

The Politics of Land

ZANU vs the MDC

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A fifth Zimbabwean piece. Samuel Kariuki and I argued that unless the (then-) union-backed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) developed an effective progressive programme (including pro-worker land reform), the land issue would be captured by the dictatorial Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) regime.

Instead the MDC placed its hopes in neo-liberal solutions, British aid, and quick fixes. It was consistently outmaneuvered by Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF, and always stepped back from the decisive campaigns that would have been needed to oust the regime. Basic parliamentary democratic reforms were possible, although not easy, in the early 2000s; so was the defeat of ZANU-PF, but the MDC consistently snatched defeat from the jaws of victory through its bad politics. It has subsequently been widely discredited; Zimbabwe's insurgent working class of the 1990s has faced defeat after defeat; ZANU-PF, despite its appalling record on every issue, remains in charge too.

Something unusual took place in Zimbabwe on Wednesday 2 August, 2000. The umbrella labour body, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions or ZCTU, called a general strike against a series of farm occupations that had begun in March this year. The call for a stay-away from work had been initiated by civic groups – including the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU), a business association representing mainly white agribusiness which controls 30% of the best arable land in the country – yet ZCTU acting president Isaac Matongo announced that the unions were now leading the action. The strike action was also endorsed by the new mass opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) – aligned to the labour movement – as well as by the National Constitutional Assembly, a coalition of civil society formations.

Now a general strike is nothing unusual in Zimbabwe: since 1996 the revived labour movement has repeatedly demonstrated its power in this manner. What was unusual was the fact that the ZCTU came out in opposition to a wave of farm occupations affecting more than 1,300 white-owned farms in a country where the issue of land reform has been central to political struggles since the initial colonization of the country by Cecil John Rhodes' British South African Company (BSAC) in 1889.

Also unusual was the fact that the ZCTU aligned itself with the CFU in this action, despite the fact that there is no love lost between the two bodies. Thus, in October 1997, farm labourers organized by the ZCTU's General Agricultural and Plantation Workers' Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) launched two weeks of work stoppages and road blockades demanding a US\$70 wage, a 135% increase. In December 1999, GAPWUZ had 84,000 members, representing a considerable portion of the more than 750,000 farmworkers who, with their families, account for rather more than two million of Zimbabwe's twelve million people.

Decolonization

In order to understand this seeming contradiction, it is necessary to examine both the course of Zimbabwe's decolonization process and of its post-Independence land reform programme – as well as the manner in which these strands have intersected, in turn, with growing pressures from the working class – as crucial factors that have created the current impasse in the country.

Like most other African countries Zimbabwe moved to independence in 1980 via a negotiated settlement. In this case, the settlement that was reached – the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, embodied in the Lancaster House Constitution (LHC) – ended the liberation war, or Chimurenga, but set in place draconian restrictions on land redistribution. The key compromise made in the settlement, and agreed to by all parties involved in the negotiations brokered by Britain – including Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Joshua Nkomo’s Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) – was the entrenchment of private property rights. The LHC also included the provision that government could not expropriate land without compensation and that the distribution of land was to take place on the basis of a “willing seller – willing buyer” approach. It was understood that Britain would help finance compensation.

The policy failed dramatically to solve the land question, lending itself to cosmetic changes rather than to any form of genuine agrarian transformation. By the early 1930s, land had been divided into that governed by communal tenure in “native reserves” (22.4% of the land), “native purchase areas” for a black yeomanry (7.1%), and privately owned commercial farms in areas reserved for white ownership (50.8%). Between 1982 and 1985, the Zimbabwe government aimed to re-settle 162,000 families on 9 million hectares (ha) of land. But by 1990 the government had only resettled 51,000 families on 3 million ha of land.

Moreover, resettlement typically involved marginal lands, these being the more readily available on the market; better lands often went to wealthy, well-connected Africans, part of the black bourgeoisie that emerged around the State and the ruling party. Land ownership also remained highly gendered, with wives constituting less than 2% of titleholders in resettlement areas at the end of the 1990s. At the same time, the 4,500, mainly white, commercial farmers represented by the CFU continued to hold 11 million ha, representing close to 70% of arable land, whilst Africans owned around 16 million ha.

This situation proved increasingly unsustainable in the 1990s. High unemployment closed an outlet for pressure on land: it is estimated that less than 22,000 school-leavers are able to enter waged employment each year. Unemployment may be as high as 40% today. And a neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programme implemented with vigour by the government (now ruled by ZANU-Patriotic Front [ZANU-PF], a merger of ZANU and ZAPU) from the start of the 1990s worsened the situation by fostering deindustrialization and mass public sector layoffs. Meanwhile, the former combatants from the liberation war armies of ZANU and ZAPU – the 50,000 war veterans – also came into conflict with government from the mid-1990s.

The “War Vets”

Not only was land not forthcoming to the latter, but payments from the War Victims Compensation Fund were suspended in March 1997 after it was revealed that politicians had plundered its coffers with bogus claims. The matter was only resolved in August 1997, after dramatic protests, Mugabe promised to pay back pension arrears and guaranteed a monthly stipend of Z\$2,000 per head from January 1998, as well free health care and education to the families of such “war vets.” This gesture certainly won the war vets to government’s side, and this volatile constituency – who in 1996 had been already threatening to forcibly occupy both white-owned land and the farms of ZANU-PF politicians – now found that it paid to support the incumbent politicians, rather than to seek to expropriate their land. (Such material considerations doubtless

also brought to the ranks those numerous “war vets” who were actually far too youthful to be genuine but who also attached themselves to ZANU-PF in 2000). This shift in alignment would have enormous implications for subsequent developments, as we shall see below.

Mugabe initially tried to fund the generous packages to the war vets by implementing a special 5% levy on wages (and company profits), a 2.5% hike in sales tax, and higher prices for petrol and electricity. This move outraged the ZCTU, which raised demands around this issue in general strikes on the 9 December, 1997, and on the 3/4 March, 1998. Further general strikes against price rises took place in November that year.

By this point, in any case, the ZCTU and its leadership (notably general-secretary Morgan Tsvangirai) were riding at the crest of a wave of popularity amongst the urban working class and of resistance to government excesses. Not only had the unions reportedly grown from 200,000 members in 1996 to 700,000 by 1998, but they also had the credibility to call a National Working Peoples Convention in Harare in February 1999 to launch a “mass political movement for change.”

This labour upsurge led to the formation of the MDC, although the fledgling organization was from the start disproportionately influenced by the middle class (as well as by business, including white farmers), adopting conservative economic policies and appointing business leader, Eddie Cross, as its economic spokesperson. Nonetheless, the new party and its allies in civil society were able to help defeat Mugabe in a referendum on a new constitution (which included provisions for land acquisition) in February 2000.

The land invasions

It was at this point that the war vets, now loyal to Mugabe, and supplemented by ZANU-PF youth, reappeared following the referendum, a wave of farm occupations took place, sponsored both tacitly and often more overtly by the state itself. Distinguished from an earlier set of farm occupation movements in 1996 and 1998, which had been marked by their peasant base and open hostility to ZANU-PF, the new occupations aimed to intimidate MDC supporters and restore Mugabe’s threadbare credibility on the land issue. For his credibility on this front had steadily declined as fiery speeches on land reform repeatedly failed to actually materialize into action, and as donors began, from the mid-1990s, to withdraw such funding as was available for reform, arguing that the funds were being misused.

The result: for all its popular appeal, the MDC still only managed to win 57 out of 120 elected seats, behind ZANU-PF’s 62 seats, in the June 2000 elections. Notably, the MDC votes were overwhelmingly concentrated in urban, working class areas. Of course, the fact that Mugabe’s minions acted violently to prevent the MDC from developing a sustained rural election campaign had a profound impact on the outcome. After all, there were 31 deaths in the run-up to the elections and widespread MDC/ZANU-PF clashes, not to mention many plausible allegations of electoral fraud. We must not forget this fact in the paragraphs that follow. At the same time, it also appears to be the case that the intervention of the war vets had, up to a point, helped Mugabe successfully to pose as the champion of land reform.

There is also another dimension to this, however. For the fact remains that the MDC’s own lack of any real rural land reform programme or serious drive to build a peasant base in the communal areas must be seen as having played straight into Mugabe’s hands. Clearly, the war vets did not

create the rural crisis from nothing: the potential for a rural crisis has existed for years as a result of the unresolved land question.

The MDC's flaws

Given Mugabe's record on land reform, it would not have been too difficult for the MDC to make the land question its own issue. Indeed, it was an issue that should have been even more readily exploitable by the MDC than by ZANU-PF: a bold MDC land reform programme would have undercut Mugabe's fatuous claims to champion the rural poor and helped secure the new party a peasant majority in addition to its undoubted workingclass support. The irony was that, by default, the MDC effectively surrendered the land issue to the very party that had consistently blocked any real land reform for twenty years.

The MDC is correct to deny that the war vet land occupiers are a genuine peasant movement. But this is not good enough: such an argument helps the MDC avoid the question of how a far more legitimate peasant social movement could be built in Zimbabwe and the question of what role the MDC and ZCTU could play in such an undertaking. In fact, a systematic programme for agrarian transformation is precisely what the MDC lacks. For all its noises about taking the land issue seriously, the MDC has largely sidestepped the land issue.

This is unfortunate since the current situation seems highly unstable and the need for particularly firm leadership from the MDC in opposition is self-evident. A strong police and army presence, ostensibly to prevent post-election violence but clearly targeted at harassing MDC strongholds, has helped create an ongoing climate of fear, for example. Rifts have also appeared between government officials and the war vets who have now branched out into allocating residential stands in urban areas (charging \$1,500 a piece for "survey" and "demarcation" costs). And many of the occupied farms remain under the control of the war vets.

It is in this context, of course, that the ZCTU strike (noted at the outset of this article) against the war vets' actions and calling for a restoration of law and order occurred. Not least important in all of this is the fact that many farmworkers will lose their jobs if the land is allocated to the farm occupiers. Philip Munyanyi of GUPWAZ estimates that farm occupations have driven 5,000 workers from their homes in the past six months, and that a further 10,000 jobs are in immediate jeopardy on hundreds of farms. Around the town of Bindura, for example, war vets have seized workers' houses for themselves, whilst workers now live in makeshift shelters of plastic sheeting and straw. Up to 350,000 farmworkers could be affected if the occupations are legalized.

Regrettably, the MDC's silence on the land issue, the failure to blend effectively the interests of workers and peasants into an effective strategic plan, is emblematic of larger flaws in its programme. Not only does the MDC lack the alternative land reform programme that would be deserving of peasant (and worker) support but the party also has yet to demonstrate that it has, more broadly, the kind of clear alternative to ZANU-PF's neo-liberal policies that would be deserving of the long-term support of the urban working class.

What is actually required, then, is a programme for social transformation that overcomes divide-and-rule politics by posing demands — around land, around political reform and social welfare restructuring, around popular self-management of services and production — that address the needs of both peasants and workers and thus helps building a class alliance between the two

that transcends the urban/rural and commercial farm/communal area divides still mirrored in the June 2000 election results.

Any plans for progressive agrarian reform would have to accommodate both peasants and workers, of course. Specifically, it would have to factor in the vast rural working class, rather than presenting the land issue as simply being one of indigenous peasants versus foreign landlords. For one thing, GUPWAZ and its constituency cannot be treated as irrelevant to the land question; for another, the question must also be posed as to whether dividing large-scale commercial farms into tiny peasant holdings necessarily provides a sustainable basis for agrarian transformation.

At the moment the party's dangerous liaison with business should be sending out warning signals about the need to secure working class control over what is, after all, widely seen to be a "workers' party" and to do so before the MDC is lost to its mass base. This latter is the danger with all centre-left political parties: they tend to look "upwards" towards multi-class alliances from which workers do not benefit and to demobilize grassroots struggles in a race to influence a state that is actually quite hostile to labour.

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