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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

Zimbabwe Ten Years On: Results and Prospects

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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentators

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After a decade of political polarisation and international stand-off, the debate on Zimbabwe has finally been opened up to a wider reading public, thanks to Mahmood Mamdani's "Lessons of Zimbabwe", appearing in the *London Review of Books* (04/12/2008). Renowned scholars, within and without Africa, have broken their silence and have taken public positions. The debate now extends beyond a small group of specialists in Southern Africa and the UK and also goes deeper into the issues than what is readily available in the daily media. While we may wonder why it took nearly a decade for this to happen, there is good reason for the sudden change: during November-December 2008, Western governments and associated think-tanks began to test publicly the idea of intervening militarily in a small peripheral country and ex-colony, this time under the pretext of the "right to protect" Zimbabweans from a crazed tyrant. For many of us, this is dangerous talk; for others, it is either not serious enough, or serious and overdue. It is no surprise then that the knives would come out in the ensuing debate, and that this would intensify with the prospect of forming an "inclusive government" and resolving critical issues.

Mamdani's article set out from a simple premise: that Zimbabwe's deeply unequal and racialised agrarian relations were historically unjust and unsustainable. Restating this premise was significant, because during the course of the crisis the foundation of the debate kept shifting to other issues, such as good governance, productivity, or even historiography. Mamdani went on to argue that the radical land reform of recent years

has had various casualties, including the rule of law, farmworkers, urban land occupiers, and agricultural production. But even so, he argued, the land reform has been historically progressive and is likely to be remembered as the culmination of the anti-colonial struggle in Zimbabwe. He concluded that similar, or even worse, convulsions are quite possible elsewhere, for example, South Africa, unless proactive measures are taken there. Mamdani approached a complex issue calmly and methodically, in stark contrast to the emotive analyses and distortions that we see in the daily propaganda war. His article was followed soon after by a public statement by 200 African scholars, attending a continental meeting in Cameroon, who denounced Western sabre-rattling and any plan to re-militarise Southern Africa. Their statement was short, without detailed analysis of the Zimbabwe question, and written with the urgency of resisting a dangerous escalation.

These two statements were enough to blow the lid off. Concerned scholars of Zimbabwe in the USA and Europe scrambled to assert their expertise on the crisis, to label detractors as gullible victims of Robert Mugabe's anti-imperialist script, to vilify the whole land occupation movement, and to equate it with extreme human rights violations (Scarnecchia *et al*). Even scholars on the Left, such as Patrick Bond and Horace Campbell, joined in to dismiss the threat of external intervention as mere Mugabe rhetoric and to dispute really existing imperialism in the country. Despite their evident ideological heterogeneity, they converged instantly around a shared focus on personalities rather than the issues and resorted also to underhanded methods of argumentation (as noted by David Johnson).

The basic issue in Zimbabwe, like in so many other ex-colonies, remains how to resolve the two historic questions, the agrarian and the national. The issue of democracy is intrinsic to both the agrarian and the national questions; one issue can only be enhanced by the other's advance. Let us recall that in Zimbabwe, democracy itself was an historical conquest against settler colonialism. But this democracy fell far short of attending to the historic demands for social justice; instead, the newly independent state began to defend privilege in the name of rights and to criminalise demands for justice through the rule of law. Thus, when the deep antagonisms of this society escalated, civic organisations and ordinary citizens were faced with a confounding dilemma: either to tolerate the suspension of the rule of law and go for a historic breakthrough; or defend the rule of law and defend perpetual inequalities and backwardness. In our case, we defended the land reform not because we are "undemocratic", but because we believe in a deeper form of democracy, one that can only be set on a more meaningful and stable footing by structural changes. Despite the casualties identified by Mamdani, the land reform has indeed created the social and economic foundation for a more meaningful democratisation. There is need now to address the deficiencies of the land reform process, to rebuild the hard-won democratic institutions, and to lay the seeds for the next phase of the national democratic revolution.

That deep structural changes have taken place in Zimbabwe is beyond doubt. This has been established by various studies undertaken by AIAS and associates between 2001–07 (see references on the social and economic outcomes). The only other serious study published to date is by Ian Scoones and his associates at the Institute of Poverty Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) in Cape Town. Taken together, these studies have shown that land reform was not "hijacked" by "cronies"; although

cronyism has indeed operated, it has been marginal to the whole process. The land reform has been broad-based and largely egalitarian. It has benefited directly 140,000 families, mainly among the rural poor, but also among their urban counterparts, which on average have acquired 20 hectares of land, constituting 70% of the land acquired. The remaining land has benefited 18,000 new small- to medium-scale capitalists with an average of 100 hectares. A small segment of large-scale capitalists persists, including both black and white farmers, but their land sizes have been greatly downsized to an average of 700 hectares, much lower than the average of 2,000 hectares previously held by 4,500 landowners on the whole of this land.

Moreover, various new dynamics are underway in the countryside in terms of labour mobilisation, investment in infrastructure, new small industries, new commodity chains, and the formation of cooperatives. And despite the adverse economic conditions, land utilisation levels have already surpassed the 40% mark that prevailed on white farms after a whole century of state subsidies and racial privilege. That the crop yields remain low is largely due to input shortages, not the lack of entrepreneurial spirit or expertise by the new farmers, as is so often claimed. The new agrarian structure in Zimbabwe now holds out the promise of obtaining food sovereignty (which it had never obtained before), creating new domestic inter-sectoral linkages, and formulating a new model of agro-industrial development with organised peasants in the forefront.

Needless to say, a number of scholars have never recognised this potential. On the contrary, they continue to speculate about "crony capitalism" (Patrick Bond) and the "destruction of the agriculture sector" (Horace Campbell), without having conducted any concrete research of their own, or properly interrogated the new research that has emerged.

Deep structural change has been accompanied by recurrent state violence. The most serious contradiction of the whole process has been the shrinking of political space, especially for progressive social forces. The state apparatus has continued to resort to brute force, long after the land reform. In this regard, we have been accused of turning a blind eye to state violence (see Brian Raftopoulos and Horace Campbell). But this is not the case. To defend structural change is not to condone murder, rape, abduction, and torture. Our approach to state violence has certainly been different; we have not chosen the path of listing the number of victims and moralising about it. Rogue violence aside, our purpose has been two-fold: to analyse the changing class character of state violence so as to understand its function; and to provide concrete alternatives to avoiding and resisting state violence.

We have argued that in the early stages of the land reform (2000–03), while the leadership of the ruling party was struggling to appease and co-opt the land occupation movement, the use of force was used in defence of the landless and against the political forces allied to the white agrarian monopoly and Western interests. From 2003 onwards, as the land movement dissipated and as the enlarged black capitalist class repositioned itself within the ruling party, violence began to be used in defence of narrow class interests, but still against the forces allied to the West. This led to a series of tragedies between 2005 and 2008, especially as economic hardship deepened. The leadership of the ruling party substituted mobilisation tactics by quick-fix, military-style operations: first against "illegal" urban dwellers (2005), destroying the new urban settlements that had emerged during the land occupations; then against "illegal" rural

miners (2006–08), who had resorted to panning and smuggling for their livelihoods; then against profiteers (2007), in a price-control blitz whose effect was to further expand the parallel market; and finally, during the presidential contest of 2008, against those that the ruling party could no longer convince. Indeed, these ongoing convulsions, combined with the economic hardship (see below), had the effect of undermining the “vanguard” claims of the ruling party, even in the countryside. This culminated in a deep and tense electoral polarisation, with the opposition for the first time in the lead, which could only be defused through power-sharing negotiations. The violence (especially irregular detentions) has dragged on until now.

What were the concrete alternatives? It became very clear to us, as the rural and urban land movements dissipated or succumbed, that neither political party was capable of advancing the national democratic revolution to the next phase: if the opposition was a lost cause from the beginning, the ruling party had suffered a terminal class shift. We suggested that the only way forward was for social movements themselves to take the initiative, *but not by contesting the control of the state apparatus*. We called for a retreat from dogmatic party politics and a return to grass-roots political work, with the objective to build durable and democratic structures in the countryside, especially cooperatives, to build alliances with urban workers, and to begin once again to change the correlation of forces (Moyo & Yeros 2007a). For us, it seemed self-defeating to stand up to the state apparatus on a neo-colonial platform, or without adequate progressive alliances. For our detractors, however, the platform of the opposition was not neo-colonial, it was progressive.

This, in turn, has been among the most disheartening aspects of our colleagues’ work: their failure to interrogate the external factor and penetration of Zimbabwean politics. Of course, as David Johnson has pointed out, many of our detractors “don’t see contemporary imperialism as a category for analysis” anyway. But there are others who do, and they chose to abscond. Horace Campbell and Patrick Bond, especially, have gone to great lengths to say that “there are no sanctions on Zimbabwe” and that the economic decline is self-inflicted. Indeed, they have given the impression that imperialism has suddenly been suspended in the case of Zimbabwe. Scarnecchia *et al.* have gone even further to call Mamdani “dishonest” for attributing blame to sanctions. This absurd chorus became complete when supposed ideological adversaries claimed that the West is actually saving Zimbabwe: “USAID was prolific in sending out its food support”, says Bond; “Western food aid has been a lifeline”, say Scarnecchia *et al.*

The intrusive external factor is a constant in the history of Zimbabwe and the continent. In the case of Southern Africa, military, financial and diplomatic support for the white minority regimes was crucial in dragging out the liberation struggles, destabilizing independent states, and sealing neo-colonial transitions. In the case of Zimbabwe, the Western achievement was to enshrine the colonial regime of property rights in the new constitution of 1979. Thereafter, great effort was made by various means, including via the IMF and World Bank, to co-opt internal politics in favour of structural adjustment. And then, in the early 1990s, when structural adjustment was at its height, and when the rest of Southern Africa was making a transition to majority rule, the USA tried to re-establish its military presence in the region, initially in Zimbabwe, and partially succeeded by building an air strip in Botswana. It should have been expected, therefore, that relations would heat up in the late 1990s, when Zimbabwe abandoned structural adjustment in 1996, initiated extensive compulsory land acquisition in 1997,

mobilized Angola and Namibia in 1998 to intervene against the US-sponsored invasion of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by Rwanda and Uganda, and finally turned on its neo-colonial constitution in 2000. This was a major shift in the correlation of forces. Did the West really turn the other cheek at this point, as Campbell and Bond seem to suggest?

On the contrary, this is when destabilisation was deployed anew. Mamdani has given a taste of this destabilisation campaign, and we have also written about it (Moyo & Yeros 2007b and forthcoming a, b; see also Gregory Elich and Stephen Gowans). In short, Western capital went on strike, citing the lack of "investor confidence", while Western governments dedicated themselves to financing the opposition. Suffice it to say that the combination of economic isolation and political penetration has been severe, giving rise to a war economy, with extreme shortages of foreign exchange and basic goods and inputs, unrelenting hyperinflation, loss of productive capacity, and under-investment in social infrastructure, leading more recently to a very deadly cholera outbreak.

Many of our critics have sought to bolster their argument that there are no sanctions on Zimbabwe by pointing out the signing of new contracts in the mining industry. But whatever new contracts are being signed with Western, Eastern, or South African firms, they are slow in coming and a drop in the bucket. At the same time, the "food aid" that is being provided, and which has been hailed as a "lifeline", must also be interrogated: this policy is in fact the corollary of a donor boycott against newly resettled areas; food aid would not have been necessary if inputs constraints had been lifted in these areas.

The Zimbabwean state confronted this destabilisation campaign by becoming the most *dirigist* in the world. It intervened across all sectors of the economy to control prices, distribution and credit, to nationalise land, to reassert control over natural resources and export revenues, and to impose majority control by indigenous capital over the mining sector. Its economic strategy has included the resurrection of state-owned enterprises to direct the recovery and to diversify trade and investment to the East. But its overall approach has been to fight the siege by promoting an indigenous bourgeoisie. This has been the basic *internal* contradiction which, besides its violent political outcomes, has opened the way for the financialisation and informalisation of business activity, the entrenchment of speculative interests, the profiteering by capitalists all around (white, black, ZANU-PF, MDC), and the excessive printing of money, all too often applied in the interest of the larger capitalists.

It is clear that the heterodox strategy has been insufficient and incoherent, creating a playground for opportunistic behaviour. To be sure, the realities of isolation and penetration, combined with serial droughts and irregular rainfall, would have challenged any heterodox plan. Moreover, the fact that regional partners did not go far enough to provide economic support has also complicated the economic environment. But even so, the heterodox policy itself has been insufficient, in that it has lacked ideological clarity from the beginning and has also failed to rise to the occasion in the course of radicalisation. To take one basic example, the financial system should have been more thoroughly regulated from the outset, together with agrarian capital. This should have been seen as a prerequisite for the promotion of a whole series of politically defensive and economically developmental measures, from the financing of cooperatives in the countryside to the expansion of urban housing. Another example is the stock market, which became a hothouse of financial opportunism, and was only regulated in late

2008. The policy framework has also been incoherent in that it has not made effective use of the market mechanism. Economic policy has relied on the wrong capitalists, the speculators as opposed to the producers, and bypassed the vast majority of producers, who are peasants. However, we must be clear that none of this is a problem of "patrimonialism", as our detractors claim – a problem which could be eradicated by "regime change". The insufficiency and incoherence of economic policy is a reflection of the changing balance of class forces in the country and the weakness of urban and rural working-class organisations themselves. Regime change will not change this fact.

Suffice it to conclude with three issues that must now concern all genuine democrats: (a) the need for an economic recovery that is sovereign and socially just; (b) the opening of political space, in form and substance, for the re-organisation and expression of the popular will, especially of the urban workers and small peasant producers; and (c) the fortification of the autonomy of the region by devising mechanisms of financial self-help.

In the course of the power-sharing negotiations in late 2008, various think-tanks and donors – including a multi-donor trust fund managed by the World Bank and a donor group called the "Fishmongers" – began to discuss the issue of economic recovery. The UNDP, however, took the lead and proposed that Zimbabwe should readjust to the world economy by means of shock therapy. This was an astounding conclusion, not only because the UNDP had previously distanced itself from IMF and World Bank orthodoxy, but also because shock therapy has been completely discredited worldwide, and because the world economy itself is collapsing. To what exactly should Zimbabwe adjust? As outlandish as it is, we nonetheless take this talk very seriously as well. Indeed, the greatest danger now is of an elite power-sharing pact that re-subordinates Zimbabwe to parasitical international financiers and off-loads the costs of recovery onto the peasants and workers.

What is the alternative?

First, as Ben Cousins has also pointed out, peasant production should be made the pillar of the economic recovery, through subsidised inputs, fair prices, and secure tenure (which does not mean freehold).

Second, economic recovery requires a comprehensive framework for achieving food sovereignty for the country as a whole, not only for the rural producers on a "subsistence" basis. This requires the technical upgrading of agriculture under the control of an organised peasantry and the revival of agro-industries. It also requires the resolution of the farmworker question, an underclass of "cheap labour", which remains to be allocated land on an equal basis, freed from labour tenancy, and which needs to be incorporated into a cooperativist and social protection system.

Third, trade and industrial policy should be reformulated to secure the recovery of strategic industries and their re-orientation to wage goods and to the technical upgrading of agriculture.

Fourth, the mining sector must also be guarded closely, as this is crucial to the earning of foreign exchange and public revenue. The regulation of this sector must continue to ensure that the mines are not sold to the highest briber and that the revenues are

reinvested locally.

Finally, state banks should be given the leading role in the economic recovery, given that the private banking system has not played its part, and is unlikely to do so. What is necessary, now more than ever, is a credit system that directs productive and compatible investments to agriculture, industry, housing, and infrastructure. Such a policy would be in line with emerging trends around the world, including the re-positioning of state banks (and even the nationalisation of banks) in South America and the recent state interventions in the banking system in the USA and Europe.

Of course, many of our colleagues will again protest: the possibility of a heterodox recovery without IMF funding is naïve! But we would be naïve to believe that an external injection of finance, such as has been promised on the condition of “regime change”, will be delivered as promised. Zimbabweans will be made to beg for each tranche each day, while new conditions will continue to be invented long after regime change. This is a story we know too well. Moreover, we should bear in mind that aid resources have dwindled, and will dwindle further.

The most recent changes in economic policy indicate that policy-making is at a dead end. The ruling party has generally resisted normalisation with international finance, but it has now endorsed “dollarisation” and has also removed price and foreign currency controls. The policy change has formalised the loss of control over monetary and exchange rate policies in the hyperinflationary environment, but, ironically, it has also sought to retain an element of sovereignty by avoiding a wholesale return to the Bretton Woods institutions and the serial imposition of policy conditions. Its specific objective has been to improve the conditions for non-Western capital investments and to cajole domestic capitalists. Nonetheless, this policy alone can hardly be socially just, given that the poor are virtually shut out of a highly iniquitous hard currency market.

The opening of a political space for the re-organisation and expression of the popular will is fundamental to the tilting of state power back to a sovereign and socially just economic programme. This does require inclusive government, which has now been realised, but not any kind of inclusive government. Contrary to what has been suggested (see Bracking & Cliffe 2008), the character of this government is still open to dispute. Of course, many have argued that the removal of Robert Mugabe and his replacement by Morgan Tsvangirai is the precondition for the re-opening of political space and “effective” economic policy. But Mugabe’s removal would by no means guarantee the re-opening of political space, given that the opposition has been consistently clear about its support for an extroverted recovery programme, which in turn could only be implemented on the back of a new round of political repression.

Defenders of “regime change” have sought to support their partisan argument by taking refuge in myths about the “progressive” nature of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), or of “progressive tendencies” within the MDC. “The MDC and most in civil society have formally opposed Western-style sanctions”, declares Bond. But they never put up a fight, and this is because their main electoral strategy has always been to drive the economy into the ground, not to organise the working class on a working-class platform. “Zimbabweans who want transformation must oppose the neo-liberal forces within the MDC”, Campbell tells us. But who are these opposing forces within the MDC? And why should we expect them to bite the hand that feeds

them? And if they did so, why should we expect them to be spared of a new round of destabilization? For us, the task remains for social forces, including the trade unions and farmers' organizations, to step back from their political party alliances and resist a return to an elite pact and IMF tutelage.

Such a strategy, finally, has a very specific foreign policy, which is to prevent the issue of aid and recovery from being transferred to the United Nations, the IMF, and the World Bank, and to resist the marginalisation of the working peoples through superficial consultancy advice and ineffective "dialogues" with civil society. Discussions of aid and recovery must remain under the control of Zimbabweans, within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) framework. The latter must now reinforce its strategic autonomy by devising mechanisms of financial self-help and a regional integration scheme based on equality, solidarity and strategic planning. This too, is in line with progressive initiatives elsewhere, especially in South America.

In fact, the least noticed aspect of the Zimbabwe question is the regional dynamic that has emerged towards the construction of a strategically autonomous region. To be sure, SADC regionalism remains deeply contradictory. On the one hand, a SADC Free Trade Agreement is now in motion, together with a plan to create a common currency (in which Zimbabwe has expressed interest). Although these developments have been hailed as breakthroughs, their reliance on market power and functionalist logic is most likely to backfire, by reinforcing unequal development in the region and harming solidarity. On the other hand, SADC now counts on a mutual defence pact, a rare if not unique achievement in the South. This pact was pioneered by Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia in 1998, at the outset of the DRC intervention, and was extended to the rest of SADC in 2003. This new strategic posture is based on the principles of equality and solidarity and, thus, runs contrary to the functionalist logic of the economic integration underway. For this reason, we believe there is much more at stake now in Zimbabwe than our critics recognise – and imperialism knows it. A critical aspect of this is the ongoing East-West scramble for minerals and energy throughout the region. No wonder the destabilisation campaign has also taken aim at SADC, putting pressure on member-states (particularly Botswana, Zambia and Tanzania) and trying to undermine SADC solidarity.

Nonetheless, SADC has repeatedly and successfully denied the West direct involvement in the negotiations. Indeed, the intensity of the destabilisation campaign against Zimbabwe and the dirty tactics against SADC have forced regional members to look into the mirror and realise that they share something very valuable: a common sovereignty regime, conquered collectively by heroic sacrifices and struggles against imperialism. Thus, while SADC members continue to cling to the logic of the market, they have also judged correctly that what the West really wants in Zimbabwe is the total dismantling of black nationalism, the total defeat of an integration scheme that is strategically impervious, and the wholesale return to the dark ages of neo-colonialism. This has finally yielded an agreement on an inclusive government, which the West views sceptically and continues to threaten with the "stick" of sanctions.

Some of our critics continue to see all this differently. They believe that the inclusive government is evidence that the region lacks the nerve to stand up to tyranny. We believe it is a step forward: there is a realization in the region that only a political project that upholds regional autonomy in the face of external imposition will succeed in

marshalling internal forces to wage a consistent struggle for democratisation.

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