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Zondo Commission – procedures not followed in Maseko removal from GCIS

Former government spokesperson Themba Maseko returned to the witness chair at the commission of inquiry into state capture on Wednesday to provide more information on his 2011 transfer from the Government Communications Information System (GCIS) to the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). The move, he maintains, was orchestrated by former president Jacob Zuma because Maseko refused to submit to pressure from the Gupta family to give them the GCIS advertising budget during his tenure.

Maseko told commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo that all administrative processes followed in relation to the matter – including letters shared across ministries – happened after he was removed, and were merely meant as a cover-up at Cabinet level of how badly the issue was handled. The transfer of directors-general, he said, is formally placed on the agenda of cabinet meetings and discussed there. This, however, did not occur in this instance.

Instead, he was told by then minister of monitoring and evaluation, the late Collins Chabane, days before the meeting that he was being removed from his post as GCIS CEO, with the promise that Chabane would “find something else” for him elsewhere in the public service. In his role as spokesperson, Maseko would often sit in such meetings and later relay key issues discussed in press statements. On this occasion, however, his removal was neither placed on the agenda, nor was it shared with the other ministers present, to give them a heads up. As a result, the eventual announcement by Chabane to the rest of Cabinet was a consequence of a media leak and rapidly growing interest in the story.

Maseko learned for the first time from Chabane’s announcement that the minister planned to transfer him to the DPSA, and would later learn that even the minister of that department at the time, Richard Baloyi, had not been informed on this development. Baloyi was not present in the cabinet meeting.

Documents put on the record by evidence leader Advocate Kate Hofmeyr seemed to confirm Maseko’s assertions that formal procedures were not followed. These included a letter from Chabane to Baloyi indicating the intention regarding the transfer, and a response to this effect by Zuma, in the form of a presidential minute, dated 3 February, the day after the cabinet meeting. Although the commission asked for de-classified minutes of the meeting from the Presidency to help with its investigation, they were told that the exercise would be futile because the minutes in question did not include a discussion on Maseko’s transfer, and therefore there was no need to de-classify them.

Only the oral announcement by Chabane constitutes the mention of the transfer, said Maseko, adding that he subsequently had to write the press release that confirmed the news, to help allay speculation.

The post-matter correspondence among the departments, said Maseko, only served to confirm to him that Chabane’s hand had indeed been forced by an instruction from Zuma. “It was an attempt to make sure that the decision complies with what the law requires,” he said.

The day's proceedings were held away from the usual venue in Parktown, Johannesburg. Before starting in the morning, Zondo thanked the City of Johannesburg for making its Braamfontein council chambers available for this week, as the usual venue was not available.

Maseko's testimony was followed by that of his successor at the GCIS and former Department of Labour DG, Mzwanele Manyi, who is expected to continue giving evidence on Thursday.

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