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Zondo Commission: it was improper for an advisor to have the power he did, says Phumza Macanda

Former treasury spokesperson Phumza Macanda has told the commission of inquiry into state capture that she, like her former colleagues who have testified before her, had the impression that Des van Rooyen did not know the two advisors he brought along to the department when he was appointed finance minister in 2015. Her testimony related to the brief period in which Van Rooyen was minister in December of that year.

Van Rooyen was appointed following Nhlanhla Nene's dismissal by former president Jacob Zuma. The move unleashed widespread backlash, negative market reaction, and uncertainty in the global media and financial spaces. Until then, the backbencher had been a member of Parliament's standing committee on finance, but was otherwise little known, and this only fuelled media speculation around Zuma's decision to remove Nene.

Macanda's first encounter with the new minister was on the morning after his appointment, when she and then director-general Lungisa Fuzile phoned to congratulate him. The pair also wanted direction on his first media statement, in light of the local and international reaction his appointment was getting. Their expectations were thwarted as Van Rooyen dismissed their request, and told them he had already drafted his own statement that he would provide to them at a later stage.

Soon after he was sworn in at the Union Buildings, they got a piece of paper that he had read from at the ceremony, which briefly highlighted his commitment to making Treasury more accessible to the public. He would reiterate the point while addressing the Treasury executive team at a meeting later that day, telling them that there would be some changes to how things were done in the department.

Macanda published the final statement produced on the day – she had had to type it out from the printed copy given to her by Van Rooyen, and get approval from his new advisor Mohamed Bobat. Bobat, whom Macanda had met earlier that morning for the first time, had told her that he was now the line of approval for media statements, a declaration that alarmed Macanda.

"He was a little aggressive in tone... even hostile," she recalled, adding that in the history of the department, advisors had never played a role in the preparation or approval of statements.

This was not the only odd occurrence. In a management meeting later that morning, Van Rooyen announced that from that point onwards, all matters that were meant for him would have to be forwarded through Bobat and a new chief of staff introduced as Ian Whitley.

Macanda was further shocked by Bobat's reaction when she brought up the matter of the vacancy in her unit that had been created by her own move to the new post. The matter, he told her, was not urgent. "I do not know where Mr Bobat derived his power from," she said. "In the first two minutes of meeting him he had made himself clear to be in power."

Macanda left Treasury in 2016 and is now with Absa.

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