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Derek Anton Matyszak (09/05/60 – 16/02/23)

“Speaking Truth to Power”

It with sadness that the Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU) announces the death of Derek Matyszak. Derek was a founding member of RAU and a former chairperson of the Amani Trust, as well as a Board member of multiple NGOs. Derek was a well-known lawyer and academic, but most well-known for his legal activism.

After graduating from the University of Cape Town with a BA. LLB, and the recipient of a Beit Scholarship and the D.B. Molteno prize for the most outstanding student in constitutional law, Derek worked for five years in private practice. In 1991, he assumed a post as Director of the Legal Aid and Advice Scheme at the University of Zimbabwe, and subsequently in 1993 became lecturer in Procedural Law, a post he held until 2007.

Derek was an activist at heart, and believed in the power of the law to protect civil and political rights. He supported multiple civic causes and organisations, supporting GALZ, Kubatana, the Amani Trust, and finally RAU. His influence in all these causes over many years is little known as Derek by nature preferred to work quietly in all his actions. Few know, for example, that Legal Aid and Advice Scheme, under Derek’s guidance was one of the founding members of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum, providing legal assistance to the victims of the Food Riots. This voluntary assistance, using students under his supervision, became the forerunner of the civil litigation strategy now used by human rights organisations to combat the impunity for gross human rights so frequently applied by the government.

During this time, and during his time with the Amani Trust and RAU, Derek developed into the formidable legal and political analyst that some many know. He authored more than 80 research papers, legal opinions, and Op-Eds, and the range of his inquiries was extraordinary. He produced the [first independent audit](#) of the voters’ roll in 2009, and thereafter became well-known for his detailed analyses of elections. He also undertook detailed critiques of [indigenisation](#), the [ZANU-PF constitution](#), and many other [constitutional issues](#). His analyses were always minutely researched, argued comprehensively in great detail, Derek, like Alex Magaisa subsequently, became the go-to person for constitutional matters in the political crisis that has afflicted Zimbabwe since the late 1990s.

After leaving RAU in 2017, Derek worked for the SAPES Trust and the [Institute for Security Studies \(ISS\)](#) in Pretoria, where once again was a prolific commentator on Zimbabwe, authoring 28 reports and Op-Eds between 2018 and 2019. He subsequently worked with [Veritas](#) and as an independent consultant.

Derek was not your typical lawyer: few in the profession are addicted to motorcycles and rock music. His music collection would not have looked out of place in a high street music shop. However, as a lawyer in court and on the public platform, he was a formidable opponent. Apart from always being exceptionally well-prepared, his very quick mind enabled him to see the flaws in other's arguments, and woe to those who were sloppy or poorly prepared. He was a frequent discussant at the SAPES Policy Dialogues over the years, startling many with his blunt, but always well-researched, presentations. Derek called a spade a spade ALWAYS. Often his energy in presenting looked almost explosive but mediated by wry comment and dark humour.

His passionate belief in civil liberties and his belief that the state needed always to be controlled from excesses meant that he undertook an enormous amount of legal work *pro bono* never *pro deo*: Derek was allergic to the latter term.

Derek suffered a massive stroke in 2019 which left him disabled and curtailed his prolific contributions to democracy. From humble beginnings in Shabani (Zvishavane now), Derek became one of the powerful advocates for democracy and civil liberties, and it was always vocational for him. In quick succession, Zimbabwe has lost two (with Alex Magaisa) immense talents, the kinds of talents that might have graced the bench with judges of erudition and courage. He is survived by his wife, Nadia, and his brothers in South Africa and England. Go well, compagnero.

Tony Reeler
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