

# FOREWORD

BY PRESIDENT THABO MBEKI

Any good dictionary will refresh your grasp of what is really meant by that much over-used term, “comrade.” I myself have just consulted a dictionary, which reminds me that a comrade is an intimate friend or associate. We are accustomed to making, almost automatically, the move from the simple word “comrade” to its revolutionary sense, “comrade-in-arms.” My point however is that Ahmed was each and both of these, taken separately as well as together.

Ahmed Timol was my comrade not in only in the broad and diffuse sense that we shared an allegiance to a humane political movement that was determined to overthrow injustice, in that we were comrades-in-arms, but we were also comrades, quite literally. He and I went to receive political training in Moscow in the Sixties. We had the same teachers in the same institution. We ate the same food. We made the same friends, acquaintances and contacts. We shivered alike in that cold foreign place and were warmed by the same revolutionary yearnings.

So now when I glance again at my dictionary, it is fitting and proper that it explains to me that the word “comrade” comes from the early French *comarade* which signified a member of a group sleeping in the same room, a roommate, a companion. This sense of the word originates, in turn, from the Old Spanish word *cámara* which means room. And one can trace this sense of a shared room further back through the Latin. So Ahmed and I shared a room, but a large one. His room was an entire country and not only that, but the world even beyond South African borders, throughout which he also sought justice.

Ahmed himself noted certain ironies in an autobiography that he once wrote, upon which the author of this book is able to draw. Ahmed wrote: “It is indeed a tragic history of our families that my forefathers were once colonial subjects of the British Raj in India and my father both a subject of British Imperialists in India and now a victim of South African colonialists and racialism.” There was further irony in the fact that Ahmed’s life started as the world began to galvanise itself successfully against the racial tyranny of Hitler and ended as the apartheid juggernaut, feeding on the same dark forces as Nazism, reached its height of repression in South Africa in 1971. He was himself the light in a darkening room. As someone says in this book, he ought never to have existed. The apartheid regime had banned us a decade earlier and had brutally set out to break and torture our scattered comrades. They believed that they had broken the back of the underground. And then they found Ahmed. *Mayibuye!* They performed upon his body a macabre dance, a *danse macabre* of exorcism through violence. It was their own neurosis that spoke through every blow, because in him our revolutionary spirit was made flesh and they simply could not believe it. He was and remained, even after his death, the spectre that was haunting South Africa.

That was at the high tide of apartheid, when every single institution in South Africa, from the tiniest municipality to Parliament, had been finally rid, by the white nationalists, of the remnants of people of colour who in some provinces had enjoyed a precarious place by grace and favour of a paternalistic “English” colonial era. This had been one of the most grimly systematic bleaching operations in history. And yet, the atmosphere of apparent racial control, of white *baasskap*, was misleading. The times were already turning; soon to be followed by strikes, urban protest, freedom for neighbouring countries, sanctions and disinvestment, unprecedented world mobilisation of opposition, and guerrilla warfare. All these forces, and others, combined with growing white doubt to bring the whole edifice crashing down in 1990-94.

You will read in this book that Ahmed was Muslim but never sectarian: he sought national unity across the class, caste and religious divides of his own community. You will further read that he was communist without ever abandoning his religious piety. And you will read how his revolutionary discipline never overtook his joy in simple things. I want to emphasise very strongly that Ahmed was, apart from all this, a great Africanist in the most profound sense. Just as Dr Dadoo expanded the non-racial ethos that is the hallmark of our liberation movement, just as Dr Dadoo lifted the gaze of his community to behold its African realities, so too did Ahmed Timol expand upon and enact, in his own flesh and with his own blood, the great lengths to which the Indian community in South Africa could and would go in order to assert and claim its proper birthright in this place: Ahmed belongs in a high place amidst the pantheon of great African indigenous leadership not only in this country but across the diaspora. As is so often the case, the challenges that we face are not unprecedented and we are able to learn from the prior experience of others in nationalist struggles elsewhere. The vision of Dr Dadoo during our struggle for liberation was, for instance, strikingly similar to the vision of the great West Indian historian and prime minister, Eric Williams, whose book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, pioneered a new understanding of the end of the slave trade a century and a half after the end of the successful revolution of Haitian slaves. In his speech marking the independence of his country, Williams directly addressed the great diversity of his country in the cause of national unity:

*There can be no Mother India for those whose ancestors come from India. There can be no Mother Africa for those of African origin. There can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties. There can be no Mother China even if one could agree as to which China is the mother; and there can be no Mother Syria and no Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one mother and Mother cannot discriminate between her children.*

This is the wisdom that we too apply, in our own quest for a single South Africa. And still, as late as 2003, it was possible to read, in the pages of a business newspaper, a column by a notoriously disaffected columnist who has long ridiculed our goals of national unity in the international press. He has long – and

wrongly – warned the world that a free South Africa would quickly descend into tribal warfare, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. This voice turned, during 2003, to try an assault on the longstanding unity between Indians and Africans in this country. Thus the columnist castigated what he chose to call “our Asian countrymen” as though South Africans of Asian ancestry can occupy no indigenous place in our revolutionary pantheon and even in our democratic government. Such men cannot read this book without hanging their heads in shame. Sadly, it is too much to ask for remorse.

These are weighty matters. And yet this book, despite its sombre subject and its analytical seriousness, succeeds in bringing out the bliss that drove the man Ahmed Timol. The author himself correctly quotes CLR James. This great historian of the Haitian revolution, in all its tragedy and triumph, is also the author of a blissful and classic essay concerning cricket, *Beyond A Boundary*. In this essay James saw the beginnings of “the West Indian renaissance not only in cricket, but in politics, in history and in writing.” The author is himself to be commended for the labour of this book, which is in itself a further sign of the African renaissance in our own time. In his very first line he writes that “Ahmed Timol is one of the most celebrated official murder victims of apartheid South Africa.” When I first read that I paused over the word “celebrated”. Was this word not somehow wrong? I know that the writer meant this word in the sense of “famous” or “well known”. But the other meanings – the festival overtones of the word “celebrated” – at first seemed out of place. And yet I see that Ahmed’s nephew is quite right. Because we do finally celebrate, in the most festive sense, the courage and humanity of this extraordinary African.