

Press Release

For immediate release

12 December 2019



South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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New analysis on why erosion of property rights will not help land reform – IRR

Too much of the debate on the ‘debate’ around expropriation without compensation is based on faulty and often misrepresented evidence. This is examined in an analysis published by the Institute of Race Relations today.

Entitled *How Zakaria got it wrong*, the report looks at a discussion by respected author and current affairs host Fared Zakaria about South Africa’s land politics on the American television channel CNN. Widely noted when it was broadcast, it embodies many of the mistakes and failings made by observers in describing what is at work.

The report analyses the conflation of the ideas of land reform and Expropriation without Compensation (EWC). The former is a positive and widely supported idea, with a moral imperative and potential benefits for the country. The latter is a policy track that empowers that state, but does nothing to deal with the problems in its land reform programmes.

In common with many observers, Zakaria appears to misunderstand this.

To assert – as Zakaria does (again, in common with others) – that ‘not enough has changed’ is quite accurate. But his account fails to describe the continuities between the denial of property rights in the past and the policy orientation of the present government. For example, there is no mention, let alone analysis, of the State Land

Lease and Disposal Policy of 2013, which decrees that land acquired for redistribution should be retained in state hands and not passed on to beneficiaries as their property. Millions of black people who were denied property rights in the past remain so deprived today.

When Zakaria invokes the experience of successful land reform in such contexts as South Korea and Taiwan, there is a mistaken parallel with what is underway in South Africa. Far from expanding private property rights, as was the case in these countries, EWC is but another chapter in a policy trajectory that is deeply statist in orientation.

The report comes as the government is moving to amend the country's Bill of Rights in order to grant itself a freer hand to intrude into private property rights.

This is a reckless move, which is not justified by the available evidence on the reasons for the sub-optimal performance of land reform in South Africa.

The report seeks to contribute to productive discussion around the issue.

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