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Integrity in Business

# Company implicated in money laundering invoiced millions in contracts with state bodies

The State Representation Services in Tete province and the Tete Municipal Council are the main clients of Zohra Holding, a company investigated by the Public Prosecutor's Office on suspicion of money laundering

#### Summary

A business group suspected of involvement in money laundering, and whose premises were recently searched on the order of the Public Prosecutor's Office, has won millions of meticais in contracts to supply goods and services to public bodies in Tete province. In the last four years (2019-2023) the holding, the Zohra Group, SA, obtained more than 300 million meticais in awards from public bodies, in Tete province alone. Zuneid Esmael Amad Abdul Satar is the sole shareholder in the Zohra Group and Paulo Auade, the former provincial governor, is the administrator of the company. This text documents, with evidence, the business trajectory of the group, from its rise to its fall. It shows how the company won hundreds of millions of meticais from the State, presents the bodies with which the company did business, and their real beneficiaries. It argues that the absence of effective public scrutiny of the real beneficiaries of commercial companies may have created conditions for politically exposed people, associated with the business group suspected of money laundering, to abuse their influence to obtain advantages in public contracts and to undertake a series of questionable businesses without leaving traces of their involvement.

#### Introduction

A company associated with politically exposed people<sup>1</sup> (PEPs) and suspected of money laundering has won contracts worth millions of dollars with public bodies in Tete province. In the last four years (2019-2023) this holding company has positioned itself as an assiduous supplier of automobiles and rent-a-car services and vehicle repair for State institutions in the province, and it has obtained more than 300 million meticais in awards from public bodies in Tete province alone. A company suspected of involvement in money laundering, but which pockets hundreds of millions from public bodies reveals weaknesses in due diligence in relation to the effective beneficiaries, in the context of the high risk of money laundering and of financing the terrorism in which Mozambique finds itself.

Business records show that the holding company was set up formally in 2016. Up until 2019, it was a company without much significance. It possessed modest premises located in the Samora Machel neighbourhood in Tete city and its main activity was automobile repair. However, the holding underwent enormous growth through the supply of vehicles and car hire and vehicle repair services for the State. As from 2019, the company expanded its premises in Tete, and expanded to other provincial capitals, namely Pemba and Beira; it also expended its investments to mining, real estate, and the sale of fuel, among others.

<sup>1 &</sup>quot;An individual who holds or has held a relevant public post, his relatives and acquaintances. Due to their position and influence many politically exposed people are in positions which can be abused for money laundering, corruption or bribery, and financing of terrorism, among others". Cf. FATF (2013) Politically Exposed Persons (Recommendations 12 and 22) Available at: <u>https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatfrecommendations/Peps-r12-r22.html</u> [Consulted on 9 May 2023]

The reasons behind this rapid rise remain hidden from the public. However, documents consulted during the research show that, shortly before recording this meteoric rise, the holding became associated with politically exposed figures and, in this same period, it injected capital budgeted at 320 million meticais, the origin of which could not be traced. Documents also show that, from then until now, the business group positioned itself as one of the major suppliers to the State in Tete province, benefitting from preferential treatment in the awards from public companies and other State bodies, notably the Provincial State Representation Services and Tete Municipality. Between 2020 and 2023 these institutions each spent almost 100 million.

The Holding is suspected of involvement in money laundering schemes. On 7 June 2024, the company's offices in Tete were searched and material seized by agents of SERNIC and officers of the Attorney-General's Office, under the "Stop Money Laundering" operation, carried out by the Central Office for the Fight against Organised and Transnational Crime<sup>2</sup>. The company's registered owner, Zuneid Satar, was detained and is on a list of seven business people rounded up in the operation.

This text is the result of documentry research complemented with field work undertaken in Tete province. The field work consisted of interviews with key informants and non-participatory observation at the place where the company operates.

The text documents with evidence the business trajectory of one of the largest suppliers to the State in Tete province. It shows how much the company earns, in which sectors it operates, how and with whom it does business, and it tries to identify its real beneficiaries. The text argues that the company was set up as a legal entity with a legitimate social object, but over the last four years, it was involved in money laundering schemes that were possible thanks to business with the State, facilitated by politically exposed individuals.

#### A workshop that became a major supplier of vehicles to the State

On 4 April 2016, in Tete city, a small company named Zohra Sociedade Unipessoal was registered, with declared social capital of 5 million meticais<sup>3</sup>. The sole owner of the company, Zuneid Esmael Amad Abdul Satar, was born in Tete. He comes from a family of business people of Asian descent, which became noteworthy in the late 1990s.

In seven (7) years, Zohra has changed its name three (3) times. In 2019 it was called Zohra Group – Sociedade Unipessoal, Limitada<sup>4</sup> and in 2023 it became the Zohra Group, S.A. The social capital, intead of increasing, dropped to 20,000 meticais<sup>5</sup>.

At the beginning, Zohra was a company without much significance, and it gave its social object as "provision of services in the mechanical area"<sup>6</sup>. In 2017, the company expanded its social object to include activities such as "the sale of vehicles; the sale of equipment, the hire of equipment and general trade", "sale of spare parts and accessories for automobiles", among other activities<sup>7</sup>.

As from 2019, the company began to expand. It changed its name to Zohra Group, Sociedade Unipessoal, Lda. It formally expanded its activity to other areas, and enlarged its premises. The inauguration of the new installations of the business group, first in Tete and Pemba, in 2019, and then in Beira, in 2021, was chaired by high ranking state officials. In Tete city, the President of the Republica, Filipe Nyusi, on 11 June 2019, personally chaired the ceremony to inaugurate the *Zohra Group Business Park*, an imposing building located in M'padue neighbourhood, on National Highway Number 7 (EN7). In Pemba, the ceremony was chaired by the then Minister of Industry and Trade, Ragendra de Sousa, on 2 December 2019. In Beira, it was Carlos Mesquita, then Minister of Industry and Trade<sup>8</sup>, who chaired the event, on 11 November 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Jornal Notícias (8 June 2024) "STOP BRANQUEAMENTO DE CAPITAIS": Operação apreende bens em Tete, Beira e Pemba". Available at: <u>https://www.jornalnoticias.co.mz/2024/06/08/stop-branqueamento-de-capitais-operação-apreende-bens-em-tete-beira-e-pemba/</u>. [Consulted on 10 June 2024]

<sup>3</sup> BR nº 132, III Series of 4 November 2016 – p. 7003

<sup>4</sup> Cf. BR no. 204, III Series of 23 October 2019 - p. 6773

<sup>5</sup> Cf. BR no. 156, III Series of 14 August 2023 - p. 5181

<sup>6</sup> Cf. BR no. 132, III Series of 4 November 2016 - p. 7003

<sup>7</sup> Cf.BR no. 88, III Series of 7 June 2017 - p. 3138

<sup>8</sup> Club of Mozambique (2021, 11 November) Mozambique: Minister Mesquita inaugurates new ZOHRA Group project in Beira. Available at: https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-minister-mesquita-inaugurates-new-zohra-group-project-in-beira-204459/. Consulte on 5 May 2024

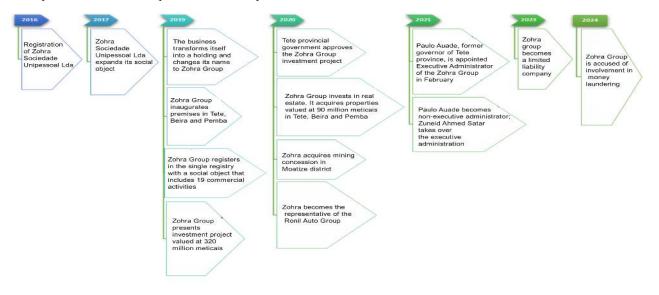


Caption: view of the installations of the Zohra Group inaugurated by Filipe Nyusi on 11 June 2019, in Tete City.

As part of the expansion, in November 2019 the *holding* was registered in the single registry with a broader social object, which included a total of 19 activities, ranging from real estate promotion to consultancy for business and managment and administrative services<sup>9</sup>. In the same period, the company submitted to the Tete provincial government an investment project named "Zohra Group", budgeted at 320 million meticais. The object of the project was the provision of cargo transport services and logistics. It was approved by the Tete provincial government in February 2020.

Also as part of the company's rise, it became the official representative of Ronil Auto, SA; it invested in mining, real estate and the sale of fuel, and it became a limited liability company in March 2022<sup>10</sup>.

The growth of the business group over the past four years was also shown by its annual volume of sales. Between 2020 and 2023 the *holding* had an average annual income of about 200 million meticais. More than half of this sum resulted from business with public bodies in Tete province and in other parts of the country.



Source: adapted by the author, based on interviews

<sup>9</sup> Cf. https://www.ufsa.gov.mz/inscritoscef\_detalhes.php?referencia=2019F000003115

<sup>10</sup> Cf. BR no. 156, III Series of 14 August 2023 - p. 5181

### An assiduous supplier of the State

As from 2019, the Zohra business group became an assiduous supplier of vehicles, rent-a-car and vehicle repair services for State institutions. The list of clients of the business group includes a variety of State institutions in Tete province, ranging from district governments to public companies, provincial directorates, and others based in the province.

Among the most frequent clients are the Tete Municipal Council, the Office of the Provincial Governor, the Office of the Secretary of State, district governments (Zumbo, Angónia, Marávia, Marara, Cahora Bassa), the Zambezi Valley Development Agency, the Provincial Planning and Finance Directorate, the Provincial Education Directorate, and the Tete Provincial Assembly, among others.

Between 2020 and 2023, the holding earned at least 300 million meticais from the sale of vehicles, rent-a-car services and vehicle repair for State institutions in Tete province. Part of this sum refers to the hire of vehicles for State events, including presidential visits.

#### The 10 main clients of the holding in Tete

	Amount awarded
Public bodies	2020-2023
Office of the Secretary of State	105,000,000.00 Mzn
Tete Municipal Council	100,000,000.00 Mzn
Provincial Economy and Finance Services	35,000,000.00 Mzn
Tete Provincial Assembly	13,000,000.00 Mzn
Zumbo District Government	10,000,000.00 Mzn
Zambezi Valley Agency	7,000,000.00 Mzn
Provincial Directorate of Education	6,000,000.00 Mzn
Angónia District Government	5,000,000.00 Mzn
Provincial Directorate of Health	3,000,000.00

The Office of the Secretary of State, or the State Representation Services in Tete Province, and the Tete Municipal Council are the public bodies which drained most money into the coffers of the Zohra Group, SA in the last four years.

Between 2020 and 2023 these two bodies spent more than 200 million meticais in contracts awarded to the holding, which is more than half the invoicing of the company with public bodies in this period.

The Office of the Secretary of State occupies top position in the list of public bodies who paid most money to the accounts of the Zohra business group. In the last four years, this public entity spent 105 million meticais in awards in favour of the Zohra Group, SA.

Tete Municipal Council, under the management of Mayor César de Carvalho, is also at the top of the list of the greatest clients of Zohra. In this period, it paid Zohra an annual average of 25 million meticais in awards, amounting in all to 100 million meticais.

Following these two bodies, the finance sector in the province, namely the Provincial Planning and Finance Directorate, and the Economy and Finance Services, are among those which drained most money into the holding. These two bodies together spent rather more than 35 million meticais in the last four years.

In the next position is the Tete Provincial Assembly, with contracts of 13 million meticais awarded to this business group.

In fifth position is the Zumbo District Government, with awards valued at 10 million meticais.

The Zambezi Valley Development Agency is in sixth position, with a total of 7.2 million meticais in favour of the holding.

With awards budgeted at 6 million meticais in favour of the business group, the Provincial Education Directorate is in seventh position.

The Angónia District Government is in eighth position, with a total of 5 million meticais in awards in favour of the Zohra Group, SA.

In ninth position is the Provincial Health Directorate with rather more than 3 million meticais awarded in favour of the business group.

# Illicit electoral financing through a company suspected of money laundering

Sixteen (16) vehicles from the Zohra Group, SA were used during the Frelimo campaign in Tete city in October 2023. Vehicles bearing the company's logotype were seen circulating in Tete city at the height of the campaign. One of them carried Jacinto Nyusi, the son of the President of the Republic. But it was not Frelimo that paid for the hire of these vehicles as would have been expected. These vehicles were requested by the office of the Secretary of State to Tete, as part of the central celebrations of the day of the Mozambican Armed Forces (FADM), on 25 September 2023. The vehicles were requested in a letter signed by the Director of the Office of the Secretary of State, Paulo Ivo Cassicai, on 21 September 2023. The request was for 17 vehicles - 4 minibuses, 4 VIP cars and 9 protocol cars – which would also be used for the visit by the President of the Republic to Zumbo district for the inauguration of the District Law Court and for the inauguration, also by the President of the Republic, of the offices of the National Social Security Institute (INSS) in Moatize.

According to the information on the invoice, the protocol vehicles were used for 24 days, the VIP cars for periods ranging from 16 to 26 days, and the minibuses were used for 9 days. However, the presidential visit to Tete province was only for a few days. This period coincided with the campaign for last year's municipal elections, and some of these vehicles, rented for the presidential visit, were used for the campaign of the ruling Frelimo Party.

### The PEP behind the Zohra Group, SA

The business group which became one of the major suppliers of the State in Tete in the last four years was, until a short while ago, unknown, but was discreetly earning millions of meticais in awards of contracts. This low profile stance meant that it escaped public scrutiny. However, the name of the holding flooded social media this year, after the detention of a South African businessman, accused of tax fraud. This suspect has links with Zuneid Satar, owner of the business group.

The business records of the group and other documents were scutinised to ascertain who was part of the shareholding structure. These records show that since it was set up formally in 2016, the company's shareholding structure has remained unchanged over the years. In the years when the business group underwent gigantic growth (2020-2023), Zuneid Satar remained the sole shareholder of the group, at least on paper!

However, in February 2021, a year after the holding began its investment project in Tete, a change in the group's business records draws our attention. Paulo Auade, who had been governor of the province up to 2020, was appointed executive administrator of the business group. In other words, Auade, who up until then was not part of the shareholding structure, came to be the top manager of the group.

Two months later, Zuneid Satar occupied the position of executive administrator, relegating Auade to a more symbolic position, that of non-executive administrator. A year later, the holding was transformed into a limited liability company, and took the name Zohra Group, SA.

The involvement of Paulo Auade in the holding draws our attention, not only because he is a politically exposed person, since he was governor of Tete a year before he became manager of the company, but also because of the close relations of Auade with the President of the Republic, Filipe Nyusi, another politically exposed person. The involvement of politically exposed persons in private business carries serious risks for integrity, since their influence may be used unduly to facilitate money laundering, corruption or bribery, among other infractions<sup>11</sup>. The constant award of contracts worth many millions in favour of the business group in Tete province may result from the influence which these figures exert over State institutions. Both the executive administrator and the non-executive administrator of the business group have relations with the President of the Republic.

Auade is a *protegé* of Filipe Nyusi. Both are part of the Makonde elite, and they were colleagues in the Mozambique Port and Rail Company (CFM) where Auade was director of institutional relations and Nyusi was rail director and executive director. In 2013, the then President, Armando Guebuza, appointed Auade governor of Tete province. When Nyusi took power, in 2015, Auade was one of the few members of government reappointed to the same post. He stayed there until January 2020, when he was relieved of his duties. A year later he became manager of the Zohra Group SA, earning almost the same salary as when he was governor, according to the documents consulted.

Zuneid has been photographed in business meetings, accompanied by members of the *nomenklatura* and business people associated with the ruling party. He has followed the head of state on some visits abroad, appearing discreetly as an ordinary businessman. But in his birthplace he proclaims himself as a partner of the head of state.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg T, Larisse G, Michael Latham, Caroline G, (2010). Politically Exposed Persons: preventive measures for the banking sector. Available at: <u>https://docu-ments1.worldbank.org/curated/en/611261468155103854/pdf/542500PUB0Exp0101Official0Use0Only1.pdf</u>. [Consulted on 12 May 2024]



*Caption*: Photo 1. A partner of the Zohra Group, general Atanásio Mtumuke, a veteran of the armed struggle and a member of the Makonde elite, during the launch of his book in the Zambeze restaurant, in Lisbon, on 26 April.

Photo 2. Partner of the Zohra Group and Frelimo parliamentary deputy, Agostinho Vuma, at the launch of the book by General Mtumuke in Lisbon, an event that was chaired by President Filipe Nyusi.

"Real beneficiaries" refers to individuals who exercise real and effective control, over commercial companies. In the literature, there is a sub-category of beneficiaries referring to individuals who, although they appear in the company's registration documents, do not have any final decision over its assets<sup>12</sup>. They are the so-called legal beneficiaries. Paulo Auade and Zuneid Satar, whose name appears on the commercial registration of the Zohra Group, SA, fall into this sub-category.

Unlike the legal beneficiary, who usually appears in the shareholding structure of the company, the effective beneficiary is the person who exercises real control over a commercial company, and for whose benefit business is undertaken or assets are generated. Often this figure remains hidden in the registration documents of commercial companies, particularly when he is a public servant occupying a position of great importance.

#### An example of the use of corporate vehicles by PEPs

In matters of large scale corruption, cases are reported of the exploitation of corporate vehicles by politically exposed persons to hide their involvement in questionable businesses<sup>13</sup>.

The past history of the business group and its link with the country's political elite suggests that the same thing may be going on with the same purpose.

One of the ways in which PEPs hide this type of legally constituted commercial structure, is by placing in the management people in their trust who do not attract attention. They can be appointed as administrators or act as "*front men*" for the company<sup>14</sup>. Another common way is by resorting to the services of "business training agents"<sup>15</sup>", who are business people charged with forming and managing companies and assets in favour of third parties<sup>16</sup>.

The figures of Paulo Auade and Zuneid Satar in the holding seem to fit into this logic – the first as an appointee, occupying a merely cosmetic position, and the second as a front man and business training agent, responsible for the constitution of the holding and the management of its assets.

14 Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> McKenzie, M (2016). Risks and Challenges of the Use of Corporate Vehicles (CVs) and Identifying Ultimate Beneficial Owners. <u>https://www.seacen.org/publica-tions/RePEc/702003-100408-PDF.pdf</u> [Consulted on 9 May 2024]

<sup>13</sup> Franklin, B (2011). Where does beneficial owner hide? Available at: http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/784961468152973030/pdf/The-puppet-masters-how-the-corrupt-use-legal-structures-to-hide-stolen-assets-and-what-to-do-about-it.pdf. [Consulted on 10 May 2024]

<sup>15</sup> Group of professionals who facilitate the formation and management of companies for the benefit of third parties.

<sup>16</sup> Lord N, (2018). Managing Illicit Finances Using "Corporate Vehicles": PaCCS Policy Briefing. Available at: <u>https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/corporate-vehicles/2018/06/28/managing-illicit-finances-using-corporate-vehicles-paccs-policy-briefing/</u>. [Consulted on 15 May 2022]

### Zohra suspected of money laundering

The Zohra holding is suspected of involvement in money laundering schemes. The media reported that, on 7 June 2024, the company's offices in Tete were searched and material was seized by SERNIC agents and officers from the Attorney-General's Office, under the "Stop Money Laundering" operation carried out by the Office for the Fight against Organised and Transnational Crime<sup>17</sup>. The registered owner of the company, Zuneid Satar, was detained at the time. He is one of a list of 7 business people rounded up during the operation.

However, high level measures are under way to block the inglorious end of the business group which, for years, grabbed millions in business with the State.

### Conclusion

A company suspected of money laundering has undertaken business with State bodies valued at more than 300 million meticais, over a period of four years, which shows that, either the State did not carry out effective due diligence to ascertain the real beneficiaries of the companies with whom it does business, or the involvement of politically exposed persons in the company's business meant that it ignored the risks of money laundering that the company represented.

In less than 7 years of existence, the company, which started life as a small single-person company, expanded its investments into a variety of sectors, including those which are most exposed to money laundering, and moved millions in assets, without any questions asked, which raises serious reservations about the integrity of its businesses. The involvement of politically exposed persons in private business has been associated with cases of money laundering, corruption, bribery and other financial offences. The lack of effective public scrutiny of business and of this business group in particular, may have created the conditions for the politically exposed persons associated with it to have abused their influence in order to obtain advantages in public contracts and to undertake a series of shady businesses that damage the State.

<sup>17</sup> Jornal Notícias (8 June 2024) "STOP BRANQUEAMENTO DE CAPITAIS": Operação apreende bens em Tete, Beira e Pemba. Available at: https://www.jornalnoticias.co.mz/2024/06/08/stop-branqueamento-de-capitais-operação-apreende-bens-em-tete-beira-e-pemba/. [Consulted on 10 June 2024]

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#### Legislation

BR No. 40, III Series of 1 October 1997

BR No. 132, III Series of 4 November 2016

BR No. 88, III Series of 7 June 2017

BR No. 25, III Series of 18 June 2003

BR No. 204, III Series of 23 October 2019

BR No. 156, III Series of 14 August 2023



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