

Critique of the Article by Mahmood Mamdani

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The contribution by Mahmood Mamdani to the *London Review of Books* on the situation in Zimbabwe would make good comical reading had the situation in Zimbabwe not been so tragic. The poverty and subjectivity of his analysis is nothing short of a mockery of intellectual discourse, and not befitting of a submission to the reputable review. To the broad masses of the people of Zimbabwe and to an objective and dispassionate observer, Zimbabwe is a tale of a man-made human tragedy that exceeds the atrocities and heinous crimes afflicted on the people of Zimbabwe by colonialism. In all fairness, it would be a tall order finding any redeeming feature of Mugabe's ruinous policies – other than the beneficiaries of his patronage.

Central to Mamdani's argument is that "Mugabe has not only ruled by coercion, but by consent, and his land reform measures, however harsh, have won him support not just in Zimbabwe but throughout southern Africa". It would appear that the term consent has a totally different meaning to Mamdani than to most people. Since his defeat in the February 2000 Referendum Mugabe stole one election after another until he was finally humiliated in the 29 March 2008 elections. State sponsored violence became a permanent feature of Zimbabwe's elections in flagrant violation of SADC's norms and standards for free and fair elections. And how does support for his so-called land reform manifest itself? Mugabe and his party have had to literally bludgeon the electorate into submission, both rural and urban – especially the latter.

Mamdani attributes Mugabe's political setbacks to Western support for the Opposition and Civil Society. However, whatever support and influence there may be from the West, it pales into

insignificance against the means and resources at his disposal to influence the electorate, including total control of the public media. Surely this base of oppositional support has to be something more than the role of the West.

The people of Zimbabwe willingly and freely offered wholehearted support to the struggle to liberate them from white, racist, settler minority rule at great personal risk to themselves and in spite of racist repression and open support for the Smith regime by the West. What could have changed for them now to be duped by the same white racists and the West into bartering their hard won independence? In the circumstances, it is not only an affront and the height of irresponsibility, but also an extreme insult to the intelligence of the people of Zimbabwe to attribute their principled opposition to Mugabe to manipulation by the West.

Mamdani terms Mugabe's disastrous, violent and chaotic land grab charade a "democratic revolution." Who are the beneficiaries of this so-called "democratic revolution"? Is the political, bureaucratic and military elite's dispossession of the white farmers – who happen to be Zimbabweans with full constitutional rights – "democratic" by any stretch of the imagination? At least the occupation of the farms by white farmers had a redeeming quality in that the country was not only self-sufficient regarding food, but also had a surplus for export to feed the region. Now, with Mugabe's henchmen on the farms, the nation has been starving since the farm occupations began. This has been blamed on a succession of droughts. If that were true, what are we to make of the people of Botswana and Namibia who inhabit perennially drought-prone deserts and are surviving without any food handouts from the West? Surely we have to face reality and call a spade by its name. Drought has very little to do with food shortages in Zimbabwe.

No one doubts the need for genuine land reform in Zimbabwe (which, by the way, is still necessary) and the redressing of historical imbalances. Talk of

the irreversibility of Mugabe's so-called land reform is irresponsible, reactionary, totally misguided and misplaced. The objectives of genuine land reform are:

- Alleviation of poverty
- Food security
- Economic development
- Decongestion of communal areas

None of these core objectives were realized through Mugabe's chaotic land grab. If anything, the very opposite is the case. There is grinding poverty and no food security with more than half the population relying on food handouts from the demonized West. The communal areas are still heavily congested, with horrendous environmental consequences. The economy has been brought to its knees through the destruction of the value chain both upstream and downstream of agricultural activity, which, thanks to the abuse of the need for land reform for political expediency and to shore up Mugabe's flagging political fortunes, has now been reduced to worse than subsistence farming.

The first casualty of Mugabe's madness was the rule of law, followed by democratic and property rights, the economy and service delivery, and culminating in the total collapse of health care and education infrastructure. All of these factors have reduced Zimbabwe to the status of a failed state. Thousands have needlessly died of the preventable cholera epidemic and from other diseases while Mugabe and his cronies are looting the country's resources on a grand scale in complete insensitivity to the people's welfare.

Much has been said of the effect of sanctions on Zimbabwe's economic well-being. If the truth be told, Zimbabwe lost access to multilateral donor support way back in 1999 through failure to service its still outstanding debts. And that was before the farm invasions, in backlash reaction to which the sanctions were supposedly imposed. As for the targeted and personal sanctions, Zimbabwe has on its part also imposed targeted sanctions on both the

EU and the United States. In any case, if the West has imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe, the country still has a lot of friends in the East and the rest of the world who could easily help it weather the storms. Rhodesia, South Africa, China, Cuba and Libya are examples of countries that were subjected to real economic sanctions without having to experience the stratospheric levels of inflation and economic collapse that Zimbabwe is now facing. Evidently, there is more at play than the sanctions Mugabe's sycophantic apologists keep harping about.

To an objective observer, Mamdani's dogmatic support for Mugabe could at best be accounted for by a criminally unpardonable ignorance of the reality on the ground in Zimbabwe despite a tsunami of documented evidence of Mugabe's crimes and excesses against the people of Zimbabwe. At worst, the motivation might be a rewarding public relations service to spruce up Mugabe's battered international image.

With regard to the castigation of Botswana and Zambia as being under the spell of the West, it is instructive to note that it was these countries, alongside Tanzania, that constituted the Frontline States. They were the midwives of the liberation of Southern Africa. In the immoral defence of dictatorship and repression, the beneficiaries of their efforts and sacrifices are now claiming to be more 'revolutionary' than they. What Botswana and Zambia have done is nothing more than to publicly and steadfastly stand by the letter and spirit of the SADC protocols on good governance: respect for the rule of law and human rights, and free and fair elections – codes to which both Mbeki and Mugabe duly appended their signatures. If one suggested these protocols were dictates from the West, Mbeki and Mugabe would also be culpable of puppetry. On the contrary, it was these very values that were captured as the ideals of the liberation struggles, in support of which these same frontline countries took a principled stand. Furthermore, Zimbabwe is not only a signatory to a whole range of regional and international protocols founded on the

observance and upholding of the principles of good governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights and free and fair elections, but more importantly, the country's own constitution is anchored in the same values.

The fundamental challenge for all progressive people, be they from the East or West, is to stand by the side of the long suffering people of Zimbabwe in their struggle to break free from the yoke of Mugabe's despotic rule – and not to condone it and prop it up for whatever reason. The latter would make them accomplices and enemies of the freedom of the people of Zimbabwe.

About the author

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