

Contradictory Constructions of the Crisis in Zimbabwe*

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A striking aspect of Zimbabwe's crisis has been the struggle over its meaning within Zimbabwe, Africa and the wider world. Differences have split those who had been allied during the liberation struggle and have made odd bedfellows of former foes. Thus, Zimbabwe has become a site for intellectual, as well as political and material contestation.¹

The discussion has reopened questions about the legacy of the liberation struggle for contemporary politics and the issues of its "unfinished business", especially in the continuing racial imbalance in land ownership in southern Africa. A second central issue has been the question of democracy in Zimbabwe and the state's legitimacy, given the highly contested results of a series of elections (in 2000, 2002 and 2005) and the closing of space for opposition forces between, as well as within elections. A third important area of debate is over the significance of global pressures in creating the crisis.

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1. See S. Moyo and P. Yeros, "Land Occupations and Land Reform in Zimbabwe: Towards the National Democratic Revolution", in S. Moyo and P. Yeros (eds), *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (Zed Books, London, 2005), Chapter 7; D. Moore, "Marxism and Marxist Intellectuals in Schizophrenic Zimbabwe: How Many Rights for Zimbabwe's Left. A Comment", *Historical Materialism*, 12, 4, 2004, pp 405-425; B. Raftopolous and I. Phimister, "Zimbabwe Now: The Political Economy of Crisis and Coercion", *Historical Materialism*, 12, 4, 2004, pp 355-382; P. Yeros, "Zimbabwe and the Dilemmas of the Left", *Historical Materialism*, 10, 2, 2002, pp 3-15; P. Bond and M. Manyanya, *Zimbabwe's Plunge – Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice* (Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, 2002).

At least two major approaches have emerged: one largely supportive of the actions of the Zimbabwean government and the other profoundly opposed to it.

For one section of opinion, the previous decades since independence have been obliterated and Zimbabwe is once again battling neo-colonialism and imperialism. The past history of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) as a liberation movement and the continuity of revolutionary tradition have become sources of legitimation for the beleaguered government of Zimbabwe.²

For this camp, the key issue (indeed, the only issue) in understanding Zimbabwe's troubles, is the refusal of forces within and without Zimbabwe to accept the radical reform which has resulted in the transformation of commercial farmland ownership from white to African farmers.³ In this view, concern about the abuse of human, civil and political rights is merely a smokescreen to cover efforts to remove the current government in Zimbabwe and to restore old enemies to power. Those who find the behaviour of the current government unpalatable, are therefore regarded as part of a fresh imperialist project. From this point of view, the regime of President Robert Mugabe needs to be celebrated for completing an important task which had been integral to the liberation struggle.

A central proposition of the opposing view is that the current crisis is less about finishing the tasks of the liberation struggle than a reaction by the current government in Zimbabwe to the most serious challenge to its power since independence. In this view, the impetus for land reform was an opportunistic attempt by the ZANU (PF) government to regain popular favour. Accordingly, support for Mugabe represents a betrayal of mass public opinion in Zimbabwe and backing for a cruel regime riddled with venality and corruption.

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2. See T. Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: the Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2, June 2004, pp 215-234; B. Raftopolous, "Nation Race and History in Zimbabwean Politics", in B. Raftopolous and T. Savage (eds), *Zimbabwe: Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, 2005), pp 1-12.
 3. See, for example, S. Moyo, "The Politics of Land Distribution and Race Relations in Southern Africa", in R. Stavenhagen and Y. Bangura (eds), *Racism and Public Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005).

In total, the first approach puts the emphasis on external factors and regards the current regime in Zimbabwe, headed by President Mugabe, as a tribune of the South. The second focuses more on internal dynamics, the nature of the regime in power, and the governing party's refusal to accept the popular will.

Before assessing these two general approaches to the crisis, let us turn first to a synopsis of their contents.

Discourse 1: The Mugabe regime as a tribune of the South

The theoretical provenance of the first approach is almost entirely structuralist and historicist. As suggested above, it employs the grand narratives of anti-colonialism, imperialism and even socialism. These link the Zimbabwe of the present crisis to the struggle against white minority rule which ended with independence in 1980, and the larger struggle of the South against domination from the advanced industrial world. Therefore the explanation of the Zimbabwean crisis given by this approach comprises the five main dimensions discussed below.

Land reform is misconstrued by racist opponents

Land reforms are designed to end racial inequality in land ownership and to pave the way for redistribution in other sectors of the economy. Zimbabwean development had been blocked by the racial imbalance which, two decades after independence, saw a tiny number of white commercial farmers (about 3 700)⁴ still owning almost seventy per cent of prime farm-land, while nearly seven million African farmers in communal areas operated in conditions of extreme overcrowding and land shortage. The latter functioned in the driest regions and in areas with the country's worst soils, while the white-owned commercial farmers held vast tracts of unutilised, arable land.⁵

4. H. Bernstein, "Land Reform in World Historical Perspective", *Review of African Political Economy*, 30, 96, June 2003, p 224, footnote 25.

5. Gregory Elich claims that the percentage of underutilised land in large commercial farms averaged about 40 to 50 per cent in the regions with the best land, and 85 per cent where the land was less suitable for farming. G. Elich, "What the West Doesn't Want to Know – Zimbabwe's Fight for Justice", *Weekend Edition*, www.counterpunch.org, 7-8 May 2005.

Above all, land reforms rectify a major historical injustice. Zimbabweans are recapturing land which had been stolen from them during the process of white settlement from the 1890s right through to the 1960s. Hence there is no need to pay compensation for this land; only for improvements to farms.

Arguments that the land reform is responsible for the decline in agricultural production are premature at best, and untrue and racist at worst. While incomes may decline in the present, this is a necessary cost. Redistributing land will lay the basis for a more egalitarian income generation and distribution in the future.

Past difficulties which provide the larger context for the crisis are held to reside in neo-liberal structural adjustment policies which the government was persuaded to adopt by donors and international financial institutions in the early 1990s

According to this view, Zimbabwe has been punished for its refusal to continue with what the government believes to be counter-productive policies and for its inability to service its debts to international financial institutions fully. This set of policies included the standard recipe of downsizing the state, deregulation and liberalization. By the late 1990s, the government abandoned this approach when the results proved economically disappointing and politically disastrous.

The crisis is primarily the fault of Britain, and also of other Western powers

Western interests have imposed formal and informal sanctions on Zimbabwe and actively plot ways to unseat the Mugabe government. Western powers have prohibited ruling members of the regime from travelling to their countries and have frozen their financial assets. In addition, the USA passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA) in 2001, which opposes financial aid to Zimbabwe from multilateral financial institutions and excludes Zimbabwe from benefiting from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) facility. Since the beginning of the current crisis, Zimbabwe has also been subject to a donor and investor strike with aid frozen and lines of offshore credit cut – actions which the Zimbabwean government and its supporters consider to be a regime of “sanctions”. Therefore, Zimbabwe has been starved of foreign support as punishment for its confiscation of land from white farmers.

The rise of the opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), in 1999 represents the backlash of the wealthy white farming sector and its external supporters

The choice between the MDC and ZANU (PF) is thus a choice between the return of colonial domination or a continuation of rule by the party that brought Zimbabwe to independence. As Mugabe explained:

The MDC ... is immovably and implacably moored in the colonial yesteryear and embraces wittingly or unwittingly the repulsive ideology of return to white settler rule. MDC is as old and as strong as the forces that control it ... It is a counter revolutionary Trojan horse contrived and nurtured by the very inimical forces that enslaved and oppressed our people yesterday.⁶

Hence, in this view, the MDC does not have the right to take power even if it gains majority support. It constitutes an illegitimate, foreign, unAfrican and treasonous force. Attacks on MDC officials and supporters by ZANU (PF) are justified as a means to prevent the return of Zimbabwe to white rule and represent a continuation of the liberation struggle in the post-colonial period.

True patriots and citizens primarily are rural peasants

In this exclusive vision of citizenship, peasant backers of ZANU (PF), especially in the rural areas of Mashonaland, are considered to be the “true” citizens of Zimbabwe, while large groups of Zimbabweans – urban dwellers, farm workers and whites – are not regarded to be patriots. Their lack of authenticity can be seen in their support for the MDC. Didymus Mutasa, now Zimbabwe’s Minister for State Security, Land, Land Reform and Resettlement, went so far as to argue that “We would be better off with only six million people in Zimbabwe. They would be our own people who support the liberation struggle. We don’t want all these extra people.”⁷

6. Cited in Raftopolous, “Nation Race and History”, p 3.

7. Cited in T. Grundy, “Fury at Mbeki Failure to Rein in Mugabe”, *The Scotsman*, 19 June 2005.

Urban dwellers are considered to be deracinated, totemless⁸ and at the periphery of the liberation legacy. They have been characterized as “the ones who are leading the nation astray.” A government campaign in May to June 2005 to evict people who were living in informal settlements in and around urban areas, was termed Operation Marambatsvina. While presented as “Operation Restore Order”, the term’s literal translation is to “drive out the trash / rubbish”. The government has referred to these people as “filth” and maintains that this campaign was a bid to restore order, cleanliness, beauty and lawfulness to Zimbabwean cities. As Police Commissioner Augustine Chihuri put it, the Operation was meant to “clean the country of the crawling mass of maggots bent on destroying the economy”⁹

Farm workers are also considered not to be true Zimbabweans, as they are believed to be alien descendants of migrant workers from Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia.¹⁰ They therefore do not qualify for full citizenship or rights to land.

In expressing an intention to evict any remaining white farmers in September 2005, Mutasa said the government wanted to “rid the country of the white community”.¹¹ White farmers were “dirty and should be cleared out,” he added. “They are similar to the filth that was in the streets before Operation Murambatsvina”.

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8. To be called “totemless” is an insult, meaning one has no father to look up to for guidance and no genealogy. On a trip to Rome in June 2002, Mugabe told Zimbabweans there: “*Ndiko kune mitupo kumaruwa. Mitupo iri muBulawayo ndeipi? Mitupo irimuHarare ndeipi?*” (“What totems exist in Harare and Bulawayo? Totems are only found in rural areas.”) Cited in “Editor’s Memo”, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 28 June 2002.
 9. Cited in P. Ncube, R. Bate and R. Tren, “State in Fear: Zimbabwe’s Tragedy is Africa’s Shame”, *Africa Fighting Malaria*, 6 July 2005, p 2.
 10. In fact, only 26 per cent of farm workers are not Zimbabwean in origin. L.M. Sachikonye, “The Situation of Commercial Farm Workers after Land Reform in Zimbabwe - A Report Prepared for the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe”, (CIIR, London, May 2003), pp 57-58.
 11. Cited in G. Mutimba, “Mutasa Threatens to Evict all White Farmers”, *Zimbabwe Standard*, 18 September 2005.

Discourse 2: Internal dynamics of power explain difficulties

The second school of thought emerged most powerfully towards the end of the 1990s (especially after 1997) as socio-economic difficulties, political repression and corruption mounted. This understanding of the current state of affairs in Zimbabwe is based on the five principal propositions discussed below.

External forces, especially international financial institutions and Britain, are not primarily responsible for the current state of Zimbabwe

One part of the opposition in Zimbabwe (excluding trade unions and some civil society groups, but including the independent press, key economic advisers to the MDC and the private sector) supports the neo-liberal policies dominant in northern countries and in international financial institutions. They would return Zimbabwe to what they regard as “economic fundamentals”. According to this view, the problems of the 1990s arose from a failure of the government to fully implement the reforms promoted by the international financial institutions.

The crisis in Zimbabwe is a product of the Mugabe regime’s attempts to shore up an eroding power base

By the end of the 1990s, disaffection had produced strong opposition within civil society and a new political party, the MDC. The defeat of the government in a referendum over a proposed constitutional reform in February 2000 precipitated the government’s attempt to regain lost ground. Subsequently, the Zimbabwean government rigged three elections in a bid to stay in power. In the process, it violated most norms laid down in regional (the Southern African Development Community), continental (the African Union) and global agreements specifying internationally accepted criteria for human, as well as political rights and governance.

ZANU (PF)’s struggle to stay in power has produced an extreme non-liberal form of politics which has become highly abusive

Legislation now prohibits basic freedoms of the press, of association, and of dissent. Above all, the current government has removed the concept of impartiality before the law and abandoned the notion of separation of

powers. Recent constitutional amendments prevent recourse to the law when land is seized and allows the government to seize passports of citizens suspected of undermining the national interest during their travels.

The government (1) has tightened control so that all institutions of the state are meant to serve only the ruling political party; (2) has militarized the state, putting retired military figures into key positions and creating paramilitary forces drawn from the “war veterans” and the youth militia; and (3) has developed a politics of exclusion which denies full citizenship to those who do not support ZANU (PF).

Land reform has primarily had a political agenda

According to this view, land reform should be understood less as the equitable transfer of land from a small class of white commercial farmers to land-poor farmers from the communal areas, and more as a tool in service of a regime and a president whose power has rested, to no small degree, on patronage. Proof that the land reform had a largely political agenda, can be seen in its timing (it was driven primarily by electoral considerations), its reckless and hasty imposition (without a well-considered and sustainable agricultural strategy), and the resulting decline in agricultural production. One must remember that the state had vast tracts of land which it had not distributed before it started the land reform.

The crisis has produced the “Zairisation” of Zimbabwe

As the formal economy collapses, this school points to what they consider to be wholesale looting not only of the white commercial farming sector, but also of state assets by an ultra-corrupt elite. In this period, fortunes have been made by a parasitic class of Zimbabweans located primarily in the civil service and ruling political party, while the vast majority lead a perilous existence, lacking even the basics. The expensive military intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo brought benefits to a few key individuals, but not to the country as a whole. From the point of view of this school, ZANU (PF) has overstayed its welcome in power and has become incompetent, repressive and corrupt.

An assessment of the competing claims of this discourse

The question of external responsibility for the Zimbabwean crisis

One may agree with erstwhile allies about part of their argument. In the first place it is clear that the policies pushed on Zimbabwe in the late 1980s and 1990s by external forces such as international financial institutions and other donors, set the stage for the tragedy which has unfolded.

The government had hoped to find a way to accelerate growth, to break through the foreign exchange earnings constraint, to fund social services and, above all, to employ the hundreds of thousands of secondary school leavers entering the job market. With two recessions in the 1980s, high government deficits, an overvalued currency, and restrictive access to industrial inputs, there was strong pressure to remedy these problems through structural adjustment programmes.¹²

However, the neo-liberal policies of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) did not deliver significantly in the areas of growth and investment, and the trade deficit exploded.¹³ As Patrick Bond indicates, inflation averaged more than 30 per cent during the period of adjustment from 1991 to 1995.¹⁴ Total manufacturing output fell by 24 per cent in the 1990s as deindustrialization ravaged the textile, metal, transport, equipment and clothing subsectors.¹⁵ From 1991 to 1996, foreign debt rose as a percentage of the gross domestic product from 8,4 to 21,8 per cent.¹⁶

Significantly, the deterioration of living standards (with the sharp reduction in real wages¹⁷ and new cost recovery policies in health,

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12. P. Carmody and S. Taylor, "Industry and the Urban Sector in Zimbabwe's Political Economy", *African Studies Quarterly*, 7, 2 & 3, November 2003.
 13. P. Bond, "Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis: Outwards vs. Inwards Development Strategy for Post-Nationalist Zimbabwe", *Labour, Capital and Society*, 33, 2, November 2000, pp 173-182.
 14. Bond, "Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis", p 175.
 15. Bond, "Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis", p 176.
 16. Bond, "Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis", p 180.
 17. As Phimister and Raftopolous point out, the indicators included: a decline in real wages from an index of 122 in 1982 to 88 in 1997; a drop in the share of real wages in the gross national income from 54 per cent in 1987 to 39 per cent in 1997; and the figure of households living in poverty increased from 61 per cent in 1995 to 75 per cent in 2000 – "Zimbabwe Now", p 3. Carmody and Taylor add that the World Bank regarded reduced real wages as a "brutal but

education and other social services), as well as the growing population of unemployed, literate youth, provided fertile grounds for opposition politics. Riots against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) broke out in high-density suburbs in 1993 and in the city centre of Harare in 1995. Public sector workers went on strike in 1996, followed by private sector employees in 1997, a general strike in 1997, and a mass stayaway in 1998. Yet in precisely this period, the IMF insisted that Zimbabwe should reverse the imposition of a luxury import tax and abandon price controls on staple foods.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, the Mugabe regime became increasingly frustrated at its inability to sustain reforms which it had put in place in the 1980s (especially increases in social sector funding). It became all too obvious that, as standards of living started to crash, the regime's ability to retain popular support was open to question. Senior ministers within the government came to view their adoption of neo-liberal policies as their greatest mistake. No wonder that many in Zimbabwe see this crisis through the lens of their relations with the international financial institutions. Clearly, external forces set the stage for the desperate struggle which the Mugabe regime then launched to stay in power.¹⁹

Secondly, however, the focus on the external input of Britain seems more a displacement of responsibility, rather than an accurate portrayal of events. It stretches credulity to accept Mugabe's insistence on the nature and extent of British sabotage of his regime.

To be sure, Britain's handling of the Zimbabwe crisis, especially in the early years, was inept.²⁰ Two British ministers, Claire Short and Peter Hain, in particular acted in ways that inflamed and aggravated difficulties between the two countries.

On the central issue of British promises to fund land reform in Zimbabwe at the Lancaster House conference preceding independence, the

necessary" adjustment to generate export-led growth. "Industry and the Urban Sector".

18. Bond, "Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis", p 183.
19. However, while the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) severely undermined Zimbabwe's industrial base, "the corrupt and capricious policies, wrapped in a radical populist guise, pursued by Mugabe and ZANU after 1997 substantially finished the job." Carmody and Taylor, "Industry and the Urban Sector".
20. See D. Blair, *Degrees in Violence – Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe* (Continuum, London, 2002), pp 132-138.

evidence is mixed. British government representatives deny that Britain ever agreed to take sole responsibility for funding land reform. Instead, the pledge was to donate funds, and to galvanise other donors. Since independence, the British government has provided R570-million for land reform and more than R6-billion in bilateral support.²¹ Once the crisis began to cause shortages of food supplies in Zimbabwe, Britain gave more than R940-million in food aid.

Yet there is no question that the British government reneged on further funding for land reform in the late 1990s. In 1997, in her capacity as Secretary of State for International Development, Short wrote to the Zimbabwean Minister of Agriculture stating that the election of a Labour government “without links to colonial interests” meant that Britain no longer had a “special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchases” in Zimbabwe.

In the following years, British officials made clear that their government’s primary concern was poverty reduction and hence assisting poorer Zimbabwean farmers rather than “cronies” of the Zimbabwean government. At that point, relations deteriorated as the Zimbabwean government became irritated by the British government’s emphasis on governance and its attempted involvement in the determination of beneficiaries of land reform.

Anti-imperialism and Zimbabwean nationalism

As we have seen, in his battle with the West, Mugabe has used nationalism and pan-Africanism to win support from the region and the continent, as well as a wide swathe of African public opinion.²²

The reasons for his success may not be too hard to find. This is a region and a continent force-fed on an economic agenda during the last 25 years which has produced widespread global impoverishment and inequality. African economies and societies have directly experienced a policing of internal economic policy through structural adjustment programmes which have been more draconian and severe than even experienced in colonial times. The return in the last years to an overt

21. “The Facts”, Letter from Nick Sheppard, British High Commission in Pretoria to *Business Day*, 7 May 2004.

22. See I. Phimister and B. Raftopolous, “Mugabe, Mbeki and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 31, 101, September 2004, pp 385-400.

imperial role by the United States of America and Britain in the Middle East has only strengthened the reaction against Northern dominance. For some, a “resurgent nationalism represents a necessary defensive stance in the face of the New Imperialism, an abrasive face towards the global bully.”²³

However, while one can agree that the IFIs and the West bear part of the responsibility for the crisis in Zimbabwe, they do not provide an excuse for much of what has transpired. One can not help noting that “the “imperialist” card, like the “racist” card, has been played to great effect by Mugabe and his ministers whenever politically expedient.”²⁴ Certainly, the rhetoric of nationalism and anti-imperialism helps obscure growing class divisions and inequalities within Zimbabwe itself.²⁵ Moreover, “the nationalism that presents itself as the nation’s shield” involves at the same time “the suffocating embrace of murderous regimes”.²⁶ As Brian Raftopolous observes, the task is to develop an anti-imperialist critique and practice that builds more democratic political spaces at home, as well as challenging the ravages of the new imperialism.²⁷

Racism and opposition in Zimbabwe

In terms of the claim that opposition to the current Zimbabwean regime and its policies is a product of racist attitudes, there is no question that the plight of white farmers attracted international attention and strong reactions from the Western press and Western governments. By comparison, human rights abuses and electoral tampering elsewhere in Africa have gone unremarked. Even worse was the virtual silence of many Western countries during the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which saw 3 to 5 million people killed and many more millions displaced, not to mention the ineffectual Western response to the genocide in Rwanda and now Darfur.

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23. B. Raftopolous, “The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Challenges for the Left”, public lecture delivered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 23 June 2005, p 18.
 24. See D. Pillay, “Playing the ‘Imperialist’ Card has cast a Spell on Mugabe’s Critics”, *Sunday Times* [South Africa], 26 October 2003.
 25. R. Southall, “Democracy in Southern Africa: Moving Beyond a Difficult Legacy”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 30, 96, June 2003, p 258.
 26. Raftopolous, “The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Challenges for the Left”, p 18.
 27. Raftopolous, “The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Challenges for the Left”, p 14.

That said, the government in Zimbabwe itself has operated on a racial basis – targeting farmers, primarily (but not exclusively) on the grounds of race. Most of the large scale white commercial farmers were not descendants of original colonial settlers – fully 80 per cent of farmers had not “inherited” farms and only 5 per cent came from pioneer stock.²⁸ About 70 per cent of commercial farm deeds had changed hands in the first two decades of independence.²⁹

Moreover, the overwhelming majority had purchased their land with formal assurances of no interest from the ZANU (PF) government. These purchases could only be made after the government had waived its right of first refusal on all large scale commercial farms land sales under the 1985 Land Acquisition Act. In 1992, amendments introduced a Certificate of No Present Interest (CONPI), which allowed the government to purchase previously offered land when funds came available. In any case, these assurances were brushed aside once the fast track land reform began in earnest.

Proponents of the first discourse have argued that receiving stolen property, innocently or not, gives you no claim on it and no claim to compensation for your losses under the law. According to this opinion, the racial targeting of land reform was a necessary corrective to the enormous imbalance in land ownership.

However, given the government’s prior assurances under its own legislation, this position involves historical revisionism and a rewriting of the rules.³⁰ Moreover, had the Zimbabwean government wanted to undertake serious, well-considered land reform, other options were available. Certainly, there were possibilities of funding land purchases for Zimbabweans from taxes on the white commercial farming sector and

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28. This information comes from British scholar Angus Selby in a private communication with the author by e-mail, 1 November 2004. His data comes from the Commercial Farmers Union and includes an estimate for the small proportion of CFU non-members. He cautions that these figures are based on CFU membership registration records and that an accurate figure is difficult to ascertain, as many farms were sold between companies or partnerships for tax reasons and many large farmers expanded their holdings considerably during both phases.
 29. Angus Selby using data from the Commercial Farmers Union, private communication, 1 November 2004.
 30. For a strong rebuttal of the government’s arguments justifying land seizures, see W. Shaw, “‘They Stole our Land’: Debating the Expropriation of White Farms in Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41, 1, March 2003, pp 75-89.

especially on underutilized land or, as researcher Angus Selby suggests, a tobacco levy which could have been matched by Britain and other donors.³¹ Others like Mary Ndlovu have observed that “if ZANU PF had been prepared to genuinely engage the CFU in the early 80s to work out a strategy it would have been possible, by a combination of subdivision and compensation, and subsidised purchase prices for black farmers.” Donors would have helped.³²

At any rate, for most of the first two decades of independence, especially after 1984, the government seemed not to have been interested in a serious programme of land reform, and actively discouraged land occupations by squatters.³³ From 1997 on, things changed when war veterans and a wide variety of groups within civil society began to agitate for a more radical land reform. After the government’s defeat in the constitutional referendum in 2000 and with the growing power of the MDC, Mugabe made no secret of his feeling that the white community had betrayed and abandoned him. The deep-seated resentment within Zimbabwe about the continuing racial imbalance in land ownership provided him with the tinder to move against them. Therefore, although there were genuine issues of injustice in the distribution of land ownership, the alliance between the government and white agricultural capital was abandoned more for contemporary than historical reasons.

At the same time, the issue of racism has had a crucially important second dimension – the reality is that it is the opposition to the regime, not the purported racist prejudice of a tiny white minority (some estimate as few as 30 000 now out of a total population of 11 to 12 million) and their external supporters that the government finds unacceptable. The membership of the coalition within civil society and the MDC is primarily black, as is the independent press and most of the judiciary.

While the beneficiaries of the land reform are black, the overwhelming majority of victims of the land reform have also been black. These included 350 000 farm workers and their families (a total of about 2 million people) of whom about two-thirds to three-quarters were left jobless, homeless and destitute.³⁴ As the land reform progressed,

31. Private communication, 1 November 2004.

32. Private communication, 2 November 2004.

33. See S. Moyo, “The Land and Agrarian Question in Africa: the Case of Zimbabwe”, draft paper, University of Fort Hare, 25 September 2004, pp 8-11.

34. Farm workers were marginalised in the process of redistribution. Figures vary, but less than 3 per cent and possibly as few as 0,1 per cent of farm workers were given land in the land reform process. T. Neil, “Labour and Union Issues

another 30 000 to 35 000 black settlers were pushed off farms in favour of more elite interests.

The crackdown in May to June 2005 against the informal sector and the removal of residents from backyard shacks targeted the poorest urban black Zimbabweans.³⁵ In this case, 46 000 vendors were arrested with estimates ranging up to a million made homeless and destitute in mid-winter. Before the blitz, the informal sector supported about 3 million black Zimbabweans.³⁶ No less than 300 000 African children affected by this blitz were forced to drop out of school, though many have now returned.³⁷ In the opinion of many observers, these actions were directly related to the support which the urban areas have consistently given to the MDC and a desire to bring the informal economy under state control.

The issue of the “progressive” or “socialist” nature of the current Zimbabwean state

It is also hard to accept (as some on the left would have it) that the approach taken by the Zimbabwean government in the period since 1997 is “progressive” or “socialist”.

In terms of the socialist nature of the Zimbabwean state, there are a few points to substantiate this claim. In the first place, it can be argued that, generally, the government has believed in strong state intervention and has not permitted the free reign of market forces. Price controls, managed exchange rates, a monopoly over the sale of grain, and a myriad of government regulations direct key economic decisions. State-owned parastatals control the railways and airlines, commercial transport, telecommunications, mining and steel sectors. The government’s fiscal policy has involved high taxation and a commandeering of the assets of the domestic banking system to allow extensive state spending.³⁸

in the Zimbabwean Agricultural Sector in 2004”, PhD thesis, 2004, pp 15, 35. See also A. Hartnack, “‘My Life Got Lost’: Farm Workers and Displacement in Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 23, 2, May 2005, pp 173-192.

35. It also offered the possibility of replacing medium and small scale businesses which had been destroyed with ZANU (PF) clients particularly among the youth militia.
36. “‘Tsunami’ Hits Informal Sector”, *Zimbabwe Standard*, 26 June 2005.
37. “300 000 Children Drop Out of Schools in Crackdown”, *Zimbabwe Online*, 18 June 2005.
38. E.A. Brett, “Political Victories and Economic Defeats – Managing the Post-

Secondly, there is no question that the land reform served the principle of redistributive justice and opened the possibility of advance.³⁹ In the A-1 part of the land reform (the scheme for small farmers) which constitutes 66 per cent of the total land redistributed⁴⁰, 87 per cent of the beneficiaries were the rural poor, including communal area farmers, the urban poor and a few former farm workers.⁴¹ In addition, for some, land reform may have provided significant gains for the broader democratisation process. Sam Moyo has argued that the process of land occupation has created space for greater awareness and participation by rural people in social struggles hitherto dominated by formal state structures and urban civil society organisations.⁴²

Yet progressive and socialist policies have within them fundamental notions of popular control and popular benefit. On the issue of popular control, the state (and especially the army), rather than mass action at the base, was the principal driving force animating land invasions from 2000 on.⁴³ The state played a significant role in organising, animating, funding and transporting prospective settlers in the land invasions. While settlers and war veterans may have taken the initiative in certain areas, they were responding to signals from the state and assisted by state institutions.

In other respects, the state in Zimbabwe, with its extreme abuse of human, civil and political rights, has operated in ways characteristic of a quasi-fascist, rather than a socialist state. Carte blanche has been given to paramilitary forces (the youth militia and “war veterans”); national security forces (police and military) have been pressed into direct service for the ruling political party; and Zimbabwean institutions have been militarized and transformed into partisan bodies.

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- Election Crisis in Zimbabwe”, unpublished paper, London School of Economics, May 2005.
39. Although he heavily qualifies his conclusion, Henry Bernstein regards the land redistribution in Zimbabwe as a “progressive” expression of a (new) agrarian question of labour and an advance. See H. Bernstein, “Land Reform in World Historical Perspective”, pp 220-221.
 40. “Report of the Presidential Land Review Committee on the Implementation of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, 2000-2002 (‘The Utete Report’), Zimbabwe, August 2003, p 5.
 41. Moyo, “Land and Agrarian Question in Africa”, pp 26-27.
 42. S. Moyo, “The Land Occupation Movement in Zimbabwe: Contradictions of Neo-liberalism”, *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 30, 2, p 330.
 43. See Sachikonye, “The Situation of Commercial Farm Workers”, pp 35-40; Moore, “Marxism and Marxist Intellectuals”, pp 418-420. For a contrary view, see Moyo and Yeros, “Land Occupations and Land Reform in Zimbabwe”.

While some writers on the left⁴⁴ have downplayed questions of civil and political rights as liberal bourgeois concepts that do not come to grips with material inequality, the lack of rights in Zimbabwe has not led to a more egalitarian society either. Indeed, on the issue of popular benefit, one sees an idealism in the Mugabe regime's blithe disregard for the sobering material realities of most Zimbabweans that would have done most European aristocracies proud. The blatant enrichment of a tiny urban elite and their clients in this period sits uneasily with the socialist claim.

Certainly the urban working class of Zimbabwe – suffering levels of unemployment and poverty which range from 70 to 80 per cent – have not been beneficiaries of the current changes. Declining real wages and a deterioration of the social wage have meant that even those with jobs have suffered.⁴⁵ The enforced exodus of the poorest urban Zimbabweans in the winter of 2005 reflects a brutal, indeed genocidal, indifference to popular welfare as has the government's moves to destroy food crops in urban areas. Overall, the human development index has dropped below what it was in 1975.⁴⁶

In terms of the land reform, while the interests of sections of black capital may have been served, especially those acquiring multiple farms,⁴⁷ it is still an open question about the extent to which the peasantry has benefited. Not counting the removal of small black farmers from the land on which they had settled after 2000, the redistributive aspect has been significantly smaller than anticipated. By November 2003, the number of farmers receiving land (130 000 small farmers and 20 000 large farmers⁴⁸) was considerably less than the 300 000 peasant farmers and 54 000 commercial farmers originally claimed by the state media. Even more significantly, the reform has not alleviated overcrowding on communal lands. While estimates vary from province to province, at a

44. Yeros, "Zimbabwe and the Dilemmas of the Left"; Moyo and Yeros, "Land Occupations and Land Reform in Zimbabwe".

45. Zimbabwe's legislation makes it almost impossible for workers to launch a legal strike. Strangely, in terms of the socialist claim, workers are taxed at a rate of 45 per cent, while companies are taxed at only 30 per cent. "Chaibva Lashes Out at Gono", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 30 July 2004.

46. M. Ndlovu, "Zimbabwe's March – the Struggle Continues", *Pambazuka*, 199, 24 March 2005.

47. Moyo found that about 400 influential individuals had been allocated more than one A2 plot, while about 145 black and white farmers still owned multiple farms which were acquired on the open markets. "Land and Agrarian Question in Africa", p 26.

48. Moyo, "Land and Agrarian Question in Africa", p 25.

national level, a rate of only 10 per cent decongestion has been achieved.⁴⁹ Overall, at least 75 per cent of Zimbabweans still live in rural areas with limited farming land.

Moreover, the lack of state support in infrastructure and services to small farmers who had been resettled, meant that much of the reform initiative was stillborn. Government resources have been focused disproportionately on the larger farms in the A-2 scheme. During the land reform, the communal areas were largely forgotten, with inadequate resource transfers from the state and no indication of planning for their rehabilitation.⁵⁰

There remains the question of whether this period in Zimbabwe, with all its chaos and disruption, is but an early phase of primitive accumulation out of which a new capitalist class will emerge to transform the productive base of the economy.

So far, there is little to indicate such trends.⁵¹ The elite which has emerged, while prone to conspicuous consumption, has not on the whole been productive.⁵² As David Moore points out, its base is in trade and rent-seeking at best, speculation and crime at worst.⁵³ Asset stripping seems to be more typical than wealth creation. In the agricultural sector, although a good cross-section of the elite have multiple farms, many are absentee or weekend farmers. In a telling admission in 2005, Mugabe lamented on state television that only 44 per cent of the land allocated to commercial farmers was being fully utilized.⁵⁴

There is no indication either that labour is being used more progressively, with absolute surplus value (the increased exploitation of labour) being transformed into relative surplus value (the more productive

49. Moyo, "Land and Agrarian Question in Africa", p 30.

50. L. Sachikonye, "Land Reform – Presentation & Group Discussion", unpublished minutes of meeting, p 12.

51. See, for example, R. Davies, "Memories of Underdevelopment: A Personal Interpretation of Zimbabwe's Economic Decline", in B. Raftopolous and T. Savage (eds), *Zimbabwe: Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Weaver Press, Harare, 2005), pp 19-42.

52. At any rate, the state under Mugabe's ZANU (PF) has always expressed ambivalence about a successful autonomous capitalist class, giving short shrift to figures like Econet's Strive Masiyiwa or confiscating the properties of those who fall out of favour as in the case of Mutumwa Mawere.

53. Moore, "Marxism and Marxist Intellectuals", p 406.

54. "Mugabe 'Disappointed' by New Black Farmers", *Independent Online (IOL)*, 1 March 2005.

use of labour).⁵⁵ Reports indicate that wages and working conditions for agricultural workers on farms owned by black agricultural capital are worse than in the days of white commercial agriculture, as are employer-employee relations.⁵⁶ Most are now casual, rather than full-time workers, and are paid on the basis of piece work.⁵⁷ Labour in both rural and urban areas is more vulnerable in the current period than at any time since independence

This leaves the question of the progressive potential within ZANU (PF); and here the work of John Saul remains prescient. In an early and controversial article,⁵⁸ Saul emphasised the ways in which “petty-bourgeois politicking” – the jockeying for position within and between Zimbabwean liberation movements based on factionalism and personality and the instrumentalism of ethnic issues – had forestalled the deepening of the revolutionary project.

At the time of Zimbabwean independence, he wrote cautiously of Mugabe “cast ... in the role of Sphinx, guarding his options and seeming deliberately to muddy the ideological waters”, and warned the left against “waiting for Mugabe”.⁵⁹ While he looked at the prospects for Zimbabwe moving beyond “primitive” or bourgeois nationalism to a more revolutionary nationalism (defined as realizing the interests of the people as a whole, rather than the interests of a small group), he noted that “considerable controversy swirls around the question ... of just what kind of promise of continued forward movement ZANU has to offer”.⁶⁰

In the current period of crisis in Zimbabwe, one finds a deepening of the pathology foreshadowed by this analysis – the intense petty-bourgeois politicking as rivals battle to succeed Mugabe, and Mugabe

55. Davies, “Memories of Underdevelopment”.

56. The lowest paid farm worker (A1) gets Zim\$450 000, a mere 5 per cent of what the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe says a family of six now requires to live a normal life. Even so, payment of wages is erratic. C. Chimhete, “New Farmers Accused of Neglecting Workers”, *Zimbabwe Standard*, 9 October 2005. See also Sachikonye, “The Situation of Commercial Farm Workers”, p 45; Moyo, “Land and Agrarian Question in Africa”, p 34.

57. Neil, “Labour and Union Issues”, p 34.

58. J. Saul, “Transforming the Struggle in Zimbabwe”, *Southern Africa*, February 1977 reprinted in J.S. Saul, *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa* (Monthly Review Press and Heinemann Educational Books, New York and London, 1979), Chapter 5.

59. J.S. Saul, “Zimbabwe: The Next Round”, *Monthly Review*, 32, 4, September 1980, p 38.

60. Saul, “Zimbabwe: The Next Round”, p 34.

(still the Sphinx) guarding his options and muddying the ideological waters.

The sombre dénouement of post-colonial, post-liberation politics

A central question that this case opens for us is a familiar Orwellian one, namely why do “revolutionaries” come to look like their opponents in all too short a time? Why, in a macabre and eerie way, have the laws and actions of the Mugabe regime taken on the characteristics (where they have not actually exceeded those) of the government of Ian Smith?⁶¹

In this case, the historical legacy of the war for liberation provides an important part of the answer – especially in the inculcation on both sides of authoritarian patterns of rule and undemocratic practices. Armed liberation struggles did not provide the experience or habits which would help foster democratic systems of governance after independence, accept the legitimacy of an opposition or promote respect for human rights. The colonial states which liberation movements moved into had also been militarized in the war against black majority rule. Thus, when liberation from white minority rule finally came in Zimbabwe, it did not usher in the substance of a democratic culture. Instead, its vision was the one-party state.⁶²

Hence, to understand the roots of the Zimbabwean crisis, one must reject the monopolization of the historical narrative represented by “patriotic history”. In this school of thought, the record has been simplified, “rendered in terms that portray an unequivocal and linear advance towards triumph. History is cleansed of failure, ambivalence and blemish.”⁶³ Instead, one must go back to interrogate the myths, legends and historical record of the liberation movements both during the periods of struggle and also during their period in power. After all, the darker

61. Zibani Maundeni argues that, in fact, “the postcolonial state elite (in Zimbabwe) inherited the precolonial state culture that generated factionalised state elites, a culture that was built around large and undisciplined armies that were composed of poor people who served the purposes of dispossessing the rich classes and enriching a few members of the state elite.” See his “Why the African Renaissance is Likely to Fail: The Case of Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 22, 2, May 2004, p 208.

62. See Southall, “Democracy in Southern Africa”, pp 255-272.

63. H. Marais, *South Africa – Limits to Change* (Zed and University of Cape Town, London and Cape Town, 1998), p 7. See also Raftopolous and Phimister, “Zimbabwe Now”, p 20.

shadows of the internecine battles within ZANU during the 1970s⁶⁴ were followed by the repressive horrors of the *gukurahundi* in Matabeleland⁶⁵ and a record of rigid intolerance to opposition forces in the post-independence period.⁶⁶ Ironically, even the insistence on unity as a prerequisite for national development led to an early intolerance of those who raised questions of human rights, the rule of law and good governance.⁶⁷

So what is left for a more hopeful future?

In the current conjuncture, with the polarization in Zimbabwe between a tiny elite and the impoverished majority, the promise of forward movement seems heavily mortgaged. The failure of the land reform to transform the lives of the rural majority removes one of the last potential avenues for hope. The deliberate pauperization of the urban poor has eliminated safety nets for those trying to survive in hard times. In total, the degeneration of the Zimbabwean state into a repressive, military apparatus and the dramatic collapse of the economy has minimized the prospects for change in the immediate short-term.

However, it is also clear that the current regime in Zimbabwe is running out of options. As E.A. Brett points out, the government's need to provide benefits to its various constituencies – the political elites that control the party apparatus, the traditional chiefs who control the rural areas, the soldiers, police, youth militia and war veterans who are used to repress dissent, not to mention the general population who depend on its economic and social services – has forced it to print more and more money, producing an inflationary spiral that is now virtually out of control.⁶⁸ With the crunch in the period following the election of 2005, fewer supporters will have access to benefits. Barring significant infusions of capital from sympathetic countries like South Africa, access

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64. See L. White, *The Assassination of Herbert Chitepo – Texts and Politics in Zimbabwe* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2003).
 65. *Breaking the Silence Building True Peace – A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988* (The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and The Legal Resources Foundation, Harare, 1997).
 66. See N. Kriger, “ZANU(PF) Strategies in General Elections, 1980–2000: Discourse and Coercion”, *African Affairs*, 104, 414, January 2005, pp 1-34.
 67. See B. Kagoro, “The Opposition and Civil Society”, in R. Cornwell (ed), *Zimbabwe's Turmoil: Problems and Prospects*, Institute for Security Studies, 17 June 2003.
 68. Brett, “Political Victories and Immediate Defeats”.

to significant levels of foreign support will not be possible until Mugabe goes.

The broad coalition of opposition forces which emerged in Zimbabwe – battered, bruised, divided and disoriented though it may be by government repression and a series of rigged elections – held and may still hold within it the promise of a different phase in the political life of the country and the region. As Joe Hanlon argues, it might be more appropriate to use the term *Chimurenga*⁶⁹ for this phenomenon – not as the government does to describe the initiatives it has taken since 2000, especially in land reform, but more to refer to the emergence of the next generation of political leaders no longer prepared to accept the negative side of rulers like Mugabe and his comrades, who came to power with independence at the end of a liberation struggle.

Beyond this goal, however, the purpose of such new groupings is not clear. With such a wide array of forces assembled under the umbrella of dissent, the struggle over political direction will only begin with their success. A great weakness has been their failure to link up in a meaningful way with the land question and with rural struggles. As Raftopolous notes: “The challenge of developing a broad citizenship rights politics across rural and urban areas remains immense.”⁷⁰

At any rate, at writing, the repressive efforts of the state have contained this promise, for the time being, the old forces of liberation have triumphed over the new. The era of post-liberation politics in southern Africa remains firmly rooted in the past, belying the promise of an African Renaissance and a new beginning.

69. *Chimurenga* is a Shona word meaning struggle. The “First Chimurenga” refers to the early resistance to British colonialism in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century and the “Second Chimurenga” to the national liberation struggle against the Rhodesian regime in the 1960s and 1970s.

70. Raftopolous, “The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Challenges for the Left”, p 17.

Abstract

A striking aspect of the Zimbabwean crisis has been the struggle over its meaning within Zimbabwe, Africa and the wider world. The discussion has reopened questions about the legacy of the liberation struggle for contemporary politics and the issues of its “unfinished business”, especially in the continuing racial imbalance in land ownership in southern Africa. A second issue has been the question of democracy in Zimbabwe and the state’s legitimacy given highly contested results in a series of elections (in 2000, 2002 and 2005) and the closing of space for opposition forces between, as well as within elections. A third important area of debate is over the significance of global pressures in creating the crisis.

At least two major approaches have emerged – one largely supportive of the actions of the Zimbabwean government and the other profoundly opposed to it. For one section of opinion, the key issue in understanding Zimbabwe’s troubles, is the refusal of forces within and without Zimbabwe to accept the radical reform which has resulted in the transformation of commercial farmland from white to African farmers. A central proposition of the opposing view is that the current crisis is less about finishing the tasks of the liberation struggle through the land reform, than a reaction by the current government in Zimbabwe to the most serious challenge to its power since independence. This study will attempt to assess the merits of the debate.

Opsomming

Teenstrydige Konstruksies van die Krisis in Zimbabwe

’n Treffende aspek van die Zimbabwese krisis is die teenstrydige menings wat oor die betekenis daarvan in Zimbabwe, Afrika en die wyer wêreld gehuldig word. Die bespreking daarvan laat opnuut vrae ontstaan oor die invloed van die vryheidstryd op eietydse politiek, asook die “onafgehandelde besigheid” daarvan, veral wat die voortgesette wanbalans van rasse se grondeienaarskap in suidelike Afrika betref. ’n Tweede aspek wat aandag verdien, is vrae oor die wettigheid van die demokrasie in Zimbabwe, veral gesien in die lig van die uiters betwisbare uitslae van ’n aantal verkiesings (in 2000, 2002 en 2005) en die afname aan ruimte wat die regering tussen die verkiesings, sowel as daartydens, aan die opposisie gelaat het. ’n Derde belangrike debatspunt handel oor die invloed wat globale druk op die ontstaan van die krisis gehad het.

Ten minste twee hoofstroom benaderings het ontstaan – een

daarvan grootliks ondersteunend van die aksies van die Zimbabwese regering en die ander besonder sterk daarteen gekant. Vir die een opiniegroep lê die sleutel tot begrip vir Zimbabwe se probleme opgesluit in die weiering van magte binne en buite Zimbabwe om die radikale hervorming wat die transformasie van eienaarskap van kommersiële plaasgrond van wit na swart boere tot gevolg gehad het, te aanvaar. 'n Sentrale veronderstelling van die opponerende opiniegroep is dat die huidige krisis minder oor die afhandeling van die take van die vryheidstryd deur grondhervorming gaan, en eerder die huidige regering in Zimbabwe se reaksie is op die ernstigste magsuitdaging waarteenoor dit sedert onafhanklikheidswording te staan gekom het. Hierdie studie poog om die meriete van die debat te bepaal.

Key words

Zimbabwe, crisis, contradictory meanings, land reform, repression, democracy, nationalism, imperialism.

Sleutelwoorde

Zimbabwe, krisis, teenstrydige betekenisse, grondhervorming, onderdrukking, demokrasie, nasionalisme, imperialisme.