

## Govin Reddy: Newsman and activist (1943–2017)

GOVAN Reddy died in Johannesburg at the age of 74. He was an anti-apartheid activist who was detained, banned and spent ten years in exile. But it is as the deputy group CEO of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) who missed out on the top job in 1998 – when it went to an obscure priest from Zululand – that he is best remembered.

The youngest of eleven siblings, Reddy was born on 16 June 1943 on a small-scale banana farm in Pinetown. The farm was confiscated in the late 1960s under the Group Areas Act to make way for Clermont township. After matriculating at Sastri College in Durban, Reddy completed a BA (Hons) at the University College for Indians on Salisbury Island, later the University of Durban-Westville. He taught at a farm school but was fired after refusing to participate in a ceremony commemorating Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd after he was assassinated in 1966. He then taught history at Inanda Seminary in Durban for a couple of years before completing an MA in African History at Northwestern University in Chicago, followed by a postgraduate diploma in African Studies at the same university. Back in Durban he became a researcher at the Institute of Race Relations, worked closely with the new, more progressive, leadership of the Natal Indian Congress and associated with the Black Consciousness movement.

After a speech to University of Durban-Westville students in 1976 in which he exhorted them to emulate the heroism of the Soweto youth uprising and the revolutions in Mozambique and Angola, he was detained and held for five months in Modderbee Prison under



section 29 of the Internal Security Act. He requested that an hour of classical music be piped into his communal cell each day, much to the loud displeasure of the comrades. After his release in 1977 he received a five-year banning order, which limited his job options. He ran a tiny bookshop in Durban, contriving to import and sell books the regime deemed subversive. The security police harassed him, confiscated his books and made life so difficult that Reddy skipped the country in 1981 and got a job with the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) in Harare. He was head of current affairs at the ZBC from 1982 to 1984 while Mugabe's notorious Fifth Brigade, unreported by the broadcaster, slaughtered thousands of civilians in Matabeleland and torched their villages.

In 1985 he moved to Italy to work for Inter Press Service, a news agency based in Rome focusing on the developing world. In 1989 he returned to Harare as editor of *Africa South* magazine. He lived with police guards outside his house after his name was found on a list suggesting he could be a target of South African special forces. He returned to South Africa in 1991 and was deputy

director of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in Johannesburg until joining the SABC. After being fired from the SABC he became CEO of the *Mail & Guardian*.

Passionate about cricket, he was shortlisted to take over as CEO of Cricket South Africa from Ali Bacher in 2000 but lost out instead to Gerald Majola. He complained that under apartheid he had been too dark, but now he was not dark enough. Nevertheless, in 2002 he was appointed director of the new Sol Plaatje Media Leadership Institute at Rhodes University, and in

2006 went to Mumbai as India Manager of Brand South Africa. On his return he was appointed professor extraordinary by the universities of Stellenbosch (Journalism) and Pretoria (Political Science). He was also appointed to the National Lotteries Commission board.

Reddy, who had cancer, is survived by his second wife Tessa and four children.

CHRIS BARRON

This is a shortened version of the obituary originally published in the *Sunday Times*, 5 November 2017.