

## **ROBERT MUGABE AND THE RULES OF THE GAME**

by  
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There is absolutely no doubt that the farm invasions in Zimbabwe, sanctioned and encouraged by Robert Mugabe since February this year, have reverberated strongly across the continent. In the eyes of some, mostly among the poor, they have helped him regain his status as liberator and champion of the oppressed, after a decade of competing unfavourably with the iconic Nelson Mandela. It matters not the slightest that Mugabe's motives were entirely selfish and centred on his own political survival, in which, at least in the short term and by the narrowest of margins, he has succeeded.

For the past 20 years everyone in Zimbabwe has agreed that there is need for further land reform. This includes the Commercial Farmers' Union, which after the recent election offered to surrender 200, then 400, then 600 farms to the government, on condition that 'the land reform and resettlement programme is carried out properly.' But that is all they are agreed on, and the CFU may well come to regret its two decades of blocking land reform whilst proclaiming its support for it.

To understand why the farm invasions in Zimbabwe have aroused so much fear, enthusiasm and Western media coverage, it is necessary to return to the years of the Cold War and to recall the often pathological Western fears that Africa might turn Communist. A line can be traced from the murder of Lumumba, through support for fascist Portugal's continued control of its colonies, support for Moi in Kenya and Savimbi in Angola, to the historic compromise with Robert Mugabe (and allies) in Lancaster House in 1979.

In this 'crucial capitulation' forced on him by Britain but also by Mozambique (which hosted his guerrilla army), Mugabe accepted the infamous 'willing seller, willing buyer' formula for land reform, trusting that the British would come forward with the generous funding they seemed to promise. Subsequent compromises (or capitulations) were signed by the liberation movements in Namibia and South Africa in the 1990s. In South Africa, existing property rights were - and are - protected in the new Constitution.

The essential point is that in effect these compromises justified, legalised and froze in time all that had gone before - a century of white land grabbing in Zimbabwe and Namibia, even longer in South Africa. In the course of this, millions of people were uprooted from their ancestral lands, often with deliberate cruelty, and always without being paid any compensation. Thus were the apartheid and land apportionment maps of Southern Africa drawn up. But, since 1980, the rules of the game as drawn up in the West (and subsequently endorsed by all donors) meant that this colonial *status quo* was legalised. A line was drawn under a past history of oppression, and to change it required in virtually all cases the 'willing consent' of those who were the beneficiaries of past expropriation. Ironically, the new governments brought stability and with it a rise in land prices, which made it more difficult for them to buy land for resettlement.

All this meant that the question of redistribution of land was never seriously addressed, despite liberation rhetoric about fighting for lost land and seeking to 'smash the system'.

Instead, we have witnessed tinkering at the edges and little more. This is for a variety of reasons, including the constraints mentioned earlier, but also because in Zimbabwe and Namibia significant numbers among the new ruling elite acquired land for themselves in various ways, and because - at least until very recently in Zimbabwe - politicians' attentions were more usually preoccupied with urban concerns, especially as the impact of structural adjustment programmes intensified. So the early enthusiasm for land reform soon waned and tended to be revived, cynically, only when there was an election to be fought (generally against very modest opposition).

In September 1998 Mugabe's government and a number of donors signed up to a new programme of land reform according to the old rules of the game. But this February, facing his most serious electoral threat since independence, Mugabe humiliatingly lost a referendum which would have further extended his already excessive powers and allowed him to expropriate farms - with the British being required to pay any compensation offered to dispossessed farmers. This unexpected rebuff precipitated the farm invasions by Chenjerai Hunzvi and his 'war veterans'. In encouraging this, Mugabe quite deliberately tore up the rules of the game, let the genie of redistribution out of the bottle, and reverted to the language of the liberation struggle and historical injustice and to scapegoating Britain, the former 'colonial master'. He was greatly aided in this by spectacular lack of diplomacy and historical understanding on the part of leading British diplomats. He also bypassed the narrow technical arguments (which opponents of land reform in Southern Africa have always had recourse to) and appealed in a language which - because the fundamental issues have not been seriously addressed - has not only had enormous popular appeal across Southern Africa and beyond, but also made a number of governments extremely nervous.

In a context in which the one thing which unites people across Southern Africa (and unites them against donors) is the need for redistribution, and in which the World Bank's Deputy Resident Representative in Zimbabwe argues forcefully that redistribution is good for growth, it seems that those Western interests, which not so long ago congratulated themselves on saving Southern Africa from Communism, need to fundamentally rethink their approach. By letting this genie out of the bottle Mugabe has concentrated people's minds in a way that nothing else has done. Whether the business is finished in the style preferred by Hunzvi and his war vets, or in the more orderly way favoured by technocrats, remains to be seen. What is certain is that most of the existing plans in the region are being urgently revised, as people hastily seek to learn lessons from the recent Zimbabwean experience.

It would be rash in the extreme to make any forecasts about the future in such a fast-moving scene as Zimbabwe in the year 2000. Opposition intellectuals like Brian Raftopoulos and Ibbo Mandaza's *The Mirror* have argued that the best thing would be for politicians to return the initiative to the technocrats to adopt the 1998 land reform programme, which is still notionally on the table. Yet there is nothing in his current rhetoric to suggest any such movement in Mugabe's position and it seems virtually certain that he will press ahead with his own brand of land redistribution. However, the fact that there is now for the first time a strong opposition in parliament might ensure that more transparent processes are adopted and that some safeguards are offered to farm workers. All this will confront donors with new and very difficult challenges. Should they simply wash their hands, stick to their post-1980 principles and walk away, or will they try to reflect on history (and their part in it) and on their own past mistakes, and seek imaginative new ways of re-engagement? Whatever happens in Zimbabwe, Mugabe has challenged and changed the rules of the game far beyond his borders.