

Zimbabwe: The politics of land and the political landscape

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Some progressives have celebrated Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe's designation of almost all white-owned commercial farms for redistribution to smallholders or black commercial farms as the delayed conclusion to the liberation struggle against settler colonialism.

Many others condemn the exercise and the land occupations which accompany it. Such critics point out the narrow political interests of the ruling Zimbabwe National African Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) — which pinned its recent electoral "successes" on the policy — and decry the politicised violence associated with it. They suggest that the program has limited economic sustainability given the lack of planning and the paucity of domestic and international resources directed towards it.

There is broad support for land redistribution in Zimbabwe, but this is in spite of, not because of, the ZANU-PF and its narrowly defined interests. For a genuine land reform program in Zimbabwe that benefits the people, not simply the country's elite, there is a need to move beyond both the simple anti-colonial nationalism of ZANU-PF and the managerial, modernising nationalism of the opposition Movement for Democratic (MDC) and its international supporters.

The position of Zimbabwe's approximately 300,000 men, women and children who worked on the 5500 or so predominantly white-owned commercial farms at the start of the land invasions in early 2000 illustrate this point.

Although the plight of farm workers is used by the international media and Western governments as a rhetorical stick with which to beat ZANU-PF's claims about land redistribution, the implications of their situation has rarely been drawn out in a way that shows the limitations of the alternatives proposed to ZANU-PF's so-called "fast track" land resettlement program.

'People of the soil'

"We went to register for land with the local war vets but they told us to go away. 'You support the whites. This land is not for you!', they told us. But all we do is work for the whites and as our jobs are disappearing, we are desperate'."

Shadrek, a middle-aged farm worker in Goromonzi district, raised a common refrain heard from many farm workers. With government statistics showing that, as of October 2001, only 1.7% of the households resettled during the previous 18 months were headed by a farm worker, the tens of thousands of workers retrenched or evicted from white-owned farms since the start of the invasions underscore Shadrek's anxieties.

The "fast-track land resettlement program", pitched as the final transfer of land from the *MaBhunu* ("Boers") to the *vanhu vevhu* ("people of the soil"), as President Mugabe often describes it, resonates with many anti-imperialist progressives around the world.

Their assumption is that, when it comes to land redistribution, the end of giving land back to the poor African masses justifies the means, which go against common values of democracy and human rights.

Yet as Shadrek's widely held sentiments suggest, the "people" or "African masses" are narrowly defined by ZANU-PF. Not only are many farm workers excluded from acquiring land, but so are many women, those identified as supporters of the MDC and many others discriminated against on other grounds by those who are distributing the land.

On the other hand, those who are acquiring land come from all classes and locations. Not only are landless peasants benefiting, but so are urban businessmen and senior government officials. Colonialism's legacy is being addressed, but to assume that the liberation of "the masses" is taking

place misunderstands what is happening on the ground and the anti-populist historical tendencies of Zimbabwe's rulers.

Land occupations are not new in Zimbabwe's 22 years of independence. What is new is that the ZANU-PF government is not, as they have done in the past, reacting with mass evictions, the burning down of homes built by those accused of "squatting", and the dumping of evictees on the side of the road with what belongings these "people of the soil" had managed to gather during the raid.

Knowing this history of the ZANU-PF government's heavy-handed removals of "squatters", many currently state-approved land occupiers and war veterans are quite uneasy. They fear that, if their presence is no longer needed politically by the ZANU-PF leaders in the near future, the police will be unleashed on them.

This, combined with limited government support to the new settlers, not only discourages the settlers to invest heavily in the "stand" they have been assigned on occupied commercial farms. It also dissuades those that have land rights elsewhere to give them up.

At the same time, there is an increasing number of people looking for land due to growing joblessness as Zimbabwe's economic crisis deepens, including by tens of thousands of evicted farm workers. A dramatically reduced rainfall throughout the country means that famine has become a real threat.

'Agro-industrial revolution'

But Shadrek's claims, like those of many other farm workers, are about being excluded, not about rejecting land redistribution in and of itself. It is here, in meeting the popular demand for land in the country in a comprehensively inclusive process, where the MDC and its national and international supporters flounder.

Their solution to the land inequities, sketchy as they tend to be, is to establish an independent land commission composed of relevant national stakeholders to come up with an equitable and economically sound land redistribution to the landless. This would rely on future Western donor funding and programs to provide the environment for such a scheme.

The MDC's (slim) policy on land adds that all smallholder farmers will get individual title as part of an "agro-industrial transformation program". As Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the MDC, declared at an election rally in Mutare in February, the MDC would stop "villagising" the whole country as the chaotic fast-track program is doing: "Mugabe wants to create peasants out of the whole country, killing the productive commercial sector that is supposed to produce for the country."

Such an invocation conjures up a tired formula: an image of a technocratic state that, after due consultation with appropriate "stakeholders", and with promised international financial support, will act as a midwife for a transformative modernisation, allowing the magic of freehold tenure to enable productive black farmers to increase their enterprises and to persuade unproductive farmers to sell their land and become full-time workers in expanding industries and other urban jobs.

This alluring yet deeply flawed image guided the colonial Southern Rhodesia state of the 1940s and 1950s and the post-colonial ZANU-PF state throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s. It is a disempowering, impoverished and impoverishing image. Aside from the reliance on a heavy-handed state to enforce the new property regime, which in turn generates new forms of resistance and legitimacy crises (note the Mugabe government's former aversion to "squatters"), African history is littered with examples of how land titling increases landlessness and poverty as the promised "industrial revolution" fails to materialise.

As for farm workers like Shadrek who want both land for security and some farming and a job, they would likely be disqualified from this "new" approach to modernisation on the grounds of lack of finance, ability or appropriate "development" outlook. They would be consigned instead to a future of only farm work, until another opportunity arises for land struggles.

That the MDC reiterates this exhausted formula being peddled by some of its well-wishers in Washington and London speaks to its own myopia when it comes to the land issue.

Other routes

One possible route out of these limited alternatives is to worry less about the "national level", with the aim of either redistributing land to the "people of the soil" or ensuring a productive modernised future, but to focus instead on localities. Cooperation and sharing are occurring between various land occupiers, and between some of them and commercial farmers in many places, though such bonds are often built on mutual suspicion and are highly susceptible to antagonism.

But they show that different models of land-ownership and resource-access are possible. Not all land invaders, let alone farm workers who also want land, wish white or black commercial farmers to disappear. They often want, instead, access to unutilised land, commercial farmers' expertise and access to a wider range of networks of resources, as well as better working conditions.

If a legitimate government can facilitate discussions in the various localities to reach agreement on such arrangements among all interested parties, including those such as farm workers and women who are typically excluded, then the current chaos can possibly lead to improved living conditions for many.

But the violence and discrimination against perceived enemies of the government needs to end to permit activist and civil society networks to emerge and operate freely in the countryside.

This would enable the promotion of alternatives to what Patrick Bond and Masimba Manyanya have called exhausted nationalism, and from history's trash-heap of failed "agro-industrial revolution" pipe-dreams.

Until then, the desperation cascading out of ZANU-PF's violent and narrowly political attempt to resolve its version of the land question will only increase, leading to grim conditions for countless Zimbabweans such as Shadrek.