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David Lewis: Government's 'name dropping' proposal trivialises a major administrative breakdown

Justice Minister Jeff Radebe's proposal that a public service campaign be introduced to discourage a 'negative culture of name dropping' overlooks the real issues. Corruption Watch is responding to the findings of the inquiry into the Gupta wedding plane landing at Air Force Base Waterkloof on 30 April 2013.

David Lewis, Corruption Watch's executive director, said the Justice Minister's findings admit to an extraordinary litany of fraudulent misrepresentation on the part of people acting on behalf of the Gupta family and employed in senior positions in the public service, the defence force and the police. These fraudulent misrepresentations potentially entail criminal liability and these should be investigated and, if criminality is found, they should be charged.

But how could this happen? How is it possible to 'misrepresent' that one speaks in the name of the President or a member of the cabinet without evidence of this, without evidence of formal authority? This incident speaks to a serious breakdown in administration at the highest level. How can the public be expected to accept that if a violation of security of this dimension could have been secured by misrepresentation, that the same does not occur in the issuing of licences or tenders or in the range of administrative decisions that are taken on a daily basis by public officials in their engagement with well-resourced private parties and firms. This is the level of mistrust that acts of corruption of this scale generates.

It would seem that mere mention of the Gupta family in the same breath as the names of senior members of the executive was sufficient to procure the most extraordinary privilege and to result in the most flagrant breaches of law and security considerations. We have to ask how it is that the Gupta name resonates so loud. Is it not because of their highly publicised relationship with the family of the President? Is it not because their name does already, and on a regular basis, open the door to extraordinary privilege? Are there other business people whose name secures similarly privileged access to public resources?

To refer to what has happened here as 'name dropping' is to trivialise a major administrative breakdown, and the doings of a family who clearly are capable of commanding extraordinary privilege based on their relationships with senior public figures, clearly including the President. That fact is clearly sufficiently well-known to enable or oblige senior public servants to act in flagrant contradiction of the law. This is the root of problem: starkly inappropriate relationships between senior people in public life and elements of the business community. This problem will not be resolved by the frankly silly proposal to make 'name-dropping' a disciplinary offence.

For more information:

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