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Zondo Commission – Mbalula’s 2011 Gupta disclosure swept under the carpet

Former minister of communications Siphwe Nyanda told the commission of inquiry into state capture on Thursday that former president Jacob Zuma failed to convince him of the real reasons why he was removed amid a cabinet reshuffle in October 2010. It was the same reshuffle that would introduce then deputy minister of police Fikile Mbalula to Cabinet as sports and recreation minister.

Nyanda’s evidence focused on the issue of Mbalula’s alleged disclosure to an ANC national executive committee (NEC) meeting a year later, in 2011, that he was told by members of the Gupta family – and not former president Jacob Zuma – of his impending appointment to Cabinet. Earlier in the day, former minister in the presidency Trevor Manuel had also testified about what transpired in the meeting in relation to Mbalula.

Both men described an upset Mbalula, who questioned the Guptas’ sense of authority and their actions. According to Nyanda, there had been rumours for some time within the ANC that the Gupta family were influential in how critical government functions were run.

With regard to the role played by the ANC leadership in holding Zuma accountable for his relationship with the Guptas, a matter of contention among party members, Nyanda said members probably did not feel emboldened to speak out. The shock that members expressed after the meeting at which Mbalula spoke, he said, was not so much over Mbalula’s disclosure, but more towards the fact that Zuma – who as party president had the role of closing each meeting – did not address the issue on the day, or on any other occasion after that.

“The onus was on him as the president to make a comment,” said Nyanda. “It was clear that he [Mbalula] was saying the president is derelict, or the president informed other people who informed him. These people who were the subject of current talk of having influence over the president.”

Commission chair and deputy chief justice Raymond Zondo put to Nyanda that another witness before him, former minister of public administration Ngoako Ramatlhodi, had told the inquiry that the NEC did speak up on many occasions against Zuma’s closeness to the Guptas. Nyanda said they may have been after his years of service in the NEC. He was elected to the NEC in 2007 at the Polokwane elective conference of the ANC, and stepped down in 2014.

With regard to his own removal, Nyanda said he thought Zuma was simply creating space for someone else to replace him, and with hindsight is able to say now that things happened that speak to different reasons for his removal than what Zuma advanced at the time.

For one, there were a lot of movements in the state-owned entities under the communications portfolio, including Telkom and Sentech, which suggested that there was more to his removal than what Zuma had impressed upon him. At the time that he told him of his removal, Zuma mentioned that the top ANC officials had decided to redeploy Nyanda as ambassador to Germany, and murmured something about an issue that had to do with the SABC, which Nyanda did not pursue at the time. He had heard rumours about his possible removal, but did not take these seriously.

Nyanda's successor, the late Roy Padayachie, was reportedly largely responsible for the controversial contracts that saw the Guptas gain access to the SABC prime-time current affairs programme *Morning Live* via the TNA Business Breakfast slots hosted by the family's *New Age* newspaper.

In his testimony, Nyanda mentioned that soon after his appointment to office, he was approached by one of the Gupta brothers, and Zuma's son Duduzane, who asked for a meeting with him. On the day of the meeting, the pair made a presentation to Nyanda about the family's Sahara business. He did not think there was anything untoward about the meeting.

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