Robert Mugabe and the Land Question in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

It has been a year since former President died. Already a lot has been written about Zimbabwe’s former President, Robert Mugabe. There are many renditions. To others; he was a villain responsible for the massacre of thousands in Matabeleland in the early 1980s, a despot intolerant of dissent, violently suppressing opposition. He took away farms from real farmers and gave it to his cronies and in the process single handedly destroyed the economy of the country. To others he was very popular, an astute statesman, a Pan Africanist who spoke truth to power and was largely a victim of the imperial machinations of the West-especially the former colonial master. Many of these accounts are true and reflect the complex nature of the man. I am probably the least qualified to attempt to write about the man. I never met him personally, except for that fleeting moment way back in 1997 when I graduated at the University of Zimbabwe, even then it was a such a brief and insignificant moment. I got to know him through his fiery speeches, the gossip about him (especially his health), but also and more importantly through the public policies his government promoted since 1980 (see Annex 1). Most of my research has been focused on analysing Zimbabwe’s post-independence attempts at socio-economic development and that inadvertently brought me to trying to understand the leader of that particular government- Mugabe. This is not an expose of how the man thought-no not all but an analysis of the policy programs that were introduced under his leadership.

The 1980s: Nation Building and Harmony with the Colonial Master

There was no way Mugabe could avoid dealing with the land question at independence. He had been adamant throughout the Lancaster House negotiations on the need for a speedy resolution to land. The land question was a major grievance that fueled the struggle for liberation. Prior to independence, Palmer had observed that:

“… the most acute and difficult question confronting the first government of Zimbabwe, whether its ideological hue, will be that of land bedevilled by its past use as a political and economic weapon by the whites and by the consequent mythologies to which this has given
rise to…...and the lessons to be drawn from the agricultural failure of neighbouring Zambia and Mozambique will impose constraints on future land and agricultural policies” (Palmer, 1977:246).

The land question dominated the political discourse that led to independence and there was recognition among the contesting political parties and observers that political stability will only be brought about after an exhaustive land reform exercise. The political statements of the time largely revolved around the need for a land reform program and it was a major feature in election manifestos of the political parties that participated in the first elections. The 1980 Zanu (PF) election manifesto identified the resolution of the land and agrarian problems as one of the most pressing tasks:

“It is not only anti-people but criminal for any government to ignore the acute land hunger in the country especially when it is realised that 83% of our population live in the rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood” (1980; 40).

At Lancaster the British, in pursuit of the sanctity of property rights had offered a compromise under which, in return for the Zimbabwean government guaranteeing existing property rights, committed to underwrite half the cost of the resettlement program. Land reform was meant to lead to better utilization of the agricultural potential through optimised land use and consequent increase in agricultural production and farm productivity to achieve national self-sufficiency. It is important to note that Zimbabwe’s independence coincided with a new zeitgeist around land reform. There was a policy shift from state-based land reforms towards reliance on the formal credit market and on landed property transfer which is freely negotiated in the open market.

The large-scale commercial farmers, who were mostly whites and less than 1% of the population, occupied at least 45% of agricultural lands, which are approximately 15.5 million hectares. At least half of these large-scale commercial farms were in Natural regions I to III, areas with good rainfall.

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1 In the late 1970s many developing countries had major debt problems and had approached the Breton Woods institutions (World Bank and IMF) for balance of payment support. The economic aid offered was tied to conditionalities, which required adjusting governments not to regulate the working of the market including the land market.
patterns and high potential for intensive cropping systems. The more than 700,000 indigenous households who made up 98% of the population were through colonial policies translocated to marginal lands in Natural Regions IV and V, which are predominantly livestock production zones.

Land reform started on a high note; by March 1982, 8,600 families had been resettled on 520,000 hectares of land and by 1983 the figure resettled had gone up to 15,000 families. Zimbabwe had in eighteen months transferred from white to black control only ten percent less land, than Kenya had done in fifteen years.

Relations between the British government and the new Zimbabwe government improved in the 1980s due to a number of foreign policy achievements on the part of the British, including giving Mugabe several awards for statesmanship and supporting Zimbabwe’s bid to host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Harare in 1987. In terms of land reform, the British honoured their pledge to provide compensation for acquired farms and from 1980 to 1988 they released £44 million towards the purchase of farms. The British government, working with local partners in Zimbabwe, undertook an evaluation of the land reform programme. The Cusworth and Walker (1988) report produced empirical evidence that supported land reform and showed that land beneficiaries were better off than their customary counterparts in terms of asset accumulation and food security (Cusworth and Walker, 1989). The report concluded by urging the British government to release more funding for land reform. However the passing of the Land Acquisition Act (1992) was greeted with hostility by the British government (Selby, 2006:13)

**The 1990s: Experiments with Neoliberal Reforms**

The land redistribution slowed down in the 1990s due to a variety of factors. In July 1990, Mugabe’s government released an economic policy statement, ‘Zimbabwe- A Framework for Economic Reform (1991-1995)’, in which it announced a major policy shift towards market reforms. Commitment to equity through income distribution was officially abandoned in the new
development strategy. The new five-year programme was premised on orthodox reform packages prescribed by the IMF, which included public sector reform, trade liberalisation, deficit reduction and creation of a ‘favourable climate’ for economic growth whose target was set at 5% per annum. Achievement of this new policy meant ‘...moving away from a highly regulated economy to one where market forces play a greater role within the context of government objectives’ (GoZ, 1990). There is no consensus on the real reasons why Mugabe embarked on structural adjustment. He had always entrusted the economy to market-oriented Economists such as Bernard Chidzero (Minister of Finance) and Kombo Moyana (Governor of Reserve Bank). Zimbabwe jumped into economic reforms before being pushed.

Agricultural discourse shifted slightly to see the agricultural sector in terms of a progressive, productive, large scale and market-oriented agriculture, located in the traditional white commercial farming zone and backward unproductive small scale ‘subsistence’ production in the communal areas (Sachikonye, 2003). During this period government abandoned the interests of the poor and landless and embarked on a land reform programme to benefit the ‘indigenous elite’ as a counterweight to the established white agrarian bourgeoisie (Moyo, 2000, Alexander, 2003). The prospects for an egalitarian land reform diminished as a result of the change in the policy thrust from socialism to neoliberalism. Cooperatives that had been established in the early 1980s were collapsing. Mugabe’s colleagues in ZANU-PF increasingly questioned the desirability of the peasant alternative as the way to proceed on land reform.

The free market perspective was biased against nationalization or compulsory acquisition of property, hence despite the constitutional amendments and the Land Acquisition Act (1992) there was still little that the government could do in terms of compulsory acquisition of land. The economic reforms did not address the key constraints facing small scale farmers such as discriminatory land and financial markets, distorted water rights and lack of access to essential infrastructure for more effective land use (Moyo, 2001). Most of the incentives offered such as export processing zone status and concessionary rate loans were to the large-scale commercial farms. The commercial farming sector responded to these incentives and influenced changes in land use and tenure tendencies and consolidated the move towards an increasingly market
orientation towards the land question (Moyo, 2000). The ruling elites realising the commercial benefits in land made demands for themselves in order to expand into newly emerging markets. Black capital directed its lobbying efforts toward the de-racialization of the ownership base of commercial farmland. Government responded favourably to these demands that by 1997 there were over 800 indigenous commercial farmers (Moyo, 2003). It was apparent by 1997 that any form of egalitarian land reform had been abandoned and the little land acquired was distributed to party loyalists often in very large quantities (Lahiff, 2003).

However, ESAP was a major disaster characterized by a ‘sustained-meltdown’ of the economy. Mugabe faced opposition from within; war veterans who were not part of the state structures made demands for land reform. The land issue was revived in response to grassroots based demands initially led by the Svosve people of Marondera in Mashonaland East who occupied four farms in a particularly high-profile case and received support from some government officials. Further occupations occurred nation-wide including thousands of people who were mainly communal and resettlement area farmers, retrenched workers and war veterans. Most of the land occupied was white-owned commercial land. In August 1998, Mugabe tried to remove the occupiers with the belief that the UNDP conference on land would yield a positive result in terms of unlocking funding to purchase more farms.

The Betrayal

In 1996 there was a change of government in Britain. The Conservative Party, in power since the late 1970s, lost to the Labour Party under Tony Blair. The new Labour government made fresh land reform funding conditions and explained to the Zimbabwe government that funds for land reform were to be based on a ‘community initiated market assisted’ model of land reform. In 1997 the UK government absolved itself of responsibility to pay compensation for land redistribution despite the fact that during the deliberations the Chair of the Lancaster House talks, Lord Carrington, had made a commitment to support a land reform programme in Zimbabwe. He said that:
the British government recognises the importance of this issue [land] to a future Zimbabwe government and will be prepared within the limits imposed by our financial resources to help (Carrington, Lancaster House, 1979:2).

In a letter to the Zimbabwean Minister of Lands, the then Overseas Development Secretary, Ms Claire Short, acknowledged the positive outcomes of land reform from the previous decade, cautioned the Zimbabwean government against an accelerated land redistribution exercise and went on to claim that:

I should make it clear that we do not accept that Britain has a special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchase in Zimbabwe. We are a new Government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and as you know we were colonised not colonisers (Short, 1997:1).

The letter was instrumental in aligning moderate camps within ZANU (PF) with the more radical groups (Selby, 2006:15). Furthermore, the letter allowed the ZANU (PF) government to portray the land deadlock as part of a bilateral disagreement within a wider set of historical grievances (Mail and Guardian, 5 November, 2005). A number of initiatives meant to restore negotiations over land were set in motion from both Britain and Zimbabwe. In Britain, Tony Blair, realising the lack of tact in Claire Short’s letter, wrote directly to President Mugabe and assured him of his government’s commitment to Zimbabwe’s land reform (Selby 2006:16). In Zimbabwe a joint initiative of the CFU, finance sector and land policy technocrats formed ‘Team Zimbabwe’ as an attempt to find an amicable solution to the land issue and also to keep donors and the government engaged on the possibilities of funding land reform (Selby, 2006:32).

The various diplomatic efforts did not necessarily contribute towards the softening of ZANU (PF)’s position. A form of highly charged and confrontational nationalism focused on a redistributive approach last seen during the liberation struggle re-emerged and President Robert Mugabe was

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2 The leading actors of this initiative were former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Dr Robbie Mupawose, Chairperson of the Bankers Association, Greg Brackenbridge, and land policy technocrats, Professors Mandivamba Rukuni and Sam Moyo.
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at the forefront of this process (Alexander, 2006). President Mugabe was quoted declaring that:

We are going to take the land and we are not going to pay for the soil. That is our set policy. Our land was never bought [by the colonialists] and there is no way we would buy the land back...Britain would have to do that (President Robert Mugabe quoted in The Guardian, 15 October 1997).

In 1998 the government designated 1 471 farms for compulsory acquisition under the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme Phase 2 and promised “overnight completion of the resettlement programme” (Kinsey, 1999:174). The official target was the resettlement of 91 000 families and “youths graduating from agricultural colleges and others with demonstrable experience in agriculture” (GoZ, 1998:23). Eventually 625 of the listed farms were delisted because they did not meet Government’s criteria for resettlement.

Enter Morgan Tsvangirai and Mugabe’s First Defeat

We have read elsewhere that Mugabe was competitive by nature. One of his strongest opponents came in the form of a Trade Union leader, Morgan Tsvangirai. In 1997 a coalition of mostly urban based civil society organisations established the NCA and the first chairperson of the NCA was Morgan Tsvangirai. The NCA was formed to lobby for a new constitution and to facilitate the process of consulting Zimbabweans on “issues they want covered in the constitution” (Mudzengi 2008:389). In response the ZANU (PF) government initiated a parallel process; it hastily established a constitutional review commission to be the main body that would lead the process of writing a new constitution. The GoZ’s constitutional commission embarked on nationwide consultations and these consultations included workshops on awareness on the weaknesses in the existing constitution. Various civil society organisations, including the CFU, made submissions on issues they would want to see included within the constitution. Towards the end of 1999, the constitutional commission presented a proposed draft to the president, and a referendum on whether to adopt the constitution was held in February 2000. The proposed constitution contained two contentious clauses on the terms of
the executive president and compulsory acquisition of land. The NCA mobilised for a vote against the proposed constitution and they found a willing logistical partner in the form of the CFU whose members were threatened by the proposal to make compulsory acquisition of land lawful. The proposed constitution was rejected in the referendum.

**Fast Track Land Reform: An Inevitable Course**

The combination of economic decline exacerbated by structural adjustment, consequent urban protests and the emergence of an anti-state civil society, the formation of a viable national opposition party, radicalisation of rural politics through war veteran mobilisation around restoration of alienated lands, the internal threat posed by war veterans within ZANU (PF) and the NO vote to a new constitution contributed towards a tipping point\(^3\) in the ruling party’s position on land and the appropriation of the nationalism discourse. It was however the referendum defeat that marked a watershed moment in ZANU (PF) politics. It became clear that Mugabe was not invincible and that his party was going to face a major electoral challenge in the 2000 Parliamentary elections. There was a dramatic shift in Mugabe’s strategies; the populist rhetoric without actual delivery of land could no longer convince the electorate and there was a real threat of being manoeuvred out of power by the newly formed MDC. By 2000 the ruling party was re-invoking its radical liberation credentials, returning populist land reform to the agenda, and making it the central plank of its electoral campaign (Yeros, 2002a:160).

Mugabe sought to strengthen existing ties with the war veteran elements within the party. Although it was common practice for ZANU (PF) to commit itself to resolving the land question during every election campaign, circumstances in 2000 were very different: “it was faced with a formidable opposition from within [war veterans] and from outside, the MDC” (Sadomba 2008a:15). Exactly a day after the announcement of the February 2000

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\(^3\) Malcolm Gladwell (2000) describes this phenomenon as the moment in which little changes, actions, ideas and ways of behaving cross a threshold and spread like a veldfire or epidemic.
referendum results rejecting the draft constitution, war veterans occupied a
derelict farm in Masvingo belonging to a white farmer (Sadomba, 2008a:119)
and this triggered a wave of occupations such that by the end of the month
this had occurred on 30 farms across the country. At their height in June about
800 farms had been occupied (Moyo and Yeros, 2005b:188). Yet again the
response of the state to the new wave of occupations was ambivalent. There
seemed to be two camps, one that preferred to pursue a legalistic route and
another that was “in favour of radical nationalist solutions to the land
question” (Moyo and Yeros, 2005b:188). When the national land movement re-
emerged in 2000 the latter camp appeared able to dominate but not without
resistance (Helliker et al., 2008:14). Unlike in earlier times when land
occupations were resisted by the state, this phase of occupations enjoyed tacit
endorsement from the Government, for instance whereas during the earlier
land occupations the state had evicted the land occupiers, in the post-2000
period the land occupation movement received logistical support from the
ruling party and the state (Moyo and Yeros, 2005b:192).

Whilst land occupations were ongoing Mugabe’s government launched the
Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) on 15 July 2000. The objectives
of ‘fast track’ were to respond to “compelling national economic and social
 imperatives of poverty eradication and foster economic development” (PLRC,
2003:18). In essence fast track meant that the GoZ would “speed up the pace
of land acquisition and resettlement” and the main target of the policy was
“the immediate identification of 5 million hectares for compulsory acquisition
and an accelerated programme of planning, demarcation and settlement
placement on all acquired farms” (GoZ, 2001a:6-7).

By the end of 2003 a total of 2 652 farms with a combined hectarage of 4 231
080 had been allocated to 127 192 households under the A1 resettlement model
(PLRC 2003:5) and the national take up rate was 97 percent. The corresponding
figures for the A2 resettlement model were 1 672 farms amounting to 2 198 814
hectares which was redistributed to 7 260 beneficiaries. The take up rate under
the A2 ranged from 42% (Manicaland) to 100 percent (Matabeleland South),
with an average rate of 66% nationally (PLRC, 2003:6). This was a considerable
increase in the number of farms acquired, especially when compared with the
approximately 800 farms that had been occupied prior to fast track between
February and June 2000. In the fourth year of the fast track programme the number of beneficiaries increased to 140 866 households allocated land under A1 and 14 500 households under A2 by the end of 2005 (GoZ, 2006:2).

**Who Got the Land?**

Critics of the fast track approach to land reform, have mostly criticised the programme on the basis of six controversies of land reform: (i) the land occupations of 2000 were politically contrived and had nothing to do with the need for land reform; (ii) the beneficiaries of land reform have been largely political cronies; (iii) land reform has been a total failure (iv) there has been no investment in the new resettlement areas; (v) agriculture is in complete ruins; and (vi) the rural economy has collapsed (Scoones, 2008). The preceding discussion has already dealt with the first controversy- yes there could have been political machinations but there was also a real demand for land reform. The discussion below focuses on the second controversy. As already mentioned, fast track is usually dismissed as part of Mugabe’s attempts to vote-buy, by allocating land to his cronies. Whilst we do not have the list of names of the approximately more than 130 000 households who benefitted from land we can discuss the categories of the beneficiaries.

According to nationwide survey carried out way back in 2008 the biggest sub-group (61.2 percent) of land beneficiaries came from customary tenure areas. The second group of land beneficiaries is made up of people who came from urban areas. Approximately 20% of the beneficiaries were women. The discussion on gender relations and access to land has to go beyond an analysis of what women received in their own right to focus on the nature and quality of access to land. The land rights being bestowed in newly resettled areas are qualitatively superior to those prevailing in communal areas. Are all these Mugabe’s cronies?

**What is happening on the Farms?**

The third controversy about land reform-is that production has been decimated. There was indeed a production slump across all crops immediately after fast track land reform. National tobacco output plummeted from a peak
of 237 million Kg in 2000-1 to a low of 48.8 million Kg in 2008. Horticultural crops such as mange-tout literally disappeared only to resurface after the dollarization and liberalisation of the 2009. Perhaps it was this decline that led others such as Richardson to argue that there was a relationship between the loss of property rights and production decline. However, by 2011 production had recovered across many crops. One of the salient features of that recovery was the significant contribution by the smallholder sector towards overall maize and tobacco production. Table 1 below provides a comparison across farm sectors and their output up until 2011.

Figure 1: Tobacco Production over the years/ agricultural seasons

![Tobacco Production Graph]


Figure 2: Maize Production over the years/ agricultural seasons
There is very limited explanation for this dramatic increased output of maize and tobacco from the smallholder sector when we compare with the period before fast track land reform. Property rights, the alleged cause of agricultural production decline, are still yet to be resolved. What changed? Could it be the rise of new forms of agricultural financing in the form of contracting farming models? It is important to note that prior to the dollarization of 2009 financing towards agriculture production had all but disappeared. Figure 1 provides an illustration of financing trends towards agriculture from 1990 up until 2009. Furthermore, “the agricultural policy environment until 2009 was characterised by heavy-handed state intervention funded through quasi-fiscal means which distorted markets and incentives and undermined the economy (Scoones et al 2010). The reintroduction of price controls led to input supply shortages which forced farmers to the black market where inputs were being sold at prices far higher than the official gazetted prices (James 2015:91)

Figure 1: Bank credit to Agriculture and growth in maize, tobacco and cotton output
Consequences of Fast Track

The FTLRP coincided with and to a certain extent fuelled Zimbabwe’s worst economic performance crisis. It was characterised by a 40 percent decline in GDP (World Bank, 2006), a rate of inflation that had been rising since 2000 and reached its highest at more than 1 500 percent in 2008 (CSO, 2008) and acute foreign currency shortages. The economic meltdown has also been associated with the shrinking of industrial activity, through the closure of many manufacturing concerns and downsizing of some, and consequent high unemployment rates (estimated to be in the range of 70 percent of the total labour force). The economic decline affected social reproduction capacities of both urban and rural households. Formal sector urban employment shrunk from around 3.6 million in 2003 to 480 000. Even those who have managed to retain their jobs are in most cases receiving wages that are below the poverty datum line, mostly eroded by the hyperinflationary environment.

Ironically by some major twist of fate, it is the attempt to resolve the land question that led to Zimbabwe’s isolation from international financial circuits. Yes, there are those who argue that Zimbabwe’s isolation was due to non-payment of debts. That could be true, but it is also important to note that Zimbabwe was not the only defaulter—but others were not punished like Zimbabwe. Furthermore, some of the debt that the Mugabe government was being asked to pay were funds that had been advanced to Ian Smith’s...
government to fight the terrorists (see Bond and Manyanya, 2003). Then there are others who argue that the sanctions (especially ZIDERÁ) was due to a governance crisis. Maybe. But it is also important to compare the scale of the human rights violations associated with fast track land reform program and the Matabeleland massacres in the 1980s. It is conservatively estimated that approximately 20,000 people lost their lives during the Gukurahundi massacres—so why wasn’t Mugabe sanctioned then? Could it be that the current sanctions have really got nothing to do with human rights of Zimbabwe? Instead they are part of Capital’s arsenal of tools to resist attempts at decolonisation.

There is definitely a lot more yet to be written about the late President Mugabe. His contributions were definitely negated by the iron-fisted nature of his rule. He was no democrat; at his best he was probably a developmental despot. He contributed significantly towards a social policy that was the envy of many in the 1980s into the early 90s only for those benefits to be squandered due to a combination of an unsustainable cost structure and donor conditionalities that insisted on cost recovery. Perhaps his lasting contribution will be in how he remained steadfast on land reform after 2000. The opponents to land reform including the commercial farmers union, the British government and the international media probably under-estimated his resolve to fix the land question.
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