



Achmat, Zackie (b. 1962)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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South African activist Zackie Achmat has been a pivotal figure in his country's response to AIDS. His refusal, from 1999 to 2003, to avail himself of anti-retroviral drugs until they became affordable for the poor brought him recognition from health and human rights advocates worldwide.

Born Abdurrazack Achmat in Johannesburg, on March 21, 1962, "Zackie" was raised in a conservative Muslim household by his mother and aunt in Salt River, an area of Cape Town. In a 1995 autobiographical essay, provocatively entitled "My Childhood as an Adult Molester," he describes the conditions of life for South Africa's "coloureds" during the apartheid era, when he suffered discrimination and poverty. Although of Malaysian extraction, he identified with the country's black population, who were subject to even worse treatment. The essay also offers a rare portrait of gay male life in the colored community.

By age ten, Achmat was aware of his homosexuality and began to question religious teachings. An eager reader, he soon exhausted the limited offerings of the bookmobile that served his neighborhood and received a special pass to use a town library ordinarily reserved for whites. However, its restrooms were still off limits. While seeking available facilities, he discovered restroom sex with adult men and took up the life of a "moffie," South African slang for a gay man.

Achmat's political activism began with the 1976 student uprisings against apartheid. He organized youth resistance groups for the African National Congress (ANC) while it was still banned, and he was jailed several times. In the 1990s apartheid was repealed and a new constitution initiated. The ANC came to power under the charismatic leadership of Nelson Mandela in 1994.

Achmat was one of the founders of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality in 1994, which advocated for gay rights in the new constitution. After considerable debate, in 1996 South Africa became the first nation to include protections against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its Bill of Rights. In 1998 all remaining local sodomy laws were declared unconstitutional.

Achmat co-founded the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in 1998 to address the AIDS epidemic. South Africa then had the highest number of AIDS cases in the world, a figure that would eventually grow to over 5 million. To put a human face on the crisis, Achmat publicly announced his own HIV-positive status and vowed not to take anti-retroviral drugs until they were available to all South Africans.

As he later told his group, "The majority of people with HIV--they don't have a face, they don't have a political understanding. They're desperate, they're poor, they're alone. . . . I can't look them in the eye when I take medicines and I know they're going to die."

TAC's first campaign was directed against drug industry pricing practices. TAC joined the government's defense against a lawsuit brought by pharmaceutical firms to block importation of generic medicines. Through rallies and international media activism the group advocated vociferously for affordable drugs. Achmat even shipped enough AIDS drugs from Thailand to treat 700 sufferers, to make the point that

generics were available at a fraction of the quoted cost. Facing a public relations disaster, in 2001 the pharmaceutical companies dropped the suit.

Now TAC faced a more prolonged struggle against its own government to make anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) available in the public health sector. Thabo Mbeke, who had succeeded Nelson Mandela as president in 1999, refused to accept the link between HIV and AIDS and pronounced ARVs "harmful to health."

Enduring frequent bouts of illness, Achmat spearheaded TAC's civil disobedience campaign to force the government to promote the use of ARVs. TAC and other groups sued the government to provide Nevirapine to curb mother-to-newborn transmission of HIV. TAC won the support of former president Mandela, who met with Achmat and declared him a national hero. In August 2003, anticipating a victory, Achmat resumed treatment in time to reverse his declining health. In November, South Africa's Ministry of Health finally agreed to a government-funded program to provide ARVs on a wide scale.

Although there have been other obstacles to effective treatment for HIV infection in South Africa, TAC has made steady progress. In addition to his work with TAC, Achmat has also directed the AIDS Law Project at University of Witwatersrand and co-founded ABIGALE (Association of Bisexuals, Gays, and Lesbians).

A filmmaker, he has also directed several documentary films: *Scorpion under a Stone* (1996, about the Afrikaans language); *Gay Life Is Best* (1993, on the 1992 Johannesburg Pride March); *Die Duiwel Maak My Hart So Seer* (1993, interviews with poor children); and *Apostles of Civilised Vice* (2000, on South Africa's gay history).

Brian Tilley's documentary *It's My Life* offers an intimate portrait of Achmat's activism during the time of his medication strike.

Achmat received the Desmond Tutu Leadership Award in 2001; the Jonathan Mann Award for Global Health and Human Rights in 2003; and the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights in 2003. In 2004, he was one of the nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize.

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Ruth M. Pettis is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.