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An internal memo circulated in a North West government department last week during the days leading up to its national Women's Day commemoration event on Wednesday. It ended with a brief and unexplained request: "You are also requested to wear black skirts or pants."

Little did they know, said some disgruntled public servants who had received the note, that on their arrival at the official event in Kimberley in the Northern Cape, they would be paraded as part of the matching black-and-green-clad ANC Women's League cohort.

The televised government-funded event, where President Jacob Zuma gave the keynote address, turned into an ANC Women's League rally to lobby support for one of the party's presidential hopefuls, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma - complete with a song-and-dance in which Zuma also took part.

"It was a false pretence of a women's day commemoration and a sinister strategy to prop up the ANC Women's League numbers," said a North West public servant, who spoke to City Press on condition of anonymity.

She said public servants from the Free State and the Northern Cape also attended the event.

Thapelo Dithebe, chairperson of the ANC in Kimberley's Frances Baard region, who is also the face of the Dlamini-Zuma campaign in the Northern Cape, said the government event was attended by anyone who wanted to show up.

He insisted that "no one is prescribed what to wear".

Dithebe said the local women's league had invited their colleagues in the Free State, North West and KwaZulu-Natal to come and support the event.

He said the women's league had made no secret of their preference for Dlamini-Zuma to be the next ANC

# Women's rally or political campaign?



**CELEBRATIONS, ANC STYLE** Women came from across the country to commemorate national Women's Day at Galeshewe Stadium in Kimberley in the Northern Cape. Among those attending was presidential hopeful Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma

PHOTO: KOPANO TLAPE GCIS

president and that, when members saw that she was in attendance, they were naturally excited.

The ANC branch in the Frances Baard region has also announced its support for Dlamini-Zuma, breaking rank with the provincial ANC.

Government insiders in the North West said at least six departments - including finance, public works, health,

education, human settlements and economic development - had funded travel and accommodation expenses for staff to attend the Women's Day celebrations. They had been prompted by a similar memo from national government.

Among the staff members were secretaries, interns and cleaners.

Another employee said: "We did not ask why they wanted a dress code. But to our surprise, when we got there, we found that we had actually accompanied people to a Zuma campaign event because we found everyone wearing the same black and green."

"Maybe they wanted us to look like everyone else and not differ with the others who support Zuma, because black and green was the colour of the day. I did not see the importance of our going there, except for Zuma and his women's league."

But another employee said it was not unusual for government to prescribe a dress code, and so staff did not question the directive. She added that they volunteered to go on the trip and were not forced.

"But what happened there was not what we expected, so we used the trip as an outing to get some fresh air."

North West government spokesperson Brian Setswambung said the national Women's Day gathering was a government event and departments that sent employees to represent them paid for their transport, like they would do for any other government event.

"There was no prescription for employees who attended to wear black skirts," Setswambung said.

Dithebe said women came in their numbers to celebrate. "The event was successful and was graced by the presence of Dlamini-Zuma. The women of this country and the ANC branches have pronounced that it is time for a woman president."

Unfortunately, one or two people tried to mar proceedings, he said. "They wanted to disrupt the event but did not succeed. They organised service delivery protests and destroyed our beautiful flags, but they did not succeed. We are unstoppable."

Referring to the opposition's motion of no confidence against Zuma on Tuesday, he said: "The spirit of the country was also lifted after the failed coup in Parliament."