

IJM South African History Online
Draft Update, Elaine Mohamed, 8/14/2013

Professor Ismail Jacob (Josef) Mohamed was born on 27 July 1930 in Barkley East, Eastern Cape. His parents, Rose Johanna Fortuin and Ismael Mohamed, divorced before he was five years old and he was then raised by his mother. His father had been a traveler for a tire company but became a small general dealer shopkeeper in Bloemfontein where he lived out the rest of his life. Mohamed's mother, Rose christened him Ismail Jacobus but at school he was known by the name on his birth certificate: Ismail Mohamed; to his family and friends he was always "Josef."

Academic and professional career

Mohamed's early years (until standard Four) were spent in Barkley East where his mother worked as a cook for White Families. After she lost her job (when World War II broke out and jobs were hard to come by), they moved together to Aliwal North (also Eastern Cape). When Mohamed was 12 years old his mother left for Johannesburg, Transvaal (now Gauteng) to seek employment there. She left Mohamed with his maternal grandmother, Katrina, and sent for him only after she had made a home for him in Doornfontein.

The Fortuins were devout members of the NG Sending Kerk and Mohamed attended church regularly. He was enrolled at St. Joseph's Catholic School where the nuns had a profound effect on him and he was baptised into the Roman Catholic faith. At St. Joseph the medium of instruction was English and he was not proficient in the language. He failed his examinations that year. He also contracted Typhoid (diagnosed after a prolonged fever) and was isolated in the hospital for five months.

Upon recovery, Mohamed studied at the Eurafican Training Centre, walking the three miles from Radio Springs where the family lived. He went on to Secondary School in Vrededorp, Johannesburg and matriculated in 1949. He topped his class, particularly in Arithmetic, which he loved.

During his secondary school years, Mohamed's mother found him part-time jobs (scrubbing and polishing floors and gardening in the homes of the White supervisors she met in the clothing factory she worked) so that he could pay his school fees. He was thus aware from an early age aware of the social ills of South Africa and the hardships associated with poverty. In one of these families, he got a job teaching mathematics to the children, as it has become known that he was excellent at the subject. In 1950 Mohamed took a job as a painter and builder's mate and was thus able to enroll at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) in 1951. He completed his BSc in Mathematics and Physics two years later in 1953, and earned an Honours degree in Mathematics in 1954. In 1955 Mohamed began his first teaching appointment at the William Hills High School in Benoni, Transvaal and registered for an MSc at WITS. In 1957 he was awarded a bursary to study mathematics at Queen Mary College, University of London. He completed his M.Sc. (WITS) in 1960 while simultaneously holding an assistant lectureship at the University of Wales, Cardiff. In 1961 he completed his Ph.D. in Mathematics in Group Theory at University of London while an assistant lecturer at Queen Mary College.

During the course of his Ph.D., Ismail Mohamed, working with Professor Heineken, solved a major outstanding problem in the field of Group theory and thus introduced an extremely fruitful area of

mathematical research. Together they constructed a collection of counter-examples now internationally known and cited as the Heineken-Mohamed Groups. Mohamed's research, "On Certain Generalisations of Equations in Groups and the Number of Solutions" was published in 1959.

Witnessing the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre via television in London brought intense feelings about home and the struggle there. The Mohamed's decided to return to South Africa as soon as they could. Mohamed declined the offer of an appointment at the University of London upon his graduation in September 1961 and instead accepted an appointment at the University of Witwatersrand. Over the next several years Dr. Mohamed Ismail tried to pursue his dreams about math research alongside an equal passion for human rights.

Feeling politically and professionally immobilised at home, Dr. Mohamed accepted a lectureship at Birkbeck College, University of London at the end of 1964. A year later he moved his nascent family back to the continent after being appointed Senior Lecturer at the University of Zambia, Lusaka. In so doing, Dr. Mohamed was part of the inaugural mathematics department (the university opened in October 1965).

In July 1968 Mohamed accepted a position at the then newly established University of Botswana, Basutholand and Swaziland. From 1968-74 he advanced from position as Senior Lecturer to Reader to Noted Professor of Mathematics. (In 1995 Dr. Mohamed was awarded an honorary doctorate in Science and Mathematics by the National University of Lesotho. His family accepted the award on his behalf because he was under house arrest at the time. House Arrest was part of the South African government's draconian system of silencing dissent.)

Despite this recognition and opportunity for professional advancement in mathematics, Mohamed hankered to return home. In 1974 he applied for a position at the University of the Witwatersrand. His appointment – notwithstanding his record in mathematics - was not successful. As noted in his correspondence (personal family documents) and in an invited talk to the National Academy of Science, the University deputy Vice-Chancellor took the position that, "*One can see that to point you in a permanent position of authority over white students and junior white staff would be to wound the very heart of Baaskap [white supremacy] and that there are limits to which we can go to offend a government.*" Referencing in 1985 the reluctance and/or refusal of white universities to "*admit blacks into their governing bodies or to being more positive about admitting them as students and staff,*" Dr. Mohamed addressed on the international stage the importance of bringing "*pressure to bear on those institutions for affirmative action programs.*" [Significantly, at the ANC Memorial event for his funeral, the current vice Chancellor, Adam Habib apologized for the University's history of racism.]

Instead therefore of moving to Johannesburg from Lesotho, in 1975 Ismail Mohamed accepted a position as Professor and Head of Department at the University of the Western Cape. He had been there for just over a year when in 1976 he was arrested and his appointment at Bellville (as it was then called) was terminated. Unwilling to leave South Africa again, he took a position as Associate Professor of Mathematics at the University of the Witwatersrand. However, it was not long before he assumed position as a Professor in the Department. He was among a handful of Blacks thus honoured. Mohamed remained

at the University of the Witwatersrand until elected to the first democratic government under Nelson Mandela in 1994.

Dr. Mohamed was a member of both the London and the American Mathematical Societies and published in the Journal of Algebra, Journal of London Mathematical Society, the German Mathematische Annalen, South African Mathematical Society of the University of Cape Town and in the Springer Proceedings of the Second International Theory of Groups. He participated in numerous international conferences and was visiting Professor of Mathematics at the City University of New York in 1986-87.

Political development

Mohamed's early political and social awareness began at his mother's knee when she talked about her exploitative wages and conditions in the clothing factories where she was a machinist. Her fellow workers visited her and talked about trade unions. He followed them to meetings on street corners where members of the [Communist Party of South Africa](#) (CPSA) spoke about workers and workers unity. The Party had set up co-operatives and Mohamed and his mother began buying vegetables at their cheaper prices. At age fourteen Mohamed tried to join the Cape Coloured Corps as his uncles Jaap and Joey Fortuin had done. (Enlistment was the only way many rural Coloured families could survive.) However, the Corp did not accept him: Mohamed was malnourished and underweight, and did not even look his fourteen years.

Further politicization occurred during Mohamed's first years at University. It was a financial struggle to pursue his education and additionally, he had earned a "conditional exemption" [South African "matriculation exemption" means one has met the standards for university entrance for a first degree and does not have to take any entrance exams] because of his mark (score) in English. To earn money he worked on the railways as a 'scully' (washing dishes) and he took odd jobs as a handyman. To the resentment of White staff in the dining car, he read feverishly during every free minute. White staff tore up his books and he fought back. In response they accused him of causing trouble and he lost his job.

Fortunately Mohamed received a bursary during his second year at university. By this time, his mother had become an active member of the Garment Workers Union (GWU). Mohamed joined the [Non-European Unity Movement](#) (NEUM), attended the weekly seminars arranged by the Progressive Forum in Doornfontein, and met with members of the All-African Convention. He studied Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, learnt about the Industrial Revolution, and about revolutions in China, India and Algeria. By 1955 Dr. Mohamed was a NEUM activist, distributing leaflets during the [Alexandra Bus boycott](#) and canvassing members at his mother's and at other factories. He became convinced that workers were of crucial importance and that their political participation was imperative to the liberation of South African Society. In addition to work in the aforementioned organizations, he became involved in the [African People's Democratic Union of South Africa \(APDUSA\)](#).

The [African National Congress Youth League](#) (ANCYL) was active at this time but Mohamed saw it through critical NEUM eyes. It seemed to him that the organisation's emphasis on national liberation failed to address the question of the ownership of the means of production and left workers as an exploited, subservient class in a bourgeoisie world. He believed the [NEUM's Ten-point programme](#) gave a clear guidance, while the [African National Congress](#) (ANC), appeared to have no fundamental policy. Nevertheless, Mohamed also recognized that the ANC enjoyed the kind of grassroots support that NEUM

did not. Along with comrades within the Unity Movement, Mohamed worked to find a unifying consensus between the two groups. Disillusionment with the NEUM settled in as he came to the conclusion that the NEUM was concentrated on intellectualising small groups but had failed to develop a strategy of action for a transfer of power. He grew irritated by their rhetoric and denigration of ANC campaigns and boycotts. After the Freedom Charter was signed in 1955 the [Congress of the People](#) began to epitomize for him the working ground he was seeking.

While in London (1957-1961), Mohamed lived in a bedsit in the East End and soon joined the British Labour Party, in North London. He worked with socialist groups and workers groups in the trade union movement to strengthen the socialist wing of the Labour Party, believing that a Socialist Britain would facilitate change in South Africa and in the colonial world. Back in South Africa (1961-1964) he continued to work with the [African People's Democratic Union of South Africa](#) (APDUSA), in pursuit of the ideal of social revolution through non-collaboration and boycotts. APDUSA strove to become the leading section of the NEUM, and canvassed support in Black townships and in the rural areas. For a time, APDUSA succeeded in recruiting workers in the homelands but lacking an adequate social base, and losing its leadership to exile, it faltered and collapsed.

In Lusaka, Zambia (1966-1968), the Mohameds came into direct confrontation with the politics of the exiled, renewing his acquaintance with his former political colleagues, [IB Tabata](#), Wycliff [Tsotsi](#) and [Jane Gool](#), and met members of the ANC and the [Pan African Congress](#) (PAC). Once again he argued for minimum consensus among the groups. At the same time, he gained first hand insight into the liberation movements of Rhodesia, Angola and Mozambique.

This association continued during the tenure at University of Botsawna, Lesotho and Swaziland at Roma, Lesotho. His work allowed him to interact with the many young students who came from South Africa, and through them, he refreshed his insight into the political situation. It sharpened his yearning to return home and involve himself in the struggle. Once again he became active in the Staff Association. On the family's return to South Africa (Cape Town) in 1975, Ismail Mohamed worked closely with [Trevor Manuel](#), [Cheryl Carolus](#), [Johnny Isse](#) and others against Apartheid education. Following the June 16, 1976 uprisings in Soweto, Professor Mohamed urged the Black staff to join the students in protest against the State's war on children. He delivered an address at a [South African Students Organisation](#) (SASO) conference in Hammanskraal in July of that year sharing the platform with [Winnie Mandela](#). Along with many others he was detained and held at Caledon Square, Cape Town and later transferred to Victor Verster Prison in Paarl under the Section Ten of the [Internal Security Act](#). During his three and a half months in detention without charge or trial it was difficult for family to visit and along with others they helplessly scrutinized blood-stained clothing that came home in error. Mohamed was released in December 1976.

Upon moving to Newclare, Johannesburg in 1977, Mohamed threw himself into community work in the townships of Newclare and Coronationville. As the 1980-81 school boycotts unfolded he helped to organise co-ordinating parent-bodies. In July 1980, his son Andrew who had just turned 17, fled the country with a group of friends, escaping into exile, but some of his friends were arrested and the Mohamed's became involved in the long trial that ensued. For two years Ismail and Ellen Mohamed lived with the information (provided by the security police) that their son had likely been killed on the border.

(He returned to South Africa in 1991.) Their eldest daughter, Elaine, was detained (1981) and charged for furthering the aims of the [South African Communist Party](#) in 1982. The family went through a tense period, during her 7 month solitary confinement and trial. She was convicted to five years imprisonment, all of it was suspended. During her detention the Mohamed's were founding members of the Detainees Parents Support Committee along with Max and Audrey Coleman, and David Webster among others. Mrs. Mohamed remained actively involved in FEDTRAW.

In May 1980 following the Theron Commission, President P.W. Botha proposed a tri-cameral parliament in which Coloured and Indian people would have largely cosmetic power with Black (African) people completely excluded from citizenship. In the Transvaal Mohamed worked unstintingly on the Anti-Republic Celebrations Committee, speaking at student rallies at the University and in Soweto and other townships, working door-to-door, and galvanizing support for the democratic movement.

On the 8th May 1983, Transvaal Anti-PC (of which organization he was unequivocally elected chair) was launched. Speaking at its inauguration, Professor Mohamed declared, *"The voice (of the coloured Labour party) that spoke at Eshowe was the voice of betrayal and not the voice of the people."* Along with comrades, Mohamed worked tirelessly on what became one of the most successful election boycott campaigns in the history of South Africa. In August 1983 the [United Democratic Front](#) (UDF) was launched. Owing to ill health (coronary by-pass surgery), he missed the national launch of the UDF in Cape Town. He had however been elected as one of the Vice Presidents of the UDF, Transvaal region. Speaking to the UDF's and his own commitment to the cherished ideal of non-racialism and the role of the trade unions, Mohamed is quoted as saying, *"We reject the government's attempts to co-opt sections of the oppressed into entrenching apartheid. We demand the right for all people to rule and share fairly in the wealth and resources of our country. We shall write our own constitution based on the Freedom Charter."*

On the night of February 18, 1985, Professor Mohamed (then a vice-president of the UDF) was arrested along with other leaders of the National UDF, of its Transvaal region, and union leaders from the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU). They were taken to Durban and then Pietermaritzberg where they joined others on charges of treason and contravening the Internal Security Act in December 1985. The Pietermaritzburg Treason Trial (1985) as it was known was one of the two treason trials against the UDF.

The sixteen were Mewalal Ramgobin, Chanderdeo "Gerge" Sewpersadh, Moorogiah "MD" Naidoo, Essop Jassat, Aubrey Mokoena, Curtis Nkondo, Archibald "Archie" Gumede, Devadas "Paul" David, Albertina Sisulu, Frank Chikane, Ebrahim "Cas" Saloojee, (Prof) Ismail Mohamed, Richard Thozamile Gqweta, Sisa Njikelana, Samuel Kikine and Isaac Ngcobo. Eventually the state dropped charges against 12 of the accused in December, 1985. The remaining accused were SAAWU officials; the trial against them collapsed after the state introduced suspect evidence. They were released in June 1986. (During his trial (while granted bail) Mohamed traveled between Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg in an attempt to continue his mathematical work at the University of the Witwatersrand. Following the trial, Mohamed resumed his university teaching post in Johannesburg.

Significantly, during Professor Mohamed's imprisonment, the Committee on Human Rights (created in 1976 by the National Academy of Sciences) campaigned for his release as a prisoner of conscience. Mohamed was later honored on April 27, 1987 at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC. His paper is included in the book *Science and Human Rights* (1988), published by the National Academy of Sciences. Dr. Mohamed was at the time on sabbatical at the City College of the City University of New York. As noted in that paper, for Mohamed the onslaught against workers plunged him into workers' support committees and renewed his commitment to trade unionism.

Harassment and threats from the security police continued through the next year for all family members and Mohamed witnessed the devastating strikes against comrades and friends. On December 20, 1986 Dr. Mohamed and his family hurriedly left their home and South Africa after being warned by comrades that they were no longer safe at home. Taking advantage of the sabbatical to which he was due, Dr. Mohamed stayed in New York until July 1987. His daughter Jennifer was advised not to return to South Africa and remained abroad.

In 1989 the UDF began working more closely with the unions and the Mass Democratic Movement emerged. Additionally, from 1981 until the un-banning of the ANC, Mohamed worked in an underground unit of the ANC together with [Ebrahim Ebrahim](#) and [Lindiwe Sisulu](#). Alongside local comrades, Mohamed spearheaded the launch of the ANC in Newclare and Bosmont.

Always known as an eloquent writer in both Afrikaans and in English, amongst Professor Mohamed's notable lectures are the Academic Freedom Lecture delivered in 1986 at Rhodes University and a paper on Rights and Concerns in Conflict in South Africa at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC in 1987.

In 1994, Professor Mohamed became an ANC Member of Parliament. His contributions in Parliament include, amongst others, his contribution to the Green Paper on Science and Technology, his ongoing efforts to secure increased national funding for Science and Technology at Parliament, and his efforts to position and support a dedicated Department of Science and Technology whilst Chairperson of the Subcommittee of Science and Technology. He also represents the Science and Technology Portfolio Committee of Parliament at the National Science and Technology Forum of which he was a founding member.

Professor Mohamed served as an MP for three terms eventually retiring in 2009. During that time he worked at the ANC Kiptown branch and in Dobsonville when parliament was not in session. Professor Ismail Jacobus Mohamed passed away on 7 July 2013 in Johannesburg. His wife Ellen, five children and grandchildren survive him.

Other Family Matters

In 1959 Mohamed married Ellen Kathleen Rygaardt, a former student of his who had joined him in London in 1958. Ellen Mohamed found employment as a Laboratory Technician and simultaneously joined the Paddington Technical College where she earned a diploma in Chemical Technology. In 1961 they had their first daughter (Elaine) in London and following difficulties obtaining a visa for the child to

travel to South Africa with them, they returned to South Africa for birth of Andrew, Jennifer, Ivor and Ingrid.

Member:

London Mathematical Society
American Mathematical Society

Awards:

Shell Postgraduate Bursary 1954
Shell Postgraduate Scholarship 1957
Australian National University Sponsorship to attend Second International Conference in Group Theory, Canberra 1973

Publications:

Journal of Algebra
Journal of the London Mathematical Society
Proceeding of the London Mathematical Society
Mathematische Annalen
South African Mathematics Society of the University of Cape Town
Springer Proceedings Second International Conference Theory of Groups

Community and Political Work:

Chairperson of Dorcas Creche, Western Township, Johannesburg 1979/81
St John's Eye Care Clinic, Westbury
Member of Western Purpose Multipurpose Centre Project of Johannesburg Child Welfare 1984
Chairperson: Transvaal ad hoc Anti-President's Council Committee 1983
Transvaal Anti-President's Council Committee 1983/84/85
Members of Council: Transvaal Indian Congress

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Last ERM update 8/14/2013