

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, Navanethem Pillay.

Rwanda is a small state in east-central Africa. It is known for its natural beauty, with dramatic steep mountains and deep valleys covering most of the country. In 1994 this scene was devastated by genocide, and, in just three months, nearly a million people were slaughtered.

Four years later, the mayor of the Rwandan town of Taba was tried and, on 2 September 1998, became the first person to be convicted of genocide in an international court¹.

Two days later, former Rwandan Prime Minister Jean Kambanda was sentenced to life imprisonment² and became the first head of state to be held accountable for atrocities committed during his regime³.

Navi Pillay, whom we honour today, was one of the judges responsible for these convictions AND for setting these groundbreaking precedents. “Groundbreaking” and “first” are words that crop up many times in Navi Pillay’s distinguished career.

She was born in Durban and studied at University of Natal Law School. She was the first woman to open her own law practice in Natal. Her precedent setting achievements began even then, when she won the right for Robben Island prisoners to have access to legal representation.

After that, she served on the bench as an Acting Judge in the South African High Court.

She then spent eight years with the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda, where she led a number of groundbreaking decisions, including defining rape as a war crime. In 2003, she was one of the first appeal judges at the newly established International Criminal Court – the first ever permanent, independent court which acts against genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes⁴.

Since 2008, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Pillay has continued to show the bravery that was evident in her days as an activist lawyer. She has addressed the issues of abolition of capital punishment, discrimination against the Roma people, women’s rights in the global economy, “honour” killings and the rights of caste-affected communities.

This is a tough profession. But, despite devoting her life to acting against the most atrocious crimes, she has earned a reputation as person who is both gentle and gracious. She is tough – but fair. She is also a skilled diplomat; she can get people to come together around a common vision and, importantly for her work, she can cut through the most tangled of bureaucracies⁵. In fact, as a Judge at the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda, she confirmed the first indictment in November 1995 in a hotel room, at a time where there were no facilities and no venue⁵.

Today, the beautiful state of Rwanda has a new constitution. There is peace and development. But there is something more. There is also justice. Navi Pillay and her tribunal showed that international criminal justice was possible. They took something that was just a concept and made it a reality.

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, Navanethem Pillay.

1. International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Historic judgement finds Akayesu guilty of genocide. Press Release, **1998**. Arusha, 2 September 1998.
2. International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Jean Kambanda: Judgement and Sentence. Case no.: ICTR 97-23-S, **1998** Arusha, 4 September 1998.
3. Newburger, E., The bus driver's daughter. *Harvard Law Review*, **2006**. Spring Edition.
4. International Criminal Court (ICC). *ICC at a glance*. 2010; Available from: <http://www.icc-cpi.int/menu/about%20the%20courticc%20at%20a%20glanceicc%20at%20a%20glance?language=en-GB>.
5. Coalition for the International Criminal Court (CICC). *CICC questionnaire to candidates for a post of judge of the International Criminal Court*. 2002; Available from: <http://www.iccnw.org/documents/QuestionICCSouthAfrEng.pdf>.