

# Mission: Capture M&G - Guptas advised on buying out one of their most vocal critics

The Guptas considered buying one of their most vociferous critics, the Mail & Guardian newspaper, in a James Bond-style 'Project M', leaked emails show.



The emails, from January 28 2016, show that Zimbabwe's Alpha Media - which publishes three national newspapers: News Day, The Standard and the Zimbabwe Independent - was also in the family's sights.

In an email with the subject line "Some early thoughts on 'Project M' sent by the former chief executive of Gupta company Oakbay, Nazeem Howa, to Rajesh 'Tony' Gupta, Howa speaks about the possibility of buying the M&G and its sister titles "which are indeed brands which have great recognition factor in South Africa across all sectors of society".

"The newspaper is champion a position [sic] that President Zuma is corrupt and should be relieved of his responsibility. They have made it their focus to find ways to support the #Zumamustfall campaign, and the family and our group have become convenience [sic] pawns in their strategy to unseat the President," Howa writes.

He then lists statistics on the circulation and advertising revenue of the newspaper which, according to him, had been hurt by its editorial position.

"Editorial position has certainly been a factor in this decline and one would question how quickly one can reclaim the lost

government advertising spend, and how much of an editorial positioning change will be needed to achieve that," Howa writes.

He ended the email by saying the estimated cost of the acquisition would be R20-million "which I would argue is not a good deal at all".

At the time of the email, articles were appearing frequently in the Mail & Guardian revealing the inner workings of the Gupta family. The newspaper was among the family's fiercest media critics.

A report in the newspaper in 2013, which referenced a Sunday Times expos that alleged that Tony Gupta had tried to bribe a senior official at SA Airways, led to both newspapers being sued by the family for R500m for defamation - possibly the biggest defamation suit in South African legal history - but the suit never went to trial.

Trevor Ncube, deputy executive chairman of M&G Media and publisher of the M&G, is also the chairman of Zimbabwe's Apha Media.

Asked to comment on Monday, Ncube said the M&G had not changed ownership since 2002.

"As normal with any business we get approached by entrepreneurs expressing an interest in acquiring our business," Ncube said when asked if he had ever received offers from Gupta-linked businesses.

Asked if he would have declined a purchase offer from the Gupta family, Ncube said: "The Mail & Guardian is a national institution of which we are mere custodians. We have a duty to protect its brand of journalism, particularly cutting- edge investigative journalism.

"It would be reckless and irresponsible to off-load the business to anybody likely to undermine the 30-year-plus legacy of fiercely independent journalism," Ncube said.

The Guptas attorney, Gert van der Merwe, said he had advised his clients not to respond to media inquiries until the veracity of the e-mails has been established.

**Source:** The Times

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