

## *Research Notes...*

### Researching International Issues in Seychelles: Notes on my experience

I have been undertaking research with a colleague (Dr Pradeep Taneja) in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne on the international agency of island states in the Indian Ocean. While we have been developing a general approach to this issue, each of us has also been examining in more detail some particular states: Mauritius and Seychelles in my case; Maldives and Sri Lanka (not usually classed as one of the SIDS (Small Island Developing States) for Dr Taneja.

Having made use of material available in books and journals and on various Web sites, I decided it would be helpful (indeed essential) with my two SIDS to visit these countries to interview people who could help me to appreciate better some of the details and nuances as seen from the local perspective or by resident observers who were not necessarily nationals of those countries.

Here is how I went about the task, commenting only on my experience in Seychelles in May 2024.

### Contacts

In the first place I had to establish a list of people I could interview, keeping in mind that I had only a week in Seychelles, and Monday to Friday in practical terms. In Australia I knew some academics who had worked on Seychelles or perhaps the western Indian Ocean more broadly. They gave me some suggestions. I also contacted the non-resident Australian High Commissioner (Ms Kate Chamley, based in Mauritius, but a frequent visitor to Seychelles). It is part of the work of a diplomatic mission to follow political developments in its allocated country or countries with a view to advising the home government about relevant issues.

Combining the suggestions from these sources I contacted potential interviewees through email or sometimes through WhatsApp, including advance conversations in some instances. I also approached some people or agencies without those people having been suggested to me. Sometimes there was no response to my emails; occasionally people declined but suggested others to approach.

I allowed about three interviews per day, also trying to keep some blocks of time available in case other suggestions came up while I was in Seychelles (and allowing for a bit of recreation!).

## Experience with interviews

The people I interviewed were participants or observers (sometimes both) of the way in which Seychelles related to its international context. The list included politicians and activists, academics, officials (retired and active), and diplomats (the categories sometimes overlapping).

I explained to interviewees that the interview (or briefing in some cases) would be taken as an off-the-record backgrounder. ‘Chatham House rules’ is the term used (after the custom developed in the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London): what one hears is non-attributable. Academics might be in a different category; however, if I wished to cite a point made by an academic, I would contact that person before going ahead.

My practice was to avoid taking notes during the meetings but to listen very carefully. I had a broad set of questions relating to the international issues relevant to Seychelles, including the impact of domestic politics. The questions could be adapted to take account of the position and experience of the interviewee. As soon as possible after any meeting I would write notes based on my memory of the main points.

## Practicalities

My first contacts were made probably two months ahead of the planned visit. Often there were a number of emails before the details were confirmed. Sometimes people wanted to wait until shortly before the planned meeting to confirm the meeting and work out a venue.

Once in Seychelles it was sometimes difficult to determine the exact location of a venue. Often the venue was given as a building that was named but without a street number (it seems to be the practice in Seychelles not to use street numbers). A meeting place might be a location within an area but without even a street name being given. In such cases one needs to ask for more specific directions from the interviewee.

For meetings in Victoria a good location was the *Ma Boulangerie* café at the National Library in Rue de la Possession.

Sometimes street names have changed, and maps have not necessarily been updated. For example, Francis Rachel Street (named after one of the people killed in the coup of 5 June

1977) is now Rue de la Possession. I think from signs I saw it might have been Fiennes Esplanade in colonial times (after one of the governors), and even earlier Victoria Street.

## What might be done better

I have indicated the need to clarify exact locations of meeting places. One can spend a lot of time wandering around otherwise. The locals usually try to be helpful, but they don't necessarily know either.

Using a taxi might have been a good idea with some of the more obscure locations. However, from observation I didn't see many taxis cruising around; one would have to book in advance.

Car hire would have been another option, but my interviews were all in or near Victoria. With narrow roads local drivers often seem to go too fast for my liking.

Being budget-conscious (as a self-funded researcher in this instance) and a public transport aficionado I opted for a visitor's bus pass lasting one week. At twenty euros for eight days or ten euros for four days (can be bought when completing the entry document), this is very good value. You also see how ordinary Seychellois live. And who wouldn't thrill to the experience of zigzagging down La Misère in the No. 13 bus at breakneck speed!

I opted to stay in a villa in the hills above Victoria traversed by La Misère. Again, this was quite economical, and I saw something of local life.

As far as communications were concerned when out and about the purchase of a local sim card or eSim might have been a good idea. I relied on email and WhatsApp but you need the internet connection of course.

If you have any Seychelles currency in cash at the end of a visit, it is a good idea to change at the airport to a more internationally popular currency such as euros. Depending on the country, changing Seychelles currency into other currencies can be more difficult upon one's return. Alternatively, a donation to an organization such as UNICEF is another option.

## What I learnt

I had a very productive week in Seychelles. The people I met were most helpful and forthcoming. My task now is to go back to the work I have previously done and hone my analysis and even change it in significant respects. Our project began with an assumption

of the primacy of geopolitics, while also taking account of other issues. Having met a range of people in Seychelles and heard their views, perhaps those ‘other issues’ should be given a higher priority. This is not to say that geopolitics is irrelevant. Seychelles has to position itself to account for the actual or potential impact of geopolitics. However, what I constantly heard was the importance of the issues relating to the status of Seychelles as one of the SIDS, covering economics, sustainable development and the maritime environment most obviously, but also the challenge of meeting the minimal requirements to function as a state. In terms of population Seychelles is the size of a local government area in Melbourne, my home town in Australia (about 100,000 in each case). Interaction with the external environment covers not just the major powers, but a range of small to middle powers both within the region and beyond, including other Indian Ocean states and fellow SIDS from around the globe; international organizations or groupings such as the Indian Ocean Commission (in the southwest Indian Ocean), the African Union, the European Union, the United Nations and its various agencies, and the Commonwealth also play a role. Non-state actors such as criminal syndicates involved in money laundering, drug trafficking or piracy can also be important.

I am conscious of the need to avoid being an outside researcher who ‘parachutes in’ to become an instant expert. I presented myself as a learner about Seychelles – and I am. However, with a project such as this one it is important to have a comparative dimension, covering some relevant island states in the Indian Ocean in this case but it could be SIDS more globally. As a political scientist one is attempting to develop generalizations about political dynamics in relation to a given issue. These can be tested through reference to case studies and comparatively. However, in assessing particular situations it is important to be as well informed as possible. Interviews in the context of a short visit can be helpful in this respect. It is always possible to have follow-up questions through email or other means. While analyses on specific aspects of a topic such as this might be succinct (the specific instance of Seychelles in the context of the international agency of Indian Ocean island states), it is important to aim for accuracy.

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