

Next generation of Chagos exiles resists deportation

Monday 6 August 2018, by [MCQUE Katie](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2018).

Since he took his first breath, Dominique Elysee has lived in exile. It is all he has known. His mother gave birth to him in Mauritius, having travelled while pregnant to the tropical island from the nearby UK-owned Chagos islands. She was forbidden to return home, for this was 1968, when British forces were driving all of the inhabitants off the islands to clear space for the United States to build a military base on the largest island, Diego Garcia.

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That short visit – a routine trip for Chagossians who would go to the more developed Mauritius to buy clothes, medical supplies, food and other consumables – stretched out into years, then decades, unable to go home.

Now 50, Dominique is living in the town of Crawley, near Gatwick airport, with his mother and sister. However, he is not a British citizen, and cannot work, despite having qualifications in English, IT and six years’ experience as a head chef in Ireland. Had he been born on the Chagos Islands, like his mother, he would have the right to a UK passport.

‘All I want is the right to live and work in this country. I have nowhere else to go. My family are from Chagos. They were forcibly removed by the UK Government and they now live here,’ says Dominique. ‘If the Government will not let me settle here, then they must allow me to settle on Chagos.’

This Tuesday, Dominique’s case will be heard in London’s High Court, where he has petitioned for the right to British Citizenship. To support him a group of about 100 Chagossians will protest outside of the courts to draw attention to the immigration problems faced by a people who were made refugees at the hands of the British and Americans.

Adding to the pressure, a committee of UK members of parliament, the cross-party Home Affairs Committee, this month backed a bill that would allow the descendants of people born on the Chagos Islands to register as a British Overseas Territories Citizen (BOTC), giving them the right to remain in the UK.

The Chagos archipelago is a cluster of UK-owned islands in the Indian ocean. After the entire population were forcefully evicted in one of the starkest episodes of British postcolonial aggression. Equidistant from Tanzania and Indonesia, the American military base has great strategic importance, due to its relative proximity to the Middle East and Afghanistan. The Americans have made no sign of wanting to give it up, and the Chagossians are forbidden from returning.

Instead, they were made refugees, dumped on the shores of nearby Mauritius and Seychelles. They received no support to rebuild their lives in the foreign lands they found themselves in, and they have been banned from returning to their homeland ever since.

The New Internationalist has previously [uncovered poor working conditions](#) for the Filipino contractors working on the military base on Diego Garcia, and also a [‘catastrophic’ explosive risk](#) resulting from the US military’s use of the island, which may be a reason the Chagossians’ long-fought struggle to return has been denied.

There are fourteen British Overseas Territories, which are territories under the jurisdiction and sovereignty of the UK. They include the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, the Cayman Islands and Montserrat. Queen Elizabeth II is their head of state.

A citizen from one of these territories are classed as British by descent, but they cannot pass on their citizenship to their children if they are born outside the UK or a qualifying territory. After a long battle, won in the early 2000s, the Home Office has allowed Chagossians born in exile between 26 April 1969 and 1 January 1983 to become British Citizens. As he was born in March 1968, Dominique does not qualify for citizenship under this provision. These rights were also not extended to the second generation born in exile.

The fact that children of Chagossians are born outside their homeland is no fault of their own, but the result of their enforced exile. Nevertheless, they are treated by the UK’s Home Office as immigrants like any other. To remain they have to go through a hugely expensive naturalization process.

It is the youngest and often vulnerable members of Chagossian families that have faced the wrath of the UK’s immigration policies. With the cost of gaining British Citizenship often soaring to more than £10,000, many families struggle to keep up with the payments. Chagossian children have been detained or deported after reaching adulthood, despite their parents being British citizens.

Dorinder Lindor is one of those affected. A third generation Chagossian-in-exile, she came to the UK from Mauritius as a teenager with her single mother and three younger brothers, in 2011. While her mother found a job working long hours as a cleaner, Dorinder cared for her little brothers at home.

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In 2012, around the time of Dorinder’s 18th birthday, she applied for indefinite remain to leave in the UK. Her application arrived at the Home Office two days late, and on that ground was refused.

She was given the right to appeal, which she didn’t exercise right away. Barely able to speak English, the forms she had to fill out intimidated her and were difficult to understand.

After three years of fighting to stay with her family she was arrested and thrown into Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre, before being deported to Mauritius. She is now forced to live in a country separated by thousands of miles from her family.

It is important to note that had they not been driven from their motherland, all Chagossians would have the right to register as a British Overseas Territories Citizen in the first place, a situation the home affairs committee described as perverse. Not only have the Chagossians been evicted from their homeland, for many this has also had the effect of stripping their citizenship

The [British Indian Ocean Territory \(Citizenship\) Bill](#) was first presented in Parliament by Henry Smith, the Conservative MP for Crawley, in January. It will have a second reading in October. Even though it has been backed by MPs from all parties, as a ‘Private Members’ Bill’ – rather than a bill that is part of official government business – it is still unclear if it will be passed into law.

Should it pass, it will allow anybody that is of Chagossian descent to register as a British Overseas Territories Citizen. Consequently, the costs of acquiring British Citizenship would be reduced from about £10,000 to £2000.

Additionally, a cross-party parliamentary Home Affairs Committee recommended support for the bill [as part of a report on the Windrush generation](#) published at the start of this month.

The HMT Empire Windrush was a ship which carried one of the first groups of post-war Caribbean immigrants to the UK, which had invited them to help with labour shortages, often in the health service. The word has become synonymous with people who came to the UK from Commonwealth countries after the Second World War and before 1973.

However recently, under Theresa May's '[hostile environment](#)' policy, many who have been lawfully resident for many decades have been treated as if they were in the country illegally. This has caused people to lose their homes and jobs, in addition to being refused healthcare, pensions and access to social security. Some of these people have been subject to immigration enforcement measures and held in detention; others have been unjustly removed or deported from the UK.

Even as the mistreatment of the Windrush generation has been brought to the public's attention by journalistic efforts spearheaded by the Guardian, the Chagossians' struggles have remained largely untold.

The Home Affairs Committee drew parallels between the Chagossians' situation and Windrush scandal in that they are yet another cohort of people whose descendants struggle to access British citizenship. 'The Government should support Henry Smith MP's Private Member's Bill and allow anyone who can prove that they are descended from a person born on the Chagos Islands to register as a British overseas territories citizen and thereby have a right to remain in the UK,' the committee's report states.

The Government now has a statutory responsibility to consider and respond to the report.

As for the Chagossians, they remain hopeful their immigration difficulties will be resolved, despite many difficulties.

'For many of the second and third generation it will be like a dream come true. Many of us are waiting for the British government to do the right thing for the Chagossian community,' says Sabrina Jean, a second generation Chagossian and chair of Chagos Refugees UK. 'It's time.'

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