

Response to the Mamdani Debate

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Most of the responses to Mahmood Mamdani's article in this issue have challenged his interpretations of several areas in the political debate on the Zimbabwe crisis, including: the land question and the role of the war veterans; the benign position on state violence and underestimation of the enormous levels of displacement that have taken place under Mugabe's rule; the misreading of the history of the labour movement; the dismissive characterization of the MDC and the civic movement; the mistaken assessment of the contribution of sanctions to the crisis; the brutal closure of democratic spaces; and perhaps most astonishingly the evasion of the enormous loss of legitimacy of Zanu PF and its increasing recourse to coercion, particularly as evidenced in the 2008 elections, to remain in power. Together these responses should, at the very least, cause readers to pause for further thought in reading Mamdani's analysis of the situation in Zimbabwe, based as it is largely on the work of Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros. In addition to many others I have, in several interventions,¹ offered alternative readings of these events and will this year attempt to consolidate those positions within the context of a new *History of Zimbabwe*² currently being completed by a group of Zimbabwean historians.

It is clear that debate on these issues, particularly the form and outcomes of the land reform

¹ Eg: Brian Raftopoulos, 'The Zimbabwe Crisis and the Challenges for the Left', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32,2,2006; Amanda Hammar, Brian Raftopoulos and Stig Jensen (Eds), *Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis*, Weaver Press, Harare, 2003.

² Brian Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo (Eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History of Zimbabwe from the pre-colonial period to 2008*, Weaver Press, Harare, 2009.

processes, will continue for a long time to come. However in the short and medium terms the livelihoods of both the peasantry and what remains of the urban workforce have been subjected to devastating attacks from the state, within the context of an economy that is now characterized by rapid informalization, enormous displacements of livelihoods, a rapid diasporization and loss of skills, hyperinflation, and a rentier state that has shown little evidence that it has anything resembling a coherent strategy to move beyond the current morass. Moreover, notwithstanding the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Mugabe regime, the policies that have been pursued by Zanu PF have so weakened the economy and social forces in Zimbabwe as to make the country more vulnerable than ever to the imperatives of the international financial institutions, as well as forms of investment from countries like China that have yet to show their benefits for Zimbabwe's national interests.

Equally important has been the gross violations of the democratic political rights of Zimbabwean citizens, of which there is abundant evidence in the literature. This issue continues to be a central problem in the Moyo/Yeros work, and it is most startlingly understated in the Mamdani piece. For Moyo and Yeros the problem of the violence of the state is dwarfed by the broader structural violence that the 'radicalized state' in Zimbabwe is confronted with, and the criticisms of those who have highlighted these violations are dismissed for their "resort to 'human rights' moralism".³ For these two authors a 'deeper form of democracy' can 'only be set on a more meaningful and stable footing by structural changes.'⁴ Related to this, for Mamdani the 'support' of large numbers of the peasantry because of the land interventions, has allowed the nationalist to 'withstand civil society based opposition, reinforced by Western sanctions'.

³ Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, *The Radicalised State: Zimbabwe's Interrupted Revolution*, *Review of African Political Economy*, 111, 2007.

⁴ Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, *Zimbabwe Ten Years on: Results and Prospects*, www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/54037. 16/12.09.

The major problem with these propositions is that the authoritarian state that has emerged over the last decade in Zimbabwe has become a major hindrance not only to longer term structural economic changes, but to the development of a more democratic dispensation. The kind of 'anti-imperialism' that has been espoused by the Mugabe regime has been built on a systematic undermining of those democratic spaces that would have been essential to build a democratic base for the land project. It is therefore an 'anti-imperialism' built on widespread coercion and diminishing electoral support despite the state violence that has become central to the Zanu PF project. Therefore the 'sobering fact' that needs to be kept in mind about the period not just from 2000-3 but from the late 1990's to 2008, is not just the massive changes on the land, but the widespread state attack on the citizenry of the country that has been the modality of the politics of land. It is doubtful that the manner in which the Zimbabwean ruling party has behaved over the last decade will induce a memory of, in Mamdani's words, the 'end of the settler colonial era' for the majority of Zimbabweans. Rather Zanu PF's selective rendition of who 'belongs to the nation' and the violent exclusions and dispersals of large sections of Zimbabwean society over this period, have produced a more problematic conflation of colonial and post-colonial styles of politics, and a deep distrust of the revived nationalism of the state.

Writing in 2006 about Uganda after the Amin experience, Mamdani made an acute observation:

If we can draw one lesson from the Amin period, it is this: how the Asian question is defined and resolved will affect not only the Asian minority, but all Ugandans. The Asian questions can be defined in a racist and exclusive way, as it was by Amin, so that the fact of colour blurs that of citizenship and commitment. Or it can be defined in a non-racial and inclusive way so that we make a distinction between different types of Asian residents in today's Uganda, legally between

citizens and non-citizens; and socially between those for whom Uganda is no more than transit facility, and those for whom Uganda has been a home for generations.⁵

This statement could quite easily be transposed to the white settler legacy in Zimbabwe, where the Mugabe state has legally excluded, not only whites from citizenry but large numbers of farm workers. Moreover it has placed political exclusions on urbanites and their organizations that have a long history of a critical relationship to the violent exclusivism of nationalist party politics.⁶ The MDC and the civic movement in Zimbabwe have many problems, not the least of which is their lack of attention to the legacies of structural inequality in the country, and their slow realization of the need to understand the global frame of the Zimbabwe crisis. However, more than Zanu-PF, the forces of the opposition have opened up the discussion on the need for a more democratic citizenship and state that will be essential to dealing with the longer term structural challenges of the country.

Looking to the Future

The September 2008 political agreement signed between the two MDCs and Zanu PF and the Government of National Unity that was established in January 2009 were the result of pressure at various levels. For South Africa and SADC the policy of quiet diplomacy was premised on three issues: firstly South Africa's need to avoid diplomatic isolation in the region and on the continent; secondly the determination of the region to maintain diplomatic control over the Zimbabwe question in the face of pressure from the West; thirdly the assumption that any agreement on Zimbabwe had to have the support of the Zimbabwe military in order to avoid instability in the event of

⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, *The Asian Question Again: A Reflection*, www.pambazuka.org

⁶ Timothy Scarnecchia, *Urban Roots of Democracy and Political Violence in Zimbabwe: Harare and Highfield 1940-1964*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, New York, 2008.

the defeat of Zanu PF at the polls. Thus from very early on Mbeki had as his goal the establishment of a Government of National Unity with the MDC as the junior partner irrespective of the electoral result. The politics of regional solidarity and stabilization, even under an undemocratic regime like Mugabe's, always took precedence in regional strategy over the democratic wishes of the Zimbabwean people. This version of 'anti-imperialist' politics once again has at its core profoundly anti-democratic propositions that have been challenged by civil society groups in the region. While I have argued for the necessity of accepting the outcome of the SADC mediation in Zimbabwe because of the balance of forces nationally and in the region, I have no illusions about the enormous obstacles that an authoritarian state will pose for the opening up of democratic spaces in the country. The centrality of regional politics in dealing with the Zimbabwe question has highlighted both the importance of such organizations in the current global configuration and the severe limits they place on democratic struggles within states. The irony of course is that SADC will now preside over a new regime of economic liberalization in Zimbabwe, led by South African capital.

In conclusion we are told by Moyo/Yeros that there is 'good reason' to surmise that the major reason for the late intervention of Mamdani and other African scholars into the Zimbabwe debate has been the recent 'Western sabre-rattling' and plans to remilitarize southern Africa.⁷ Apart from the fact that western military intervention in Zimbabwe was the least likely response to the Zimbabwe crisis, the position of African scholars who denounced such unlikely threats would have been much more credible if their criticisms of the violence of the Zimbabwean state over the last ten years had been equally audible. In the event the voice of African scholarship on this issue, with notable exceptions,⁸ has been all but inaudible. It appears that it still

seems safer for many African scholars to gather behind Mugabe's impoverished version of 'anti-imperialist' politics than against the glaring abuses of a former liberation movement. There is an urgent need for an anti-imperialist politics that places both political and redistributive/economic questions at the centre of its agenda. Until then there will be the temptation to keep holding on to the lesser nightmare.

About the author

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⁷ Moyo/Yeros, Zimbabwe ten years on.

⁸ Horace Campbell, *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberalism*, David Philip, South Africa, 2003.