

Rough Draft

We are No Longer Going to Ask for the Land: An Overview of “The Land Issue” in Zimbabwe

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“We are no longer going to ask for the land, but we are going to take it without negotiating.”

-- Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe’s only leader since 1980, running for re-election in 2012 at the age of 88.

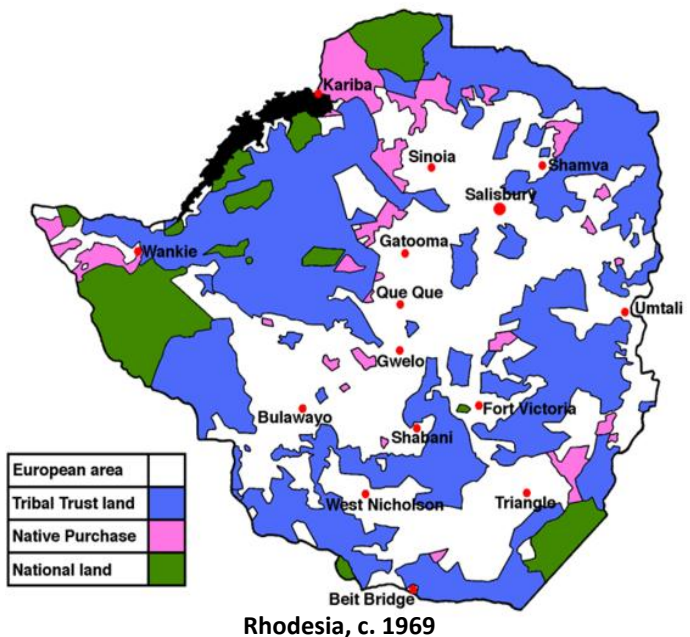
Synopsis:

The boundaries of present-day Zimbabwe can be attributed to Cecil Rhodes and his British South Africa Company (BSAC). In 1890 the BSAC came to “southern Rhodesia” and confiscated land from locals without compensation. Such confiscations were achieved first with the gun and later through law. When Robert Gabriel Mugabe became leader of Zimbabwe in 1980, he and his government first tried to acquire land with compensation using the law. The Mugabe regime is now set on confiscating land from locals without compensation, oftentimes at the barrel of a gun. This article provides an overview of “the land issue” in Zimbabwe.

Nothing New Under the (Rhodesian) Sun; The Land is Ours for the Taking

The boundaries of present-day Zimbabwe can be attributed to Cecil Rhodes and his British South Africa Company (BSAC). In 1890 the BSAC came to “southern Rhodesia” and confiscated land without compensation from locals. Such confiscations were achieved first with the gun and later through law. In the words of the journalist Matthew Sweet: “... It was Cecil Rhodes who originated the racist 'land grabs' to which Zimbabwe's current miseries can ultimately be traced. It was Rhodes who in 1887 told the House of Assembly in Cape Town, South Africa that 'the native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise. We must adopt a system of despotism in our relations with the barbarians of Southern Africa'.”¹ The “we” to whom Cecil Rhodes referred was, of course, whites of the British Empire.

In 1923 whites in Rhodesia opted for self-rule, officially ending the era of the BSAC. With self-rule came the ability to make laws meant to codify white access and privilege with regard to land.



Source: Visual rendering of information from Fungayi Musara’s “Land Tenure and Agricultural Policies” – an honors thesis presented to the University of Adelaide, October 1980.

¹ [Sweet, Matthew, "A Bad Man in Africa," *The Independent*, 16 March 2002](#)

One particularly audacious law was the 1930 Land Apportionment Act (1930). Some three-quarters of the country's most prized land was set aside for "Europeans" either directly (e.g., as agricultural areas) or indirectly (as "national lands" or "tribal trust lands"). Black peasants were forcibly resettled onto marginal "Native Reserves," later known variously as "Tribal Trust Lands" or "communal areas."² And whereas most of the white minority (some four percent of the total population) was ultimately given private, legal title to land, the vast majority of blacks, even on "Native Reserves," were given usufruct rights only – meaning the state continued to own the land even as occupants on that land were allowed to use it. Even wildlife management showed a marked inequality. All wildlife belonged to either one of two parties: on private, freehold land – that is to say, on mostly "white" land -- wildlife belonged to the landowner; on government land – parks, reserves, national forests and "black" communal areas -- it belonged to the state.

Subsequently the status of white farmers (versus mere landowners) was especially advanced with the passing of the 1969 Land Tenure Act. This law allocated approximately half of all agricultural land to some 6,000 white farmers, then comprising about one one-thousandth of a total population of 5 million in Rhodesia.³ The foundation for large "white" commercial farming operations was set, laying the groundwork for future conflict over the land.

Sowing the Seeds for "White" Commercial Farms⁴

White commercial farmers benefited from what came to be a relatively diverse and well-developed market economy in Rhodesia. An interlocking system of large-scale agricultural production was supported by manufacturing and industrial sectors, in turn supported by a mature financial sector. In the middle of all were various agricultural marketing boards. Such boards typically worked in the following way: all of a commercial producers' commodity intended for market would be surrendered to an agriculture board; maize, for example, would go to a "Maize Control Board" (later the Grain Marketing Board), dairy to the "Dairy Marketing Board," cotton to the "Cotton Marketing Board," meat to a "Livestock and Meat Industry Control Board," and tobacco to a "Tobacco Industry and Marketing Board." The agricultural board would then set prices for producers and consumers, facilitate sales to consumers, and undertake import and export activities as needed. "Europeans" would receive board-issued certificates upon surrender of their commodities plus a monetary advance and, once sales had been transacted, a final pay-out upon redemption of the previously-issued certificate.

The advantage to white commercial farmers was that most black farmers of any size likewise had to channel their crops through a board. The boards inevitably paid black producers at levels below market parity to white producers. The margin between what blacks were paid and what whites were paid was instead channeled to white producers, thus increasing revenues to white farmers and/or, through subsidies, offsetting some of their expenses. In the end some black farmers – competitors to white producers, as it were -- were squeezed out of the market, driven out of business because they

² See <http://www.gta.gov.zw/Land%20Issues/factsheet.htm>

³ See World Bank data at

http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9.&met_y=sp_pop_totl&idim=country:ZWE&dl=en&hl=en&q=population+of+zimbabwe#!ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=sp_pop_totl&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&ridim=region&idim=country:ZWE&ifdim=region&tstart=-307998000000&tend=1269838800000&hl=en_US&dl=en

⁴ There is extensive literature on how over 90 years of land policies were designed to further the interests of a handful of white farmers. For example, see: Roger Riddell, *The Land Problem in Rhodesia* (Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1978); Richard Hodder-Williams, *White Farmers in Rhodesia, 1890-1965: a history of the Marandellas District* (Macmillan, London, 1983); Paul Mosley, *The Settler Economies: studies in the economic history of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia 1900-1963* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983); Henry V. Moyana, *The Political Economy of Land in Zimbabwe* (Mambo Press, Gweru, 1984).

could not earn a profit, or at the very least an adequate profit, vis-à-vis an agricultural board. Other black farmers simply found it not worthwhile to try and sell their crop or crops commercially and instead became subsistence producers. The end result of black producers becoming subsistence producers benefitted white farmers through basic economics: the commercial supply of black competitors' commodities went down, and given a situation where demand for white farmers' commercial commodities stayed the same or increased, commodity prices were more likely to shift favorably for white producers.

It should be mentioned that other dynamics constrained black agriculturalists, often to the benefit of white commercial farmers. Recall that the vast majority of blacks, even on "Native Reserves," were given usufruct rights only – meaning the state continued to own the land even as occupants on that land were allowed to use it. Because black farmers did not own their land, they could not use the land as collateral against which to borrow in order to purchase inputs which might have increased the land's productivity (e.g., fertilizer). Additionally, due to crowding on communal land -- population densities were some three times greater in black than in white areas⁵ -- few black farmers could practice traditional crop rotation practices: cultivating land for a couple of years, then moving on to a new plot and leaving the previous plot fallow, thus giving soil time to regenerate. Instead, some black farmers intensively farmed the same plot year after year after year... Eventually so many of these plots became unproductive that many black farmers gave up selling the fruits of their labor (or crops and livestock), and instead sold their labor to harvest others' fruits (and grains, and tobacco -- or nearly anything else the productive white commercial farming sector needed harvested or husbanded). With an ample supply of desperate workers, white farmers were able to keep labor costs (read: wages) low. In part it is this last point which allowed many white commercial farmers to switch from producing food crops to more lucrative non-food crops like tobacco – commodities which brought a relative premium but were labor-intensive to produce.⁶

High politics also allowed for white commercial farmers to exert or obtain an inordinate profile in Rhodesia. For example, after the regime of Ian Smith made its 1965 "Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI)" from the United Kingdom, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 216 calling upon all states not to recognize Rhodesia as an independent country, to deny any assistance to its "racist minority," and to impose sanctions. In response the Smith regime gave the agriculture sector great legal and financial backing, specifically to achieve food and economic self-sufficiency in response to international ostracism.

By the time Robert Mugabe came to power in 1980 – the birth of modern Zimbabwe after a bloody *chimurenga* -- the agricultural sector was the second largest foreign exchange earner after the mining sector. It contributed significantly in terms of raw materials both to the food processing and textile industries. And it was also the country's largest contributor to total formal employment. In fact, studies estimated that if the number of farmers in the commercial and smallholder areas and their dependents were added, approximately two out of every three people in Zimbabwe derived their livelihoods from the agriculture sector circa 1980.⁷ More significantly, the vast majority of these people were tied to the activities of white-owned commercial farms specifically.

⁵ Robin Palmer. "Land Reform in Zimbabwe, 1980-1990," *African Affairs*, Vol. 09, April 1990, p. 105.

⁶ Paul Mosley. "The Settler Economies: Studies in the Economic History of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia 1900-1963," *African Studies*, No. 35, 1983.

⁷ USAID study.

Mugabe's Government with no (Lancaster) House of its Own

Despite the Mugabe government's stated priority to achieve land reform, the British-brokered peace in 1979 between the Rhodesian regime and leaders of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) imposed constraints. The Lancaster House Agreement prohibited any new Zimbabwean government from seizing white-owned land for at least a decade, meaning April 1990 was to be the earliest that a revisiting of the "land question" could be more fully dealt with. In return for guaranteeing existing property rights, the British (along with other international donors) promised to underwrite the costs of a resettlement program where black farmers could establish themselves on farm ground obtained through a "willing-seller, will-buyer" arrangement.

It might seem strange that a "victors' peace" was not imposed circa 1979, at the end of the *chimurenga*. But it is largely *because* of the terms of the Lancaster House Agreement with regard to whites' title to land that an end to the war was made possible; without major concessions the Smith regime might have fought on. Plus the war had been devastating with regard to peasant food production. At its end some 20 percent of the entire rural population had fled or been forced from their homes: half a million had become "urban refugees," having flocked to towns to escape the war; a quarter million had left the country entirely; and the Smith regime had forcibly put some three-quarters of a million into "protected villages." War, too, had disrupted anti-disease measures with regard to livestock; by 1979 an estimated one-third of all cattle had died in the country.⁸ As a result, white commercial farmers were producing some 90 percent of the country's marketed food at the time of Lancaster House.⁹ The leaders of ZANU and ZAPU, locked in negotiations with the Smith regime, took all this into account. Ultimately they made a decision to allow white farmers to stay on, if only to help feed the country – a view likely shaded by what they witnessed in neighboring Mozambique. There, when FRELIMO fought its way to power in 1974/75, it did nothing to discourage Portuguese settlers' exodus from the country. What resulted was near famine and economic collapse.

Of course under the terms of the Lancaster House Agreement letting white commercial farmers stay on was to be coupled with getting more blacks onto their own lands. To this end the Zimbabwe government acquired around 40 percent of a targeted 8 million hectares (19.77 million acres) of land in the first decade of Mugabe's rule, resettling some 50,000 black families (about 416,000 people) on more than 3 million hectares (7.41 million acres).¹⁰ Still, the government had proclaimed in 1980 that it intended to resettle 162,000 households – three times more than what was actually realized -- on all 8 million hectares. Such claims had raised expectations amongst aspiring peasant farmers to unimaginable heights.

Sensing the political liability of not matching early rhetoric with later results, Mugabe's government sought to deflect blame. A document from the Ministry of Lands and Agriculture and Resettlement made clear that blame should not lie with the government or its leader:

Due to a variety of reasons, all of which have their roots in the Lancaster House Agreement, the resettlement programme did not perform to expectations. Firstly, under the willing seller/willing buyer principle, land was not offered in sufficient bulk to the government. Secondly, that which was offered to government was the poorer quality land in regions of low rainfall patterns and poor ecological soils. Thirdly, because of the "fair market price" clause (of the Lancaster House

⁸ Robin Palmer, p. 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ PBS Online Newshour. "Land Redistribution in Southern Africa." Obtained from <insert link>

Agreement), the government was greatly constrained and there have not been sufficient funds forthcoming to buy the land.¹¹

Regardless of whether ZANU and ZAPU's signing up to the Lancaster Agreement was a mistake made with the best of pragmatic intentions, or as the scholar Julian Cobbing has called it, a "crucial capitulation,"¹² how the Mugabe-led government acted during the 10 years the Lancaster House Agreement was in effect provides insight into the regime it would become.

Political Obstacles: Millstones or Grist for Mugabe?

The inability of the Mugabe-led government to meet black expectations and demands, especially with regard to land reform, led to strong voices of political opposition arising from Matabeleland in the early 1980s, in west and south of Zimbabwe, where ZAPU was strongest. In response President Mugabe ordered into Matabeleland the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade which, between 1983 and 1987, tortured and killed some 20,000 (for perspective, it is estimated that 30,000 died in the civil war that ended white minority rule).¹³ The end result was that Robert Mugabe's ZANU party consolidated political power – ultimately eliminating ZAPU and subsuming what remained of its leadership into "ZANU-PF," as Mugabe's party is now known – effectively turning Zimbabwe into a *de facto* one-party state.

The trend toward a one-party state in the 1980s was facilitated by the Mugabe-led government's following of a "corporatist model" originally implemented by the Rhodesian regime in the wake of UN sanctions imposed in 1965. As part of this model the state took control of such crucial parts of the economy as utilities and agricultural marketing boards (for a review of how agriculture boards worked in Rhodesia, and then in Zimbabwe, please see earlier in this article, p. 2). Consequently, if the Lancaster House Agreement's terms denied the Zimbabwean government the ability to act as it would have liked with regard to obtaining land and resettling black peasants, control of various agriculture boards provided it with an ironic opportunity: in Rhodesian days, revenues skimmed from agricultural marketing boards were used to benefit white commercial farmers; in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe, white commercial farmers, via agricultural marketing boards, provided revenues to be skimmed for the benefit of ZANU-PF's base and supporters. Two of the most overt ways this was done was through agricultural subsidies being dispensed to ZANU-PF card-carrying black subsistence farmers, and through the appointment of ZANU-PF card-carrying elites to agricultural boards, irrespective of whether they had any competencies or experience in agriculture.¹⁴

Additionally, under the Lancaster House Agreement when or if a (white) commercial farmer wished to sell his land, he was legally bound first to offer it to the government, ostensibly to make sure the land could be subdivided and settled with black farmers. If the government decided for whatever reason it did not want the land, a "no present interest" certificate was to be issued. These certificates then allowed (white) land owners to sell on the private market to whomever they wanted. Often the first person who turned up with substantial money in hand – enough to pay full market value for the land or better, per the terms of the Lancaster House Agreement -- was a senior member of the government, one of the new black ruling elite. It is not coincidental that by 1989, on the eve of the planned sunset of the Lancaster House Agreement, there were some 500 black members of

¹¹ Ministry of Lands and Agriculture. "Land Issue Fact Sheet," date ??????, p. 2

¹² Julian Cobbing, 'The Imperialising of Zimbabwe', *Transformation*, 9 (1989), p. 85.

¹³ The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe. *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1985*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

¹⁴ For a more thorough exploration of the extent of the Mugabe government's "rentier state" – the vast network of interlocking patronage networks meant to ensure and perpetuate the Mugabe regime's rule – see Martin Dawson and Tim Kelsall's "Anti-Developmental Patrimonialism in Zimbabwe" in *The Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, January 2012, pp 49-66.

Zimbabwe's predominately white Commercial Farmers' Union (CFU), but more intriguingly, at least 10 *government ministers* were known to be members of the CFU with sizable farms.¹⁵ Ties between the CFU and Mugabe's government certainly were not hurt by Mugabe's appointment of a previous President of the Commercial Farmers Union, Denis Norman, as his first Minister of Agriculture. Such cozy relations between Mugabe's government and Zimbabwe's (white) commercial farming class were not to last, though.

An African Farm -- Buy, Hook and Crook

The Lancaster House Agreement era ended in April 1990. The Mugabe government soon passed the Land Acquisition Act. This law empowered the government to acquire land for resettlement even without a "willing seller," stipulated that the government had only to pay "fair" compensation for land (a much more ambiguous term than "fair market value"), and allowed the government to limit the size of farms so as to "create" land to be acquired. In sum, the "rentier state" – the vast network of interlocking patronage networks meant to ensure and perpetuate Mugabe's and ZANU-PF members' rule – was beginning to take shape with regard to land reform.

This said, despite the existence of the Land Acquisition Act, the pace of land acquisition and resettlement remained relatively slow. In the period from 1990 to 1997 less than 1 million hectares (2.47 million acres) of land were acquired and fewer than 20,000 families were resettled, often on land of poor quality.¹⁶ The reason land reform was so slow was mostly of the government's own making. As Dawson and Kelsall surmise:

ZANU-PF's readiness to extract rents from business... (made it) increasingly profitable not to produce but to trade, seeking arbitrage on everything from foreign currency to fuel. In such an environment, a productive capitalist sector could not develop. Instead, an elite of political businessmen and outright "robber barons" emerged, whose positions and profits depended not on productivity but on connections to Party.¹⁷

In this predatory environment, the Zimbabwean *state* was being bled dry of the means to acquire land even as *governmental ministers* and *ZANU-PF members* continued to do so. And it just wasn't land reform efforts which suffered as a consequence. Average citizens everywhere were suffering, too – to the point that riots broke out in 1995, 1998 and 2000. Whereas average annual GDP growth had been 4.3% between 1980 and 1990, it was a paltry .9% between 1991 and 2000.¹⁸ By nearly every measure Zimbabwe was heading in the wrong direction. Unfortunately, it was to get worse. Much worse.

Let's Make a (Fast Track) Plan

According to the country's Commercial Farmers' Union, at the start of 1999 there were 4,000+ white commercial farmers across Zimbabwe holding some 11 million hectares (27.18 million acres) of land in the country. Still, profitable commercial farming had become increasingly difficult in 1990s Zimbabwe. As but one measure of this, a United States Agency for International Development study concluded:

¹⁵ See: Karl Maier's "Zimbabweans grapple with the law of the land," *The Independent*, 28 October 1989; Gift Siphosiso's "Row over Zimbabwe landless," *New African*, October 1989, p. 32; Psungwadzei Tagwireyi's "Frustrated Peasants in for a Long Wait," *Africa South*, November/December 1989, p. 16.

¹⁶ PBS "Land Redistribution in Southern Africa"

¹⁷ Dawson and Kelsall, p. 53.

¹⁸ UNDP. *Comprehensive Economic Recovery in Zimbabwe: A Discussion Document*, 2008.

Zimbabwe's farmers face one of the world's heaviest rates of agricultural taxation, perhaps partly because agriculture is such a crucial source of revenue for government. Zimbabwean farmers were taxed explicitly through producer price fixing, export taxes, and taxes on agricultural inputs. They were also taxed implicitly through an overvalued exchange rate which reduced the prices they obtained for their exports, and through high levels of industrial protection, which raised consumer prices.¹⁹

If white commercial farmers felt like targets via governmental taxation and trade policies, they likewise felt targeted rhetorically and physically. President Mugabe's rhetoric from 1997 increasingly placed the country's problems at their feet. Of course he needed a boogeyman, given that members of one of ZANU-PF's historically most ardent supporters in civil society, the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA), were becoming increasingly critical of "their" government. Symbolically certainly, but possibly even practically, Mugabe could not afford to lose the "War Vets."

Consequently, on the heels of public scandals involving government cronyism – the Indigenous Business Development Centre scandal and the Boka scandal being two of the most egregious²⁰ -- Mugabe followed up with another to appease the veterans: in 1997 he ordered the War Victims Compensation Fund raided and unbudgeted cash payments given to all veterans immediately, in addition to increased monthly pension payments. While this was enough to assuage some war vets temporarily, Mugabe's unilateral moves also precipitated a collapse of the Zim dollar and the Zimbabwean stock market on "Black Friday," November 14th, 1997. Indeed, November 14th, 1997 is considered by some Zimbabwe watchers to be the start of the current economic crisis. True to form, rather than accept that his actions had somehow played a part in precipitating a crisis, Mugabe instead announced that the government would seize 1,500 white-owned farms. Plus, for good measure, he also said the British should pay for the seizures since Rhodesian settlers had originally stolen the land from black farmers.²¹

Into this political and economic milieu came a new actor: the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Zimbabwe's first opposition political party to ZANU-PF in over a decade. One of the MDC's first demands was for a new constitution, one that could reign in, check and balance presidential and governmental excesses. While President Mugabe did create an official commission to rewrite the constitution, the resulting document actually proposed *enhancing* the power of the presidency, purportedly to aide in "finally" providing a person (i.e., Mugabe) the ability to implement true land reform. Key to this ability was proposed provisions allowing the president unilaterally to acquire land without compensation. Voters, though, were less impressed with promises of land reform and more concerned about the prospect of two more terms of a super-empowered Mugabe presidency. In February 2000 a clear majority rejected the proposed constitution in a popular referendum.

Undeterred, in April 2000 President Mugabe signed into law a constitutional amendment introduced from the ZANU-PF dominated Parliament. The amendment made law what voters had rejected two months earlier in the constitutional referendum. Soon thereafter, President Mugabe announced his "fast track" resettlement program. Some 3,000 farms were targeted for immediate seizure – all in spite of a Supreme Court ruling stating that such targeting and seizing was unconstitutional in light of other provisions within the constitution beyond the newly-amended part. A United Nations Development Program report surmised that constitutional or not, the fast track program

¹⁹ ? USAID..... See Jansen and Rukovo 1991 and Masters 1991.

²⁰ Insert details about both scandals.

²¹ SOURCE???????

was arbitrary (farms where owners and/or workers had supported the MDC had clearly been put at the top of the list), , chaotic (some targeted farms had already been acquired and resettled in previous years), and violent (news reports claimed that nearly ??????? were killed in the early days of the program). Soon “war vets” – many looked too young to have been in the war -- occupied some 1,000 farms, both unlisted as well as listed, taking lives and livelihoods in the process.

An Endgame?

Between the years 2000 and 2010, Zimbabwe’s GDP was halved, public services became sporadic at best, non-existent at worst, and the rule-of-law or national reconciliation became theoretical.²² In the 2008 presidential election, President Mugabe employed a well-orchestrated campaign of fear and violence to secure the presidency.²³ In 2012 the stage is set for him and his ZANU-PF supporters to do the same in order to secure a strangle-hold on State House and Parliament (the MDC currently holds a tenuous, ineffective majority in Parliament). One thing has changed, however: white commercial farmers have become all but an extinct species, with a mere 150 still in existence. It would seem, then, at least one part of “the land issue” has been resolved. Whether this benefits a majority of Zimbabweans is highly unlikely.

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²² Insert GDP data source and examples...

²³ See Peter Godwin’s *The Fear: The Martyrdom of Zimbabwe*

