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Zondo Commission – Mbalula was concerned about the Guptas’ growing influence and power

Fikile Mbalula confirmed on Friday that he told an ANC national executive committee (NEC) meeting in 2011 of his anger and irritation at finding out from by Ajay Gupta of his impending promotion from deputy minister of police to minister of sports and recreation the previous year. He did it because of the power the Gupta family seemed to wield in government at the time. It was his turn to speak on what transpired in that meeting, following the versions of former ministers Trevor Manuel and Siphwe Nyanda at the commission of inquiry into state capture.

Manuel testified in February that an emotional Mbalula, who even cried while addressing the meeting, complained about being told by Atul Gupta that he was going to become a minister, and not the president, as should be the case. He also said that from his perspective, Mbalula was essentially calling out the president of the ANC and the country – former president Jacob Zuma – on his failure to carry out his constitutional duty.

Mbalula said Manuel was correct that he was congratulated by one of the Gupta brothers, but it was Ajay Gupta and not his brother Atul who phoned. Manuel also got it wrong when he said Mbalula was told at the Saxonwold home of the Guptas. Ajay, in his responding statements to the two versions, told the commission that his conversation with Mbalula happened at his family’s Sahara Computers offices in Midrand. He also said he had not specified which portfolio Mbalula was going into, and it was only because he had seen press speculation on the impending appointment.

“I was at a friend’s place, and he [Gupta] called,” said Mbalula. “He congratulated me on my appointment to minister of sports and recreation.” Asked by Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, the commission chairperson, if he’d ever been called by Ajay prior to this, Mbalula could not recall, but said that he did not particularly have a relationship with the family. Zondo further asked him where he thought Ajay would have gotten his number from, to which he responded: “It’s easy for people like him to get the number of someone like me.”

It is also true that he was the only one who spoke out at the NEC meeting, and Mbalula gave insight into his state of mind at the time. The issue for him was the threat of the integrity of the NEC, most of which was made up of sitting cabinet ministers. “I said these people enjoy powers that not even ordinary ANC members have,” he recalled, adding that he had analysed the issue as an appropriate issue to raise on that platform. “The ANC taught us to raise issues in a meeting, it was not in a rally or anything like that.”

His fellow NEC members were “bowing [their heads], looking down”. No one spoke after his point was made, except for one member who “rubbished” what Mbalula had just said.

“I understood that as a cabinet minister, you owe your plate to the president – it happened to Pallo Jordan, under Mandela – we shouldn’t owe our value to the person who appointed you, but to the people who elected us.

“A majority of NEC members are cabinet ministers, so it is difficult for some to raise issues...I just didn’t understand why 80 of us could not stand up and give direction, even if it meant establishing a commission ourselves.”

The dynamics within the ANC at the time have to be understood, explained Mbalula, with many people being afraid to speak out even when they wanted to raise issues. It was only in the lead-up to the party's national elective conference in Nasrec in December 2018 that members of the NEC started being vocal and raised issues.

After the meeting, said Mbalula, details of what transpired there were leaked to the media, and the next time he saw anything about it was in the *Sunday Times*. He used the opportunity to call out his fellow NEC members, saying that they did not find it prudent to speak out like he did in that platform, but someone saw it fit to leak it to the media.

Post NEC meeting, there was a certain level of animosity between himself and the Guptas. On the first occasion that he saw Ajay after that, he confronted Mbalula over what he had heard about what had transpired at the meeting. From then on Mbalula made a point of keeping the family at arm's length.

A point of contention for evidence leader Leah Gcabashe was the apparent disparity with a transcript of Mbalula's interview with former public protector Thuli Madonsela in 2016. In it, Mbalula notes that he was never contacted or appointed by anyone other than Zuma, when he was questioned over a public statement by EFF president Julius Malema, who urged him to publicly declare that he was summoned to Saxonwold and appointed.

It became a case of arguing semantics between Mbalula and Gcabashe, with the former stating that Madonsela's office asked specifically about how he was appointed, and not specifically on how he first found out – officially or not – of his appointment.

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