
Seychelles: A Successful Socialist Country, with Terrible PR

by Andre Vltchek

It is rich, stunningly beautiful, and it has the highest UN Human Development Index of the entire continent of Africa.

Its streets and roads are perfectly paved, and its gardens are blooming with local and imported flowers; its primary and secondary education (10 years of schooling) is compulsory and free, and so is the medical care, including all treatments and medicine.

And Seychelles is what could be described as a welfare state, with a guaranteed survival minimum wage, much higher than the average wage in most of the “star capitalist countries” (if one adopts the terminology of the Western media) like the Philippines, Indonesia and most African nations.

This country is beautiful and tolerant; it is one of the best places on earth to live.

Public transportation is subsidized, and so are culture, sports and the water supply, as well as most other public services.

Already, several years ago, the annual income per capita stood at around \$7,000; and since then it has climbed to well above \$10,000.

A Seychelles Supreme Court Judge, Justice Mohan. N. Burhan, originally from Sri Lanka, considers the country nothing less than paradise: “This country is beautiful and tolerant; it is one of the best

places on earth to live.” He is excited, as he shows me the capital from his car.

It is true that Seychelles is open-minded and liberal. Its more than 100,000 people used to belong to various races. There were Africans, Indians, Europeans and Asians living here. Now there are hardly any enclaves — people mix freely.

The past is mostly forgotten; the past when slavery was brought to this originally uninhabited archipelago by the French and then maintained by the Brits for some time; the past of brutally exploited laborers from India. Now everyone is equal, and there is a certain degree of harmony.

But just a few miles from the Supreme Court, in a relatively poor neighborhood called Corgate Estate, disgruntled young men hang around aimlessly, chatting on several street corners, angry and, at first sight, potentially dangerous.

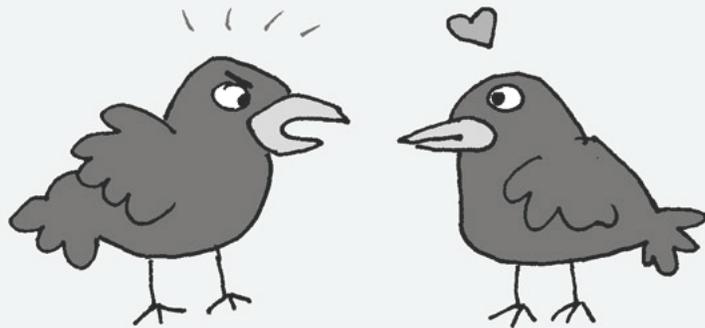
I approach one group and introduce myself.

“How is life here?” I ask neutrally.

“It’s crap,” I am told in both English and in French. “*Merde!*”

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I don't blame individuals
 for social problems.



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Yet it is our responsibility
 to end the system
 that causes them.

“Why?” I want to know. The entire estate looks quite decent; definitely not wealthy, but clean, with running water, electricity, and paved streets, and a well-equipped community medical center right on the main street. It looks more like some lower-middle class Malaysian town than those neighborhoods in desperately poor free market “stars” such as Kenya, Indonesia or Uganda.

Vincent, a young man of 23, begins immediately spitting insults at the government:

“They want us to work for some ridiculous wages — for \$250 a month. I’m working part-time on a fishing boat... It is very tough to survive. I have four children.”

After some time, he admits that his family is getting subsidies and that his children will be attending public school for free. His wife gave birth to all their children in a neat clinic.

“I guess we all get used to this, in Seychelles...” admits Vincent.

But soon he goes back to his previous rhetoric, supported by the loud cheers of his friends. The speech soon degenerates into incomprehensible absurdity:

“We’d like the government to change... They should give us more, much more. We want Michel

to step down and go to hell. We hate his guts... he killed his own son...”

Then comes the chilling punch line: “We need foreigners to come... We need them to overthrow our government... Maybe the US or France or the UK...”

As I walk down the hill, I see an old lady washing clothes. She is corpulent and good-natured.

“Mother,” I ask her. “Is it really so bad living here?”

She smiles at me: “Does it look bad to you?”

“It looks fine,” I reply.

“You see,” she keeps rubbing some sheet against a big rock. “Then it cannot be so bad after all, can it?”

But for the opposition, things are bad. And there is opposition, and there is independent media, even in this small country. *Seychelles Weekly*, for instance, is bombarding the government with the most vitriolic accusations. On September 13, 2013 it concluded in its editorial:

The coup d’état brought about a one-party state system which still lingers to this day. There are 25 constituencies and there are 25 district administrators appointed on a political basis to ensure the continuous running of the country as a one-party state. As long as this structure remains in place there will never be any effective democracy in Seychelles.

Anne Gabriel, chief medical officer at the Health Ministry’s community health directorate, explains to me the concept of the primary health care model which was adopted by Seychelles in 1978, after the World Health Organization meeting held in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, then part of the Soviet Union:

The basic concept was and remains access to medical services for all the population. It is what could be described as a primary health concept... Mauritius adopted it as well, and so did Madagascar, but there they did not manage to get very far with it. It was also implemented in Malaysia, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka...

“After independence, Seychelles progressed enormously,” explains Sylvette Evenor, the press officer for the Health Ministry.

She nods sadly, after I recall my visit and discussion with the dwellers of Corgate Estate:

People got used to getting so many things for free. Now we actually have to teach them how to appreciate what they already have. You know... I

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go to so many parts of the world where people have nothing... such as Indonesia, or even in India, all over Africa. There, they often don't even realize that they have nothing... Here, they don't realize that they have so much, almost everything.

She sighs. She is close to retirement, in love with her country, but often bitter about how little people understand and appreciate what they have:

Tourism...pushes prices up for everybody...

In a way, Seychelles is an advanced and democratic socialist country. Now we have to educate people; we have to make sure that they don't take things for granted, that they take responsibility for what they have. Not everything can be for free... Much can and should be, but not all. Life is too easy here...

Life is too easy, too gentle; enormous public beaches caress lush green shores, tall mountains scratch the sky. Flowers and exotic trees are everywhere. People are polite. There is no fear on the streets.

Prices are exorbitant, the main complaint of many citizens. Tourism is still one of the main currency earners, and it is hedonism that is attracting rich and famous visitors like British princes or Swedish princesses. They come here for honeymoons or secluded vacations. But hedonism pushes prices up for everybody on this relatively small island nation.

New developments, like villas built on reclaimed land, are worth at least 1.2 million euros.

In 2008, the economy of Seychelles was in trouble and the government approached the International Monetary Fund—a major mistake, according to many people. True, in 2008 the public debt of Seychelles stood at 175% of GDP. But combining socialist planning and IMF remedies was certainly a very radical move. The IMF agreed to provide a two-year \$26 million rescue package, but demanded brutal restructuring. In January 2009, President Michel asked creditors to cancel half the archipelago's \$800 million foreign debt. A \$9 million loan from World Bank followed.

Public spending was dramatically reduced, currency was allowed to float and prices raised, astronomically. Tens of thousands of citizens became poor, overnight.

It is definitely not a society with equally distributed wealth. But the lowest end is still higher than the average in most Southeast Asian countries, the Indian subcontinent or Africa.

It is also relatively "free"—not overly dependent on major foreign powers; nothing like other island nations such as Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia or many small countries in the Caribbean.

Nothing like the Dominican Republic, which could still be defined as one of the American protectorates, which struggles to survive, a victim of corruption and mismanagement.

But there are signs that Seychelles is moving closer to dubious embrace of global political players.

Justice Burhan, who hears Somali piracy cases, refuses to comment on whether placing the court here in Seychelles for Somali pirates was a political decision, designed to bring this island nation closer to Western powers and their interests. He only comments: "Our law here is very broad... Jurisdiction covers offenses committed off the territorial waters of Seychelles."

Seychelles is also suffering from problems related to narcotics. Drugs are being consumed here, and the islands are used as a transit point by drug smugglers. The government's response: creating NDEA (National Drug Enforcement Agency), which is not really very "national"—it consists mainly of officers from Ireland.

"What is socialist about Seychelles?" I ask Benjamin Rose, principal secretary for culture at the Tourism and Culture Ministry. With her is Peter Pierre-Louis, a policy analyst at the ministry.

What is it, culturally, that makes Seychelles a socialist country?

They think for a while, then reply, complementing each other:

It has a lot to do with the history and make-up of our young country. Tanzania and its president, Julius Nyerere, heavily backed the first president, who fought for independence from the UK. Socialist idealism originates there. This country has no native or indigenous population. All of us are

of mixed race, of European (French), Asian (Chinese, Indian and Japanese) and African decent. No one is superior to the other. We take pride and thrive in diversity. There is a strong sense of egalitarianism. There is really no gender discrimination either. We can consider ourselves "socialists at heart" in the actual way we live and think. We are very sharing people and support each other in our daily lives. Also, it did help to lay good foundations, to have the National Youth Service, which was influenced by Cuba.

I ask whether they believe in socialism, and whether Seychelles is a socialist country? They nod.

"We have free education and a free health care system, a subsidized transportation system. The government does take care of its people."

And the culture, what role does it play in social development?

It plays a significant role, but we are actually fearful of the disappearance of our culture due to the rapid advancement and use of technologies like social media, and cable TV. We have very rich oral traditions, traditional dance and music. It is something that identifies all of us as Seychelles.

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lois, but it is being rapidly eroded at an alarming rate.

Our tri-lingual policy plays a significant role in our social development. All the three languages (French, English and Creole) are national languages and have equal status. Creole is our lingua franca but tends to fall behind next to two of the world's most powerful languages, but we use it as the language of instruction in the first two years of instruction. Seychelles holds an annual Creole Festival.

Seychelles is not a paradise. Its salaries don't match its astronomical prices, the main complaint of its citizens. The Daily Subsistence Allowance (DSA) for visiting United Nations staff is approximately the same as that for Paris or New York, but the incomes do not come anywhere near to those in the above-mentioned cities.

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There are other serious issues, like selling the land and chunks of public beaches to foreign developers, as well as that extremely cozy relationship with Western governments and the Commonwealth.

But overall, Seychelles is relatively wealthy, clean and well organized. Cars here stop for pedestrians, sick people get treated, children are schooled and towns are very neat. Poor people are fed and housed. Its Human Development Index rank is 46 out of 187 countries with comparable data, in the bracket of "very high human development," between Argentina and Croatia.

In just two years it moved up by six places.

Still, almost everybody is shouting, dissatisfied.

The government here does definitely much better in housing and feeding its people than it does in

self-promotion.

Marie-Reine Horeau, technical advisor in charge of international relations at the Education Ministry, recalls how the socialist spirit came to Seychelles through education:

In the past, we had no private schools here. And we adopted a very important element from the Cuban educational system — National Youth Service. That was compulsory for boys and girls of ages 15 and 16, for two years, later reduced to just one year. The main objective was to bring all children together; regardless of their background, no matter whether they were rich or poor. Kids had to learn how to take care of themselves... We even had some instructors for morning drills, those coming from Tanzania and from North Korea.

I am sitting in Horeau's office, as she calmly remembers the old days that shaped her country. The view is beautiful, that of the mountains right behind Victoria City. By now I already know that the National Youth Service is something that brings nostalgia to almost every senior educator in Seychelles.

As you can imagine, nobody was happy to have their kids away from home for 1 or 2 years... But the results were so great, as children learned how to stand on their own, and how to be independent. The discipline was excellent then... Kids used to call each other 'comrade.' There was plenty of respect toward each other, and toward others. Many came out from this system as good citizens and true patriots.

"And now?" I ask.

She is not sure how to reply at first, then shrugs her shoulders: "It is different... It's more like Facebook and Twitter generation now... all that social media... Things like 'Gossip Corner.'"

In Seychelles the public schools, community

medical centers, elegant cultural institutions and libraries rub shoulders with private and luxury marinas, and 6-star resorts.

It can all be a little bit confusing: Cuban educational concepts and Soviet-style medical care, next to huge multi-million dollar catamarans and hedonistic resorts.

It is socialist in many ways, but simultaneously too closely cooperating with the West on the issues like Somalia and drug enforcement.

But in Seychelles, it is all somehow blending into one colorful collage. It is not perfect but it flies, and it has both style and heart.

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