

Behind the Rainbow

'non-people'

Why Mauritius' 'rainbow nation' is a mirage

Mauritian politicians proclaim national unity, but the fate of at least one segment of society, the country's Afro-Creoles, challenges such claims, writes

Loga Virahsawmy...



THERE ARE MANY kinds of Mauritians. Most are descended from people brought from India. There are some Chinese. There are French and English speakers. And there is a sizeable number of people called Afro-Creoles.

These last, descended from slaves, speak the language that binds together the disparate peoples of this island nation – Mauritian Creole. Yet the Afro-Creoles themselves are a non-people, denied their history or even their identity. Though Mauritian Creole is understood by nearly everyone, it is still unrecognised in law and is banned from schools. The Afro-Creoles have been ghettoised, their vibrant language hushed up. English is the official language; the media uses French. There is no Afro-Creole newspaper.

Politicians here are fond of saying, in Creole: "Enn sel lepep enn sel nation" (one country, one nation) and "nation larkansiel" (rainbow nation), but Mauritius is a country where the colours of the rainbow don't mix.

Afro-Creoles have become the wretched of Mauritius, liv-

ing in what looked like suspicious circumstances, was too much, and they rebelled. For a moment, the international media focused on their plight.

Symbols of opulence like supermarkets, restaurants and businesses were looted. Cars were set alight. The wave of violence soon reached peaceful villages known for their racial harmony. Houses were burnt down. Yesterday's friends were made enemies overnight. President Cardinal Jean Margent went to these villages promising moral, financial and social support but the harm had already been done.

Since then, measures have been taken in earnest to improve the lot of the Afro-Creoles. The government has set up three large projects: a trust fund for the financially vulnerable; a resource transfer programme; and a social awareness programme called "Anou Dibout Ansam" (Let's stand up together).

The private sector, religious bodies and NGOs have put up structures to help the most vulnerable with housing, education and recreational facilities, but progress is slow. There is still much to be done to remedy the decades of neglect of the Afro-Creole people.

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ing in ghettos with the barest minimum of infrastructure and inferior schools. Drugs, alcohol, prostitution, child delinquency, street children and failure at school are rampant.

When in February 1999 a popular Afro-Creole singer, Kaya, died in prison, Afro-Creoles rioted. The death of their

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