

THE INDEFATIGABLE PRISCILLA JANA – A TRIBUTE

(Dr Ismail Vadi)

Lenasia's prominent human rights lawyer and former MP, Priscilla Jana, breathed her last on Saturday, 10 October 2020, at a frail care home in Pretoria. In her death our community sadly has lost one of the most unrelenting, persistent and fearless anti-apartheid lawyers since the 1970s.



Priscilla was at one time married to Reggie Jana, the brother of Lenasia's first chemist, Jaison Jhina.

Who can forget the larger than life Devikarani Priscilla Jana, dressed in her colourful sari, taking her oath of office in South Africa's first democratic parliament in May 1994?

She was one of six political leaders in Lenasia that got elected as an ANC MP – the others being ANC stalwarts Ahmed Kathrada, Laloo "Isu" Chiba, Dr Rashid Saloojee, the brothers Mohamed and Mohseen Valli Moosa and Ismail Vadi. With her legal sharpness she played no small role in fashioning our democratic Constitution and the post-apartheid legal edifice.

Both as an anti-apartheid activist and lawyer, Priscilla maintained equanimity between the Congress-aligned organisations such as the Transvaal Indian Congress and the Azanian People's Organisation linked to the Black Consciousness Movement. She was never an ideological hack, but a level-headed and committed fighter for freedom that focused on the task of mobilising and defending our people against apartheid. In the 1980s, Priscilla was a familiar figure speaking at political rallies at the Lenasia Civic Centre and the JISWA Centre in Extension 3, Lenasia. Among her closest political associates were Dr Joe Variava and the family of the late Dr Mohamed Ismail Momoniat.

Having no children of her own she adopted Tina, the daughter of United Democratic Front and ANC leader, Popo Molefe, when he was charged and sentenced to 10 years in the Delmas Treason Trial. To this day Tina calls herself Tina Jana-Molefe as a mark of respect to her adopted mother.

As a lawyer she represented some of the most famous political prisoners of our time such as Nelson and Winnie Mandela and ANC soldier, Solomon Mahlangu. As Mahlangu's lawyer, she was among the last persons to see him going to the apartheid gallows on that fateful morning of 6 April 1979 saying, "Tell my people that I love them. They must continue the fight. My blood will nourish the tree that bears the fruits of freedom."

Priscilla Jana played a significant role as an anti-apartheid figure. She was a member of the South African Students Organisation, the Black People's Convention and the Federation of Transvaal Women. She was banned by the apartheid government and her home in Lenasia was petrol bombed by security agents. She served as South Africa's Ambassador to the Netherlands and Ireland and as the Deputy Chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission.

Regrettably, I had not seen Priscilla in recent years. My abiding memory of her is regularly taking from Lenasia in a cooler, savouries prepared by the hospitable Ms Hajira Momoniat, and handing them over to Priscilla in Parliament for her to enjoy.

Priscilla, you led an honourable, dignified and courageous life. Hamba kahle my fellow MP, Comrade Priscilla Jana!

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