REDUNDANCY ON THE INSTALMENT PLAN: CHAGOSSIANS AND THE RIGHT TO BE CALLED A PEOPLE

Sandra J.T.M. Evers & Marry Kooy

The Chagos archipelago in the Indian Ocean has received increasing attention from media, politicians and commentators over recent years, largely due to litigation in the British courts concerning the forced expulsion of approximately two thousand Chagossians in favour of a US military base on the largest island in Chagos, Diego Garcia, during the 1970s. The location and relative isolation of the Chagos archipelago, which is situated virtually midway between Africa, India, Australia, and the Arabian Gulf, make the islands a centre of strategic importance to the Pentagon—particularly in the post 11 September 2001 world. More recently, the environmental lobby has made its voice heard on the fate of the islands. The rich marine environment and coral reefs of the archipelago inspired Chagos’ declaration as the world’s largest Marine Protected Area in 2010. Furthermore, disputes between the British and Mauritian governments, both of whom claim ownership of the islands, remain unresolved. But what about the Chagossians themselves, who are locked in a political and legal battle for the right to return to the islands?

CHAGOS AS CONTESTED SITE: AT THE CROSSROADS OF POLITICKING AND EXCLUSION

In April 2010, Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary David Miliband announced the creation of a Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the British Indian Ocean Territory of Chagos. The MPA includes approximately sixty islands scattered across the vast reaches of the Chagos archipelago. The Miliband campaign was backed by the Chagos Environment Network (CEN), a collaboration of nine conservation and scientific organisations. On its website, www.protectchagos.org, it is stated that “[t]he combination of tropical islands, unspoiled coral reefs and adjacent oceanic abyss makes this area comparable in global importance to the Great Barrier Reef or Galapagos Islands. As a fully protected marine reserve, all extractive activities, such as industrial fishing and deep sea
mining, will be prohibited in the Chagos. This decision will safeguard the rich diversity of marine life found in the area” (CEN 2010).

Exceptional marine ecosystems notwithstanding, the evicted Chagossians consider Chagos to be their home. The original inhabitants of the Chagos islands are exiles from the African continent and Madagascar. They arrived in the archipelago during the 18th century as slaves, to perform forced labour on private copra plantations. After the abolition of slavery (1835), these former slaves continued working for their former masters. A later wave of indentured labourers arrived from India to meet labour shortages.

The historical circumstances underlying the eviction of Chagossians from the archipelago bear consideration. During the era when Chagos formed part of British colonial Mauritius, the British, whose strategic hegemony in the Indian Ocean was on the wane, agreed to make Diego Garcia available to the US as a military base. Diego Garcia is located 1920 kilometres (1174 miles) north east of Mauritius with a surface area of 30 square kilometres (12 square miles). During the 1965 negotiations for Mauritian independence, the British demanded surrender of the Chagos islands in exchange for a £3 million indemnity. This transaction allowed the British to offer the use of Chagos to the US and triggered the forced clearance of the entire population: plantation owners and workers alike, to the Seychelles (also a British colony at the time) and Mauritius. Currently, about 750 of the 1,500–2,000 evicted islanders are still alive. It is estimated that 4,000 Chagossians and their descendants dwell in Mauritius, about 550 in the Seychelles and about 1,000 in the UK (Chagos Refugees Group 2008, 12; cf. Campbell 2008; Fletcher 2007). They occupy the lowest rung of these societies, where their lot is one of impoverishment, discrimination, high unemployment, degrading housing conditions, ill health, and educational difficulties. The Chagossians blame lamizer—their misery—on being dérasiné, literally ‘uprooted.’ They nurture the memory of a recently lost utopia, where food is abundant, with free housing, education and health care, and where a sense of community prevails.

The image of a group of displaced exiles, locked into a perpetual cycle of liminality and poverty while dreaming of their homeland, is common to most descriptions of refugees. However, there is something both passive and violent about the eviction of the Chagossians. Uprisings, battles and conflicts did not precede the turn of their fate. Chagossians were essentially dealt away with at the global poker table. Having lost their land, their identity was denied to them a posteriori. Little compensation