

ZACKIE ACHMAT

b. March 21, 1962

SOUTH AFRICAN ACTIVIST

“The desire to know requires courage, patience and persistence because freedom, dignity and equality depend on it.”

By organizing protests, Achmat demanded that the government take action to provide AIDS education, prevention and resources for HIV-positive citizens.

Zackie Achmat is a South African activist whose work has focused on people living with HIV/AIDS, the gay community and combating apartheid. He is a Nobel Peace Prize nominee and a recipient of the Desmond Tutu Leadership Award and the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights.

Achmat was raised in Cape Town, South Africa. At age 14, he participated in the 1976 anti-apartheid uprising in Soweto. As an adolescent, he assisted the African National Congress by organizing his peers. He continued to fight against apartheid until its end in 1994.

Achmat became active in South Africa's gay community and founded the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality. In 2000, he directed the documentary “Apostles of Civilised Vice,” chronicling the history of the gay community in South Africa.

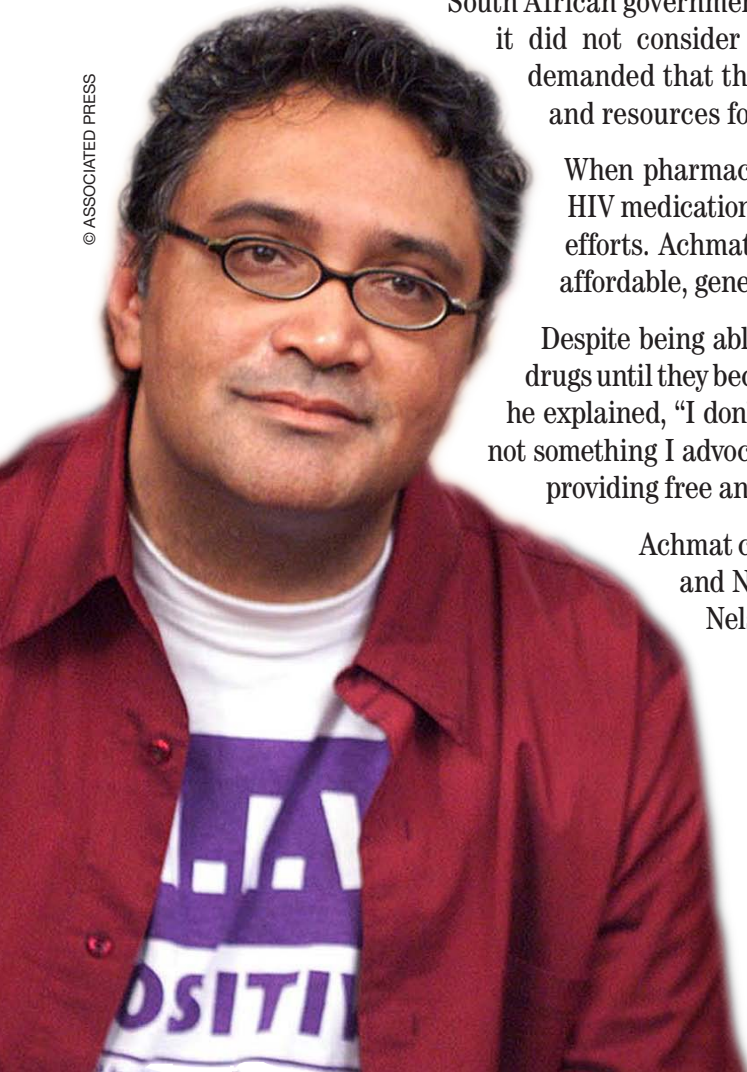
In the late 1990s, Achmat was diagnosed as HIV-positive. It was difficult for him to obtain treatment or medications in South Africa, which had one of the highest rates of infection.

Achmat helped create the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). TAC led campaigns against the South African government, which was reluctant to get involved with the epidemic because it did not consider AIDS a significant problem. By organizing protests, Achmat demanded that the government take action to provide AIDS education, prevention and resources for HIV-positive citizens.

When pharmaceutical companies filed a lawsuit to block the import of cheaper HIV medications, Achmat and TAC led a successful campaign that thwarted their efforts. Achmat continued to lobby for price reductions and increased access to affordable, generic HIV drugs.

Despite being able to afford antiretroviral medications, Achmat refused to take the drugs until they became available to all South Africans. When asked about this decision, he explained, “I don't think it's noble; I think it's dumb. But it's a conscience issue. It's not something I advocate for anyone else.” In 2003, the South African government began providing free antiretroviral medications to a greater portion of the country.

Achmat cofounded ABIGALE (Association of Bisexuals, Gays, and Lesbians) and Ndifuna Ukwazi (Dare to Know), an education-based organization. Nelson Mandela called Achmat a national hero.



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