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Zondo Commission – Zuma claims limited contact with Guptas during set-up of the *New Age*

Former president Jacob Zuma may have inspired the establishment of the Gupta family's media enterprise, but he never influenced government business to that effect.

Zuma returned to the stand before the commission of inquiry into state capture on Tuesday. He testified that he did not recall interfering in the work of the Government Communications and Information System (GCIS) in relation to the Gupta-owned *New Age* newspaper, as per the testimony of former GCIS CEO Themba Maseko in August last year.

Asked by evidence leader Paul Pretorius if Ajay Gupta enjoyed the confidence of his executive enough to execute an alleged threat against Maseko that he would get his seniors to "sort him out" if he did not hand the government's advertising budget to the family, Zuma said not.

In his own testimony last year, Maseko claimed that Gupta called him in November 2010 to intimidate him into meeting with the family to discuss the media buying budget under Maseko's control, failing which Gupta would report Maseko to his seniors. This was, Gupta said, because he had influence over ministers in Zuma's cabinet, and Maseko's refusal to co-operate with him was not welcome.

Maseko testified that the GCIS was responsible for a R600-million budget for media advertising, to buy advertising space for interested government departments and other entities.

The phone call, said Maseko, was a follow-up to a meeting he had attended with Gupta at the family's residence in Saxonwold, Johannesburg, where the issue was first raised. Gupta wanted Maseko to re-channel the funds to the family's then newly-established newspaper, the *New Age*. While Maseko's immediate reaction was to say that was not how government worked, Gupta persisted.

Maseko would later start receiving calls from heads of communications in government, who were concerned over alleged bullying tactics by Gupta, who was calling them directly to bring business to the *New Age* and bypass GCIS.

"I'm not sure if I should really interpret people's mood and how they addressed one another," Zuma said on Tuesday, in response to a question from Pretorius on whether or not Gupta was justified to tell Maseko he enjoyed such privilege with members of the executive.

"Did Mr Gupta enjoy government support in the *New Age*?" asked Pretorius.

"I don't know, because I never discussed it with government people."

Pretorius then wanted to know, on the basis that Zuma had encouraged the Guptas to go into the media industry in the first place, if Zuma knew how they were advancing their wishes to fund the project. "From time to time they briefed me on the project," said Zuma. "They were just briefing me on the progress they were making, not the financing."

While Zuma would not recall the circumstances surrounding Maseko's removal from GCIS two months after the latter's altercation with Gupta, he denied being directly involved. Maseko told the commission last year that the then minister in the presidency, the late Collins Chabane, had called him into his office

at the beginning of 2011 to tell him that Zuma wanted him out of GCIS, but that he wanted to keep him in public service and would therefore make a plan for him.

Maseko further stated that Zuma happened to be out of the country at the time, a point the former president said was ridiculous, to imagine that he would leave the country just to give such a directive.

Zuma continues to testify.

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