

Tribalism in Modern Africa

by Anthony Lavers

After months of bluster, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe has abandoned his threat to confiscate white-owned farms without compensation and promised to run a legal and just land reform program, which will not destroy the modern farming sector.

Mr. Mugabe's radical policy change does not stem from a born-again commitment to liberal justice. The more prosaic reason is that the International Monetary Fund told him that the loans his government needs to survive will dry up if he takes over the productive farms built up by whites over the past century.

Nor was the IMF influenced by sympathy with white settlement: it simply recognized that Zimbabwe's shaky economy would collapse without the export earnings from white farms. If that happens, the billions of dollars it has loaned Mugabe's regime will never be repaid.

After some 20 years of misgovernment Mugabe's black followers are becoming increasingly restless. High prices and low job expectations have turned trade

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unionists, students and the small black middle-class from ardent support to riotous hostility. Even the army, which Mugabe depends on to damp down unseemly public emotion, is getting fed up with late pay and the dispatch of some of its best units to bolster another dictatorial regime in the Congo. Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia got rid of most of their white farmers 40 years ago by compulsory purchase. The murder of nearly 600 white farmers in 1998 indicates some of South Africa's blacks have the same aims.

But the wish to get rid of white farmers raises perplexing questions for the 60-odd African countries, which gained independence after 1967. Will they become self-supporting members of the world community or slump into poverty? Is the "African renaissance" a mask for continental regressions? Will they develop societies based on the rule of law or degenerate into the brutal tribal systems from which they emerged only a century or so ago?

The IMF has forced President Mugabe to face fiscal reality. For the time being, white farming is safe and an economy which was once sturdy enough to resist sanctions, and has recently survived on foreign aid, will continue to function.

Outside Zimbabwe there is liberal sympathy for the African desire to get rid of the whites, mainly of British and South African stock, who settled a sparsely

populated area between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers in the 1890s, called it Rhodesia and dominated it for 70 years. Zimbabwe's remaining white farmers occupy about a third of the country's arable land from which they produce 80 percent of the country's exports, including the quality tobacco, which is its top foreign exchange earner.

There is no restriction on black purchases of white farms on a willing buyer-seller basis, but so far the government has bought few of what it calls "commercial farms" and most of those have gone to politicians instead of the landless peasants Mugabe is pledged to help.

The president is a university-educated, Westernized individual well aware that the schools, health services and higher living standards his people need depend on a thriving economy. Why, then, should he break up the farms earning so much foreign exchange, especially as there are abandoned properties and undeveloped land available for peasant resettlement?

Mugabe's policies may mystify outsiders, but are easily understood in terms of the African attachment to land. This is as strong as the links between Australian Aborigines and the land they occupied, but whereas Aborigines did not recognize individual ownership, this concept is basic to the social structure of the Bantu-speaking tribes of east, central and southern Africa.

Bantu is the generic name of a

group of related languages spoken over most of the eastern seaboard of Africa. Bantu-speaking peoples are thought to have originated in Ethiopia and gradually moved southward, reaching as far as the Transkei in South Africa as recently as the seventeenth century.

Where the land was lush and fertile as in the Kikuyu districts of Kenya and Zululand in South Africa, the movement was slow, but in dryer areas the tribes practiced shifting cultivation, clearing forests for crops and moving on when the soil became exhausted.

Bantu people measure wealth in cattle, sheep and goats, but their prime interest is in land for tilling. Before the fifteenth century their staple grain was sorghum, but this was soon replaced by maize, sweet potatoes and other South American crops introduced by the Portuguese.

The key element in these societies is family land ownership. There is constant dispute over it and as late as the 1890s Kikuyu clans often fought each other over land claims.

The male head of each family owned the land and on his death it was divided equally among his sons. This inheritance system worked well enough while the population was kept low by warfare and disease, but when European rule enforced inter-tribal peace and inoculations wiped out diseases such as bubonic plague and smallpox, populations increased beyond their land's capacity to support them.

Kenya's population growth was typical: when the British took over

in 1895 the population was around two million in an area the size of France. By 1939 it had risen to five million and thirty years later to ten million.

It is now around 22 million and only epidemic diseases such as AIDS and malaria are slowing its growth.

Population pressures drained the land's fertility. A ten-acre block would feed a family well and produce a cash surplus, but when that holding was divided among six or seven sons the resulting fragments could not support new families and their male members would seek work in the towns, creating the squalid slums which disfigure every sub-Saharan city.

When Kenya became independent in 1963 the British government bought out and divided white farms for peasant settlement. Relief from land hunger was short-lived because the white farming districts made up only 6 percent of the country's total land area, though they produced 85 percent of its exports.

The settlers' farms were highly mechanized, but their heavy clay soils were unsuitable for the peasants' hoes and simple ploughs. Production from the subdivided holdings fell sharply. From being a net exporter of meat and grain, Kenya became dependent on food imports. This dependence has grown with the spiraling population and so have urban slums and mass unemployment.

Paid work and the mutual help of the extended family system avoid starvation, but almost all Africans, regardless of their education or income, still long for land. A

family's holding represents its food supply, social status, bank balance and old age pensions rolled into one. I once asked an African colleague in Nairobi where the money would come from for hospitals, education and such sought-after prizes as cars after whites had left the country.

He shrugged:

Who cares? Why worry about hospitals? If you get sick, either you die or you get better. If you die you can't worry, and if you get better you're all right. What do schools teach that we really want to know? As for cars, we used to walk long distances and we can do it again. But what we do need is land. That's why you whites must go.

We used to be few and now we are many. What is an African family without land and grazing for its stock? With land we are rich. Without it we are worthless.

If an educated man wealthy enough to drive a Mercedes can feel that way, how much more so Africa's millions of illiterate peasants?

While the tiny elites who now rule Africa are likely to prosper whatever happens, the future is ominous for the mass of the people. No Kenyan alive today can remember the coming of the first Europeans, but in 1955 I met an old man of the Kamba tribe in the Machakos district who as a little boy witnessed the arrival of the first railway survey party. He had been terrified by the "white ghosts" in the survey team.

I asked him whether he regretted what followed — the arrival of the British administration, then the colonists and various forms of humiliating discrimination. Didn't he want to return to the time when his people lived by their own laws without interference from foreigners? His answer astonished me:

No, I would not like to see those days again because we lived in fear.

Fear of the marauding Masai warriors who bloodied their spears on Kamba herdboys. Fear of famine caused by drought or locusts. And the most traumatic fear of all — the terror of witchcraft, which pervaded his community and was said to kill people as surely as poisoned arrows.

As we end this century it seems that something very like the ancient way of life rejected by that old Kamba farmer is returning to Africa. Only three of the sixty or so sub-Saharan nations have escaped

internecine violence and none are free of corruption. For nearly all of them democracy is a hollow farce. Not one of them is economically better off than it was as a colony, not even Nigeria with its enormous wealth from oil.

Countries such as the Congo, Somalia and Sierra Leone have become the continent's basket cases, disrupted by the kind of inter-tribal warfare which wracked the old societies. The main difference is that the tribes now use automatic weapons instead of spears and bows and the death toll is many times higher.

African politicians realize this, but none has had the courage to tell his people it is impossible for every family to own land and that most people must live by paid employment under legal systems which protect the foreigners on whom their prosperity will depend for several more generations.

South Africa, with some five-and-a-half million whites in a population of 35 million, is Africa's

only industrialized state. After four years of black rule violent crime is causing economic and social disruption and formerly excellent hospitals are disintegrating from shortage of staff and money, with tragic results for sick people.

Thabo Mbeki, who will take over from President Mandela later this year, must find lasting solutions to these problems. To restore his country's former prosperity he will have to punish rampant corruption. To raise local and overseas confidence he must support and protect the white farmers who feed the nation and the industrialists who earn its national income. By doing so he will risk unpopularity with land-hungry blacks, but failure to act now will lead to national disintegration and the chilling possibility of an inter-racial civil war.

Will he have the courage to lead a genuine multiracial democracy? The world should have the answer within five years.

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