



4 September 2019

Zondo Commission – SABC’s irregular dealings with the Guptas

The commission of inquiry into state capture on Wednesday heard how, in early 2012, members of the Gupta family lobbied for an SABC channel to start up their broadcast news offering to then group CEO Lulama Mokhobo, just one week after she had occupied the position. Mokhobo testified that then acting COO Hlaudi Motsoeneng took her to the Saxonwold home of the Guptas, only telling her that someone wanted to congratulate her on her appointment.

Once there, she was made aware of the real reason for her visit, but turned the family down on the basis that such decisions can only be made through a proper tender process. Also present were Duduzane Zuma and the son of Ace Magashule [Tshepiso], whom Mokhobo did not name.

Upon arrival, said Mokhobo, her mobile phone and that of everyone else was taken away, and the batteries removed.

"They promptly told me they would have liked to play a role in SABC’s digital terrestrial television future because they were interested in creating a news channel and they would hope I would allow them to get access to a channel," she told the commission.

"I saw it as a lobbying of sorts for them to be afforded an opportunity on SABC platforms at that time."

Responding to a question by commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo on whether she said anything to Motsoeneng after the incident, Mokhobo said she did not, but was intrigued and annoyed by his actions. She added that she had trusted him at the time because she was new, and he was popular, so she did not suspect that there was anything untoward in him asking her to go.

Soon after the meeting, Mokhobo began the process of implementing a contract between the public broadcaster and TNA Media, the company owned by the Guptas, under which the *New Age* newspaper was published. This was to formalise the arrangement for the TNA breakfast briefings, which were aired regularly on SABC2’s *Morning Live*.

The arrangement had started before her appointment at the SABC, and although she was not clear on its background, her concern was that there was no contract in place to protect either party should a risk be realised. "A matter of concern when I arrived was that they were operating without a contract," revealed Mokhobo. "They (TNA) were already delivering newspapers and live broadcasts were already happening."

For her, the problem was in the SABC neglecting the risk associated with not contracting TNA to formalise the arrangement. "There was eventually going to be an audit finding, because if a relationship is regular, it has to be regulated."

Asked by evidence leader advocate Thandi Norman to confirm if indeed the SABC was never invoiced by TNA as part of the arrangement, Mokhobo said the premise on which the SABC decided not to charge was that the breakfasts fell under its news offering, which policy bars from doing such.

Because it was SABC News that oversaw the regular airing of the breakfasts, the costs related to broadcasting it were also to come from the division's budget. Mokhobo said she discovered through the commission's investigators, when she was approached to give evidence, that the cost of the outdoor broadcasts of the breakfast briefings came to about R20-million.

Back then she also noticed that after the signing of the contract, the frequency of the shows increased, and when Mokhobo asked why this was so, she was told that they had become critical as they brought government to the people.

Besides the cost of airing the live broadcasts, the SABC also forked out over R900 000 over some time for the *New Age* to be delivered to its Auckland Park offices. Again, no contract existed between the two entities to formalise this.

If there was any negotiation over this arrangement, it would have happened at the level of Motsoeneng or then head of news Jimi Matthews, said Mokhobo, according to the delegation of authority of the SABC. Matthews is expected to give testimony before the commission.

Useful links:

[Zondo Commission website](#)

Corruption Watch's [Zondo Commission updates](#) page

[SABC website](#)