

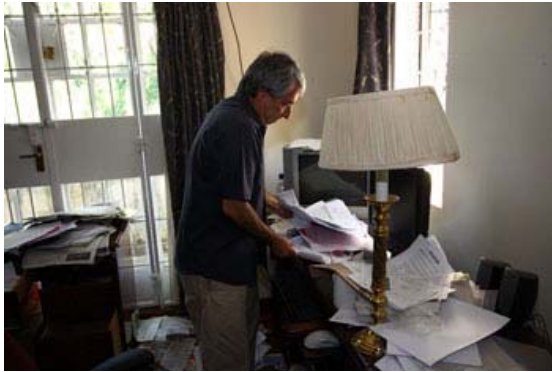
January 12, 2007

Kenya's Political Gadfly Profiles

Salim Lone turns the car down a winding driveway in Nairobi's diplomatic enclave to a bright bungalow with a terraced garden. The house is separated from the thick overgrowth in the back by a high fence topped with electric wire. There's a gate and guard.

“When I was a young journalist,” he says, “I never came back here. This area was all white.”

Today, he says, he lives here by accident. He and his wife, Pat, rented this house because it was one of the few they could find that had a downstairs bedroom, which they needed for his mother. But it is a peaceful spot for a man who has spent his forty-odd years in journalism making other people uncomfortable.



For his political commentary and muckraking style, he ran afoul of both the Kenyatta and Moi regimes in the 1970s and '80s. He was jailed, stripped of his Kenyan citizenship, exiled in 1982, and made stateless. He went back to the United States, where he had attended Kenyon College in the 1960s and where he had worked for the United Nations. Later, President Moi sent word that all had been forgiven and that he was free to return. He did so, only to find himself in jail again.

Kenya has matured politically since the return of multi-party elections in 1992 and the end of Moi's reign a decade later, but Lone still takes to the pages of the Kenya's *Daily Nation* to criticize the current president for failing to complete his promised reforms and to call for greater participation in opposition politics.

He's also fighting bigger battles. In 2003 Lone served as spokesman for the United Nations Mission in Iraq when Sergio Vieira de Mello, the Spanish diplomat in charge of the mission, was killed along with 23 other UN personnel. A suicide truck bomb demolished the building.

“The United Nations should never have been there,” he says. “This was just cover for the United States and the Bush administration's illegal war.” He resigned in protest after the

His recent [article in the International Herald Tribune](#) about the new US involvement in Somalia has struck a chord in this part of the world. He called the American attacks on alleged al-Qaeda sites in Somalia ““a reckless proxy war [whose] real goal is to obtain a direct foothold in a highly strategic region by establishing a client regime there.””

He is in demand as a speaker and commentator, especially as Kenya finds itself on the fringes of an American military operation and has sealed its border with Somalia against the flow of refugees and the Islamists of Mogadishu’s toppled regime. Kenya was a victim of terrorism in 2002 when the American embassy was bombed in Nairobi, killing some 200 Kenyans, and an Israeli-owned hotel was bombed near Mombasa. The Pentagon initially said it had killed one of the perpetrators of those attacks, but has since backed away from the claim.

““It’s the same pretense as the Iraq war,”” he says. ““The United States is using charges of terrorism as a pretext for another illegal war.””

For all his pique, Lone is quick to laugh and is a generous host. When I met him for lunch, we had a delightful chicken, rice, and somosa meal prepared by his American wife, who works for UNICEF. ““After Pat and I were married, we lived for a time with my parents, and she really learned to cook traditional food very well. Now she is as good as the other Pakistani Kenyan daughters-in-law.””

We talk a little about Indians in Nairobi, if there is any sense of insecurity as a minority community. ““Ten or fifteen years ago, that was true, but not today. There are now more blacks than Indians in the middle class, so there is less resentment at the community’s wealth,”” he says.

Lone spends his time consuming all the newspapers he can get his hands on. Internet connections in Kenya are slow and unreliable, so he pores over newsprint, clipping articles and keeping files. His study is strewn—not piled but strewn—with newspapers, as if they have been blown off the desk by a strong wind. ““I’m thinking about hiring an assistant to help me organize these files,”” he says, his voice trailing off, perhaps at the sheer scale of the task ahead.

I think he is secretly drawn to the disorder of it all. It hasn’t been easy for him to be a Kenyan Asian, gadfly, progressive journalist, political prisoner, UN official in Iraq, and campaigner against what he perceives as the Bush administration’s imperialism, which has now arrived at Kenya’s doorstep. His job as a writer is to probe that chaos, cut through the lies and propoganda, and produce something revealing and often unpopular with the powers that be.

All images by Preston Merchant

The Lost Indians of Kenya

To the Editors:

Early in 1969, Gordhandass Shah, a resident of Kenya for thirty-five years and holder of a British passport, was told by the government that under its new Immigration Act he was no longer able to continue working in Kenya, and that he should leave the country within three months. Being a British citizen, he contacted the British Embassy to make arrangements for moving to England. He discovered at the Embassy, however, that because he was not a white British citizen, there were severe restrictions on his right to enter Britain, and that in fact it would not be possible for him to go there in the foreseeable future.

When the three months the Kenya government had allowed Mr. Shah were up, he was arrested and tried in Criminal Court for being in Kenya illegally. His argument that the country of his citizenship, the only country he was eligible to go to, would not admit him was found unacceptable, and he was jailed, later to be deported to England.

By all counts, Gordhandass Shah is one of the luckier of the more than 200,000 East African Indians who hold British passports. Police escort for the journey to England notwithstanding, he was able at least to find a home and earn his livelihood. For the other thousands it is a much more painful story: they are unable to earn a living in Kenya, and they are not being deported to England, where they legally belong.

The Indian's troubles started in the early 1960s. In the preceding seventy years, more than a quarter-million of them had been encouraged by Britain to settle in the East African colonies. Most of these Indians were traders, artisans, or lower professionals, occupying the middle position between black and white in the colonial hierarchy. They lived in their own large communities, segregated from both the Africans and the English. They were the essential instrument of British rule over the indigenous population, and had greater contact with the Africans than did the British. As such, they received more privilege than was granted the Africans, but by the same token they earned a lot more of the black resentment than the colonists did.

When Kenya received independence in 1963, the Indians were offered the choice of obtaining either British or Kenyan citizenship. Because the painful, post-independence experience of the Congo was still fresh then, and because many Indians felt that the growing demand for position and power from the newly educated African middle class would lead inevitably to their exclusion from the job market, only about 10 percent of the Indian population applied for Kenyan citizenship. The rest chose what later turned out to be "devalued" British passports.

The current crisis began in 1968, when Kenya passed the first of its many laws that largely bar Indians with British passports from holding gainful employment. Almost simultaneously, the Labour government in Britain, expecting an influx of its colored citizens from the East African countries, limited to 1,500 the number of Indian families with British passports who could enter England annually.

As a consequence, there are now thousands of Indians in Kenya, unable to work there and denied the right to their legal homeland. As Nasir Butt, a father of seven who lost his job as an auto mechanic in 1968, said: "If we were victims of a natural disaster or running away from a communist country, we would have aid and interest. But now no one is interested, no one cares. We are not even considered refugees."

Most of these "refugees" are skilled in some craft or another, but now they can be seen walking the streets of Nairobi, Mombasa, and other cities; some have taken to begging, others live on charity, and many have moved in with those relatives and friends who can still make a living.

The more enterprising ones have tried by various means to publicize their cause. Small groups sometimes manage to sneak onto planes bound for England, where, of course, they are denied admission and put back on the plane to Kenya. But Kenya refuses to readmit them, because once an Indian leaves Kenya he cannot return except with a special visa. So these Indians begin a long trek, shuttled—without charge—from one world airport to another, until finally someone admits them—temporarily.

Because of the great distances these homeless groups travel, they have come to be called "migronauts," and it is not unusual to meet these migronauts in the transit lounges of various world airports. I met one such group in Entebbe, Uganda, late last year—five teen-age boys who had only just begun their odyssey, having flown to Bombay, Entebbe. Those Indians still left in East Africa are gradually beginning to feel a rising hostility among the African masses. Fortunately there have been no incidents of overt violence so far, but unwanted and unclaimed, the Indians rather easily become the targets of witch hunts. Those Indians still trading are frequently singled out as the exploiters of the native population; the Indian community earlier this year was widely blamed—without presentation of any evidence—for a leakage of the national high-school examination in Uganda and Kenya; and last month Tanzania announced the nationalization of all property valued at over \$15,000—but the New York Times correspondent there has reported that only property belonging to Indians has been expropriated.

The Indian community in East Africa is subdued and uncomfortable, and sometimes even fearful. The constant topic of conversation among the community is how best one can wrangle one of the 1,500 vouchers issued for entry into Britain each year, and large hordes will eagerly gather at the homes of those fortunate enough to win one of these vouchers to learn how the lucky ones presented their cases to the British Embassy. Every once in a while there are rumors in the community that Britain has decided to finally let all of its Indian citizens come "home," while those more maliciously inclined circulate false news of massacres of Indians at the hands of Africans.

Two such rumors recently turned out to be true. A little over a year ago, an Indian family of four was ritually hacked to death in Nairobi. And last month the British government announced that it had doubled to 3,000 the number of Indian families who could enter Britain from East Africa each year. At that rate, it will take about twelve years for the unwanted and unemployed British East African Indians to make it "home."

Salim Lone
New York City