

Frene Ginwala

Much is made of the Zarathushtis who have risen to great heights in business. The Tatas and the Godrejs are household names. Much less discussed—and much less celebrated—are those prodigious Zarathushtis who have risen to great heights in public service. Forgetting our captains of public service could have deleterious consequences for our future generations, especially as anxious Zarathushti parents increasingly push their children to be professionals who earn lots of money instead of encouraging them to be “do-gooders.” Indeed, we risk becoming a one-dimensional community if we only celebrate our heroes from the business world.

This article is about one woman who went against the grain and chose to help her country, even when she had ample opportunities to turn her back and focus on her own professional advancement. Through her tireless efforts, she helped topple one of the most deplorable governments the world has ever seen. And if that wasn't enough, this great Zarathushti woman stayed on and was instrumental in forming of the most acclaimed democracies on the face of this Earth. This is the story of Frene Noshir Ginwala.

Frene Noshir Ginwala was born on April 25, 1932 in Johannesburg, South Africa. She was a second-generation South African, as her grandparents emigrated from British India in the nineteenth century. Dr. Ginwala was born into an affluent family, and unlike many other women of the era, she was encouraged to pursue higher education. And Dr. Ginwala was very successful in her studies, earning a Bachelor of Laws from the University of London.

Dr. Ginwala could have remained in England and forged a successful legal practice, or she could have chosen to join her parents who had moved to Mozambique, but she instead chose to return to South Africa. This decision could not have been made lightly. She was returning to a country which had just passed legislation dividing the society into distinct racial groups, condemning Dr. Ginwala (and all other Indian and Colored descendants) to inferior-class status. With the inauguration of the apartheid regime, thousands of families of all races were being uprooted and forced into areas segregated by race. Dr. Ginwala began participating with the Youth Wing of the African National Congress (ANC) in protesting these changes that were taking place.

During this time (the mid- to late-1950s), the protests conducted by the ANC were relatively calm. They were always aimed at specific policies rather than calling for revolution, and the protests were always non-violent. The situation worsened at the turn of the decade as protests grew larger and the regime grew more fearful of militant activity. The regime cracked down on dissenters, with several well-publicized blood baths. The ANC was banned and its top-level leadership was condemned to prison. Worried that the apartheid government would target her and her associates, Dr. Ginwala went into exile, leveraging her extensive network across East Africa to protect many of the condemned leaders of the ANC. Of course the leaders of a political movement need to have presence on the ground, and so many leaders of the ANC shuttled back and forth between South Africa and neighboring countries. Over the years and decades that followed, Dr. Ginwala would regularly help these leaders sneak into and out of South Africa, including Oliver Tambo (the former leader of the ANC) and Nelson Mandela.

After being banned in South Africa, the ANC needed a new home. Dr. Ginwala helped start the ANC Government in Exile in Tanzania, but instead of organizing the government or planning protests, Dr. Ginwala decided that the most effective way she could contribute to bringing down the apartheid regime was to bring as much attention to its atrocities as possible. She helped start a local newspaper in Tanzania and she also became a regular correspondent for several British news agencies.

We now know that the apartheid regime in South Africa fell because of international pressure, in part brought on by newscasters like Dr. Ginwala. But the road was tough. Before long, Dr. Ginwala was forced to flee Tanzania, so she returned to England to complete her Doctorate in Philosophy at Oxford. Dr. Ginwala would then spend most of the 1970s and 1980s writing and lecturing across the world to bring attention to the apartheid regime. She engaged with the UN and participated in other international conferences organizations, all the while continuing to rise in the ranks of the ANC.

After 31 years in exile, Dr. Ginwala returned to South Africa in 1991. It was clear that the National Party (which was behind the apartheid movement) had to relinquish power, and Dr. Ginwala spent the next three years working with ANC leaders and others to coordinate the transfer of power. In 1994 Dr. Ginwala won a seat to Parliament, and she was soon elected Speaker of the National Assembly, the first democratically-elected Speaker in the history of South Africa. This was a critical time in South African history, with the Parliament expected to draft a Constitution for the fledgling democracy. As the Speaker, Dr. Ginwala was expected to play a critical role in the drafting of this Constitution. She did not disappoint. Through the Constitution process, she and her fellow Parliamentarians sought to solidify many of the objectives that the ANC had struggled to realize for years, from banning racial discrimination to laying the foundations for a truly democratic society.

Dr. Ginwala also sought to advance the representation of women in politics. She created the Women's League of the ANC. Through much of her association with the ANC, she was one of, if not the only woman in a position of leadership. Due to her direct influence, the ANC bylaws today require at least 30% of its seats be given to women. This is quite impressive for any political party, but it is especially praiseworthy for one embedded in such a hierarchically-gendered society as South Africa.

Dr. Ginwala was re-elected in 1997 and chose to retire from politics in 2004. From there, she became the First Chancellor of one of South Africa's flagship universities, The University of Kwazulu-Natal. Her term ended in 2009. Today, Dr. Ginwala sits on various advisory boards and commissions at both the national and international levels. She is a living embodiment of what can be achieved when a good Zarathushti devotes oneself to public service.