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### A parallel universe - competing interpretations of Zimbabwe's crisis

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## A parallel universe – competing interpretations of Zimbabwe’s crisis<sup>1</sup>

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This article examines competing interpretations of the nature and cause of Zimbabwe’s contemporary crisis. It finds that while neoliberal macroeconomic policies promoted by international financial institutions helped to provide a structural basis for the crisis, arguments attributing blame to Britain and to wider Western sanctions are overblown and inaccurate. Similarly, although Western reactions to Zimbabwe’s land reform have had a racist tinge, these paled in comparison with the explicit racist intent of policies adopted by the Zimbabwean Government. The claim that Zimbabwe is undergoing a process of progressive transformation must be weighed against the nature of state power, the intensification of class divisions, a precipitous economic decline, a problematic development strategy and the extreme abuse of human, civil and political rights.

**Keywords:** land reform; sanctions; crisis; human rights; transformation; racism

The struggle within Zimbabwe during the 2000s has been accompanied by a vigorous debate over the nature of liberation movements in power and the prospects for a new form of politics in Southern Africa. Lined up on one side have been those stressing continuity with the past, insisting that the terrain and *dramatis personae* have not changed, that the battle is only the latest chapter of the struggle which brought Zimbabwe to independence (Mamdani 2008; Moyo and Yeros 2005, 2007; Yeros 2002). A central proposition of the opposing position is that the current crisis is less about completing the final stages of Zimbabwean liberation than a reaction by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) to the most serious challenge to its power since independence (Concerned Africa Scholars 2009; Raftopoulos 2006; Moore 2004; Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004; Bond and Manyanya 2002). In sum, the first approach puts an emphasis on external factors and regards President Robert Mugabe as leading a vanguard for national sovereignty and revolutionary transformation. The second focuses more on internal dynamics – the nature of ZANU-PF in power and its determination to exclude opposition forces.

This article will review these competing interpretations. It will argue that, while neoliberal macroeconomic policies promoted by international financial institutions (IFIs) helped to provide a structural basis for the crisis, arguments attributing blame to Britain and to wider Western sanctions are overblown and inaccurate. Similarly, although Western reactions to Zimbabwe’s land reform have had a racist tinge, these paled in comparison with the explicit racist intent of policies adopted by the Zimbabwean

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Government. There is no question that policies of national ownership and affirmative action have not only produced a major redistribution of land to small farmers, but they have also served as the basis for a massive programme of patronage for the power elite. Finally, the claim that Zimbabwe is undergoing a process of progressive transformation will be weighed against the nature of state power, the intensification of class divisions, a precipitous economic decline, a problematic development strategy and the extreme abuse of human, civil and political rights.

### **Mugabe, ZANU-PF and the revolutionary project**

In the first case, those who support and defend the transformation wrought by ZANU-PF since 2000 invoke the continuity of revolutionary tradition (see Mamdani 2008; Moyo and Yeros 2007). The claim is that, in its attempt to return ownership of Zimbabwe's productive base to the African majority, the ZANU-PF state is finishing the tasks of the liberation struggle. The theoretical provenance is almost entirely structuralist and historicist, employing the grand narratives of anti-colonialism, imperialism and even socialism. These link the present crisis to the battle against white minority rule that ended with independence in 1980 and the larger battle of the South against domination by international capital and the advanced industrial world.

This explanation of the Zimbabwean crisis has five main dimensions endorsed primarily by those within the ZANU-PF camp<sup>2</sup>: that land reform has been misconstrued by racist opponents; that the structural adjustment policies the government was persuaded to adopt by donors and IFIs in the early 1990s provide the larger context for the crisis in the 2000s; that the crisis is primarily the fault of Britain and other Western powers; that the rise of an opposition force in the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) represents a backlash from the wealthy white farming sector and its external supporters; and that citizenship belongs primarily to those who back ZANU-PF. Let us examine each of these points in turn.

The central point of land reform in this perspective is to end racial inequality in landownership 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 4500) still owning almost 70% of the best farmland while nearly 7 million African farmers operated in conditions of extreme overcrowding and land shortage in communal areas. The latter farms were located in the driest regions with the worst soils, while white-owned commercial farmers held vast tracts of unutilised arable land (Elich 2005). Following the completion of the land reform in 2009, resettlement farmers occupied 26.8% of the land while the share of large-scale commercial growers was reduced to 6% (Hawkins 2012).

Above all, then, land reforms rectified a major historical injustice, recapturing land that had been stolen during the process of white settlement. Proponents argued that receiving stolen property, innocently or not, gives no claim on it and no right to compensation for losses under the law. Hence, in this view, there was no need to pay for this land; only for improvements to farms. In any case, Mugabe made clear that his government would brush aside legal impediments: 'The courts can do whatever they want', he said, 'but no judicial decision will stand in our way' (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and the Justice for Agriculture Trust in Zimbabwe 2007, 13–14). At ZANU-PF's insistence, the new 2013 constitution explicitly prohibits a legal challenge to land

expropriation by the state. Suggestions that land reform is responsible for the decline in agricultural production are said to be premature at best and untrue and racist at worst. While incomes may decline in the present, redistributing land will lay the basis for a more egalitarian income generation and distribution in the future. Indeed, a recent school of thought argues that there are clear signs of a rebound in production and the emergence of a successful smallholder sector located on the land which has been redistributed (Scoones et al. 2010; Hanlon, Manjengwa, and Smart 2013).

Rather than the economic crisis having been caused by land redistribution, in this view, Zimbabwe has been punished by Western powers and institutions for stepping out of line. In the 1990s, the Zimbabwean Government had adopted and then refused to continue the standard neoliberal recipe of downsizing the state, privatising state companies, deregulating and liberalising. By the late 1990s, the government abandoned this programme when the results proved economically disappointing and politically disastrous. Shortly after, IFIs retaliated, stopping balance of payments support and other financial assistance. Even after the government repaid a substantial part of its arrears, the IFIs did not resume funding.

This cut-off added to already fraught relations with the West. In the view of the Mugabe Government, Britain and to a lesser extent the USA had reneged on promises made at the Lancaster House Conference in 1979 to fund a major land redistribution programme as part of the negotiation process that brought Zimbabwe to independence. When the Zimbabwean Government proceeded with its programme of fast-track land reform, Western countries imposed what are regarded as illegal sanctions on Zimbabwe and actively plotted ways to unseat the Mugabe Government.

Until recently, these sanctions prohibited Mugabe and more than 200 senior members of his regime from travelling to Europe, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Canada and froze their financial assets. The European Union (EU) ceased military cooperation with Zimbabwe, banning arms sales, and would not allow 40 companies linked to the Mugabe regime to conduct business in EU countries. In 2001, the USA passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA) which limited economic relations between US citizens and any person or entity considered responsible for undermining democratic institutions and processes in Zimbabwe. ZDERA also instructed US delegates to multilateral financial institutions to vote against financial aid to Zimbabwe and excluded Zimbabwe from the African Growth and Opportunity Act facility.

Beyond these measures, a regime of informal sanctions has been in effect since the beginning of the current crisis, with official aid frozen and lines of offshore credit cut by bilateral as well as multilateral donors. In particular, Western governments did not provide assistance to farmers who gained land under the reform. Private foreign investment from the West declined dramatically. Therefore, in this view, Zimbabwe was starved of foreign support as punishment for its confiscation of land from white farmers and its adoption of heterodox economic policies. Once in place, sanctions provided a strong deterrent for outside engagement of any sort. One report claimed Zimbabwe's losses from sanctions since 2001 amounted to \$42 billion (*The Herald*, 10 July 2013).

Based on this analysis, the choice between ZANU-PF and the MDC is considered to be a choice between the party that brought Zimbabwe to independence and a reversion to domination by former colonial and current neocolonial forces. In Mugabe's words:

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. (Raftopoulos 2005, 3)

From this perspective, the MDC represents an illegitimate, unAfrican and treasonous force, and ZANU-PF remains the sole legitimate heir to the liberation struggle. Attacks on MDC officials and supporters by groups aligned with ZANU-PF are justified as a means to prevent the return of Zimbabwe to neocolonial subjugation through the aegis of 'sell outs'. Political participation is considered to be the exclusive right of those within the ruling party. Hence, the MDC's election victory in 2008 was regarded as a temporary aberration, one that ZANU-PF went all out to reverse in the 2013 election. Questions of democratic space, liberties and human rights are depicted as irrelevant or counter-revolutionary. The existence of opposition forces is considered to be an affront; their activities understood as subversive attempts at regime change.

Citizenship, then, is defined selectively. Only peasant backers of ZANU-PF, especially in the rural areas of Mashonaland, are considered to be authentic citizens while large groups of Zimbabweans – urban dwellers, farm workers and whites – are not given status. ZANU-PF leader Didymus Mutasa went so far as to argue that, 'We would be better off with only 6 million people in Zimbabwe. They would be our own people who support the liberation struggle. We don't want all these extra people' (*The Scotsman*, 19 June 2005). Urban dwellers are dismissed as deracinated, totemless,<sup>3</sup> and at the periphery of the liberation legacy. The government termed a campaign to evict people in informal settlements in and around urban areas Operation Murambatsvina, which literally translated means to 'drive out the rubbish'. 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' (Ncube, Bate, and Tren 2005, 2).

Unlike peasants, farm workers are not viewed as true citizens either, in this case because many are descendants of migrant workers from Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. ZANU-PF used their origins as an excuse to treat the entire group of farm workers as aliens without rights to land (Research and Advocacy Unit and Justice for Agriculture Trust 2009, 9–12). On similar grounds, white Zimbabweans, especially white farmers, were not accepted either. Addressing the ZANU-PF Congress in December 2009, Mugabe declared that 'this is your country and not for whites. They are settlers; even if they were born here, they are offspring of settlers' (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 4 September 2009).

In sum, the first approach regards President Robert Mugabe as conducting a revolutionary programme of transformation. 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 that transferred commercial farmland from white to African farmers and then insisted on at least 51% ownership of other productive sectors of the economy. Hence, concern about the abuse of human, civil and political rights is considered to be a smokescreen to cover efforts to drive ZANU-PF from power and to put old enemies in its place. Those who find ZANU-PF's approach unpalatable are regarded as being part of a fresh imperialist project. In this view, Mugabe and his associates need to be celebrated for having completed an important task which had been integral to the liberation struggle.

### Maintaining power at all costs

An alternative approach to understanding Zimbabwe's difficulties came into focus at the end of the 1990s (especially after 1997) as socio-economic problems, political repression and corruption mounted. Its central proposition is that the current crisis is the product of ZANU-PF's struggle to maintain power at all costs. In this view, ZANU-PF's refusal to accept the popular will has been demonstrated in the rigging of every parliamentary and presidential election since 2000, including the most recent election in 2013.

This perspective is based on five principal propositions: that the crisis is a product of ZANU-PF's attempts to shore up an eroding power base; that ZANU-PF promotes a non-liberal form of politics which has become highly abusive; that land reform has had, primarily, a political agenda; that external forces, especially IFIs and Britain, are not primarily responsible for the current state of Zimbabwe; and that the crisis has led to the Zairisation<sup>4</sup> of Zimbabwe. Again, let us look at each proposition in turn.

By the end of the 1990s, disaffection had produced strong opposition within civil society and a new political party, the MDC. The linking of urban labour structures with workers on white commercial farms laid the basis for the emergence of a powerful and well-balanced opposition which posed a serious threat to ZANU-PF dominance. In this view, the defeat of the government by these forces in February 2000 in a referendum over a proposed constitutional reform precipitated an attempt to regain lost ground.

The ZANU-PF government is believed to have rigged every subsequent election in a bid to stay in power, violating norms laid down in regional, continental and global agreements specifying internationally accepted criteria for governance and human and political rights. Analysts from this perspective believe that ZANU-PF prefers the total destruction of Zimbabwe to rule by any other party (*Financial Gazette*, 12 July 2007). The concept of impartiality before the law has been abandoned as has the notion of a separation of powers. Key centres of power within the Zimbabwean state, especially the security forces, the judiciary, and major parts of the civil service, are ZANU-PF fiefdoms. The Joint Operations Command continues to act as an unofficial coordinating body for ZANU-PF and allied military interests. The state has been militarised – with retired military figures appointed to key positions and paramilitary forces drawn from 'war veterans' and the youth militia.

Illiberal legislation remains on the books, authorising highly abusive state actions, notably the Public Order and Security Act, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act and the Interception of Communications Act, prohibiting basic freedoms of association, dissent, the press and private communication. The new constitution prevents recourse to the law when land is seized, and police refuse to interfere when land invasions are under way. During and after the course of every election since 2000, ZANU-PF governments have organised a full repertoire of repressive techniques against anyone associated with the MDC – from kidnapping to arson to theft of property to torture to rape and murder. All sectors of civil society – farm workers, peasants, workers, students, the private sector, the church, the judiciary, lawyers, civil society and the opposition – continue to be threatened by these tactics.

In the key area of land, it is held that the reforms 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 the service of a party 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), its beneficiaries (the best land has gone to an elite connected to ZANU-PF) and the resulting decline in agricultural production. Even more telling was the fact that the state held vast tracts of land which it had not distributed before it started the land reform. Moreover, the focus on land reform downplayed other key goals central to the liberation struggle – the questions of universal franchise, majority rule and adequate health care, education and employment.

Notably, on economic policy, the opposition to ZANU-PF is divided: one group (including sections of the independent press, key economic advisers to the MDC and the private sector) supports the neoliberal policies which were introduced in Zimbabwe in the early 1990s. In this view, difficulties arose because the government failed to implement the policies fully, and this grouping would return Zimbabwe to the ‘economic fundamentals’ of this programme. Other MDC supporters, including trade unions and some civil society groups, have opposed neoliberal measures.

All in this camp believe that ZANU-PF has become incompetent, repressive and corrupt. As the formal economy entered its downward spiral, those with access to political power engaged in wholesale looting not only of the white commercial farming sector but also of mineral wealth and state assets. The discovery and development of diamonds in Marange in eastern Zimbabwe rejuvenated this class and provided ZANU-PF with a major source of patronage. In this period, fortunes have been made by a parasitic class located in ZANU-PF, the military and civil service, while the vast majority lead a perilous existence, lacking even the basics.

These, then, are the two principal discourses which compete to explain the dramatic developments in Zimbabwe in the years after 2000. The battle on the intellectual terrain has complemented struggles on the political and material plane. Let us turn now to consider their claims.

### **Assessing the Zimbabwe debate**

In order to assess the merits of the debate sketched above, two separate but related clusters of issues demand attention. The first centres around the role of external factors and especially whether neocolonialism and racism are central in shaping Zimbabwe’s crisis. The second cluster assesses the progressive or socialist nature of change in the 2000s in Zimbabwe. It will be argued that a careful examination does not allow an analysis whose logic lies in the past to determine the different terrain of the contemporary period. Although immensely appealing to a region and a continent with bitter memories of colonial rule, a perspective based on the era of the liberation struggle diverts attention from the realities of the class holding state power in Zimbabwe, the nature of its rule, the effect of structural change on its productive base and the future of Zimbabwean development.

### **Rocky relations with the west**

Turning first to the question of anti-imperialism, the Mugabe regime has used nationalism and pan-Africanism to win support from a wide swathe of African public opinion (Phimister and Raftopoulos 2004, 385–400). The reasons for this success are not hard to find. Since the early 1980s, African countries have experienced a harsh policing of

economic policy through structural adjustment programmes with mixed to negative results. The return to an overt imperial role by the USA and the UK in the Middle East and Africa helped to fuel strong anti-imperialist sentiment. Mugabe has wasted no opportunity to lay the blame for Zimbabwe's woes on external forces – IFIs and Western countries. In particular, Mugabe and other ZANU-PF leaders focused repeatedly on Britain's historic responsibility for Zimbabwe's catastrophe and also on the damage wrought by international sanctions.

It is argued here that Mugabe's claims misrepresent the recent history of Zimbabwe's relations with Western nations. Although neoliberal macroeconomic policies contributed to the difficulties which followed, the insistence on the central responsibility of the British government for Zimbabwe's crisis is misplaced, and the focus on sanctions is both contrived and erroneous.

Certainly, an unhappy experience with structural adjustment policies set the stage for the tragedy that unfolded and strengthened the conviction that Western powers were determined to effect regime change in Zimbabwe. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Zimbabwean Government had hoped to find a way to accelerate growth, to break through foreign exchange constraints, to fund social services and to employ hundreds of thousands of secondary school leavers coming out on to the job market. However, the policies of IFIs failed to deliver significantly in the areas of growth, investment and unemployment, and the trade deficit exploded (Bond 2000, 173–82). Manufacturing output fell by 24% in the 1990s as deindustrialisation ravaged the textile, metals, transport equipment and clothing subsectors (Bond 2000, 176). Foreign debt tripled as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) from 8.4% to 21.8% between 1991 and 1996, while inflation averaged about 27% during the Zimbabwe Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) period (Bond 2000, 175, 180; Kanyenze 2010).

The deterioration of living standards caused by a sharp reduction in real wages (see Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004, 357) and new cost recovery policies in health, education and other social services, coupled with the growing population of unemployed literate youth, provided fertile grounds for an emergent opposition. Yet, in precisely this period, the IMF insisted that the Zimbabwean Government adopt policies which would heighten class tensions – requiring that price controls on staple foods be abandoned and a tax on luxury imports removed (Bond 2000, 183). For its part, the World Bank promoted the reduction of real wages as a 'brutal but necessary' adjustment to generate export-led growth (Carmody and Taylor 2003).

Not surprisingly, the Mugabe regime became increasingly frustrated by its inability to sustain programmes which it had put in place in the 1980s, especially increases in social sector funding. It became all too obvious that the regime's ability to retain popular support was being damaged when standards of living started to crash. No wonder that many in Zimbabwe see the current crisis as having its origins in policies pushed by IFIs, adopted by the government, and then abandoned. There is no question that these abortive 'reforms' provide part of the structural basis for Zimbabwe's crisis, setting the stage for the Mugabe regime's struggle to stay in power.

While the ZANU-PF government's assessment of the destructive effect of neoliberal policies is understandable, the blame that Mugabe and others have heaped on Britain for Zimbabwe's difficulties has been both excessive and inappropriate. On the central issue of British promises to fund land reform at the Lancaster House Conference preceding independence, the evidence is mixed. Zimbabwean authorities insist, but British



Government representatives deny that Britain agreed to take sole responsibility for funding land reform.

The British position is that its government pledged to contribute to the costs and to rally support from other donors (United Kingdom 2008). Between 1980 and 1985, the UK provided £47 million for land reform and was prepared to do more (*New Zimbabwe*, 18 June 2007). However, the Zimbabwean Government did not respond, and the programme lapsed with £3 million unspent. For about a decade, the issue of funding land reform in Zimbabwe lay dormant. Then in 1997, the British Government returned to the issue in a way that touched a nerve in Zimbabwe. In a clumsy and tactless letter to Zimbabwe's Minister of Agriculture, Claire Short, British Secretary of State for International Development, claimed that the election of a Labour government without links to colonial interests meant Britain no longer had a special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchases in Zimbabwe (Short 1997). For the Zimbabwean Government, this assertion amounted to a betrayal of the solemn promise that had been part of the bargain to secure the Lancaster House agreement preceding independence. British officials further irritated the Zimbabwean Government by insisting that priority should be given to poorer farmers rather than 'cronies' of the government.

In discussions at Commonwealth meetings in Abuja in 2001 after invasions of white farms were well under way, the UK renewed its commitment to provide significant assistance for land reform and promised to bring in other international donors. In turn, the Zimbabwean Government agreed to prevent further occupation of farmlands, to restore the rule of law and to take firm action against intimidation. However, shortly after the meeting, the Zimbabwean Government reneged on its promises, aborting the arrangement with the UK.

Throughout the years that followed, the Mugabe Government singled out Britain and especially Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Labour governments for abuse, arguing against their purported neocolonialism. Even though the British Government continued to provide significant assistance – about \$1.25 billion in humanitarian and transitional assistance from 2000 to 2013 (Pocock 2009; DFID 2011) – the imperialist taint meant that it could do little more. While the British handling of Zimbabwean sensitivities was inept and ambiguous, the Zimbabwean emphasis on Britain's role as a significant cause of the crisis is at odds with the historical record.

### ***The use and abuse of 'sanctions'***

The Mugabe regime has made similar use of the issue of sanctions against Zimbabwe. As noted earlier, measures were taken by Western countries to prohibit arms sales, forbid travel and freeze the assets of more than 200 members of the Zimbabwean elite and ZANU-PF-aligned companies. The USA also imposed broader economic sanctions linked to IFIs. The targeted sanctions focused on parastatal bodies and senior members of ZANU-PF, the military, the civil service and allied individuals in the private sector. Companies affected by targeted financial sanctions were primarily held in the business wing of ZANU-PF, Zidco Holdings (*The Daily News*, 8 December 2009). These measures were intended to remain in place until Zimbabwe showed signs of progress towards the return of democracy, the rule of law and the completion of the constitutional review

process. Recently, the EU has suspended most targeted sanctions. The USA, Australia and Canada retain most measures.

As we have seen, ZANU-PF leaders claim that sanctions are illegal and can be blamed, in large part, for the Zimbabwean crisis and the poverty of Zimbabwean people. The basis for this assertion rests on propaganda and hyperbole. The targeted nature of the sanctions meant that, barring one, they lacked the potential to affect the general population or the larger economy. The only sanctions that might have hurt Zimbabwe's broader economy were provisions that instructed US delegates at multilateral financial institutions to vote against financial aid or debt cancellation for Zimbabwe (Dell 2005). To date, however, there has been no instance when the US delegate has exercised this veto. The decision by the IMF and World Bank to suspend balance of payments and other support was based on the failure of the Zimbabwean Government to service its IFI debts (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 15 November 2013) and differences over economic policy.

Although most Western countries stopped providing bilateral assistance to the Zimbabwean Government in the early 2000s, they continued to offer humanitarian assistance through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), primarily in the form of food aid and help with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The USA alone provided more than \$1.2 billion in aid from 2001 to 2013, and for a time its food aid was feeding one in five Zimbabweans (*Mail & Guardian*, 23 August 2013). Taken together, it is clear that the much-reviled West carried a large number of Zimbabweans throughout the crisis. Moreover, once the Government of National Unity (GNU) became operational in 2009, Western funds poured in. As just one example, the EU and its member states provided more than US\$2 billion for assistance to education, water, sanitation, health, agriculture and food aid (*Mail & Guardian*, 11 October 2013).

It is important to remember, moreover, that trade and investment with Europe, the USA and other Western countries were never embargoed although access to foreign lines of credit became difficult given Zimbabwe's notoriety and the stain accompanying sanctions. Nevertheless, throughout the 2000s, trade continued to be substantial and during the GNU trade doubled between Zimbabwe and the EU (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 4 April 2014). Zimbabwe ran sizeable trade surpluses with both the USA and the UK, continued to benefit from the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP)–EU Partnership Agreement<sup>5</sup> and had status as a Sugar Protocol Country within the Cotonou Framework.<sup>6</sup>

As to foreign direct investment, its dramatic decline for most of the decade reflected an international consensus that Zimbabwe was and is one of the worst places in the world in which to do business. Zimbabwe ranked 170 out of 189 in the World Bank's 2013 report on ease of doing business and 131 out of 148 countries in the 2014 World Economic Forum global competitiveness report, with similar results for most of the period since 2000. The ZANU-PF government's refusal to respect the rule of law or enforce contracts and its policy statements favouring indigenisation over property rights provided a strong disincentive for foreign involvement. Zimbabwe's hyperinflationary period (officially 230 million per cent but unofficially a quintillion) and its plummeting growth rate made Zimbabwe a bad bet for even the most optimistic investor (*Business Day*, 22 August 2008). Once Zimbabwe's currency was dollarised in early 2009, foreign direct investment started to return though cautiously given the uncertainty posed by the indigenisation programme. Although limited by debt arrears (then \$7 billion), the Zimbabwean Government was also able to borrow \$1.2 billion offshore in the period

from 2010 to 2012 (Hawkins 2012). Following ZANU-PF's return to power in 2013 and its initial recommitment to the policy of indigenisation, however, foreign direct investment plummeted.

In any case, despite ZANU-PF's contention to the contrary, neither decisions about investing nor about financial assistance can be construed as 'illegal'. Sovereign states, international bodies and corporations have the right to make such decisions. The drying up of foreign credit for Zimbabwe was a direct consequence of the nature and policies of ZANU-PF governments. It is striking that the call by ZANU-PF leaders for sanctions to be lifted, which would imply a desire for closer economic ties with the West, coexists uneasily with their contention that Western imperialism is the source of Zimbabwe's problems.

### ***Racism and opposition in Zimbabwe***

Linked to ZANU-PF charges of Western 'imperialism' has been the assertion that opposition to change in Zimbabwe is a product of racist attitudes. Certainly, there can be no doubt that the plight of white farmers in Zimbabwe attracted international attention and strong reactions from the Western press and Western governments while human rights abuses elsewhere in Africa went unremarked. The West was virtually silent during the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) which killed 3–5 million people and displaced many more. To say the least the Western response to genocide in Rwanda, Darfur and the Central African Republic and to continued suffering in the eastern DRC and the Sudans has been lame and ineffectual.

At the same time, the Zimbabwean Government itself has operated on an explicitly racial basis in its project of dispossessing white farmers. No one put the matter more succinctly than Joice Mujuru, vice-president of Zimbabwe. 'They (white farmers) call themselves Zimbabweans', she said. 'They are not. I am a Zimbabwean. When will you learn? Africa is for black Africans' (Freeth 2012).

Although the government claimed that it was reappropriating land taken from Africans during the colonial period, almost all of the large-scale commercial farmers whose land was seized were not descendants of original colonial settlers. Fully 80% of farmers had not inherited farms, and only 5% came from pioneer stock (Selby 2004). In addition, between 70% and 82% of commercial farm deeds had changed hands after independence, following assurances from the ZANU-PF government that it had no interest in them (Selby 2004; Karimakwenda 2006). As Dale Dore observed:

the vast majority of white farmers had therefore, like a growing number of their black compatriots, paid the full market value for their farms, including land, and were granted full legal title to it. They did not steal land from anyone. (2013, 2)

Moreover, under the 1985 Land Acquisition Act, land could not be purchased without government permission. By allowing sales to go through, the government signalled that it did not have an interest in the land that was being sold. In 1992, amendments introduced a Certificate of No Present Interest, which strengthened the government position, allowing the purchase of previously offered land when funds came available. However, these provisions became moot once the fast-track land reform began in earnest, after which (with some few exceptions) land policy was designed to eliminate whites from farming in Zimbabwe. Hence, the argument that white farmers did not deserve

compensation for 'stolen property' not only repudiated the government's prior assurances but also rewrote its own rules (Shaw 2003, 75–89).

Justifying the expropriations by referring to the history of occupation and settler colonialism also tended to skip over the history of land reform in the period since independence. For most of the first two decades especially after 1984, the government did not seem to be interested in a serious programme of land reform and actively discouraged land occupations by squatters (Moyo 2004, 8–11). As noted above, the government let a British programme of assistance for land reform lapse with a balance of funds unspent. From 1997 on, the issue returned to the forefront when war veterans began to agitate for a more radical land reform in the light of glaring inequities. However, it was the government's defeat in the constitutional referendum in 2000 and the growing power of the MDC which prompted the major assault on the white commercial farming sector. Mugabe made no secret of his feeling that in supporting the MDC the white community had betrayed and abandoned him. The deep-seated resentment within Zimbabwe about the continuing racial imbalance in landownership provided him with the tinder to move against this group. Hence, the government's decision to jettison its alliance with white agricultural capital was provoked as much or more by contemporary political reasons as it was by genuine issues of injustice and historical dispossession.<sup>7</sup>

In 2007/2008, the ZANU-PF government turned to other sectors of the economy when it passed the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Bill which stipulated that all foreign-owned companies would be required to transfer 51% of their businesses to indigenous Zimbabweans – defined as a person who was disadvantaged by 'unfair discrimination on the grounds of his or her race' before the country's independence in 1980. Since 2010, ZANU-PF ministers have spearheaded a drive to force foreign-owned mining companies and banks to comply with the programme and have promised to extend these provisions to all other sectors of the economy.

A crucially important second dimension of framing the reforms in terms of an anti-white discourse was that it attempted to mask the bitter power struggle within Zimbabwe's black population. Black opposition to the ZANU-PF regime stung the ZANU-PF government far more than the purported racist prejudice of a tiny white minority (some estimate fewer than 30,000 out of a total population of 12–13 million). The membership of the MDC and of trade unions, church and NGO coalitions within civil society is almost entirely black as is the independent press.

Moreover, while the beneficiaries of the land reform are black, the overwhelming majority of victims of the land reform have also been black. These include the 30,000–35,000 small black settlers pushed off farms by well-connected elites, the 350,000 farm workers and their families (a total of 1.8 million people) and the 250,000 seasonal and casual worker families, of whom about 2/3 to 3/4 were left jobless, homeless and destitute (Research and Advocacy Unit and Justice for Agriculture Trust 2009, 2; Neill 2004, 15, 35; Hartnack 2005, 173–192; Scoones 2008, 3). It has been conservatively estimated that 1% of the farm worker population died (about 10,000 people; Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and the Justice for Agriculture Trust in Zimbabwe 2007, 2–3).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the portrayal of land reform in racial terms obscures more than it reveals. Although attention has focused disproportionately on the ZANU-PF government's abuse of white farmers, there is no question that Zimbabwe's black population has suffered far more from government ill treatment in the 2000s.

### **The progressive or socialist nature of transformation in Zimbabwe**

The portrayal of the Zimbabwean crisis in terms of racism, neocolonialism and imperialism has also tended to distract attention from crucial dimensions of power inside Zimbabwe itself. Growing class divisions and inequalities have accompanied the brutality and corruption of a highly repressive state. The undoubted power and influence of Zimbabwean security forces also opens to question the 'progressive' nature of the class in power. Neither Zimbabwe's military nor its political class is known for their pro-poor sympathies. These factors help in an assessment of the claim (as some on the Left would have it) that the approach taken by the ZANU-PF government before the GNU was 'progressive' or 'socialist' and that its goal was revolutionary transformation (Moyo and Yeros 2007, 106; Mamdani 2008).

On this point, the work of John Saul remains prescient. In an early and controversial article, Saul emphasised the ways in which 'petty-bourgeois politicking' – the jockeying for position based on factionalism, personality and the instrumentalism of ethnic issues – had forestalled the deepening of the revolutionary project of Zimbabwean liberation movements (Saul 1979). 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' (Saul 1980, 38). Indeed, Saul warned the Left against 'waiting for Mugabe'. When he assessed the prospects of Zimbabwe moving beyond 'primitive' or bourgeois nationalism to a more revolutionary nationalism (defined as realising 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' (Saul 1980, 34).

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, the evaporation of the revolutionary promise of ZANU-PF, and Mugabe, still the Sphinx, confusing his would-be successors as he struggles to hang on to power indefinitely. Indeed, the structures of power which have emerged within the Zimbabwean state have been shaped to meet the exclusive interests of Mugabe, ZANU-PF and military leaders. National security forces (police and military) have been pressed into direct service, and state institutions have been militarised and transformed into partisan bodies. Carte blanche has been given to paramilitary forces (the youth militia and 'war veterans'), and ZANU-PF members continue to act as a law unto themselves.

This configuration has enabled a high level of abuse of human, civil and political rights which is more characteristic of a quasi-fascist than a socialist state (Scarnecchia 2006). During the 2000s, Zimbabwean security forces embarked on a series of commandist 'Operations' – Murambatsvina, Maguta, Chikorokoza Chapera/Isitsheketsa Sesiphelile, Mavhotera Papi and others – which led to successive waves of dispossession. Farm workers pushed off commercial farms, small farmers losing their properties, vendors in the informal sector having their goods stolen and their stalls destroyed, residents in backyard shacks of high density areas having their homes smashed, small miners expelled from active mining and farming communities losing their ancestral lands to mining companies; all these dispossessions have added trauma to impoverishment.

While some writers on the Left have downplayed civil and political rights as liberal bourgeois concepts which do not come to grips with material inequality (Yeros 2002; Moyo and Yeros 2005), the violation of these rights has not led to a more egalitarian society either. The blatant enrichment of a tiny urban elite and their clients sits uneasily

with the socialist claim, especially in a situation of widespread poverty and unemployment (estimated at about 85%). According to government statistics (Zimstat), most of Zimbabwe's estimated population of 12–13 million can be classified as poor, while 16% live in extreme poverty (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 19 July 2013). At one point in the mid-2000s, life expectancy had collapsed to 37 years for men and 34 years for women.

The class that emerged at the top of the ZANU-PF state has been prone to conspicuous consumption, but it has yet to demonstrate that it can seriously engage in economic development. A parasitic accumulation model (asset stripping) has been the norm rather than one featuring technological and productive transformation. In the period of hyperinflation, vast profits were gained from arbitrage (as a rapacious elite obtained foreign exchange, grain, fuel and agricultural inputs at subsidised rates and sold these goods on the black market) and rent seeking (economic opportunities made available only to cronies of the government). The looting of Zimbabwe's mineral wealth – gold, platinum and the diamond fields of Marange – followed on. The 2014 'Salarygate' revelations of remuneration for heads of parastatals [with the standout being Cuthbert ('Cashbert') Dube as head of the non-profit Premier Service Medical Aid Society bringing home \$6.4 million annually] repeated this general pattern.

By contrast, labour in both rural and urban areas has become more vulnerable than at any time since independence. By 2012, only 700,000 people were employed in the formal economy (excluding agriculture and private domestic service), or 14% of the workforce (Hawkins 2012). Those who are employed in the civil service receive paltry monthly salaries (about half the amount needed to live a normal life); even so, in 2013, they consumed 75% of government income (*New Zimbabwe*, 13 May 2014).

Recent research has shown that between 2000 and 2010, 224,000 jobs were lost on large commercial farms while 287,00 jobs were created on resettled farms – a net gain but qualified by the 1.5 million growth in Zimbabwe's population (Hawkins 2013). In the early years of the land reform, wages and working conditions for agricultural workers on black-owned farms were worse than in the days of white commercial agriculture, as were employer–employee relations (Sachikonye 2003, 46; Moyo 2004, 34). Most farm workers became casual rather than full-time workers and were paid on the basis of piecework (Neill 2004, 34). As a matter of deliberate policy, few farm workers (about 5%) were granted land (Moyo 2011, 946). When inflation exploded, farm workers (who received at best about 4% of the basic amount needed for a low-income consumer basket) fled the agricultural sector in droves (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 19 January 2007).

On the central question of whether land reform has made landownership more egalitarian, the evidence is mixed. In central ways, the reform has served the principle of redistributive justice and transformed the prospects of thousands of farmers. All but a few hundred of the original 4500 white farmers have been pushed off their farms, and the old dualistic structure of agriculture has been dismantled, opening up possibilities for a more diversified agrarian system.

In the scheme for small farmers (the A-1 land reform) which constituted 66% of the total land redistributed (Government of Zimbabwe 2003, 5), 245,000 farming families gained land (Hanlon, Manjengwa, and Smart 2013). Of these, 87% of the beneficiaries were the rural poor (including communal area farmers) and the urban poor (Moyo 2004, 26–27). A further 20,000 black farmers have received land under the A-2 part of the land reform – the scheme for medium- and large-scale commercial farmers (Moyo 2011, 945).

Although government land audits have not been released, reports indicate that a considerable proportion of prime commercial agricultural land has been allocated to allies of the ruling elite. The Zimbabwean press is replete with stories of multiple farm ownership by prominent politicians, judges, bureaucrats, and army, air force and police officers. Many have little agricultural experience and have let great estates lie fallow once the initial crops have been harvested or have asset stripped and moved on. Some are leasing the farms back to their original owners in what is left of the white farming community. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Zimbabweans (at least 75%) still live in rural areas with inadequate land on which to farm; there has been little decongestion of communal lands (about 10%; Moyo 2004, 30).

Also, although the coalition government attempted to provide inputs and assistance for small farmers, their absence for much of the decade meant that in many parts of the countryside the reform initiative was stillborn (Scoones 2008, 3–4; Kinsey 2009, 15–16). Government policy not to grant title deeds for new farmers means that tenure is insecure and bank credit is not forthcoming. In many cases, growers are channelled into contract farming, with foreign companies acting as their source of inputs and credit.

Despite these difficulties, in some areas, notably Masvingo province and parts of Mashonaland, there is evidence that ‘where there is low capital investment and a reliance on local labour, settlers have done reasonably well, particularly in the wetter parts of the province’ (Scoones 2008, 1; Kinsey 2009, 6–7). The hope is that recent improvements in tobacco and maize production are signs of a turnaround and that the success celebrated by Ian Scoones, Joseph Hanlon and their co-authors will be replicated more broadly (Scoones et al. 2010; Hanlon, Manjengwa, and Smart 2013). Generally, the reform has produced a wider range of farmers cultivating more land for food and exports than was the case before 2000 (Moyo 2011, 961). Without question, the social base of the economy has been broadened.

At the same time, the overall record is bleak: total agricultural production has declined precipitously – by about 50% between 2000 and 2012 (Hawkins 2012). Agricultural value added in constant 2000 prices in 2010 was lower than at independence in 1980 and less than half its peak in 2001; output per worker in agriculture rose by a third between 1980 and 2001, but by 2010 had fallen 56% (Hawkins 2013). By 2007, losses to the commercial farming sector after expropriation were estimated to amount to a staggering US\$8.4 billion (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and the Justice for Agriculture Trust in Zimbabwe 2007, 2). As commercial agriculture had formerly provided a third of the country’s GDP, the land invasions dramatically cut the state’s tax revenues, a reality which ultimately led the government to print money.

Close linkages between agriculture and industry meant that once the large-scale farms were eliminated, agro-industry closed down as well. Manufacturing output (by volume) was lower in 2012 than in 1980 and two-thirds below its peak (Hawkins 2013). Zimbabwe’s real GDP fell 40%, from \$6.6 billion in 2000 to \$4.1 billion in 2010, and real per capita incomes were 37% lower in 2011 than they were at independence in April 1980 (Hawkins 2012; Kinsey 2009, 20). Little wonder that between one-quarter and one-third of the population of Zimbabwe has emigrated to other countries in an effort to survive and to support families at home.

The structural shift in agriculture also opens to question the issue of Zimbabwe's overall development trajectory. One of the most sophisticated commercial agricultural sectors in the world has been destroyed and its technological lead abandoned with only the promise here and there of a transformed alternative. The future for an agricultural sector based on small-scale producers is, at best, uncertain, especially where new farmers face competition in regional and global markets from highly productive and efficient firms. For the domestic economy, the task ahead is to rebuild value chains between myriad small farms and agro-industry in order to revive the industrial sector as well. If these connections are not made, then the programme of land resettlement may have driven the Zimbabwean economy on to a narrower path based on the exploitation of minerals accompanied by continued deindustrialisation (Hawkins 2013).

The question, then, of whether the 'revolution' in Zimbabwe's productive base amounts to a movement forward to a more progressive future is highly problematic. Excluding the brief upturn during the 2008–2013 coalition government, the record of ZANU-PF governments has been one of economic contraction, deepening inequality, poverty, corruption and harshly repressive politics. The end to the white commercial agricultural sector may have rid Zimbabwe of a powerful minority and a dualistic agricultural structure, but the inevitably slow process of developing a productive alternative has left its economic base weakened and its population impoverished. Only the development of the Marange diamond fields, with annual revenues reported to range between \$2 billion to \$4 billion (Cross 2011), rescued the Zimbabwean power elite from the crisis for which it bears most of the responsibility. Now that the surface alluvial deposits show signs of exhaustion even this resource may not be sufficient to cushion the state and the elite from the harsh realities which have accompanied its policies.

Indeed, ZANU-PF's return to power in the July 2013 election has been accompanied by a resumption of severe economic crisis. Deindustrialisation has accelerated with 1300 jobs lost in the first quarter of 2014 (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 30 May 2014). The government has been unable to secure adequate financial assistance from IFIs, from the West or even from China. At writing, it has been forced to borrow to finance recurrent expenditures, unable even to pay civil servant salaries fully and on time. Foreign investors have shied away, dissuaded by the return to strong if confusing signals on indigenisation. Most Zimbabweans again rely on remittances from the diaspora.

The country continues to be ruled by Robert Mugabe who at 90 is reported by WikiLeaks to suffer from terminal metastasized cancer and the inevitable vagaries of old age. His determination to remain president until his death is heightened not only by his fear of being held to account at the International Criminal Court but also by the prospect of his party disintegrating in succession battles. Allied to this project is a shadow state consisting not only of core political and military hardliners but also business and criminal elements in Zimbabwe linked to their equivalents in the region and in the Middle East and Asia. Zimbabwe's great mineral wealth and especially its diamond boom in the last few years have reinvigorated these networks of power, making the prospect of significant change in the near future problematic. The implosion of the MDC following its electoral defeat in 2013 has removed, for the time being, any significant organised opposition to the ZANU-PF government.



### Conclusion: Quo Vadis Zimbabwe

In conclusion, the interpretation of the crisis by ZANU-PF, its supporters and intellectual fellow travellers continues to hold a formidable power over events. The symbolic ejection of white farmers tapped into strong feelings about African dispossession and mistreatment by the West. The potency of the attack on Western imperialism and neocolonialism, the argument that African resources (especially land) belong to black Africans and the visceral opposition to sanctions have had broad appeal in Africa and among sections of the intelligentsia. Taken together with the material bases of power (especially access to Zimbabwe's mineral wealth), this ideological force helped ZANU-PF win the day in the 2013 election. Against this view, a careful look at the nature of the regime in power through most of Zimbabwe's post-independence history casts a different light on questions of race, class and, above all, the progressive quality (or not) of Zimbabwe's 'revolution'.

This article has argued that questions of Western malign intent have diverted attention from the dynamics of power inside Zimbabwe which have produced a pathological polity and massive economic deterioration. It is argued here that the abandonment of basic rights has not been accompanied by an improvement in the well-being of ordinary Zimbabweans; their position is worse in many instances than it was at independence. As to the revolutionary promise of the transformation under way in Zimbabwe, prospects are limited in the economic sphere – with a focus on enclave mineral development and an as yet embryonic sector of small-scale agriculture. In the political sphere, the state continues to accommodate an ossified brutal elite, which monopolises power and the nation's resources – an eerie echo of the settler colonial state it replaced at independence.

### Notes

1. A very early version of this article was published in *Historia* 50, no. 2 (2005), 287–310.
2. Other authors who subscribe to this position (Mamdani, Moyo and Yeros) have not endorsed ZANU-PF's propositions about political participation and citizenship. They did argue, however, that the opposing camp paid disproportionate attention to 'liberal bourgeois' questions of human and civil rights and neglected economic and social rights.
3. 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*, 2002.
4. Zairisation refers to the state policy of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) nationalising large foreign-owned export-oriented firms and placing political cronies in charge of them. The new managers mismanaged the firms and drained them of their assets but remained politically loyal to Mobutu, then president.
5. The ACP–EU Economic Partnership Agreement is a trade deal between the EU and former European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific region that offers favourable access to the EU market.
6. The Sugar Protocol permits certain ACP countries to export a fixed quantity of sugar to the EU annually at a preferential price.
7. As a sideline, it is interesting to note that public opinion surveys found that the overwhelming majority (76%) of respondents held that the government should abide by the law and pay the owners compensation for their land and property (Chikwanha, Sithole, and Bratton 2004, 12).
8. Farm workers bore the full brunt of the attacks which accompanied farm invasions, many of them left destitute on rural roads deprived of food, shelter, health care and other forms of

support. The survivors migrated to squatter settlements in peri-urban areas where they faced another round of dispossession in Operation Murambatsvina, became artisanal miners facing further state persecution or migrated to work on South African farms.

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