

The Zumafication of the SABC



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In June this year at a meeting with traditional leaders in Limpopo, it was reported that SABC Acting Chief Operations Officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng was presented with a cow, a calf and – bizarrely – a wife. According to the traditional leaders, Motsoeneng was given these gifts because he was “committed to his job and understands the strategic objectives of the SABC”.¹ In July, it was reported that a stadium in the Free State was to be named after Motsoeneng. The story quoted a provincial official who said the community had taken the decision “because the people felt he had done a lot of good things in Qwa Qwa.”²

All this seems incredible for a man who is, on the face of it, a mere functionary at the public broadcaster. But the truth is that Motsoeneng is far more than that. He is the ‘big man’ of the SABC who has been protected and promoted for protecting and promoting an even bigger man, President Jacob Zuma. Motsoeneng’s questionable appointment, his controversial utterances and the reign of terror he is said to have waged at the SABC have put him firmly in the public spotlight.

Arguably, Hlaudi Motsoeneng is just the most visible manifestation of the ongoing ‘Zumafication’ of the public broadcaster: Zuma’s allies are carefully constructing a powerful propaganda machine that places the SABC – with some 17 million TV viewers and 20 million radio listeners³ – at the centre of its plans to manipulate public opinion.

The Mbeki years

The politicisation of the SABC started some time before the ascendance of Jacob Zuma, with the ANC accused as far back as 2003 of attempting to influence the portfolio committee in its nominations for the SABC Board.⁴ Alarm bells rang later that year when SABC Board Member Thami Mazwai said: “As a broadcaster, you have to be very flexible when you deal with these issues... You can’t afford to be driven by old clichés, such as objectivity (and) the right of the editor.”⁵ In 2004, the ANC’s election launch was controversially covered live – a privilege not afforded to any other party. Some claimed the decision was taken because the Chairperson of the SABC Board, Eddie Funde, had also been in charge of the ANC’s party list selection process.⁶

In the latter years of the Mbeki presidency, the SABC was seen to be taking Mbeki’s side in the fierce factional battle between him and Jacob Zuma. In 2005, following Mbeki’s axing of Zuma as Deputy President, the SABC failed to show footage of Zuma’s supporters booing new Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka at a rally. The SABC’s Head of News Snuki Zikalala initially claimed that there had been no SABC cameras present, but was found to have lied when E-TV showed footage of SABC cameramen at the event.⁷ In 2006, the SABC refused

to air a documentary it had commissioned that contained criticism of President Mbeki. A year later, it emerged that Zikalala had instructed the SABC to 'blacklist' political commentators critical of the President.⁸

The onset of Zumafication

After Zuma's election as State President in 2009, the ANC in Parliament rushed through the Broadcasting Amendment Bill in the record time of three months. This gave Parliament the power to replace the SABC Board with an interim Board to make executive appointments sympathetic to the Zuma faction of the ANC.⁹

The interim Board's first order of business was to appoint Solly Mokoetle as SABC group Chief Executive Officer. In 2010, the Chairperson of the new SABC Board, Dr. Ben Ngubane (a Zuma appointee) worked with Mokoetle to appoint Phil Molefe as Head of News, without consulting the rest of the Board. 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."¹⁰ Molefe did the job he was appointed for, allegedly instructing senior executives at the SABC to stop giving favourable coverage to former President Mbeki. According to a *Sunday Times* source, Molefe told SABC executives that "he got his instructions from Luthuli House."¹¹

The rise and rise of Hlaudi Motsoeneng

In 2011, the Ngubane Board appointed Hlaudi Motsoeneng Acting COO of the SABC. Motsoeneng's first brush with controversy had been back in 2007 when, as an Executive Producer at Lesedi FM, he was dismissed following charges of racism, dishonesty, and promoting staffers without following due process. Motsoeneng was re-appointed a year later by SABC Chief Executive Dali Mpofu in what was perceived as caving into pressure from the ascendant Zuma faction. This was not the last time that Motsoeneng's career would be rescued by higher powers.

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In early 2013, the SABC Board requested that Motsoeneng report on an SIU investigation into SABC corruption dating back to 2008. A row ensued with Board Members after Motsoeneng allegedly offered to protect them from the findings of a separate investigation he had commissioned. The Board members interpreted this as a bribery attempt and, on 25 and 26 February, voted to have him removed as Acting COO.¹³

On 26 February 2013, Deputy Chairperson Thami Ka Plaatje advised Communications Minister Dina Pule that the Board had resolved to fire Motsoeneng. Shortly after that, Ngubane was quoted in a newspaper report as saying Motsoeneng had been reinstated, claiming that Ka Plaatje had made the decision.¹⁴ On 1 March 2013, Ka Plaatje withdrew the letter calling for removal of Motsoeneng, without the knowledge of the Board.¹⁵

The SABC Board distanced itself from Motsoeneng's re-instatement, telling the media: "[It] is regrettable as neither the chairperson nor the deputy chairperson have the power or authority to unilaterally change a board resolution." Before the Board could seek clarity from Ngubane and Ka Plaatje regarding the newspaper report, they resigned. Some days later, the Board re-affirmed its decision to remove Motsoeneng.

Mysteriously, within days of the Board reaffirming its decision to remove Motsoeneng, most of the members of the Board resigned. It was alleged by COPE MP Juli Killian that this had been under instruction from Luthuli House.¹⁸ The new interim Board immediately voted to reverse the decision to remove Motsoeneng as acting COO.¹⁹ In the end, the only person to survive this unsavoury episode was Hlaudi Motsoeneng himself. It was the second time that Motsoeneng was to miraculously survive at the SABC but not the last.

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The Public Protector's report

In November 2011 two senior SABC employees requested an investigation into financial mismanagement at the SABC, undue interference by the Minister, Motsoeneng's allegedly fraudulent appointment as Acting COO, and his unlawful activities while occupying that position.

The Public Protector's report issued on 17 February 2014 made several damning findings about

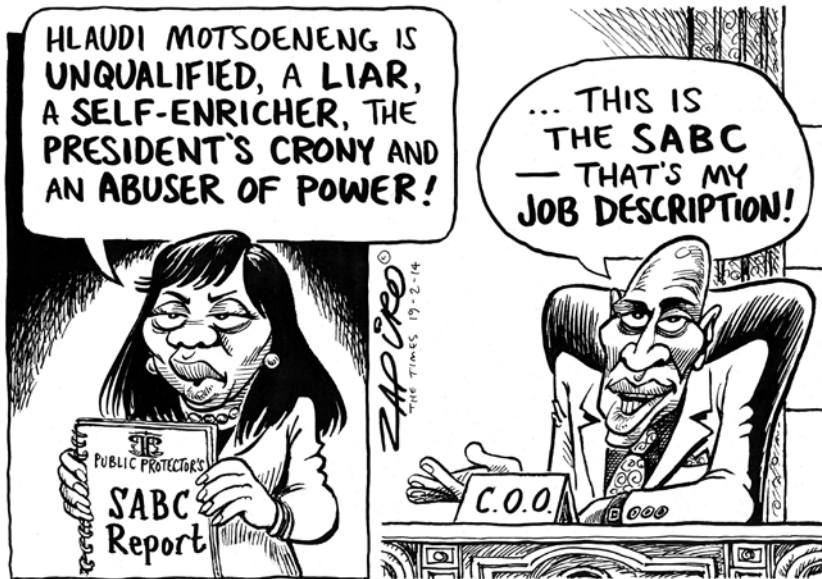
Motsoeneng's appointment and conduct, including that he:

- lied about having obtained a matric certificate and made up imaginary grades on his application form for the position of COO, as well as earlier positions held at the broadcaster,
- abused his power by having his salary increased three times in the space of one year, from R1.5 million to R2.4 million,
- Was responsible for the unlawful appointment of Ms Sully Motsweni to various positions and for her subsequent unlawful salary increases between 2011-2012. Motsoeneng was also, in part, responsible for the unlawful appointment of Ms Gugu Duda as CFO,
- "purged" senior staff leading to "the avoidable loss of millions of Rand towards salaries...and settlements for irregular terminations of contracts" and
- unilaterally increased some staff members' salaries without following the SABC Personnel Regulations, leading to the SABC's "unprecedented salary bill escalation by R29 million."

The Public Protector directed the Board to take disciplinary action against Motsoeneng, to recover all wasteful expenditure incurred as a result of irregular salary increments and for the Minister to take urgent steps to fill the position of COO within 90 days of the report.

To date, no disciplinary action has been taken against Motsoeneng and no attempt has been made to recover the wasted money. One recommendation that was complied with was the appointment of a permanent COO – although it is unlikely that it was the appointment that the Public Protector had in mind.

At a SABC Board Meeting on 7 July the Board resolved to appoint Motsoeneng as the Chief Operations Officer in a permanent capacity. Minister Faith Muthambi reportedly arrived at the SABC at around 19h00 and entered into a private conference with the SABC Chairperson, Ellen Tshabalala, prior to the Board Meeting. When the Chairperson emerged from that conference at about 21h00, she proposed to the Board that it immediately appoint Motsoeneng as the permanent COO – even though the question of filling the COO post was not on the meeting's agenda.²⁰



Several Board Members objected on the grounds that the position had not been advertised, and no candidates were shortlisted or interviewed as stipulated in the SABC Articles of Association. Five of the eleven board members did not support his appointment: two abstained and three voted against. The remaining six board members voted in favour of the appointment. Muthambi duly announced Motsoeneng's appointment the next morning.

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This was the third time that Motsoeneng had survived at the SABC against all odds. Instead of being fired, he has been protected and promoted by high-ranking politicians. It is not hard to figure out why.

The perfect functionary

President Zuma has never been so embattled. Guptagate, Nkandlagate, Marikana, the arms deal and the spy tapes saga have cast a dark shadow over his presidency. Many in his own party hold him responsible for heavy electoral losses in the 2014 election – from 66% to 62% nationally, and down 10% in Gauteng to 53%. This is why Zuma needs a loyalist at the heart of the SABC to help him survive the inevitable internal backlash.

There is more than enough evidence to suggest that Motsoeneng's unswerving loyalty to the President has helped him keep his job. It is reported that Motsoeneng has been known to boast about his strong ties to President Zuma.²¹ It has also been suggested that he ensured favourable SABC coverage for Zuma to help see off Kgalema Motlanthe's challenge for the ANC presidency at Mangaung.²² When Zuma was booed at Nelson Mandela's funeral, Motsoeneng saw to it that the spectacle – widely reported on at home and abroad – never made it on to the prime time SABC news bulletins. The parallels with the SABC's non-coverage of the Mlambo-Ngcuka booing incident some ten years earlier are striking.



But it was the job that Motsoeneng did during the 2014 election that must have really endeared him to the ANC leadership. Early on in the campaign it was reported that SABC staffers were instructed not to show crowd shots of opposition party rallies or carry footage of service delivery protests.²³ The SABC also caused controversy when it pulled DA and EFF television adverts critical of Zuma's record on corruption and job creation.

Motsoeneng has couched the pro-government agenda of the SABC as a commitment to reporting on positive news stories. As he said in August last year: "The media normally focus on the negative publicity. I believe, from the SABC's side, 70% should be positive news stories and then you can have 30% negative stories."²⁴ Motsoeneng went further with his attack on the media in July this year when he told a conference that the print media only reports on corruption because the government is black. He also said that journalists should be licensed, a practice commonplace in repressive regimes such as Iran, Myanmar and Zimbabwe.²⁵

Motsoeneng is the perfect functionary to ensure positive reportage of the President – ruthless and calculating. But it would be a mistake to think that President Zuma's plan to control the airwaves ends with Hlaudi Motsoeneng.

A new propaganda ministry

Government sources suggested in May this year that President Zuma was waiting until after the election to establish an Orwellian-sounding 'Information Ministry'.²⁶ On 16 July, the President proclaimed that the old Department of Communications would become the new Department of Telecommunications and Post. The SABC would move to a newly constituted Communications Department that would include the Government and Communication Information System (GCIS) previously housed in the Presidency.

Industry experts were quick to point out that the proclamation made no sense in a world in which digital and broadcast technologies were rapidly converging. Despite widespread criticism of the departmental split, no rational and compelling

explanation from the government has been forthcoming. And so we are left to speculate about the President's motives in creating a new Department of Communications with unprecedented control over the crafting and dissemination of government's message.

It is of some concern that the same Minister in charge of the GCIS and the SABC is also able to exert influence over the broadcast regulator, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, as it falls under the aegis of her Department. Perhaps even more alarming is the shifting of the Film & Publications Board from the Department of Home Affairs to the Department of Communications. The Film & Publications Board's wide-ranging powers to classify and proscribe virtually any content has led some to speculate whether it has been set up to be the censorship arm of the new 'Ministry of Propaganda'.

The deployment of Zuma-ally Faith Muthambi to head up the Department of Communications adds further credence to the idea of a propaganda ministry. Shortly after assuming office, Muthambi announced that she would be reducing the number of SABC Board Members from 12 to 5, and transferring Parliament's powers to hire and fire the Board to herself.²⁷ Her role in the appointment of Motsoeneng discussed earlier confirmed her complicity in the ongoing politicisation of the SABC.

Conclusion

Hludi Motsoeneng is the personification of a renewed and far-reaching assault on the independence of the public broadcaster. But his protection and promotion is just one component of a plan to ensure that the entire state communication apparatus sends out a positive message about the Zuma presidency – a “good story to tell” in ANC parlance.

The capture of the SABC by factional interests is mirrored in the politicisation of other state institutions important for Zuma's survival, including the prosecuting authority, the intelligence services and the police. This process of Zumafication should be of concern to every South African with an interest in protecting our constitutional democracy. Indeed, it is going to take the collective effort of the media, civil society and political parties to stop it.

NOTES

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