

Poor black South Africans are ready for real land reform, but who will benefit?

Published on Pambazuka News (<https://www.pambazuka.org>)

[Boaventura Monjane](#) [1]

Friday, March 9, 2018 - 18:30



Earlier this month, the South African parliament voted for a motion to amend the constitution that will allow the government to expropriate private land (largely in the hands of white South Africans) without compensation. There is a general assumption that the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is talking about white-owned private farms, but neither the African National Congress (ANC) nor the EFF have said anything to clarify exactly which (if any) lands the government will expropriate. Debates about land reform in South Africa predate its democracy. Market-oriented land reform policies have been tried since the end of apartheid, but they have failed. The “willing buyer-willing seller” mechanism failed, as it did in Zimbabwe. More than two decades after democratisation, the white minority still controls most of the country’s productive lands.

The expropriation without compensation option was always considered in South Africa, although with little resonance and little effect. Political and public debates over this “radical” measure however have gained prominence relatively recently. Its new proponents – the EFF as well as some “left” forces, such as the Black First Land First movement, the African People’s Democratic Union of Southern Africa and some non-governmental organisations working on land and agrarian issues (that no one took seriously, until – apparently – very recently) have advocated that buying “stolen” land from white owners was unjust, and a radical economic transformation was urgent in South Africa.

The truth of the matter is that “white South Africans own over 72 percent of [the] total of 37 million hectares of farm and agricultural holdings by individual land owners”, according to the Land Audit. According to the Alternative Information and Development Centre, “even the 13 percent of land for black Africans in the former homelands is effectively held by the state in ‘trust’ [in the case of Ingonyama Trust, in KwaZulu Natal], and controlled by state-paid kings and chiefs”. White people also control other key economic sectors in the country. To give an example, only three per cent of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange is black-owned and the major banks are [white-dominated](#) [2], heavily tied into international banks, especially European banks. This is how unequal the issue is, if we use race as a marker of the distribution of the means of production or economic productive resource.

The unpopularity of controversial former President Jacob Zuma urged him to consider land expropriation without compensation when his political life was already uncertain in early 2017 – many called this proposal political opportunism – but it was probably too late. His successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, took up the issue in his State of Nation Address, but it was the EFF that submitted the motion that was passed in parliament by an overwhelming majority of 241 votes (against 83), but how realistic is expropriation without compensation in the current juncture in South Africa?

Some groups, such as the Inyanda National Land Movement, have already expressed support for the policy of land expropriation without compensation. According to Inyanda “this is a decision that was

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long overdue”, but there are also sceptical voices, even among disadvantaged South Africans, posing questions about which land are the proponents of expropriation “[talking about who will it be given to, and for what](#) [3]”.

I have visited rural South Africa on a regular basis since 2009, for research and field visits. I have ranged as far as the Eastern Cape, the Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. I have interacted with farm workers, farm dwellers, small-scale farmers, landless peasants, poor urban communities and some (white) commercial farmers – truth be told, it is not easy to get a white commercial farmer to talk to you. At the moment when the motion was passed, I was doing field research in the West Coast, Western Cape for my doctoral thesis.

Rural South Africa is powder keg. Exploited farm workers and landless people are hungry, angry and ready to take land. The conditions for a “Zimbabwe-style” land reform have been created. If amended, the constitution would just “constitutionalise” what would happen soon or later. Land occupations and rural uprisings have happened on a small scale, right across the country, as well as in urban settings. They have focused on housing, livestock and farming. Occupied land not only concerns the white farms: it includes municipally owned and common lands. Most of these occupations are repressed and the people evicted, but some have resisted and settled. The mainstream media and academic scholarship have attached little relevance to this, but rural struggles for land and dignity are mushrooming everywhere in South Africa.

Rural grievances, land and agrarian questions in South Africa are indeed complex. The assumption that “all blacks want (farm) land” and “all whites own – or are benefitting from – land” is very simplistic and highlights “race” over “class” in this complexity. The agrarian structure and rural conflicts are not solely between white (commercial) farmers and black (landless) peasants and farm workers. It is between commercial farmers themselves, between black indigenous people themselves and with their traditional chiefs, and between all of the above with the state (municipalities and central government). Simplifying the land and agrarian conflicts to blacks and whites (colonialists and colonisers) is a misleading approach. Customary lands are as contentious as private farmlands. Municipalities governed by the ANC are as problematic in the way they have managed and addressed land reform as those governed by the Democratic Alliance and other opposition political parties.

Based on my discussions with different people, there is no homogenous voice about how people see the vote among either the landless (blacks) or the landed (white) elite. I have heard black small scale farmers saying that if not followed up, “this move will be troubling”. I have seen white landowners laughing at me when I asked about land expropriation – since it seems that they are not taking this seriously – as well as commercial farmers saying “let them try and come to my land. I will shoot them to death”. But I have also heard both black and white people opining that land redistribution is the necessary measure to solve historical injustice and inequality.

South Africans urgently need a national land debate that is extended to all segments of society to continue the process rural and agrarian democratisation. Such a debate must capture as many voices as possible in order to build a popular national land reform programme that goes beyond the replacement of white capitalist land owners with black capitalist land owners, whilst also addressing racial discrepancies. A resolution of the land question must, however, be in accordance with the needs of those who work and live off the land. This means the destruction of all existing tribal and feudal relations in the rural areas and the nationalisation of the land. A new division of the land and its management must be undertaken by committees that are democratically elected and answerable to the people.

* Boaventura Monjane is a Mozambican social activist and PhD candidate at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal. His research focuses on land and agrarian questions, looking at peasant and rural agency in Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

** Special thanks go to Judith Hitchman, Ricardo Jacobs, Sameer Dossani and Sithandiwe Yeni for their valuable comments and proofreading.

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Issue Number: [855](#) [5]

IssueOrder: 4

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =  
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Article-Summary:

The South African parliament has voted for a motion to amend the constitution that will allow the government to expropriate private land without compensation. However, a true resolution of the land question must be in accordance with the needs of those who work and live off the land. This means the destruction of all existing tribal and feudal relations in the rural areas and the nationalisation of the land.

Category: [Land & Environment](#) [6]

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[2] <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/697401/South-Africa-white-population-uprising-warning-Zimbabwe-land-grab>

[3] <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-03-07-op-ed-is-government-going-to-consult-us-on-expropriation-farm-dwellers/#.Wp-wKoKY08U>

[4] <https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/2742>

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