

Name: Ernest Moabi Dipale

Date of birth: 1961

Date of death: 8 August, 1982

In summary: Ernest Dipale was a 21-year-old student from a politically active Soweto family. He was detained under the Internal Security Act in 1982 and was found hanged in his cell two days after his arrest. Official reports state that he committed suicide, but evidence suggests that he was murdered.

On the morning of 8 August, 1982, [Ernest Moabi Dipale](#) (also known as Ernest Mwapi Dipale) of Soweto was found hanged in his prison cell at the John Vorster Square detention centre in Johannesburg. The 21-year-old student was detained on 6 August, 1982 under the [Internal Security Act](#), which gave the apartheid government the power to detain people without a trial. He was the 56th person to have died in detention since the passing of the [90-Days Act](#) in 1963. The official cause of death was given as suicide by hanging, but the notoriety of John Vorster Square and the torturous acts committed there, along with Dipale's family involvement with the [African National Congress](#) (ANC) provides evidence that suggests that Dipale was murdered by security police.

Ernest Dipale's detention in August of 1982, which led to his death, was not the first time that he had been detained by security police. In October of 1981, Ernest was kidnapped and beaten by Vlakplaas officers. Vlakplaas was a paramilitary death squad, commanded by [Dirk Coetzee](#), that specialised in capturing and killing political enemies of the apartheid government. The following comes from Vlakplaas member Butana Almond Nofomela's amnesty application to the amnesty committee of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (TRC):

‘Thereafter they proceeded to Zeerust and on to a farm in the vicinity of where Moabi was interrogated about the whereabouts of his sister Joyce Dipale. During the interrogation he was assaulted by them to such an extent that he lost consciousness.’¹

It is unknown if Ernest revealed Joyce’s location to his assailants during this attack, but she was located a month later.

Ernest’s sister Joyce Dipale was a known member of the ANC who was in Botswana at the time of Ernest’s encounter with the Vlakplaas. Joyce Dipale herself “was kept in solitary confinement for 500 days during 1976 to 1977” in John Vorster Square and was subjected to brutal torture.² A month after Ernest was kidnapped and beaten, in November of 1981, Joyce Dipale was attacked and shot in Botswana.

‘In one of the first cross-border operations carried out by Vlakplaas-based death squads, on the night of 26 November 1981 a commando led by Dirk Coetzee descended on a house in the Botswana capital occupied by the ANC member Joyce Dipale...Shot point-blank, Dipale...survived the attack.’³

Joyce Dipale was shot three times but miraculously survived. Sixteen years after the attack, Joyce attended Dirk Coetzee’s amnesty hearing in Johannesburg. ‘Joyce Dipale was present at Monday’s hearing, but the committee was informed that she had lost most of her ability to speak

¹Butana Almond Nofomela. Amnesty Testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Durban, November 6th, 1996, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/decisions%5C2001/ac21279.htm>.

² Elirea Bornman, *Violence in South Africa: A Variety of Perspectives* (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 1998), 231.

³ Tor Sellström, *Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa* (Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 1999), 694.

and had suffered a stroke as a result of the attack.’⁴ The Vlakplaas attack failed at taking Joyce’s life, but succeeded in taking her voice.

A year later, right before Ernest Dipale was detained and brought to John Vorster Square, there was an attempt on his life. The Johannesburg based newspaper *The Rand Daily Mail* reported on this attack. ‘The night before he was detained, Mr. Ernest Moabi Dipale... reported to Meadowlands police that a man had fired two shots at him, his mother said yesterday.’⁵ Ernest was driving with his friend Oupa Koapeng a few nights before his detention when a white man pulled alongside them and shot. Dipale, who was driving the car, proceeded to speed away. It is unknown who the man was that attacked them, but it can be assumed that it was a member of Vlakplaas who had a history with Dipale and his family. The same article adds: ‘Mr. Dipale and Mr. Koapeng were detained on Thursday morning at a friend’s house. Mr. Koapeng was released yesterday.’⁶ Dipale and his friend Koapeng were both detained together a day after the attack, but Koapeng was released the next day, so it is clear that the security police were after Dipale and they wanted him dead. A small non-profit journal run by the South African Students Press Union points out the targeting of the Dipale family. ‘His family’s lawyers have said an attempt to shoot Dipale was made two days before security police arrested him. Earlier this year an assassination attempt was made on his sister in Botswana.’⁷

⁴ South African Press Association, “Coetzee Tells Amnesty Committee of Bungled Cross-Border Raids,” January 20, 1997,

<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media%5C1997%5C9701/s970120c.htm>.

⁵ Mail Reporters, "Hanged Man's Mother Tells of Mystery Shots." *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), August 10, 1982. Accessed October 20, 2017.

<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/hanged-man-s-mother-tells-of-mystery-shots-spotlight-on-interrogators-after-another-detainee-dies/XgFXW2wxKaoOLw>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ “Square Claims Another Detainee’s Life,” *SASPU National* 3, no. 2 (August 1982): 1, http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnAug82.1680.6867.003.002.Aug1982.4.pdf.

Ernest, like so many other blacks during apartheid, knew how brutal detention in John Vorster Square could be. His sister Joyce more than likely told Ernest of her torturous experience there in 1976.⁸ Joyce was subjected to outrageously inhumane acts of torture including electric shocks to genitalia and breasts, just one example of some of the horrendous acts committed in the tenth floor “workshop” of John Vorster Square.

After Ernest Dipale was found dead, officials reported that he had confessed to the crime for which he was being detained, but this confession was never released and was most likely made up by the officials to cover up Dipale’s death. The following is taken from an article in the *New York Times* two days after his death:

‘A 21-year-old black man found hanged in his cell Sunday morning had made a confession, the authorities said today, but they refused to make it public. Lieut. Gen. Johann Coetzee of the security police said the dead man... had confessed to a magistrate and had been scheduled to appear in court Tuesday... The charges were not specified.’⁹

The alleged confession opens up a question about Ernest’s “suicide.” Why would he hang himself when he had confessed and had a scheduled court appearance? It is also noteworthy that not only was the confession not made public, but the charges he “confessed” to were not specified either. Ernest Dipale had no previous history of suicidal thoughts, and his mother pointed out, as seen in an [ANC booklet](#), that this did not change when he was detained. The ANC booklet reports:

⁸ Clive van den Berg, “Drawing Depicting Torture Endured by Joyce Dipale During her Detention, (Johannesburg, 2007), https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/drawing-depicting-torture-endured-by-joyce-dipale-during-her-detention/9wGcmIsxwvrv_Q.

⁹ “South Africa Reports Confession.” *New York Times*, August 10th, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/08/10/world/south-africa-reports-confession.html>.

*'Dipale's mother, who had last seen her son the day before his death, said there was nothing about his behaviour to suggest that he was about to kill himself. The magistrate... found that no one was responsible for Dipale's death and accepted the police version of suicide by hanging.'*¹⁰

The same ANC booklet also includes a powerful section exposing the horrific practices at John Vorster Square and other detention centres:

*'The State has alleged that 20 detainees hanged themselves in their cells in the past 20 years. The death weapons, we are told, were items of clothing or bedding...ripped into shreds to make a "rope" thick enough for the exercise... It is evident, however, that in the majority of cases, if the cause of death was, indeed, suicide, the detainees were desperate. Where individuals are driven to death it cannot be called suicide. Culpable homicide is more appropriate.'*¹¹

The security police were responsible for so many deaths in detention that they ran out of excuses for causes of death, but the state continued to cover them up and call them "suicides." In the above excerpt, the ANC is stating that those who killed themselves in detention were either murdered and had their death staged, or they were forced into suicide. Both of these scenarios point to homicide.

While investigations have reopened in recent years for other cases, Ernest Dipale and his family have yet to find justice. An [inquest](#) into his death was made a year after his death, but still no-one was found responsible for his death. The apartheid government was somehow able to

¹⁰ African National Congress, *Torture is Part of the System*, September, 1984, 23, http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/boo19840900.026.021.000.pdf.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 15

make the situation even worse at Dipale's funeral. *New York Times* coverage of the funeral reported:

*'At today's funeral, the police initially turned away mourners who arrived at Mr. Dipale's home in the black satellite area of Dube outside Johannesburg... new security regulations covering funerals were framed, permitting the authorities to try to contain political outpourings at the burial of those view as martyrs.'*¹²

Dipale's family was not even able to mourn their loved one in peace without being harassed by the police, who were responsible for his death.

¹² Alan Cowell, "Blacks Defiant at South African Funeral." *New York Times*, Aug 15, 1982, 3. <http://proxy.libraries.smu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/122033467?accountid=6667>.

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“Square Claims Another Detainee’s Life,” *SASPU National* 3, no. 2 (August 1982): 1,

http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnAug82.1680.6867.003.002.Aug1982.4.pdf.

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