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Zondo commission – SSA probe found serious political interference, says investigator

Because of threats to the safety of State Security Agency (SSA) officials investigating alleged corruption by their former colleagues, a senior investigator testified in-camera before the commission of inquiry into state capture on Wednesday.

With her identity hidden, the witness known only as “Miss K” told the commission that she headed up Project Veza, an investigation that was established in December 2018 to uncover alleged corruption at the agency. Veza has looked into events spanning the period 2008 to 2018, which include the blatant flouting of procurement processes by agents, appointment irregularities, and political influence in the operations of the SSA.

Veza followed on from where Project Momentum left off, she said, as the SSA had started to implement the recommendations of a high-level review panel established earlier in 2018 by President Cyril Ramaphosa to probe the alleged capture within the agency. The capture is believed to have spanned the tenures of ministers Siyabonga Cwele (2009 – 2014), David Mahlobo (2014- 2017), and Bongani Bongo (2017-2018), who oversaw the rampant abuse of some functions of the SSA, allegedly for the benefit of the ANC as well as former president Jacob Zuma.

Senior executives accused by Miss K of implementing the abuse included former head of counter intelligence Thulani Dlomo, former director-general Arthur Fraser, and others like Moruti Nosi and Sonto Kudjoe.

Under Dlomo’s watch, a cohort of 48 recruits from KwaZulu-Natal was placed within the SSA between 2008 and 2009, trained and provided with SSA-owned firearms, and deployed in projects across the country. Some would later be placed in the South African Police Service and the South African National Defence Force for the personal protection of former president Jacob Zuma. This was done without following agency recruitment standards, while Dlomo himself did not have the authority at the time, as he was not yet employed by the SSA. He was a security manager at the KwaZulu-Natal department of social development, the commission heard, when he began with the recruitment of the agents, 27 of whom would eventually be absorbed into the other services mentioned above.

Miss K confirmed that through interviews held with some of the recruits as part of the probe, investigators learned that they did not follow reporting channels of other agents while under the SSA, but in some cases reported directly to Zuma. Dlomo too was reporting directly to Zuma, and not his own seniors, investigators were told.

Dlomo's mission was to create a special, American-style presidential protection unit with the sole mandate to gather intelligence for Zuma's protection.

One operative who was interviewed as part of Veza told Miss K that SSA resources were used in the Protect Luthuli House campaign, under which purported members of the MKMVA were bussed in from KwaZulu-Natal, with food and accommodation paid for by the agency. Pretorius noted that further details of the allegations would be traversed in later evidence.

Miss K's evidence was led under unique circumstances. A fellow investigator in Veza, known in the commission's public record as "Mr Y", had been scheduled to appear, but having recently come out of a coma, was seriously indisposed, said evidence leader Advocate Paul Pretorius. Miss K was then scheduled to replace him, with an undertaking that she would confirm elements of Mr Y's affidavit before the commission.

This arrangement did not find favour in the legal teams of people implicated in Mr Y's evidence. Advocate Rapulane Kgoroadira, representing both Bongo and Fraser, lamented the commission's attempt to get "get Mr Y's evidence in through the back door", calling for an allowance for Miss K to submit an affidavit of her own to confirm the evidence.

Commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, however, dismissed the plea, saying that the substance of Miss K's evidence was in Mr Y's affidavit and the contents thereof reflect her own knowledge.

Other complaints were raised by lawyers representing other implicated people, who saw the process as being outside of procedure, as they should have been given implication notices of Miss K's evidence ahead of her appearance. Pretorius undertook to ensure that, while going through Mr Y's affidavit, where Miss K came across information that she could not confirm, she would indicate this, and if there was information that she did not know of, she would indicate this too.

Miss K is expected to continue her testimony on Thursday.

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