

SPECIAL MEDIA REPORT: KADER ASMAL DIES

Timeslive, 22 June, 2011 17:00

ANC stalwart Kader Asmal has died of a heart attack. Party secretary general Gwede Mantashe said Luthuli House has received confirmation of the former education minister's death from the organisation's Western Cape office.

Asmal was minister of water affairs and forestry from 1994, a member of the ANC's national executive committee, and education minister from 1999.

He was born on 8 October 1934, in the small rural town of Stanger, KwaZulu Natal (then Natal). Young Asmal was raised in a vibrant, lower middle-class family. His mother was a home-maker while his father was a shopkeeper.

Although not overtly political, his parents encouraged lively debate in the family of 10.

A consistent concern for human justice stems from Asmal's childhood. Like the vast majority of South Africans then, his first brush with racism was as a teenager when a White shop-owner barred him from buying a newspaper. A transformative moment in his political understanding, according to Asmal, occurred when footage of Nazi concentration camp victims was shown to him, and he decided on a career in law in order to oppose such oppressive mentality.

He gradually saw a link between this tragedy in European history and his own life under apartheid. A significant turning point for Asmal in the 1950s Defiance Campaign era came as a politicized Matric pupil, when he saw the Campaign's leaders marching in prison uniforms through the dusty streets of Stanger. He responded by leading the school stay-at-home.

Precluded from returning to his land of birth because of his political activities, Asmal began teaching at Trinity College. For the next 25 years, specializing in human rights, labour and international law, he lectured in Dublin and rose to Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1980-1986). In 1983, he received the Prix UNESCO in recognition of his work in the advancement of human rights. On his return to South Africa, he became Professor of Human Rights at the University of the Western Cape (1990-1994).

Throughout these years, as a founder of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement in London (1960) and as founder, Vice-Chairperson (1963-1972) and Chairperson (1972-1991) of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, Asmal effectively opposed apartheid on behalf of the African National Congress (ANC).

He worked for South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SAN-ROC) and was vice-president of International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF). Asmal also added his efforts to civil rights campaigns in other parts of the world, including Palestine and Northern Ireland, and served on international legal commissions.

The popularizing of a culture of human rights throughout society has been a contemporary goal of Asmal's. This he has done via his service on the ANC's structures, especially the National Executive Committee (NEC), and through his chairing of the Council of the University of the North, to which he was appointed in December 1992.

In the April 1994 general election, Asmal was 22nd in the ranking for the ANC's National Assembly, and became a member of parliament. He was appointed Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry in May 1994, a position he held until 1999. He was also appointed as Minister of Education in the June 1999 elections and served in this position until 2004.

Asmal has written two books, co-edited another, written nine chapters in books and has penned 150 articles on legal and political aspects of apartheid, labour law, Ireland and decolonization.

Asmal is also an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, and a laureate of the 2000 Stockholm Water Prize, for his work on water issues in South Africa.

Asmal was married to Louise, and they have two sons in South Africa, and two grandchildren.