

CAPX

While Africa starves, its leaders change the subject

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On March 6, Tristan Voorspuy, a former British army officer and founder of luxury safari company Offbeat Safaris, was shot and killed by pastoral herders in Kenya, while inspecting some of his lodges. His murder was only the latest in a spate of killings, land invasions and destruction of private property that are, apparently, being incited by local political leaders in the country.

Three days earlier, Jacob Zuma, the President of South Africa, called for confiscation of farmland without compensation. These assaults on land rights in both countries are taking place while Zimbabwe's catastrophic experiment with land expropriation and redistribution is reaching an apparent denouement in the form of widespread starvation. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

The issue of land rights in Africa is a complex one. In many African nations, the farmland was stolen, or purchased under suspiciously generous conditions, by the settlers after the European colonial adventurism revved up toward the end of the 19th century.

On the other hand, the Europeans have become Africa's most productive farmers, introducing to the continent large-scale farming, better fertilizers and higher yields, and more scientific ways of raising animals. By producing greater quantities of food more cheaply, they have benefited the local population as well as the national exchequer.

Professor Rondo Cameron wrote in his 1993 book, *The Concise Economic History of the World*, that Africa was home to 120 million people in 1900. Today, it is home to 1.2 billion Africans. Only Latin America experienced comparable population growth during the course of the 20th century.

Moreover, Angus Maddison's data shows that Africa's gross domestic product grew by over 1,600 per cent – not a far cry from the GDP growth of over 1,700 per cent in China. Of course,

Africa was starting from a very low base, which explains why Africans remain the world's poorest people.

Speaking of the original inhabitants of the continent, there is very little evidence that Africans are desperate to farm. The idea of having a plot of land may be compelling for a variety of reasons – including the satisfaction of seeing an act of ancient injustice rectified – but land redistribution does not solve a number of practical problems.

First, most Africans desire to live in the cities, where they want to become accountants, managers and traders. Like people elsewhere, they abhor the drudgery and monotony of agricultural life.

Second, reversion from large-scale to small-scale and subsistence farming can undermine farm efficiency and, consequently, food production.

Third, experience shows that newly-landed small-scale and subsistence farmers are often in need of state subsidies, which puts further pressure on the exchequer.

Finally, assaults on land rights can have catastrophic knock-on effects on the overall economy.

Take the example of Zimbabwe. In 2000, Robert Mugabe, the 93-year-old dictator who has run Zimbabwe as his private fiefdom since 1980, gave the green light to his supporters to invade commercial farms, many of them held by white Zimbabweans. The private property rights of commercial farmers were revoked and the state resettled the confiscated lands with small-scale and subsistence producers – many with no previous farming experience. Agricultural production plummeted.

The farm invasions had ripple effects throughout the rest of the economy. The banking sector, which used farm land as collateral, was hit by bad debt and curtailed the issuing of new loans. The manufacturing sector, which relied heavily on processing agricultural goods, went into a tailspin.

Declining domestic production deprived Zimbabwe of the ability to earn foreign currency and buy food overseas. Famine and hyperinflation, which peaked at 89 sextillion percent in 2008, ensued and communicable diseases spread. That year, Zimbabwe's GDP per capita collapsed to a level last seen in 1952.

In fact, the results of a poll conducted by the South African based Helen Suzman Foundation, in September to October 2000, indicated that only 6 per cent of Zimbabweans rated the land question as the country's most important issue. Most were concerned with a lack of jobs and falling living standards.

I suspect that Mugabe fanned the flames of anti-white resentment and green-lighted the farm invasions in 2000 for the same reason that Jacob Zuma has started to talk about land expropriations in 2017.

Back in 1999, Mugabe lost a referendum on the new Zimbabwean Constitution and his party, the ZANU-PF, appeared poised to suffer an electoral defeat at the hands of the movement for

Democratic Change in 2000. Similarly, in 2016, Zuma's African National Congress suffered major electoral setbacks in the local elections and is poised to lose its parliamentary majority at the next general election scheduled for 2019.

After 23 years of ANC rule, South Africans are disgusted by high unemployment, failing public services and widespread corruption. Better to change the subject and pick on a small and defenceless minority. As I said, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

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