

UNIVERSITY

Meer chooses action over anger

South African dispels myths

By Cathy Peterson
Emerald reporter

Although she is a university-trained sociologist and the authorized biographer of Nelson Mandela, South African Fatima Meer said she is denied a basic right in her country enjoyed by many in the United States.

Because of her color, Meer cannot vote in South African government elections.

But Meer, of Indian descent, said she does not let her anger get in the way of her activism.

"Of course I'm angry ... but I'm not in a state of anger, I really couldn't survive that way. I'm mobilizing through action," Meer said.

Meer is the University's fifth Carlton and Wilberta Ripley Savage Visiting Professor. She is also the author of *Higher Than Hope: The Authorized Biography of Nelson Mandela*, as well as a short biography of Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi.

She is teaching a course on peace issues in southern Africa, the Middle East and India, as well as another course on women in South Africa this fall.

"Growing up in the system of apartheid, being segregated and abused, lots of people reacted against it," Meer said. "I was among them."

While in high school, Meer participated in organized resistance campaigns in 1946 and 1953. She was banned from participating in the resistance organizations, under a South African security law in 1954, 1976 and 1981. She and Winnie Mandela were detained without trial for five months in 1976.

In 1975 Meer helped found the Federation of South African Women, which was banned a year later because the state felt threatened by their activities, Meer said.

In South Africa, Meer has been active in the development



Photo by Sean Poston

Meer, left, and graduate student Barbara Sumner take part in a group discussion before a class lecture.

of education and research opportunities for black social scientists at the Institute for Black Research. The institute recently completed a survey of South Africans' reactions to the current political situation in their country.

Meer said the survey found that 78 percent of all South Africans supported negotiations between the African National Congress and the government and found very little support for an armed solution. Support for Nelson Mandela was also very high, she said.

"He has a total commitment to the democratic process," Meer said. "If you want a people to be moved together, you need to walk with them, not ahead of them."

Meer has been acquainted with the Mandelas since the 1950s, and her husband, Ismail

Meer, was tried for treason with Mandela in 1956.

Since Mandela's release last spring, South Africa has entered a new phase.

Americans who want to help black and white South Africans carve out a new government should keep themselves informed and support sanctions against the current nationalist government, Meer said.

"Fatima Meer has spent her whole life doing academics as an activist," said Leslie Scott, a graduate teaching fellow who is working with Meer.

Shannon Oliver, one of Meer's students, said the sociologist has debunked many myths about South Africa.

"She has illuminated how inadequate the media is here in presenting what's happening in South Africa," Oliver said.



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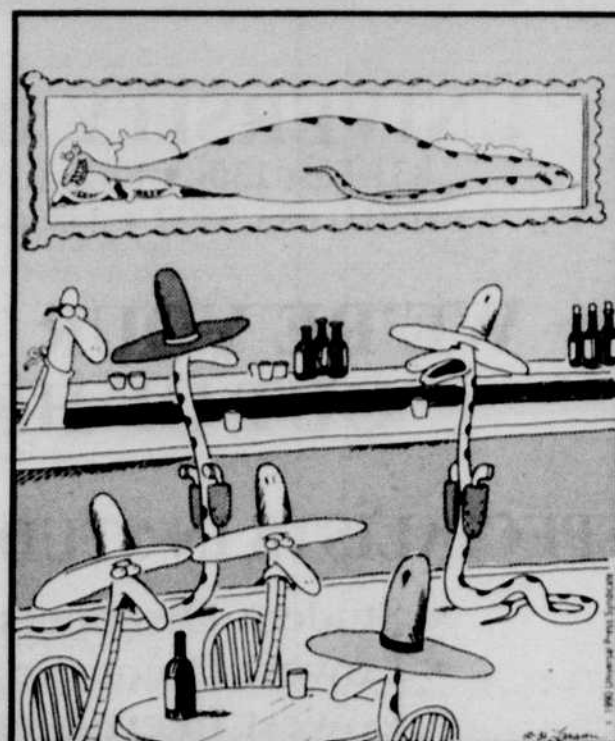
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