

ABOUT YUNUS MAHOMED

Yunus Ismail Mahomed, “YM” or “Styles” as his comrades, friends and colleagues fondly called him, was a South African lawyer, anti-apartheid cadre, development activist and business leader. He was born on 30 December 1950 and graduated from the University of South Africa. He served his articles and set up his law practice in Durban.

Yunus’ political interest and convictions arose from, and were forged by, his own experiences of apartheid discrimination in Johannesburg, a brief period studying abroad in Pakistan, and his time in Durban where he would live most of his adult life. In Durban, Yunus was exposed to and participated in activism at the University of Durban-Westville where students campaigned for an SRC independent of the Broederbond-led administration. Like many student activists, Yunus realised the limits of campus struggles in bringing about change in the country and subsequently dedicated himself to working in poor communities. He followed the displacement of families after the floods in Tin Town, a shack settlement on the banks of the Umgeni River. Much of the wisdom and experience he gained, and which shaped his convictions, came from working among and with such communities.

When the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), the only ‘legal’ arm of the Congress Alliance which had been banned in the political crackdown during the early 1960s, was revived, Yunus became involved in this structure and served on its Executive Committee. The NIC promoted non-racialism, and contributed to the formation of later efforts at mass mobilisation in the form of the Release Mandela Campaign, The United Democratic Front (UDF), and the Mass Democratic Movement. Yunus was involved in the UDF since its launch in 1983, became the regional secretary for the movement in Natal, and was elected to the UDF’s national executive.

From 1976, Yunus was an attorney in many political cases including the ‘Delmas Treason Trial’ in which Popo Molefe, Mosiuoa Lekota and Moses Chikane, key leaders of the UDF, were arrested and charged under the security laws along with 20 others. The trial ran from 1985 to 1988, with sentences being overturned by the Supreme Court in 1989. He also represented members of the Butterfly Unit of the African National Congress in the ‘Doctors’ Trial’ which resulted in Sibongiseni Dhlomo and Vijay Ramluckan being sentenced to Robben Island for treason.

In 1985, at the height of apartheid repression, Yunus worked alongside Beyers Naude, Archbishop Tutu and Max Coleman to establish the Kagiso Trust (KT). KT is a development trust for promoting social and economic upliftment. Initially, it used funds channelled from the European Union to support victims of apartheid. Efficient investment of donor funds in development enabled KT to grow as a social development agency that supported hundreds of self-sufficient NGOs across the country. As democracy dawned, Yunus’s sound strategic vision led to the formation of KT’s investment arm, Kagiso Trust Investments (KTI). Today KT sustains several independent programmes such as the Beyers Naude Schools Development Programme that reaches 419 schools in the Free State, and the Eric Molobi Scholarship Programme which has awarded bursaries to 155 students to date.

At the time of his death on 6 January 2008, Yunus was chairperson of KT, deputy chairperson of KTI, and served on the boards of several companies including Kagiso Media, FirstRand and Remgro. In 2011, KTI became Kagiso Tiso Holdings (KTH) following a merger with Tiso Holdings.