

A Reply to Mamdani on the Zimbabwean Land Question

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The most useful aspect of Mahmood Mamdani's article "Lessons from Zimbabwe" (London Review of Books, 4 Dec 2008) is his challenge to influential stereotypes of land reform commonly found in the media and elsewhere. Citing Ian Scoones' note on five myths of land reform in Zimbabwe¹, Mamdani points out that the massive redistribution of farms since 2000 has not resulted in complete agricultural failure. Provisional research findings from the Zimbabwe component of our three-country study of the impacts of land redistribution, which form the basis for Scoones' article, do indeed show that some of the new occupants of former commercial farms in Masvingo Province have produced good crop harvests in years of reasonable rainfall (such as the 2005/6 season).

Other research by Scoones and colleagues² demonstrates how the livestock sector in southern Zimbabwe has remained vibrant through a fundamental restructuring of both production systems and commodity chains.

As pointed out by Mamdani and as is evident in our research sites, drought has played a key role in constraining crop output from land reform farms in recent years, and is undoubtedly a key factor in the current food crisis. Other factors include the completely inadequate supply of inputs such as seed and fertilizer, partly as a result of the wider economic crisis, and exacerbated by corruption in the allocation of these inputs as well as a dire shortage of foreign exchange. The collapse of the old commercial farming economy, together with non-production on some of the farms taken over by

the new elite, have contributed to that wider crisis, for sure, but are far from the sole causes.

This complex interplay of factors affecting the agricultural sector is rarely acknowledged in the media, or in ill-informed commentary³ where all the problems of the economy are sometimes ascribed simply to the impact of radical land reform.

More problematic is Mamdani's core argument that the Mugabe regime has survived in large part due to its popular support, located in particular amongst the rural peasantry. Despite occasional acknowledgement of the authoritarian and repressive nature of the regime, the violence that has accompanied land occupations, and corruption by members of the ruling elite, the overall thrust of the article is to de-emphasize repression and highlight popular support for Mugabe.

As other responses to Mamdani's piece have shown⁴, his characterization of the political dynamics at work in Zimbabwe is simplistic and specious. He over-emphasizes ethnicity, the urban-rural divide, donor support for civil society, rich country sanctions, and the degree of rural support for Zanu (PF). He under-plays class divides, the extent of state violence and intimidation, the withholding of food aid to opposition supporters, the manipulation of election processes and results, and the support provided to the regime by Mbeki and SADC governments. Key instances of repression, such as the Matabeleland massacres of the 1980s, the deprivation of farm workers' and others' citizenship rights, and the massive assault on the urban poor in Operation Murambatsvina are mentioned but downplayed. Ignored are effective rule by and through the state security apparatus, and the role of a politically connected rentier class (overlapping substantially with ruling party

¹ See <http://www.lalr.org.za>

² Mavedzenge, B.Z., J. Mahenehene, F. Murimbarimba, I. Scoones and W. Wolmer (2008), 'The Dynamics of Real Markets: Cattle in Southern Zimbabwe following Land Reform', *Development and Change* 39(4): 613-639.

³ See for example RW Johnston, *London Review of Books*, Letters, 30 (24), 18 Dec, 2008.

⁴ *London Review of Books*, Letters, 31(1) 1 January 2009; Patrick Bond in *Links, International Journal of Socialist Renewal* (<http://links.org.au>)

bigwigs) in manipulating the foreign currency market for parasitic wealth appropriation, thus buffering the elite from the economic meltdown it has helped to bring about, but contributing further to that meltdown⁵.

Mamdani's professed aim in his intervention is to "free the debate about Zimbabwe from the narrow confines of a regime-opposition polemic". This a worthwhile objective, given the debilitating effects of a political discourse that sets up an opposition between the politics of rights and the politics of redistribution, as Brian Raftopoulos and others have pointed out, and the need for fresh ideas on a way beyond the present impasse. Unfortunately Mamdani has succeeded only in stoking the fires of the polemic, through a selective and myopic use of writing about Zimbabwe. In some cases he appears to simply invent his own evidence, as in his attribution to me of a view that I have never held (that previous to our research I was of the opinion that "the land reform would destroy agricultural production"). Mamdani's analysis of Operation Murambatsvina is similarly fantastical.

However, one key point not acknowledged sufficiently by Mamdani's critics is the highly effective way in which Mugabe and Zanu-PF has used both the land issue and anti-imperialist demagoguery to win support in both urban and rural areas, and across the region. Even in the most recent elections there was evidence of continued support for Mugabe despite the very extreme hardship being experienced by most people. This forms part of the complexity of the political situation that moral correct denunciations tend to obscure.

To return to questions of land and farming, there is an urgent need to gain a nuanced understanding of the new realities that have emerged in the Zimbabwean countryside in recent years, to help

inform thinking about land and agricultural policies in the post-Mugabe era. At present we have only a partial picture of these realities, and there is little debate (in public at least) about what those policies should be. Ideologically driven stereotypes will hinder rather than help, and critical scholarship has a key role to play in subverting such constructs.

The MDC view that a future land policy must focus mainly on restoring the health of the large scale commercial farming sector, in part by restoring private property rights, is problematic. As Scoones points out, the old agrarian structure, premised on a stark divide between large-scale (mostly white) and small-scale (black) farmers, has given way to a more complex and less polarized structure. This reality should form the basis of policies to enhance the sector's performance. On the other hand, an "agrarian populism" that idealizes peasant production and homogenizes the rural population is not very helpful either. It ignores the short-term need to restore export earnings from estates and other specialized, capital- and knowledge-intensive production regimes, and the importance of feeding large urban populations, and does not sufficiently acknowledge class differentiation amongst land reform beneficiaries and peasants.

A better starting point is a disaggregated analysis of existing and potential agrarian structures. This must take account of variability and difference in terms of scales and forms of production, class and gender identities, as well as agro-ecological region. Investment in up-stream and downstream linkages to provide inputs to producers and to market their surpluses will be critical. Secure property rights are, of course, important, but these need not take the form of freehold title; *conditional leasehold*, as well as renovated forms of communal tenure and strengthened institutions for common property management, could provide both security and a means to ensure that agrarian reform objectives are met. Crucial will be effective, transparent and accountable institutional frameworks to oversee agrarian reform and guard against the corruption that has become so pervasive in Zimbabwe. Only a

⁵ Davies, Rob (2004), 'Memories of Underdevelopment: A Personal Interpretation of Zimbabwe's Economic Decline', in Brian Raftopoulos and Tyrone Savage (eds), *Zimbabwe, Injustice and Political Reconciliation*, Cape Town, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation: 1-18.

government with real democratic credentials can create such institutions, which is why a way must be found to exit Mugabe, his henchmen and the generals from the seat of power.

About the Author

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