

Zuma offers silence over answers for Nkandla

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WAS the Mail & Guardian (M&G) justified last week in publishing the public protector's interim report into Nkandla? Public Protector Thuli Madonsela said it was a breach of the law, but I am less sure of this. There is a clause in the relevant act that makes it illegal to publish documents and evidence that is before her during an investigation, but it does not deal with interim reports.

More relevant may be a moral argument: is it fair to publish allegations in an interim report before the accused have been able to respond and correct any errors? I think the M&G might have upset due process, but it was for the public good. The evidence belongs in the open, particularly when there are attempts to cover up. I think the M&G met its obligation to make it clear it was not a final report.

After all, there is nothing to stop President Jacob Zuma standing up and defending himself, correcting any errors, making it clear if he feels he has been unfairly treated. Or just admitting wrong and undertaking to correct it.



Anton Harber

In fact, the most striking thing is Zuma's silence. He has his party henchmen attack the media and Madonsela, deflecting attention away from the allegations themselves and on to those who make them. He has the right to reply and rebut allegations, and we are all eager

to hear it, but chooses not to.

African National Congress secretary-general Gwede Mantashe asked questions this week about whether Zuma wanted these home improvements, or whether it was his decision to spend taxpayers' money on a swimming pool on his property or to move his wife's tuckshop.

Why does he not simply ask Zuma these questions? He is the one who can answer them.

A media owner's name cropped up in another leaked interim public protector's report. The public protector's inquiry into the fishing industry apparently raises questions about a dubious tender bid won by Iqbal Survé's Sekunjalo company, which recently bought the Independent newspaper group. Survé has denied the accusation and laid a charge against the Sunday Times for publishing the interim report.

It is a sad day when a newspaper owner — whose role should be to protect editors and journalists — acts against another for publishing material that belongs in the public arena. Survé is putting Sekunjalo's interests ahead of his newspapers', and their credibility will suffer for it.

This challenges all his editors to work out how they will cover the story. I don't envy them, as it is not pleasant to have to cover a story about the person who hires and fires you. Fortunately, we have sufficient diversity in our media to know that if they do not cover it fully, others will.

In London this week, Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger went to parliament to defend his handling of the Edward Snowden revelations. The Guardian has faced relentless pressure from the British state and other newspapers, which have accused it of being "unpatriotic" in leaking embarrassing secrets of its government and their allies.

Rusbridger was able to show that the Guardian had acted cautiously, consulting the British government frequently on what they intended doing and not naming individuals who might be endangered. It was a lesson in responsible journalism: publishing startling information in a way that minimises harm and damage and rebuffing those who would use "patriotism" and national security to protect those who abuse power.

It is not only the big national papers that are facing such threats. The editor of The Informer in Matatiele in the Eastern Cape, Andile Nomabhunga, was arrested and charged this week with trespassing after visiting the home of a town manager accused of using official funds to build a studio in her house. Nomabhunga was invited into the house to take pictures, but the manager's lawyer husband laid charges after they appeared in the paper.

We live in gratitude to outspoken media that err on the side of exposure and shrug off intimidation by the state, politicians and even media owners.

■ Harber is Caxton Professor of Journalism at Wits University and former M&G editor