Land, Property and Power: 

The Land Issue in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Since Independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean Government has confronted the 'land issue' – the racialised and colonially-constructed profound inequity in landholdings that had left most of the nation’s best lands in the hands of a white-settler commercial-farmer minority while much of the indigenous black populace, many being subsistence farmers, was confined to largely-marginal Communal Lands. White farmers held land as property, while black farmers held land without formal title but via direct relationship with Tribal Lands Authorities, subject to the State’s ultimate ownership of the lands.

Though initially focusing on market-based land reform within the constraints of the Independence Constitution's support for property rights, in the late 1990s the Government’s Land Reform Programme moved increasingly towards wholesale compulsory appropriation (with minimal compensation) of the lands of white farmers. Land was redistributed to Zimbabweans, predominantly those with linkages to a ruling constellation of Government-State-Zanu-PF led by President Mugabe, via a system of permits and leases, susceptible to political manipulation, and constituting in effect the negation of the idea of property as a mode of tenure in rural Zimbabwe.

Now, as the crisis of governance deepens in Zimbabwe and the power of Zanu-PF and the ruling elite seems increasingly entrenched, land redistribution has become increasingly politicised, personal and factional. Membership of Zanu-PF and access to the ruling elites of Zanu-PF and Government have become the essential key in accessing land, and in the processes of land allocation which have become dominated by patron-client relationships and hierarchically-constructed relationships of mutual obligation. In this context, the idea of property as a market-based rather than politically-obligated form of land tenure no longer suits the purposes of the increasingly neo-patrimonial ruling elites.

In Zimbabwe, the white farmers have been evicted and rural productivity is tenuous – especially on the former white farms. Lands are nationalised, yet still it is the broad bulk of the people who remain dispossessed as the processes of land reform are co-opted to political purposes, and as lands are co-opted by political elites.