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South Africa's Former President Offers Fiery Defense in Corruption Probe

Jacob Zuma denounces allegations against him as a decades-old plot to destroy him



Jacob Zuma, former South African president, prepares to testify in Johannesburg on Monday. PHOTO: WALDO SWIEGERS/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Gabriele Steinhauser

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JOHANNESBURG—Former South African President Jacob Zuma forcefully defended himself in his first appearance at a corruption commission, denouncing more than two decades of allegations against him as an elaborate smear concocted by foreign intelligence agencies and remnants of the country's old apartheid-era security services.

It was an eye-catching performance. Mr. Zuma launched the inquiry in January 2018 in a failed attempt to deflect mounting media reports and statements from political colleagues that he had allowed an Indian business family to direct government decisions ranging from cabinet appointment to state contracts.

Mr. Zuma's defense team, which later accused his daughter, Gwladys Zuma, of orchestrating the

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Mr. Zuma has long denied allegations that he has abused state business for the gain of his family and friends. But Monday’s hearing—the first in a week of planned testimony by the former president—was his most detailed defense yet.

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After entering the Johannesburg hearing room to the claps and chants of his supporters, Mr. Zuma presented himself as the victim of a foreign-led campaign to undermine him reaching back to his return to South Africa from exile in 1990, during the final years of the white-minority regime. The aim, Mr. Zuma said, was to stop him from revealing the names of spies that had infiltrated the ANC, and who foreign powers and the former apartheid regime hoped would one day lead the country.

“There was a plan to deal with Zuma and Zuma has been dealt with all the time,” the former president said, adding that attacks ranged from fake media reports and criminal charges to poisoning attempts.

A former ANC spy chief who spent a decade on Robben Island alongside Mr. Mandela, Mr. Zuma didn’t offer any evidence of the alleged involvement of foreign intelligence agencies or the assassination attempts. Instead, he lashed out at white South African business leaders and journalists, and defended his relationship with the Guptas, the Indian business family who allegedly exercised an outsize influence in the country before they left South Africa.

“I never did anything with them, unlawfully or otherwise,” Mr. Zuma said. “They were friends. They were friends with everyone.”

The Guptas have denied wrongdoing and aren’t currently facing criminal charges.

Since hearings started in August, South Africans have been pounded by near-daily revelations of alleged corruption and influence peddling by senior members of their ruling party. The allegations involve a much wider cast of characters than the Gupta family, whose relationship with Mr. Zuma initially sparked the inquiry. One South African business man recounted how he

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Following Mr. Zuma's ouster, South African prosecutors re-established corruption charges against him linked to a 1999 arms deal that were dropped weeks before he was elected president in 2009. The trial in the case, which Mr. Zuma said Monday was part of the conspiracy against him, is expected to start later this year.

Mr. Ramaphosa has pledged to support the prosecution of ANC members accused of wrongdoing and established a special unit to bring charges against those implicated at the state-capture commission. Three other commissions, meanwhile, are investigating mismanagement and corruption at South Africa's tax office, the prosecuting authority and the government investment fund.

Mr. Zuma, though, retains powerful allies within the ruling party and other state institutions, who have publicly attacked Mr. Ramaphosa and some of his key ministers. Among other things, Mr. Zuma's supporters are pushing changes to the mandate of the South African Reserve Bank and more aggressive action to redistribute wealth from South Africa's white minority to the black majority, unsettling foreign investors and weakening the rand currency.

South Africa's economy also continues to struggle with the fallout of the Zuma years, which left some of its state-owned enterprises, including the power company, with debilitating debts and often unable to provide reliable service.

Write to Gabriele Steinhauser at gabriele.steinhauser@wsj.com

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