



## **Press Statement**

**9 September 2025**

When we came together to form *Defend our Democracy*, it was in response to the devastation of state capture: the brazen looting of the public purse and the deliberate incapacitation of the very institutions meant to hold power to account. We knew that rebuilding our democracy would be difficult, requiring persistence and courage.

But even then, we assumed our safety. We believed that while the work of holding the powerful to account would be arduous, it would not carry the risk of assassination. Friday's broad-daylight murder of insolvency lawyer Bouwer van Niekerk shatters that assumption. Its impact is icily chilling: no one engaged in accountability work whether auditor, lawyer, investigator, civil servant or activist can now presume their safety.

This is not an isolated crime. It follows the killings of Babita Deokaran, Mpho Mafole, Frans Mathipa, Zenzele Sithole, and so many others who dared to try to block corruption and expose abuse. Each murder drives home the same message: those who stand in the way of looting and lawlessness are marked for elimination.

South Africans know this history. We are all too familiar with a past in which people were targeted for their principles and resistance, a past in which a privileged minority thrived while the vast majority were deliberately immiserated. Our constitutional democracy was meant to break decisively with that legacy. It was meant to secure dignity, safety and equality before the law. To allow a new class of crooks and mafia bosses to steal and murder with impunity is to betray that promise and drag us backwards.

As our state disintegrates, and as lawlessness and impunity spread, mafia-style thugs and corrupt networks feel emboldened. Their aim is simple: to continue growing fat on ill-got gains, free from scrutiny. By sending hitmen to gun down Bouwer van Niekerk at 10 am on a Friday morning, on a busy road in a densely settled neighbourhood, they showed open contempt for the very idea of an intact criminal justice system. If our police, investigators and prosecutors do not respond with urgency and resolve, they will confirm the killers' assessment: that South Africa's justice system is hollow, incapable of protecting the innocent or punishing the guilty.

The murder of Bouwer van Niekerk is reprehensible. We mourn the loss of a courageous, consummate professional, and extend our deepest condolences to his family, friends and colleagues.

But mourning is not enough. If South Africa is not to slide irretrievably into a mafia state, our political leadership must act and be seen to act now. Those who perpetrated and ordered his assassination must be tracked down, prosecuted and jailed. Only then can we claim to still have a democracy worth depending on and not one which has slipped away.

**For media interviews, contact**

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