

Diego Garcia: Inspirational Lessons

The history of Diego Garcia, the huge military base on the beautiful horse-shoe-shaped Indian Ocean coral Islands, is a classic story of what kinds of struggle can win against imperialism and what kinds can't and don't. In a nutshell, I will argue in the name of *Lalit* the organization in Mauritius that I represent today, that if and when the movement is always increasing the *will to understand* the entire political-economic-social reality within the people in the movement – at the same time as it struggles on particular issues – then is when it is more likely to make gains. Victory is then always possible. If it allows elements of the demands to be separated in a mechanical way from the “un-understandable” rest, or one demand to be traded for another, it is doomed to short-terms “gains”, at best, with the prospect of resignation and failure, at worst.

Where did this Diego Garcia base come from?

As Britain withdrew from its worldwide empire of colonies, it “bought into” the United States newer empire. As Britain was ceding Independence to Mauritius in the 1960's, in a blatantly illegal condition for Independence¹, it sliced off part of Mauritius², including the Chagos Archipelago that Diego Garcia is part of to make up a fictional State called British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT)³, in order to “give it” to the US for a military base to control of the Persian Gulf, Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian sub-continent. In exchange for the Polaris military system Britain still has. The plan for the base and for the territorial dismemberment included another concept: that the Chagos Islands, including Diego Garcia, would have no population. Note the strange grammatical formulation of “would have” that betrays so clearly the intended genocide.

Three issues were thus linked organically from their inception: (i) a country illegally dismembered, even granted a new Constitution without any mention of its borders, and a fictional State invented, (ii) the inhabitants forcibly removed from the Islands and their history denied, so that (iii) an isolated, strategically placed, military base could be installed where there was not the political pressure of living people present. And our aim in *Lalit*, has been to get our minds around the dialectics of these three inter-related realities, throughout our struggles. It has not been easy.

40 years of struggle: gains and difficulties

The struggles in Mauritius, were for the first 15 years completely separate from the struggles at international level. The people forcibly removed had difficulty getting even people in Mauritius to know what had happened to them, while successive Mauritian

¹ It is against the UN Charter, as well as against international law to divide a colony, keeping part, in exchange for granting Independence.

² ² British Order signed by the Queen: “As from the date of this Order in Council the Chagos Archipelago, being islands which immediately before the date of this Order were included in the Dependenceis of Mauritius, shall together form a separate colony which shall be known as the British Indian Ocean Territory.[Statutory Instrument Made 8 November 1965 at the Court at Buckingham Palace].”

³ In fact, some islands from Seychelles, another British colony, were also part of BIOT until they were claimed by Seychelles after its Independence and won back.

Governments ran diplomatic level campaigns of a formalistic nature on the “soveriennty issue” at the UN, OAU, thus informing top level politicians and UN representatives, who remained the only people who “knew about” Diego Garcia. It was as though the triple-crime (forcible removal, sovereignty, military occupation) were so outrageous that there was a credibility gap. In the ‘70’s Lalit, and I have personal experience of this, had difficulty convincing activists, grass-roots organizations, even left parties, women’s organizations that it was not confabulation. People often said, “How come we don’t know about this?”

One funny example is worth quoting. In 1981, we sent a telegram (it was still those days) calling for support for the women of Diego Garcia. We got a reply from a big women’s organization in the USA, must have thought Diego Garcia was a polygamist of some sort: “Who is Diego Garcia. Make sure it’s a women’s issue”.

People did not believe us. If something as awful “mass kidnapping” and dividing a country had happened, they would know.

Neighbourhood and street demonstrations in Mauritius in the – 1970’s and 80’s – were what led to massive gains in all directions – precisely because they were on the combination of the three issues: sovereignty, reparations, and for the closure of the US military base. The victories came in two forms: (i) negotiations and compensation for the displaced people, setting up a Trust Fund for British compensation, and also (ii) political progress in that everyone in Mauritius and more and more in the world knew. *Lalit* was part of this mass movement that made the issues very high profile, and got a lot of support in Mauritius, and some from abroad. But in victories, there are defeats: the Chagossians signed receipts that said they would make no further reclamations of Britain. The Trust Fund brought some bureaucratisation of the Chagossian community leaders.

The issue then went underground until 1998, when *Lalit* took the initiative of setting up the “RANN NU DIEGO” Committee, the 1970’s slogan for returning Diego/returning to Diego, in which the Chagossians and eight Mauritian organizations met on a Common Platform. Pressure was put on the Mauritian Government to go to the UN General Assembly to get a motion passed to put a case before the UN International Court of Justice at the Hague.

During this revival, a legal firm in Britain found out about the case, and offered to put a case in the British Courts for the right to return. They won a major victory in the British High Court in the year 2000, when the Courts said that they had the right of return. The British State was harshly criticised by the judgement. (See our book on our site www.lalitmauritius.org). The British Government then immediately passed a Queen’s Order in Council banning the Chagossians from Diego Garcia Island. The British Government then passed a new Order in Council in 2004 which for the first time banned all Chagossians from ANY of the Chagos Islands, not just Diego Garcia. These proclamations by which “the Queen” (Tony Blair, in effect) acts behind the back of the British parliament, aimed at over-riding the British supreme Courts. The Chagossians challenged this Order in Council in the British Courts and won the right to return.

The British Government's appeal against this was heard last month, and we are waiting for judgment.

However, the Chagossians leadership have not been able to manage the contradictions that the legal procedures have produced. They had to plead that they were British (having actually spent time on British Indian Ocean Territories, the fictitious State after its illegal detachment and before their forced displacement) in order to get legal aid and a locus standi. This Britishness then got confirmed by the Courts (BIOT was recognised) so the British State has started a process of integrating the Chagossians into Britain. And of course many Chagossians have pictures of the Queen, the Head of State, and wave the British flag and so on in demonstrations. Recently, they have also made an undertaking that they will settle only the "other Chagossian islands" and not Diego Garcia, thus accepting the logic of the base.

The same has happened for their damages cases that are in the process of hearings to get them heard in the US Courts. The US law says that damages cases cannot put into question US foreign policy. And this again has been a very heavy contradiction for the leadership of the Chagossians' movement to bear. People who were at the WSF No Bases Plenary will remember how their leader did not ever actually say that the base must be closed down. This submission was perhaps not necessary, but then again, legal advisors on big damages cases get to do a lot of political advising, too.

However, progress was made politically in other ways. Through these Court Cases, the issue of Diego Garcia, and the knowledge that it was being used for attacking Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the issue of the forcible displacement of the people, were for the very first time made known to vast numbers of British citizens, despite the Governments attempts to keep it all a secret. This process was accelerated when John Pilger made his TV documentary STEALING A NATION.

Meanwhile, under political pressure, the Mauritian government, for the first time, publicly threatened to take the UK Government to the UN International Court of Justice at the Hague in 2004. To do this, the then Prime Minister announced, he would withdraw Mauritius from the Commonwealth. This was necessary because Britain had accepted the jurisdiction of the ICJ from only non-commonwealth countries. No sooner had this threat been made than Tony Blair sent his UN representative to change what jurisdiction Britain accepts the ICJ for. Now it refuses to accept jurisdiction for disputes involving any country that was ever in the Commonwealth. And, for good measure, only concerning disputes that date from before the 1960s.

When *Lalit* jointly with the Chagos Refugees Group internationalized the struggle at Mumbai at the NO BASES first Conference at the WSF, and we were preparing a ship to take the Chagossians to Diego Garcia, and even planned a PEACE FLOTILLA, supported by No Bases network, then the British Government, itself, organized a ship to take 100 Chagossians to visit Diego Garcia and put flowers on their ancestors' graves in 2006.

So, no-one can say that mobilization doesn't have any effect.

Additional constant difficulties

David and Goliath, difficulties of scale, that we share with the Palestine people.

Distance, Diego Garcia and the Chagos is distant from the other Mauritian Islands of Rodrigues, St. Brandon, Agalega.

The US Government purchases a lot of fresh supplies for the base from Mauritian producers. In times of economic downturn, this is a constant pressure to concede.

There are jobs for a handful of Mauritians, and Chagossians are no longer banned from working on the base. This, too, as with all bases, has to be part of our considerations.

Africa Growth and Opportunities Act (a US law that grants trade facilities to a host of African countries including Mauritius) is on the express condition that the African country does not oppose US "national interests" or "foreign policy". This we have found is also a constant pressure on the Mauritian government, through the bourgeoisie.

And now, of course, as the final appeals are getting underway, and victory to return to the "other Chagossian Islands" becomes a real possibility, major tourist industry private companies are jockeying for position to get contracts from either the Mauritian Government or the Chagossian organizations, as the case may be.

It has been and still is a struggle, rich in lessons. What is important now, is that the hope to close the base at Diego Garcia is clearly linked to the world movement against all bases. This is the way we get around the David and Goliath issue. And then our demands have to be maintained:

The Demands

1. The immediate decolonization of Diego Garcia and the Chagos Archipelago through the disbanding of the illegitimate "British Indian Ocean Territories"; the cancellation of the Orders in Council that prohibit the return of Chagossians to their native islands; the re-unification according to international law and the UN Charter, of the Republic of Mauritius that was dismembered as an illegal condition to Independence in 1968.
2. An immediate halt to ever using Diego Garcia for B-52's or other military apparatus to attack other countries (whether Afghanistan, Iraq or any other land) and the complete closing down of the United States military base on Diego Garcia; the organization of an ecological clean-up; a public undertaking that no other base be set up elsewhere to replace this one; the conversion of part of the base into a non-military Tsunami Warning Station for the Indian Ocean, and part into a UNESCO World Heritage Site around a vast ecological project to regenerate the coral and the lagoons, as well as other forms of job creation.
3. Halt to prisoners being held or "rendered" on or near Diego Garcia.

4. The immediate right of return, as well as full reparations and compensation for damages, from the US and UK governments to all Chagossians forcibly removed between 1965 and 1973.

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