

# A must-watch this Freedom Day: Zupta documentary *How To Steal A Country*

Issued by [Showmax](#)

24 Apr 2020

The Guptagate documentary *How To Steal A Country* is now streaming first on Showmax, just in time for the Freedom Day long weekend, with early reviews calling it "An excellent documentary, one of the best ever made in our country" (Leon van Nierop in *Rapport*); "Nothing short of remarkable... the definitive example of speaking truth to power so that this can never be allowed to happen again" (John Harvey, *Dispatch* news editor); and "Essential viewing for all South Africans" (*Spling*).





With the Emmy-winning [Miners Shot Down](#) and One World Human Rights Documentary Film Festival winner [Everything Must Fall](#), Rehad Desai made the definitive documentaries on Marikana and #feesmustfall respectively.

Now, in *How To Steal A Country*, co-directed by Emmy winner Mark J Kaplan (*The Village Under The Forest*, *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*), Desai turns his unflinching gaze to another defining moment in South Africa's recent history: the rise and fall of the Gupta family.

As editor Ferial Haffajee puts it in the documentary, "They came here as traders. They sold shoes out of the boot of their car... And they left here as multi-billionaires."

Desai's take on how they accomplished that is a suspenseful detective story uncovering one huge bribery scandal after another, involving the top echelons of political power and several well-known multinational corporations.

As investigative journalist Thanduxolo Jika says in the documentary, "It's been almost ten years of unabated looting. They estimate that it's close to a trillion that the whole state capture debacle cost the country. A country that has got the highest unemployment rate, the highest rate of people who live in poverty. A trillion could have changed their lives."

"The country has never known anything other than state capture - under Apartheid, it was the same," says Kaplan. "So in a way, everything that we're experiencing was built into the system. The Guptas didn't invent anything - they just perfected it."

"Part of state capture in South Africa was not just the extraction of funds from institutions like Eskom or Denel or whatever it is," says then finance minister Pravin Gordhan in the documentary. "It was also the capture and the almost decapitation of the relevant law enforcement institutions. You had a double whammy. You had the freedom to steal but you also had freedom from prosecution."

In *How To Steal A Country*, journalist Richard Poplak traces the turning of the tide against the Guptas to their landing at Waterkloof airbase, a National Key Point, for a family wedding. "I think one of the defining moments in the history of democratic South Africa was the landing at Waterkloof," says Poplak. "This moment of overreach where they flexed so

much muscle, you know, they strained their biceps so massively, they actually tore through their clothing and we got a peak at how this actually works.”

Former president Jacob Zuma’s firing of two finance ministers in quick succession raised further questions, but the smoking gun was the #GuptaLeaks - a trove of over 300 000 emails and documents akin to the Panama Papers, laying bare the modus operandi of the Guptas and their associates.

“The Gupta leaks are this huge treasure trove,” says investigative journalist Susan Comrie in the documentary. “What we figure out from the leaks is that you’ve got Gupta lieutenants heading up state-owned companies. You’ve got ministers that are in their pockets; you’ve got these all-expenses-paid trips to India, Dubai. We figure out that the president’s son has a residence permit in Dubai. I mean the emails really confirm the inner workings of deals that have been made between Gupta companies and particularly the big state-owned companies, Transnet and Eskom.”

Speaking about the Gupta leaks, Poplak says, “I’ve tried to describe to people all the time what it’s like to be inside those emails. You kind of feel the revoltingness sort of rise up your oesophagus as you go along.”

“The problem with the news is we get all these snippets and small parts of the jigsaw puzzle but we never get to see the full picture,” says Desai. “This film in many ways was a response to the then minister of finance’s appeal to join the dots - and from the feedback we’re getting, people find it jaw-dropping and gobsmacking and surreal when they see it all.”

“At times the documentary is hard to stomach because we are reminded of how brazen the looting was,” says Kaplan. “And how close we still are to becoming a failed state in big part as a consequence. What we have tried to do in the film is to show just how bad it was. But, in actuality, it was much worse.”

“I think the post-COVID world will have a lot less tolerance for this kind of thing,” says Desai. “It’s clear we need a different type of society and that all available resources will now be required to make society less vulnerable.”

Former president Zuma and the Gupta family have repeatedly denied any wrongdoing. To date, there have been no successful prosecutions of people involved in state capture,

Watch the trailer:

Watch *How To Steal A Country* first on Showmax:  
<https://www.showmax.com/eng/movie/ac4kolml-how-to-steal-a-country>

## 7 of the best quotes from the documentary:

*Investigate journalist Susan Comrie* “Journalism has gone through a rough time everywhere, but in the last few years I think we’ve really felt our importance. We’ve realised how important it is to have really thorough investigative journalism. It was one of the few things that held democracy together, until the other parts of the state could, could be uncaptured, could recover.”

*Lawyer Brian Currin* “Not only in South Africa but in Sub Saharan Africa, every single country inherited institutions that were extractive. When you inherit institutions and they were extractive, it’s very easy to fall into the practices of the coloniser. I think that is part of our problem and what we see today - practices that are not dissimilar from what colonisers were doing.”

*Rajesh Sundaram, News Editor, ANN7* “President Zuma would tell me as editor about how the editorial policy should be. He would say that he didn’t want an out-and-out propaganda station. He wanted there to be a very positive approach, as far as the ANC was concerned, and more specifically the coterie around them in the ANC. And also he wanted his rivals, both within the ANC and outside, to be featured, but featured in a negative light, and he said that it should not be direct, it should be subtle. Only then would people give this station any credibility. And he needed a station like this, which, unlike the other stations, would sing his praises.”

*Rajesh Sundaram, News Editor, ANN7* “I was conned into coming in... for what I believe was a mafia-like operation for setting up a propaganda station, which I did not want to in the first place. I’d never been as scared as that in my entire life. And believe me I’ve covered civil war, I’ve covered wars and riots, but those last few days when I was in South Africa were the most scary in my life. I actually thought that I would die, that I would not see my family again.”

*Editor Ferial Haffajee* “I picked up my phone, and I noticed these very weird images of me... very clearly meant to demean and shame me. The thing that I realise now is that it worked because I kept quiet about it for months and I would call up my family and say ‘Hey, it’s not me in those pictures’ because clearly it impacted and it hurt and I needed people to know that it wasn’t me on the lap of a billionaire, Johann Rupert, or in his bed - those were some of the other images... Women journalists are often attacked and demeaned in these ways when... we say things that people don’t like. It’s a very easy revenge tactic.”

*Former finance minister Pravin Gordhan* “Some are saying that about a hundred billion Rands might have disappeared. A hundred billion Rands is approximately eight-and-a-half to nine per cent of total government expenditure.”

*Former finance minister Pravin Gordhan* “The only thing we’re interested in is how fifty-five million people can become richer, not a few.”

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