

ABDULLAH MOHAMED OMAR (1934 – 2004)

It was all too brief

YUNUS OMAR

Traditional obituaries and tributes begin with a person's birth, and in linear fashion, they trace landmarks in that person's life. The traditional obituary ends with that person's death. I would dare to suggest that Abdullah Mohamed Omar's life was not conventional, hence this departure from the norm.

In death, Abdullah Omar succeeded where many had failed. On that Saturday afternoon in March, we came from all corners, representing all persuasions, to pay tribute to a simple man. **Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about Abdullah Omar's death was that he showed how possible it is to unite our disparate communities.**

The young Omar, born on May 26 1934, hailed from Observatory in the Cape, fulfilling his share of duties in his parents' shop. His parents committed themselves early to securing for their children a more than decent education. And so, out of that simple Observatory business grew the range of intellects that would one day serve our country in the legal, medical, academic and business fields. Abdullah Omar was the first of his siblings to attend university, setting a trend in his family that belies their modest economic origins.

The young Omar completed his primary schooling in Salt River. His life-trajectory after primary school was to intersect with one of the keenest brains this country has known. So often in life one's virtues are not sufficiently developed. In the young Abdullah's case, fortunately, this was not to happen. Whilst at Trafalgar High School in District Six, Omar came into contact with Ben Kies, who was later dismissed from the teaching profession because of his political work in the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM). Kies is known to have been a formidable influence on the young Omar's political thinking and activism. Their teacher-pupil relationship was soon supplanted by a political and legal liaison that ended with Kies' untimely death, in a courtroom, in 1979. By then both teacher and pupil had become legends in the anti-apartheid struggle, respected and admired by a cross-section of activists and their families.

During a lifetime of study and work, Abdullah Omar completed a degree in law at the University of Cape Town in 1957, and opened a legal practice in District Six in 1960, partnering with Cadoc Kobus who ran the office in Langa. Their practice was structured in this way because of the restrictions placed on them by apartheid legislation. Soon after setting up practice, members of the PAC walked into his office, and his entry into the legal-political arena had begun in earnest. It must be remembered that he was a committed member of the NEUM, but he saw no conflict in representing the PAC, and later members of the Black-Consciousness Movement, and the ANC. Perhaps here his greatest legacy is embedded, although much still remains to be learnt of this modest man's contribution. Petty sectarianism was not Omar's guiding principle. Instead, his

actions speak to us today as we attempt to chart our way out of historical (and contemporary) ideological pigeonholes.

In 1985, two years after the formation of the United Democratic Front, Omar left the Unity Movement, which had long ago ceased to exhibit the vibrancy of the 1940's and 1950's. He had been an influential member of the New Era Fellowship, a forum that had honed intellectual acumen amongst a generation of activists. It was no easy parting, and this period must have been hard on the lawyer and his family.

It is perhaps instructive to reflect on his disappointment many years later when he was confronted in his home by members of People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD). Then serving the post-apartheid government as its first Minister of Justice, Omar was advised, against his will, to vacate his non-palatial home in Mabel Road, Rylands. He had thus suffered three evictions in his life; the first two occasions as a result of apartheid's Group Areas Act (he had been evicted from Observatory and later District Six), the third a consequence of actions taken by members of a community he had served with distinction. It hurt him more than it angered him, says Farid Sayed, *Muslim Views* editor, a long-time client and one-time working neighbour of the Omar's in Mabel Road in Rylands.

The respect that this modest man commanded is encapsulated in the following anecdote. Late on the night that Abdullah Omar's appointment as the first post-apartheid Minister of Justice was announced in 1994, a couple drove around Athlone frantically looking to buy a rose. The rose was intended for Abdullah Omar, to indicate the immense pride felt by the overwhelming majority of people who had come to know him over so many years of struggle. The rose was found, bought, and delivered. When I watched that couple walk up the driveway of the man they still call 'Uncle Dullah', on the day of his funeral, my mind turned to the rose. It remains an abiding memory.

Abdullah Mohamed Omar will, of course, be remembered primarily for his outstanding commitment to providing legal assistance to all who needed it. But there was another aspect to Abdullah Omar's life, an aspect that speaks to the clinical, depersonalised social structures we often create. In a television discussion programme made in 1988, three Robben Island prisoners met after a long time. During their reminiscing, Neville Alexander spoke movingly about the sensory deprivation they had suffered, and how the simple touch of a hand rekindled the human spirit. I was immediately struck by the similar experience of a client of Abdullah Omar. This client, a noted anti-apartheid media figure, related how his fear and anxiety at impending imprisonment had been dissolved by the reassuring hand of Abdullah Omar. That simple gesture, a hand on a young man's shoulder, bolstered the resolve as no words could have done. This was not a lawyer's gesture; it was the gesture of a man who understood that his clients were possessed of the range of human frailties.

In writing and reflecting on a life so admired, how does one escape the temptation to address this life uncritically? On the weekend of his death, Chris Barron penned a tribute to Abdullah Omar in the *Sunday Times*. It remains a contested piece, as many still feel

that Barron's reflected criticism of Omar's role as Minister of Transport in the Mbeki government was unwarranted. I think Barron was too harshly judged. All one can do now is speculate as to the response of Abdullah Omar to this criticism. Perhaps an answer Omar gave soon after his appointment to the Transport portfolio will indicate his mindset at the time. **Asked about whether he felt his move from the Justice Ministry may have been a demotion, his reply was soft but considered: "I am a loyal cadre of the ANC, and cadres go where they are deployed."** He said this while standing outside a hospital ward in the Somerset Hospital, waiting his turn to visit an older brother. I've pondered those words ever since. While loyalty is often blind, it is quite inconceivable that someone who had defied the apartheid state would acquiesce in the face of the party. His mind was too keen, and his actions spoke of a man committed to the ideal of serving where he was needed. He would, I believe, have taken the criticism on the chin.

People live on in our memories. We recreate them, and we weave the elements of their lives together as best we can. Too often, though, the canvas of memory falls victim to the enticing notion that the only memories worth treasuring are the good ones. **We erase pages, sometimes whole chapters from our own lives, so that we can remain comfortable with ourselves.** It is a common thread in most works of biography, and it is one we need to revisit. If we are ever to learn from our own mistakes, and from the mistakes of others, we need to be frank, but sensitive, about those aspects of lives that are not heroic or worthy of praise. Abdullah Omar would not have claimed to be perfect. He was human, and subject to all the challenges of life. If there were errors of judgement, these need to be accepted as part and parcel of life. Inconsistencies of principle, of course, require analysis and discussion. Having observed something of his life; having heard about and having read the opinions of so many others, one can scarcely fail to call Abdullah Omar one of the role-models of his generation. In so many ways, he is worthy of emulation.

And so, as we reflect on his life, we would do well to ask serious questions of ourselves and our various social networks. And we draw the circle from where we began this reflection, i.e. at his funeral. Has a head of state ever walked so freely on the streets as Thabo Mbeki did that day in March? Have citizens ever jostled ministers and the head of state for the honour of carrying a bier? How many people, in death, can bring together so many of us in common purpose? We sat on the grass, on chairs, on the stands of the Vygieskraal Stadium, and we buried him as the day drew to a close. And for an all too brief moment, we buried the prejudices that still bedevil us.

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Hamba Kahle, son of Africa.

Pull Quotes:

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