

Yusuf Bhamjee:

the ‘always there’ politician, 1950–2025

by Yunus Carrim

Former KwaZulu-Natal MP Yusuf Bhamjee was the ‘always there’ politician; there, most of all, for his constituents who would flock to his constituency office at the Truro Centre in Northdale in Msunduzi (Pietermaritzburg) and be sure to be attended to. But he was there, too, at many weddings, funerals, birthdays, anniversaries and other private family functions. He was rooted in the community; a real ‘community politician’.

This flowed in part from the location of the Bhamjee family in the Indian community of Msunduzi. A very hospitable, socially responsible family, they were very well known over several decades. There was a time when most Indians bought their shoes from the famous Bhamjee’s Shoe Store located in the middle of the Indian business sector in lower Church Street. Whites looking for cheaper shoes would also roll into Bhamjee’s. And in later years, many Africans too.

The family moved from Wolmaransstad in the Transvaal to Pietermaritzburg in the mid-1950s and set up the shoe shop in 1958. Yusuf, who passed away on 3 January 2025, was born in Wolmaransstad on 10 January 1950. The whole family was involved in the business and looming over them was the matriarch, the formidable, friendly, business-savvy Mrs Aisha Bhamjee who knew most of her customers personally. ‘Customers are part of our family,’ she’d say; ‘treat them like that.’ And she would often reduce prices for those who couldn’t pay. With changes in the footwear market, the business petered out.

Linked to the Congress movement, brothers Hanef and Yusuf played prominent political roles and Ismail an anti-apartheid sports role. Yusuf left for Ireland in



Yusuf Bhamjee as uMgungundlovu mayor speaking on the Nelson Mandela marathon

1969 to study politics. A rather curious outcome of my 1976 political detention was meeting journalist detainee Joe Thloloe, which led to a United Nations scholarship to study journalism and sociology in England. I met Hanef while there, but not Yusuf. Coincidentally, he and I returned to South Africa in June 1983. We soon met up. Both of us got jobs at the Development Studies Research Group at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) and he later lectured in politics and I in sociology. We were together almost every day and in and out of each other’s homes.

In the early 1990s we served on the ANC’s regional executive committee and in 1994 Yusuf was elected to the KwaZulu-Natal legislature and I to the national assembly. Initially, we both served in the same constituency office, but I was later moved to Ladysmith (now the Alfred Duma municipality). Yusuf served in the KwaZulu-Natal legislature from 1994 to 2004; the national assembly from then until he became mayor of uMgungundlovu district municipality from 2008 to 2016; and then he served again in the legislature until 2019. He chaired the legislature’s local government committee for many years. During his stint as uMgungundlovu’s mayor, the municipality received several clean audits while enhancing service delivery and development. And he introduced the Nelson Mandela marathon, which starts at the hall in Edendale where Mandela made his last public speech at the 1961 All-In African Conference and ends at his capture site near Howick. It now draws about 20 000 participants annually.

The focus in this tribute is more on issues not covered elsewhere and our personal-cum-political

relationship. Yusuf was 'always there' not just for his constituents but also at every major political event. When violence broke out in the townships, including those near Richmond, he was there too, with other MPs, to try to secure peace. He was there too in the ANC branches and other structures. While not a South African Communist Party member, he was very supportive as he was to Cosatu and Sanco.

His reach went far beyond his original political roots in the Indian community. He served people of all races, not least from the informal settlements in the northern areas of Pietermaritzburg, so advancing the ANC's non-racialism in practice. And the number of people across colour and class divides who turned up at his funeral and afterwards at the Bhamjee house attest to the range of people he and the family had reached.

In 1986 I suggested that we organise a get-together of those of us released from our brief state of emergency detention and ask a cook to make a breyani, also liked by African comrades. 'I'll cook it,' said he. I was sceptical. But he did. And it was ever so good. Unlike me, who carefully measures the spices used, he would just nonchalantly throw them all in, like a traditional Indian housewife – and out would come his wonderful dishes.

He launched *New Dawn*, the city's first progressive community newspaper. He was soon annoyed with me that I didn't know how to run a newspaper. 'But you're a bloody journalist,' he said. 'Yes, but that doesn't mean I can manage a newspaper.' Both of us were clueless – and our other commitments meant the paper fizzled out. Ultimately, it was a hilarious experience. Among his other feats, he was the Natal high schools 100 metre sprint champion, a good cricketer and a coach of Young Natalians Football Club and received the Andrew Mlangeni Green Jacket award for his contribution to non-racial sport.

He was always resourceful and knew how to get things done; and he brought this into his work as an MP, to the considerable benefit of his constituents and advantage of the committees he served. He had a generous side and often assisted his constituents and comrades in need financially and in other material ways. He was also a very good fundraiser for the ANC. He was incorruptible and people felt at ease contributing through him for various progressive and humanitarian causes.

Of course, Yusuf also had his flaws. Who among us doesn't? He would take sides in internal divisions among the activists rather than being above the fray

and he would tend to marginalise those who got in his way. Many politicians do, but Yusuf needn't have, as his position was never really threatened by anybody. For a public representative, he had too thin a political skin and couldn't take criticism easily. At some deep level, he had an unnecessary sense of insecurity and this tended to blur his vision at times and could be quite frustrating.

But these and other flaws were outweighed by his many strengths and his sheer persistence. He was always there at every political and community meeting, however mundane and tiresome. And always on time! He had enormous stamina to endure long and boring meetings. He relished helping people and came alive through that. He worked endlessly, and in many parts of the province, including far-flung rural areas.

Yusuf played a major role in keeping activists in the northern areas together. His departure left a huge vacuum there. And those who didn't take to him will also recognise this in time. Although some promising younger comrades are emerging, they can't play the role he did. There won't be another Yusuf Bhamjee – he came in a context that is no more and had a certain struggle and family pedigree that can't be replicated.

Although we had strong ties, we had an up-and-down relationship. After 1994, with our different roles in different spaces and my spending about half the year away from Pietermaritzburg, we would drift apart and come together episodically. The increasing complexity and volatility of the movement and broader political terrain in which we operated put further strains on our relationship. We would argue and get mad at each other, but we always found each other when it mattered. Our strong historical and emotional bonds would triumph over our irritations with each other.

And now that he's gone, that's come starkly through. I've been taken aback at the grief that's overcome me and now feel that he was 'always there' for me too; and that he was a very important part of my life. Why is it that so often it's only when a person passes on that we recognise their value, that their flaws are no less a part of them than their strengths? Just as one's own are. That people are more than the sum of their parts. And ultimately you can only value them as a whole.

I so wish I'd told him how, beyond our differences, as a whole, as a person, he was very important to me. Even when he couldn't hear me in that dreaded hospital ICU. But I think deep down he knew.