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The SANDF: Who's Really in Charge?

Section 199 of the Constitution provides that the security services, including the SA National Defence Force, must act in accordance with the Constitution and the law, and in general be subject to civilian control and the oversight of Parliament. This is typical of a democracy – the armed forces are expected to refrain from political involvements, to act within the law, and to be accountable to the structures of democratic governance. It is of some concern, therefore, that in recent times the SANDF, at both leadership and 'footsoldier' levels, has strayed from these provisions; and that there has been little, if any, attempt by the civilian authorities to rectify the situation.

One of the most obvious examples was the visit of the Chief of the SANDF, General Rudzani Maphwanya, to Iran in August 2025, during which he made remarks about South Africa's relations with that country, about the war in Gaza, and about SA and Iran "supporting each other and oppressed nations".

<https://tinyurl.com/5ebdnsjx>

While the actual content of what the General said was fairly routine, it was a clear intrusion into issues of foreign policy, on which he had no mandate to speak and which caused significant embarrassment to the government.

<https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/dirco-clarifies-remarks-foreign-policy-after-sandf-chiefs-iran-visit>

<https://tinyurl.com/yksw7wfs>

As concerning as his remarks were, were the questions around accountability. At first, the line was that the visit itself had not been sanctioned by the government and was 'ill-advised' – at least, that was how the Presidency and the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO) framed it. Later, the position was clarified – his visit had been approved by the Defence Minister for 2024, but was then postponed to 2025. The fact that SA's geopolitical situation, specifically *vis-à-vis* the new US administration, had become more delicate by the time of the visit, was seemingly overlooked. Either way, the danger of having a military general taking it upon himself to speak on foreign policy is apparent.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gBkaizvgd4>

<https://tinyurl.com/2cdzfsum>

<https://www.politicsweb.co.za/news/dod-clarifies-general-rudzani-maphwanyas-visit>

Another instance of either confusion between the SANDF and the government, or possibly of defiance of the latter by the former, occurred in January this year, when the SA Navy hosted 'Exercise Will for Peace' at Simonstown. The exercise involved vessels from various BRICS nations, including Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. Regardless of the debate about whether it made sense for SA to host such an exercise, given that it was clearly likely to upset the USA and raise eyebrows among some of our European allies, the more pressing question was around who was actually making the decisions. It was reported that the Presidency had instructed the Defence Minister to ensure Iran's withdrawal from the exercise, but that its vessels had continued to take part. As the Institute for Security Studies put it, "if a presidential directive was ignored, this suggests either ineffective communication or a severe disconnect between military command and civilian authority. Either way, South Africa seems to lack meaningful control over a major multinational exercise in its own waters." A board of enquiry was subsequently

appointed to find out why the instructions of the political authority had not been carried out, but seven months later the board has not yet completed its task.

<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sa-s-naval-gazing-reflects-a-deep-defence-and-foreign-policy-disconnect>

<https://mg.co.za/politics/2026-01-19-parties-demand-answers-over-iran-role-in-a-sandf-naval-exercise/>

Neither of these incidents involved direct criminality or loss of life, unlike the death of senior Hawks investigator, Lieutenant-Colonel Frans Mathipa, who was shot dead in August 2023 while he was investigating the murder of an Ethiopian national in Johannesburg. Col Mathipa had uncovered strong evidence against a number of SANDF Special Forces members, six of whom were subsequently charged with his murder. Since being charged some of them have failed to return to court, some have been promoted by the Army, and all are having their trial costs covered by the SANDF, even though their actions cannot – by definition – have been in the course of their military duties. The Daily Maverick's Stephen Grootes situates this incident within a worrying pattern which, he argues, creates the impression that "the SANDF's top leadership is able to break the law and get away with it."

<https://tinyurl.com/3c3rmjdc>

This incident has also been covered internationally by the BBC, in an exposé which can only have harmed our reputation for adherence to the rule of law.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly8djwgem0o>

<https://tinyurl.com/bdhkdxav>

Compared with such serious actions and allegations, recent reports about the behaviour of some SANDF troops deployed in the Cape Flats and other areas as part of 'Operation Prosper', may seem fairly minor – slapping a woman and unlawfully confiscating a pair of trousers from a man on the grounds that they have a camouflage pattern.

<https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/i-want-my-pants-back-army-refuses-to-return-designers-seized-camo-clothes-20260817-1125>

<https://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/sandf-saps-probe-video-of-soldier-allegedly-slapping-mitchells-plain-woman-20260830-1002>

But it should be remembered that during the military deployment as part of the COVID-19 lockdown, at least one person was killed specifically by SANDF members (Collins Khosa, in Alexandra, Johannesburg), while another 10 died as the result of security force actions, some of which involved SANDF members. The lack of accountability and proper investigation of these incidents makes it difficult to apportion responsibility, as the Daily Maverick's in-depth analysis makes clear.

<https://tinyurl.com/4mk7fhwz>

Finally, internal governance problems within the SANDF, including auditing matters that have been unresolved for 20 years, have caused no less than the Deputy Minister of Defence, General Bantu Holomisa, to take the unusual step of calling publicly for an independent enquiry.

<https://share.google/ZYkVIF1E5zPnQID9j>

It would be an exaggeration to describe all this as a crisis, but at the same time it is clear that all is not well in the SANDF when it comes to its understanding of the proper boundaries within which it is required to operate. It is instructive that, in none of the instances mentioned above, is there any record of an SANDF spokesperson acknowledging wrongfulness or apologizing for the impugned actions. At best there is mention of an enquiry, after which the matter is effectively dropped. A far more energetic exercise of political authority over the army – along the lines suggested by General Holomisa – is urgently required.

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