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Pieter du Toit | Sabotage and scapegoating: The assault on André de Ruyter and the escalating war over Eskom

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Eskom CEO André de Ruyter

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*Eskom CEO André de Ruyter, already fighting with one arm tied behind his back thanks to the decrepit state of Eskom's power stations, hamstrung by a lumbering procurement bureaucracy and frustrated by a lack of skills, is now also having to put down an internal rebellion, writes **Pieter du Toit**.*

The war for control of Eskom, its balance sheet and buying power is escalating almost by the hour.

The company's group chief executive officer, André de Ruyter, might be the target, but the real prize is control over an imminent loan of R131 billion to facilitate Eskom's transition away from coal, and the company's annual procurement spend of billions and billions of rands. Those leading the assault on De Ruyter are motivated not by an urge to improve

performance, electricity generation or outcomes, but rather the desire to maintain the networks of extraction, which has seen massive amounts of money being pilfered from the company.

And while Eskom staggers along, trying to implement long-overdue maintenance projects and attempting to close the gushing money taps, those who were central figures during the years of state capture are being rehabilitated as "independent energy experts" on national television.

Neutral observers?

Matshela Koko, the senior executive who was at the centre of the Guptas' Optimum Coal Mine acquisition, and whose stepdaughter scored millions in contracts from Eskom, is being paraded by Newzroom Afrika, ENCA and the SABC as an "independent energy expert". Brian Molefe, a self-styled close friend of the Guptas, also appears on SABC to opine on Eskom operations. 702 Talk Radio reverts to Adil Nchabeleng, a favourite of the RET crowd for his support of the Russian nuclear lobby, and SABC used Mandla Maleka, a disgruntled former Eskom executive who was passed over for the job of treasurer, to slam De Ruyter after a media briefing.

Suddenly, many of those implicated in the company's near collapse are being normalised as neutral observers, experts in their field and with the standing to analyse internal machinations. They aren't "alternative voices"; they are deeply conflicted individuals invested in who controls Eskom.

Koko and co are alternative voices or "independent experts" as much as Jacob Zuma is an independent expert on governance and the rule of law.

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What would happen if De Ruyter is fired? Possibly the triumphant return of Koko or Molefe to the Eskom executive?

Possibly, but the endgame is undoubtedly the restoration of the internal extraction networks, who for so long enjoyed untrammelled access to and control of procurement spend at Eskom. News24 has reported extensively on the rent-seekers who almost literally shovelled billions of rand out of the company over the last six months. Corruption and theft are part of Eskom's DNA, from management at Megawatt Park down to conveyor belt operations level at far-flung power stations. We have glimpsed a sliver of the extent of corruption at the company, and how the brazen culture of extraction was allowed flourish. Make no mistake, those networks are still functioning.

Wednesday's trips at three generating units at Matimba, one of Eskom's two best-performing power stations, is not a coincidence. And who responded almost immediately

on Twitter, with more detail than Eskom was able to provide? Koko, that's who. Days earlier, he tweeted a screenshot of a highly sensitive dashboard detailing the state of generating units across the network. The dashboard is not publicly available and comes from deep within the bowels of Eskom operations. How did Koko access it?

Internal rebellion

De Ruyter, already fighting with one arm tied behind his back thanks to the decrepit state of Eskom's power stations, hamstrung by a lumbering procurement bureaucracy and frustrated by a lack of skills, is now also having to put down an internal rebellion. The outages at Matimba, out of character and highly unusual, seems to confirm this. Eskom's management is now readying for an escalation in the conflict over the company's future, with forensic experts being brought in to investigate the highly suspicious breakdowns, which, to some at Eskom, looks like obvious sabotage.

The Eskom boss has also been assigned close protectors, such is the heat being generated.

So, what if De Ruyter is fired? Load shedding, for one thing, will stop. The maintenance and refurbishment programme will be suspended, and the country will enjoy an uninterrupted electricity supply. The criticism of De Ruyter and his team will be repeated, and his dismissal justified with the suspension of load shedding; Koko, Molefe and Maleka will appear on television and radio, and state capture will be forgotten.

But power stations will again break, diesel will again be used as emergency generation capacity is fired up, and the whole cycle of abuse and neglect of power stations will start anew. Load shedding, whoever is in charge, will be reintroduced.

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It will, however, be the extraction networks that will be the most satisfied. When the R131 billion clean energy deal was announced, breakages increased. And with that, public attacks on De Ruyter and board chairperson Malegapuru Makgoba intensified. These networks felt the squeeze for two years as investigations by the Special Investigating Unit and law firm Bowmans started to expose corruption. But now they have a chance at survival and even a spectacular resurrection.

Billions of rands are about to flow into the energy sector. There will be ample opportunity for the unscrupulous to eat. If De Ruyter has his way, that money will be tightly managed. The predatory extraction networks are, however, already scheming, with all manner of plans allegedly being drawn up to make sure De Ruyter and his team do not administer those funds.

It was Pravin Gordhan, now Eskom's patron as public enterprises minister, who, in 2016 and 2017, implored the public to "join the dots" when the state capture networks held sway.

The dots this time around are glowering as large as then.

- Pieter du Toit is assistant editor: in-depth news and a former parliamentary correspondent.

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