

Civil Society and the Zimbabwean Crisis

Written by Kirk Helliker

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Civil Society and the Zimbabwean Crisis

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/07/02/civil-society-and-the-zimbabwean-crisis/>

KIRK HELLIKER, JUL 2 2012

Zimbabwe has been characterised by intense social conflict since the mid-1990s and particularly from the year 2000 because of the state's land redistribution programme known simply as 'fast track'. The article is divided into three sections. First of all, there is a discussion of the crisis in Zimbabwe; secondly, the debate within Zimbabwean studies about the character of the crisis is outlined; and, thirdly, the article focuses specifically on civil society in Zimbabwe.

a) Development of the Zimbabwean Crisis

Zimbabwe obtained independence in 1980 and just over a decade later (in the early 1990s) a structural adjustment programme was implemented. This involved the standard structural adjustment package of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation which undermined many of the socio-economic advances of the 1980s – for example, state spending on unproductive sectors (notably health and education) was cut and significant wage increases for workers (including public sector workers) were blocked. As living standards plummeted because of a deepening economic crisis, the trade union movement – particularly in major urban centres – blossomed. Alongside the union movement (especially the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions – ZCTU) and its series of strike actions in the 1990s, a vibrant civic movement emerged which eventually coalesced around the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA).

The NCA and aligned urban civics agitated against the closing down of democratic space by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party (under the leadership of Robert Mugabe). There was also a deepening concern amongst the burgeoning opposition to ZANU-PF that state power was being increasingly centralised in the presidency. At the same time, ex-combatants which fought in the civil war in the 1970s against the colonial Rhodesian regime (organised under the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association – ZNLWVA) were demanding proper compensation from the state for war injuries, both physical and emotional. A major confrontation was looming.

The Zimbabwean state, in addition, had failed since independence to implement a genuine land reform programme despite the fact that the land question was central to the struggle against the colonial regime. For the first two decades, the Zimbabwean state had pursued a willing seller-willing buyer (market-led) reform process for purchasing farms for redistribution to landless blacks. In 1997, when the state signalled its intention to compulsorily acquire nearly 1,500 white commercial farms, there was major opposition from the ex-colonial power (Great Britain) and white farmers. Meanwhile, a series of localised and largely spontaneous invasions of white farms by land-hungry blacks took place, notably in 1998.

The ZANU-PF government, in 1999, revised the Zimbabwean constitution and this was put to popular vote in February 2001. Two revisions were particularly critical: compulsory acquisition of farms and an even more powerful executive presidency. The NCA and its affiliates (with significant funding from Western international donors) campaigned for a 'NO' vote while the ruling party obviously campaigned for a 'YES' vote. The revised constitution, with a low voter turnout, was rejected. In the meantime, a new opposition party (Movement for Democratic Change – MDC – with Morgan Tsvangirai as leader) was formed in late 1999 with NCA and ZCTU backing (and with considerable financial support from white commercial farmers).

Under the leadership of local war veteran associations, the occupation of white commercial farms began in earnest

Civil Society and the Zimbabwean Crisis

Written by Kirk Helliker

immediately after the defeat of the revised constitution. The occupations, particularly in 2000 and 2001, became a nation-wide movement with the tacit support of the ruling party. This was condemned unanimously by Western donors, whose concerns were dismissed by the ZANU-PF government. In the light of the occupations – which involved a degree of coercion and violence – the state initiated and implemented an official land reform programme called ‘fast track’. This involved the massive redistribution of farms (compulsorily acquired) and the emergence of ‘A1’ farms (divided into small plots for small-scale farmers) and ‘A2’ farms (larger commercially-viable sections of farms). In the parliamentary elections that ensued in June 2000, the MDC did extremely well, particularly in urban centres and throughout the Matebeleland provinces. The opposition also performed admirably in the 2002 presidential elections.

b) The Zimbabwean Debate

These events from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s resulted in a very acrimonious debate within Zimbabwean studies. Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros refer to the land occupations underpinning fast track as having a “fundamentally progressive nature”. As well, the Zimbabwean state, because of its outright disdain for Western donors and its anti-colonial land restructuring, is labelled as a “radicalised state”. Other scholars, such as Brian Raftopoulos, David Moore and Ian Phimister make substantially different arguments in highlighting the regressive and authoritarian nature of recent political changes in Zimbabwe.

Critics of Moyo and Yeros claim that the latter’s statements about fast track entail perverse value judgments made by “patriotic agrarianists” or “left-nationalists” who fail to analytically capture the repressive character of state nationalism in contemporary Zimbabwe, designated as an “exclusionary” nationalism or an “authoritarian populist anti-imperialism”. They argue that this authoritarianism amounts to “domestic tyranny”, and they speak about a “number of African intellectuals on the Left” (including Moyo and Yeros, but also Ibbo Mandaza) who “leapt to the defence of ZANU PF” and its re-distributive economic policies. For their part, Moyo and Yeros claim that their critics (who they call “neo-liberal apologists” for imperialism or “civic/post-nationalists”) demote the significance of national self-determination and the agrarian question in Zimbabwe (as expressed in the land movement) by focusing on the movement’s excessive violence and eventual co-option by the ruling party and state.

The debate involves fundamentally different conceptions of the crisis haunting Zimbabwe. On the one hand, there is a radical nationalist discourse which speaks of a land crisis and stresses national sovereignty and re-distributive policies. In terms of this discourse, Raftopoulos says that land “became the sole central signifier of national redress, constructed through a series of discursive exclusions”. This process of exclusion entails sidelining sub-national counter-narratives found for example in Matabeleland and the urban trade union movement. On the other hand, there is a liberal democratic discourse which refers to a governance crisis and emphasizes human rights and political democratization – this involves what Blair Rutherford calls a “managerial, modernising nationalism”. Mandaza (with links historically to the ruling party) says that during the late 1990s post-nationalist forces in alliance with foreign donors (the main funder for advocacy NGOs such as NCA) were engaged in a subterranean “social crisis strategy” that sought to make Zimbabwe ungovernable. Thus, the civic nationalism propagated by theorists such as Raftopoulos is portrayed as ‘progressive’ urban civil groups warring against the state, and this entails seeking to undermine economic (re-distributive) nationalism. This debate in many ways captures the main political schisms and discourses that exist in Zimbabwean society, therefore articulating party-political conflicts in theoretical clothing.

c) Civil Society in Zimbabwe

The dominant understanding of civil society, as used in both political and intellectual discourse around Zimbabwe, is the mainstream Liberal notion of civil society as embodied in the international development system. Both sides of the debate effectively use this notion, which regularly conflates civil society with NGOs. Within Zimbabwe, civil society is normally seen as being manifested particularly in the urban civic (and sometimes trade union) movements; this involves conceptualising civil society in organisational terms (or its institutional make-up). The “civic-nationalists” speak about the progressive character of civil society in struggling against a particularistic, irrational and authoritarian nation-state; the agrarian-nationalists meanwhile challenge civil society’s supposed progressive status.

Civil Society and the Zimbabwean Crisis

Written by Kirk Helliker

The former position effectively romanticises or cleanses civil society in Zimbabwe, as even civic activists themselves increasingly note. For instance, Brilliant Mhlanga, a human rights activist, wrote in 2008 that Zimbabwean “civil society is showing double standards” and that it “has internalised the image of the ruling party, its tactics and general guidelines, and is therefore fearful of freedom of any meaningful change”. There is significant evidence of problematic practices internal to NGOs and civil society in Zimbabwe in recent years that warrant a serious critique of their status as bearers and harbingers of democracy. At the same time, the shared (by both sides of the debate) organisational definition of civil society, as deployed in Zimbabwe, is highly exclusionary – with an urban bias and possibly middle class bias. For instance, it remains unclear why the land movement from the year 2000 – consisting largely of rural land-short people – would not also fall within the ambit of civil society.

In addition, the organisational definition of civil society (no matter which groups or movements it includes or excludes, and irrespective of how it is judged) goes contrary to the rich historical and nuanced understandings of civil society in the academic literature dating back to Hegel and Marx. The prevailing definition in Zimbabwe hollows out these historical understandings; these understandings focus on civil society as a social space (and not as particular identifiable organisational formations) and specifically within liberal bourgeois democracies where voluntary contractual arrangements and civil liberties prevail and are not undercut by forms of social compulsion or coercion.

In this regard, underlying the debates about civil society, democratic change and agrarian transformation in Zimbabwe has been a deathly silence on whether civil society in fact exists in post-2000 Zimbabwe. Insofar as the notion of civil society (as a specific kind of social space) is linked specifically and exclusively to liberal democratic capitalist societies, then societies marked by compulsive forms of rule (authoritarianism and traditionalism) would be devoid of civil societies. Hence, colonial settler societies in Africa, in which chieftainships dominated agrarian spaces and colonised subjects in urban spaces were racially oppressed, were possibly only characterised by ‘white’ civil society. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, rural chiefdoms remain operative within large portions of the agrarian countryside and (as the “civic-nationalists” emphasise) repressive modes of state rule prevail throughout the country. Hence, Zimbabwe – despite the hundreds of NGOs in existence – may be largely devoid of a rule-of-law civil society. In this light, debates about the pros and cons of (an existing) civil society in contemporary Zimbabwe would be misplaced.

—

Dr Kirk Helliker publishes in the areas of civil society, political emancipation, land reform and Zimbabwe. His most recent book is a co-edited collection of essays on *Southern Africa: Helliker, Kirk and Tendai Murisa, eds (2011), Land Struggles and Civil Society in Southern Africa, New Jersey: Africa World Press.*

Further Reading

See Moyo, Sam. Helliker, Kirk and Murisa Tendai. Eds. 2008, *Contested Terrain: Land Reform and Civil Society in Zimbabwe*, Pietermaritzburg: SS Publishers; and Helliker, Kirk, 2012, ‘Civil society and state-centred struggles’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 30(1):35-47.