



British Land policy in Zimbabwe: An Overview

DR RANJEET KUMAR

The history of Rhodesia may be said to begin with the granting of the charter to the British South Africa Company in October 1889, and it is doubtful whether any country ever had so eventful a history during the first ten years of its national life as Rhodesia has had. Prior to 1889 but little was known of the country beyond the Limpopo river¹, though explorers like Carl Mauch and Thomas Baines, and limiters of the stamp of F. C. Selous had brought back reports of the healthy uplands and the abundance of gold and other metals in the great territory to the north; but, save for a very few adventurous spirits, the white population preferred to remain in Cape Colony, Natal, and the two Dutch Republics. The inhabitants of the Rhodesia were the Mashonas and Makalakas which were extremely unwarlike, but were very clever workers in iron.

The early civilization was succeeded by Bantu-speaking peoples, who migrated into the area after the 5th century. Rhodesia is found in the works of Persian and Arabian geographers and historians between 947 A.D and 1060 AD. Later references are made by the Portuguese, who endeavored to occupy the country, but their mortality from malaria and other diseases was so considerable that, after a short period of residence, they left for the coast.² In the early 16th century, the Portuguese made contact with Shona-dominated states and developed a trade in gold and other articles. British private merchant ventures had trade along the West African coast in the 16th century and in the 17th century. As a result of industrial Competition among the European powers for slaves, gold and other goods led to the creation of British trading companies and ultimately it established the bases on the southern African region. Rhodesia has a history dating back before the dawn of the Christian era. The territory was occupied by the British South Africa Company, from where the modern history of Rhodesia may be said to have begun. The era of modern monopoly imperialism coincided with the discovery in the late nineteenth century of such important minerals and diamonds. Northern and Southern Rhodesia were known in 1886 as northern and southern Zambesia. The title "Rhodesia" was given with imperial sanction in 1895.³

In Berlin, Germany, thousands of miles away from Africa, the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 decided how the African lands would be colonized. The conference heard not a single voice from the African natives. By the First World War, the European powers had, on paper, partitioned the entire African continent.⁴ Despite being pragmatic and flexible in respect of all colonial question the British did not value the African nations boundaries, customs, religion or their rich cultural life; they did however, value their land. One can see how the British gave response to the native people of Zimbabwe. After almost 20 years of land reform promises white people still owned 70% of the best land in Zimbabwe in 2006. This lesson looks at the history of land ownership in Zimbabwe, and where land reformation might be headed.⁵

¹ Blake, Robert. A History of Rhodesia , Eyre Methuen, London 1977, p-4.

² Official Year Book of the colony of southern Rhodesia, No-3,(Rhodesia printing publishing company, Ltd, 1932) p.1

³ New Africa year Book, P-393.

⁴ John Iliffe, Africans: the History of a continent, Cambridge university press, Cambridge 1995, pp-134-168

⁵ <http://dialspace.dial.pipex.com/town/terrace/lf41/nay/zimphist.htm>

Actually the first white settlers in 1890 took part in what is termed the scramble for Africa, preceded and triggered off by the discovery of diamonds and gold in South Africa. During the 1880's European imperial powers like Germany, Portugal and Britain showed a growing interest of establishment in north of the Limpopo. As we see that the Portuguese already had colonies on the East and West Coasts of Southern and Central Africa, and British penetration from the south was to prevent them from linking their territories across Africa.

The British South Africa Company (BSAC)

The era of modern monopoly imperialism coincided with the discovery in the late nineteenth century of such minerals like gold and diamonds. This discovery influenced the pace of development throughout the southern African sub-region in one hand and prompted the BSAC to begin to process the colonial expansion in the region on the other. Besides mineral rights, the Rudd Concession also conferred sweeping commercial and legal powers to Cecil Rhodes. British South Africa Company (BSAC) obtained a charter from Queen Victoria in 1899. The charter granted the BSAC the right to operate in all Southern Africa.

The discovery of a major gold field evaded the expansion of BSAC. Numerous small mines were opened up. As a result the opening of immigrants started arriving from South Africa following in the wake of the Boer War. After much trial and error, farming became established and within 20 years of the first pioneers entering Rhodesia the ground roots of a sound agricultural industry for whites had been established.

Formation of two Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland

The BSAC attempted to combine the two Rhodesia like Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia during the years immediately after the World War I, however, Southern Rhodesia was suspicious of the huge black population she would acquire by this move, and the scheme was finally rejected in 1917.

The British Government proposed a union of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland and admission in to the commonwealth as an independent entity in 1951. Merger of two was passed in the House of Commons in 1953. The Federation was finally constituted. There were five conferences held between 1951 and 1953 as well as a referendum in the territories concerned regarding the establishment of federation. The conferences were initiated by the Labour Government and agreed to Federation in principle, but held certain reservations about black rights⁶. The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland came into existence in 1954.⁷ Huggins became Federal Prime Minister in 1954 and he was succeeded in Southern Rhodesia by Garfield Todd. He refused to extend power and franchise to the blacks,⁸ and also sought to enforce the African Land and Husbandry Act in all black areas. Whereas his predecessor, Huggins had applied the Act to very selected areas only in an effort to convince the blacks native of the advantages of sound animal and field-husbandry practices. Todd's efforts led to widespread discontent in black areas.

After Todd, Sir Edgar Whitehead became the Prime Minister who remained in the office until the election in 1962 when the Rhodesian Front came to power. Whitehead's tenure of office was characterized by escalating violence not only in Southern Rhodesia, but also in other Federal territories.

⁶ [p://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federation_of_Rhodesia_and_Nyasaland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federation_of_Rhodesia_and_Nyasaland)

⁷ [p://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federation_of_Rhodesia_and_Nyasaland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federation_of_Rhodesia_and_Nyasaland)

⁸ Margrey Perham and Jack Simmons, "Africa Discovery: an anthology of exploitation, Harmondsworth, Penguin books, 1976, P.21

The constitution did have certain merits on the other hand, as provisions had been made for black advancement. It contained a Bill of Rights aimed at preventing discriminatory legislation, and providing a safeguard against laws infringing on civil liberties. Provision had been made for a Constitutional Council that would act as a watch-dog as regards legislation, ensuring that this was not inconsistent with the Bill of Rights. The bill also opened up the franchise to a greater extent than ever before, and for the first-time permitted blacks to sit in the Legislative Assembly.

The Rhodesia under Company Rule

Colonization has been the major means of disseminating European ways of life and economic organization over the rest of the world. When the first whites arrived in 1890, the land between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers was populated by the Shona and the Ndebele people. It is thought that the Shona had been there for about thousand years. The Ndebele arrived in the 1830s, having migrated north from Natal after falling out with the Zulu King. Cecil Rhodes had made a fortune in diamond mining in the Cape where he set up the British South Africa Company to explore north of the Limpopo river in 1889. He promised some settlers to give 3,000-acre farm and gold in return for carving a path through Mashonaland. The Shona were too fragmented to resist and the British flag was raised at Fort Salisbury on 13 September 1890.

There is no other continent in the world where colonialism showed its face in such a cruel and brutal form as it did in Africa and particular Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. The modern history of Zimbabwe starts with the establishment of the former British colony of Rhodesia in 1890 by white farmers mainly from Britain and South Africa. In 1860's there were discoveries of gold in Mashonaland and the potential of the area began to attract the attention of Cecil John Rhodes the great economic imperialist. Rhodes was one of the colonialists who had made a huge fortune in diamonds and gold in South Africa and who begun to be also interested in exploiting the minerals north of Transvaal.⁹ Cecil John Rhodes obtained mineral concession from then native ruler of Mashonaland, Lobengula. Queen Victoria signed the charter on 19th October 1889 as a result of which the British South Africa Company was founded in the region. Between 1890 and World War I the British South Africa Company and the British government appropriated the land of the Shona and Ndebele people largely by military conquest and created the new colony of Southern Rhodesia by 1895. This company spearheaded the colonization of Rhodesia. The colonial expansion to the north of South Africa was dominated by the British South Africa Company. The company had a private police force, a kind of mercenary army which had as its primary task the repression of African resistance.¹⁰

BSAC had obtained exclusive mining rights from the Ndebele king, Lobengula, in return of cash and kind. As far as Lobengula was concerned he had not conferred land rights. Lobengula the then king of Matabeleland and Mashonaland was not aware of the nature of and implication of this agreement made with European or especially with BSAC. Cecil Rhode's agents tricked the King Lobengula of the Ndebele into agreeing to a mining concession, the Rudd Concession, which gave the British South Africa Company exclusive domain over all metal and mineral resources in his kingdoms. He had never intended to allow such things. The military occupation of African land in 1890 was followed by its appropriation by British settlers who were each awarded thousands acre and gold mining.

The settlers received strong support from the BSAC which enabled them to set themselves up on the land and to gain control of the market for agriculture products. Seizure of African land the greatest effect on the supply of labour.¹¹ The African lost their best lands and were forced to pay rents. The whole country was divided into two areas, one in which only Europeans could own land and the other for Africans. The first comprised the most fertile regions, while the second contained the less fertile

⁹ Margrey Perham and Jack Simmons, *opcit*, pp-24-28

¹⁰ Blake, Robert. *A History of Rhodesia*, *opcit*, pp-22

¹¹ *ibid*, p.178

and the infertile regions. The 1930 land apportionment act forces half of Africans to move to special reserves, as a result of the land apportionment act Africans were effectively prevented from competing with European in agriculture.

The people who live in this world especially in Africa and Asia, who have suffered the consequences of colonization, can easily understand the agony and misery of Zimbabwe. Colonialism was established to serve and promote the colonizers interests at the expense of those of the people. Colonial government structures, land and economic institutions were carefully and deliberately designed to exploit human and natural resources in the respective colonial possessions. Never in the history of Africa and particularly Zimbabwe did so many changes occur and with such speed as they did between 1880 and 1935. Indeed the most fundamental and dramatic though tragic of these changes took place in the much shorter period from 1890 to 1910, the period that saw the conquest and occupation of virtually the whole continent of Africa by the imperial powers and the establishment of the colonial system. The period after 1910 was essentially one of the consolidation and exploitation which was an integral part of the colonial system.¹² The indigenous African population was pushed off of fertile land in infertile land with poor or erratic rainfall. By 1914 white settlers who made up only 3 percent population controlled 75 percent of the economically productive land, while about 97 percent black Africans were forcefully confined to approximately 23 percent of the land.

Land apportionment act 1930 excluded Africans from half of the country that contained the best farming land.¹³ Even those who had the land were unable to sustain themselves because soils were poor and rainfall low and unreliable. There are areas with a sub-tropical climate which permits the cultivation of variety of crops tobacco, maize cotton, groundnuts, sugar, wheat, coffee, and citrus fruits. It was mainly large Europeans farms that these crops were grown. As Margery Perham has pointed out, in the entire course of Rhodesian history, British failed to use it to prevent the increasing gap between white privileged and economic power and African subordination.¹⁴ Between 1960 and 1979 white immigration to Rhodesia was 180,000 and white emigration in the same period was 202,000.¹⁵

Independence Zimbabwe

After independence, the whites of Zimbabwe did not lost their prior privileged position except in Government. Although Blacks started to replace whites in many public sector jobs some extent. You could see whites everywhere. Not only the agriculture, service sector and business but also Zimbabwean participation in some international sporting events continued to be white dominated. In spite of the small number, the white Zimbabwean minority maintained control of much of the economy through its investment in commercial farms, industry and tourism. There can be no greater proof of lack of real independence for Zimbabwe than that situation where a mere 0.03% of its population allowed to own 70% of all arable land and totally control the agriculture and the economy. Mugabe was being accused of violating the spirit of reconciliation, but did reconciliation means that colonizers would continue to own they had grabbed before independence? Rather than prove anything against Mugabe, the west's accusations only prove how little it thinks of the right of Africans. Could one even imagine a situation in which 4,500 Africans were allowed to own 12 million hectares of land in Britain Or anywhere in Europe?¹⁶ However, continuing programme of land reform dislocated white farmers. The Commonwealth has always recognized that the land issue is at the root of the crisis in the Zimbabwe. it stated "We all agree that land redistribution is the only way forward. We never supported the legacy of colonialism where minority of whites' farmers owned 80% of farmland and d

¹² <http://www.mathaba.net/africa/zimlandhistory.htm>

¹³ Why Mugabe is right, New African, IC Publication Limited, London, No. 385, May 2000, pp-14-17

¹⁴ Margrey Perham and Jack Simmons, opcit P.22

¹⁵ Ian Beckett , The Bush War 72 – 1979,

¹⁶ Koigi Wamwere, (from Norway) "Letter to Editor" New African, London, No. 386, June, 2000

black Zimbabweans had to survive on 20% of the land. This was patently unjust, unsustainable, and reform was needed. Since Zimbabwe's independence, Britain has traditionally been protective of white farming interests and insisted on a land reform policy based on market mechanisms and the 'willing seller and willing buyer' principle. More broadly, from 1997 Britain's involvement in Zimbabwe's crisis needs to be understood within the context of Government efforts to promote its version of the third way in Africa.¹⁷

The British government refused to come to terms with the Zimbabwean government on the issue of land and preferred to dictate and adopt a new kind of understanding. The actions by the British Government invoked reactions from Zimbabwean people and Government. In fact British Government was in fear that her commitment to fund land reform in Zimbabwe would spark a series of demands from former colonies. Demand from former colonies led to loss of support both at Britain internal and from her other allies who had basically the same obligation as Britain in their former colonies. As a result the question of land and demands for compensation for colonial injustices would not be confined only in Zimbabwe but all emerged in countries like Namibia, South Africa, Kenya and Australia and Brazil and so on. Probably the question would come before the western world that the West has the moral duty to pay not just compensation to white farmers, but also Africans who have for years been deprived of valuable resources through colonialism. It must be borne in mind that sooner or later, the colonial wrongs have to be corrected all over post-colonial states because they are ticking time bombs. Colonial injustice will be corrected by giving land not only to Zimbabweans whose land was alienated for long years, but also to the rest of countries in Africa and Asia.

The election was regarded as neither free nor fair, and making background against violent land seizure, the Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth. Mugabe has been excluded from the commonwealth summit in Nigeria. The European Union and United States also slapped sanctions on Government. Britain played an important role in the EU's decision to implement targeted sanctions against the government of Zimbabwe on 18 February 2002.¹⁸ Mugabe said the white section of the group holds a grudge against him due to his policy of seizing white-owned farms for redistribution of landless blacks. He added "if our sovereignty is what we have to lose to be readmitted into the commonwealth and the perhaps the time has come to say so."¹⁹ British response towards disruption in Zimbabwe was made clear at the Commonwealth conference when Zimbabwe's continued suspension was insisted upon. Britain, as the former colonial power, has led the condemnation of Zimbabwe's regime but it is supported in this by the United States and other Western powers. March 19, 2003, the Commonwealth group of mainly former British colonies decided to extend a one-year more suspension of Zimbabwe.

A new Constitution is drafted by all political parties in a government of national unity which is subsequently overwhelmingly approved in a national referendum in 2013.

¹⁷ Ian Taylor and Paul Williams, *opcit* p 551-52

¹⁸ Cited in Ian Taylor and Paul Williams, *Ibid*

¹⁹ African Chronicle, vol iv, No. 24, Nov 19- Dec 1, 2003