

# Chapter 17

## Sowing Political Capital and Harvesting Economic Regression: White Commercial Farm Seizures in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

*Since 2000, Zimbabwe has embarked on an unplanned “land reform” referred to as the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). The tumult experienced in its wake has infamously become known as the crisis in Zimbabwe. This chapter dissects and interrogates issues relating to competing variables such as land restorative and redistributive moral considerations, “hypocritical” political expedience, and, related to the latter, indigenous economic empowerment considerations that government used to justify FTLRP. The central hypothesis is that the economic and political crisis that FTLRP spawned was not, strictly speaking, “land reform,” but, by a figure of speech, only some aspirin that was meant to ease people’s pain caused by economic and political challenges for which government did not have a solution. Adopting a stance of victim, underdog triumphalism, FTLRP was essentially a mischievous pretext for the ZANU(PF) government to coercively retain political power while sacrificing the economy, which inexorably imploded.*

### INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has for more than a decade, starting from about 2000, largely remained globally (in) famous especially in the general opinion of the western world subsequent to the inauguration of the so-called, Fast-Track Land-Reform Programme

(FTLRP). FTLRP is a violent, ZANU(PF) government endorsed and/or orchestrated extra-judiciary and populist seizure of mostly white-owned large scale commercial farms whose owners numbered about 4,500 (Kanyenze et al., 2011) under the pretext of resettling ‘landless’ indigenous blacks after the Labour-led British government discontinued

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the Lancaster House commitment to finance land reform. This chapter takes the broad view that the commencement of FTLRP that the ZANU (PF)-led government expediently endorsed was its capitulation to the demands of land hungry peasants and a powerful war veterans' constituency. The entire project was thus precipitated and leveraged principally on crisscrossing causes of political anger by all the parties involved with land reform, comprising: the government of Zimbabwe which was angry both with Britain and the local white farmers for supporting the newly-formed opposition party – Movement for Democratic Change (MDC); war veterans and peasants who were now angry with government for its slow pace of resettling people; and Britain which was angry with abuses of grants for land reform. The manner through which FTLRP was inaugurated and delivered demonstrates no resemblance of sober investment of prior reflection on government's part. It was largely a panicky, fire-fighting political survival strategy. The political dimension of the programme finds consonant commentary from Moyo, et al. (2008:351) who in their analysis of the Zimbabwe land question make the observation that 'other criticisms have been that the government instituted the land reform programme for partisan political purposes...' This is the same view that is expressed more directly by Matondi (2012:73) when he says that 'Land reform was a political process, deriving legitimacy from complex historical, economic and social contexts'. Seizing on the moral high ground of righting a colonial wrong, government adopted a stance that we have called *victim/underdog triumphalism* which takes origin from traditional folkloric philosophy which will further be explained in the theoretical framework. Land was simply taken as spoils of the Second *Chimurenga* – along the same fashion that white settlers had done subsequent to the 1893 Anglo-Ndebele war and the First *Chimurenga* of 1896-97.

While skilfully exemplifying from two contesting points of view in regard to land reform in general, Scoones, et al. (2010) quote two op-

posing stances, for and against the future role of farming as an engine for economic development. They outline van der Ploeg's (2009) who is supportive of 'locally-controlled production systems' of smallholder agriculture, which, in the Zimbabwe scenario, equates perhaps to A1 and A2 resettlement farms. Proffering a contesting view, Scoones, et al. (2010:3) also quote from Collier (2008) whose views are that '...the advocacy for small-scale agriculture solutions are naïve and populist, pointing to the competitive advantages of large-scale, 'modern', commercial agriculture in the context of globalization.' The current chapter's view is that agriculture-driven economic development should be based on sound economic principles and considerations, contrary to what seems to be the policy position of the government of Zimbabwe.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This chapter develops and uses a simple theoretical framework to account for government's justification for embarking upon FTLRP. We will refer to the theory as the triumph of an 'unfairly treated victim or underdog'. This perspective is largely borrowed from Shona and/or African philosophical lore and it has a close resemblance with the biblical legend of David and Goliath to the extent it is the small and the contemptible David who triumphs over the big and boastful giant. In Shona folk literature there is something magical about the unfairly treated victim who often emerges triumphant from behind to make his/her enemies account for their misdeeds. Underlying this analysis is a legitimized use of violence about which Kaulem (2011:82) writes 'Most democratic processes are still being described and understood as violent fights, even by African democrats.' In the current scheme of analysis, the government of Zimbabwe built the perception that it was an unfairly treated underdog or victim of a western conspiracy to starve blacks of their own land

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