HONORARY GRADUATE

Ismail Jacobus Mohamed

Ismail Jacobus Mohamed was born in Barkly East on 27 July 1930. His parents, who separated when he was four years old, were poor, and his mother supported the family by doing domestic work. He moved with his mother to Aliwal North when he was about eleven. There he attended St Joseph's College, but became seriously ill with enteric fever as a result of the harsh conditions under which the family was forced to live. In 1943 his mother moved to Johannnesburg to work in the clothing industry and he only rejoined her in 1944. The next year he started high school. In 1949 he matriculated from the Eurafrican Training Centre and Secondary School in Johannesburg. During his school years he supplemented his mother's meagre income by doing part-time domestic work. He grew up surrounded by racism and discrimination and his experiences and those of others around him moulded him into a fierce opponent of apartheid.

In 1951 Ismail Mohamed entered the University of the Witwatersrand to read for a Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics and Physics. He obtained a first-class honours degree in Mathematics in 1954 and then taught mathematics at high school from 1955 to 1957, reading for his Master of Science degree at this university as a part-time student. While teaching at high school he met Ellen Rygaart, whom he married in London in 1959. They have five children.

Mohamed went to the University of London in 1957 to read for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Queen Mary College under the supervision of the distinguished group theorist, the late Professor K A Hirsch. In the same year, while still a research student, he was appointed an assistant lecturer in mathematics at the Universty College of Wales in Cardiff. After completing his PhD degree in the 1959/1960, academic year he was appointed assistant lecturer at Queen Mary College, University of London.

In 1961 Mohamed received an offer of a position as a lecturer at this university. Once again he experienced the harsh realities of being black in apartheid South Africa. Inevitably he became involved in the organisation and mobilisation of the oppressed people through various anti-aparthied bodies. The period 1961-4 saw heightened repression and detention without trial. It was therefore not suprising that the family returned to England at the end of 1964. Mohamed was appointed a lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London. He once more became involved in anti-apartheid activities, but the urge to be back in Africa again proved too strong. He accepted a post as a senior lecturer at the newly established University of Lusaka, Zambia. In addition to his academic activities there, he worked closely with the Ministry of Education to train skilled workers who were so badly needed by the country, which had recently attained independence.

In 1968, the family moved to Roma, Lesotho, where Mohamed took up an appointment as senior lecturer in Mathematics at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. He was rapidly promoted to Reader in and then Professor of Mathematics. Over the years, despite his political involvement, he managed to publish his research in renowned journals.

It was during this period that his well-known and highly respected work with Hermann Heineken was published. One of their papers involved a major problem of group theory of more than twenty years' standing. Other joint work followed. They constructed a collection of counter examples now internationally known and cited as the Heineken-Mohamed groups. As a result of their work, several important mathematical conjectures in group theory were resolved.

It was for his outstanding contribution to mathematical research as well as his sterling contribution to tertiary education in Lesotho and a lifetime struggle for social justice that Ismail Mohamed was awarded the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa* by the University of Lesotho in 1985. His wife Ellen had to receive the award on his behalf, as he was being tried for treason in South Africa at the time.

In the early seventies the ANC and other anti-apartheid organisations became increasingly concerned about the devastating effects of Bantu education on the oppressed majority in South Africa. Some felt that black academics who could legally return to South Africa should seriously consider doing so. This resulted in Ismail Mohamed's decision to accept the Chair of Mathematics at the University of the Western Cape in 1975. However, his political convictions brought him into conflict with the university establishment. When he was arrested and detained without trial for three and a half months for his protests against the arrests and massacre of 16 June 1976, the University of the Western Cape seized the opportunity to terminate his appointment. The family suffered considerable hardship before he was offered an appointment at this university as lecturer, subsequently senior lecturer, and in 1983, Associate Professor.

On returning to Johannesburg in 1977 Ismail Mohamed again became actively involved in organising the community against apartheid. His activities included health care projects and the development of pre-school facilities in depressed areas. He was involved in residents' committees struggling against high rents and for better living conditions. He and his family were constantly harassed by the Security Police and were arrested and detained on several occasions. He was a founder member of the Transvaal Anti-PC Committee formed to oppose the racially divided tricameral Parliament, and he played an important role in the formation of the United Democratic Front. In February 1985 he was arrested with fifteen other members of the UDF and charged with treason. The State's case against them collapsed and they were acquitted on all charges in December 1985.

In January 1987 Ismail Mohamed, his wife and his two youngest children were forced to flee to London where he continued to be an outspoken opponent of apartheid. In April 1987, he delivered an important address to some six hundred scientists at the Human Rights Symposium of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington D.C. Despite fears that he would be arrested, the family returned to Johannesburg in September 1987 and Ismail Mohamed became Vice-President of the Transvaal branch of the United Democratic Front.

After the unbanning of the ANC and other organizations in February 1990, Ismail Mohamed immediately became involved in the formidable task of educating people in democratic principles. He was elected to Parliament as a national representative for the ANC in April 1994.

In recognition of his contribution to mathematics, his tireless work on behalf of the underpriviledged people of Southern Africa, and his lifetime campaign against apartheid, the University, with a deep sense of pride, confers on one of its distinguished graduates, Ismail Jacobus Mohamed, the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.