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# Revisiting the case of Ahmed Timol, an unresolved death in detention

**TIMOL: A QUEST FOR JUSTICE**  
by **Imtiaz Cajee** (STE Publishers) R135

Review: **Maureen Isaacson**

In *No One to Blame? In Pursuit of Justice in South Africa* (David Phillip) 1998, George Bizos details the absence of justice, the conflicting findings of state pathologists, the magistrate's acceptance of the dodgy evidence of the policemen who were present when Ahmed Timol fell from the 10th floor of John Vorster Square while in custody.

This new book takes up the unresolved case of Timol's death in October 1971. The policemen involved, who denied torture had taken place, ensured an unsatisfactory inquest. "Indians can't fly" was a popular joke in those circles. Timol's is one of

several detention deaths for which magistrates found "nobody to blame".

Imtiaz Cajee, Timol's nephew, exposes details that were judged irrelevant, or simply not known. He does not mean to resolve the case, rather to open the doors to further investigation and to show that some wounds will not be covered with time. "There is no point in giving this book to you, the reader, as a dispassionate or clinical account of my uncle's death. I am not a coroner. Such an approach would merely heap new crudities upon the old indignities that my family had already suffered."

The formal tone of the narration is at times at odds with otherwise colloquial accents. Nonetheless, we are drawn into an understanding of this loving man, a human rights activist to whom passivism was anathema. Described as a Muslim of the

most human kind, Cajee says his uncle's fundamentalism was "never theological and always humanist". In his introduction to the book, President Thabo Mbeki observes that, despite his communism, Timol did not forsake his piety.

Interviewees offer insights into Timol's death. Salim Essop, a fellow member of the South African Communist Party who was detained at the same time, was hospitalised after the security men at John Vorster Square had believed that "... the torture on Ahmed was so severe that he collapsed a number of times, and at some point he died. Once Ahmed was dead, the police panicked."

Mohamed Khan, employed by the Central Islamic Trust in 1969 as the burial and hearse supervisor, was taken by a Sergeant Fourie to the Hillbrow mortuary, where Timol's

body was still fresh. "Timol's one eye was out of the socket, his body had blue marks, his nails were removed and he had burn marks over the body as a result of shock treatment."

Hardly a fitting condition for suicide by jumping out of a window - yet suicide among detainees is not ruled out as a reality by Cajee.

In 1991, the truth commission wrenched once again from Hawa Timol the desperate story of her son's death. She told the commission that if her body had a zip, she would open it to show her pain. She was not willing to forgive, she said.

Although the ANC vowed to avenge Timol's death, it has not, and Cajee too is unsatisfied with the reconciliation talk that has been the substitute for such action.

The truth commission failed to subpoena any of the security police-

men allegedly responsible for Timol's detention, torture and death. Although Piers Pigou, a commissioner, made contact with Joao Anastacio Rodrigues, one of the policemen present when Timol fell to his death, Pigou resigned from the commission before closure could be reached.

Cajee's recent conversation with Johannes Hendrik Gloy, one of Timol's captors, makes all the more vital the publication of such a book. Gloy said Hawa Timol's "talk of torture was a bunch of lies".

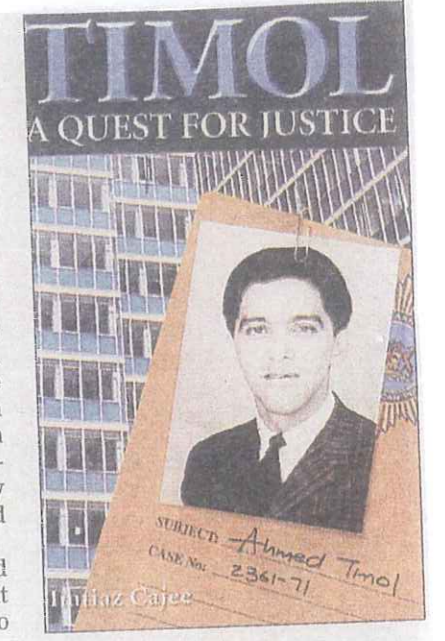
Read in the light of the ironies of our current situation - former prisoners now running the police force and the military - the need for a true history of the struggle is evident, even urgent. These sentiments are expressed in the book's conclusion: "We must continue to educate the masses about the legacy of fallen

comrades. The heroes and heroines of the struggle need to know that we shall never forget them."

*Timol: A Quest for Justice* provides an interesting biographical portrait. Timol was born on November 3 1941 in Breyten, in what is now Mpumalanga. Haji Timol, his father, was a wholesaler who specialised in rice, later sold khaki, and opened a bicycle shop and then a fish and chips shop in Roodepoort. The fish shop burnt down and Haji became half blind. The family budget was supplemented by Hawa's needlework, and later Ahmed shared his earnings with them.

The families of Haji Timol and Hawa had come from a close-knit community in Gujarat, India, to South Africa in 1918.

Haji, who had been educated in India, was not a deeply political man, although he supported the SA



Indian Congress under Yusuf Dadoo, a neglected hero, another whom Cajee exhorts us to deliver to history.