

Kenya revisited

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ON my first visit to Kenya in 1960, before independence, I found the whites edgy and some Africans surly. There were evidences of the past Mau Mau troubles and some whites still carried revolvers. Great efforts were made to rehabilitate those who had been involved in guerilla war. There were good London shops in Nairobi, carrying stocks of good quality but inexpensive clothes. White farmers were complaining of the encroachment of squatters on their land, and this worsened by the time of my second visit, just after independence.

In 1964 there was a new confidence in the Africans in Nairobi, but also, at times, a certain hostility to all non-Africans. There were, however, frequent public statements by President Kenyatta and others that Kenya would not tolerate racialism or colonialism.

During my three following visits I noticed that the changes had accelerated. Nairobi now swarms with tourists, there are several flourishing bookshops, souvenirs for tourists and many new and costly hotels. There are also long bus queues, overcrowding, dirt and crime, but the general impression is one of busy, hopeful people and of much development and building.

What did whites fear before Independence — falling standards, inefficiency, victimisation, even of liberal whites who would be prepared to stay under a black government? They, and Asians even more, feared not being able to export capital or income; loss of political influence; expropriation of land; tribal conflict; falling educational standards; possible chaos. Many people, whites and Asians with British passports, left the country.

In May 1977, race relations seemed very good. The races mix easily in cafes and restaurants. No whites jostle blacks off pavements, as happened recently in Vrededorp. Many whites have come in on contract and all non-Kenyans, black and white, require a work permit.

I am told that Asians feel a certain insecurity, and those who are involved in big business maintain a low profile. Tribalism is still alive and, though there is great respect for Kenyatta himself, there is criticism of his relatives and, at times, a latent hostility against the Kikuyu by other tribes.

Efficiency has dropped in some ways, but to blacks it is worth it. I visited a large house in the former 'white highlands'. The paintwork had deteriorated, but the house was obviously a happy

home to a large African family, and its solid weatherproof construction was fully appreciated by its African owner. He had bought the farm with a 20-year loan from the Government. The occupants had no luxury, but a sense of achievement: they were making good where it had been expected that they might be inadequate.

I also visited a foreign-owned coffee estate, and observed a happy relationship between the white manager and his employees and servants. Whites working for big expatriate firms still have a marked prosperity; others living on so-called 'local' salaries have apparently voluntarily lowered their standards of living.

Kenya has a free enterprise economy, with obvious business opportunities. The Government fixes a minimum salary for people in full-time employment, and this salary varies from one area to another. While I was there the minimum wage for a labourer in Nairobi was raised from R35 to R40 a month.

Men and women are paid the same for equal work. A graduate teacher earns R100 a month. One can live comfortably on local produce on such a salary, but could certainly not afford imported goods. Education must be paid for by the parents. With a shortage of schools, people can accept that they should pay for what they get.

The country has a one-party Government; only party members may stand for Parliament. There was much anger over the detention of a member of Parliament who had been too critical. Government is often by decree; for example, while I was there, a total and immediate ban on all hunting was imposed — and high time too

It seems that the prestige of the Party (Kenya African National Union) has declined, while the power of the provincial bureaucrats has grown. There are tales of graft and of muddle... as elsewhere. The tabloid newspapers publish the sensational essence of news, and South Africa and Rhodesia figure prominently, always unfavourably.

In conclusion, I would say that whites have no political influence and Asians may not have a secure future after Kenyatta has gone, because small-town Africans covet Asian shops. Africans in Kenya still face many problems, but they have a good country, those in the arable areas are hard-working and are eager to get their children educated. Much of Kenya has a lovely climate. It is exciting and stimulating to visit, and I would be happy to live there.