

African National Congress

KZN Province

Salutes

Cde. Mewa Ramgobin



10 November 1932 - 17 October 2016

**A Brave, Tenacious and
Resolute Freedom Fighter.
Hamba Kahle Comrade.**



Mewa Ramgobin - An Unflinching Democrat, Innovative Mobiliser Against Apartheid. A Progressive Intellectual.

Mewa Ramgobin was born in Inanda on 10 November 1932. He became politically active in the Natal Indian Congress through attending a report back meeting on the Congress of the People where the Freedom Charter was adopted. He participated in the 1959 potato boycott against the atrocious working conditions of the farmworkers. A recurring theme of Mewa's life was the use of symbolism to display the unity of all oppressed people and the centrality of the leadership of the ANC to the resolution of our intractable problems. A second characteristic of Mewa's life is that he held strong opinions on all topics and readily aired them at every opportunity. This trait led him to be silenced through banning orders for a total of 17 years.

Mewa lived his life by the trinity of universal Gandhian values of Satyagraha (Active Non-violent Resistance), Sarvodaya (Universal Upliftment and Development) and Ahimsa (Respect for All Life).

On completion of his schooling he enrolled at Natal University – Black Section. While on campus he was elected President of the SRC and tabled a motion for the National Union of SA Students (NUSAS) to elect Chief Albert Luthuli as Honorary President of NUSAS.

When the Sharpeville massacre occurred in 1960 and liberation movements banned, Mewa participated in a 5 day fast together with Nokukhanya Luthuli, the wife of Chief Albert Luthuli, ANC President and Sushila Gandhi, the daughter-in-law of Mahatma Gandhi.

In 1960 Mewa visited India where he married Ela a fellow activist from university.

In 1965 Mewa received his first banning order that restricted his movement and association. The order expired in 1970. Mewa visited Cape Town in a move that contrasted his own recently acquired relative freedom with that of the incarcerated leadership on Robben Island. He launched the Committee for Clemency in 1971 together with Advocate Lewis Skweyiya, Rick Turner and Alan Paton, advocating for the release of political prisoners to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the apartheid republic. Small meetings were held throughout the country, creating a new instrument to organise and mobilise people in the absence of the liberation movements. Clemency was extended to some categories of prisoners but excluded political prisoners.

Even though the NIC was not banned, it became dormant as its leadership like Doctors Monty Naicker and Kesaveloo Goonum faced the wrath of banning orders and arbitrary detention. Banding together with activists like George Sewpershad, Swaminathan Gounden, Farook Meer, Jerry Coovadia and Rabbi Bugwandeen, the process of organising NIC branches also followed the methods used through organising the Committee for Clemency where small house-meetings and garage meetings were held throughout the province.

In 1971 he conducted a tour of visiting US Congressman Charles Diggs to the sugar estates in Natal where he highlighted the atrocious working conditions of the farmworkers. As a direct consequence of highlighting the oppressive and exploitative nature of apartheid, in September 1971 Mewa was banned once again.

The NIC was relaunched under the leadership of George Sewpershad and the first Congress was opened by Nokukhanya Luthuli, once again invoking the power of symbolism. By 1972 the NIC had 28 branches and 7 000 members making it a powerful advocate of the Freedom Charter in an oppressive and closed political environment. In this period the NIC strove to maintain the unity of the oppressed and resisted successive attempts to co-opt the Indian middle class into an anti-majority partnership where material advantages would accrue to Indians while the African majority would continue to be subject to dispossession and exploitation. Mewa explained: "The Congress Alliance was a manifestation of a vision that the destiny of the Indian people in South Africa was inextricably linked to the vast majority of African and democracy loving Whites in South Africa."

In 1973 Mewa received a parcel bomb at his Durban offices. The parcel raised suspicion as the sender was unknown. While carefully opening the parcel it detonated. Mewa's children, Kidar, Kush, Asha, together with a staff member narrowly escaped injury. He was forced to relocate his business to Verulam where his family set up home. At Verulam, while still banned, he held court with other struggle luminaries like IC Meer, George Sewpershad and Paul David – all also banned at various times - and it became a centre for political consultation on the urgent political issues of the time.

At Phoenix Settlement there were ongoing programmes of disciplined study through discussions on history, political issues, organising strategies and through physical work and silent contemplation. Many remarkable young activists honed their politics at the Phoenix Settlement where Steve Biko, Rick Tuner and Mamphela Ramphele were regular visitors. A health clinic was established near the Settlement by the SASO students and Rick Turner also brought his students to the Settlement to participate in work camps.

Mewa's approach was non-sectional where he worked with all strands of progressive political opinion – from the liberals like Alan Paton, Black Consciousness adherents, socialists like Rick Turner while being firmly embedded in the Congress tradition with the Freedom Charter as his beacon.

In the 70's a new young crop of student activists were drawn into the launch of the NIC where debate occurred around the continued relevance of a perceived ethnic organisation. Adherents to Black Consciousness like Saths Cooper called for a Black Congress while those of the Congress tradition saw the NIC as a continuation of the Congress Alliance. Activists like Pravin Gordhan, Yunus Mahomed and Roy Padayachie initiated civic organisations in Phoenix and Chatsworth as a mechanism to rebuild Congress' connection with the people.

In the early eighties with heightened student protests, student activists inevitable found themselves in discussions in Verulam where Mewa held forth on principles, strategies, tactics and the need to go beyond the campus to achieve social change.

In 1981 the country united to refute attempts by the apartheid regime to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the apartheid republic as well as the elections to the SA Indian Council. A natural platform for non-racial unity was created and the Transvaal Indian Congress was revived. This soon led to discussions around a national platform for unity against the Tri-cameral proposals and the Koornhof Bills where Indians and Coloureds would be accommodated in a three chamber racially based parliament and the African majority would exercise their self-determination through the Bantustans and the Urban Black Councils. This totally outlandish proposal was roundly rejected and directly led to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in August 1983. Mewa was elected as co-Treasurer with Cassim Saloojee of the TIC.

In 1983 Mewa's 5 year banning order, due to expire in 1986, was rescinded. His and several other leaders likewise had their orders revoked as part of the preparations for the regime to introduce their political reforms. They hoped that the easing of these orders would serve as an inducement to participate in the proposed tri-cameral dispensation being offered. Mewa again invoked the symbolism and organised a group comprising of fellow unbanned activists - M J Naidoo, George Sewpershad, Paul David and Subry Govender – paid homage to Winnie Mandela then languishing in banishment in Brandfort.

In 1984 elections to the tri-cameral parliament were held resisted by a massive organisational effort. The UDF came to occupy centre stage in SA with formations of women's, youth, civic, workers developing increasingly militant forms of resistance to apartheid.

The anti-Tricam campaign commenced with a placard demonstration held outside the Durban City Hall. Mewa, George Sewpershad and others were arrested and charged with contravening the Riotous Assemblies Act. They were defended by later to be Chief Justice Ismail Mahomed and were all acquitted.

At the height of the anti-elections campaign a security swoop was conducted on its leadership. The detention orders were challenged and Mewa and fellow leaders were briefly released while the state sought their re-detention by fixing up their technical errors. Utilising a remarkable tactic reminiscent of the Iranian student occupation of the US embassy in Tehran, six UDF leaders occupied the British Consulate in Durban. UDF co-President Archie Gumede, ex-Robben Island prisoner Billy Nair, NIC President George Sewpershad together with NIC Executive Committee Members Mewa, MJ Naidoo and Paul David drew attention to the draconian apartheid security legislation and the intense mobilisation of the people against the sham reforms.



Paul David, MJ Naidoo, Billy Nair, Archie Gumede and Mewa occupying the British Consulate in Durban.

Five of the six were charged for Treason on their vacation of the Consulate. The sixteen accused in Pietermaritzburg Treason trial reflected the breadth of apartheid opposition - Mewa, George Sewpershad, MJ Naidoo, Essop Jassat, Aubrey Mokoena, Curtis Nkondo, Archie Gumede, Paul David, Albertina Sisulu, Frank Chikane, Ebrahim Saloojee, Ismail Mohammed, Thozamile Gqweta, Sisa Njikelana, Samuel Kikine and Isaac Ngcobo. The last four were all members of the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), while the others were members of the United Democratic Front (UDF), the Transvaal or Natal Indian Congress (TIC and NIC) or affiliated organisations.

The Treason Trial and other forms of severe state repression had the effect of isolating participants in apartheid structure as well as driving more activists towards exploring armed resistance and the repression – resistance spiral continued its upwards momentum.

In 1986 a National State of Emergency was declared and the UDF and associated organisations were effectively banned. Notwithstanding these efforts a Defiance Campaign was launched Mewa led the march comprising of mainly senior citizens and the ailing to the then Whites only Addington Hospital to demand medical treatment. Several other acts of Defiance continued culminating in the unbanning of the ANC and other liberation organisations in 1990.

In 1993 in yet another desperate attempt to stave off the emergence of a democratic South Africa, Mewa's and Ela's second son Kush was assassinated.

In 1994 both Ela and Mewa were elected to South Africa's first democratic parliament. Mewa served on the International Affairs Portfolio Committee until his retirement in 2009.

He is survived by his wife Mariam, former wife Ela Gandhi and children Asha, Arti, Ashish and Kidar and a younger son, Imthian, from his second marriage.

