

Re: Lessons of Zimbabwe*

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Returns in the 2008 election suggest that Zimbabwe is a deeply divided society. This is so whether you go by the official count or that of the government. I have argued that this split has three fault lines: urban-rural, ethnic and class. R.W. Johnson ([*London Review of Books*] Letters, 18 December 2008) and Timothy Scarnecchia et al [see this issue] disagree, but they have not offered a satisfactory alternative explanation. Instead, they suggest, apparently in unison, that the splits in Zimbabwean society are a result of the machinations of those in power — ‘Mugabe and his cronies’ — who wish to hang on to it at all costs.

In a utopian variation on this argument, Gavin Kitching gives a blueprint of policies that ‘should have been’ followed: he assumes that the will of rulers translates into policies, with no intervening factors, internal or external, historical or contemporary, acting as checks and constraints. Terence Ranger [see this issue] concludes that whereas ‘Mugabe’s policy may be an inspiration to those in South Africa who want to redress gross inequalities in landholding . . . it should also be a warning of how not to go about it.’ This is the same verdict I heard in Kampala in 1980 on Amin’s expulsion of Ugandan Asians: he should not have done it this way! My object is not to propose the ‘fast-track reforms’ as a model of land redistribution for South Africa, but to sound a warning about the kind of demagoguery that is likely to follow, should those in power continue to ignore historically just demands.

I do not question that Mugabe and Co desire to hang on to power — at considerable cost — but I do argue that this single fact cannot explain their ability to do so. Nor can fear or intimidation by

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itself explain why so many who have no power — almost half the Zimbabwean electorate — would vote for the regime. This is not just a split between state and society, as critics of my article suggest, but a case of a society itself being deeply divided.

In my article I identified two divisive issues in particular. The primary issue, in a predominantly rural society just emerging from the settler colonial era, was the land question. The second — whose importance is bound to grow in the aftermath of land redistribution — is the freedom to organise independently of the regime.

The government responded to the exercise of that freedom with a mixture of repression and incorporation. Critics of my article focus only on the former. Repression — especially of trade unions and civil society organisations — has been very marked in the urban areas. A far more nuanced relationship developed between the regime and the war veterans’ organisation, partly because of its historical links to the liberation struggle, and partly because it straddled the two major divisions, between state and society and urban and rural.

The explanation for the fast-track reforms of 2000-3 does not lie in the machinations of government, as these letters suggest, but in the success of the veterans’ mobilisation. The regime’s response evolved as the organisation grew: as I explain in the article, the same government that was initially showered with plaudits for using force to evict squatters was later condemned for using force to redistribute land. I do not believe the official embrace and co-option of the veterans’ organisation can be explained as a conspiracy; the debate on how to respond culminated in a split at the highest levels of power.

Scarnecchia et al dismiss the destructive impact of Western countries, both as drivers of sanctions and as powerful opponents of any regional effort to resolve the Zimbabwean crisis. Let me recall that the sanctions predated fast-track reforms: they were a response to Zimbabwe’s involvement in the

Congo war. As early as November 2001, Jack Straw as foreign secretary publicly boasted of building coalitions against Zimbabwe. There were reports of British threats to withhold budgetary support — some claimed even food aid — from Malawi and Mozambique as the Extraordinary Summit of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) opened in Blantyre, Malawi on 14 January 2002. During the summit, the Tanzanian president, Benjamin Mkapa, said Baroness Amos, who was then parliamentary under-secretary for foreign affairs, had urged him in a phone call not to support Zimbabwe; when that failed, he said, Straw phoned and attempted to bully him. In 2007, the SADC called for an end to sanctions and for international support for a post-land reform recovery programme. In 2008, Western countries managed to bring their influence to bear on key SADC members — Botswana and Zambia — to split the SADC.

I am not suggesting that there is a single explanation of Zimbabwe's rapidly accelerating economic crisis: the causes of the crisis are complex and multiple. My critics seem to think that the economic crisis is explained either by the regime's repression and incompetence or by the draconian sanctions set in place by the West. The fact is that neither one nor the other on its own, but both — and other factors, including recurring drought — underlie the crisis.

My disagreement with Johnson, Scarnecchia et al is both political and methodological. They seem to imagine only two options: either to romanticise Mugabe as a liberation hero or to demonise him as a post-liberation despot. I have suggested that these caricatures overlap for one reason: the liberation struggle against settler colonialism did not end with the guerrilla war and political independence in 1980, but continued through the fast-track reforms. In any case, the regime that championed land reform is the same regime that unleashes repression against anyone who dares to organise independently of it. Scarnecchia et al cannot fail to see this, but apparently they refuse to accept it; whence their insistence on an either/or conclusion, and their

tendency to scour all scholarship for a hidden agenda: is the author for or against Mugabe? Actually, that is beside the point.

Focused on Mugabe and eager to defend the opposition, they seek to portray my article as a piece of pro-regime writing, whereas it aims to free the debate about Zimbabwe from the narrow confines of a regime-opposition polemic by understanding Mugabe's survival as part of a far bigger picture: that of land reform and the historic struggles which underpin it — struggles that Mugabe and Zanu-PF championed in the liberation era, opposed during the period of structural adjustment and 'reconciliation', and turned to their advantage when faced with an effective opposition.