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# Parliament's new boss plans a security overhaul



The fire at parliament in January last year. The institution is now working on plans to rebuild the damaged buildings at a cost of more than R2bn. Picture: Gallo Images

By ANDISIWE MAKINANA

● Ten months after an inferno raged through parliament, the institution has not conducted its own investigation into how the incident happened and how a similar disaster can be avoided.

This was revealed by the institution's new administrative boss, Xolile George, in an interview with the Sunday Times this week.

Parliament is now working on plans to rebuild the gutted buildings at a cost of more than R2bn.

"As a new person, when I asked the question I was advised by management that so far no investigation has been done. It is of course a concerning matter which we will be able to prioritise," said George.

"We understand many players have their role, the criminal investigation by law enforcement has happened; I would imagine public works had a role to examine the adequacy of its own infrastructure support role. And I am sure for us in terms of parliamentary security, we also have a role to ask questions about what happened.

"What did we do? What did we not do? Were our management plans adequate for that moment? Were we exposed? All those things will help us to strengthen the security environment of parliament and we will be looking at that."

George was appointed secretary to parliament, effectively its CEO, in June, taking over from Gengezi Mgidlana who was placed on precautionary leave in June 2017 and eventually fired in 2019.

He indicated this week that the security of parliament needs to be improved. Parliament has not had a head of security since Zelda Holtzman was suspended in July 2015. After her departure, the security division was downgraded into a unit under Institutional Support Service, alongside household and catering and without an independent head.

Two months ago, George told the joint standing committee on financial management of parliament that he was prioritising the appointment of a new head of security and a CFO for the institution.

"I'm at a stage where I am almost concluding the internal processes," he said when asked about the appointments.

He said he found that the two positions had been "juniorised" and that he had to review the scope of the two roles before he could pitch them to the market "fairly soon".

"We have a situation of the fire; you have security being a subdivision of facilities management. Security is quite a strategic issue for the image of the institution.

"So you need an elevated conversation for an institution like ours, which is a national key point. Security must be a major focus and priority," he said.

The same will apply to finance regarding the CFO position, whose "current level is quite low" in the organisation.

George wants to see a shift in how the parliamentary administration supports MPs.

He believes the administration has to robustly scrutinise the mechanisms parliament uses for its co-mandates – lawmaking, public participation and oversight.

"I won't be able to say at this point that our oversight is yielding the results we desire. I have not yet examined it, primarily because of newness.

"All I've committed to the joint standing committee is that our planning approach is deficient in many areas: the performance management system, the strategy planning in terms of setting priorities.

"But you also need to know, as a result of your actions as parliament, this is how it has translated into the executive shifting on its approach or focus of programme execution ... we don't implement, we scrutinise but we also hold the power to influence decisions differently."

Coming from the local government sphere, the former South African Local Government Association boss says he knows the nuts and bolts of execution. This empowers him to examine actions of executive players in a manner that helps them ask: "Is our oversight plan structured properly?"

George believes effective oversight should be measured by the effect it has on the lives of ordinary people.



Xolile George