

# **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy In Zimbabwe**

The Honors Program  
Senior Capstone Project  
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April 2014

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Periodization .....	3
Pre-1980s: Rhodesia .....	4
1980-1990: Lancaster Era .....	9
1990-2000: Economic Era.....	13
2000-Present: Land Era.....	16
Analysis.....	19
Land as a Construct.....	23
Conclusion .....	29
References .....	31

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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**ABSTRACT**

This project explores how Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe handled the culturally vital land issue. Research was conducted using scholarly sources including books and academic articles related to Zimbabwe, Rhodesia, land policy, economic analysis, and governmental legal policies. Information collected was divided into four historical periods based on the major land policies shaping government action. This periodization helps simplify the land issue by contextualizing the vast information surrounding Zimbabwean history. Analysis of government actions during these periods shows the land issue consistently being tied to other goals. The essay argues that Mugabe has used the call of land reform to fulfill personal political objectives and consolidate power. In the process, this project explores the modern history of Zimbabwe and the reasons land has become central to African identity.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Land and land distribution are undeniably powerful and important factors in African social, political, and economic life. Africans generally believe that European colonials took land away from its rightful African owners and exploited the African people, leaving them impoverished even after decolonization. Therefore, equal land distribution and returning land to the rightful owners has become idealized among the populace. This is not to say that Africans are unified in what land means or what is the best method of dealing with past and present grievances. Zimbabwe, like many countries, has had a difficult time reconciling necessity with ideology. However, Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe and the ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front) party have used this land question as a political tool and tailored the debate to suit their present political needs.

To be clear, it is not my purpose in this thesis to argue for or against land reform. Instead, by focusing on the content and delivery of the arguments and the questions raised, I have constructed a historiographical narrative of Zimbabwean history. This narrative focuses on land reform policy and analyzes why Mugabe and the ZANU-PF chose a specific response to a given time. The goal is to explain why and how land is being used politically over time. In addition, this analysis will help propose an origin to the land debate, an origin rooted in politics instead of culture or economics. To facilitate analysis, I have divided Zimbabwe's history into four major eras of policy, a periodization necessary to explain the role of land reform in Mugabe's policies.

A significant flaw in the historiography of Zimbabwe is a lack of periodization. To people already engrossed in Zimbabwean studies, this is hardly an issue. After all, Zimbabwe as it currently stands is less than forty years old and it could be argued that the overarching political and economic issues have remained relatively unchanged. Within three months, I was able to familiarize myself with Zimbabwe to such an extent that I could converse with a political official and have a response to every major event he was referring to. That said, entering a body of literature that lacks a given focus or division of time made it difficult to understand what was going on at critical moments, or why events occurred when they did.

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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For example, Abiodun Alao's book *Mugabe and the Politics of Security in Zimbabwe* made little distinction between economic events in the early 1980s, the 1990s, and post 2000s, even though quite clearly the economic and political situation in each era was vastly different. This would be akin to wrapping the American economics of the 1920s (the Roaring Twenties), 1930s (the Great Depression), and 1940s (World War II) into one history. Context matters because it provides us with the necessary background to understand the major factors that motivate people to act at a given time. It helps narrow focus into manageable time segments for more intensive study. Such contextualization of the land issue helped me trace and explain Mugabe's actions across decades.

While for purposes of this paper I will focus on Mugabe and his land policies during each period, I will also argue that this periodization can easily be applied outside of land politics. This is one reason I periodize Zimbabwean history into clear major historical eras. Hopefully, in the future other historians and researchers can refer to these eras and make their works that much easier to understand and cross reference.

To reiterate, the objective of this document is not to debate the land issue but instead to see how Mugabe handles it. This paper will cover four major eras of Mugabe's land policy, explain why these eras determined land policy, and draw conclusions showing that Mugabe was not focused on land for ideological reasons but instead for political ones. This helps shift the land debate away from its arguments, focusing instead on why the land debate exists in the first place.

### **PERIODIZATION**

Clear periods of focus are easily identifiable for Zimbabwe. Surprisingly, many key events and changes take place in numerically neat and historically obvious moments: Zimbabwe effectively began in 1980 and important moments in land reform occur in almost exactly ten year intervals. Additionally, within each decade internal and external factors remain effectively consistent. When each decade is compared to another, the differences are apparent. For example: The Cold War politics dominated the 1980s but disappeared in the 1990s. At the same time, Zimbabwe was economically prosperous in the 1980s but struggled in the 1990s.

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

---

These factors influenced government action within each period. This context helps with the analysis of policy in each era.

For the purposes of this paper, I will classify everything pre-1980s as Rhodesia to separate the Rhodesian government and history from those of Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, Rhodesian history highly influenced Zimbabwe, so I added a Rhodesian era to make explicit the continuity between the two nations. With that said, the four major eras are as follows.

1. Pre-1980s: Rhodesia Era
2. 1980-1990: Lancaster House Agreement: Lancaster Era
3. 1990-2000: Economic Decline: Economic Era
4. 2000-Present: Land Seizures and Rule by Force: Land (or Land Occupation) Era

I call the three post-Rhodesian eras the Lancaster Era, the Economic Era, and the Land Era based on the important politically limiting factors within each era. Other researchers may also wish to divide the Land Era into 2000-2009 and 2009 to the present because the Unity Government was created during 2009. However, because the government has not taken any new course on land reform, I will consider it part of the Land Era.

Regardless, any historical discussion about Zimbabwe has to begin with Rhodesia and the problems the nation created that still exist to this day.

#### Pre-1980s: Rhodesia

As with many modern African countries, until the arrival of European colonists, the territory now known as Zimbabwe was officially owned by no one. Most of the land was unofficially owned by various groups with vastly different cultures. The only thing separating the people here from the common colonial narrative is the lack of a slave-trade in their history. Living in a land-locked territory in southern Africa, there was no access to the sea and therefore little if

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

---

any contact with European or American slave traders. This meant that Zimbabweans do not deal with the divisive issues created from past enslavement and selling of their neighbors.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless, in 1890 Cecil Rhodes led the British South African Company on an expedition into this territory and claimed it for Britain. As a side note, the area was named Southern Rhodesia, but the name was often shortened to Rhodesia, especially after it became a British colony in the 1920s. Nevertheless, from 1890, the narrative is similar to other parts of Africa. The Europeans subjugated the populace and implemented European laws and customs. Treating formerly disparate native groups as one population, the colonists moved them around as they saw fit. European notions of land ownership and economics were forced upon the people, drastically changing their lifestyles. Ultimately, the Europeans came to claim most of the territory, assets, and general wealth of the new nation while using the populace for cheap labor.

The land issue for Zimbabweans began with the creation of this company-owned territory and the relocation of the people within the territory. While there were too many individual cultures to make generalizations about pre-Rhodesian land ownership, it can be stated that at least a few groups had lived on their land for generations and were relocated against their will. It should be noted that, while not all natives were moved off of their land and not all owned land, the general feeling of being restricted to specific boundaries was felt by all. Although the Zimbabwean experience might not have been as severe as that of many African colonies, the black Rhodesians were obviously unhappy with this state of affairs.

During the post-WWII decolonization movement, returning land to native Africans was seen as a common goal across Black Africa. The Pan-African movement took many forms but it eventually led to violence to force out Europeans or their white governments. This occurred during the Cold War with many of the militia forces advocating Communism or Socialism, even without clear understanding of the political doctrines.

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<sup>1</sup> George P. Landow, "The Land Issue," *Contemporary Postcolonial & Postimperial Literature In English*, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/zimbabwe/politics/land1.html> (accessed April 19, 2014).

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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The ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) was no different in this regard, using a Socialist revolution as a justification for violent action against the Rhodesian government. This is where the nationalist ideology of war veterans that fought for the people and the land originates.<sup>2</sup>

However, during this time ZANU, which drew their forces from Zimbabwe's Shona ethnic majority, was not the only movement. Another was the ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union), which consisted of troops from the Ndebele people. The ZANU were trained more for guerilla conflicts and the ZAPU had conventional forces. Despite both desiring the creation of Zimbabwe and an end to white minority rule, these two groups were often at odds. They tried working with each other numerous times but managed an alliance in name only. Sometimes fighting broke out.<sup>3</sup> Even with the guerilla forces fighting each other, the white Rhodesian government had difficulty suppressing the movement. Though they tried to use intimidation to force the black Rhodesians into line, the ZANU were equally willing to use violence and, in fact, may have been more brutal in enforcing compliance.<sup>4</sup>

The war between the South African-supported Rhodesians, the Mozambique/Chinese-supported ZANU, and the Zambia/Soviet-supported ZAPU ended up being far too destructive for any side to maintain. I will discuss this destructiveness in greater detail later in this essay, but for now one major consequence was the rise of Robert Mugabe as the primary leader within the ZANU. Although I have heard from personal sources that Mugabe was chosen as a leader solely because of his fluency in and ability to speak clear English (admittedly very important in communication between ethnic groups that either spoke English [the official language of Rhodesia] or their own local language), the truth might be far simpler. To bring the war to an end quicker, Mozambique agreed to Rhodesia's terms to begin negotiations. One of these terms was jailing the majority of the ZANU leadership. This left Mugabe as one of the only leaders left. With the spotlight on him, Mugabe proved to be excellent at giving

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Compagnon, *A Predictable Tragedy: Robert Mugabe and the Collapse of Zimbabwe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> M. Tamarkin, *The Making of Zimbabwe: Decolonization in Regional and International Politics* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 114.



**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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speeches that represented party ideals, recruiting fighters, and training militant groups.<sup>5</sup> Though never fighting himself, Mugabe was a valuable leader and was soon put in charge of the ZANU and stayed in charge even after the other leaders were freed. As beneficial as he was to his political group, Mugabe was aggressive and steadfast in his actions. He often wanted to continue fighting rather than compromise on some issues even when no one else involved in the struggle was willing to go on.

As previously mentioned, the war between Rhodesia, ZANU, and ZAPU, was unsustainable for all parties. While economically capable (thanks to the support of their South African allies), the Rhodesian whites were not only too small a section of the population to support any kind of war effort, but the stress and dangers of war were causing a mass exodus of whites and strain on the remaining population. To give an example of how serious this situation was, in 1976 there were around 270,000 whites in Rhodesia. Due to the war that same year, 6,000 more whites emigrated from the country than immigrated to. This is a 2% drop in total population after one year of fighting. The white Rhodesians did not enlist black Rhodesians as soldiers due to fear of arming the general populace. This meant that soldiers would only be drawn from the white populace. Ultimately, less than 1% of the population was trying to monitor and militarily react to 99% of the population. At the same time, 40% of the government budget went to the military.<sup>6</sup> Again, this was one year into the war. The fighting only grew worse from there, especially as the guerrillas began concealing their training camps. Frustrated by an inability to strike militant camps, the Rhodesian forces turned to attacking the economic foundation of their neighbors, with devastating effect.

On the militant-supporter side, Zambia was completely unable to maintain any kind of realistic military support effort. The country needed the railway through Rhodesia to be open to maintain exports of valuable minerals and imports of food. Mozambique was no better off. Power stations and factories were being destroyed with impunity by the Rhodesian Special Forces.<sup>7</sup> There was no clear victor in the conflict. Although in the long run the militant groups would have overwhelmed the Rhodesians, the economic collapse of their supporting nations

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 104-107

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 120-122.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 256-258.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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would have made the struggle far more difficult if not impossible. Thus, when the opposing sides met in 1979 to discuss the creation of a new government, the Lancaster House Agreement ended up being a compromise among different groups. Provisions were worked out for a transfer from white minority rule to black majority rule. In the upcoming parliamentary elections, blacks would be given a majority in the house and whites an amendment-blocking minority of 20 seats. The parliamentary setup would allow the majority of government decisions to be made by blacks, but any constitutional changes or emergency powers had to be supported by the white representatives. This would help protect the constitutional rights of the white minority, which could have otherwise been amended by the former guerilla leaders. At the same time, land could only be transferred on a “willing seller, willing buyer” basis. This meant that both the buyer and seller had to agree to the process independently and be willing to make the exchange without external pressure. For this, the British would cover 50% of the purchase price of the land.<sup>8</sup>

It goes without saying that this was not a victory for the land movement. In spite of being only 1% of the population, the whites held around 50% of the farm land, including farm land that was considered superior.<sup>9</sup> Everyone knew that this agreement would drive up land prices and make redistribution a long-term process. Here, Mugabe and the ZANU tried to oppose this decision and called for a continuation of the violent land struggle.<sup>10</sup> However, Mozambique pressured them to comply. Notably, this is one of the only times in Tamarkin's book, *The Making of Zimbabwe*, that the land issue and land struggle are brought up as a primary reason for action. Tamarkin covers the making of Zimbabwe from local, regional, and international viewpoints in great depth while mentioning both overt and implicit reasons for given actions. He mentions the likely motives behind maneuvers whether they are political or personal. His conspicuous lack of reference to the land issue calls into question the centrality of the issue to the pan-Africa movement's leaders. This omission does not rule out oversight on the part of the author, but it does hint that motivations for action extended beyond the overt call for land. Tamarkin himself suggests that there was a struggle for influencing the future ideology of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 255-272.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Palmer, “Land Reform in Zimbabwe, 1980-1990,” *African Affairs* 89, no. 355. (April 1990): 164-165.

<sup>10</sup> Tamarkin, 263.

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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Zimbabwe. Even with constitutional restrictions, the new government could have shaped the country to be socialist, capitalist, or otherwise. Given that possibility, it is understandable that land would be considered of secondary importance.

On another note, Daniel Compagnon remarks that even after the Lancaster House Agreement was approved by all sides and an election was to be held, Mugabe and the ZANU threatened to continue the war if they lost the election.<sup>11</sup> How this threat ended up influencing the war weary populace is hard to gauge, but it does show intimidation tactics were used long before they surfaced in the post-2000 elections. It also shows the international community's ignorance of or indifference to the influence of fear tactics when not followed by violence.

Regardless, although not specifically mentioned in any of the texts, many works imply that the Lancaster House Agreement and resulting provisions were binding. The war parties likely would have met any overt aggression on Mugabe's part with an all-out military retaliation. This is a conflict that Mugabe and the ZANU could not have won, especially since the ZAPU was a viable alternative to this government. Thus, any kind of forceful land redistribution violating the Lancaster House Agreement was out of the question, even though the ZANU won the most seats in the new parliament.

In addition, the compromise was meant to ease transfer of power from the white minority to black majority. Thus the constitution also held that many of the unequal provisions – including the reserved white seats in the parliament and the land provisions – would only last ten years.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, under the Lancaster House Constitution, the land issue could not be touched for ten years. This constitution would restrict and define government action for the next decade. This is why I call the next period of Zimbabwean history the Lancaster era.

#### 1980-1990: Lancaster Era

After successful victory in the February 1980 election, the new Prime Minister Mugabe immediately reversed his pro-black political stances and called for reconciliation between whites and blacks. This was not just because of his substantial electoral victory or a change of

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<sup>11</sup> Compagnon, 47-48.

<sup>12</sup> Abiodun Alao, *Mugabe and the Politics of Security in Zimbabwe* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 31.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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heart: the president of Mozambique, Samora Machel, directly warned Mugabe of the dangers of not retaining the white minority on whom the economy relied.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Mugabe's control of the government gave him enough power to do whatever he wished. While "willing seller, willing buyer" and other Constitutional provisions were essentially inviolable thanks to the blocking white minority, the Zimbabwean Constitution itself was flexible and allowed the governing leaders to act freely in addressing most issues. It was because of this that Mugabe was immediately able to invoke emergency powers to give him more control over the military and legislative aspects of the government.<sup>14</sup> From there, the government went on an admittedly unsustainable but perhaps necessary spending spree to rework the entirety of the economic system to incorporate a rising black consumer base and educated class.<sup>15</sup> As suspected, this did not leave much money for land distribution.

Still, by 1990 the government had bought 3.5 million hectares of land or approximately 25% of commercial farming land owned by whites in 1980. Of this 2 million hectares had been resettled by 71,000 families. While this figure fell far short of government goals, it still represented a substantial effort towards land redistribution in such a short period of time. To help with this process, the Zimbabwean government passed legislation that gave it the first choice to purchase any lands available for sale. Thus, the government surveyed various farm lands to judge their market value and potential for resettlement. Some farmland was deemed of no interest and given a certificate to indicate that it would not be purchased for redistribution.<sup>16</sup> Thus, not all land was seen as desirable. In spite of the common perception that no whites wanted to sell their land, the reality was that, after the election, there was a slight exodus of white Zimbabweans willing to give up their land. These were individuals who feared that Mugabe or other leaders would go back on their word or would not want to live under black majority rule. Finding sellers was never an issue. However, because land owners could name their price and there was limited property for sale on the market, prices for land went up considerably. At the same time, land purchased had to be refitted from large

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>14</sup> Alao, 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Masaka, "Pitting Market Economy Against Planned Economy: A False Dichotomy in Zimbabwe (1980-2011)" *Journal of Black Studies*. 44, no. 3 (April 2013): 316-318.

<sup>16</sup> Alao, 168.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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farms to smaller individual farming plots. This required additional material investment to support incoming farmers. Therefore, the government could not afford to purchase all the available land.

Related to land reform, though often unmentioned in the land debate, the white commercial farms were worked by migrants from neighboring countries. Migrant farmers formed the basis of labor for most of the large farms, and by the time of Zimbabwe's creation many had been there for at least one generation. Though numbers vary depending on how these people are classified and counted, around one million lived on commercial lands. Often they maintained a surprisingly benevolent relationship with the white land owners who would provide healthcare and education.<sup>17</sup> Thus, any land purchases had to somehow deal with the classification of the laborers already present. The government had to determine whether migrant workers were Zimbabwean or not. This determines whether or not they are entitled to Zimbabwean land. Still, whites would often simply sell their unused land and continue to work the land they always had, along with their laborers, thereby bypassing this difficult issue for the government.

Nevertheless, as expected, the pace of land redistribution was too slow for the populace. While people were restless about unequal land distribution, a discontent fueled by media claims of favoritism in land distribution towards government officials, opportunities surfaced elsewhere in society. Zimbabwean healthcare and education during this time were remarkably high, with the latter being the best in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>18</sup> In addition, industry was highly productive, as was indicated by Zimbabwe's status as the second biggest economy in southern Africa behind South Africa.

Although small farmers continued to face economic problems, a strong economy, strong currency, and heavy government subsidies helped soften the blow. Moreover, it must be remembered that Zimbabwean farmers had the advantage of stability in government and society. Besides the Matabeleland crisis (discussed later in the essay) and the continuing

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<sup>17</sup> Compagnon, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.,

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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violent clashes within a military composed of former enemies, Zimbabwe was peaceful when compared to its neighbors.

This was not a perfect economy. It relied heavily on foreign aid, foreign investment, and unsustainable government deficit spending. There were incidents of favoritism in the government. However, when compared to the rest of Africa, Zimbabwe was a shining star. As important as the land issue was ideologically, reconciliation seemed to be working. Zimbabwe was not experiencing internal civil wars, ethnic violence, economic disaster, political repression, or stratification of wealth. Unequal distribution existed, but everyone shared in the prosperity.<sup>19</sup>

However, at the same time, the government had other priorities. Although both militia groups were incorporated into the new Zimbabwean army, along with the Rhodesian forces, the ZANU and ZAPU were at odds. There are various political and social reasons for this animosity but a large part was the perceived favoritism of the ZANU majority over the ZAPU minority. When the military had to decommission large parts of the army to make it more manageable, proportionately more ZAPU were fired than ZANU. Fighting broke out on occasion. One noteworthy incident began in February 1981. In this month ZIPRA and ZANLA units (the names for the guerrilla units of the two groups) occupying the Ntabazinduna camp near Bulawayo city entered an unspecified disagreement. This escalated to the point where nearby units from other military installations came to assist their side with armored personnel carriers and other high-powered weapons. Because neither side would back down, Mugabe was forced to enlist the white Rhodesian forces to stop the conflict through air strikes and Special Forces soldiers. Not only was expensive military equipment lost in this incident, but over 200 people were killed.<sup>20</sup> This incident is representative of many occurring in the era.

Though the exact details are too long to get into for the purposes of this paper, the ZANU and ZAPU conflicts were solved after Mugabe accused the ZAPU of trying to instigate a rebellion. This began a man-hunt against ZAPU officials. At the same time, the military was

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<sup>19</sup> Masaka, 316-318.

<sup>20</sup> Alao, 48-49.

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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sent to support Mozambique against a South African-supported militia group and suppress rebels in the Matabeleland of Zimbabwe. Perhaps due to mismanagement of military forces, improper training, or simple political suppression, as many as 20,000 civilian casualties were reported. Sometime after, the ZAPU remnants were incorporated into the ZANU to create the ZANU-PF. This left the ZANU in control of the only major political group in Parliament. Again, this Matabeleland Massacre was the only major incident of violence in Zimbabwe. It must be remembered that, compared to other new African countries, this ambiguous incident was quite tame. At worst it was a political struggle solved with military action. The populace elsewhere was not affected and the new ZANU-PF changed nothing politically yet ended the fighting and political disagreements. This kind of military suppression was not used elsewhere and Zimbabwe remained a cohesive society.<sup>21</sup> Reconciliation between ethnic groups seemed to be working. However, this event and the aforementioned military quarrels show that Mugabe and the ZANU were far too focused on internal political struggle and external security threats to pay much attention to the land issue.

The foregoing events explain why the Lancaster House Agreement provisions were not as restrictive as is often thought. The “willing seller, willing buyer” provision and constitutional protections helped to ensure that economically necessary whites stayed and foreigners invested without fear of sudden nationalization. This may have stopped quick land distribution but there was no realistic way to build the needed infrastructure for small farmers or to easily deal with the current immigrant farm laborers anyways. And with South African military might or internal rebellion a real threat, political and military security was a primary goal. All that the constitutional land provisions did was to give Mugabe an excuse for delaying redistribution. In the end, the “willing seller, willing buyer” policy was politically beneficial. As long as the economy remained strong, the land issue could be pushed to the periphery. Unfortunately, Zimbabwe's system could not last.

#### 1990-2000: Economic Era

By the 1990s, it had become impossible to ignore the economic problems of the nation. While the droughts of 1992 damaged the agrarian industry, no single factor can be isolated and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 82-91.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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blamed for this decline. However, each factor cumulatively affected the economy in significant ways. Government debt had increased substantially from 15% of GDP in 1980 to nearly 50% in 1989. Comparatively, Zimbabwe's debt crisis was more manageable than practically every other major African country at the time.<sup>22</sup> Regardless, it required cutbacks in public welfare and reductions of the standard of living, which disproportionately affected the lower classes.<sup>23</sup> Further, the unsustainable war in Mozambique (started in the 1980s) and particularly the later war in Congo strained the economy to the breaking point. Mozambique cost up to US\$60 million per year and the Congo cost at least \$3 million per month.<sup>24</sup>

Industry was negatively affected by government-assisted labor unions. Wage raises meant to increase the standard of living and more equally distribute wealth instead drove up production costs. Added to this, the economy was stretched to the breaking point as it sought to produce for all of Zimbabwe's population instead of just a white minority. There simply were not enough goods to go around, which drove up importation of goods instead of developing internal industry, thereby possibly stunting growth. Nor should it be ignored that being landlocked and having to deal with ties to the rest of economically struggling Africa caused issues with trade and economic development. Just as problematic were the reverberations from the OPEC oil shocks that increased the cost of energy and trade. Finally, favoritism toward political elites in the form of government loans and support for unsustainable businesses only made the situation worse. In particular, mismanagement of war veteran funds ended with Mugabe being held hostage by militants in 1997. A promise of budgetarily unsustainable pension funds got these soldiers to back down at the cost of diverting more public funds towards the military. Unable to pay for the immediate cost, the government printed money thereby worsening already rampant inflation.<sup>25</sup>

For some Zimbabweans, with opportunities drying up elsewhere, land redistribution became a stronger economic and political motivation. However, funding for land reform declined along with everything else. Although Mugabe and the ZANU did consider forced nationalization of

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<sup>22</sup> Compagnon, 199-200.

<sup>23</sup> Masaka, 320.

<sup>24</sup> Alao, 151-153.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 99.



**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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farmland as early as 1990 - since the Lancaster provisions had expired - the British said that they would not support anything other than “willing seller, willing buyer.” They would likely cut off their financial aid if any other policy route was used. Thus, it was made clear that land occupation and forceful distribution would damage confidence in the Zimbabwean government.<sup>26</sup> This was not a viable alternative.

Surprisingly, in the political scene talk of land redistribution was limited. Most calls for reform were directed at government institutions and the aforementioned favoritism. There was noticeable fraud in some elections but the political parties that formed were often too exclusive to make significant headway into electoral politics. On the other hand, the various national strikes and protests they organized were able to affect the operations of the country, including a strike that shutdown nearly the entire country's industry for days. Despite having the ability to significantly impact the country, these new political parties could not gain parliamentary seats because these movements relied upon an urban political support base that was not sizable compared to the farming and rural populace.<sup>27</sup> Just as important, the majority of whites voted for Mugabe and the ZANU-PF because they found themselves benefitting from the new regime while retaining their wealth. Thus, ZANU-PF and Mugabe were legitimately elected to government positions with substantial majorities at each election cycle. They passed laws as they saw fit.

This dominance persisted until the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) appeared. This group, which had formed from the remnants of past political movements, managed to gather enough support and to significantly excite the populace so that it began to threaten ZANU control. The MDC gathered support by appealing to the unifying problems in Zimbabwean society, such as the economic instability. Notably, they did not address the land issue and unequal distribution.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Mugabe and the ZANU often tried to focus on the land issue and promise land reform. This tactic did not generate political favor in times of hardship. Finally, the MDC scored a major victory. A constitutional referendum based on land

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<sup>26</sup> Palmer, 177-178.

<sup>27</sup> Compagnon 89-101.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 103-106.

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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reform was defeated in February 2000.<sup>29</sup> This meant that the ZANU had lost support of the populace and would likely be replaced come next election. Without some clear political victory, Mugabe could not maintain power.

#### 2000-Present: Land Era

Part of the constitutional referendum in year 2000 was the ability of the government to nationalize land. When this was defeated, the government pushed ahead and implemented what came to be known as the “fast-track” resettlement program. Military units spread throughout the country and forcibly evicted commercial farm owners and brought in farmers to settle this land. These land seizures mostly targeted MDC supporters.<sup>30</sup> This suggested to the populace that the event was a political maneuver to win popular favor for the next election. Since most whites had supported the ZANU-PF – again, the ZANU had protected their rights and prosperity up until this point – few whites within the nation felt threatened. This was reinforced when the government claimed that the farm seizures were over in December 2002, and encouraged white farmers to resume planting to alleviate food shortages.<sup>31</sup> It was only as the government began progressively seizing more land, regardless of owner political affiliation, that the farmers realized they were in danger.

On the other hand, the international community quickly responded with shock at the sudden action and violence. At the same time, they were surprised at Mugabe's vitriolic speech. Gone was the policy of reconciliation. Instead, he blamed whites and their political puppets as the source of Zimbabwe's problems. He spoke about recolonization efforts by whites and how he was righting past wrongs. Ever since this time, Mugabe has continued to use racist rhetoric to justify any course of action.

Quickly Europe, America, and many international organizations cut off aid, loans, and economic support.<sup>32</sup> That, along with the damage caused to the farms by the violent land seizures, the mismanagement of farms by new farm owners, and the droughts of previous

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<sup>29</sup> William H. Shaw, “‘They Stole Our Land’: Debating the Expropriation of White Farms in Zimbabwe,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 1 (March 2003): 76.

<sup>30</sup> Alao, 183.

<sup>31</sup> Compagnon, 178-179.

<sup>32</sup> Sam Moyo, “Agrarian Reform And Prospects for Recovery,” in *Zimbabwe: Picking up the Pieces*, ed. Hany Besada (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 141.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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years, essentially destroyed the agricultural industry that Zimbabwe relied upon. Much of the nationalized land was either given to government employees or handed over to farmers for settlement. Part of the problems of mismanagement occurred because the government officials given this land did not move to the property and had no economic incentive to develop it. Many let the land lie fallow, only using it as a vacation spot.<sup>33</sup> In addition, many of the newly resettled farmers were forced to leave this land after they realized it was unsuitable for mass cultivation. It should be noted that most of the “farmers,” who settled these new lands, were not actually farmers by profession; they were people who called themselves farmers based on a claim about their pre-Rhodesian culture. Thus, lacking experience in farming, they often did not understand the requirements for successfully cultivating land.<sup>34</sup> These aspiring farmers did not know that Mugabe and the ZANU had not properly redeveloped these newly acquired lands for small-farmer cultivation. Professional farmers knew this and were not easily persuaded to settle the land.

Again, most of this acquired land was not distributed to people who actually knew how to farm. In fact, many of the black immigrant descendants working on white farms were kicked off to make room for Zimbabweans. Others simply lost their livelihood as the owners fled the farm, while finding employment elsewhere proved difficult. This created a large unemployed workforce. By 2002 about 100,000 had lost their jobs and that number would increase by several hundred thousand as more land was seized and the economy worsened.<sup>35</sup>

Continuing economic deterioration contributed to ever-increasing opposition to the government. To quell dissent and suppress MDC opposition, Mugabe and the ZANU turned to violence and blatant rigging of elections. They would destroy homes or assets of the opposition to force compliance through fear. While this allowed the government to hold on to power, obviously it did nothing to solve the underlying economic problems facing the country. Despite the growing crisis, Mugabe found ways to use the deteriorating economy to his advantage. Often ZANU would cut off food from any location that did not vote for them.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 178-181.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 174-175.

<sup>35</sup> Blair Rutherford, “Conditional Belonging: Farm Workers and the Cultural Politics of Recognition in Zimbabwe,” *Development & Change* 39, no. 1, (Jan 2008) 91-94.

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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As early as 2004, NGOs that tried to assist a now starving and healthcare-deprived populace were forced to comply with government demands.<sup>36</sup> The UN could not step in as Zimbabwe was supported by Russia and China (though particularly the latter as it was a long-time ally of the ZANU and had privileges in resource extraction).<sup>37</sup> African nations would not intervene; many leaders were supporters of Mugabe during the pan-African movement and dealt with land inequality in their own countries. They found Mugabe's cause just.<sup>38</sup>

By 2008 even these tactics failed to coerce the populace enough to support Mugabe and the ZANU. The government forced an election run-off to buy time for more suppression. In a way this tactic worked but the destruction caused to the country's infrastructure and the mass violence sparked an international outcry.<sup>39</sup> Though Mugabe technically won the election after the opposition pulled out of the race, the country was nearly unsalvageable, especially politically. To save the government's credibility, South Africa helped broker a deal between the MDC and ZANU to share power in a new unity government.<sup>40</sup> This government remains highly ineffective and corrupt but no longer as overtly violent as before. While threats against the electorate are common and may have influenced the 2012 elections, there has been no overt use of physical violence. The reforms, including the abandonment of the Zimbabwean dollar, promoted some stability and allowed the economy to develop once more, but time will tell how effective these changes will be.<sup>41</sup>

The ZANU and Mugabe continue to find ways to hold on to power and this does not look like it will change until Mugabe's death. Government officials still receive preference in the distribution of economic and political assets, including generous financial loans and free transportation. None of the seized or destroyed assets of the MDC and its supporters were compensated by the new unity government. To be fair, there is no realistic way to achieve this given the poor state of the nation. Currently in Zimbabwe, the land issue is (as far as white-owned land is concerned), for better or worse, effectively solved. There are few white owned

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<sup>36</sup> Clare Kapp, "Health and hunger in Zimbabwe," *Lancet* 364, No. 9445, (October 2004): 1569-1570.

<sup>37</sup> Alao, 188-194.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>39</sup> Compagnon, 254.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Godwin, *The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010): 204-206.

<sup>41</sup> Compagnon, 268.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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farms left. In fact, there are very few whites left, with some sources listing fewer than 20,000 in all of Zimbabwe. From this point onward, any accusations about unequal land distribution on the basis of colonization are difficult to take seriously.

**ANALYSIS**

Normally, arguments about land reform have focused on the sudden change of events caused by the year 2000 land seizures. At this point, land went from purchase to seizure by force. Academics often see a disparity in Mugabe's policy between a past of free political expression and rule by law, followed by a period of escalating violence and suppression. His political tone also shifted, becoming racial and anti-western. Often he uses anti-colonialism to support his actions.

Thus, in the literature, there are two major schools of thought. One suggests that Mugabe was a genuine reformer frustrated by constant international restrictions, who finally accepted forceful acquisition of land to appease a "land hungry" populace.<sup>42</sup> Another group suggests this was simply an arbitrary action used to hold on to power and destroy the opposition.<sup>43</sup>

To address the first theory, there are many who support the land seizures even if most do not support the way it was carried out. Even with all the land purchases over the first twenty years, whites still owned the majority of land, even if not all of it was fully used. They also continued to control other major economic assets of the country. Those that see Mugabe's action as a legitimate reform note the impossibility of equal land distribution under the terms of the Lancaster House Agreement and they recognize inadequate finances necessary to obtain a true prosperity under distribution.<sup>44</sup> Particularly problematic was the lack of adequate infrastructure to support any kind of economic livelihood. Much of Zimbabwe's farmable land was productive because of the irrigation techniques and farm equipment used in production. The large commercial farm lands used entirely different farm equipment than those of the small farmers. Before the land could be cultivated by small farmers, they would need to secure the material and finances necessary to repurpose large-scale commercial

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<sup>42</sup> Moyo, 132-136.

<sup>43</sup> Compagnon, 189-190.

<sup>44</sup> Moyo, 134.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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farmlands. This drove up the cost of redistribution. Under these circumstances it is not hard to see it taking decades if not over a century for proportional economic representation in society to be achieved by this way of land distribution.

Especially given the perilous state of the economy and the affluence of many whites, government favoritism toward whites seems obvious to the populace. On this view, the 2000 land occupation ended up solving distribution and perceived favoritism, even if it did not solve the underlying economic issues. In addition, some (such as Sam Moyo) suggest that the primary problem with the Fast-Track Land Reform Program was that the international community cut off financing and restricted the economy.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that land redistribution and its economic benefits would have been far more successful had this not happened.

Yet the Lancaster House Agreement land provisions ended in 1990. This gave Mugabe the political right to decide Zimbabwe's land policy on his own. Forceful land occupation was already considered in 1990. As already mentioned, at the time, the British response was a warning of economic retaliation similar to what happened in 2000. Therefore, the results of the land seizures should not have surprised Mugabe. He should have known that violence would cut off vital support for the economy. Even if genuine land redistribution was the goal, and this was frustrated by British policy, none of the consequences for it changed for ten years. In fact, the economic benefits for forceful redistribution became even more dubious as the years went on and the economy worsened.

Even if we assume that Mugabe was fed up with the restrictions and inadequate finances for land purchase, Compagnon notes that finances could not have been the full story. Foreign donors collected tens of millions of dollars and were willing to pay for the land seized in 2000, but Mugabe refused to allow any money to go to those who lost their land.<sup>46</sup> In other words, Mugabe refused to allow other people to pay for the transfer of land at no expense to Zimbabwe. There is no clear reason why he would refuse compensation for the land owners and further cut off Zimbabwe from the financial support of the international community.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>46</sup> Compagnon, 172.

## **Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**

### ***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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However, if political power drove Mugabe's decision, then cutting off funds from those financially ruined by the event would prevent them from using the money to fight back politically. At the same time, academics have noted that there were significant funds spent elsewhere both in the 1980s and 1990s that could have gone to land redistribution but did not. Such things included loans for party officials and military spending. The invasion of the Congo in the late 1990s seems especially egregious. There were no funds to support this and most of the economic wealth gained went to party officials.<sup>47</sup>

It could be argued that Mugabe simply wanted to get the land and develop it later in order to satisfy popular demand for land caused by economic strain. In other words, backed into a corner politically, he focused on land to try and regain popular favor. This sounds plausible, but Daniel Compagnon calls into question many assumptions about this theory. Actual studies done on farmers suggest that they do not want undeveloped land. This is why even though 30% of Zimbabwean citizens agreed with the land seizures only 2-3% had considered land ownership a priority. Other factors such as cheap loans or irrigation were desired.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, much of the populace might approve of forceful seizure of land, but most agree that this would come with compensation.<sup>49</sup> Again, Mugabe refused this. Mugabe and the ZANU heavily pushed the land issue in the 1990s and even talked about creating a government body to promote discussion of the issue among the populace.<sup>50</sup> But this is not what the vast majority was asking for. The popular drive for land was caused by economic hardship. Hardship was not solved when unproductive land was given to inexperienced farmers.

Even then, when land seizures began, plenty of whites were willing to give up some of their land and only work a portion of it. Under these arrangements, it is conceivable that the main commercial farms could have remained productive and supported a newly developing farm class. The owners were kicked out anyways, an act which lost the support of both the whites and their farm laborers who form a substantial portion of the voting population. It seems very unlikely that a man so focused on this land issue was at the same time so oblivious to the true

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 174-175.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>50</sup> Palmer, 180-181.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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needs and desires of the people, as well as the consequences of his actions. Finally, if Mugabe really desperately wanted land reform, there was no need to wait ten years. From 1990 onwards, land could be decided by the government however it chose, even if they would lose support from the British and perhaps the white minority.

As for those who suggest this was all to hold on to power and punish white opponents, there is a slight problem with that theory. Whites supported Mugabe until the year 2000. If they wanted to hold on to power that badly, the government could have simply rigged votes or used violence to attack MDC supporters directly instead of focusing on farms. Forceful land distribution was not politically popular, economically viable, ideologically prioritized, or even necessary for power. Thus a question needs to be asked: What exactly was accomplished by the year 2000 land seizures? By looking back upon Zimbabwean history, we can see that there was a clear primary focus for Mugabe in each of the three major eras outlined in this paper.

Mugabe prioritized reconciliation for the populace and control over the government in the 1980s. The new Mugabe and ZANU government had to make sure their government looked legitimate or the groups that worked together to create the Lancaster House Agreement would have replaced them. Legitimacy is a huge issue for a new government and even the actions against the ZAPU were qualified under the suggestion that they were trying to overthrow the government. Considering the interconnected nature of African nations, support of neighbors and international groups was always needed to continue internal operations unopposed. This was not an issue by the 1990s. The 1990s were instead consumed by economic hardship. As is often the case, it is hard to separate political developments from economic ones and vice-versa. Tightening budgets meant funds had to be cut. Loans to government officials and economic aid for supporters became difficult to acquire. Quite simply, the government was running out of things to give. Whether the world likes to admit it or not, a large part of the political game is being able to give something to major supporters. Obviously, these economic problems bled into the next era. Post-2000, violence and any means necessary were used to hold on to power at all costs. Economic effects were completely disregarded in favor of controlling votes and destroying the opposition, physically if necessary. Without this, no doubt the ZANU government would have been removed by popular demand. Only when



**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

---

holding on to power became impossible to continue both economically and politically, did Mugabe accept the Unity government.

From analyzing the actions and restrictions on land reform in each of these three eras, we can determine the goal of the 2000 land seizures.

Naturally, we cannot ignore timing. The constitutional referendum based on a new land reform program was defeated thanks to the MDC. Before this moment, Mugabe's power over the political process remained unopposed. There was no need to do anything major to crush the opposition. Mugabe had legitimate authority and violence was unnecessary except against the ZAPU, who could theoretically oppose him militarily. This, along with MDC targeting during land seizures, suggests that land reform was a way to attack the opposition. Defeating the referendum did not change political policy. Thus, there is a reason land was chosen. By seizing land specifically Mugabe was able to justify his actions to the African community and gain their support or at least prevent intervention. This allowed him to attack the MDC by labeling them as western-supported. In other words, Mugabe legitimized his attack on the opposition in a way arbitrary violence could not. He also had acquired an asset. Land itself is seen as a sign of wealth and pride beyond its economic productivity. With difficult economic times making patronage unsustainable, Mugabe acquired a steady supply of wealth obtained slowly over many years and given to supporters.

And so land reform did change in the year 2000, but Mugabe's policy did not. Land reform was adjusted to the immediate needs of the regime. All Mugabe did was to continue a political system already set in motion. When it was convenient, he cut off funding for reform and blamed the Constitution or international community for restrictions. When that was no longer viable, he used land as a mask for political repression.

Land was never the issue for Mugabe. In truth, he may never have looked at land the same way other African politicians did.

Land as a Construct

The current land debate often relies upon the assumption that land is important to Africans. As mentioned earlier, there may be truth in this assumption. However, it implicitly assumes

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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that land is seen the same way by all Africans and that the view has not changed over time. This idea of the land debate being purely about land or wealth does not hold up to the scrutiny. I believe William H. Shaw perfectly deconstructs the arguments many African leaders use to justify land seizures in “They Stole Our Land’: Debating the Expropriation of White Farms in Zimbabwe.” In this article, Shaw wanted to help people move beyond the land debate by using evidence and logic to reject what he saw as invalid arguments for those supporting land redistribution. In the end of his article, he called for a more sensible analysis of the land issue. I am going to go one step further than Shaw and question the origin of the argument of the land issue and its connection to the pan-African movement. I would like to question whether the pan-African land argument still applies today.

The ultimate problem with the land debate is an over-fixation on land as an end in itself. The literature seems unable to move beyond this point even long after it became irrelevant to the political discussion. By this I mean the modern world does not rely solely upon land as a means of income, and many modern African youths understand this. Most Zimbabwean youths want a job more than land and are more concerned about the economy than rectifying past injustices between blacks and whites.<sup>51</sup>

Based on what the evidence and argument of this essay, it would seem that, whatever the results of land redistribution might be, Robert Mugabe was not acting out of a desire to rectify the land issue. His arguments about land simply do not appeal to the majority of the Zimbabwean populace. Often his most outspoken advocates outside the ZANU are other former pan-African leaders. These are persons who believe the battles fought against colonial governments were for land. There is a generational disconnect between Mugabe and the Zimbabwean populace which hints that there is more to the land debate than a desire for fair distribution of land.

For any individual looking back on history, it is rather easy to forget that present conditions of life do not necessarily reflect those of the past. The land debate did not start with Mugabe or any particular political leader. While creating this periodic narrative, I have seen plenty of

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<sup>51</sup> Landow, “The Land Issue.”

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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academics debate the land issue and either support it based on economic and historical reasons or reject it based on those very same factors.

Based on what I have read and heard, the land debate can be boiled down to three arguments. The first argument has to do with ownership. Many Africans rightly feel that their land was taken from them in times past by the European colonists. In this case, the land question was meant to address past grievances regardless of whatever benefit or detriment addressing the problem might cause. But as Shaw points out, not all land was owned by Africans before the colonists arrived. Some land was freely acquired and then developed into an economically productive site by the colonists using colonial capital. To claim this is African land simply because it is located in Africa does not make sense as it ignores true ownership. Moreover, before white settlers, blacks often took the land from other blacks. Saying whites took land from blacks and have to return it but blacks do not have to give back the land they took from other blacks is an obviously flawed argument. If taking land from another is wrong, then it should not matter who took the land and when the theft happened. Therefore, (as Shaw says) land ownership needs to be dealt with on a case by case basis instead of being treated as one historically concrete situation.<sup>52</sup>

The second argument about land redistribution is wealth. The unequal distribution of wealth has made life difficult for many post-colonial Africans. Very often, there is a vast divide between the wealthy and the poor. Historically, the size of land mattered with its productive capability and most people made their living based on the production of their land. But as we have seen, this is no longer the case. Industrialization has changed this. In fact, Zimbabwe's high standard of living in the 1980s can be attributed to the development of infrastructure, government support in education, and better paying jobs. It had little to do with land ownership. While other African nations that did not experience overall prosperity might not be able to see the economic changes caused by industrialization, the highly-educated Zimbabweans would know that their livelihood came from more than land.

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<sup>52</sup> Shaw, 82.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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The third argument is that land is culturally significant. That is true but it does not explain why land was chosen as a focal point for debate. This is akin to saying a debate about money is important because money has a lot of culture attached to it.

None of these answers get to the heart of the issue. Why was land chosen as a focus for African grievances back when the pan-Africa movement began? I do not have an authoritative answer to this question, but I do have a theory based on historical circumstances.

First, the pan-African movement states that Africans and those of African descent need to be unified as the fates of all African individuals are intertwined. In simple terms, Africans should support Africans. In the middle of the twentieth century this would be an easy argument to make because many African countries were under white minority governments. However, the farther one goes back in history, the harder this argument is to sell. Contrary to popular debate, Africans are not all the same.

Often we take for granted that Zimbabweans are all one group but this was hardly always the case. Back when the supposed battle for land began, many African nations were exceptionally young. Rhodesia came into existence in 1890. This means that even by 1950 any Rhodesian over 60 would remember a time when blacks were not considered a single group. Even the first generation would live with parents that had a completely different language and culture from other black residents. Nevertheless, all of these groups have a similar complaint about the oppressive rule of the white-led government. If someone was a pan-African leader trying to rally people around his cause, the obvious rallying cry would be to throw off an oppressive government. Instead, the pan-African guerilla fighters often said they fought for land. It is an argument that makes sense because many Africans, especially young Africans at the time, would feel that they had land taken from them. This idea of land could generally be agreed upon yet there should have been plenty of people who would have realized the fallacy of this call. And yet, the pan-African movement often focused on the land issue in spite of its shortcomings. This hints that there was a good reason to use land ownership as a basis for argument beyond trying to rally Africans around a single cause.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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The fact is most arguments are not meant to convince people who already believe in a cause or goal. Arguments are also meant to give legitimacy to a cause others do not believe in. Something often taken for granted in the present world is that all humans should be considered equal. Back in the early twentieth century, this idea was rather rare. Europeans and those of European descent often felt superior due to, at the very least, their technology. Many felt it was their right to rule over what they considered to be their inferiors and uplift them. Black leaders trying to convince whites that they deserved to be treated equally could easily be dismissed.

However, European law is very clear on the issue of ownership. If someone owns something, no one has the right to take it from him. Based on this view, the call for land was not just to rally black Africans but also to validate the pan-African movement to the white colonists. After all, as much as the call for equality could be dismissed, the rights of ownership are harder to ignore. This argument for land is great as a political tool for the young pan-African movement.

Therefore, a probable reason for the original call for land was simply due to a necessary political argument that could be universally accepted by everyone. However, as said before, there are obvious holes in this argument and not everyone might believe in it. Older individuals within the pan-African movement would be more likely to understand the call for land as a political construct as opposed to believing it themselves. This would allow them to use the issue however they saw fit without contradicting their own beliefs.

One question raised by this hypothesis is whether Mugabe would be able to see this land debate as a political tool instead of a personal motivation? The answer lies within his history.

Robert Mugabe enters this land narrative in 1924. Born in Kutama, a Jesuit mission station and school near Harare, Mugabe had access to a British education as well as a religious upbringing. He was noted to spend much of his time reading instead of playing. In Kutama he trained to be a teacher then went to the Fort Hare University in South African for further education. It is here that Mugabe met with other black nationalists at this time and learned of their cause. Though he continued to pick up education at various schools (including from the

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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University of London international programs), eventually in the 1950s Mugabe went back to Rhodesia to teach but soon moved on to teach in the newly-independent nation of Ghana. It was only after this experience of teaching in a free Ghana that he became involved in the black nationalist movement and acted as a leader. However, his political speeches got him arrested and he was jailed until 1974.<sup>53</sup> The point here is that as important as Mugabe became to the guerilla movement led by the ZANU, he was far more of an intellectual than a guerrilla leader until the 1970s. Much of the land struggle happened without his input. He did not create the argument; rather, he learned of it as an educated outsider.

Mugabe was at most two generations removed from the creation of Rhodesia and unification of the formerly disparate blacks. He was extremely well educated and immersed in British culture. Mugabe would understand the British view on power struggles just as well as he would the African view. He would also have some idea of the differences within the various Rhodesian peoples. Given these factors, it is entirely possible that Mugabe understood pan-Africans' call for the return of land to its rightful owners as just another tool in the political power struggle.

As implied, one advantage of the land argument is that it becomes more relevant as years pass. Younger black Africans under white rule would be able to more easily see all Africans as one people oppressed by another. The longer the African nations exist, the more similar the cultures between groups become. But the land argument has one primary flaw in that it stops making sense the farther removed from white minority rule the individual becomes.

The land debate is implicitly attached to the oppression of the white governments. After all, the land issue is meant to explain the problem with oppression beyond simple inequality. However, once the white governments are replaced with governments run by blacks, the land question and the unfairness of white rule no longer apply as strongly. As much as governments might argue that land reform is difficult due to outside influence, the youth born after a time of white rule would not implicitly understand the land debate in the same manner

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<sup>53</sup> Godwin, 16-17.

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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as their predecessors. They would see land from a primarily economic point of view rather than a political one.

The point is that while the land debate might seem like a timeless issue, it was made for a specific moment in time to fulfill a specific argument. The land issue might be tied to culture or economics but it was primarily used for political reasons. It was a very useful political tool made to unify very disparate groups and give sense to an argument even the opposition would have a hard time opposing. Quite frankly, the argument land reform is built upon does not apply to a modern society. Redistribution of land does not solve underlying economic issues as technological and educational assets are what determine success in a country. Given that the world has changed so much since the initial use of the land-based argument, the land issue itself should be reevaluated in order to determine what exactly it is trying to accomplish in the modern world.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper does not recommend any course of action for Zimbabwe and the land issue. In truth, whether justified or not, it would be exceedingly difficult to return Zimbabwean land to previous owners and rebuild the necessary assets (including skilled workers) that made them so productive in the first place.

Nor am I suggesting that land is not an issue to Zimbabweans. Land has been engrained in the culture on a similar level to gun rights in the USA. This is true for most of Africa. Land is extremely important for Zimbabweans and it is why the land seizures happened in the first place instead of an outright anti-MDC program. Mugabe has used the land issue for a purpose other than ideology, power, or any other single concept. He used land to satisfy many goals simultaneously. It gave him international legitimacy, a means of patronage, and a way to attack his opposition.

Perhaps ironically, I am focusing on land reform to suggest why we need to stop focusing on land. Land is not some sort of clear unifying ideology. By focusing so much on land, it can

**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
*Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst*

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give us tunnel vision. Land should not be considered important just because someone says it is. In addition, land policy should not be made without consideration of consequences.

Just as importantly, issues change with time. This is the problem with trying to see history as a continuous whole instead of teasing out main driving forces behind issues in small time segments. Mugabe's actions only seem unprecedented because we tend to not see the past and how that has influenced the present. The land seizures were not a decision he made in a vacuum. They could not be. If land really was something that to him existed for its own ideological sake, he would have continued with the war back in 1979 when the Lancaster House Agreement and its policy towards land were made. The American Revolution certainly happened over less and continued over less pressing matters of ideology. But even that revolution was related to economics.

Thus, I will say this: Nothing is unprecedented. Nothing breaks with the past. Not completely. But times do change. In the modern world everything can change in an instant. Yet there is always something that drives the next action. It can be hard to see what these driving forces are unless we focus on smaller pieces of time and divide one moving force from another.



**Periodization of Robert Mugabe's Land Policy in Zimbabwe**  
***Senior Capstone Project for Kenneth Warhurst***

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