



Hotel Democracy

WHILE TAKING TIME OUT IN A LOBBY IN TANZANIA, BILL SNADDON DISCOVERS HOW THE GAME OF POLITICS IS PLAYED IN THE EAST AFRICAN NATION.

I arrived in Tanzania last year with my girlfriend, who had an internship at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. We were based in the town of Arusha, between Lake Victoria and Mt Kilimanjaro, in the northeast of the country. The town has mountains in one direction, fertile farmland in the other, and green jungles a turn of the head away.

For a couple of months I worked at a local school in Shangarai, a village on the fringe of town. Every morning I woke at eight o'clock, got a taxi and then a daladala (a minibus, Tanzania's main form of public transport) to get to the school.

Daladalas have capacity for about 12 people, but once I was squeezed in with 43 others. The morning journey, taxi and daladala, cost about A\$1.50. I often told my fellow commuters how much a journey like this would cost at home. Their first response was a prolonged laugh. Then, when I made it clear I was serious, they uttered (so I believe) a hot-breathed Swahili expletive.

Spending time away from the school, with its less-than-basic conditions, was vital. Many foreign workers and volunteers who visit these areas often find themselves stressed and overwhelmed by the conditions. There are 200 kids at the school; 30 have HIV; many more have malaria; and most, if they're lucky, eat one small meal a day.

I found myself constantly telling the students to stop chewing at their pencils, which is what some do when hunger hits. Though when I told them to spit out the crushed pencil from their mouths, I had to remind them that school rules say no spitting.

Occasionally, at weekends, I'd try to find a few hours to lounge around one of the nicer hotels in Arusha. And so it happened that, one day, I was sitting in a lobby, using the wireless internet, when a waiter approached me. CNN was on the TV; Kevin Rudd was making a speech. The waiter, Shedrock, noticed that I was intently watching and listening to Rudd. So he asked me: "Are you from Australia, sir?"

“Every few minutes he would look around, perhaps paranoid that someone might overhear our conversation.”

I will never get used to someone calling me ‘sir’. And, being the progressive Generation Y male that I am, I said, “Call me Bill.” We began chatting and, before long, he sat down and started asking questions about Australia.

I showed my new friend a map of Australia on Google Maps and we spoke about Australian cities, culture and politics. Mostly, though, he wanted to know how democracy worked in Australia. Having the internet at the ready, I opened the Australian newspaper’s website and directed him to the comments section that appears at the bottom of opinion pieces. His face went from light and happy to confused and almost distraught. Shedrock found it hard to believe that Australian citizens could openly criticise and oppose government policies, saying things in a public forum like: “Rudd clearly has no idea when it comes to domestic and international issues! He should be sacked for his crazy wish to drive Australia into loopy socialistic values!”

I rambled on for a few minutes, telling him how, if I wanted to, I could write an open letter to my prime minister and insult him directly. It seemed as if Shedrock’s head was about to explode. I thought it was time to ask him about politics and democracy in Tanzania.

Shedrock told me about the shallow democracy that operates there. Every few minutes he would look around, perhaps paranoid that someone might overhear our conversation. I said that if he didn’t want to talk about African politics then it was totally fine. After all, I didn’t want to get him – or me – in trouble.

“No, no,” he said, “I do want to talk about it.”

Apparently, all the workers at this particular hotel shared his dim view of Tanzanian politics. He added that although many Tanzanian government ministers frequented his hotel, they never get too close to the ‘lowly workers’.

I asked if Shedrock had voted in the national presidential election in 2005, when Jakaya Kikwete was elected for a five-year term. Yes, he replied, adding that he had also voted for Kikwete’s CCM party, which has its origin in the party that liberated Tanzania from British colonial rule in the 1960s. “The CCM party is the best option we have,” he told me.

So, I asked, was Shedrock looking forward to the next election, due this year? “We already know that Kikwete is going to win... What’s the point?” He was describing a frustrating state of affairs, yet during the conversation he was laughing; also showing great humour and perspective.

I quizzed Shedrock about the ministers that stayed at his hotel. “Oh, they come here, eat the buffet, drink the best whisky, do corruption... Then go home to their mansions, which are down the road from the slums, or they stay the night in the deluxe suite.”

“Do the ministers ever sit at the bar and drink with the barman?”

“Ha, never! Only the businessman in their Italian suits drink at the bar and chat with the workers... The ministers don’t like getting too close to the ordinary Tanzanians – they’re scared of us.”

I brought up the topic of university academics and their role in scrutinising the government. After a sigh and a shrug, he described how some academics travelled around the country, going to conferences and giving speeches. Sometimes they might even criticise certain government policies. That sounded normal to me, but Shedrock hadn’t finished: “Yes, these academics are told by the government to criticise specific policies.”

By doing this, everyone wins, I guess: the academic gets scholarly credit (not to mention a little extra cash, perhaps), while the government could claim to be presiding over a healthy and robust democracy.

An hour later, as the sun was setting, I was about to leave the hotel and walk back to my apartment – walking after dark in Tanzania, one of Africa’s most stable and safe countries, is not advised – when Shedrock approached me again.

“Billy, come over to the window and look at this.” Down below, in the hotel carpark, was a national Tanzanian minister. Shedrock and I coyly watched him stroll through the hotel lobby towards a room.

“Keep watching,” said Shedrock. Two minutes later, a young and very attractive woman arrived, with high heels and even higher hair. To my surprise – though not to Shedrock’s – she went into the same room the minister had just entered. Shedrock left me for a second. I heard him conferring with his fellow staff members. When he returned he asked what I thought had just happened? “Hmm, could it be that the tottering woman was his wife?”

Shedrock and the other staff members knew this wasn’t the case: they could tell that the woman wasn’t his wife because of the minister’s eyes and, more obviously, her hemline.

We chuckled for a minute. Then, with an exaggerated look of shock on my face, I told Shedrock that if a government minister were doing a similar thing in Australia, I would consider taking a photo of the two of them and sending it to a journalist, or perhaps post it straight on YouTube. I said that if an Australian minister were caught doing that – publicly cheating on his wife in a classy hotel – it was possible that a scandal would result. Shedrock, meanwhile, informed me that this was the third minister in the past month to visit his hotel with a leggy ‘friend’.

By this time, the sun had set, my taxi was waiting, and so I bid farewell to Shedrock and his workmates. While walking through the automatic doors I turned and asked Shedrock if he thought Tanzania could continue on its present political path.



"My friend," he said, "have you read about what happened in Kenya recently?"

It's difficult to compare the politics of different countries, but I found it interesting that Shedrock alluded to Kenya – and the violence that engulfed the Kenyan people following their 2007 election. It was an especially timely comparison because around the same time I was talking with Shedrock, a public debate began in Kenya concerning a new constitution. If ratified, the new constitution would separate executive, legislative and judicial powers in a fairer and more balanced way. With any luck, it might even help to create a more stable nation. There was also talk of a new push against corruption in Kenya.

Most locals I spoke to in Tanzania assured me there were no such problems there because, as they said, "Tanzania is peace". There were also many people who, like Shedrock, express their distaste for "show democracy". Time after time, when I was chatting with taxi drivers, they would rant about the corruption and the flimsy tax system and the politicians' Mercedes – all of this while trying to avoid the potholes and the oncoming daladalas. I usually managed to calm them down by asking if they had any Michael Jackson tapes for the cassette player.

The comment that sticks in my mind, though, came from a taxi driver who, after I asked him for his thoughts on Tanzania's future, proclaimed that: "In 20 years, revolution will have arrived." Perhaps Shedrock will be around to see it.

Bill Snaddon is a Melbourne writer. 'Shedrock' is not the real name of his hotel informant.



FROM TOP: A FARMER ATTENDING TO THE CROPS; BILL SNADDON WITH THE LOCAL FRUIT AND VEGETABLE WOMEN, WHO SELL A HUGE, JUICY PINEAPPLE FOR AS1; CITY FRINGE OF ARUSHA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL SNADDON AND TED BATROUNNEY.