



Response

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Policy and the Generals

It is a cardinal rule of democratic governance that a country's security services should not interfere in political matters, or comment on questions of policy that belong to the elected civilian government (except when asked to do so in their area of professional expertise), or publicly criticise their civilian superiors.

The defence force, the police service and the intelligence services are meant to serve the interests of the nation as a whole, regardless of which party or ideological tendency happens to be in power. If any of these entities shows partisan sympathies it is effectively supporting one party or ideology and opposing the others, thereby subverting the people's democratic rights. And if it interferes in matters of government policy, which properly belong to elected officials, it likewise undermines democratic structures and procedures.

In the last couple of months the rule has been violated more than once. At the beginning of July the KwaZulu-Natal Police Commissioner held a press conference, surrounded by camouflage-clad officers toting assault rifles, at which he accused the Minister of Police and some senior colleagues of being in league with major criminal gangs and of interfering with investigations into politically-linked murders. It is not clear whether Lieutenant General Mkhwanazi had tried to bring these allegations to the attention of President Ramaphosa, or of the Portfolio Committee on Police, before going public.

Later that month, the Chief of the SA Navy, Admiral Monde Lobese, told a parliamentary committee that the National Treasury was "sabotaging" the defence force by failing to grant it sufficient funds. He went on to say that "National Treasury can't be allowed to be a super-department, or a government on its own, over and above the current government."¹

Then, in August, the head of the SANDF, General Rudzani Maphwanya, used the occasion of a visit to Iran to express his views on that country as one that "stood alongside the oppressed and defenceless people of the world", and according to a BBC report, told Iranian officials that "his visit carrie[d] a political message from Ramaphosa's administration". The Presidency, in response, called the visit "ill-advised" and the Department of International Relations and Co-operation said that his comments "do not represent the government's official foreign policy stance".²

Most recently, the National Police Commissioner, General Fannie Masemola, has come under criticism from the acting police minister for his decision to "prematurely" return 121 case dockets (relating to the same politically-linked murders highlighted by KZN's Lieutenant General Mkhwanazi) to a police task team instead of allowing the Madlanga Commission of Enquiry to deal with them. Acting Minister Cachalia said that he was concerned "that steps are being taken in relation to this matter before the Commission has had a chance to investigate the issues surrounding the Task Team".³

¹ <https://www.news24.com/politics/national-security-at-risk-head-of-sa-navy-accuses-treasury-of-sabotaging-sandf-20250718-1190>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62n9yrynjyo>

³ <https://centralnews.co.za/acting-police-minister-cachalia-criticises-masemola-over-premature-return-of-121-dockets-to-kzn-political-killings-task-team/>

It may well be that in some of these instances the uniformed officials are correct in their concerns, and that they genuinely feel that they are acting in the national interest. But that, of course, is not the point. Channels and mechanisms exist for them to express their views to their elected superiors which, if used properly, do not undermine other government departments or the executive authority in general. And the personal views of a general on Iran or any other country, or on wider geopolitical issues, should remain just that – personal, and not broadcast on official platforms.

Since last year's elections South Africa has been going through a period of adjustment to the fact that we no longer have a single, dominant governing party. For 30 years ANC policy was effectively South African policy, but now the situation is far more fluid and nuanced. Appointed officials – and not just those who happen to wear a uniform – may have grown used to certain policy lines, and may instinctively have echoed them in their professional dealings. Now, though, they have to realise that they are employed by a state with a much broader ideological range and a more mixed set of policy positions.

Over the years our security forces have generally observed the principle of non-interference in political and policy matters, and these departures from that principle certainly do not constitute a crisis. But any crossing of constitutional lines is serious, and hopefully the civilian authorities will send a clear message to the uniformed leadership that they need to respect the relevant boundaries.

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