

Ugandan Asians and the Lessons for us

The problems currently faced by the so-called "Ugandan Asians" have caused the entire world to issue out statements of condemnation against Idi Amin and his government. In the moment of heat, the complexity of the situation has been lost to political observers and above all the important lesson for "Indian" people in Africa is not being sufficiently stressed.

Scapegoat

There is reason to believe that Amin is far from being the only guilty party in this whole fiasco. In fact the two other parties involved, namely Asians themselves and Britain, are even guiltier. It is because of his antics and blatant stupidity that Amin has clouded the issue and made himself the scapegoat in a situation so basic to proper race relations in Africa. Perhaps a brief glance at history will illustrate just why the Asian population in Uganda got alienated from the native population.

There were in Uganda, prior to the present expulsion about 80 000 Asians, out of a total population of 9½ million. The main Asian immigration into Uganda came about towards the end of the last century as a result of the British colonial administration policy which attracted indentured labour to assist in the building of the Uganda-Kenya railway. Accompanying this main group were a number of "passenger Indians" of the middle caste merchant class, mainly of the Gujerat stock. This lot came for business purposes and quickly established a network of trading stores throughout Uganda and along the railway.

As the colonial secretariat expanded in Uganda, a number of Asians were employed in the lower strata, working directly under the white colonialists and in a lot of ways identifying themselves with the colonialists.

Exploitative

The Asians had skills and education which the Africans did not have. Moreover the Asians were wealthy enough to send their children for studies abroad and these on return swelled the ranks of the professional personnel in Uganda. As time went on, the "contribution" to, or control by the Asian group of trade, professions and civil service was com-

As far back as September 1972, with Amin's expulsion of "Asians" from Uganda, the treachery of the non-white middle class was outlined by Steve. Events in the Vaal Triangle in September 1984 prove that Steve was perfectly correct when he remarked: "For those of us who shall have too much to lose when others gain what is rightfully theirs, let us accept the fact that we constitute part of the problem: a part which shall have to be dealt with efficiently, painfully, seemingly cruelly and yet so basically logically."



Eastonville, Evaton, Vaal Triangle: September 3, 1984.

pletely out of proportion to their members. Then also the Asians refused to see themselves as part of the soil of Africa. Although they tried hard, they could not really filter through into the upper echelons in Uganda which at the time were a monopoly of the white colonialists. In a sense, therefore, the Asians became middle men who continually saw themselves as a minority and by their practice of exploitation of the Africans through money-lending at inflated interest rates, through the practice of bargaining, through the absence of price controls, they contributed to the growth of animosity between themselves and the Africans who saw them as a hostile exploitative minority.

When independence came in 1962, the Asians were given a choice of citizenship through provisions in the Ugandan Constitution. Most of them preferred to retain British citizenship as against Ugandan citizenship. Hence, as the Africanisation process stepped up, Ugandans replaced foreigners in most fields and trading licences were preferably given to citizens of Uganda. It was at this point that the Asians started feeling robbed.

The threat to rid Uganda of the exploitative non-citizenship ranks which had been in control of trade and industry in Uganda came as far back as 1970 when President Obote announced in his opening address to the Uganda Parliament that all U.K. passport holders would have to leave Uganda. The issue was further picked up by General Idi Amin in January this year.

To the average Ugandan, the Asian departure will present no loss. This is sad to say about a group of people being unfairly treated. A number of people in Uganda including the powerful student group in Makerere University have condemned the action of Idi Amin and called upon him to come and address them on the question. On that day he referred to the Asians as leeches upon the Ugandan economy. In a sense in Africa too the reaction has been sharp as shown by Tanzania. But what prompts this reaction in these quarters is more the deliberate cruelty and immaturity with which the whole question has been handled. No one wants to question the basic existence of the animosity between the two groups and the fact that there is reason for this.

Britain

In terms of the overall international world, what has further compounded the whole issue has been the hue and cry raised by Britain about what they call "Ugandan Asians" who are in fact British citizens. With the kind of racist overtones implicit in the British immigration policy, the Heath government together with its so-called opposition just could not face the prospect of admitting into Britain 40 000 "brown skinned" British citizens. It was therefore imperative to try and paint Amin and Uganda as the real culprits in the whole thing so that if Britain does in fact have to take her responsibility of housing her own citizens she would appear as the benevolent helper of a destitute homeless Asian population.

This of course is nonsense taken with the background that Britain has played in the colonisation of Africa; where Britain has been active in setting one dark race against another so as to create a powerful buffer zone between herself and the local African races; where Britain has for years enjoyed the fruits of exploitation of Africans by Indians who were banking and investing all their monies in British business; where Britain was happy to plant their citizens throughout Africa so as to create an easily accessible market for her products and also control industry and commerce in the former colonies through major well guarded investment in these countries. Now that the Asians have served their purpose Britain has no use for them and is trying very hard to "get the Ugandan Asians absorbed by friendly countries". When we view the hesitation by Britain to take in her Black citizens against the fact that since the 1971 Immigration Act was passed, a potential 10 million white immigrants from the Commonwealth countries are permitted to enter under the "patrial" clause, then we begin to see that colour plays an important role in validating or invalidating one's British citizenship. Britain is echoing what most English people throughout the world are saying that "there shall always be an England" except that they forget to add, "only for whites".

It must of course be pointed out that in spite of all this, nobody sanctions Amin's actions. In a world where Black people are moving fast into a formidable alliance to protect their interests, Amin's actions have cast an unfortunate shadow across Africa. The British Asians in Uganda may have renounced their claim to normal Black brotherhood through their exploitative actions; they may even have tainted the image of the 30,000 remaining Ugandan citizens but this still does not give Amin any moral grounds to treat Ugandan

citizens as if they have no equal right to belong to Uganda.



Idi Amin.

Lessons

The lesson for us is a complex one. White South Africa as usual is busy laughing at Amin's antics and seeing him as a crazed being. In the process they forget that their own actions in this country make Amin's outburst look like a sermon. The Ugandans may have a semblance of a case where they are made to feel despised in the country of their birth by the major part of a group of people who want to see themselves as a visitor minority. In South Africa, whites took our country by force long ago; they truck us around like cattle, moving us from one spot to another; they kill us and our children through creation of squalid conditions leading to T.B., kwashiokor, malnutrition, robbery, murder, hooliganism, etc. They destroy our soul through migratory labour pass laws, wanton discrimination and racial bigotry; they beat and kill us occasionally into submission at Sharpeville, Langa, Gelvandale, Cato Manor and a host of other places; they force us to work as cheap labour so that they can enjoy the fruits of our labour while basking in the sun on our best beaches; where on earth do they then get the nerve to laugh at anybody for being cruel and a racist?

For us Blacks there is a definite lesson. There are in this country nearly 700 000 people of Asian descent.

It is important for this group to see that the trend of race relations in any country is largely influenced by the interrelationship of groups in their joys and woes. We, all of us Black people, are currently the objects of the most abject racism ever perpetrated in the world. Rightly or wrongly, there has been a tendency in South Africa for a long time in the past for Asians to see themselves as a minority group. To what extent this tendency is justified one does not know but it is clear that

it may prove dangerous for race relations in time to come. Already there have been periodic outbursts of animosity between Africans and Indians in Durban and other parts of the country particularly in 1949. The trend observed elsewhere in Africa viz. the existence of a highly "successful" but exploitative merchant class is found here too. However, unlike in the rest of Africa, there has been a steady shift of interest in the general Black man's plight from the Indian ranks. To date we know countless cases where Indian people had to go to jail as a consequence of their political activities.

Black solidarity

What must clearly be regarded as naughty however is the kind of nonsense that makes some Indian nationalists in Durban want to draw a warning note out of the Amin fiasco. Supporters of Black consciousness were warned by one columnist in a Durban newspaper to beware the evils of African nationalism as evidenced in the Amin outburst.

Does it not occur to this political ignoramus that the cause of friction is precisely the non-involvement of one group during the struggle period? Does it not occur to him that if I win independence for myself in spite of appalling silence from a potential colleague then I'm likely to be suspicious of his motives when he motivates for an alliance between me and him after my victory?

The apostles of Black solidarity are right in insisting that all of us must join hands now in seeking for a solution to our common problems. Fence sitters have a curious way of always losing with all sides at the end of it all. If it is wrong for Indians to be discriminated against in India, then it is wrong for them to suffer the same fate anywhere else in the world and they have to learn to fight that evil alongside those they are oppressed with, be it in Kenya, Uganda or in South Africa.

Finally, for the merchant class Indian, Coloured and African bourgeoisie, the writing is on the wall. There is a role for all of us in the struggle for our emancipation. Each one of us has an obligation to be as much a part of the struggle as the situation demands. For those of us who shall have too much to lose when others gain what is rightfully theirs, let us accept the fact that we constitute part of the problem: a part which shall have to be dealt with efficiently, painfully, seemingly cruelly and yet so basically logically. This is the lesson Amin has taught us.

 ONE PEOPLE ONE AZANIA