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Jacob Zuma painting The Spear still exposed to view despite ANC rally

Goodman Gallery website displays Brett Murray portrait of South African president as film board concedes it cannot classify art

David Smith, in Johannesburg
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ANC supporters march to the Goodman Gallery, which removed works at the premises by the artist Brett Murray, including his portrait of President Zuma. Photograph: Stephane De Sakutin/AFP/Getty Images

Thousands of supporters loyal to South Africa's president, Jacob Zuma, have marched on an art gallery to protest at a satirical painting that showed him with exposed genitals.

Filling the streets of Johannesburg with the black, green and gold colours of the African National Congress the demonstrators gathered on Tuesday outside the Goodman Gallery, eye of a political storm since it displayed Brett Murray's work The Spear.

The march featured ANC flags, songs and toyi-toying – dance associated with the struggle against racial apartheid – and shirts and placards with declarations such as "President Zuma has a right to human dignity and privacy", and "We say no to abuse of

artistic expression".

Riot police and vehicles were waiting outside the gallery. The mood was generally peaceful despite a few homemade placards that referred to the racial dimension of the furore, stating "Whites hate blacks", and "Draw your white father naked, not our president".

The gallery, which previously displayed a part of Murray's exhibition in its windows, had removed the works and put up a big slogan instead: "The Goodman Gallery respects your right to protest."

A series of leaders from the ANC and allies addressed the crowd, denouncing the painting as racist to loud cheers and calling for it to be placed in a "museum of shame".

Buti Manamela, national secretary of the Young Communist League, told protesters: "The movement has always promoted freedom of expression, but you cannot denigrate important figures."

Gwede Mantashe, the ANC's secretary-general, announced triumphantly: "Comrades, in the presence of everybody, the Goodman Gallery has watched your march and they committed to removing that portrait from their website."

There was jubilation and claims of "victory", but the gallery later denied Mantashe's claim, saying that the talks did not mean a settlement.

By late on Tuesday afternoon Murray's disputed painting, The Spear, was still visible on the website. The ANC called off its boycott of the City Press newspaper, which had published an image of the painting but had agreed to remove it on Monday.

Zuma is asking a regional high court to issue an order saying the display of the now-defaced painting violated his constitutional right to dignity.

In a separate hearing regarding The Spear, South Africa's film and publication board on Tuesday conceded that it did not have the legal jurisdiction to classify any content published or broadcast by media outlets, but said it would forward complaints to the national press ombudsman.

One reporter tweeted a comment made during the proceedings: "It is not a penis designed to titillate. It is a penis that is part of a political statement."

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