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Why has the ANC Government in South Africa Gone Slowly on Land Reform, and Why did Mugabe in Zimbabwe Abandon Gradualism?

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A key focus of land reform in southern Africa has been the increasingly divergent policies enacted by the Zimbabwean and South African governments. Indeed, beginning in 1997 Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF ushered in a radical land reform which rapidly accelerated after 2000. The program has led to questions of the government's purported motivations for land redistribution as numerous black farms have also been targeted for direct acquisition (Moyo 2004). On the other hand, despite ongoing racialised economic inequality in South Africa, the ANC has retained its measured approach along the market-based terms of willing-buyer/willing-seller with a focus on restitution (Hall 2004). The current policies of these two countries could not be more disparate. Numerous factors have been proffered as critical incentives for policy change. These range from the countries' historic transition agreements and contemporary economic situations through to their geographic and demographic make-up (Alexander 2007; Beinart 2001; Goebel 2005; Walker 2005). While these factors certainly establish difference between the two countries, they do not necessitate the divergent policies. Neither one factor, nor their sum is sufficient to explain why Zimbabwe has radicalized while South Africa had remained gradual. Rather, this essay will argue that the crucial link determining the countries' trajectories has been the political context and particularly the political climate of both countries, specifically after 1997 in the case of Zimbabwe (Berstein 2003; Hall 2004; Moyo 2004; Sender & Johnston 2004). It is how the politicians have galvanized the historical, economic, demographic and geographic factors, given their individual political contexts, that explains why the ANC government has continued along its slow and steady path, while ZANU-PF—and increasingly Mugabe alone—has abandoned gradualism altogether (Hall 2004; Alexander 2007).

To demonstrate this argument this essay will first situate the contextualizing factors—the independence negotiations, economics, geography and demography— in relation to state policy and the political context. It will then explore four particularly pertinent aspects of the political environments in which South Africa and Zimbabwe are situated. These include the global political discourse at the times of the countries' independence, the political rhetoric utilized by the leaders in expressing their visions for the future of their countries, the political ramifications of the transition negotiations, and the role of popular political support. In doing so, this essay demonstrates that the divergent land reform policies are bound up in matters of the historical political context and contemporaneously securing political power.

Contextualizing the Political Argument

As mentioned, four factors significantly contribute to the current divergent land reform policies of South Africa and Zimbabwe. These are the historic transition agreements, the economic situation since independence, the geographic make-up of the countries and the demographic make-up. This section will briefly explore each one noting the political linkages inherent in each.

Firstly, land reform in Zimbabwe and South Africa is rooted in the countries' negotiated transitional agreements.

Why has the ANC Government in South Africa Gone Slowly on Land Reform, and Why did Mugabe

Written by Cosanna Preston

Basically, these negotiations between the respective liberation parties and the white minority out-going governments signalled compromised revolutions which limited any hope of initial radicalization in land reform (Goebel 2005). In the Zimbabwean case it was the Lancaster House agreement involving the Zimbabwe Rhodesian government and the Patriotic Front (PF), consisting of liberation leaders from the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). These two parties would later merge to form ZANU-PF under ZANU's leader Robert Mugabe. Pertinent to this discussion, the Lancaster House agreement of 1979 set out two key terms designed to ease the white minority out of power. Firstly, the initial ten years of land reform—between 1980 and 1990—would be a willing-buyer/willing-seller, market-based approach with an emphasis on redistribution to the large and landless black, rural population (Walker 2005). Secondly, the white minority—effectively three percent of the population—would retain 20 percent of the legislature seats until 1987 (Moyo 2004, p 5).

In the case of South Africa, negotiations, known as the 'historic compromise', occurred during the period leading up to independence, between 1990 and 1994. The negotiations took place between the liberation party—the African National Congress (ANC)—and the outgoing minority rulers—the National Party (NP). In this case the white community stressed the importance of private property and the willing-buyer/willing-seller approach was also proffered. Accordingly, the focus was on legal restitution of specific properties appropriated by the white minority since the 1913 Natives Land Act. Government appropriation was not initially allowed as socialist ideals were sacrificed for the neo-liberal, market-based approach (Beinart 2001; de Wet 1994; Hall 2004).

To demonstrate the importance of politics, there are three points of note when comparing these negotiations. Firstly, the role of external negotiations, as in the case of Zimbabwe, versus the internal negotiations in South Africa is critical for contemporary reasons of political leverage and mobilization. ZANU-PF retains lingering animosity with the terms of the British-mediated Lancaster House agreement, suggesting it is a remnant of an imperial past. The same resentment is not articulated by the ANC leadership as the negotiations lacked the external, ex-colonial element (Goebel 2005, p 362; Alexander 2006). Secondly, both parties—despite their socialist backgrounds—are contextualised by market-based land reform, at least initially. Thus macro-economics alone cannot be the causal factors. Thirdly, the South African approach of restitution established individual claims to land (Hall 2004). In contrast, the Zimbabwean discourse of redistribution retained a focus on group rather than individual redress. This left more space for radicalization as there was no avenue for individual legal recourse (Walker 2005; Goebel 2005). Fourthly, the issue of transitioning political power was engendered differently. The Zimbabwean agreement, under British pressure, protected and phased out white domination while the ANC willingly compromised its socialist position to incorporate the NP in national unity. All of these points are bound up in dynamic political discourses of independence, unity and prevailing global political orders.

The economic situation since independence is a second key factor. On a basic level of GDP and exports, the land issue has simply been more important to the overall economy of Zimbabwe (Bernstein 2003, p 212; Hall 2004; Moyo 2004; Walker 2005). The 'food category' for the country comprises 44 percent of its exports and ten percent of its GDP, while agriculture employs over 20 percent of the labour force (Goebel 2005, p 358). Further, during the independence period leading up to radicalization, 1980 — 1998, agriculture was the only sector that showed an economic increase (Ibid). In contrast, in South Africa the 'food category' comprises 11 percent of exports and only 5.6 percent of the GDP (Ibid). During the similar initial period of independence, 1993 — 2002, agricultural labour declined by 13 percent (Ibid). Such statistics assist in understanding the political saliency of land and agriculture, a prominent popular priority in Zimbabwe and a lesser issue in South Africa.

In terms of macro-economic reforms both countries took on structural adjustment programs. Yet, in Zimbabwe these are increasingly unpopular as they are blamed for demise of Zimbabwe's social programs and clash with communally packaged, small-holder farm projects (Alexander 2006; Goebel 2005; Hall 2004; Moyo 2004). In South Africa the macro-economic reforms are wholly adopted by the leadership, functioning along side the ideals of private property and market reform (Goebel 2005; Hall 2004). As the next section will demonstrate, this blame versus acceptance is contextualized by global politics and the rhetoric of the respective leaderships.

The geographic and demographic make-up of the countries are the third and fourth relevant factors contributing to the divergent land reform policies. In Zimbabwe, there is a much higher rural population, a higher percentage of small-

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holder farms (i.e. individual family commitments), and much more fertile land available for farming. In contrast, in South Africa there is less fertile land available for farming, the population is far more urban and there are more large-holder, commercial farms. Accordingly, in South Africa, there is a lesser desire to work the land and a stronger desire amongst the population for wage-labour (Goebel 2005; Hall 2004). This is yet another reason why there is less political pressure from individual voters regarding the land question in South Africa than in Zimbabwe.

The preceding factors are indeed important for contextualising land reform in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Indeed the factors set the terms of difference between the two countries and inform the popular sentiment as regards the question of land. However, it is the way in which the leadership of the two countries have used these factors to legitimize their agendas in response to the broader political context, which has been the deciding factor in the trajectories of their respective land reforms.

The Politics of Land Reform

Speaking particularly to the South African case Hall (2004) notes “that the impediments to more decisive action [in land reform] are political, not essentially legal or constitutional” (p. 651). Of course the reverse—the ‘impediments’ continuing with a gradual land reform—are also political in Zimbabwe (Alexander 2006). To understand these claims it is important to contextualize contemporary politics within global politics at the time of independence. As Bernstein (2003) explains, Zimbabwean and South African independence occurred as one global order, socialism vs capitalism, was coming to an end and neo-liberal globalization was on the horizon. Zimbabwe, entering into independence in 1980, did so when the globalization/economic imperialism movement was emerging as the victor. Yet, ties to the initial African nationalist independence movements of the 1960s and 1970s still resonated with the population. South Africa, however, achieved independence in 1994. By this time neo-liberal globalization defined the global order. Thus, while the international community celebrated the end of the apartheid, the support for the accompanying socialist movement had waned with the fall of communism (Ibid; Beinart 2001).

This dramatic shift in the political climate is reflected in the respective leaders’ rhetoric regarding independence and the way forward. In the case of South Africa, the moral leadership and call for the united rainbow nation by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu is well known (Ibid, p 289). Indeed, since 1955 and the ANC’s freedom charter, a non-racial South Africa had been the aim (Ibid, p xv). Yet, the charter and party leading up to the transition were inherently socialist. With the ‘historic compromise’ negotiations the socialist agenda was dropped in order to accommodate the NP and Mandela and Frederik Willem de Klerk (the NP leader) increasingly shared rhetoric of national unity (Ibid, 283). The same national cohesion in Zimbabwe was never prevalent for Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF and Ian Smith’s Rhodesian Front. As Sender and Johnston (2004) note, the nationalist movement was “under pressure to demonstrate that ‘foreigners’ and colonialists would no longer dominate agricultural production” (p 143). Thus the Lancaster agreement was viewed as a colonial imposition and ZANU-PF rhetoric at the time of independence was not of reconciliation and unity between the races but was solely concerned with the capital welfare of the black population (Moyo 2004, p 5). While land reclamation was crucial in both instances in order to address historical injustice and contemporary social inequality, the issue of reclamation in the South African context was bound by the broader vision of national unity, while in the Zimbabwean case, reclamation was an ends in itself. This dichotomy then limited the radicalization of the South African approach while leaving room for a radicalized approach in the Zimbabwean context (Goebel 2005).

To ground these discussions of political climate and rhetoric in example let us further investigate the transition negotiations and initial stages of independence discussed above. In the case of Zimbabwe, Moyo (2004) suggests that “by the late 1970s, British and American foreign policies were becoming intensely preoccupied with the possibility of radical outcomes in Southern Africa, henceforth focusing their energies on a negotiated transition to neo-colonialism” (p 6). This along with pressures from Zambia and Mozambique to ease the destabilization in the region ushered in the compromised transition with the British mediation (Beinart 2008). The result, however, has engendered an extreme bitterness by Mugabe toward the British, which he holds accountable for not only the original colonialism but structuring the very basis of Zimbabwe’s independence through the Lancaster House agreement and encouraging the willing-buyer/willing-seller policy and structural adjustment. This has proved incredibly politically salient in his radicalization of land reform as he can attribute nearly everything from social ills to constitutional

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legislation, as overseen by the British, as remnants of imperialism. Combining these circumstances with a rhetoric that does not stress national unity, but black resurgence, Mugabe is able to justify his increasingly isolationist and lawless tactics as releasing the state from the shackles of imperialism (Alexander 2006; Goebel 2005).

In contrast, the South African transition process was entirely internal and by the point of 1994, the two parties were not at ideological logger-heads as in Zimbabwe. Rather, they shared views of modernity and progress which attracted international attention and support. What's more, the ANC recognized the need for foreign and national investment to supplement the neo-liberal national economic policies. As such, it was important to maintain relations with the international and national white community as they held the predominant links to investing capital (Beinart 2001). This is not to suggest that the ANC was entirely submissive. It did reject the absolute right to private property, adding a caveat in the 1996 constitutional conference. The caveat allowed for state expropriation of land so long as it assisted in achieving targets for restitution, redistribution and land tenure reform (Hall 2004, p 654). However, as Hall (2004) notes, the need to maintain white and international relations—and thus the political inability to radicalize reform—is evident in the fact that this caveat has rarely been utilized (Ibid).

While the discussion thus far indicates why Zimbabwe is more prone to a radical approach and why South Africa is inclined to retain its methodical approach, it does not explain why South Africa has continued along this path and why Zimbabwe experienced a decisive switch in policy when it did. In contemporary South Africa, recalling the discussion of the national economy as well as the demographic and geographic make-up, reclamation of agricultural land has not been a priority for the government or the people. The party's political support base is heavily based in towns; people want a secure place to live rather than farm land. Additionally, there is simply insufficient land to provide even subsistence portion of land to all blacks in South Africa and public demand has focused on issues of education and social services. The ANC has prioritized its policies and funding accordingly. In doing so, it has retained strong support from the electorate. Thus there is little motivation to adjust the current reforms (Beinart 2001, p 271, 320 – 321).

Such coherence has not been prevalent in Zimbabwe. Moyo (2004) links the radicalization of land reform, and its timing, to four key factors. Firstly, in a 1997 donor conference the government failed to acquire international financial support to assist with the acquisition of listed farms through willing-buyer/willing-seller tactics. Secondly, at the same time, poor national economic performance and lagging land reform sparked national strikes and protests from trade unions and war veterans, that latter of which were at times violent. In a political move to quash rebellion Mugabe embraced the war veterans and in defiance of the international community listed 1471 farms for 'compulsory acquisition' (Alexander 2006, p 183; Moyo 2004, p 17). The 1998 sharp economic down turn, the third factor, is partially tied to increased isolation from international community which resulted from the farm listings. The tensions contributed to mounting public dissatisfaction with the government and fractures in ZANU-PF. The result was increasingly personalized leadership (Ibid). Given the increasingly hostile political climate, the fourth factor was the rise of a strong political opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999. Mugabe framed the MDC as neo-liberal, imperialist sympathizers due to their support from white commercial farmers. Crucially, support for the MDC was demonstrated in the 2000 constitutional referendum when Mugabe unexpectedly lost an attempt to garner more power for land seizure (Alexander 2006, p 184 – 186)[1]. The political motivations for the radicalization of the land reform are even more apparent when one considers that even black farms were targeted; the owners were accused of 'fronting' for white interests (Moyo 2004, p 22). Indeed, these four factors, culminating during 1997 – 2000, amounted to Mugabe's "coalition of radical liberation and nationalist forces, against external 'opposition' and white capital" (Moyo 2004, p 19). The timing of the radicalization was intrinsically linked to politics. As Bernstein (2003) comments, "A redistributive land reform was sanctioned opportunistically by a political regime that is oppressive, corrupt and desperate, and perhaps increasingly divided as its political bankruptcy became more evident in the face of challenges to it" (p 220).

Conclusion

Considering the political situations of these two countries, one can see how the non-political factors were galvanized to forward political agendas in the respective countries. Indeed, the stable, urban-based political support for the ANC and the neo-liberal context of independence explain the continued slow reforms. Meanwhile, Mugabe has used

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radicalization of land reform within the confrontational context of Zimbabwe's independence in a desperate attempt to retain political power. This is not to suggest that South Africa's program is free of faults. The reform program is incredibly tedious, suffers from a major lack of funding, and it is highly questionable as to how the program has contributed to closing the inequality gap, given that South Africa remains the most unequal country in the world (Hall 2004). By the same token, what is seen as chaos today in the Zimbabwean context could be the seeds of a successful, if not highly disruptive, land reform (Beinart 2008). However, the percentage of originally identified beneficiaries of the land reform is dropping in the percentage of recipients, while urbanites and wealth rural-based ZANU-PF supporters are growing on the list (Moyo 2004, p 23). Thus it seems unlikely. Nonetheless, it is all too soon to judge the effects of the land reform. Perhaps future and hindsight will illicit something constructive to be learned from these difficult processes.

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[1] The extent to which Mugabe has reacted against the perceived threat of the MDC is perhaps most evident in the 2005 Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Restore Order) which saw the clearing of at least 570,000 people from informal dwellings. The evictions were purportedly to clean up urban centres for purposes of development but Potts (2006) points to political motivations noting very few of the evictees were ever properly compensated.

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