyane said she had been preoccupied with proving the error Agrizzi made in saying it was her 50th that was hosted there. On recollection after Coetzee's testimony, it came to her that it was her 40th, which had not been as significant. Mokonyane earlier testified that her 50th birthday celebration was held at Silver Star casino.

But Notshe pressed her on her statement that no party of hers was ever hosted by Victoria Guest House, taking her back to a transcript of her oral evidence.

"I live in Krugersdorp, and that venue is one of the venues closer to where we live, and as I've said in my previous testimony it has been used for several other activities. On this matter, that was earlier on referred to as my 50th birthday, and I contested, the plan was to have a private dinner as the family and indeed we left home with an understanding that I'm going to have a private dinner."

On the evening in question, in 2003, she arrived at the venue with her husband Serge Mokonyane, only to be surprised by family and friends, said Mokonyane. She then threw shade at the décor theme of the night, saying that if it had been for a party it would have been of a better standard. "Looking at what Mr Coetzee had written I think there's also a bit of confusion and exaggeration on his submission and it's up to the commission to really cross-examine him."

Commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo argued that the surprise factor of her 40th birthday would have been enough for Mokonyane to remember the event and mention it in her testimony.

"Somebody might say that it cannot be true that you can remember that other parties were held at the venue, but you could not remember that your birthday was held there. Somebody may say that it was not convenient for you to remember your 40th birthday because it would give credence to Agrizzi's evidence that there was this special relationship between yourself and Bosasa or between yourself and Gavin Watson," Zondo asked.

Mokonyane responded: "I walked into these chambers and the whole world was focused on my 50th birthday called 'break a leg'. I had to say there was nothing called 'break a leg' which was my 50th birthday. For me chair, that is where I am.

"It was over a decade ago. What attracted my attention was the assertion made by Mr Agrizzi about a 50th birthday with the theme 'break a leg' held at the Victorian Guest House. I would have known had Mr Agrizzi said it was the 40th, because you can see, as the statement goes further down, I did say that there had been many parties."

Mokonyane's lawyer, Advocate Laurence Hodes, told the commission of an intention for his client to cross-examine Agrizzi.

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