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voices

CARVING UP THE PIE The construction industry is being undermined by the so-called construction mafia that demands a percentage of project income PHOTO: ISTOCK

CONSTRUCTION MAFIA

THE CANCER CREATED BY THE ANC

The "construction mafia" that is hamstringing one of South Africa's key industries is the creation of the governing party and its allies, writes **Thamsanqa Malinga**

In 1999, jazz musician and producer Themba Mkhize released his seminal album *Tales From the South*, which featured the famous track *Amankwebevu*.

In the song, he warned: "Ushwala buyazakhele ikhehla labo" - a metaphor warning that alcohol could ruin a young man and turn him into an old drunkard. As someone who loves the use of language, I thought I should start this piece by quoting Mkhize's words to discuss the state of drunkenness termed the "construction mafia", which was created by the ANC and its cadres, thanks to their overindulgence in the tender system.

Poor Public Works and Infrastructure Minister Shile Zikalala - who was seen huffing and puffing while exercising during lockdown - is now running around trying to attract media attention, telling all and sundry that he is dealing with the cancer of the construction mafia which is spreading across South Africa at an alarming rate.

So bad is this scourge that major blue-chip construction companies such as Calgro M3 have had to take a stand and officially withdraw from provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal. Imagine that.

In a country so besieged by unemployment, a big corporate decides that it will not take up any construction projects in a province because it is intimidated and forced to pay bribes, protection money and all sorts of "commissions" to mafiosi posing as "business forums". Yet, in the face of this public statement by the company, government was silent.

Do you know why the ANC government kept mum while this cancer of the construction mafia started and festered? Because this is the creation of the ruling party and its cadres.

In fact, the construction mafia is an infection caused by the Progressive Business Forum (PBF), that bizarre entity that the party in black, green and gold says is a "business engagement platform that draws participation from SMEs and corporates across all sectors ... [and] facilitates engagement and creates opportunities for dialogue among business leaders, entrepreneurs, government and civil society".

What it fails to say is that this entity is a "masked networking" body that fundraises for the ANC year in and year out.

When the PBF was founded, it was selling tables for the state of the nation address, the



SHILE ZIKALALA

January 8 event of the ANC. Businesspeople could wine and dine with the ANC president and high-ranking officials of that organisation. However, these officials also doubled as the president of the country, his ministers and deputy ministers.

The lines between party and state have been deliberately blurred.

Those wishing to buy high-cost chairs or tables at the event were those cadres benefiting from the tenders or seeking to benefit from government business. It was a mutual-benefit affair.

The president of the ANC appeared at the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture and testified that, due to its work, his party's donors were now afraid to commit to it.

The same was said by the late deputy secretary-general Jessie Duarte and the expelled secretary-general who is now the leader of the African Congress for Transformation, Ace Magashule.

When the ANC could not even pay salaries to its employees, it became public knowledge that donors were afraid to continue funding it.

Former ANC and national president Thabo Mbeki has remarked that "people join the ANC just to get access to powerful positions".

Even when sent to quell the situation in the Free State, he bemoaned the presence of "criminal elements" in the party and called for an audit.

In the long line of people "wanting to eat", we find the small tenderpreneurs, those operating from internet cafes and dining rooms because they cannot afford to pay the "membership fee" of the PBF, which buys one

access to high-end networking events.

These guys were left on the outskirts to starve while those with proximity were eating and flaunting their ANC-branded leather jackets, motorbikes, wines and cigars.

In no time, the internet café and dining room tenderpreneurs found a loophole. Unfortunately for National Treasury, they thought they were doing a good deed with the preferential procurement regulation.

The outcasts grouped themselves outside the PBF, formed small township business forums and exploited the "30% tender rule". The department of public works had introduced a policy that compels companies awarded tenders worth more than R30 million to subcontract 30% of the contract value.

These "new guys" focused on that. They would waltz into any construction site in their "township wards", announce themselves to be a "business forum" and demand subcontracts.

If a tender had already been awarded to another company which happened to be from outside of the area, the response was simple: "Give us the 30% and we'll just walk away", because they knew what the tender was worth to those having to bid for it.

Government simply looked the other way. These were just cadres with illegally-won contracts paying off other cadres who felt short-changed by those with "connections".

In time, this ANC battle resulted in rattling guns in townships in Durban and elsewhere in South Africa. Still, no one bothered to do anything about it. As long as the ANC had money when January 8 rolled around and there were free T-shirts to give away, motorcades and all, the ANC was not going to intervene, neither as a party nor as government.

These township forums were emboldened because they were getting away with it. They took the practice to big formal business, and it became a cancer that we now cannot even put into remission.

To paraphrase Mkhize's use of metaphorical language, avarice creates its own pus. This so-called construction mafia is a pus oozing from the wound that is both the ANC and that black, green and gold PBF.

Malinga is a director of Mkabayi Management Consultants, a columnist, a political commentator and the author of *Blame Me on Apartheid*

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