CHINA'S SHARP POWER IN AFRICA

The Trappings of the Mauritius Safe City Project

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China has entered the global stage with a bang—as a provider of affordable goods, a development partner, and a growing (and often assertive) presence in international governance systems. It cannot be ignored as a global player, but beyond the pomp and fluff, it is crucial to understand what are the actual incentives behind China's growing leadership role—be it in the area of technology, military, economics, or culture.

Africa was long considered by the Global North as a forgotten continent, an unequal partner in multiple asymmetries of trade, development, and information. But China has assiduously courted Africa, and its presence is far from a novelty. In its 2006 white paper on Africa, China premised its relational power on the principles of "sincerity, friendship, mutual benefit, shared prosperity, mutual support and common development."[1] It unabashedly engages with African countries, openly dangling what seem like advantageous concessionary loans, striking deals behind closed doors, and offering "generous" knowledge transfer. China has supported major infrastructure projects such as roads, dams, hospitals, airports, and ports. These visible aspects of development shape public sentiment. According to the latest round of the Afrobarometer survey of public opinion, China ranks second to the United States as "the best model for future development."[2]

However, China's accelerated presence and aggressive method of engagement give cause for concern. Its conspicuous presence in Africa has coincided with citizens' demands for greater political accountability and transparency facilitated by the internet and mobile technology. Initially tolerated, in recent years these demands have been suppressed in a host of African countries by measures ranging from social media taxes, introduction of cybersecurity legislation, and internet shutdowns to invasive online surveillance. In addition, cameras are popping up at busy intersections and quiet neighborhoods as part of "Safe City" projects officially promoted to combat crime, vandalism, and other antisocial behavior.

"Safe Cities" are an evolution of the smart cities concept initially advanced by the World Bank as a means of ensuring greater municipal efficiency. However, China's leading role in the global spread of smart and safe cities prompts concern. Commentators point to China's export of authoritarianism and its facilitation by tech companies such as Huawei, ZTE, Dahua, Hikvision, and others.[3] Steven Feldstein particularly spotlights the role of

Huawei in "offering advanced equipment [and] technological support to set up, operate and manage these systems."[4]

Safe Cities are spreading rapidly across Asia, Latin America, Central Europe, and Africa. Twelve countries within sub-Saharan Africa have a Safe City. Examples are Kenya and Uganda, which Freedom House classifies as "partly free" and "not free," respectively.[5] Mauritius is an island celebrated as a shining example of democracy in Africa, yet it too is falling prey to this technology, and the Mauritius Safe City Project (MSCP) is replete with red flags.

For a project that will use public funds to repay a loan contracted by the Export-Import (Exim) Bank of China, the MSCP is shrouded in opacity. The project is estimated to cost US$455 million spread over twenty years.[6] It involves public data that will be collected using intrusive technology such as facial recognition. Yet there has been no public discussion about its adoption and implementation. Why was it set up? Whom does it serve? Why is there so little information in the public domain? What are the financing mechanisms involved? Who are the key stakeholders and what are their roles?

China in Mauritius: A Snapshot

Mauritius established diplomatic relations with China a half century ago, shortly after achieving independence. Mauritius has a small but thriving Sino-Mauritian population whose ancestors came to the island as traders and merchants. Trade, culture, and knowledge transfer have to a large extent underlain the bilateral relationship through Chinese cultural centers, people-to-people networks, capacity-building programs, expertise in fishing, and scholarship programs. In 2016, a Confucius Institute and a branch of the Bank of China opened, and talks for a free-trade agreement began. The agreement was signed in 2021, the first between China and an African nation. In the words of an ex-diplomat who worked closely on China-Mauritius relations, "China has a real soft point for Mauritius and has been very generous over the years towards us."[7]

Likewise, at the World Political Parties Summit sponsored by China on July 6, 2021, the Mauritian prime minister poured praise on the "CCP as the architect of modern China" and congratulated it "for its strong leadership, avant-garde vision, hard work, discipline and tenacity."[8] An ex-cadre of the Militant Socialist Movement (MSM) confirmed that the MSM, the prime minister's party, has had very strong ties with the CCP since the MSM's founding in 1983.

Mauritius also has strong ties to India. Roughly 70 percent of the Mauritian population has Indian ancestry and retains linguistic, cultural, or religious connections to India. India has been generous in its tax treaties, credit lines, and knowledge transfer, and appears to be vying with China to curry favor with Mauritius. In recent years, India has financed a number of large infrastructure projects in Mauritius, such as a light-railway metro. India

signed a free-trade agreement with Mauritius shortly after China did and is developing one of Mauritius's outer islands, Agaléga. The Indian and Mauritian governments have denied setting up a military facility on Agaléga and have explained India's presence there as part of India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) policy.[9] With a major US military installation already in the vicinity on Diego Garcia, these developments signify intensifying geostrategic competition around Mauritius.

The Mauritius Safe City Project: Safety and Surveillance

Researching the MSCP was like finding scattered pieces to a complex puzzle. The first question that came to mind was, How did Mauritius get to a Safe City project? There was little public information concerning the MSCP. I therefore approached a range of stakeholders, including members of parliament, ex–political party cadres, journalists, and civil-society groups. An insider with knowledge of the project pointed me to an unsolicited bid from Huawei to the government of Mauritius in 2015. Prior to that, there had been some discussion about upgrading the existing closed-circuit television network of the Mauritian police. But this simple upgrade rapidly morphed into a large Safe City project (see figure 1). The first public mention of the project occurred in 2016, during the presentation of the 2016/17 National Budget:

> Government is coming up with a Safe City Project on a pilot basis. In that context, smart cameras would be installed with special focus on major public areas, along main roads and motorways, pedestrian walkways and principal traffic centres. These cameras would be a powerful and effective tool to combat crimes and drugs proliferation, [and] assist in more effective traffic and road safety management.[10]

How did Huawei convince the government to embrace the concept of a full-blown Safe City? The MSCP coincided with a spat between the current ruling government and two of its major allies, the US and the United Kingdom. In 2015, Mauritius, under the leadership of the current ruling party, initiated legal proceedings against the UK in the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. Mauritius won a succession of battles toward recognition of Diego Garcia and the Chagos Islands as Mauritian territory. The Diego Garcia case seems to have soured the relationship with the US and UK to the point that the current prime minister has referred to them as "hypocrites and champions of double talk."[11] With Mauritius's traditional partners out in the cold, it was perhaps an ideal moment for a further and stronger rapprochement with China.

In late 2017, the cabinet decided that the Mauritian police should contract with Mauritius Telecom for the latter to operate the MSCP. Matters then accelerated when Mauritius Telecom entered a "preferential buyer credit loan agreement" with the Exim Bank of China with the government of Mauritius acting as guarantor.[12] The loan agreement is for a period of twenty years effective from April 1, 2018. To date, there has been no disclosure

Figure 1. A Safe City camera in operation in Mauritius

Source: Photo taken by the author.

regarding the tenure of the contracts between Mauritius Telecom and the Exim Bank of China, or between Mauritius Telecom and the Mauritian police; both are deemed confidential.

The official rationale for the MSCP referred to public safety and security. But several of the stakeholders whom I interviewed found it difficult to justify the presence of a Safe City on a small island like Mauritius that is usually sheltered from high levels of crime and other types of banditry. Moreover, one cannot help but notice the decline in Mauritius's democratic credentials over the last ten years. In fact, the decline accelerated beginning in 2017, which coincides with the implementation of the MSCP. Are they linked in any way?

Over the last two decades, a change in political culture has gripped certain mainstream political parties in Mauritius. They have become extremely leader-centric, and power and decisions are concentrated, focused on big money and growing levels of cronyism.[13] A clique-like mentality has affected governance, causing corruption, nepotism, and impunity to rise. Two recent reports document the island's democratic backsliding.[14] A series of increasingly authoritarian measures have reined in civil liberties, including the introduction of a biometric ID card in 2013, arrests of journalists in 2019, multiple suspensions of a commercial radio station's license in 2020, and the political capture of key institutions including the legislature, where opposition members of parliament have been recurrently expelled (2020–21). In early 2021, matters worsened when the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Authority published a consultation paper with proposals that pose a danger to both civil liberties and political rights, insofar as they point toward the establishment of a digital surveillance system.[15] More recently, the Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Act (2021) and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act (2021) were adopted in the Mauritian parliament despite wide public protest.[16] They aim to punitively constrain content.

The Nexus between Opacity and Corruption

Opacity is a defining feature of many of the Safe Cities that China is supporting. In the case of Mauritius, the project was closed from the outset and, according to stakeholders who have inside knowledge of the MSCP, even certain government ministers were kept in the dark. A trickle of information leaked out because of existing systems of horizontal accountability, namely the Mauritian parliament and the National Audit Office (NAO).

Officially, the MSCP falls under the jurisdiction of the Mauritius Police Force, which itself is under the Prime Minister's Office. However, questions surround the architecture of the MSCP. There are multiple players within the MSCP—the Mauritius Police Force, Mauritius Telecom, and Huawei—and the responsibility of each is unclear.

The government of Mauritius selected Mauritius Telecom to provide "security equipment, related hardware and software and licenses to the Government of Mauritius for a contractual period of 20 years."[17] It avoided competitive bidding requirements in the Public Procurement Act (PPA) by invoking Section 3(1)(a) of the PPA, which states "this Act shall not apply to procurement undertaken to protect national security or defence, where the Prime Minister so determines."[18] But why did the government undertake this course of action and specifically select Mauritius Telecom? Were there no other possible competitive telecom bidders?

An informant close to the MSCP is convinced that the choice was deliberate due to the very close relationship between the current top management of Mauritius Telecom and the closed and influential group that manages the MSCP. Further elaborating on the matter, the informant mentioned that Mauritius Telecom was part of the early deliberations

in 2015 and even part of a delegation that visited China in connection with the rollout of the MSCP. Furthermore, its status as a private company puts it outside public and parliamentary scrutiny.

Several Parliamentary Questions (PQs) in 2018 and 2019 requested information on the contractual nature of the loan between Mauritius Telecom and the Exim Bank of China, the safety and privacy of data, and the overall cost of the project. In its recently released report for the 2019–20 period, NAO sheds light on aspects of the MSCP that are troubling, especially with regard to contract management, expenditure management, and deliverables not attained. Two elements stand out. The first confirms the opacity around the MSCP: "The lease agreements were not made available to the NAO officers as the Police explained that the agreements could not be provided due to a clause of mutual disclosure under the terms and conditions of the agreement."[19] The second deals with nonaccountability and the way that funds were disbursed and used during three fiscal years (2017/18, 2018/19, and 2019/20) of the MSCP. MUR 760 million (approximately US$25 million) in spending had no corresponding payment vouchers or supporting documents.

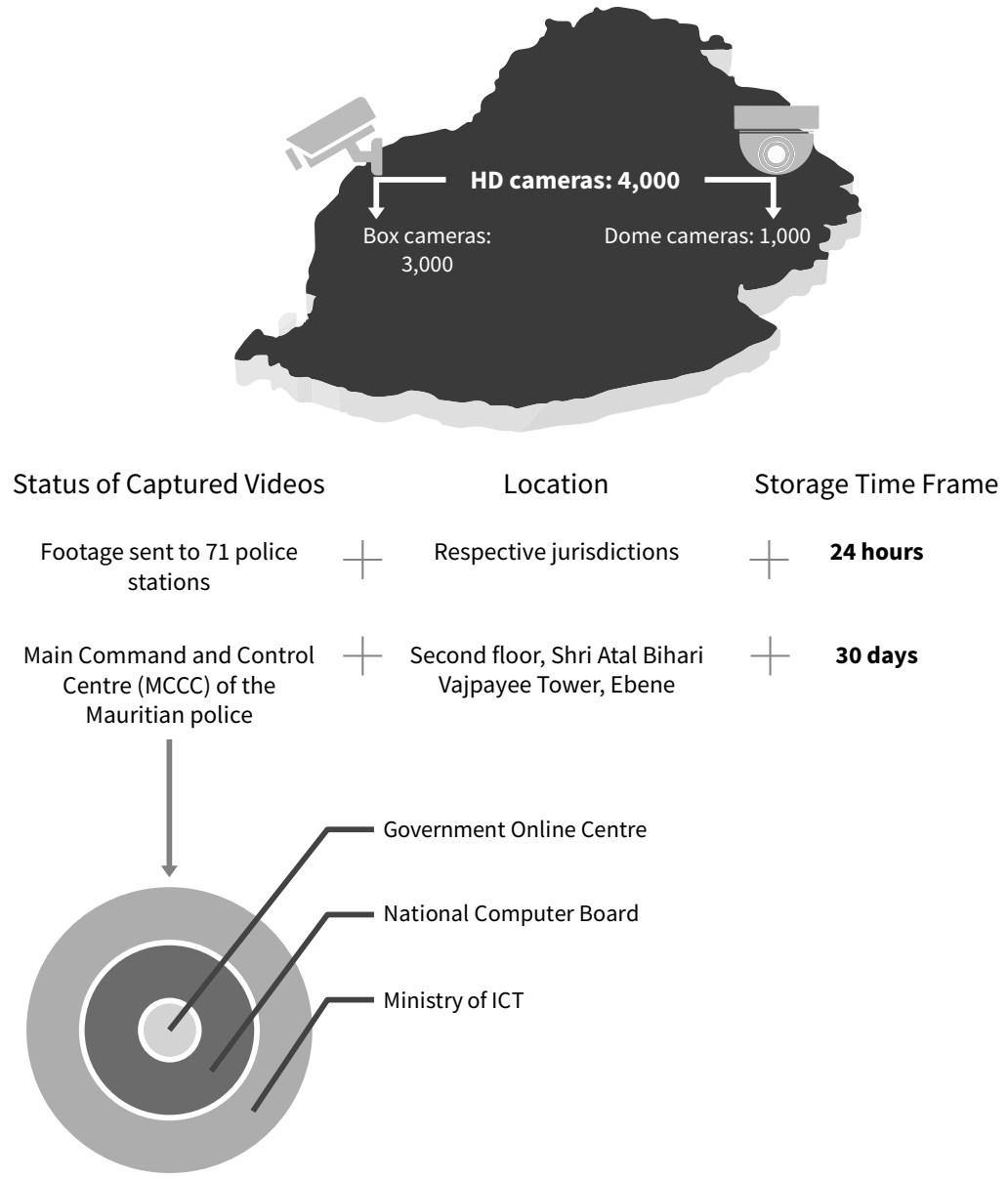
A stakeholder with inside knowledge of the MSCP links this opacity directly to corruption. According to this source, big infrastructure-related projects fetching millions of dollars in contract money can encourage corruption since the final cost of these projects may far exceed the original estimate. These overruns are at times justified as deviations within the project. Although it is unclear whether this is the case with the MSCP, the opacity and confidentiality surrounding the project cast doubt on whether the principles of good governance have been adhered to.

Data Ownership, Storage, and Use: Under Whose Jurisdiction?

Data is key to the success of the MSCP. Mauritius has currently one of the best data-protection laws in Africa as well as a Data Protection Office. One of its strengths is that it aims to strengthen the personal autonomy of data subjects and the control they have over their personal data. However, section 44 of this Data Protection Act stipulates: "Personal data shall be exempt from any provision of this Act where the non-application of such provision would, in the opinion of the Prime Minister, be required for the purpose of safeguarding national security, defence or public security."[20] This provision gives one person, the prime minister, the authority to reverse the Act's personal data privacy protections and, according to the Code of Practice for the Operation of the Safe City System(s), it applies to MSCP data.[21] Some who follow the MSCP closely do not discount the potential for abuse, misuse, or even manipulation.

It is unclear who stores and ultimately controls the data. The government has maintained that the Mauritius Police Force will operate the cameras and have custody of data collected.[22] However, during a recent trial, officers from the Mauritius Police Force testified that the

Figure 2. Distribution and storage of data in Mauritius



data is in fact held by Mauritius Telecom. Mauritius Telecom was quick to release a public statement saying that the data is stored at the Government Online Centre—a public body under the aegis of the ICT ministry (see figure 2).[23] So, who really has custody of the MSCP data? This lack of clarity can easily allow for the manipulation and misuse of data—a grim prospect for those who cherish their civil liberties and political rights.

The Mauritian Police, the MSCP, and the Citizens

Despite the ambiguity and contradiction over who stores and ultimately controls data from the MSCP, the Mauritius Police Force remains a key player. Round 8 of the Afrobarometer Mauritius survey reported that nearly half (44.5 percent) of respondents trust the police "just a little" or "not at all."[24] This comports with a national sentiment that the police (or at least its higher echelons) are at the behest of those in power and unable to exert independence in the exercise of their duties.[25] This low public trust puts into question the ability of the MSCP to ensure the security and safety of citizens. Key opposition party leaders, antigovernment protesters, and even common citizens fear that sensitive data could be handed over to the government for political reasons. For instance, the Leader of the Opposition (a constitutional position) has on numerous occasions publicly expressed concern about surveillance and about misuse and manipulation of data.[26] In light of the antidemocratic measures that the country has witnessed in the last five years, the worry is that the MSCP might become a tool for political control, manipulation, and oppression.

What of the training of the Mauritius Police Force to operate the MSCP? Judging from the impressive fleet of intelligent video and traffic surveillance cameras, the radio communications system, and the centralized command and control center, one may assume that extensive training has been provided. But by whom? Huawei? Other technicians from China? When the government promoted the MSCP in 2018 and 2019 as a state-of-the-art project, a deputy commissioner of police was featured in a Huawei promotional video, praising Huawei.

The Huawei-China Connection?

After the unsolicited bid by Huawei, what began as a simple upgrade to the existing Mauritius Police Force CCTV network turned into a full-blown Safe City project, all behind closed doors. In addition to benefiting from the "preferential buyer credit loan agreement" with the Exim Bank of China, Huawei is an important player in the rollout and perhaps management of the MSCP.[27] Promotional material on Huawei's Safe Cities website pitches the Mauritian case as building a "safe Mauritius, the inspiration for heaven."[28] Moreover, Huawei has grown into more than just a simple ICT vendor. It has launched several initiatives and programs ranging from the Huawei Academy (under the aegis of the University of Mauritius) to content partnerships with local media houses. Moreover, the Chinese ambassador attends most of the formal events that Huawei organizes.

Feldstein speaks to Huawei's strategy when he says, "Huawei is directly pitching the Safe City model to national security agencies, and China's Exim Bank appears to be sweetening the deal with subsidized loans."[29] Though the MSCP contract is not publicly available, it would be consistent with Chinese practice for the subsidized loan agreement from the Exim Bank of China to direct the government of Mauritius to contract Chinese firms (such as Huawei) to provide infrastructure as well as technical and other support to the MSCP.[30]

Too Many Gray Areas

MSCP is costing the Mauritian taxpayer millions of dollars for which very little to no information can be found in the public domain. Knowledgeable observers believe that this opacity is deliberate and invites corruption. Those who see cameras at busy crossroads, in their neighborhoods, or in front of their homes worry about the justifications for these cameras and their locations. Are they being watched? Tracked? Will citizens grow self-conscious and start to adjust their behavior or censor themselves? What will happen to the cherished political rights and civil liberties that the island has built its reputation on?

Lessons Learned

China's well-oiled rhetoric of helping Africa bridge its digital divide needs to be viewed with guarded enthusiasm. Africa's digital infrastructure is increasingly at risk as China rolls out its technology hardware and software, offers attractive concessionary loans, and promotes digital sovereignty. One of the most damaging outcomes, as exemplified by the MSCP, is a culture of opacity and impunity. Therefore, it is imperative that key stakeholders within and across African countries double down to push back against such projects. As with the MSCP, they must ask questions such as Who does it serve? Why an unsolicited bid? Who are the key players? Is it a priority project? This pushback should be not solely against China but also against national governments and local elites who thrive on such opaque and closed dealings.

The MSCP case also highlights the importance of institutional checks and balances. A confidentiality clause was systematically invoked as a shield against questions pertaining to contract details. Confidentiality clauses are a recurrent feature in large infrastructure projects funded by China. This must end, and the doctrine of public interest must prevail. In the case of Mauritius, institutions such as the parliament, the National Audit Office, and the media drew attention to the MSCP's underlying issues. However, even these institutions had limited success in piercing the triple armor of confidentiality, opacity, and impunity.

Last, the MSCP should serve as a cautionary tale for other countries contemplating similar projects. Sharing knowledge and experiences concerning Safe Cities is essential to bolstering democratic governance and combating malign and opaque practices in Africa and beyond.

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28 27 26 25 24 23 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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