

Bashir Lalani

Ugandan Asian Oral History Project: Political Environment

Bashir Lalani: “As I mentioned earlier, I am one of ten siblings, I rank the ninth right now. Youngest of the boys but I have a sister younger than me. We all essentially grew up in Uganda, had our schooling in Uganda. Some of my older siblings went to Makerere University, which was one of the finest higher learning institutions. Some even call it the Harvard of Africa from a medical school perspective so it was a very good educational system. Everything rolled about, life was very peaceful under the British colonial powers. It was a Commonwealth country and things were fine as far as I understood.

Uganda got its independence in 1962, 9th October 1962, when Dr. Milton Obote became the first prime minister. Before that, under the constitution, we had the Kabaka, Sir Edward Mutesa, who was the king of the province called Buganda Province. Buganda was the predominant province in Uganda but after the constitution changed, during Independence, Uganda became one and we had the Prime Minister of the Republic of Uganda. After the British left, things also started to change. Everything seemed normal, life went on, and into the sixties, I could remember a beautiful life—in fact, it was paradise on earth. As Winston Churchill once said about Uganda, it's the pearl of Africa. Whatever you sowed in Uganda grew. Uganda is one country where you would not hear of starvation, unlike Kenya or Tanzania or other parts of sub-Saharan countries. Uganda is very green and fertile. It is also the source of the Nile. You might recall from the history, it was Dr. Livingstone who had met [John Hanning] Speke in a town called Jinja, which is the source of the River Nile from Lake Victoria and sources the water to Egypt. In the sixties, I recall, life was beautiful, normal, we used to call it paradise on earth. Things started to change in 1966 when the new constitution came about. Dr. Milton Obote had come out with the Common Man's Charter and he wanted to introduce the local Africans into the community and into the businesses at large, which is fine and normal, but those things were incorporated by many of the people who took up the right to become citizens of Uganda. There were others who were not inclined to become citizens so they remained as non-Ugandans and it continued.

Fast forward a little bit. In 1971, when Dr. Milton Obote was attending that conference in Singapore, the Commonwealth Conference in Singapore. There was something in the air about how the Asians were to be kicked out because the Common Man's Charter had indicated that if you are a non-Ugandan, you may have to leave the country, or the choice was given that you become a Ugandan and you had the right to continue as a Ugandan. So there was some whiff in the air about what was going to happen, and to the best of my understanding, it was the British government who thought what was going to happen if there was a mass exodus. While Dr. Milton Obote was attending the Commonwealth Conference in Singapore, the military coup was organized by the British behind the scenes with Idi Amin with the intent that he would overthrow the government, which he did, and he would come to power and then everything would be normal. Well, it was normal until 1972 when Idi Amin, the President of Uganda at the time, supposedly had a dream that he wanted to make Uganda a completely black African,

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native-run country, which may be fine in speech but not practical because the Ugandan Asians were running the economy of Uganda and they had the upper hand on the economy.”