

Mamdani on Zimbabwe sets back Civil Society

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Although Mahmood Mamdani is an inspiring intellectual and political writer, one of Africa's greatest ever, his *London Review of Books* article 'Lessons of Zimbabwe' invites debate and disagreement. To begin, consider Mamdani's 'abiding recollection of my first few months back' in Uganda when his compatriots did not oppose Idi Amin's expulsion of 'Asians', saying only that 'It was bad the way he did it.' The Zimbabwe case is so different as to repel such comparisons. The 4000 whites who controlled the bulk of good land until February 2000 included beneficiaries of the historic colonial theft, while others bought into the system by purchasing farms after independence. Most had vast swathes of underutilised land, but many were extremely productive, using racially exclusive networks for credit, inputs and marketing, especially to growing international markets during the 1990s liberalisation era. Helter skelter, they were all removed; a few hundred remained on their farms through the late 2000s because they cut deals with local elites or in some rare cases, had the support of neighbouring Communal Area constituencies for whom they provided services.

Rather than confuse matters with the Uganda comparison (which related mainly to urban Asians and those in commercial circuitries), the following is more 'likely to be said' of the situation prevailing in February 2000:

- land transfers to the majority were necessary and long overdue, since the free market model agreed at Lancaster House [the independence agreement between the liberation movement and the British government] and in subsequent World Bank loans wasn't working (nor was it meant to), and since structural adjustment had generated vast profits for tobacco, horticultural and other (mainly white) agro-exporters, while

peasants lost economic ground during the 1990s (a point important for understanding resentments against wealthy white farmers);

- notwithstanding a record of hostility to rural squatter movements, Mugabe turned from a defeat in the national constitutional referendum of February 2000 to desperate encouragement of war veteran invasions of white farms (especially after white farmers were shown on TV writing cheques to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change), which does represent a profound change in tenure to be sure, but moreso represented a desperation power grab;
- Mugabe allowed far too many of his cronies to get good farms (as even a state investigating commission conceded), and didn't set up proper agricultural support systems for those millions of landless who should have benefited from redistribution, leading to a huge decline in agricultural output, food aid dependency on Western donors and NGO distributors, and the repeated prospect of mass starvation (points that Mamdani skirts).

For Mamdani, both Mugabe and Amin 'projected themselves as champions of mass justice and successfully rallied those to whom justice had been denied by the colonial system.' Naturally, there are a wide variety of such rulers who used a fake anti-imperialism and anti-neocolonialism to rally support, from Marcos in the Philippines to the Argentine generals, back to the characters Frantz Fanon described in *Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. It's an old trick, but Zimbabweans are not so blind as to 'remember 2000-3 as the end of the settler colonial era. Any assessment of contemporary Zimbabwe needs to begin with this sobering fact.' And yet two countervailing 'facts' also stand out:

- 2000-03 was the moment when — reminiscent of the early/mid-1980s in Matabeleland — an electorally-threatened Mugabe used brutal violence against his opponents, terrorising the society and

vindicating those who claimed Mugabe's rule would necessarily end in dictatorship, hence leaving the early 2000s the definitively 'exhausted' state of Mugabe's ultra-nationalism (insofar as it stopped delivering goods and instead switched to coercion); and in any case,

- 'settler colonialism' easily transformed into post-settler neocolonialism nearly everywhere, and Zimbabwe is no exception, for while the society may now have less than a quarter of its former peak of white inhabitants, the economy is still oriented to activities that, if not controlled by white Zimbabweans or white South Africans or white Brits, mimics that control through compliant local black ownership -- in finance, commerce, mining and residual manufacturing especially (while a preponderance of white senior managers remains).

For Mamdani, 'The best publicised casualties of the land reform movement were the urban poor who hoped to benefit from extending land invasions to urban areas.' There was, in reality, a huge disconnect between what was happening in the countryside and the cities, so that this sentence is misleading: 'The veterans spearheaded occupations of urban residential land in 2000-1. Housing co-operatives and other associations followed their lead and set up "illegal" residential or business sites.' Actually, the housing coop movement was firmly established by the mid-1990s and did not follow the war veterans' lead -- but instead joined hundreds of thousands of atomistic urban residents in setting up illegal or informal economic activities and residential situations in the overcrowded, underhoused cities. They did so in an incremental way beginning in the 1980s, hence there were an estimated 700,000 people whose shelter and livelihoods were destroyed by Operation *Murambatsvina*, including those of Mugabe supporters.

For Mamdani, 'the state feared that it would lose control over towns to the MDC if the land reform

movement was allowed to spread' - an unusual formulation to explain *Murambatsvina*. Mugabe had a simple rationale for invoking *Murambatsvina*: demonisation/intimidation of opposition supporters (and even, by accident, some of his own urban supporters). Victims included the broader progressive political project of those in civil society - e.g. many Zimbabwe Social Forum affiliates - who consistently supported poor people both through radical rural land reform advocacy and through 'rights to the city' projects such as informalisation of survival activity. To conflate these complex and thoroughly contradictory processes with no concrete evidence is far beneath Mamdani's capacity.

Turning to Mugabe's faux anti-imperialism, Mamdani blames much of the hostility from the West upon 'Zimbabwe's entry into the Congo war in August 1998.' But recall that in 1998 Mugabe was supporting Laurent Kabila (who came to power in part through global mining interests), and his own allies' and generals' personal interests in that process are well documented. No doubt some geopolitical factors related to control over the eastern DRC were also in play, with the US lining up with Uganda and Rwanda for medium-term control of the region's resources. But Mamdani forgets that the IMF explicitly allowed huge financial transfers from within the Zimbabwe fiscus to finance the war (so long as cuts in other programs paid for it), and expressed much more concern about a new set of late 1990s economic policies that reflected structural adjustment's failure: introduction of selective price controls, increased tariffs, import licensing on some goods, procrastination in meeting regional liberalisation targets, pegging of the exchange rate, suspension of foreign currency accounts, introduction of new export incentives and application of new levies on tobacco and consumer goods.

For Mamdani, 'Participants in the donor conference for Zimbabwe that year [1998] were decidedly lukewarm about committing funds', yet they had been the whole time since 1980. For Mamdani,

there followed another alleged punishment: ‘The following year the IMF suspended lending to Zimbabwe.’ Hang on, by then, Mugabe had stopped repaying IMF loans, and was violating several of the neoliberal conditions placed on earlier loans. For Mamdani, another indication of the fall-out in 1999 was that ‘the US and the UK decided to fund the labour movement, led by the ZCTU, first to oppose constitutional change and then to launch the MDC as a full-fledged opposition party.’ Yet international donor support for the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions’ more conservative initiatives dated back to the 1980s, in part through the AFL-CIO’s cold-warrior dominated Solidarity Center and the African American Labor Center (as I recall from personal victimization when a left project gathered pace within the ZCTU).

Mamdani agrees with Mugabe that sanctions can serve as an explanation for Zimbabwe’s crisis, because after land reform finally began in 2000, ‘the Western donor community shut the door on Zimbabwe.’ The data collected by the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development suggest otherwise. In 2007, the last year full statistics exist, the West gave \$465 million to various Zimbabwe projects, representing 10 percent of the country’s GDP and – at \$40/person – a higher per capita amount than that of SubSaharan African countries receiving aid (\$39), and more than twice as much as all Third World countries (\$17). The G7 donations were \$294 million, higher than the 1980s average (\$254) when Zimbabwe was a donor favourite. Britain gave \$94 million (\$65 million average during the 1980s) and the US gave \$139 million (\$58 million average during the 1980s).

The 2000s downtick in imperialist donations to Zimbabwe – a fall by 50% from average 1990s figures, until 2007 – can be blamed on various factors: the uptick in state repression, Mugabe’s zigzagging away from neoliberal economic policies, and a sense that Mugabe would soon lose to Tsvangirai in an election. But \$277 million flowed each year, on average, during the 2000s, hardly a ‘shut door’. US AID in particular was prolific in

sending out its food support, replete with branding logos all over the maize bags and cooking oil tins.

Mamdani’s ‘door shut’ metaphor is incorrect and so is this comparison: ‘The sanctions regime, led by the US and Britain, was elaborate, tested during the first Iraq war and then against Iran.’ The only real US sanctions were the smart sanctions against the elites. Instead of imposing genuine economic sanctions, George W. Bush left Zimbabwe to his ‘point man’ (sic), Thabo Mbeki. Mamdani makes much of the idea that Bush and Jesse Helms invoked a law to oppose the World Bank and International Monetary Fund from lending to Mugabe’s government. Surprisingly, he does not mention the most profound reason for the IMF’s above decisions: Mugabe’s failure to repay overdue loans. Moreover, when in 2005-06, Mugabe (egged on by Mbeki) tried to clear \$210 million in extreme arrears (with more than \$1 billion in other arrears to the IMF, World Bank and African Development Bank still outstanding), he had not put in place the neoliberal economic policies required by the IMF for ongoing support.

My own understanding is that at no time did the US have to exercise the veto over IMF loans it has been notorious for in other cases. The ‘sanctions’ Mamdani describes were simply not a factor -- Mugabe had himself imposed sanctions on himself by not repaying the Bretton Woods Institutions starting in 1999, and by adopting non-neoliberal economic policies following his celebrated imposition of structural adjustment through 1996 (‘highly satisfactory’, opined the World Bank that year – the highest possible rating Washington gives). In any case, ‘sanctions’ by the Bretton Woods Institutions should be no barrier to a country’s growth, if it is managed properly, as Argentina showed after its 2002 default on \$130 billion in foreign loans. It then led Latin America in recovery from the ‘lost’ 1980s-90s neoliberal era.

One of the most dangerous fallacies about the country’s economic crisis is that it stems from sanctions, a point to be proven in coming days and

weeks as the Government of National Unity compels a rethink of the donor aid bans, international financial boycotts and other economic ‘sanctions’ that are allegedly holding Zimbabwe back. The awful tragedy played out the last week of February was SA foreign minister Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma’s call for ‘an end to sanctions’ against Zimbabwe. Specifically, SA finance Trevor Manuel aimed to clear at least \$1.2 billion in arrears by sanitizing Mugabe’s old loans with a new mega-loan that will immediately repay the Bretton Woods Institutions, precisely the way Manuel sanitized Mobutu’s loans through a June 2002 credit to the DRC which went straight to the IMF.

It is here Mamdani amplifies what can be considered Mugabe’s greatest myth: economic destruction and inflation unprecedented in recorded human history is due to ‘sanctions’. First, it must be recorded that, contrary to his claim that the MDC and unions favoured a suspension of aid and loans ‘in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2000’, the only sanctions publicly advocated have been ‘smart sanctions’: personal bank account freezes and travel bans on about 200 ZANU-PF and state officials. The Durban dockworkers’ refusal to offload weapons and three million bullets from a Chinese ship in April 2008 was applauded, no doubt, but Zimbabwe’s oppositional forces have rarely expressed support for specific sanctions, and the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition specifically rejected anything beyond smart sanctions.

Mamdani has been led to believe that ‘sanctions have played no small part’ in ‘laying waste’ to the economy. My own view – documented in *Uneven Zimbabwe* and *Zimbabwe’s Plunge* – is that a deeper capitalist malaise engulfed Zimbabwe since around 1974, the year that per capita wealth began to decline. The problem can be summarized as a classical case of overaccumulated capital and, by the time of structural adjustment in the early 1990s, a turn to the speculative/parasitical mode of not only capital accumulation but also state management. These deep-rooted problems cannot be reduced to Mugabe’s ‘policies’, but instead are

problems all state managers have faced, nearly everywhere in the world. Mugabe had much more leverage -- because politically he is a dictator -- to adopt a unique zig-zag technique. He has weaved between market liberalisation, crony-capitalist corruption and state interventions, leaving Zimbabwe with the highest inflation ever recorded in human history, at a time when neighbouring states’ inflation was declining substantially due to more pure versions of neoliberalism. But zagging right again in January 2009, he authorized a nearly complete liberalization of Zimbabwe’s monetary sector, which immediately caused a reported \$45 million capital flight by his cronies.

In comparison to such deep-seated endogenous processes, exogenous ‘sanctions’ have played a very small part in the present manifestation of this long crisis. Moreover, instead of ruling ‘by consent’ and instead of land reform measures winning ‘him considerable popularity, not just in Zimbabwe but throughout southern Africa’, as Mamdani posits about Mugabe, we should understand his zig-zag dirigisme as last-gasp measures to retain power through patronage on the one hand, and to bail out crony-capitalist allies on the other. The insistence on bloating out the Cabinet to 71 members is only one reflection of the addiction to patronage that his rule embodies.

Sadly, Mamdani’s source for sanctions evidence is the notorious, corrupt central bank chief, Gideon Gono, who has long abused the forex control system. Mamdani doesn’t mention that Zimbabwe has had the third worst outflow of capital flight of any country in Africa (only Nigeria and Angola have suffered a higher proportion of their GDP moving abroad, illegally, since the mid-1970s, according to the most rigorous study -- by Leonce Ndikumana and James Boyce), not to mention ubiquitous luxury good imports for Mugabe’s cronies.

In dealing with foreign debt, Mamdani laments that Zimbabwe’s arrears soared starting in 1999, but this is a matter of controversy. After all, the Jubilee

movement (locally represented by the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development) repeatedly requested that Mugabe stop repaying foreign loans. But instead of Mugabe following a principled strategy linked to other Third World leaders in a debtors' cartel, as Jubilee South (and Julius Nyerere and Fidel Castro) advocated a quarter century ago, there was a simple reason for default: he ran out of forex. In 1998, Zimbabwe paid more in debt servicing than any country in the world (as a percentage of GDP) aside from Brazil and Burundi.

Having stopped repaying -- except for the silly strategy of partial IMF repayments in 2005-06 -- naturally arrears increased dramatically. The Jubilee movement was disgusted by the IMF repayment and advocates that Zimbabwe's entire foreign debt -- \$5+ billion -- be repudiated, and indeed declared as 'odious debt' under international law, since the vast majority of people who suffered because of those loans (which mainly funded the 1990s structural adjustment destruction of the economy and social wage) were not properly consulted by the Mugabe regime.

In a related argument, Mamdani worries that 'Foreign direct investment had shrunk from \$444.3 million in 1998 to \$50 million in 2006.' But the Zimbabwe economy has been the fastest-shrinking in the world, so this is only to be expected -- it's not a sign of sanctions. And when he records the shrinking support to the state for health (e.g. the Danish state's aid suspension), he fails to note the systematic abuse of aid -- both in day-to-day activities (as the World Development Movement and ActionAid have documented) and also in Zimbabwe where forex used for aid has been systematically looted by the central bank and government departments. There are a great many providers of humanitarian aid, as well as NGOs, ready to supply the Zimbabwe countryside with food and other services -- but Mugabe has systematically prevented them from operating.

Further, when choosing evidence that can legitimize Zanu-PF, it is regrettable Mamdani reverts to the

2005 bogus electoral statistics, and in turn to findings by Namibian, Nigerian and South African official observers, given how readily African elites (from Windhoek, Abuja, Pretoria) support other African elites (in Harare) - against the mass of Zimbabweans.

Moreover, in contrast to Mamdani's hope that settler colonialism has been solved by the land invasions, ultimately, thorough-going *pro-povo* land reform will again be needed in Zimbabwe, so as to dislodge Mugabe's cronies who have merely taken over existing plantations, leaving many wrecked. Mugabe's rural victims have a right to a better future than the rancid deal negotiators from the region have imposed. Mugabe's land reform measures were 'harsh' (Mamdani) -- to a few thousand white farmers yes, but most importantly, to millions of black peasants and urban workers now starving or unable to buy food, and hundreds of thousands of rural farmworkers -- not to those outside Zimbabwe who support him (who remain well-fed). Hence the middle-ground phrasing Mamdani employs here sets the tone for a false balance.

But land aside, the September 15, 2008 'powersharing' agreement Mamdani endorses is a disaster in many other respects, as it combines the worst of both worlds: looming neoliberalism if the business faction of the MDC influences economic policy (the MDC gets the finance ministry, but while it is presently held by a leftist, Tendai Biti, the real power over reconstruction financing is being imposed from Pretoria, Tunis and Washington) on the one hand, and on the other, ongoing crony capitalism through Mugabe's extensive patronage system within the Zimbabwe state. Add to this the monopoly of violence re-legitimised: a more actively repressive arm of the state for those in civil society who would protest the new elite transition, e.g. the Women of Zimbabwe Arise members arrested in late February, and so many other dozens of human rights advocates rotting in Chikurubi and other prisons at the time of writing.

Finally, a few matters on South Africa. It would be nice if 'The experience of land reform in Zimbabwe has set alarm bells ringing in South Africa', as the Landless Peoples Movement (LPM) hoped would be the case by raising this spectre in 2001 at the World Conference Against Racism and in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Not so, for tragically, the LPM was subsequently destabilised, and there is presently no rural South African social movement with the weight necessary to raise an alarm bell that the Zimbabwe experience will be repeated.

Mamdani also misreads SA civil society by claiming that 'many activists and intellectuals, for the most part progressives, have aligned themselves with distant or long-standing enemies in an effort to dislodge an authoritarian government clinging to power on the basis of historic grievances about the colonial theft of land. Symbolic of this was the refusal by Cosatu-affiliated unions to unload a cargo of Chinese arms destined for Zimbabwe when the An Yue Jiang sailed into Durban in April.' In reality, there was no alliance with enemies, for what happened in April 2008 was simple: a local progressive church leader, Bishop Rubin Phillip (whose political roots are in the black consciousness movement), and the anti-Mugabe South African trade union movement together raised the alarm about crates of guns and about three million bullets moving from Durban to Harare, and prevented the unloading there and across the region (and they were assisted by a lawyer based at Open Society's regional arm). The most important alliance began in that process: people-people solidarity across the Limpopo River. After xenophobic attacks on tens of thousands of Zimbabweans here in May-June 2008, this point is ever more crucial to note. It means that instead of an 'alliance' between progressive activists (like Phillip or COSATU) and 'long-standing enemies', the way forward is cross-border cooperation by oppressed peoples of both countries.

From the top-down, in contrast, the picture painted by officials and the corporate media in South Africa

resembles the world view of a vulture. Consider a suggestion last September for Tsvangirai from Investec Bank's Roelof Horne: "austerity from within". At the same time, the SA Independent newspaper group editorialized that the Mugabe/Tsvangirai government should "introduce drastic policies, including slashing government spending and freeing up price, currency and other controls" as "conditions for receiving foreign aid." Particularly in the weeks following Tsvangirai's acceptance of the prime ministership chalice in February, with Manuel and the African Development Bank preparing belt-tightening strategies for the world's thinnest people, a deep critique of Pretoria/Johannesburg's subimperial designs on Zimbabwe is vital. This project, which I think is consistent with Mamdani's prior, inspiring work on African politics, is set back a little by the myriad confusions raised in his Zimbabwe analysis.

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