

After Marikana the question remains: Who is Riah Phiyega?

LEE-ANN ALFREDS

ANALYSIS

WHO is Riah Phiyega? Before her appointment as national police commissioner in June last year, Mangwashi Victoria Phiyega was an unknown entity.

She appeared to have been conjured out of, if not thin air, then definitely from left field, to steer, in the words of Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa, “the SAPS towards better compliance, systems integration, effective and greater accountability... Her international expertise, qualifications coupled with local understanding of the management dynamics... enable her to help the SAPS... deliver on its mandate”.

It did not take long for Mthethwa to have cause to rue those words. On August 16, 34 striking miners were shot dead at Lonmin’s platinum mine outside Rustenberg in a mas-

sacre that reverberated around South Africa and the world. Just 65 days on from her surprise coronation, Phiyega had become a household name.

But in the light of her performance at the Farlam Commission of Inquiry into the Marikana massacre, South Africans could be forgiven for posing the question again this week: who is Riah Phiyega?

Is she the ice maiden who laughed and joked as she was alleged to have done early in proceedings as footage of the deaths of the miners was viewed in the Rustenburg auditorium where the commission is being held? Is she merely incompetent, the manager who failed to take disciplinary steps against police officers who

failed to capture critical video footage of two of the crime scenes at Marikana last year in violation of her earlier orders?

Is she a buffoon who really does believe her denials that she “cannot say those 34 people were killed by police” – despite a police report confirming that police officers had shot the strikers? Or has she just been unmasked as the emperor without any clothes?

Despite the government welcoming her appointment, Phiyega – the wife, mother and grandmother who started out as a social worker before moving into business – was always considered to be out of her depth. “It is a mistake,” Institute for Security Studies senior researcher Johan Burger said at the time. The criticism was

directed at a government policy that is determined to put a civilian in charge of the police force. For despite all his military posturing and medals, that is precisely what Phiyega’s predecessor, Bheki Cele, was. As was his predecessor, Jackie Selebi.

Burger, DA police spokeswoman Dianne Kohler Barnard and security experts all believe that the insistence on this policy is the root of the debacle that has played itself out at the Farlam Commission this week. As one expert pointed out, policemen have lots of exposure to the judicial system. By the time they get to the top, they are hardened by experience, used to handling themselves in such challenging surroundings. Phiyega, the civilian, had no

such training to call on and duly crumbled under cross-examination.

One expert with sources inside the police force said that many officers felt sorry for her.

She is highly thought of personally. Those who have met Phiyega, sing her praises. Also, she was thrown into the deep end. As one person pointed out, here was a civilian – brought in to restore the reputation of a police force damaged by her two predecessors – overtaken by the disaster of Marikana only days into her tenure.

But that does not mean that she should continue in the job.

As Burger put it after Phiyega’s appointment last year: “That there was not a single one among more than 20 senior lieutenant-generals from which a national commissioner could be appointed is more than an indictment against the SAPS.”

Marikana probe showed up Phiyega's inexperience

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WHO IS Riah Phiyega? Before her appointment as national police commissioner on June 12 last year, South Africans could be forgiven for pondering that question.

For up to then, Mangwashi Victoria Phiyega was an unknown entity to the public.

She appeared to have been conjured out of, if not thin air then definitely from left field, to steer, in the words of Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa, "the SAPS towards better compliance, systems integration, effective and greater accountability.

"Her international expertise, qualifications coupled with local understanding of the management dynamics, are good ingredients to enable her to help SAPS achieve and deliver on its mandate, which is to ensure that South Africans are and feel safe".

It did not take long for Mthethwa to have cause to rue those words. On August 16, 34 striking miners were shot dead at Lonmin's platinum mine outside Rustenburg in a massacre that reverberated around South Africa and the world. Just 65 days on from her surprise coronation, Riah Phiyega had become a household name.

But in the light of her performance at the Farlam Commission of Inquiry into the Marikana massacre, South Africans could be forgiven for posing the question again this week: just exactly who is Riah Phiyega?

Is she the ice maiden who laughed and joked as she was alleged to have done early in proceedings as footage of the deaths of the miners was viewed in the Rustenburg auditorium where the commission is being held?

Is she merely incompetent, the manager who failed to take disciplinary steps against police officers who failed to capture critical video footage of two of the crime scenes at Marikana last year in violation of her earlier orders?

Is she a buffoon who really does believe her denials that she "cannot say those 34 people were killed by police... and to say who was shot by whom" despite a police report confirming that police officers had shot the strikers?

DA police spokesman Dianne Kohler-Barnard and other security experts all believe that the insistence on putting a "civilian" in charge of the police is the root of the debacle that has played itself out at the Farlam Commission this week.

As one expert pointed out, policemen have lots of exposure to the judicial system, spending lots of time at court while they move up the ranks, testifying on behalf of prosecutors and being grilled by defence counsel. By the time they get to the top, they are hardened by experience, used to handling themselves in such challenging surroundings.

Phiyega, the civilian, had no such training and no such past experience to call on, and duly crumbled under cross-examination.