

## The Last Colony: A Tale of Exile, Justice and Britain's Colonial Legacy

Philippe Sands, 'The Last Colony: A Tale of Exile, Justice and Britain's Colonial Legacy', (*Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2022*); 196

**Fatima Raza**<sup>1</sup>

*The Last Colony* is an international legal tale, navigating human rights and colonial legacies in the modern world; unveiling Britain and the US' selective commitment to their proclaimed values. British author Philippe Sands, recounts his journey as Mauritius' representative, an ideal person for narrating the legal and political battle at The Hague, where he fought to pave the way for the forcibly displaced Chagossians to return to the Chagos archipelago, commonly known as the British Indian Ocean Territory.

The tale uncovers multifaceted layers of illegality, including the detachment of Chagos from Mauritius, the displacement of around 2000 people like Liseby Elyse, the star witness of the book, whose personal experiences the author highlights throughout the book. Despite the directives from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the United Nations (UN), Britain's denial to correct their colonial wrongs and recognise the sovereignty of Chagos Islands as a legal part of Mauritius remains the central thread of discourse. Sands provides compelling, nuanced, and justified arguments throughout the book.

Weaving the story of colonial struggles with a tinge of personal emotion, the book uncovers grave injustices and disregard of law perpetuated by major powers like Britain and the US. This makes this

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book both a legal account and a human story. With impressive use of imagery and description, the book begins with The Hague and Liseby Elyse as part of the Mauritian delegation -- the face of the case presented against Britain. Sands frequently revisits the life story to highlight the harsh realities of forced removals by colonial states. The inhabitants of Chagos, unaware that their islands had been severed from Mauritius and renamed “British Indian Ocean Territory,” a new African colony, or that of the new military base to be built by the Americans on Deigo Garcia, were suddenly ordered to pack their entire lives into a single suitcase and leave their homes. Around 1500 people were forcibly deported that year to Mauritius, initiating a four-decade-long struggle of Mauritius and the Chagossians to reclaim their land.

The details of the case that Sands gives in his book discover a lesser-known saga of British history, uncovering the role of several individuals in this ongoing struggle. He chronologically arranges his chapters, starting with a discussion on the standing of International Law and the UN Charter in 1945, as to how the decolonisation struggle had begun (before the detachment of Chagos). Afterwards, the Non-Aligned Movement, Resolution 1514, and “an age of uprisings and national liberation movements (page no. 42),” all worked towards ushering in the global decolonisation struggle. Sands briefly sheds light on the struggle in Southwest Africa, analysing the extent of colonial influence in the legal world at that time.

Following this, a meticulous description of the history of Mauritius (and of its inhabitants) is offered, followed by the detachment process, unveiling the broader motives of Britain and the US referencing some eye-opening statements. The book reaches its peak when the case finally reached the ICJ in 2018, to be heard by 14 judges.

The account of courtroom proceedings and contributions of people like Ralphe Bunche, James Crawford, Olivier Bancoult, Anerood Jugnauth (and others) against the colonial forces enrich the discourse,

making it quite an interesting read. Sands also highlights the biases of individuals like D.A Greenhill, Sir Percy Spender, Judges Fitzmaurice and Greenwood, etc. What sets *The Last Colony* apart from previous writings on the case of the Chagos Archipelago by authors like Clare Anderson, Rugmini Devi, and Krish Seetah (which mostly discuss the legality, implications for other cases, and analyse international orders) is its up-to-date, intimate, multi-dimensional, and factually accurate account of the case. While there has been much fictional work on the island-state highlighting the human struggles of slavery, displacement, and colonialism (such as *Silence of the Chagos* by Shenaz Patel, which Sands references in this book), *The Last Colony* provides an up-to-date, intimate, multi-dimensional and factually accurate tale of the case.

Filled with intriguing historical references connecting Mauritius' struggle against colonial patterns, compelling and evocative language makes *The Last Colony* a riveting read. The author's insightful knowledge regarding the case is valuable. He contextualises the case and also incorporates similar and related cases such as Nicaragua and explores how the composition of the court's judges affects the cases, and the intricate legal aspects of the Mauritius' struggle.

*The Last Colony* is a precise, engaging and insightful book that is a recommended read for those interested in International Law, human rights, and post-colonialism. It is an easy read, with simple language, elaborative details, and a personal touch that makes it a popular read for a broad audience. Sands concludes with a poignant quote by Mauritian politician Aimé Césaire: “*A civilisation that plays fast and loose with its principles is a dying civilisation*”- a resonant end to a book that reflects the British lawyer's anxiety towards his state's selective application of its professed values. ■