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Zondo Commission – Myeni’s invasive vetting of SAA execs uncovered

The commission of inquiry into state capture heard on Wednesday how former South African Airways (SAA) chairperson Dudu Myeni ordered the vetting of over 100 executive managers of the airline, supposedly for purposes of combating corruption.

The project manager of the SAA assignment, Nokunqoba Dlamini, defended the process when she appeared before the commission.

So intent was Myeni on this mission, that she roped in former state security minister David Mahlobo in late 2015 to help. Mahlobo then undertook to deploy officials from his agency to conduct a vetting project targeting 118 staff members of SAA. In a letter dated 13 October 2015, Mahlobo reveals his intentions to his then finance counterpart, Nhlanhla Nene, of carrying out the process across all state-owned entities.

Dlamini told the commission how she presented the project scope and what it would entail, in January 2016, at Myeni’s invitation. Present were all the managers who would be subjected to the vetting. Through her engagements with them, she said, she never got the impression that they were unhappy with the process.

Evidence leader Advocate Kate Hofmeyr, however, put to Dlamini that so unhappy were some of the executives, that seven of them resigned from the airline in retaliation. Dlamini said she was never told of this, and would have expected the acting group CEO at the time, Musa Zwane, to inform the State Security Agency (SSA) of the prevailing unhappiness.

Hofmeyr revealed that one manager who underwent the process, head of financial accounting Lindsay Olitzski, was found through the process to hold dual citizenship at the time. The evidence leader asked Dlamini why, if the process was meant to clean up SAA, Olitzski remains employed there. Dlamini retorted by saying because Olitzski does not report to the SSA, she would not know why she has not been dismissed.

Olitzski’s name was first heard in the testimony of former SAA chief finance officer Phumeza Nhantsi, who told the commission in June last year that Myeni had ordered her to fire the former after results of the process had been reported to the board. Nhantsi then conveyed the instruction to Zwane, who suggested they wait until the process had been completed, much to Myeni’s irritation. In the end, Olitzski was not dismissed.

Olitzski submitted an affidavit to the commission, in which she lists a few examples of the questions that staff were subjected to during the vetting process. Reading them out to chuckles across the room, Hofmeyr noted that they were of a grossly invasive nature and hardly fulfilled the purported role of combating corruption. Some of the questions touched on employees’ upbringing and

whether all children at home were treated the same way, whether at any point in their upbringing they experienced a family member who suffered from addiction(s). One other question asked if employees were prone in any way to gambling, while another asked if they would choose their spouse again, if given the chance to reverse time.

Dlamini agreed that they were indeed personal, but defended the process nonetheless, even claiming that it played a part in SAA's R2-billion turnover in that year. Responding to this last point, commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo chuckled and said there was no way that anyone would believe that turnover improvement was a consequence of such a process.

Dlamini relentlessly stood by the process. "In terms of the strategic roles of vetting, it is to ensure that corruption is reduced in the state-owned entity," she said.

Hofmeyr then put to her that part of the process involved a declaration of secrecy by the executives, which on the surfaces does not endeavour to combat corruption.

"We had to make sure that corruption is reduced. In order for us to reach that goal, we would have to highlight any other issue, it can be small or big, but the main goal is to ensure that corruption is reduced," Dlamini said.

"How did your vetting operation assist in combating corruption at SAA?" asked Hofmeyr.

"Personnel security vetting is the first point to ensure that the people, the executives that are there are men and women of integrity."

When people who were vetted did not get their security clearance, why were they allowed to retain their jobs?"

"Because legally we are not covered in terms of that."

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