

## **WHY LAND INVASIONS WILL HAPPEN HERE TOO .....**

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Will Zimbabwean-style land invasions take place in South Africa at some point in the future? In my view – yes, it is likely that they will, despite the great differences between the political economies of the two countries. And as in Zimbabwe, land invasions organized by populist politicians will call attention to society's failure to adequately address deepening rural poverty, and put a dramatic spotlight on the emotive issue of our highly unequal and racially skewed land distribution. This could result in land reform moving higher up the political agenda than it is at present.

### **THE CURRENT CRISIS IN ZIMBABWE**

Of course, the current invasions by so-called 'war veterans' (in reality, most are members of Zimbabwe's growing lumpen-proletariat, paid for their services) are not really about land reform, as most commentators have noted. They are motivated primarily by Mugabe's and ZANU (PF)'s fears that they will lose the coming election. The invasions send a clear message to Zimbabwe's electorate: the rule of law will be no deterrent to ZANU (PF)'s ambitions to remain in power. And the open intimidation of farmworkers is no doubt being accompanied by threats of violence against voters in the communal lands where the majority of the electorate (and the ruling party's traditional power base) still live.

The farm invasions also derive from Mugabe's attempts to create scapegoats for the grinding poverty now suffered by most Zimbabweans. Blaming the tiny but still relatively well off white minority helps to shift attention away from deep seated corruption and government mismanagement of the economy. The 'race card' has increasingly been accompanied by the 'colonialism card', and Britain is now cast in the role of the 'once and future oppressor'. Attempts to lay responsibility for economic problems at the door of the IMF and imposed structural adjustment policies (which might in fact be part of the problem) has not resulted in increased political support for ZANU(PF) to date.

Most significantly, the invasions play the 'land card'. Here Mugabe has shrewdly picked a key political issue in Zimbabwe, one which strikes a deep chord within Zimbabwean society (and it would appear, in Southern Africa more widely). The invasions (together with the recent amendment to the constitution which allows for expropriation without compensating for the value of the land) seek to buttress support for the ruling party by actions which appear to address a clearly visible legacy of colonial rule. They may also help to distract attention from the blatant corruption and cronyism which marked land resettlement in the 1990s.

These stratagems may yet backfire. Many Zimbabweans understand full well that tobacco and other export crops (now under threat) bring in large amounts of desperately needed foreign

exchange, and that resettlement farmers growing these same crops require years of training and support (which government has as yet been unable to provide on a significant scale). Cynicism about who really benefits from land reform is widespread. Mugabe's willingness to sacrifice the health of the Zimbabwean economy and the well-being of its population to personal avarice and the retention of political power is so clear and obvious that even a poker hand of racial scapegoating, diversions from the real issues and massive intimidation may not win him the game.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the 'land card' is an extremely powerful one. It is striking that commentators of all political persuasion agree that the land question in Zimbabwe is critically important and far from resolved. As a result, the British government, together with other donors, will probably agree to increased levels of funding for resettlement once the current political crisis is over. Acknowledging the potency of land as a symbol of post-democracy transformation, organizations representing commercial farmers in Namibia, Zambia and South Africa have expressed fears of farm invasions. And newspaper editorials over the past month have asked again and again: can it happen here?

### **THE LAND QUESTION IN ZIMBABWE AND SOUTH AFRICA**

In many ways the two countries are so dissimilar that one is tempted to answer 'no'. Higher levels of urbanisation and industrialization in South Africa, the relatively small direct contribution that agriculture makes to the economy (around five percent of GNP), the apparent decline in the importance of land to rural people, and the lower political profile of land reform, mean that the possibility of land invasions seems, at first sight, unlikely. And the prospect of politically inspired land invasions organized by the ANC and supported by the head of state is surely even less probable....

Against this one must set some striking commonalities, in relation to the land question in particular, in the experience of the two countries. Both have a history of state-supported or state-led dispossession of indigenous people for the benefit of white settlers, who later received massive state subsidies in order to make a (lengthy) transition to modernized commercial farming. Peasant farming, at first highly successful in supplying the emerging markets, was deliberately undermined by policies aimed at developing white agriculture. In both cases the majority of the rural population was restricted to increasingly smaller 'native reserves', governed on behalf of the state by chiefs, which provided a source of cheap migrant labour for white-owned farms, mines and industries.

Population growth on a restricted land base, together with the undermining of peasant farming, led to rising levels of poverty and malnutrition. Having played a leading role in creating these problems, the state then belatedly initiated programmes of agricultural and rural development - but which had little impact, constrained as they were by inadequate resource allocations, and by the distortions of highly discriminatory policy frameworks within the wider society.

Given these rather similar historical experiences, it is not surprising that in both Zimbabwe and South Africa the liberation movements powerfully articulated demands for the restoration of stolen lands. It is true that rural struggles took different forms. In South Africa, rural communities organised themselves to resist forced removals with assistance from NGOs, but had little direct support from the exiled political parties. In Zimbabwe, rural communities played host to guerilla

fighters. A discourse of ‘land rights for the people’ emerged in both struggles, and the years immediately preceding majority rule saw radical policies for land reform being formulated. Ambitious targets for redistributive land reforms were announced soon after both ZANU and the ANC swept to power.

The policy frameworks in the two countries display some important differences. South Africa has a constitutionally mandated land restitution programme, which Zimbabwe does not, and in South Africa the market is supposed to play a key role in a demand-led programme of land acquisition, in contrast to Zimbabwe’s supply-led, state driven resettlement. Redistribution in South Africa includes a large commonage programme, and innovations such as equity share schemes and the establishment of legal entities for group land ownership. Labour tenants, not found in Zimbabwe, have legal rights and can acquire land of their own. The tenure security of farm workers has been the subject of new legislation, with little comparable protection available in Zimbabwe.

### **LAND REDISTRIBUTION POLICIES COMPARED**

And yet the core programmes of land redistribution, which have to form the central thrust of any meaningful land reform in the former settler economies of Southern Africa, do share some key features. In both Zimbabwe and South Africa these targeted the ultra-poor and landless to begin with, but made highly unrealistic assumptions about the nature of the farming livelihoods they would pursue; they suffer from inadequate funding in national budgets; are burdened by time-consuming bureaucratic procedures; have lagged behind overambitious implementation schedules; and have been subject to critical assessments of impacts (but over very short time frames). These problems have given rise to inappropriately negative judgements on land reform, which in turn has resulted in the re-orientation of policy towards ‘emergent commercial farmers’.

In Zimbabwe in the late 1980s and 1990s a myth was vigorously promoted (by commercial farmers amongst others) that land reform beneficiaries were the least productive farmers in the country. Selection criteria for resettlement schemes were redefined to give preference to ‘experienced farmers’, and in addition a large number of farms were allocated to large scale black commercial farmers (in order to “address the racial imbalance in commercial farm holdings”). Some of the beneficiaries were cabinet ministers, senior government officials, and wealthy businessmen. Many of these joined the Commercial Farmers’ Union. But performance on many of these farms has been poor, given that income from agriculture is often a secondary concern for their owners.

This shift in the focus of resettlement took place despite emerging evidence that the first generation of Zimbabwean resettlement schemes, where peasant households use non-mechanised farming methods on small plots and keep their livestock on communal grazing, are capable of making a major impact on poverty, inequality and economic output. Kinsey’s fifteen year study of 400 households in three agro-ecological zones shows that values of livestock, crop production, food and nonfood expenditure, and holdings of cereal stocks are all much higher and more equitably distributed than in overcrowded neighbouring communal areas. Other research shows that women have benefited significantly from resettlement, and thus that redistribution can attack gendered inequalities too.

South African land redistribution policy is now following in the footsteps of our neighbours to the north. Following an internal review of the Department of Land Affairs' redistribution programme which highlighted the lack of agricultural and developmental support to beneficiaries, the Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs, Thoko Didiza, has announced a new programme aimed at creating a class of 70,000 black commercial farmers over a 15 year period. Grants considerably larger than the R16,000 per household available under the previous programme will be used to try to leverage private sector capital, and farms or subdivisions will be purchased for freehold individual ownership. The beneficiaries will be relatively well off, aspirant farmers with 'sufficient net financial worth' (i.e. capital of their own).

Additional land for the rural poor is seen as supporting only 'food safety net farming', or 'subsistence agriculture', and small scale production within communal tenure systems is seen as inherently limited in its developmental potential. As in Zimbabwe, a combination of inherited professional prejudice and effective lobbying by commercial farmer groups (such as the National African Farmers Union) has led agricultural officials to underestimate the real economic value of land based livelihoods in the former homelands. Recent research estimates that these contribute a gross aggregate value of some R13.3 billion per annum, or some two and a half percent of GDP. Enhancing this through infrastructural development and more effective support services, in combination with increased and more secure access to land, would begin to attack rural poverty very directly – and more effectively than job creation on the farms of emerging commercial farmers.

Didiza's top officials argue that the two approaches are complementary, and that 'safety net farming' will provide a stepping stone into the commercial farmer programme. However, no review of the hopelessly inadequate support services supplied by provincial Departments of Agriculture to small scale agricultural projects in the former homelands has been carried out, as a basis for planning improvements in support of land reform beneficiaries. Neither the food safety net nor the commercial farmer programme has been adequately conceptualized thus far. They are being hastily planned at a central level and foisted onto the provinces and the NGOs who will be expected to implement them.

Most tellingly, no additional funds have been made available for the black commercial farmer programme, and it is clear that the existing redistribution budget line (which is already over-committed in relation to projects already in the pipeline, and is in any case set to decline over the next three years) will have to be diverted to pay for the grants to the emerging commercial farmers. The Department of Land Affairs receives only 0.4 percent of the national budget, and only a little more than half of this is for land acquisition, a clear indication of the low political priority accorded land reform. Under this regime it is thus unlikely that land redistribution over the next ten years will make much impact on the highly skewed and racially biased pattern of land holdings in South Africa.

Will a streamlined rural land restitution programme, able to process and resolve claims significantly faster than at present, make a difference? Two factors make this unlikely: one is the financial cost of resolving 13,000 rural land claims, estimated at anything between R26 billion and R70 billion. If the entire restitution budget for 2002/3, amounting to R287 million, was used for rural claims alone, resolution would take ninety years at minimum. Secondly, the total number of

people likely to benefit from restitution will never constitute more than a small proportion of the rural poor who desire access to more land. On the other hand, restitution claims have immense symbolic and hence political force, and delays will fuel discontent over land out of proportion to the numbers involved.

### **POVERTY AND THE RULE OF LAW**

As important as the problems in delivering meaningful land reform in both countries is the wider economic context. In the 1990s rural households in Zimbabwe became decidedly poorer, partly as a result of formal sector job losses and declines in remittances, partly as a result of the impact of AIDS. The urgent need to expand the contribution of small scale agriculture to the incomes of the poor has gradually become more widely accepted, and underpinned renewed donor interest in land reform.

In South Africa the economy has grown but lost formal sector jobs (one million since 1990 according to some estimates), and improvements in some rural services (e.g. water and electricity) have not been accompanied by significant economic development in the overcrowded former reserves. The poorest households are in some ways worse off than ever before. To add to the burdens of these densely settled areas, job losses in mining and other sectors have seen the return of significant numbers of men to their rural home bases – but real opportunities for self employment are scarce.

Desperation caused by increasing pauperisation probably underlies another serious trend in rural areas – increasing levels of stocktheft from commercial farms adjacent to communal areas (and within these areas too). Poached grazing by communal livestock herds has long bedeviled relationships across the boundary fences, and is on the increase, fuelling tensions. Farm murders have aroused the fears of commercial farmers that the rule of law in rural areas is under increasing stress – although they forget that their (often illegal) evictions of farm workers or labour tenants are part of the problem too. The rule of law has long been ignored in Dukuduku forest.

### **POPULIST POLITICS AND LAND INVASIONS**

Land invasions fuelled by desperation have been a feature of urban areas in South Africa over the past decade, but most have been defused by government finding alternative land for the homeless. They have not occurred on a large scale in rural areas to date, but have taken place in the Queenstown district, in Dwesa-Cwebe and Mkambati on the Wild Coast, and in the Mudimbo corridor alongside the Limpopo river. They are currently threatened in Wakkerstroom and in the southern Cape. Most of these cases involve restitution claims.

What then are the prospects for land invasions in South Africa? Right now, they appear very unlikely other than in isolated cases where communities and NGOs try to put pressure on government to speed up land reform. But could they occur on a wider scale in the next ten years? The government's commitment to protecting property rights (a key concern of foreign investors) means that the ANC and President Mbeki are unlikely to follow Mugabe's lead and provide support (and funding) for farm invasions. In addition, the ANC appears to be attempting to secure its rural support base not through populist rhetoric around land reform, but rather through cultivating a rural patronage system based on the chiefs (in the former homelands) and on

emerging black commercial farmers (on privately owned land). Land invasions are therefore likely to be met with a firm and unsympathetic response from the state.

However, there are a number of reasons to suggest that populist politicians and parties of the Bantu Holomisa type *could* begin to receive significant levels of support within the next decade. 'Jobless growth' and rising poverty and inequality are more likely in South Africa than are East Asian miracles, and could underpin increasing disillusionment with the ANC. Black empowerment which benefits only a small elite will be an easy target for critics. The deepest poverty will still be found in densely settled rural areas, with urbanisation unlikely to make much impact on the problem, and populists could well build a significant support base there.

Rural development and land reform need greatly expanded levels of funding if they are to make a difference to life in rural areas, and government has not shown much interest in these programmes to date. The current emphasis on promoting black commercial farming, and the diversion of scarce funding and human resources to this new programme, will only exacerbate the delays in addressing the land needs of the rural poor who constitute one third of South Africa's population. The land question could easily become a rallying cry for a populist opposition, and invasions of farms belonging to the landed elite, most of whom will still be white, will be an obvious way to garner publicity and attempt to mobilise a following. As in Zimbabwe, the unemployed 'lumpen' elements found in rural areas, many of them youth, could form the foot soldiers of this campaign.

The political dynamics of these invasions would clearly be very different to those currently playing out in Zimbabwe. But here, as up north, one result could be that land reform on an expanded scale suddenly becomes a higher priority for government and for society at large. Do we have to wait, or could the wake-up call happen now rather than later?