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## Land redistribution in South Africa: Towards decolonisation or recolonisation?

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### Abstract

Contrary to populist political discourses, in South Africa the ruling party's approach to land policy is reproducing paternalistic relations that echo apartheid practices and represent the 'colonial present'. This reality stands in stark contrast to the initial aim of land reform, which was conceived as part of a larger project of decolonisation. The latest land redistribution strategy, the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy, where the state remains the landowner, is no longer consistent with the project of decolonisation. This is because, we argue, land redistribution in South Africa has drifted away from the ideal of social justice; it increasingly displays symptoms of what the 'colonial present' and 'recolonisation'. Party politics, as well as the emergence of a challenge to the ruling party from the left, has prompted a more radical rhetoric, but one that co-exists with deeply conservative practices. This paper argues that the status quo represents a betrayal of the idea of land reform as decolonisation, and that a radical shift in policy and practice is needed in order to align it with a project of decolonisation in South Africa.

### Introduction

The past four years have seen the resurgence of 'the land question' at the centre of national politics. Having been relegated to the backwaters of minor state programmes – and having never attracted more than one percent of the national budget – land has become pivotal to party-political battles since the emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in political contention in the run-up to the 2014 national elections. Potent beyond their numbers in Parliament, the EFF has successfully mobilised land as metaphor and symbol of economic disenfranchisement, of the failure of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) to bring about economic freedom or even decolonisation. Picking up on the critical discourses of the Rhodes Must Fall and later Fees Must Fall student movements, which have centred on the need to decolonise knowledge, institutions and the economy, the EFF has depicted land ownership in South Africa as being the product of colonial conquest and theft, and all white ownership as illegitimate. For South Africa to decolonise, goes the logic, first the land must be returned to the black African majority.























Saul, J. S. 2012. "Transition in South Africa: Choice, Fate ... or Recolonisation?" *Critical Arts* 26 (4): 588–605.