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No-one at home but taxpayers foot R100m upkeep bill

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● It has cost taxpayers almost R100m to keep the lights on, the taps running and to spruce up President Cyril Ramaphosa's state-allocated homes in Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban since he came to power in 2018.

This is according to a written reply by public works minister Sihle Zikalala to parliamentary questions from DA MP Leon Schreiber.

The public purse has forked out the millions despite Ramaphosa mostly using the state houses as offices rather than as the residential accommodation they were designed to be, sources say.

The president prefers the comfort of his luxurious homes in top-notch suburbs Hyde Park in Johannesburg and Fresnaye in Cape Town.

The money was spent by public works to provide water and lights, pay property rates and taxes, and provide maintenance services that cost more than R11m at Pretoria's Mahlamba Ndlopfu in the 2018/2019 financial year alone.

Situated in Pretoria's Bryntirion Estate, the residence is said to be the one that Ramaphosa occupies the most.

The department has spent around R325,000 on water and electricity, R1.1m on property rates and taxes and R29m on maintenance since 2018.

At Oliver Tambo House, which is for deputy president Paul Mashatile, R12m has been spent on maintenance and the water and electricity bill stands at R2.6m, while around R190,000 has been spent on rates and taxes.

Mashatile does not stay at the house, preferring his private residence in Midrand's high-end Waterfall City.

At the presidential residence in Cape Town, Genadendal in the Groote Schuur Estate, R10.9m has been spent on electricity and water while about R5.6m has been spent on maintenance.

At Durban's J.L. Dube House, R6.5m has been paid for electricity and water, with property rates and taxes costing R7.2m and maintenance R9.8m since 2018.

About R6.3m was spent to renovate the house when Ramaphosa took office, but the department and the Presidency have declined to detail the expenditure.

While the total expenditure for water and electricity, property rates and taxes, maintenance and renovations at all the official residences stands at R95.2m, a source close to the president told the Sunday Times that Ramaphosa prefers to stay at his private homes.

"It did not start with him, because Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, when she was the deputy president, stayed in her house in Sandton. She did not stay at Oliver Tambo House," the source said.

"The same with president Kgalema Motlanthe ... they stayed at their private residences.

"Jacob Zuma and Thabo Mbeki used the state houses ... when this president [Ramaphosa] was the deputy president, he bought a piece of land [in Cape Town] and started building his current house, where he stays.

"The state house has a full staff complement that is employed by the state to make sure that he is OK, prepare the food when there is going to be a meeting.

"This is to ensure that just in case he goes there, he has everything he needs, and everything is in place.

"The cleaners, helpers, chefs, gardeners, security and butlers are always available to serve a sitting head of state and the second in command, whether they occupy the state residences or not," the source said.



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Millions spent on president's homes

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Another source who asked not to be named said: "Every time he is in Durban, he uses the residence. In Pretoria they used the residence a lot under Jacob Zuma because he used to live there. Ramaphosa only uses them when there is a state visit and as an office rather than a place to live."

During the Zuma era, City Press reported that almost R1bn worth of upgrades had been planned for the Bryntirion Estate, including an "executive health facility".

Presidency spokesperson Vincent Magwenya referred the Sunday Times to Zikalala's office.

Public works spokesperson Lennox Mabaso said they had a duty to maintain the properties, whether they were fully occupied by the president or not.

"These are not personal properties but state properties that cannot be left to deteriorate. It is malicious thinking to assume that they are properties of the public office bearers that are using them.

"Maintenance on these properties is conducted based on the maintenance cycle, not based on the individual principal's wishes or desires. All expenditure is budgeted for, presented in various budget votes, and voted for in parliament. The president or the Presidency or parliamentarians do not commission

any work on these properties."

He said because most of the structures were built more than 100 years ago, they required regular maintenance and renovations.

"The department of public works conducts ongoing conditional assessments and all subsequent maintenance, upgrades and renovations where necessary, and these are entirely the responsibility of the department in its capacity as the custodian of the government immovable assets, land and buildings.



President Cyril Ramaphosa

"There are costs associated with maintenance. Most of these structures have begun to succumb to the ravages of time, putting a strain on the successive maintenance budgets of the department."

The government has preserved the properties as part of the national heritage and the budget for the upkeep of the residences is approved in parliament, he said.

Schreiber has slammed government expenditure on houses Ramaphosa is not using fully.

"What makes Ramaphosa's conduct particularly abhorrent is the open secret that he does not even live at these properties. Instead our out of touch president spends most of his time at his various luxury properties."

He said Ramaphosa would be reported to the public protector for possible breaches of the ministerial handbook and the executive ethics code.