

Re: Lessons of Zimbabwe*

Terence Ranger (Oxford University)

Mahmood Mamdani is correct to stress that Robert Mugabe is not just a crazed dictator or a corrupt thug but that he promotes a programme and an ideology that are attractive to many in Africa and to some in Zimbabwe itself. Mamdani takes care to balance this by recognising Mugabe's propensity for violence. Yet this balance is hard to maintain and towards the end of his article Mamdani lets it slip.

'Western countries,' he writes, 'brought their influence to bear on key Southern African Development Community (SADC) members — Botswana and Zambia — to split the organisation. Ian Khama, the president of Botswana, went so far as to announce publicly that he would not recognise the results of the 2008 elections.' But Khama needed no Western influence to realise that the June presidential rerun in Zimbabwe was illegitimate. Every African observer mission — Botswana's own, the Pan-African Parliament's, SADC's — pronounced that Mugabe's victory was vitiated by the violence that went on right up until the polls, which the observers saw with their own eyes, and of which some of them were the victims. The problem is rather to explain why so many SADC states have continued to accept Mugabe as the legitimate president despite the first-hand reports of their own emissaries.

This isn't a minor flaw in Mamdani's article since it bears on his principal analytical point. He stresses the opposition between urban workers and rural peasants, the latter supporting Mugabe because of land restitution. Yet the violence between March and June this year took place overwhelmingly in the rural areas. It would not have been necessary had

the peasantry of Mashonaland and Manicaland solidly supported the regime. The March election showed that they did not, despite land redistribution. The regime lost virtually all the Manicaland seats and there were solid votes for the opposition even in Mashonaland constituencies which Zanu-PF had previously taken for granted. Indeed it was in such constituencies that the violence was concentrated.

Zimbabwean peasants confront hunger, disease, repression; they have no inputs of seeds, fertiliser and draught power. The redistribution of land has been conducted in a way that makes a mockery of the potentials of peasant production. Mugabe's policy may be an inspiration to those in South Africa who want to redress gross inequalities in landholding. But it should also be a warning of how not to go about it.

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