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Brief Report No. 35

## SEYCHELLES

International attention was strongly focussed on the Seychelles island group late in November following the abortive coup attempt and hijacking of the Air India aircraft. This Brief Report, prepared by the Research Staff at Jan Smuts House, focusses on:

1. Statistics and other Background information.
2. Recent political developments.
3. Recent economic developments.
4. The abortive coup

### 1. Statistics and Background Information

Political Status: Independence achieved on June 29, 1976, within the Commonwealth. Present ruling party, within one-party system, is the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF).

President: France Albert René (also Minister of Defence, of Finance and of Agriculture and Housing).

National Congress: Convened annually, and is the supreme body of the SPPF.

Central Executive Committee of SPPF: Elected every three years.

The People's Assembly: Elected by universal franchise (25 members) and vested with legislative power.

Population: 63 000. Land Area: 444 km<sup>2</sup> (consists of 92 islands in Western Indian Ocean).

Languages: English, French, Creole dialect.

Currency: 1 Seychelles rupee (Rs) = 100 cents (US\$1.00 = 6,59 rupees (1980))

Economy:

Value of Domestic Exports: 24.4 million rupees (1977)

Estimated real growth in Domestic Product: 10% (for 1978-82 National Development Plan).

Tourism: (Seychelles' major industry): Contributes around 60 million rupees to GDP (1977) (1978).

Main Export Crops: Copra and cinnamon (together 75% of total domestic earnings), cassava and coconuts.

Fishing: Increasing catch since declaration of 200-mile limit.

Main Imports: Electrical machinery, cereals, manufactured goods, inedible crude materials.

Total Revenue (Estimated 1980): 357,8 million rupees.

## 2. Recent Political Developments

In June, 1977, a coup deposed President James Mancham and brought his Prime Minister, France Albert René, to the Presidency. The reasons for the 1977 coup were to be found in the differing political philosophies of Mancham and René. Mancham's support was drawn from businessmen and conservative islanders who were sympathetic to a capitalist approach to economic issues. René, on the other hand, drew support from the labouring classes and socialist-inclined intellectuals.

Following the coup, in which Tanzania's Julius Nyerere is said to have played an influential role, René's Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP) transformed itself into the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF) and became the country's only political Party. Within this one-party structure, a National Congress is convened annually and a Central Executive Committee elected every three years. The Congress is the supreme body of the SPPF and, between meetings, the affairs of the Party are conducted by the Central Committee.

While it was speculated that the coming to power of the SPPF would result in a dogmatic left-wing government, René has been pragmatic in his approach to government. All international agreements were honoured, including the lease to the US of a site for a satellite tracking station. (This lease was renewed until 1990 in June, 1981, at an annual rental of US\$25 million.) With regard to tourism, the country's chief source of foreign exchange, René said: "The Government realises that whatever the future holds, tourists are a bounty even when they come from South Africa. We do not like apartheid, but we are realistic."

In the field of foreign affairs, René has become a passionate advocate of non-alignment. In this advocacy, he has championed the cause of declaring the Indian Ocean a zone of peace, although allowing foreign navies to use the islands for visits and overstops. René has recently visited Libya, North Korea, Yugoslavia and China, and he attended the Commonwealth Leaders' meeting in Melbourne.

Persistent speculation that René is deeply influenced by the Soviet Union needs to be examined. Late last year, 1980, it was indicated that the Seychelles arsenal had been expanded with the delivery of 2 Soviet armoured cars (they were not identified any more clearly) and five propeller-driven patrol aircraft from Libya. On the other hand, Chinese vessels were reported to have been delivering 10 anti-aircraft guns, and the U.K. delivered a long-range Britten Norman Defender patrol aircraft. Based on the evidence of these deliveries, the country must be seen as trying to develop a military relationship with both Communist states and the West.

While the size of the Seychelles armed forces does not appear in the annual publication The Military Balance, one report indicates that the army/police force is 500 strong, supported by 140 officers and men from Tanzania. In addition, it is thought that a further 1 000 men belong to a part-time militia.

There are clear indications that two, if not three, coups have been planned against the René government. The best documented of these was in April, 1978, when 20 mercenaries, plus local sympathisers, planned to overthrow the government whilst President René was on a trip to China. In this case René acted calmly and three months later the conspirators were released. René stated, on the occasion of their release, that the "Seychelles (is) not interested either in holding political prisoners or in shooting opponents, as in certain other countries ..."

A further coup attempt was reported in November, 1979. There were strong allegations that former President, James Mancham (in exile in London), had collaborated with South Africans in this effort. Both Mancham and Pretoria denied these allegations. In the wake of this attempt, the René government detained 12 French marine instructors, arrested 100 people and closed a weekly newspaper. In response, France, hitherto the biggest aid donor, suspended all military aid to the Seychelles.

Quite clearly, the René government faces extensive opposition from exiled movements and the country's small middle class. Some 28 000 people are thought to be in exile, most probably in Britain. Last week's coup appears to have been spearheaded by one of the two chief exiled movements, Le Mouvement Pour la Résistance.

### 3. Recent Economic Developments

The economy of the country is, of course, severely hamstrung and this is acknowledged by the René Government. In presenting his 1980 budget René cautioned that, if the country wanted to prosper, a three-pronged attack would have to be launched: increased productivity and reduction in imports, changed patterns of consumption, and increased exports.

Imports for 1979 were up some 10 percent to Rs. 450-million, while exports amounted to only Rs. 25-million. The government's total revenue in 1980 was expected to run at Rs. 357,8-million, a 68,2% increase. The highest allocation of funds was to the Ministry of Works, some Rs. 55,5-million.

Britain and France continue to be the largest aid providers. In recent years major aid assistance from these countries has included housing projects, building of a tuna quay, building of schools and provision of boat-building facilities. The West German government has also provided aid. Other assistance has come from OPEC, Kuwait and China. The Soviet Union, for its part, has trained technicians and helped develop the fishing industry.

Earlier this year it was announced that Iraq and the Seychelles were preparing an extensive joint fishing venture which would run for fifteen years. The majority share holding would be held by the Seychelles.

Tourism still remains the country's chief source of revenue, and annual tourist traffic (much of it from South Africa) runs at a figure higher than the entire Seychelles population.

#### 4. The Abortive Coup of November 1981

It seems likely that last week's coup attempt was inspired by the exiled group, La Mouvement Pour la Résistance. Indeed, reports from London confirmed that their London representative, Paul Chow, had telephoned former President Mancham on the eve of the coup, informing him that it would take place. This, insisted Mancham, was his only knowledge of the plan.

However, Mr. René's government alleged that a tape recording by Mancham - intended to be used in the event of a successful execution of the coup - had been found. In response to this, Mancham admitted making two such recordings, but claimed that he had never heard of this particular movement.

The second important strand in the attempt concerns the mercenary element. It seems fairly certain that they were, in the main, recruited in South Africa. The use of Swaziland as a conduit for the Seychelles is patent evidence that they had South Africa as a springboard. Moreover, the dramatic hijacking of an Air India aircraft to Durban in escape also implicates Pretoria in international public opinion.

Apart from the longer-term implications for Pretoria, it needs to be noted that the effort - irrespective of whether the René government was tipped off - was badly prepared. With the level of resistance from the Seychelles armed forces and the inferior firepower of the mercenaries, the outcome was to be expected, even if their arrival had not been prematurely discovered at the airport.

For South Africa the mere recruiting of the mercenaries in the country has clearly implicated the country and government in the attempt. Further, the subsequent arrival of the Air India plane and the need to deal with the criminal implications thereof, raise important issues. In addition, the call on South Africa by President René that the mercenaries should be extradited creates long-term problems for South Africa's relations in Africa. The way South Africa deals with the alleged hijackers (or "kidnappers") will affect the credibility, internationally and domestically, of South Africa's stand on international terrorism, including the hijacking of aircraft.

(A fuller assessment of implications for South Africa must await further developments.)

Jan Smuts House

December, 1981