

Essays/Conference Report

The UK, US, and Mauritius

A clash of interests

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Context

I attended a conference on the Chagosian question in Pretoria in October 2022 while serving as a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPACT) at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, and I have described some of the discussions that were facilitated by participants in this essay. Representatives of the Chagosian diaspora, the ambassador of Mauritius to South Africa, scientific interpretations in papers presented, and comments by other Chagosians on the realisation of their rights, constitute the foundation of this report. Diaspora Chagosians are torn between Mauritius's fight for sovereignty rights and the interests of the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) on the island. They yearn to return to their ancestral land, and regain their identity and attain self-determination.

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Second, Mauritius fights for justice is understood to mean regaining control of Chagos. The activities and standpoints of the UK and the US, which have allied military interests, were critically examined by academicians and Chagosians. The International Court of Justice's (ICJ) order requesting that the UK return Chagos Island to Mauritius has caused a conflict of interest between Mauritius, the UK, and the US. For the Chagosians, who view self-identity and self-determination as issues of rights under international law that should not be denied, the disregard of the ICJ's judgment by the global powers would continue to signify statelessness to the majority of the Chagosians.

Background

On 4 and 5 October 2022, I attended an international conference on the status of Chagos Islands in Pretoria, South Africa. The world has moved away from direct colonisation. In the Indian Ocean, the Chagos Archipelago still bears the mark of British colonialism. This was the main theme of the conference held at Sheraton Hotels in Pretoria. Organised by the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation at the University of Johannesburg, the conference examined the status of the Chagos Islands.

The leadership of the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation gave the opening comments and outlined the conference's objectives. The remarks focused on the context of the ruling by the International Court of Justice in 2019 that asked the UK to vacate its colonial hold on Chagos Island. In the discussion that followed, the representative of the Mauritius diplomatic community argued that decolonisation of Mauritius is not yet complete with the Chagos Islands still under the control of the UK. Similarly, a former South African diplomat spoke of the role of identity and heritage in colonized people's struggles.

Chagosians began their struggle for freedom more than forty years ago. Mauritius, however, is more concerned with issues of sovereignty. Rather than being concerned about the fundamental rights of the Chagosians, it was more about economic relations with the UK. Both countries have economic and political relations that affect Chagosians. Taking action against the UK requires dealing with the root causes of longstanding problems between Mauritius and the Chagosians. As far as advocacy regarding the International Court of Justice ruling is concerned, a united front is essential for success.

The sovereignty issue preventing a united front against the UK is serious enough. Mauritius had considered the Chagos part of itself long before colonialism. Chagosians, however, aspire to become independent one day. Meanwhile, Mauritius has a range of social programmes to support Chagosians. The Chagosians Welfare Fund, a special programme for their integration, and land for agriculture are intended to address the problems they face. Others include payment of examination fees, scholarships, offer of notional prizes to young graduates, provision of sports facilities and computers, offer of information technology courses, special attention on senior citizens, and assistance to needy Chagosians for the repair of their houses affected by natural disasters. Free medical check-ups and foreign medical treatment are also provided.

There are many questions that need to be addressed, nonetheless. What are the chances of Chagos becoming a sovereign state? Will it be a continuation of another state? The UK currently grants citizenship to Chagosians and their offspring. It entails easier access to healthcare resources and other opportunities that the government of Mauritius might not be able to match. Some question whether the Chagosians' interests were considered when they were forcibly relocated and mistreated by the Mauritius government. Prior to the International Court of Justice taking their case into consideration, Chagosians had to file a lawsuit. Do the Chagosians really matter to the Mauritius government? Chagosians living in Mauritius enjoy significantly poorer levels of living than Mauritius residents.

One viewpoint holds that the United States and the United Kingdom are to blame for the Chagosians' issues. Chagosians, claim they have a right to self-determination because they have been oppressed for generations. They have a strong sense of themselves as indigenous people. They have distinct histories from Mauritius, notwithstanding disagreements. It was erroneously claimed by the government representative that neither were ever indigenous people. Although Chagosians, like Mozambique, are of African descent, this ancestry is Indian.

During the conference, there were several instances of emotional exchanges between the Mauritius government representative and participants from Chagos. The Chagosians want to be Chagosians, not Mauritius or British. It became complicated when we considered international law's position on indigenous people. Africans continue to claim that they

are all indigenous. The United Nations (UN) endorsed this, giving credence to the claim of indigenouness of the Chagosians. Self-determination is an issue in the community, with women at the forefront of the struggle. An in-depth documentary about this was screened at the conference. A filmmaker provided insight into the film's background.

The Chagos Island is considered strategically significant by Western nations for securing control of the Persian Gulf. Without considering the requirements of the local population, the US uses it as a military base. Without also protecting the interests of the locals, the British formed a colony there. Mauritius, on the other hand, deems the separation of Chagos (from Mauritius) illegal. It sees its decolonization as unfinished as a result.

Perspectives of Chagosians in the diaspora

One of the participants maintains, "I am a founding member of Chagosian Voices. I believe the judgment of the International Court is wrong". While Mauritius has Indian and Hindu heritage, the court's decision did not take the concerns of Chagossians, who have African roots. They were neither consulted nor invited to take part in the hearing, according to her. Another Chagosian living in the UK repeated the previous speaker's complaint. A founding member of Chagosians Voices, an organization that supports keeping Chagos apart from Mauritius, claims, "It has been suffering for twenty years, and it still is." The ICJ's ruling makes reference to Chagos as being of Mauritian descent, which the Chagos reject. The Chagosians' nationality was not acknowledged. There was no recognition of the identity of the Chagosians. 1968 was the year of independence, yet they were neglected in the elections that led to that victory. The Chagosians perceive Mauritius as being closely related to the US and UK at the expense of their identity, history, and interest. Although historically connected, they feel marginalized and relegated. As argued, ethnic discrimination has characterised relations between Mauritius and Chagos. It is important to them to have the opportunity to determine where they belong. The meeting clearly established the fact that almost all the participants desire self-determination.

Another participant recalled their tranquil period on Chagos Island before being deported. As argued by the participant, "We had a lot and were happy. We could not go back to our Island," mentioning the agony of being transferred against their choice to Mauritius while having Mozambican

ancestry. It was challenging to suppress it when they learned in 1972 that no one from the Chagos Island would be permitted to return to the Island. Sadly, the Chagosians were never involved in the discussions between Mauritius and the UK. She blamed the US, the UK, and Mauritius for the Chagosians' woes. The participants claim, "They made judgments for their profit...We want to be taken seriously and heard."

The plight of the Chagosian people

One of the participants from the Diaspora discussed the significance of women in the fight for identity and self-determination and noted that there has been considerable suffering. She expressed the desire to visit the Island again in the future. She questioned, "Who would be delighted to be exiled from her Island. We must retake the Island". A direct descendant of the Chagos people bemoaned the lack of acknowledgment of their people as a distinct ethnic group. The decolonization process, however, accepted the fabrication that the Chagossian people are not of African descent. That the people have received compensation is the second falsehood.

Where have the people been since the ICJ made its decision? This question was raised by one participant who a significant figure in the documentary on the plight of the Chagosians was. The main concern, as stated by earlier speakers, is the expulsion of Chagosians from their native land and the prohibition of their return, which is a matter of basic human rights. The meeting also reflected on the disposition of the African Union (AU) towards the Chagosians issues. Thus, what actions did the African Union take to free the Chagosians from British, American, and Mauritius oppression? In Chagos, younger people favour British citizenship. Nevertheless, returning to the 3500 coconut trees and 600, 000 square meters of ancestral land appears feasible. The sea is all around Chagos, and one of its resources is fish. Many participants in the battle or movement believe the effort is worthy, even though some members of the younger generations do not find the idea of returning to the island to be an appealing one.

Chagos and the Quest for Decolonisation

The Chagos issue has to do with the island's strategic geopolitical significance to Western nations. People were uprooted from their homes by Western powers in order to start hostilities with other nations. The displacement of the

people has left them without a homeland and country. It is disappointing that Mauritius is moving through with plans that put the future of the Chagosians in jeopardy.

The partial promise of rules-based order was the title of a paper Peter Harris presented on the second day of the conference. A blatant example of colonization is Chagos. China, Japan, Australia, the UK, the US, and Mauritius all have differing viewpoints on the matter. The Pacific and Indian Oceans are combined to form the Indo-Pacific megaregion. This is a political construct rather than a geographical or economic one. Who is establishing the rules and reaping the rewards in the Indo-Pacific order? There are no fair and just rules in this situation. They are likewise not founded on consensus. The fundamental ideas and methods of conducting international politics under the Indo-Pacific system are sovereignty, territorial integrity, national self-determination, and anticolonialism. While these ideas are time-tested, they have never been adequately implemented.

Is Mauritius still a colony? Mauritius's land is still under colonial rule today. The country was never fully decolonized. The 1965 separation of the island from Mauritius should not have happened because of the 1960 United Nations Declaration on Decolonization. This was against the law. In opposition, the International Court of Justice stated that Mauritius is the rightful owner of Chagos Island. Indeed, "On Chagos Island, the UK violates international law." This conclusion is very significant. The international system that supports that stance includes the International Treaty on the Law of the Sea.

Why is the UK not decolonising? There is a sense of duty that it owes to the US. Diego Garcia has housed the largest US military installation since the 1970s. This is why the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) was created (military base). All limitations that would have barred the United States from having a base on the island have been lifted by the UK. The UK has two options for decolonising: on its own initiative, or if the US concurs that the BIOT is incompatible with a rules-based system. As a vital ally, Mauritius provides the US with a long-term lease on the island. Decolonization without the US may potentially be decided by the UK government.

The UK Labour Party has already expressed support for decolonisation. The US has a responsibility to back decolonisation. Diego Garcia can only be accessed legally and properly through Mauritius. The purpose of the rules-based system is to humiliate the US and the UK for their violations. The

Chagosians currently have no state. States are addressed by the rules-based system. The Chagosians appear to be debating whether to support the UK or Mauritius. One alternative is to support or side with Mauritius in its struggle for Chagos sovereignty rights with the expectation of negotiating political rights in the future. Although the UK is least likely to provide significant political rights, it is still a possibility.

The best course of action is to lobby the African Union on behalf of the Chagosians as they insist on reclaiming their territory. They must strengthen their position in order to persuade the AU to comply with their requests. This argument teaches us that Chagosians are tenacious in their pursuit of their homeland. For the benefit of future generations, they intend to move back to their original home. The goal is to eventually put pressure on Mauritius to relocate Chagosians.

A participant spoke on the Chagosians struggle and the role of the US government in ensuring justice. The US was mentioned as the culprit on the question of who is responsible for the expulsion of the Chagosians people. The responsibility of ensuring justice was therefore linked to the US. Yet the US has been running away from this responsibility. The negotiations between Mauritius and the UK leave a gap that only the US can significantly fill. The US must be involved in fixing the problem by participating in the negotiations for resettling the Chagosians people. According to a participant, "The US outsourced the crime to the UK, and the UK, in turn, outsourced it to Mauritius." Pressure on the US government was noted as the main strategy. As far back as 1958, the US had proposed the idea of a military base in Diego Garcia. The link between the US and the military base is a crucial factor making the country the main culprit in the violation of the rights of Chagosians even though there are other state actors contributing to this crime. The abuse of human rights has been explained by Human Rights Watch. The meeting expressed hope that the Chagos people may eventually win resettlements.

Justice is at issue in the Chagos situation. It is significant both historically and globally. The meeting discussed the problem from a political science angle, claiming power plays a role. In a similar vein, a participant discussed the resettlement of the Chagossian people and argued that international law recognizes the rights to self-determination, self-identity, and indigeneity that are at the heart of the Chagosian fight.

When the UK established a marine protected area in 2010, it did so in violation of international law. The intention behind this, even though it was disguised as environmental protection, was to prevent the Chagosians from going back to their home. When Mauritius gained independence in 1965, the UK's decision to isolate the Chagos from it was illegal under international law. In 2019, the International Court of Justice declared that the UK's separation of Chagos from Mauritius was unlawful. The UK was urged to abdicate its claim to Chagos sovereignty when this decision was brought before the UN General Assembly. *The Last Colony* author, Phillipe Sands, believes that the UK's refusal to permit Chagosians to return to their homeland constitutes human rights abuse. He argued that to support BIOT supports racism and colonialism. Chagosians who wish to return to the island of Diego Garcia should be allowed to do so.

Conclusion

This essay has documented some of the discussions facilitated by paper-givers at the conference on the Chagosian question in Pretoria in 2022 while I was a Visiting Fellow at the University of Johannesburg's Institute of Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPAC). The Chagosian question, which has involved protracted fights for statehood but has so far appeared lost due to conflicts of interest between Mauritius, the UK, and the US, was covered throughout the essay.

Africans should view all Africans as their brothers and sisters in light of the predicament of the Chagossians, which sends a strong message. What the AU's stance is on Chagos is still unknown. It must be on the African Union's agenda. The Chagos Island problem also has to be solved. A committee must be established by the AU Commission to examine these concerns and develop a clear action plan. A worldwide summit should be held by the AU so that people can influence their own future.