

# Iconic South African photojournalist Dr Peter Magubane passes away



By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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Source: SABC [SABC](#) Iconic South African photojournalist, Dr Peter Magubane has passed away

His photographs witnessed pivotal moments and captured the essence of the anti-apartheid movement, including the shooting deaths of 69 unarmed demonstrators in Sharpeville in 1960, the Rivonia trial of Nelson Mandela and other leaders of the African National Congress in the early 1960s, and the uprising by high school students in Soweto in 1976.

He was born in 1932 in the Johannesburg suburb of Vrededorp - now Pageview and grew up in Sophiatown.

Magubane passed away at his home, surrounded by his family - as confirmed by his daughter Fikile Magubane in local media.

“My father passed peacefully today, at midday - he was not well, he’s passed on peacefully. My father would have been 92-on the 18th of January,” she is quoted in an SABC article.

She says his family will remember his passion, “We will remember him as a very hard-working, conscientious

photographer. He was very passionate about his work, everything else would stop when it comes to his work. We are very pained with the passing of our father.”

On *Reuters* his granddaughter, Ulungile Magubane, is quoted as saying, “He was “someone who made very big sacrifices for the freedom that we enjoy today. Luckily he was alive to see the country change for the better,” she said.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has paid tribute to Magubane, saying that as South Africa commemorates 30 years of democracy this year, Magubane’s photography will be an important part of our reflections.

In a post on X - formerly Twitter, Ramaphosa said Magubane’s prosaic passion was powered as much by what he felt from the heart as what he saw through his lens.

“As we revisit our journey to freedom and the progression of our democratic dispensation, Magubane’s imagery will be an important part of our reflections”.

Political parties including the governing ANC and the GOOD party paid homage to the icon and his remarkable life’s work. Arts and Culture Minister Zizi Kodwa, meanwhile described him as a freedom fighter as well as a masterful storyteller and lensman.

“ I have learned with great sadness of the passing of veteran photographer and activist Peter Magubane at the age of 91. On behalf of government and the nation, I offer my deep condolences to the Magubane family, our veteran’s friends and his countless associates around the... [pic.twitter.com/mfHD53Ljct](https://pic.twitter.com/mfHD53Ljct)— Cyril Ramaphosa 🇿🇦🇿🇦🇿🇿🇦 (@CyrilRamaphosa) [January 1, 2024](#) ”

## A courageous journalist

Reported in various media, local and international, one of which is the *New York Times*, a publication he had contributed to.

The publication lead with the headline: *Peter Magubane, 91, Who Fought Apartheid With His Camera, Is Dead.*

“He never staged pictures, or asked for permission to photograph people, he said. “I apologise afterwards if someone feels insulted,” he said, “but I want the picture,” “ says the *New York Times*.

In 2015 *The Guardian* asked him what his best photograph was he chose an image from 1956, that shows an anonymous Black maid in a beret and apron tending a young white girl on a bench marked with the words “Europeans Only.” “When I saw ‘Europeans Only,’ I knew I would have to approach with caution.

“But I didn’t have a long lens, so I had to get close. I did not interact with the woman or the child, though. I never ask for permission when taking photos. I have worked amid massacres, with hundreds of people being killed around me, and you can’t ask for permission,” he says, quoted in *The Guardian*.

## **Capturing the oppression of Apartheid**

He worked mainly for *Drum magazine*, where he documented the daily lives, struggles and resistance of black South Africans.

A giant in the field of photojournalism and a multi-awards winner, Magubane, will forever be remembered as one of the courageous journalists who defiantly opposed the apartheid regime in South Africa says a statement by the South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef)

“Throughout the oppressive years of apartheid, he faced harassment, beatings, buckshot wounds, and prolonged periods of interrogation and detention.

“Remarkably, he survived being shot 17 times at a student’s funeral in Natalspuit, Gauteng Province, and endured over 586 days in solitary confinement in 1969.”

Magubane’s resistance was not only evident in his actions but also in his creative methods of capturing the truth continues the statement.

“He ingeniously hid his camera in a hollowed-out Bible, firing with a cable release from his pocket. “On other occasions, he covertly took shots with his camera concealed beneath his jacket, inside a milk carton, or half a loaf of bread, pretending to eat while documenting crucial moments.”

## **Internationally recognised**

Internationally, Magubane showcased his photographic talent in London during the early 1960s and worked as a correspondent for *Time* magazine between 1978 and 1980. In 1980, he temporarily left South Africa for New York.

"I did not want to leave the country to find another life, I was going to stay and fight with my camera as my gun. I did not want to kill anyone, though. I wanted to kill apartheid," he told *The Guardian* in 2015.

In 1992, his son Charles, also a photographer and then in his early 30s, was murdered in the sprawling Black township of Soweto. The country's violence took its toll on him as he stated: "I've been covering violence from the '50s to now," he said. "It's never struck me as it's struck me now. Now it has struck on my own door."

## Nelson Mandela's official photographer

His contributions extended to major publications such as *National Geographic*, *Life*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Paris Match*, and *Sports Illustrated*.

Additionally, the United Nations (UN) benefitted from his lens through commissions from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and Unicef.

Magubane's legacy includes documenting the lives of influential figures such as Nelson Mandela. His association with Mandela and Winnie Mandela dates back to the 1950s, both as friends and in his professional capacity as a photographer.

Magubane served as Madiba's official photographer from his release until his early years in the Presidency.

## Numerous honours

Among his numerous honours, Magubane considered the South African Order of Meritorious Service Silver Class II, bestowed upon him by President Nelson Mandela, as his greatest.

He received the American National Professional Photographers Association Humanistic Award for intervening to prevent violence and became the first black South African to win Press Photo of the Year in 1958.

After the dawn of democracy in South Africa, Magubane redirected his lens towards capturing the complexities of tribal and territorial conflicts as well as the cultural traditions of post-democratic South Africa.

With nine honorary doctorates and accolades including the Cornel Cappa Lifetime Achievement Award, the Robert Capa Award, and the Martin Luther King Luthuli Award, Magubane's impact on journalism and photography is unparalleled.

He twice exhibited his most iconic images of Nelson Mandela, with the first held at a United Nations gathering in Poland, opened by former Polish President Lech Walesa.

The second exhibition took place from 1 July to 30 September 2018 at the Nelson Mandela Gateway to Robben Island, where these images were gifted to the Nelson Mandela Foundation by Dr. Magubane.

"Magubane's indomitable spirit, courage, and exceptional contributions to journalism will be sorely missed. Sanef extends its heartfelt condolences to his family, friends, and the entire media fraternity during this time of profound loss," says Sanef.

## ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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