



Land Question: An analysis the role of Media in Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction

Land is of interest to all sections of society whether rich or poor, rural or urban populations, farmers or industries, central or local government. Land possession has been a major area of dispute for whites and blacks in Zimbabwe for decades. The land problem in Zimbabwe is a consequence of the country's colonization by the British in 1890 through the British South African company set up by Cecil J. Rhodes. In order to grab the land, Cecil Rhodes in 1890, sent an invading force of white's settlers and armed men to take the territory. As a result in 1895 the new country of Rhodesia was established and settlers turned Rhodesia into their country.¹

The struggle for independence in Zimbabwe was not only meant or seen as a vehicle to regain the lost freedoms and dignities but equally or more importantly as a means to regain that source of all human livelihoods and in fact it depended on land itself. In Zimbabwe there is political independence and the long period should have helped the process of finding a formula for solving land question. Unfortunately, during this period the white landowners failed to accept the reality that the pattern of their relationship to the land had to change to accommodate the legitimate interests of millions of landless black people.

Due to colonial injustices which left Zimbabwe with a dual land ownership structure based on racial lines. The ultimate challenge that Zimbabwe has faced over the several years is to redistribute the land in equitable manner and overcome the various financial and legal constraints that have faced the country even after the independence of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has come a long way to address the problem. Land reform involves issues of property rights, land use, actual agricultural production and land administration, amongst various other facets the processes of land policy formulation and implementation.

The land question has persistent Zimbabwean politics ever since independence. It has been a constant theme of National and International actors like IMF, World Bank, NGO, the British Government, Zimbabwe Government to play in one hand and On the other hand, many people, media blame government for having failed to solve the question. It clearly feels that this is the most fundamental question in politics of Zimbabwe. It is too much to say that in one way or another fate of property rights in the land area will be key determinant of the shape of Zimbabwe's entire political economy in the years to come. The evolution of the Government's efforts to address the land question is of great importance because of the peasants expectations that their long-held grievances will be addressed as the new regime redistribute property formerly held by white farmers.² Some Indigenous and others groups are still asking that as Zimbabwe's government has committed that it wanted to take land from the white farmers and redistribute it to poor Zimbabweans but not resolved in a time framework. The tendency to blame the government is stronger among younger and better educated people. In another argument over the land question in Zimbabwe some people say the most important thing is that the white-owned farms are very productive and help to feed the people, while others say the most important thing is that these

¹ Africa South of Sahara, (London, Europa Publication, 1999), P.3396

² Jeffrey Herbst, op.cit, p-129

farms should be in blacks/African hands as a matter of moral principle. Some believed that the many large farms owned by whites should be taken away from them and redistributed whereas some of them favoured the status quo. William fletcher said "I agree with the gist of the analysis. I think that President Mugabe took a legitimate issue, which was the land question and used it to serve illegitimate objectives. I think there's very little question of that. I think that the way that the issue was manipulated in the last election was outrageous. Nevertheless, having said that, the response of the United States government in this has been just as outrageous and I believe is actually inflaming the situation."³ Mr. Straw said: "There is a need for land redistribution but it must be handled differently, without violence, without conflict, within the context of the law, bearing in mind the interests of all Zimbabweans both black and white."⁴

A number of research studies have been conducted in Zimbabwe regarding the coverage of the controversial Land Reform. Land Reform has been considered a controversial issue in the sense that the Zimbabwean citizenry as well as citizens of other nations failed to come up with the same understanding of 'what' land reform entails and how it could be successfully implemented in a way acceptable to all the stakeholders. Some citizens see Land Reform as a 'necessary evil' and others see it as an abuse of human rights. Moreover, others limit their definition of land to agriculture and others include mining in their definition of Land Reform. Still others view the Land Reform exercise as a root to improving the standards of living of the citizens of Zimbabwe, especially, the black majority. Land reform involves any change which redistributes land. Because land is a finite resource and its ownership generally symbolic of wealth, social status and political power, all forms of land reform are political in nature. Land reform, therefore, often involves restructuring patterns of wealth, income flows, social status, and prestige and so on, and these are the very basic elements or ingredients of politics. Land distribution is a revolutionary process and passes power, property and status from one societal group to another. Land tenure reform, on the other hand, involves changes in the rules that govern land and related property rights.

2. The Role of the Media

The political drama of Zimbabwe was played prominently on the media and especially in international media scene. The pro-government media, resonant the government's line of thinking and presents the land issue in historic terms, whereby the injustices of the colonial era and Britain's obligations are highlighted. As the Government of Zimbabwe always blame the British Government as defaulter on their obligations to finance the land reforms in line with the 1979 constitutional negotiations. The international media depicted the growing crisis in Zimbabwe as solely a land issue. They depicted the land issue in racial terms and in most cases failed to articulate the Zimbabwean crisis not only as a land issue, but as a crisis of legitimacy and governance. The most vulnerable group in the whole land reform process has been the millions of black farm workers who have been displaced from their land. However, the international media, especially in the UK, concentrated on the plight of hundreds of white farmers forced off their land. The twin issues of race and property rights in Zimbabwe were brought into sharp focus by the international media at the expense of the gross human rights violations suffered by the majority black people.

The effect of all this is that some sections of the international media have played right into the hands of the government by giving the government the excuse that opposition to the land reform is tied Western interests. Mugabe has successfully portrayed within the region the perception that the opposition MDC, civil society organizations in Zimbabwe and the international media are fronts for championing white minority colonial interests in Zimbabwe. Many people asked why the international media and the Western governments quiet and unconcerned when the Mugabe regime killed approximately millions black people and tortured thousands more during the Matabeleland Crisis in the early 1980s and yet the

³ <http://allafrica.com/stories/200109040319.html>

⁴ African chronical (NewDelhi, August 28 august-10 september, 2001,P.523

deaths of 5 white farmers in 2000 made headline news and changed the course of international policy towards Zimbabwe.

The independent media have down played the historical forces leading to the final compulsory acquisition of farms. The independent media have repeatedly pointed out the shortcomings of this controversial land reform, how the reforms have benefited Mugabe's closest allies at the expense of the needy peasants. They further highlighted the peasants' lack of financial and technical resources and therefore doubting their competence to engage in farming activities. White settler and controlled media began to use verbal and pictorial frames which portrayed Africans as backward and inefficient as farmers so as to prevent competition in agriculture. They started highlighting that Europeans were more superior to Africans when it comes to tilling the land. Europeans feared that 'increased production by Africans would not only threaten their markets, but would diminish the flow of labour from the Reserves¹.

Newspapers like The Herald, Kwayedza, The Daily News and the The Daily Mirror reflected the different interests and strategies of describing the issues of land. Zimbabwean people and Media who were sympathizers of ZANU (PF) had different opinion. They saw this exercise as a necessary evil while other Zimbabweans who were sympathetic with the white commercial farmers had other opinion in terms of human rights. These people and media were just filled with some resentment towards the land redistribution policy embarked by ZANU (PF). They saw land distribution exercise as an evil. Those who were opposed to this policy of land redistribution were mainly from the opposition party MDC that had emerged in 1999. Whether by design, convergence of mutual economic interests or coincidence, the MDC found itself enjoying favourable coverage and reportage of their views mostly in the The Daily News and to some extent in The Daily Mirror. It goes without saying that the government owned newspapers, namely, The Herald and Kwayedza consistently toed the official line when it came to reporting the Land Reform.

⁴ Jack Woodies, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1961, p-10