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Bernadette Atuahene

IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, batuahene@kentlaw.iit.edu

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Thwart a tyrant by resolving land crisis

Bernadette Atuahene

WHEN headlines reported “white farmers forcibly evicted from their land in Zimbabwe”, the international community was in an uproar. Our sympathies went out to those farmers on viewing pictures of them dejected and at times laced with their own blood. The blame for this atrocity was squarely placed on the shoulders of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and his party, Zanu (PF).

The international consensus is that Mugabe has evolved into a demagogue who is manipulating the sentiments of the masses with the sole objective of remaining in power.

The international community, however, ignores the fact that the real demagogue is systemic in nature. Government figures released before the land crisis showed that 4400 whites owned 32% of the fertile agricultural land while 1-million blacks owned a mere 38%. The per capita ownership rate for white farm owners was 2,270ha, while black farm owners had a paltry 0,06ha. This glaring inequality is due to the self-perpetuating legacy of colonial-era theft.

The British usurped land from the Shona and Ndebele people, who were forced to pay a hut tax and reoccupy their land as tenants. Those unable to pay were subjected to forced labour on white farms. Blacks were legally barred from owning land outside of the arid black reserves. In 1965, white settlers declared independence from Britain and, with more fervour than before, viciously repressed blacks politically and economically.

The inequitable and racially tainted colonial distribution of property that Zimbabwe inherited in 1980 on independence remains the status quo. Neutral laws that protect property rights are rightfully thought to be the cornerstone of a thriving market-based democracy. However, when those laws protect the ill-gotten gains of any group, they become a systemic inequality that functions as a razor with the potential to disembowel a nascent democracy.

The unfair land situation created a wellspring of systemic injustice. What Mugabe did was reach into this wellspring, draw up the deep-seated feelings of unfairness and manipulate these sentiments to serve his interests. However, rather than viewing Mugabe as the source of injustice, we must recognise that it is the systemic injustice that allows a tyrant such as Mugabe to thrive. If the international community is to help Zimbabwe, we must focus on the wellspring of unfairness and inequality.

We must stand behind the principle that radical land reform is imperative, and give Zimbabweans a clear alternative to the present land grabbing.

Since independence, a maelstrom of conferences, consultants and projects concerning the land question has inundated Zimbabwe, but there have been only nominal funds firmly committed to the gargantuan task at hand. As a confidence-building measure, we must encourage countries to contribute money to an escrow account dedicated to land redistribution. The trustee should release the money in stages as Zimbabwe reaches certain milestones, such as cessation of land-grabbing and restoration of civil and political rights.

Zimbabwe's poor black masses are in a quandary because they see the injustice in violently displacing white farmers just as clearly as they see the injustice in the continuing legacy of their own dispossession. Placing money into an escrow account demonstrates to the masses that the international community has not turned a blind eye to their plight. This will disempower opportunists who want to manipulate the black masses' entrenched feelings of injustice for personal gain.

Prof Atuahene teaches law, policy and international development, property law, and international business transactions at Chicago-Kent College of Law.