

The Measure of Just Demands? A Response to Mamdani

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Judging by the passionate and wide-ranging responses to Mahmood Mamdani's 'Lessons of Zimbabwe' (London Review of Books, 4 December 2008), he has struck a deep chord amongst scholars of and from Zimbabwe – as well as others concerned more broadly with questions of African politics – both with the particular issues he has raised and those left starkly absent from his analysis. The present ACAS Bulletin is doing us all a valuable service by usefully bringing together the different responses evoked by Mamdani's original piece and his subsequent response to his critics (London Review of Books, 1 January 2009). Although in disagreement with much of what he has written in these two pieces, I nonetheless express my appreciation for his efforts to stimulate serious public debate about Zimbabwe beyond partisan rhetoric (even if he himself has not entirely avoided such rhetoric). This is certainly welcome.

Much has already been written by eminent scholars as part of this debate, with whom I concur (among others, Patrick Bond and Ben Cousins). Having already added my name to a wider critical chorus (the letter to the LRB by 'Scarnecchia et al', 1 January 2009), I will limit myself here to a few additional points where I feel Mamdani's analysis would have benefited from more considered reflection, and engagement with a wider selection of sources. These points relate to his somewhat idealized reading of the land occupations and position of war veterans in this process; his underplaying of the Zanu (PF) party-state project; and his unexpectedly narrow definition of 'the people'.

One of the key premises of Mamdani's analysis of the apparently 'democratic' nature of Zimbabwe's post-2000 land revolution is that it was largely

driven by an authentic 'land occupation movement', a thesis developed largely by Moyo and Yeros (2005) and which Mamdani accepts uncritically. One cannot deny the significant role played by war veterans in initiating the land invasions and occupations both in the late 1990s and from 2000 onwards, alongside a range of other interested, mainly local actors (Sadomba 2008, Marongwe 2003). However, to account for the extent of the nationwide operation that perhaps started with more spontaneous occupations but then led fairly quickly into the 'official' fast-track land reform process, (primarily) in terms of "the success of the veterans' mobilisation", seems a rather exaggerated claim. Not only is there little evidence to substantiate the claim of a *pre-existing*, organized 'land occupation movement' prior to 2000 as Moyo and Yeros and now Mamdani claim.¹ In addition, despite contributions from varied independent sources (Sadomba 2008), it would have been materially, let alone politically, highly unfeasible for under-resourced veterans to sustain such national-scale mobilization independently of extensive party and state backing on multiple levels. Logistical, financial and other forms of support, as well as protection from legal prosecution for property-related or violent crimes, provided the basis on which many of the occupations were organized and sustained for as long as they were (Kriger 2006).

To represent the regime as somehow passively following the lead of the war veterans, or conveniently jumping on their bandwagon as a matter of elite cooptation of an established agrarian land movement, is to over-estimate the capacities, resources and scale of the veterans' 'organisation', and to significantly under-estimate the overlapping (and persistent) projects of sovereignty and hegemony of the Zanu (PF) party-state. As post-independence history has amply demonstrated, there

¹ Indeed, Moyo himself in earlier work noted the *absence* of "a nation-wide political movement and/or peasant rebellion, over demands for land" (Moyo 1999, 5). This is not to suggest that there wasn't an active war veterans movement especially during the 1990s, but this cannot be assumed automatically to be the same as a peasant or land occupation movement.

has been no organization or group to date in Zimbabwe that the ruling regime has been unable or unwilling to crush if so desired. As such, it seems strange for Mamdani to so resolutely downplay the party-state capacity and inclination to keep control of the country's key political and economic assets, least of all land. It seems equally misplaced for Mamdani to dismiss as 'conspiracy theories' the attention given by some scholars to the explicit and largely violent practices of state-making that have accompanied if not superseded the land revolution, not to mention the largely undisguised elite accumulation linked to party loyalty. Naming this as such is not a question of conspiracy but of *politics*.

Furthermore, to look at the land occupations in isolation from the broader political landscape of post-2000 Zimbabwe, and most critically the evolution of a viable political opposition and its threat to Zanu (PF) hegemony and state control, represents a key blind-spot in Mamdani's analysis. Certainly one needs to look at the land redistribution project in terms of 'historically just demands'. But one also needs to examine this project in its broader contemporary setting of wide-scale party-state attacks on any form of opposition, and the mass displacement of both rural and urban Zimbabweans. If one opens up the picture in this way, surely one cannot suggest comfortably, as Mamdani does, that "it is striking how little turmoil accompanied this massive social change" of radical land reform.

It remains hard to fathom why there is such an insistence by Mamdani, Moyo and others, on ignoring or down-playing the extensive evidence of the party-state project itself, and the profound contradictions between what the regime has claimed to be doing, and what it has actually done. And why do 'historically just demands' (defined uncritically within the paradigm of a singular and static Land Question) automatically outweigh or supersede *currently* just demands not for only land, but for the basic conditions of life: health, food, shelter, safe water, safety, and the right to exercise one's

democratic right to vote or even voice objection to one's suffering? Surely these are *all* valid.

Drawing attention to the limitations of the war veterans' thesis and to the need for more analytical emphasis simultaneously on the party-state project is not to argue against the need for a radical land redistribution process (albeit one that doesn't undermine national and local economies, or one that violates basic human rights). Nor is it to deny the depth of grievances or the genuine activism of many war veterans and other land hungry or economically disadvantaged citizens in Zimbabwe. It is rather to ensure a less idealized and more honest account of both the meaning and realities of the so-called radical land revolution that Mugabe has so successfully and cynically peddled as heroically anti-imperialist.

Finally, it is hard to understand why, with so much evidence on the brutal intimidation of the electorate both directly by force and indirectly through structural violence, Mamdani would claim so glibly that "almost half the Zimbabwean electorate" is in support of Mugabe and Zanu (PF). Certainly some are. Certainly there have been selective benefits and uneven successes related to the land reform process and other forms of redistribution of assets. But this has been overtly linked to party loyalty, and counters the too-easy assertion made by Mamdani of this being 'a social and economic – if not political – democratic revolution'. Democratic for whom? In relation to this, there is a sense, to paraphrase George Orwell, that 'some people are more equal than others', or rather in the case of present-day Zimbabwe, some get to be validated as 'the people', while others are regarded as mere surplus. And so when Mamdani says "The people of Zimbabwe are likely to remember 2000-3 as the end of the settler colonial era", one has to wonder which 'people' this refers to, and what will others, who have been violently excluded from the benefits of this revolution or worse, remember of this time.

References

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