



Response

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Full Circle?

“When thinking about the fall of any dictatorship, one should have no illusions that the whole system comes to an end like a bad dream with that fall. [I]ts psychological and social results live on for years, and even survive in the form of subconsciously continued behavior. In such circumstances history begins to turn in a tragic, vicious circle from which it can sometimes take a whole epoch to break free.”

Ryszard Kapuściński, 1985, *Shah of Shahs*

It will take some time for the revelations made last week at the Zondo Commission concerning the activities of the State Security Agency (SSA) during the Zuma era to be fully analysed and understood. But the testimony of Dr Sydney Mufamadi, who led a High-Level Review Panel that investigated SSA, and that of the acting Director General, Loyiso Jafta, both broadly corroborated by evidence given by two operatives, Mr Y and Ms C, leave absolutely no room for doubt that these revelations are substantially true.

Tens of millions of rands held in SSA slush funds were unlawfully paid to Jacob Zuma for his personal use. SSA projects were set up to influence factional battles within the ANC and to favour the ANC against opposition parties during election campaigns. R20 million was paid to the African News Agency (ANA) to produce ‘positive’ news about South Africa and the government. (Interestingly, ANA has admitted both receiving the money and the purpose for which it was meant.) Attempts were made, using public money, to set up a trade union to rival AMCU, which had become increasingly critical of the ANC and the government. And, in some ways most worrying of all, monies were set aside for the bribing of judges involved in Mr Zuma’s many court cases (though it is not known, beyond circumstantial evidence, whether any such bribes were actually paid).¹

All of this was of course illegal, unlawful, unconstitutional and corrupt, and intentionally so. Maybe less intentional, but still egregious, is the fact disclosed by Mr Jafta that the SSA cannot account for some R9 billion worth of assets! As Judge Zondo said, “How could a government department not be able to account for R9 billion? With R9 billion, imagine what you can do for people.”

Perhaps the most sickening aspect of the whole story, though, is how closely it mimics what the apartheid government did back in the 1970s and 80s. For example, in what became known as the ‘info scandal’, or ‘Muldergate’, the National Party government’s Department of Information used public money to set up one newspaper, *The Citizen*, which would provide favourable English-language coverage for government policies, and to bribe various overseas papers to do the same. The then head

¹ For a summary of the revelations see <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-01-26-secret-billions-poured-into-state-security-agency-to-sustain-and-protect-zuma-regime-claims-acting-dg-loyiso-jafta/>

of the Bureau of State Security, SSA's predecessor, General Hendrik van den Bergh, was a key player in this project, and R64 million of taxpayers' money was spent on it – about R3 billion in today's rands.

A decade later, in 1986, the security police helped to set up the United Workers Union of South Africa, which was linked to the Inkatha Freedom Party and was intended to be a rival to the congress-aligned federation, COSATU. There is also no doubt that the apartheid security apparatus was extremely active in influencing both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics in favour of the National Party, and it is likely, if not proven, that it was deployed in the factional battles that took place within the NP between 'reformers' and 'hardliners' in the 1980s and early 90s.

The similarities do not end there. As is well-known, one of the key weapons used by the apartheid security police was detention without trial, in terms of which thousands of 'troublesome' people were simply removed from circulation for as long as was deemed necessary, without recourse to law or access to family.² While it would be an exaggeration to equate a single, hopefully isolated, instance of extra-judicial detention now to the swathes of detentions back then, it is nonetheless disturbing that, according to Mr Jafta, Mr Zuma's estranged wife, Nompumelelo Ntuli, had been "held in remand detention without going through due process" by SSA operatives in 2014, and that such detention had been against her will.³ As Judge Zondo put it in his understated way, that "would be quite serious".⁴

Yet another similarity is the appeal to 'national security'. In apartheid times this concept was routinely cited as justification for excluding a whole range of issues from judicial scrutiny. Ironic then, that last Tuesday the government tried to stop Mr Jafta from testifying to the Zondo Commission, claiming it could threaten national security. Fortunately Judge Zondo, clearly understanding the difference between national security and governing-party embarrassment, waved away the attempt.

Lastly, let us hope for a final similarity. The info scandal ended the careers of the then Prime Minister, John Vorster; of the Information Minister, Connie Mulder; of the brains behind the scheme, Eschel Rhoodie; and of General van den Bergh. Even in the ethical wasteland that was the National Party government of the 1970s, their behaviour was beyond the pale. How the ANC government of 2021 deals with the SSA and with those of its senior members and officials named last week, such as current Deputy Minister David Mahlobo and former Minister Bongani Bongo, and former intelligence Director General Arthur Fraser, will tell us a lot about whether or not we have come full circle.

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² We are still dealing with the aftermath of detention without trial. The inquest into the death of Dr Neil Aggett, the trade union activist who died while being interrogated by the security police in 1982, has been re-opened and is currently underway in Johannesburg.

³ Ms Ntuli was rumoured, on what basis it is unclear, to have been involved in an attempt to poison Mr Zuma.

⁴ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/zondo-angry-over-mantulis-unlawful-detention-by-spies-probing-jacob-zuma-poisoning-93472e7f-8bb6-49f5-b335-fe88627e1989>