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Zondo commission – Zuma lied about Maseko sacking, says official

A former senior staffer in the office of former minister in the presidency, the late Collins Chabane, has confirmed before the commission of inquiry into state capture that the minister did indeed receive an instruction in 2011 from former president Jacob Zuma to fire Themba Maseko. Brent Simons testified on Monday, saying Chabane, with whom he had a close personal relationship outside official business, confided in him in 2014 regarding the action he had to take against Maseko. In his testimony before the commission Zuma denied that he had given such an instruction.

Simons was chief director in Chabane's office.

Maseko was the CEO of the government communications information system (GCIS) when he was removed in February 2011 and replaced by Mzwanele Manyi. In his testimony exactly a year ago, in August, Maseko told the commission that he was removed from his post because he refused to succumb to pressure from Ajay Gupta to give the government's media advertising budget to the Gupta family's *New Age* newspaper. Maseko said he was on his way to a meeting with Gupta when he received a call from Zuma, who told him to "help these [Gupta] brothers out," without specifying in what way.

At the meeting later, at the Gupta home in Saxonwold, Maseko was first presented with the request to move the R600-million budget towards the newspaper, which was to launch officially in December 2010. His immediate reaction, said Maseko, was to refuse, but over the following weeks he would receive numerous calls from either Gupta himself or his associates, trying to pressurise him into submitting. In one of these calls, Gupta threatened to tell Zuma of Maseko's attitude, and he believes that this may have influenced his removal.

Simons told the commission that when Zuma testified last month, saying that Chabane may have been name-dropping in reference to the instruction to remove Maseko, he was in fact being untruthful to the commission and to the citizens.

"When the former president said the minister was probably name-dropping, that was totally contradictory to the character of the minister," said Simons. He added that Chabane was very down-to-earth and conducted himself in a respectable manner, opting on occasion to travel with his officials as opposed to his security convoy, for instance.

Although Simons had been expected to testify on a broader scope of evidence, commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo ruled that it be limited only to that which related to Maseko, as some of the parties implicated in his statement had not received implication notices as per commission rules.

The second witness of the day, Chabane's former private secretary Abednigo Hlungwani, told the commission that on the second day of Zuma's appearance, he received a phone call, and later a text message, with a threat against ever divulging what he knows of Maseko's sacking.

He was in the office with Chabane on the day in late January 2011, said Hlungwani, when one of Zuma's private secretaries called him to alert him that the former president wanted to speak to Chabane. Handing the phone to Chabane, Hlungwani left the minister's office, and was not privy to the details of the conversation that ensued. It was only at a later stage that Chabane revealed to him under casual circumstances, that "we have to get rid of Maseko."

Soon afterwards, Maseko's removal from GCIS was announced after a Cabinet meeting, as was the news of Manyi replacing him. It only started making sense to Hlungwani then that Chabane may have been instructed to remove Maseko, who was moved to the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), then under the leadership of former minister Richard Baloyi. In Maseko's testimony, he told the commission that his move to DPSA was because of courtesy from Chabane, who did not want to see him leave the public service. He also said Baloyi was not very welcoming towards him, and this led to him leaving his post months after his appointment.

Both Simons and Hlungwani testified that Chabane was unhappy about letting Maseko go.

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