

International

Defiant at inquiry, Zuma denies breaking law with Gupta family

S Africa's ex-leader claims he's a victim of conspiracy

JOHANNESBURG: Former South African President Jacob Zuma told a corruption inquiry yesterday that enemies had plotted to bring him down, and he had never broken the law with the business family at the centre of an influence-peddling scandal. Zuma struck a defiant tone at the public inquiry, saying he was the victim of a "character assassination" by enemies who had tried to get rid of him for more than 20 years.

His appearance at the inquiry - set up to test allegations that Zuma allowed cronies to plunder state resources and influence government appointments - marked a dramatic fall from grace for a politician who long dominated the country's politics. Zuma, ousted by the governing African National Congress (ANC) in February 2018 and replaced by President Cyril Ramaphosa, has consistently denied wrongdoing over his nine years in power.

Referring to the three Gupta business brothers, Zuma said: "I never did anything with them unlawfully, they just remained friends. Never, never did I discuss any matter that does not belong to them." "They were businesspeople and successful businesspeople," Zuma continued.

"I'm not a businessperson, I know nothing about business, I'm a politician, I know something about politics." Under pressure from rivals in the ANC, Zuma set up the corruption inquiry he now sits before in his final weeks as president, as a number of his colleagues, including Ramaphosa, feared scandals surrounding Zuma could indelibly tarnish the party's reputation.

Zuma had avoided establishing the inquiry since a 2016 report by South Africa's anti-corruption watchdog, the public protector, instructed him to do so to investigate allegations that three Gupta brothers had been able to influence ministerial appointments and had won state contracts improperly. The Gupta family denied the accusations and left South Africa around the time that Zuma was ousted.



'Hands off Zuma', say supporters

'Vilified'
"I've been vilified, alleged to be the king of corrupt people," Zuma, 77, said in his opening remarks to the hearing in Johannesburg, which was being broadcast live on South African television. "There has been a drive to remove me from the scene...a conspiracy against me." He said he could trace this to the early 1990s, when he received an intelligence report that two foreign intelligence agencies and a branch of the apartheid government that was in power at the time had come up with a strategy to get rid of him. He did not name where the foreign intelligence agencies came from, only that they were from "big countries".

"They (my enemies) took a decision that Zuma must be removed from the decision-making structures of the ANC. That's why the character assassination, that is the beginning of the process that has put me where I am today," Zuma said. Zuma also hinted that he could spill the beans on ANC comrades who had spoken out against him. "I've been respectful to comrades, maybe I've reached a point where that must

take a back seat."

Asked about Zuma's comments, ANC spokesman Pule Mabe said the party would give the inquiry space to do its work. "The ANC is not on trial here," Mabe said.

Natasha Mazzone, a senior lawmaker with the opposition Democratic Alliance party, said Zuma was trying to whitewash serious allegations. "The fact that we've heard a conspiracy theory dating back to 1990 is proof that the real truth is going to take a long time to extract," Mazzone said. Rudie Heyneke from the Organization Undoing Tax Abuse said the inquiry could find it difficult to pin much on Zuma because he had "always been careful to stay a layer or two away from the action".



JOHANNESBURG: Former South African president Jacob Zuma appears before the Commission of Inquiry into State Capture in Johannesburg, where he faces tough questioning over allegations that he oversaw systematic looting of state funds while in power. —AFP

'Hands off Zuma'

Zuma still has allies and a group of several dozen supporters broke into clapping and chants of "Zuma" as he entered the hearing room. Outside, supporters wearing military clothing emblazoned with the emblem of the former armed wing of the ANC shouted: "Hands off Zuma!" One of them, Bongani Nkosi, said he thought the inquiry was out to get Zuma and that he had enemies because he supported radical economic policies to help poor black people.

Ramaphosa, Zuma's former deputy, has made sweeping personnel changes in government and state-owned companies as part of an effort to curb corruption and revive the stagnant economy.

But he has been hampered by the lingering influence that Zuma and his allies exert over the ANC's top decision-making bodies, as well as the scale of the problems he inherited.

Zuma, expected to give testimony to the inquiry from Monday to Friday, has also been in court on several occasions over the past year to answer corruption charges linked to a deal to buy military hardware for the armed forces in the 1990s. The inquiry, which is headed by South Africa's deputy chief justice, Raymond Zondo, held its first hearing in August and is due to finish next year. The inquiry is a rare example of an African leader being brought to book soon after losing power. —Reuters

Tombs riddle could see Vatican's efforts to find teen backfire

VATICAN CITY: The Vatican's attempts to help the family of an Italian teenager who went missing 36 years ago have merely deepened the mystery surrounding her fate, and risk backfiring, analysts say. Emanuela Orlandi, the daughter of a Vatican employee, was last seen leaving a music class in Rome aged 15, and theories have circulated for decades about who took her and where her body might lie. Two tombs at the Teutonic Cemetery in the Vatican were opened last week after an anonymous tip-off that they might contain her remains.

But in a surprise twist, not only was there no trace of Orlandi, the remains of two princesses believed to have been buried there were gone too. The Vatican immediately promised an inquiry, saying the bones may have been moved during work on the cemetery and Pontifical Teutonic College during the 1960s and 1970s. This weekend it announced it had found two ossuaries placed under a trapdoor inside the college.

They will be opened Saturday by forensic scientists and in the presence of an expert appointed by the Orlandi family. The latest development sent conspiracy theorists into overdrive again, with some smelling a cover-up by the Vatican. "Most Vatican personnel aren't cunning criminal masterminds from a James Bond movie, and sustaining a highly intricate conspiracy is, frankly, almost always beyond their mettle," Vatican expert John Allen said in religious news site Cruxnow.

'Knew tombs empty'

However, he adds: "As long as people believe the Vatican has something to hide when it comes to two 19th century princesses, or a vanished girl, it's that much harder to believe 'All the Pope's Men' about something serious. "For instance, the clerical sexual



LABUHA, Indonesia: Indonesian people stay out of their homes following 7.3 magnitude earthquake in Labuha, North Maluku. —AFP

abuse crisis and Pope Francis' ongoing efforts to promote reform". The Vatican's communications director Andrea Tornielli insisted the graves had been opened out of "Christian closeness to the Orlandi family" and "certainly not - as has been said - (in) an admission by the Vatican of a possible involvement in the concealment of a corpse". That was not enough to satisfy doubters however, particularly after Orlandi's brother Pietro, who has spent his adult life searching for his missing sibling, told media he had been warned hours before that the tombs would be empty. Orlandi urged the Vatican to question Francesca Chaouqui, a PR consultant who had worked in the tiny state and was mixed up in a separate scandal.

Chaouqui was convicted last year of leaking classified documents to journalists at the end of a highly embarrassing trial dubbed Vatileaks II. She was defended by Laura Sgro, who is the Orlandi's family lawyer. Orlandi told the Italian group Mediaset that Chaouqui called him the day before the tombs were opened to say they would be bare. "In an effort to cushion the latest disappointment (in his search), I told Pietro the tombs would be found empty. This is my only statement on the matter," Chaouqui wrote on Facebook on Friday. —AFP

All names in the family have been changed to protect their identities. Lama has spent half her lifetime held by IS, who forced her to convert to Islam and speak Arabic instead of her native Kurdish. During AFP's visit to her tent in the Khanke displacement camp in northwestern Iraq, Lama appeared engrossed in a mobile shooting game with her cousins Fadi and Karam, freed from IS around the same time.

Like the boys, Lama dressed in black and kept her hair short. The trio spoke Arabic to one another, switching to Kurdish when addressing her mother. "They're still brainwashed. When they're bored, they start talking about how they wish they were back with Daesh (IS)," said Nisrin, saying no psychologist had visited them.

Virtually every generation coming of age in Iraq has been seared by conflict, presenting an "unprecedented" challenge, said Laila Ali of the UN children's agency. UNICEF does not know exactly how many children IS recruited, how many returned or where they live. It estimates that 1,324 children in total were abducted by armed actors in Iraq between January 2014 and December 2017, when Baghdad declared IS defeated, but expects the real number is higher. —AFP

In Iraq, minority children haunted by ghosts of IS

KHANKE DISPLACEMENT CAMP: Brainwashed and broken, the Islamic State group's youngest victims are struggling to recover from years of jihadist captivity as they return to their own traumatized minority communities in Iraq. Dozens of Yazidi and Turkmen children were rescued in recent months as IS's "caliphate", notorious for its use of child soldiers and "sex slaves", collapsed in Syria.

Many have been reunited with their families, but their mental recovery has been slowed by prolonged displacement, a lack of resources, and a milieu accustomed to fearing, not forgiving, IS members. Lama, a 10-year-old Yazidi girl, has repeatedly threatened to stab herself or jump from a tall building in the few months since she returned to Iraq. "I fear she'll never be like other Yazidi children," said her mother Nisrin, 34.

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LAMEES NAJEM
Class of 2011 - Graphic Design
First Kuwaiti woman to reach the North Pole

admissions@auk.edu.kw
Tel: 1802040 / (+965) 2224-8399,
Ext: 3148 | www.auk.edu.kw
@AUK_Kuwait @AUKnews
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