

South African MP warned against investigating Russia-South Africa spy satellite

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In revelations tied to the leaked “Spy Cables” documents being published by *Al Jazeera* in collaboration with the *Guardian*, opposition Democratic Alliance MP David Maynier said he was warned off an investigation into a joint Russia-South Africa surveillance project. This is thought to be a satellite now being used by rival South African spies to snoop on each other via Russia.

Appearing on *Al Jazeera* on February 27, Maynier, the Shadow Minister of Defence and Military Veterans, said a satellite “was launched [for South African Defence Intelligence] on or about 14 December 2014,” under the codename Flute. The satellite surveillance programme was to be used for strategic military purposes, eventually culminating in the launch of a satellite by Russia on behalf of South Africa that was to integrate the countries’ satellite surveillance programmes to provide wider coverage over all of Africa and as far north as Israel.

According to the leak, a top-secret report from the South African State Security Agency (SSA) shows that Russia and South Africa were cooperating on a secret satellite surveillance programme, which the SSA codenamed Project Condor.

“Bizarrely,” as a press release on Maynier’s web page explains, “the State Security Agency appears to have been collecting intelligence about a satellite surveillance programme being implemented by Defence Intelligence.”

The SSA report dated August 28, 2012 represents the first time information about Project Condor/Flute has been in the public domain. It says the SSA was relying on an agent in Russia for details of the joint satellite surveillance project between the Russians and Defence Intelligence.

The disclosures came days after *Al Jazeera* and the

Guardian began publishing what they tout as “hundreds of secret intelligence papers from agencies all over the world.” The Spy Cables include papers drafted by operatives working for Israel’s Mossad, Britain’s MI6, Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB), the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the SSA.

State Security Minister David Mahlobo said in an interview with the *Mail & Guardian* the leak “undermines the operational effectiveness of intelligence and its mandate to secure the state and diplomatic relations.” He denied that factionalism in the ruling party could be a factor in the revelations.

In what sounded like an early attempt to apportion blame, Mahlobo added, “We inherited an intelligence [service] from a fragmented past. We had the agents from the apartheid intelligence and those from the liberation movements. They were brought together to serve the country...”

Mahlobo’s boss, President Jacob Zuma, headed the intelligence wing of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in exile. That the leaks happened during his term of office is supposed to be a sore point.

The Spy Cables describe Johannesburg as the “El Dorado of espionage.” Experts have said that, whereas under apartheid the country was relatively unwelcoming to the world, with the explosion in the number of embassies opened after the ANC accession to power in 1994 there was a commensurate rise in the number of spies in South Africa.

Even as South Africa aligns itself more and more with Russia and China—now the country’s biggest trade partner—through multilateral vehicles like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) group—the country remains susceptible to pressure from the Western intelligence agencies. Britain’s MI6 and

the CIA are supposed to have fostered an anti-Iranian bias among South African intelligence operatives. They warned that the Iranians were using South Africa as a recruiting ground for groups like Al Qaeda and asked the South Africans to keep tabs on their diplomats.

According to one of the leaked documents, the SSA considered spying for the CIA. Doing so, went the reasoning, might have illuminated what the US considered of most importance, and revealed some objectives of US intelligence gathering efforts.

The leaks come at a bad time for Mahlobo. Just days before the *Al Jazeera* scoop, the minister was forced to announce an inquiry into a signal jammer which prevented journalists from using their cell phones during Zuma's state of the nation address on February 12.

In the press gallery, journalists prevented from covering the event in real time waved their handsets, chanting, "Bring back the signal!" DA Chief Whip John Steenhuisen rose to object to the communications blackout and was followed by other opposition party MPs who denounced it as a violation of parliamentary rules and therefore unconstitutional.

A handwritten note passed from Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa to Mahlobo caused the minister to leave the House for a few minutes. When he returned, so did the cellular networks signal.

Minutes later, Economic Freedom Fighters MPs were assaulted by armed police officers and parliamentary security personnel in identical black-and-white attire. The EFF MPs were thrown out of the joint sitting of the National Assembly and the upper National Council of Provinces for interrupting the president's address, demanding to know from Zuma when he intended paying back the US\$23 million of state funds unlawfully spent on his private compound at Nkandla.

The chaos in parliament and Maynier's fruitless investigations into the secret spy satellite deals between Russia and Defence Intelligence are of a type. For a sitting MP to be told, as Maynier reports he was, by persons unknown, that the surveillance satellite was not something he wanted to look too closely into smacks of more than just a creeping authoritarianism. The impotence of opposition politics is increasingly clear.

These events signify the limits of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. Having lost the power of persuasion, the ruling party turns to ever greater

secrecy and when necessary, demonstrations of force. The DA and EFF are unable to compel Zuma to accept any responsibility for any satellites or for Nkandla, never mind making restitution for even a fraction of any expenditure he is personally responsible for. Neither the ANC, nor the reactionary EFF and DA can give expression to the popular will of working class South Africans.

The repression in parliament is related to the skulduggery of SSA agents and their 140 foreign counterparts throughout South Africa. All together dimly reflect the gigantic social pressures unleashed by the systemic breakdown of global capitalism since 2008. None of the elite factions in any of the parliamentary parties represent a way out for the working poor and the unemployed. For the masses, the answer lies in the building of an independent working class party with a socialist international perspective.



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