

# Zolani Michael “Msamaria” Mcetywa

05 January 1965 – 22 November 1993



## Born in the Treason Trial Year

Micheal Zolani Mcetywa (also known also Msamaria – *the Samaritan*), was born in Soweto, Johannesburg on the 5th of January 1965. From birth, it seemed like his life was going to be intertwined with politics as it was in the very same year of his birth that 155 members of the ANC were charged in what became known as the 1956 Treason Trial.

Mcetywa was the second child of Abel Mcetywa a migrant worker from Kimberly and Margaret Dlamini, a national from eSwatini. Abel and Margaret raised their children in a very disciplined and principled life as the family were staunch Seventh-Day Adventists. This reflected very much in the way in which Mcetywa carried and presented himself well into his adulthood – unassuming, respectful, and very immaculate in appearance. His parents emphasised the value of education.

## Joining the 70s Youth Exodus

Mcetywa's parents being migrant labourers made sure that the children stayed in school. Margaret, who would later raise the kids alone by herself ensured that her son does not stray away from his books. During the tumultuous youth exodus of the 70s as young people in South Africa clenched their fists and sang "saphuma sabheka kwamany' amazwe, lapho kungazi khon' ubaba nomama sikhalel' inkululeko," Margaret thought it would be prudent to send Mcetywa to Swaziland's Salesian Boys' High School to complete his schooling there. Little did she know she was sending him to join the ANC and to be trained as an underground operative.

Mcetywa would later relocate to Zimbabwe to further his studies at Solusi University meanwhile continuing ANC underground training.

### Mcetywa and the ANC in exile

It was at eSwatini that Mcetywa would be introduced to the ANC. He understood the situation that drove him away from South Africa – his mother wanted him to get a stable education because the situation in South Africa was unstable. Deep down he understood the oppression of his people. He abhorred the injustice. He disliked the situation that drove him away from home, it was not that he needed better education. It was the apartheid system that was driving his generation out of the classroom into the streets.

In the 70s at eSwatini, he landed in the hands of ANC seniors, Generals Mabizela and Mkhwanazi. He underwent underground operative training. He relocated to Zimbabwe to further his studies and continued with ANC underground training whilst in the country. Upon his return to Swaziland, he took up a job at Swazi Railway whilst working closely with his superiors and was then dispatched to the northern Zululand operation team. His work with Swazi Railway became a good cover and a strategic move for the movement. This meant he could strategically use the Piet Retief, Mahamba, Pongola, and Hluhluwe route until Richards Bay as someone in the Railway finance department negotiating for exports and/or coal.

### Cross border Operations

As an ANC operative, manoeuvring the eSwatini, Mahamba, Piet Retief and Northern Zululand area (which includes uPhongolo going farther down to Hluhluwe) was a dangerous mission. One must just read Jacob Dlamini's book Askari, to understand how the security branch was monitoring that region. Operatives were always kidnapped from Swaziland or ambushed along the N2.

Mcetywa's 'unassuming' nature made him evade the brutality of the death squads lurking in that area.

He worked the area diligently as an ANC operative crisscrossing eSwatini and northern Zululand on missions. Using his cover as an 'accountant,' Mcetywa would often act as a courier for the ANC in between eSwatini and northern Zululand and managed to stay clear of the notorious apartheid Security Branch.

Zolani Michael Mcetywa was not going to stay unnoticed for long, not under the watchful eye of the then-apartheid apparatus.

It was in 1985 that the ANC deployed him full-time to northern Zululand.

## Settling in Pongola

In 1985 Mcetywa came back to South Africa at the behest of the ANC and settled in Pongola (which is now known as uPhongolo) where he continued to serve as an operative linking the ANC in Swaziland and South Africa in the northern Zululand district. He took up a job at a Cotton Factory now called the Pongola Industrial Park.

In the meantime, he continued his underground work by immersing himself in community activism in the structures of SANCO and UDF. This was a very volatile time in the history of South Africa – worse in the Zululand area where an outright war was declared by Inkatha (clandestinely supported by the apartheid security branch and the Zululand Police) for those who were associated with the ANC.

Using his training as an ANC operative, Mcetywa established a football team at Ncotshane township. This was a front for umrhabulo (political education) and recruitment for the ANC.

Mcetywa was never a person for the spotlight nor pomp and political pedestals and rhetoric. He believed in getting things done for the people. He was using his talent in accounting and mathematics to offer academic support and mentoring to local high school students whilst at the same time continuing to provide umrhabulo and recruiting as an operative of the ANC.

As a community activist, he would later facilitate the installation of taps to offer running water for the residents of Ncotshane Township, Pongola at a time when black locals were excluded from having access to proper water and sanitation systems.

It was in no time that Mcetywa caught the eye of the apartheid special branch which started keeping tabs on him. With the help of his detractors in the community Zolani Michael Mcetywa would soon become a marked man with his every move monitored. His house would often be raided by the Piet Retief special branch. He would often be arrested and taken to Piet Retief for questioning.

Mcetywa's wife Harriet, told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the harassment by the special branch, **"...we experienced harsh life, and Boers will come and raid our home, searching for weapons..."**. Harriet went on further to implicate the Piet Retief special branch in Mcetywa's assassination saying, **"...I have to say this about Mr Mkwazi because he is the one who usually came to my house with this white policeman, and when my husband died, even though he was working far from Piet Retief he was here all of a sudden..."** This shows the extent to which Mcetywa's activism was felt in that he was constantly observed by forces based in a town that is 108km away.

## Rattling the hornets' nest

Padraig O'Malley writes, in his material archived in the Nelson Mandela Foundation website that, ***"according to a secret State Security Council document, the Inkatha Central Committee decided during 1985 'that the whole of KwaZulu and Natal must be turned into a so-called 'no-go area' for the UDF, regardless of the consequences'."***

It therefore is not a surprise that Mcetywa's presence and activism in the 80s up to the early 90s in uPhongolo wrestled a hornets' nest.

Through his community activism Pongola in the 80s leading up to the 90s, Mcetywa made it into the infamous security branch "album." This was a photo book of all ANC operatives that needed to be monitored, captured, turned into informers, or neutralised – meaning killed.

It got worse in 1990 when political organisations were unbanned, and the ANC was allowed to operate in South Africa. Mcetywa worked tirelessly in Pongola trying to secure offices for the ANC in the town and his efforts were thwarted by the municipality and local authorities. By this time Mcetywa had left corporate and he was self-employed. He then took it upon himself to set up an ANC office at his residence, using his garage. Through his efforts, the ANC would set up its first-ever offices in Pongola, the stronghold of the Inkatha Freedom Party (having now been registered as a political party in 1990). This was against the backdrop of apartheid machinery which was still very operational and pumping resources to third force activities to eliminate efforts of operatives such as Mcetywa.

With his home having an ANC office in the area during the 90s, this was equivalent to putting a death mark on himself and his family. State-funded black-on-black violence was flaring, homes were burning and homesteads flaring up. In the conservative parts of KwaZulu Natal, anything or anyone that was associated with the ANC stood no chance of seeing the next day.

Zolani Michael Mcetywa had rattled the hornets' nest in that as South Africa was preparing for elections, northern Zululand was shaken to the core just like Gauteng was shaken by Martin Thembekile Chris Hani. Harriet Mcetywa told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that in November of 1993, the reconnaissance of Mcetywa got so intense in that, ***"one time when he was in town one man approached him and took a picture of him. He got back home very worried about that action because the person who took the picture of him ran away soon after that. After a few days of being harassed, and police searching our home now and again, and scared for our lives, on the 20th, 1993, November, one person who was working hand in hand with him as a secretary came to our home to tell us that some men came to the business and told her that they were looking for my husband and he will be killed."***

## “Operation Ice Cream” – The Assassination

The apartheid machinery put its plan into action on 22 November 1993. Due to Mcetywa's background as an operative in eSwatini, Mahamba, Piet Retief and Pongola areas and his influence in the region, his elimination had to be an extensive effort. A man of his stature cannot be left to local operators only. IFP leadership in Piet Retief and Pongola as well as members of the Piet Retief Security Branch rolled out "Project Ice Cream."

On the morning of November 22, 1993, Mcetywa was lured out of his home by local IFP member Emmanuel Mavuso under the pretext of going to a nearby ice cream shop a walking distance outside of the township. Being a peacemaker and always wanting to have discussions with members of other political formations, Mcetywa first hesitated to go but Mavuso insisted.

They walked and as they got to the business district, Mcetywa stopped next to the Protea Furniture shop..."he looked back, and suddenly" a shot rang.

Mcetywa was shot once in the head, and he fell. Next, ten more shots rang. In total, nine shots to the head and 3 to the heart. It was a calculated assassination and longcoming.

## A Life Lived for Others

At the age of 37, Zolani Michael Mcetywa, the unassuming activist, a father of 3, a devoting husband, and an operative who had devoted his life to serving his people was brutally assassinated.

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