



SA Today



A WEEKLY NEWSLETTER FROM HELEN ZILLE

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Welcome to the latest edition of **SA Today**, the weekly newsletter from the Leader of the Democratic Alliance, Helen Zille.

SA Today
Helen Zille, DA Leader

His Master's Voice: How Zuma neutered the SABC

Those of us who value our hard-won Constitution are gearing up to defend it against an all-out attack on media freedom. The Protection of Information Bill (which effectively criminalises investigative journalism), the proposed media tribunal (to make the press accountable to politicians) and the arrest and detention of journalist Mzilikazi wa Afrika form part of a dangerous pattern.

But these attempts to curtail the independent press tell only half the story. Targeting the print media is part of the ANC's "ground war."

The other half is the "air war." The ANC has been waging a stealthy campaign to co-opt the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The air war and the ground war are part of a two-pronged assault on media freedom.

Two weeks ago, I wrote about the "ground war", which is gathering momentum between the government and the media.

Today I focus on the "air war" over the SABC. To fully understand what is happening at the SABC, we must go back to the ANC's Polokwane conference in 2007. There, the ANC noted that the SABC was integral to its political project, with the Orwellian title of the "national democratic revolution." The ANC therefore resolved to "encourage" the SABC to "promote local content that is consistent with the outlook of the country's Constitution and the values of the ANC."

So what did the ANC do to implement this resolution? How was the SABC – which accounts for 40% of South Africa's radio audience and 70% of its television audience – made answerable to the command centre of the ANC rather than the South African public?

The victorious Zuma majority in Parliament started by passing the

Broadcasting Amendment Bill (in the record time of 3 months) to give Parliament the power to remove the entire SABC Board and replace it with an interim Board that would give effect to the Polokwane resolution. The Zuma majority in Parliament swiftly replaced the 12-member SABC Board with a 5-member interim Board that would make executive appointments sympathetic to the Zuma faction of the ANC.

It was this interim Board that appointed Solly Mokoetle as SABC group Chief Executive Officer (CEO). On his appointment, Mokoetle announced that he would take his orders from Communications Minister Sipiwe Nyanda, instead of the SABC Board and Parliament as required by law.

This was the first key move in the co-option of the SABC. The second was when Phil Molefe was unilaterally appointed Head of News by the Chairperson of the new SABC Board, Dr Ben Ngubane (a Zuma appointee), instead of by the SABC Board as a whole. Again, this was a violation of the law.

A memorandum reportedly sent from members of the Board to Minister Nyanda revealed that Ngubane had cancelled interviews for the position of "Head of News" to ensure that they took place when three key members of the interview panel were unavailable. The memorandum revealed further that Molefe was chosen by Ngubane and Mokoetle in a secret meeting. Most serious of all, the memorandum revealed that Ngubane told the Board that he was "operating under the direct instructions of the President of the Republic and that he was resolved to appoint his preferred candidate."

The appointment of Molefe is patently unlawful. We therefore expect it to be challenged by the SABC Board and we will ensure that it is dealt with by the Communications Portfolio Committee in Parliament. We also intend to get to the bottom of the claim that, in appointing Molefe, Ngubane was acting on the orders of President Zuma.

What is happening behind the scenes at the SABC, underscores the experience of its disillusioned staffers who say that Phil Molefe does not make major editorial decisions without first consulting Luthuli House or President Zuma's office.

Claims that Ngubane, Mokoetle and Molefe are doing the ANC's bidding certainly do not surprise me. The suspicion that the SABC had been captured by the ruling party was emphatically confirmed when I met both Molefe and Ngubane at their headquarters in Auckland Park in July.

I had requested the meeting to discuss repeated incidents of anti-DA and pro-ANC bias monitored by our media team in Parliament.

I also wanted to speak to Ngubane and Molefe about something that Julius Malema had said at the infamous press conference where he kicked out BBC reporter Jonah Fisher for daring to point out that Malema lived in Sandton.

Once the ANC Youth League heavies had ejected Fisher from the press conference, Malema said:

"We don't force anybody to come here. We would be worried if the SABC doesn't come, but the rest of you, to be honest, we really don't care. The SABC is our own, but the rest, it's okay whether you come or don't come. We don't have a problem."

This remark, which was overshadowed by what else happened that day, was the clearest indication yet that the SABC was an ANC mouthpiece. I expected senior SABC executives to move quickly to distance the broadcaster from Malema's remarks and at least nominally assert the SABC's independence.

The silence was deafening.

So I wrote to Dr Ngubane, pointing out what Malema had said, and requesting the Board, for the sake of the SABC's credibility, to repudiate Malema. I received no reply. So I raised the issue during our meeting.

When I asked Ngubane to distance the SABC from Malema's claim, he rounded on me and accused me of "politicking". He point-blank refused to repudiate Malema, saying he would "not go against the constitution and challenge Julius Malema's right to freedom of speech".

I explained that refuting a person's claim you don't agree with does not amount to undermining their right to free speech. And I pointed out that the Constitution actually demanded the SABC to exert its independence from the ruling party. But Ngubane would not do it.

So, Malema's statement that the SABC belongs to the ANC still stands. The Chairman of the Board has refused to repudiate it, or even distance the Corporation from it.

I will not go into the rest of the discussions we had at that meeting. Suffice to say that my colleague, Lindiwe Mazibuko, MP and I left with the distinct impression that Ngubane had no intention of upholding the principle that the public broadcaster be independent of the ruling party. That he dismissed our complaints as an attempt by the DA to dictate to the SABC what the news should be, was deeply ironic.

In any event, if the law takes its course and it is found that Molefe was appointed unlawfully by Ngubane, there is every chance that neither of them will last long at the SABC.

But this may be cold comfort if the ANC pulls off its coup de grace in the form of the Public Service Broadcasting Bill soon to be tabled in Parliament. It is the final plank in the ANC's plan, hatched at Polokwane, to ensure that the SABC reflects the values of the ANC.

If this Bill becomes law, it will put the SABC under the direct de jure control of the Minister of Communications by giving him authority over its finances, allowing him to issue directives to the SABC Board, the authority to appoint the Local Content Advisory Board and the power to exert a great deal of influence over appointments to the SABC Board. All this means is that the SABC will effectively be accountable to the Minister, instead of to Parliament and the SABC Board as it is currently.

Like the Protection of Information Bill, we will fight this legislation with all we have. We cannot allow the ANC to take us back to the dark days when everything you saw on television and heard on the radio was decided by the ruling party. Those were the bad old days. We have come too far to go backwards.

Helen Zille

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