How to save a Country: Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe

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A comment on Samantha Powers’ article “How to kill a Country: Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe (Atlantic Monthly December 2003).”

**Zimbabwe’s current crisis involving land redistribution or restoration to its original owners who lost it to British colonialists, is a difficult subject to deal with, but one can hardly blame any African trying to recover what was taken from him in one of the most barbaric events in human history. For most Americans who are unfamiliar with this dark chapter in human history, Zimbabwe is just another good example of a dictator who is destroying his own country, which proves that Africans are unable to manage their own affairs. Unfortunately, this well written in depth analysis by one of America’s most progressive scholars from Harvard University who compares Robert Mugabe to Stalin and to Hitler, deliberately reflects and reinforces this tragic myth. How come nobody in western media has ever compared Ian Smith or apartheid leaders to Hitler? And what was the late Ian Smith still doing in Zimbabwe before he passed away recently??**

**To fully understand what is happening in Zimbabwe, one must examine some other African nations that went through a similar painful and costly de-colonization process and let everyone draw their own conclusion. Among these nations we can cite: Kenya, Uganda, South Africa or Tanzania.**

**Like South Africa, Zimbabwe or any other parts of the British Empire, Kenya was reserved for “British subjects” without the possibility of obtaining its independence. The accomplishment of such a task involved forcefully removing thousands of local natives from their ancestral land, and makes them settle in areas set aside for such displaced groups. It was known as the reserve. Even though Kenya is a very dry land, 80% of its arable land was reserved exclusively for British settlers/migrants who numbered about 10,000.**

**After world war1, British soldiers returning from the war were offered free land in Kenya as a reward for their services, and most of them accepted and stayed. With the colonial administration’s financial assistance and cheap slave labor provided by displaced Kenyans, these soldiers of fortune became farmers of fortune and turned Kenyan farms into some of the most productive in Africa. These new farmers largely grew coffee, wheat, corn and raised European cattle which they exclusively monopolized with the blessing of the colonial administration.**

**In many African colonies, Africans were prohibited by law to engage in trade, industry and commercial agriculture. It was in order to assure the new farmers’ monopoly in Kenya, that the colonial administration made it a punishable crime for Kenyans to grow coffee. Ironically, in Belgian colonies of Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo, Africans were executed practically on daily basis for not being able or unwilling to produce enough coffee and other exotic crops (culture obligators) that were needed to feed the insatiable appetite of the European consumers.**

**In 1953 Kenyans decided that they had had enough and launched what became known as the “Mau Mau” war that ended British rule. Belgians in Rwanda were shocked when the Mau Mau war started in Kenya, because they expected it to start in Rwanda, not in Kenya. That is how paranoid that they had become. This bloody war ended in 1963, costing 100 English lives and 40,000 Kenyan lives. To avenge each Englishmen killed in that war, 400 Kenyans were slaughtered by the royal air force. While Kenya was being pounded daily by the royal air force, Kenyatta had been arrested and imprisoned for his obvious connection with the Mau Mau.**

**Even though Mau Mau warriors were no match for the Royal Air force, the British whose colonialism was arguably applied with some civility (compared to French, Belgians and Portuguese), had quickly realized that the war could not be won and started secret negotiations with Kenyatta. Rumor has it that he was bribed and forced to agree to all British demands as a precondition for his release from prison, and his country’s independence with him as the President for life. One of these demands was for him to agree unconditionally, that independent Kenya will buy all the farms owned by the British at current market value plus bank interests. Of course Her majesty’s government would be more than willing to lend all the money to Kenya, for all these purchases. In other words, the British government would lend itself the money, pay its subjects, and Kenyan generations to come would be left to pay the bills! Was Kenyatta out of his mind? Was he bribed, coerced, intimidated or forced to accept these absurd terms? Probably. Did he have a choice? That is the real question that only he could have answered.**

**The British who were in a hurry to end this one sided deal, cash in and get out as quickly as they could, hastily concluded the transactions and Kenya celebrated its very costly and long overdue independence. As soon as the hangover was over, Kenyatta woke up and found himself with millions of acres of empty land and angry landless citizens who were demanding the return of the land that their fathers had lost. This new land crisis for Kenya had many problems and few options, but returning the land to its original owners was not on Kenyatta’s agenda, since he had agreed to buy it back from British farmers without consulting his fellow Kenyans. Since the land could not be returned to its original owners for free, the only option was to buy it from the Kenyan government that now held it. In other words, Kenyan citizens were being told that they had to buy the land that someone had stolen from them on broad daylight at gun point! Where was justice? Where was democracy? Where was fairness? Where was decency? Where was common sense?**

**Kenyatta, who obviously had no choice, was forced to persuade his countrymen to swallow their pride, forget the past and pay an exorbitant price for what was stolen from them. Not only was Kenyatta asking Kenyans to tighten their belts, but to work as slaves on their own land that they now owned only on a piece of paper. Each month a check from every farm was to be deposited in Kenyan banks that paid off English playboys who are now living in Swiss villas. Such a commitment required that a group of about two hundred families be assigned to one farm and were expected to run it and to make enough profit for paying off the loans and to support their own families. These poor peasants who had no experience whatsoever in running modern farms involving irrigations, operating farming machines, veterinarian services for cattle, etc., how could they possibly pay off millions of dollars in bank loans plus interests?**

**When Kenyatta realized how difficult it was to run these farms and make enough money to pay off the loans, he sold some of them to multi national corporations like the giant Anglo-German Brooke Bond Liebig Tea Company that operates throughout east Africa. From what I hear, up to this day, many Kenyan farms have failed to pay the money that Kenya was forced to borrow from England. When I was in Kenya in mid-80, over 30,000 Kenyans were still listed officially as landless.**

**In 1960, Her Majesty’s government attempted to use the same tricks in what is now Tanzania but it did not work. The incorruptible and the illustrious Mwalimu Julius Nyerere who had just graduated earlier from the University of Edinburgh about to emerge as Tanzania’s first President, refused to make a deal. He made it clear that his government had no intentions of violating anyone’s rights, and promised that land will be distributed freely and equally to all, and the man kept his word. We must point out, however, that Tanzania had fewer British settlers compared to other parts of the British Empire, which made it easier for Nyerere to say “NO” to the almighty England and got away with it.**

**Comparing both Kenya and Tanzania, who is better off now? Sure, Kenya gets all the tourists who come to see animals (to them Kenya is an open zoo!), and all the good publicity in western media and all the industries, but who for instance, owns such industries? Not Kenyans.**

**That is exactly how and why Idi Amin expelled about 50,000 Indians and Pakistanis who had monopolized trade and industries in Uganda, by giving them a choice of becoming citizens but they all chose to leave. I was in Uganda at that time and I witnessed this tragic event that western media twisted and used to get even with Idi Amin Dada, a monster that they had created, nurtured, trained and in the end the monster turned against its creators. Ironically, these Asian immigrants who were recruited to work on railways in British East Africa at the turn of the last Century, were British subjects yet they were never allowed to set foot in England. It was only after Idi Amin kicked them out of Uganda, that these British subjects of Indian and Pakistani origin were allowed to enter England, and that is how Idi Amin exposed British hypocrisy and committed a political suicide in the process. While Kenyans are still sending monthly paychecks to their old slave masters who now live in Switzerland, naturally, Tanzanians and Ugandans refused to take part in this modern day slavery. And anybody wonders why Africa is poor and still getting poorer and angrier?**

**In South Africa when Nelson Mandela came out of prison, he faced similar situation like in Kenya, Tanzania or Uganda. I am sure the idea of driving every Englishmen and every Dutch out of South Africa crossed his mind, but his country was a lot more sophisticated than both Kenya and Tanzania. South Africa is a major industrial complex and there was no need to destroy it by expelling those who designed it and ran it so efficiently, though at the Africans’ terrible expenses. Today in South Africa, the only visible changes are that there are no Apartheid signs anywhere, but little else has changed. That is my own personal opinion.**

**Zimbabwe which also won its very costly independence from Britain, had no wish to follow in the footsteps of Kenyatta, or Nelson Mandela and decided instead to re-claim unconditionally all the land that the British had stolen. It is true that back in the 70’s-80’s Zimbabwe produced food surplus which was unheard of in post-colonial Africa, but as far as Zimbabwean peasants were concerned, such a surplus was achieved at their expenses and it did not mean much to them. What Zimbabwe was faced with then, was either to maintain this food surplus at the expenses of a large landless Zimbabwean nation, or to redistribute the land to them and face the wrath of Bush, Margaret Thatcher, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.**

**Mugabe made a difficult decision, and promised to take land back from the British and face the consequences. What he did was to recover what was taken from him and he finds no reason to sit down and to engage in further negotiations. As far as he was concerned, the stolen property was recovered and returned to its rightful owners and that was that. The case was closed, and as far as he was concerned, there was no need to continue arguing about it.**

**In politics, however, it is never as easy as it sounds. First of all, Zimbabweans could not realistically use the land as efficiently as the English settlers, and to be fair, some of these English who were born there through no fault of theirs, considered and still consider themselves Zimbabweans. They still show up at the Zimbabwe Embassy in London to claim their Zimbabwean nationality, and they have every right to do so because nobody should be made to pay for the sins of their fathers. And obviously Zimbabwe will gain a lot more from such an act. Not only the modernization of agriculture and industries will be boosted, but the general hostility towards Zimbabwe will be removed and help the nation to move forward. In taking such measures, Zimbabwe has absolutely nothing to lose but everything to gain. What makes this negotiation more compelling, is the fact that Mugabe holds all the cards and is now in the position of strength where he can impose his own terms. It is guaranteed a win win situation.**