

## THE ZANZIBAR REVOLUTION FROM THE INDIANS' PERSPECTIVE



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: July 2020*

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Today, the 12th of January, we Tanzanians commemorate the anniversary of our 'ZANZIBAR REVOLUTION'. The Zanzibaris had to pay a high price for it, so many lives were laid down including some Zanzibaris of Indian descent. As instances one Ahmed Haji Abdullah was gunned down at Ziwani police station, also the two youthful Ismaili brothers across the jamaat khana and a Goan couple on their way back from the Sunday morning mass at the church were shot dead. Remembering 55 years ago today we pay homage to all those who had sacrificed their lives. This feels like the right moment to revisit nostalgia.

Excepting its slave trade in the distant past Zanzibar was a peaceful island where even petty theft was a rare occurrence, an exemplar to the rest of the world and its stone town as good as an Indian town inhabited and built by people of Indian descent. Its streets and alleys busy and lively as passing bicycles sounded their tinkling bells. The kahawa sellers with their brass 'dele' and tiny cups went from street to street selling kahawa while the milkmen with their bulky churn on the back of their bicycles went from door to door delivering milk. Zanzibar had pious people, peculiar vendors, delicious eateries and unique fruits that were just out of this world.

At the Forodhani people gathered in large numbers in the evening to entertain themselves. The sports loving public met at Mnazimoja, the other end of the stone town. The Sultan in his traditional dress went around in his vermilion Austin Princess driven by his chauffeur. At dusk, the 'hon' (siren) went traditionally off and the Sultan's fluttering red flag descended from its mast. The 'azan' from the mosque and the church and temple bells sounded from every corner. The public servant with his long rod went from street to street lighting the streetlamp.

Then on the 10th of December 1963 came Zanzibar's 'independence' under the coalition Government of its political parties ZNP & ZPPP (→ **1963 Tanzania Independence**) that also retained its Sultan. History is the best judge of past events only if interpreted correctly. Zanzibar had a complex political environment. It had two major political parties, the Africans backed ASP and the Arabs backed ZNP (with its African support base). The Indians seemed divided, some owed loyalty to ZNP while others backed ASP. Anyhow, the ASP supporters felt resentful of the 'independence' considering ASP had been adjudged the loser despite their 55% vote share: this obviously resulting from the odd apportionment of the constituencies. Thus, at the ASP Dockers Union fete in Membeni on a Saturday night, the 11th of January 1964, part of the excited crowd set out on their mission to overthrow the Zanzibar Government. Within hours they took over the major police stations (mind that there was no army in Zanzibar) and the Radio Station at Rahaleo. On the 12th of January 1964, the world woke up to the news of 'REVOLUTION' in Zanzibar. In no time the Zanzibar that had been the stronghold of Asians became history. The coup was led by a self-proclaimed Field Marshal John Okelo (a mason of Ugandan descent). The ASP leader Sheikh Abedi Amani Karume was declared the President. Sultan Jamshed fled the island along with his entourage.



Zanzibar's Indian settlement having come by dhow dates back to the mid eighteenth century (before the advent of the EA Railway settlement on the mainland) and most of these settlers lost traces of their contacts in India. Zanzibar had become their home. They proclaimed it 'Jangbar' in their lingo and themselves 'Jangbari'. They built their lives on this sense of belonging. India was no more a motherland for most of them. The Aga Khan, HH Sultan Mohamed Shah, patronized Zanzibar and had made it his headquarters for a brief period. Mahatma Gandhi had visited Zanzibar as far back as 1914 and many years later (1948) his ashes were brought there when a large number of Indians gathered at the docks to receive the urn. The likes of Tharia Topan, Nasser Noormohamed, Siwa Haji, Ali Nathoo and Alidina Visram featured prominently in the context of 19th century Zanzibar history. Zanzibar's enterprising Karimjee Jivanji gained international recognition. The celebrities like Freddie Mercury and Ben Kingsley hailed from Zanzibar. A 'Duty Free Zone' Zanzibar had become the commercial hub of Africa, the rupee as good as a legal tender and its administrative, financial and educational set ups controlled by the settlers. Their religious events of 10th Muharram and 21st Ramadhan were marked as 'public holidays'. They had become a force to be reckoned with.

The wind of change that had blown through Zanzibar in the wake of its Revolution therefore shattered the Indians' nerves and led to their exodus. They dispersed here and there, and their foundations degenerated into nonentities. Time has flown fast. It is exactly 55 years since that fateful day in Zanzibar. A large number has passed away. The anniversary awakens poignant memories of those days. It is painful for an old timer to view stone town today. It is haunting. Its jamaatkhana, imambara and temple are desolate and bereft of the huge gathering that once filled the entire place. The Parsee fire temple at Ziwani has been transformed into a 'godown' owned by Muzammil (its 'agiari' or fire urn and associated items shifted to Canada and consecrated at a certain place in Oakville, Toronto). Your house glares longingly, you pass through those streets and gullies where you frequented and played those children's games and some ghostly feeling creeps up, and in the still of the moment everything around seems sad and bleak. The buildings look shabby and are crumbling away. The 'Wapembas' flocked to Zanzibar in the aftermath of its Revolution and are now occupying most of the buildings in the stone town.

The present-day Zanzibar is more of a tourist resort. Many old residences have been converted to tourist hotels. Even outsiders are welcomed and encouraged to put up hotels and luxurious beach resorts to attract tourists. The Aga Khan, HH Shah Karim, funded the entire renovation of Forodhani. The eateries at Forodhani mostly cater to the taste of tourists who flock there in the evenings. Almost every shop on Portuguese Street (now Gizenga) deals in curios and tourist items. The Darajani/Ngambu area dealing in garments and electronics now forms Zanzibar's commercial hub.

The local Zanzibaris are God fearing, innocent and honest people. Sadly, the globally inflated economy takes its toll on them. Zanzibar's false economy and political gimmickry is the feature of their day to day life. Mind that the rapport between us was remarkably good. Our diaspora (pre mainland settlement) had a congenial environment with the adoption of the Afro Arab culture in its true sense. A few inhabited rural Bububu, Mfenesini, Bumbvini, Chwaka and Makunduchi. Some even integrated with the locals and hence some people of 'mixed race' among us. Today the Bohoras in adherence to the salutary advice by His Holiness Sayedna Taher Saifuddin who had paid a visit to Zanzibar in 1961 form a sizable community. Otherwise a very few emanating from our diaspora remain in Zanzibar. The moderate policy of the Government of the day (Zanzibar's merger with Tanganyika resulting in TANZANIA) provides them confidence of staking their fortune in Zanzibar and cultivate loyalty towards it; their general consensus "Zanzibar is our home, our past, our future."

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