

# Zuma and energy minister at odds over nuclear adviser

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The man behind President Jacob Zuma's nuclear project is a favourite for a senior government post.



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The *Sunday Times* has learnt that Senti Thobejane, a special adviser to both Zuma and Energy Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson, is one of three candidates for the director-general post in the Department of Energy.

Thobejane is said to be Zuma's preferred candidate, while Joemat-Pettersson is opposed to him.

Other candidates are acting director-general Wolsey Barnard and deputy director-general Tseliso Maqubela.

Joemat-Pettersson inherited Thobejane when she succeeded Ben Martins as energy minister earlier this year.

Thobejane played a key role in the nuclear agreements South Africa signed with Russia, France, China, Japan, South Korea and the US.

He was in Russia with Zuma in August. This week, he denied that he was lobbying for the Russians, saying he had developed similar "relationships" with companies from other countries.

"The relationship that I have with any company is the relationship that the South African government has with that company," Thobejane said. "Whether it is the Russians or Chinese companies, we engage with them exactly the same way."

He said there was a perception that South Africa was favouring Russia and China, but this had arisen because of "discomfort" among countries that had previously dominated the industry.

He predicted that more than one service provider would be awarded a contract to expand South Africa's nuclear power

capacity.

Thobejane, whose CV includes an MSc degree from Georgetown University in the US, said he had been approached to advise Zuma on nuclear matters in 2011. He was appointed adviser to the then energy minister, Dipuo Peters, the following year.

"I was appointed by the Ministry of Energy, but one of my functions is to provide advisory services to the president," Thobejane said.

It appears that his dual role has caused confusion and tension between himself and Joemat-Pettersson.

Sources in the Department of Energy say Thobejane has been on trips without Joemat-Pettersson's approval, and has defied instructions from her.

He described his relationship with the minister as "cordial, professional and effective", while acknowledging that it was not "lovey-dovey".

"This minister drives her people, whether it is Thobejane or the acting director-general," he said.

"Naturally people don't like to be driven. But if you are driven and you understand the reason and the purpose, then there is no reason to harbour tensions."

Thobejane is said to have refused to be vetted after Joemat-Pettersson was appointed.

"The minister asked him about five times," said one senior official.

Thobejane said he was aware of the requests for staff to undergo vetting, but this did not apply to him because Zuma had used his prerogative to give him a security clearance when the president appointed him as his adviser.

"The president has defined me in his appointment of me. [He said] 'You are defined in this dispensation.' Who am I now, or who is anybody out there, to want to define me otherwise?"

Thobejane - who speaks nine languages, including Swahili and Spanish - has years of experience in government and in state-owned companies. He has worked for the department of health in Limpopo, Eskom and the Nuclear Energy Corporation of South Africa.

He left Necsa under a cloud after he was accused of negotiating himself a 25% increase, an allegation he denied this week.

*Source: Sunday Times*