

Re: Lessons of Zimbabwe*

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And 33 others

For a number of scholars, Mahmood Mamdani's 'Lessons of Zimbabwe' requires a further response, given Mamdani's stature as a scholar and public intellectual. Some aspects of his argument are uncontroversial: there was a real demand for land redistribution — even the World Bank was calling for it in the late 1990s as the best way forward in Zimbabwe — and some of the Western powers' original pronouncements and actions were hypocritical. There is a real danger, however, in simplifying the lessons of Zimbabwe. It isn't just a matter of stark ethnic dichotomies, the urban-rural divide, or the part played by 'the West'.

One of the more difficult tasks for scholars working on Zimbabwe is to convince peers working on other areas of Africa to look more deeply at the crisis and not to be fooled by Mugabe's rhetoric of imperialist victimisation. Mamdani has, unfortunately, fallen in with this rhetoric by characterising Zimbabwean history and politics as fundamentally a battle between what he sees as an urban-based opposition, supported by the West, and a peasant-based ruling party besieged by external forces. This flight of fantasy portrays Mugabe and his Zanu-PF cronies as heroes of a landless peasantry (which is how they see themselves) and the state — backed up by the paramilitary violence of war veterans and others — as the vanguard of a peasant revolution. We suggest that Mamdani acquaint himself with the large body of Zimbabwean scholarship, which is easily available, rather than selectively using the arguments of scholars such as Sam Moyo and Paris

Yeros on land reform, and Gideon Gono, Mugabe's Reserve Bank governor, as his source on sanctions. Citing Gono is rather like using Milton Obote's writings as a source for conditions in Uganda in the 1960s and 1970s. A starting point for more informed scholarship is the recent Bulletin* of the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars.

Mamdani's portrayal of Zimbabwe's opposition politics is insulting to those who continue to endure so much in their struggle to build a better Zimbabwe. He argues that urban trade unions have always been marginal to the nationalist movement because of their supposed 'Ndebele leadership', and that the current opposition follows in this 'weak' trade-union tradition as well as being in thrall to Western interests. What he doesn't mention is the trade unions' hard-fought battle against repression before and after 1980. There were many challenges to overcome, among which ethnic politics was hardly the most prominent. That leaders such as Morgan Tsvangirai managed to reshape the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) from what had been a pro-Zanu organisation into a viable political opposition by the early 1990s reflects an Africa-wide and Africa-based phenomenon that Mamdani apparently missed. By accepting Zanu-PF's argument that the MDC is primarily limited to urban areas and is the product of the West, Mamdani's account loses credibility.

Mamdani has also sugar-coated his portrayal of political violence in Zimbabwe. He fails even to mention that many 'peasants' in Shona-speaking Zanu-PF strongholds turned against Mugabe and major Zanu-PF leaders in the March 2008 elections. It was this reversal that sparked a new round of state-sponsored violence against the same Shona peasantry that Mamdani cites as the beneficiaries of Mugabe's benevolent dictatorship. In addition, during the months preceding the run-off election (April-June 2008), food relief was denied to rural areas, leaving the World Food Programme and other groups to scramble to re-establish supply to the Zimbabwean peasantry Mamdani suggests are at the

* This letter originally appeared in the *London Review of Books* 31, n.1 (December 1, 2009) in response to Mamdani's 'Lessons of Zimbabwe'. It is republished here with the kind permission of the LRB editors.

* <http://concernedafricascholars.org/?p=123>

centre of Zanu-PF's concern. Repressive legislation and actions by Zanu-PF activists are magically transformed by Mamdani into acts of generosity to outsiders. After noting discrimination against farm workers in gaining access to land on the grounds they or 'their elders' came from another country, Mamdani adds that 'some were given citizenship.' Yet he omits the fact that just before the 2002 presidential election the Zanu-PF government removed citizenship from many farm workers and other Zimbabweans whose parents or grandparents had non-Zimbabwean citizenship rights. The disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of perceived opposition supporters disappears in Mamdani's analysis.

Mamdani's contention that the West, not Mugabe and the Zanu-PF government, is responsible for the current crisis is as dangerous as it is wrong. By selectively citing instances over the past eight years when the West has cancelled donor funding, Mamdani gives the impression that the West has not been involved in sustaining life in Zimbabwe. The reality is that there are whole sections of the Zimbabwean population that the Zanu-PF leadership would rather punish with starvation than allow to support the opposition. 'We would be better off with only six million people, with our own [ruling party] people who supported the liberation struggle,' Didymus Mutasa, one of the key insiders in Zanu-PF, said in 2002, when drought again threatened to kill thousands of rural Zimbabweans. 'We don't want all these extra people.' Western food aid has been a lifeline for 'these extra people' — when the state has allowed access.

Sanctions cannot excuse the callous disregard for human life Mugabe and his associates have shown, dating back to the Gukurahundi between 1983 and 1986 (which Mamdani glosses over as a brief bout of violence following from the tension between Zanu-PF and the 'Ndebele unions' in 1986), or the repeated land seizures which have been going on since the 1980s, the forced removals, violent reprisals, and the withholding of food aid.

Furthermore, Mamdani's suggestion that the fall in direct investment in Zimbabwe is the result of sanctions is dishonest. There are no sanctions against direct investment in Zimbabwe, as shown by Anglo American's willingness to invest \$400 million in Zimbabwe during the summer of 2008 to protect access to platinum mines. There have been large investments from South Africa, India and China, as Mugabe has bartered away the nation's resources for short-term interests. It is the kleptocracy and violence fostered by Mugabe and Co that has scared off other investors, not sanctions.

At a time when thousands of people in Zimbabwe are threatened by a cholera epidemic — in part at least as a consequence of Zanu-PF's decision to replace MDC municipal officials with Zanu-PF 'urban governors' — and international donors are scrambling to help deal with the collapse of the health sector and widespread hunger, intellectuals such as Mamdani should display more responsibility and less posturing in their attempts to draw meaningful lessons from Zimbabwe.

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