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HOW ZAKARIA GOT IT WRONG

BY TERENCE CORRIGAN



South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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HOW ZAKARIA GOT IT WRONG

Terence Corrigan

‘Emotions about land reform run high and misinformation abounds.’ So remarked Fareed Zakaria, respected author on global politics and CNN commentator in a broadcast earlier in 2019. At issue was the situation in South Africa, and Zakaria’s intention – apparently – was to introduce fact and perspective to the matter, presumably for his predominantly American audience.

Zakaria was not the first commentator to draw attention to the intensity of this debate and the hotly contested nature of the arguments raised around it. Perhaps this is in the nature of South African politics and the particular type of attention that it attracts. As an example of how this plays out in the media, Zakaria’s broadcast – widely noted at the time – was invaluable and worthy of being remembered.

The country’s land and agrarian politics provides a template on which such ideological conflicts can be amplified. Land – ‘the land’ – is not just an economic resource. It is a symbol that confers nationhood and belonging. It is something to which individuals and collectives can bind themselves. At issue is not just ownership, but the moral right to own. It is no surprise that land features prominently in nationalist worldviews, or that nationalist movements tend to lionise their rural populations as the authentic bearers of culture and identity. Indeed, this has been a feature of Afrikaner and African nationalism alike.

And while the idea of a South African ‘miracle’ may have come under attack in recent years, there remains a residual view of South Africa as somehow exceptional. For many, not least those outside the country, South Africa’s unfolding political story is a morality tale onto which ideological visions can be projected.

Simply put, land politics and the government’s drive towards Expropriation without Compensation (EWC) has taken on a significance that goes beyond issues of land, land reform and South Africa’s economic prospects. It is about worldviews and visions. In this sense, a great deal is invested in the arguments involved, and not just in the practical outcome.

In this respect, Politicsweb editor James Myburgh has pointed to the dogged defence of dubious information about the country’s land politics by respected publications abroad.¹ A prime example has been the repeated claim that white farmers own 72% of the country’s agricultural land.² This is incorrect, and although it draws on a (contested) state audit of land ownership, the audit does not in fact support this. Myburgh has also drawn attention to the reluctance on the part of some think tanks and media outlets to acknowledge an outsized vulnerability by farming households to violent crime, typically resorting to arguments that the available information makes it impossible to know whether or not the murder rate is higher than the South African average.³

Other commentators have argued that concerns about EWC and farm murders are closely linked to the agendas of white supremacists,⁴ presumably implying that such concerns are themselves morally toxic.

This he ascribed (borrowing from George Orwell) to a sort of ‘transferred nationalism’, through which intellectuals might condone or support conduct that they would abhor in their own societies. The racism of South Africa’s history invites strongly Manichean narratives and prompts assumptions about the nature of South Africa’s political economy. The ‘white farmer’ is an enduring symbol of this, and a target for justifiable retribution.⁵

(The IRR has drawn attention, in a domestic context, to the propensity of the media to describe as a ‘farmer’ white people accused of racist violence in South Africa’s rural parts, even where they neither lived on farms nor were engaged in agriculture.⁶)

It should be added that a converse line of thinking, albeit one on the fringes, sees an imperilled white minority facing extermination by a vengeful black population. In this view, land reform is to be seen as a manifestation anti-white racism. This is emphatically to be rejected.

Sadly, lines of thinking that reject evidence in favour of ideology or narrative over facts, or which are erected on a foundation of misleading or inaccurate assertions, inflicts damage on the issues they purport to care about. They inflame passions and are grist to the mill of those for whom compromise and pragmatism are a dread enemy. They make finding enduring solutions to real problems more elusive.

These may have been the concerns that Zakaria had in mind when he made his intervention. Unfortunately, what he had to say did little to achieve that. Indeed, ‘misinformation abounds’ far closer to his studio than he might realise. This analysis looks at Zakaria’s description of South Africa’s land politics quoting his words verbatim and evaluating them, as a case study of the phenomenon he decries.



President Cyril Ramaphosa’s government in South Africa is facing a fierce debate over an age-old problem: land. Specifically, who owns it and who doesn’t. That issue is an open wound in the country’s post-apartheid era. On the left, there are calls for government to seize land held by white South Africans, putting serious pressure on President Ramaphosa’s government.

There is indeed fierce contestation around land politics in South Africa, but Zakaria misstates its nature.

The truth is that what is at stake is not land reform – a programme which has existed since the mid-1990s with broad support from all stakeholders – but the degradation of property rights and the amplification of the state’s powers through a regime of expropriation without compensation (a phrase he uses shortly thereafter in his piece).

Besides, President Ramaphosa’s government is not under pressure from left wingers (the associated visuals of Economic Freedom Fighters leader Julius Malema suggesting who these are) to embark upon a programme of land seizures. This is the policy of the president’s own party, the African National Congress (ANC), endorsed at its national conference in late 1997.

It has been repeatedly endorsed by President Ramaphosa himself – indeed, it is difficult to think of an issue to which he has declared himself to be quite as unambiguously in favour as Expropriation without Compensation (EWC). ‘We are going to take land and when we take land we are going to take it without compensation,’ he

told the crowd at a party rally in March last year.⁷ And, despite pledges that all of this would be undertaken in a consultative manner, none other than the president pre-empted (perhaps ‘disregarded’ would be a better word...?) the findings of parliamentary hearings into the necessity or otherwise of changing the Bill of Rights to allow EWC by committing his government to doing just that in late July 2018 – before the hearings were complete.⁸ Not surprisingly, thus, the weight of opinion expressed in the parliamentary process against such a change was also disregarded when the committee later recommended this constitutional amendment.

Interestingly (and concerningly), this is the first attempt to amend the Bill of Rights, the core of citizens’ protection under the constitution. And it is to be done to enable EWC. Expropriation, even with the payment of compensation, is a drastic step which should be used only as a last resort. EWC fundamentally damages property rights, undermining the investment climate and opening the way for drastic economic decline.

The constitutional precedent is a dark one: the Bill of Rights has been targeted to drive a policy. In future, the constitution may again be scapegoated to achieve a policy goal.



For white farmers, these calls for expropriation without compensation are familiar. They evoke the violence of government-mandated seizures of white-owned farms in neighbouring Zimbabwe nearly two decades ago under Robert Mugabe and, for many, the debate stirs up fears that South Africa could fall to economic devastation like its neighbour to the north. Emotions about land reform run high and misinformation abounds.

Given Zimbabwe’s economic meltdown, it would be very strange if this did not figure prominently. The ANC has certainly not helped allay fears of a Zimbabwe-style outcome with its evident sympathy over the years for the Zimbabwean regime. There is a very strong argument that the key lesson it has drawn from that experience is that a sclerotic and corrupt liberation movement can hang on to power, even as the economy gives way beneath it.

Fears of economic devastation do not, however, arise solely from the prospect of land seizures. South Africa’s economy is already under enormous stress as a result of, among other things, policy uncertainty (not to mention counterproductive policies), state incapacity, deficient education, corruption and fraying infrastructure. The state of the country’s mismanaged electricity utility, Eskom, poses a catastrophic threat to the country’s prospects. The upshot is economic growth has been below the rate of population growth for the past four years and the unemployment rate stands at 29%.

The attack on property rights will only aggravate that. In fact, it already has. Economist Azar Jammine has pointed out that the land ‘debate’ has caused a fall-off in investment. The ANC decision to lurch towards EWC ‘in one fell swoop destroyed whatever hope there was of a surge in capital investment that might resurrect sustainable economic growth’.⁹

And, yes, emotions do run high and misinformation does abound.

But here are the facts. Expropriation without Compensation has happened before in South Africa. In 1913, the government passed the Natives Land Act. Back then, it grabbed 87% of arable land for whites and corralled black South Africans onto reserves where they had no individual ownership rights. Black livelihoods were destroyed. Today, not enough has changed.

Is the implication that the precedent of EWC in the country's history justifies applying it again? One would think that the abuses of the past would counsel caution about repeating them. In fact, moreover, the Natives Land Act of 1913 did not expropriate land from Africans but rather sought to prevent them from buying or leasing land outside areas 'reserved' for African occupation, and which totalled some 7% of the country's total land area. (The Act was not limited to 'arable' land.) In 1936, the Native Trust and Land Act expanded these reserves to something over 13%.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, forced removals in pursuit of the National Party government's ideological goals of segregation and separate 'homelands' for different African ethnic groups uprooted 2 million people (at a conservative estimate) and often destroyed their livelihoods.

Zakaria is broadly correct that Africans had 'no individual ownership rights'. The idea was that Africans' landholdings were essentially state or communal property, typically under the jurisdiction of traditional authorities. Behind this, in part, was the view that Africans needed culturally specific landholding models, not freehold title that white (and for that matter coloured or Indian South Africans) had access to.

One of the most scandalous failings of post-apartheid South Africa is that little has been done to grant some 17 million people living in the former 'reserves' real property rights over their holdings. Traditional leaders have instead retained their control over the allocation of land here.

Even where post-apartheid land reform has been carried out, it has become state policy NOT to confer ownership on beneficiaries, at least in the so-called 'redistribution' programme. (This is the policy aimed at providing land to those who need it, even where they have no specific historic claim to a particular property.)

The State Land Lease and Disposal Policy of 2013 explicitly states that land acquired for redistribution will remain in state ownership and that beneficiaries must lease it rather than own it – which bars them from the individual title needed to borrow working capital from banks. In addition, these beneficiaries must perform to the satisfaction of state officials (who generally have no farming expertise themselves), while only those able to produce on a significant commercial scale will be allowed to buy their holdings – and then only after 50 years. Professor Ruth Hall of the University of the Western Cape – hardly an opponent of land reform – described this as 'a policy that says that black people are not to be trusted with land'.¹⁰

This view was echoed by the *Report of the High Level Panel on the Assessment of Key Legislation and Acceleration of Fundamental Change*, chaired by former president Kgalema Motlanthe: 'It is of great concern to the Panel that recent policy shifts appear to default to some of the key repertoires that were used to justify the denial of political and property rights for black people during colonialism and apartheid.'¹¹

In September 2019, a potentially important judgement was handed down by the Pretoria High Court.¹² David Rekgase, a farmer from Limpopo province had been farming – by all accounts successfully – a piece of state-owned land since 1991. In 2002 he had requested to buy it. To this, the government agreed, but administrative wheels grind slowly. July 2010, when the Deputy Director General for Land and Tenure Reform at the Department of Rural Development and Agriculture decided not to approve the sale. Rather, Rakgase could have a ‘long term lease’. In court papers, the government said that land redistribution was being conducted on the ‘principle that black farming households and communities may obtain 30-year leases, renewable for a further 20 years, before the state will consider transferring ownership to them’.¹³ As Rakgase was in his seventies, it was highly unlikely that he would be around to see this.

The court ordered that the farm be sold to him. This was welcome relief. But that the government as willing to spend time and money to defend the denial of property ownership to a black farmer – on principle – speaks volumes about the realities of South African land and land reform policy.

In a sad addendum, the government said that it would appeal the verdict – another revealing development as to the official stance. It subsequently changed course, and said it would not do so. How this saga will ultimately play out is unclear.

For now, ‘not enough has changed’. In this, Zakaria is correct.



Of all the agricultural land owned by individuals across the country, 72% is owned by whites, who make up just 9% of the population. 4% of that land is owned by black South Africans, who make up 79% of the population.

This is inaccurate and misleading. The source is the state land audit. ‘Agricultural’ land here should more accurately be described as rural land. And while these ratios reflect the audit’s findings for land owned by private individuals and registered in their names at the Deeds Office, the rural land in such individual ownership makes up only 31% of all land in the country. The rest is owned by trusts (some 24%), companies (19%), community-based organisations (3%) and various co-ownership arrangements (a little over 1%).¹⁴ In addition, the state – either directly or through traditional authorities – owns or controls around 23%.

That Africans own only 4% of the 31% of rural land that is in registered, individual ownership reflects both the legacy of past practices and their continuance into the present. The numbers quoted by Zakaria also overlook the 9.2 million hectares¹⁵ transferred through land reform schemes since 1994 – since land of this kind is typically transferred to communities (not individuals) or to the state.

Agri-SA, the country’s largest professional agricultural body, has produced a more comprehensive audit of farmland in South Africa. This covers not just the extent of individual ownership by different groups but also the land owned by trusts, companies, and the state. It also looks at the agricultural potential of rural land, which is an important issue. It estimates land in the hands of the state and previously disadvantaged individuals (the formulation preferred in its report) at over 46% of the land with significant agricultural potential.¹⁶

Focusing on crude, decontextualised numbers like this is damaging to debate around land reform.

Nelson Mandela pledged that 30% of South African land held by whites would be distributed to poor black citizens after apartheid. But progress is painfully slow. It's not hard to see why.

Land reform has not proceeded rapidly, and there had been a great deal of commentary on this. To the extent that EWC makes any claim to a pragmatic rationale, it is that buying property makes land reform prohibitively expensive and that it's necessary to lower the costs by constitutional and legislative fiat. But the Motlanthe report disagreed, saying: 'Experts advise that the need to pay compensation has not been the most serious constraint on land reform in South Africa to date – other constraints, including increasing evidence of corruption by officials, the diversion of the land reform budget to elites, lack of political will, and lack of training and capacity have proved more serious stumbling blocks to land reform.'¹⁷

The fact is that, at base, land reform has not been a priority for the government, nor for South Africa's people. Budgeted expenditure (including debt service costs) in 2019/20 comes in at R1.8 trillion. Of this, R30.7 billion is devoted to land reform, rural development and agriculture – the whole functional area. This is equivalent to a paltry 1.7%. It's one of the smallest items in the budget. It is also projected to grow slowly, by about 3% annually until 2021/22.¹⁸

Budgeted expenditure for land reform, for restitution and for farmer support and development, come in together at R9.2b billion, or 0.5% of consolidated expenditure, with scant growth over the coming years.¹⁹

Actually, this is understandable. Land reform (at least in the agrarian sense) is not a major priority for ordinary South Africans. Our polling in 2015 and 2019, for example, suggests that between 1% and 6% of South Africans view it as a priority for improving their own lives.²⁰ Afrobarometer's polling in 2018 put the proportion of South Africans regarding land as a priority issue for government's attention (first, second and third responses combined) at around 7%.²¹

This in turn is not surprising. South Africa is a rapidly urbanising society – some two thirds of people live in towns and cities. Such land hunger as there is mainly translates into a desire for urban land, which is wanted for housing and access to the modern economy.

Land reform is disruptive in a Robin Hood sort of way. As The Economist notes, it involves the government grabbing land from the relatively well-off and doling it out to the poor. This often involves a fight. Take China. In 1949, after the communist revolution, the government began grabbing land from landlords who were the victims of brutal violence. Almost half the country's arable land was distributed to 300 million people. The violence was horrific but the reform had immediate effects. According to The Economist, grain outputs soared by as much as 70% in the decade following 1945. But revolution isn't always bloody. For instance, South Korea in the 1950s peacefully bought up private farms and distributed them to tillers, minting 1.6 million small landowners. Taiwan also benefited from reforms around the same time. Scholars have often noted that good land reform policies help build a middle class that then helped democracy flourish.

“*But let’s return to Africa, specifically Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe allowed unconscionable violence against white landowners, he doled out land to cronies which caused deep economic suffering. The dominant narrative was that it was an unmitigated disaster. But, as Ben Cousins of the University of the Western Cape points out, the legacy of Zimbabwean land reform is more complex than the dominant narrative, particularly when you consider the case of tobacco farmers. As the New York Times reported, when 2 000 mostly white tobacco farmers were forced from their land, tens of thousands of mostly black farmers took their place. At first production ebbed but it rose impressively in later years, creating livelihoods for the once landless.*”

Zakaria believes the reason for a lack of progress on land reform in South Africa is that it is ‘disruptive in a Robin Hood sort of way’. It’s unclear why he would make this assertion. There is a great deal of research and analysis available on the failures of land reform in South Africa, not least the Motlanthe report, referred to above. A lack of official commitment to land reform, poor project design, inept management, a lack of post-transfer support to beneficiaries, corruption and so on explain the failures, rather than ‘disruption’, real or perceived. Besides, disruption is not something that has always bothered South Africa’s government. Robin Hood-esque or not (and there may be more of the Sheriff of Nottingham to it), the government has been willing to drive policies that harm investors and entrepreneurs and encourage skills and capital to exit. EWC is simply one of the latest of these.

He then veers off into describing land reform elsewhere as an implied vindication of the approach being taken in South Africa. One hopes that he is not suggesting that the ‘brutal violence’ in China or the ‘unconscionable violence’ in Zimbabwe (which was far from confined to ‘white landowners’, but was visited upon farmworkers and opponents of the regime in general – something that has never entirely dissipated) is an acceptable price to pay. Zakaria’s own work, after all, has done much to emphasise the importance of respecting limits to power, and structuring government action according to rule – we at the IRR have great respect for his work on ‘illiberal democracy’. Zimbabwe certainly fits that bill.

Nevertheless, there may be truth in pointing to benefits derived by peasants after the early reforms in China, or small tobacco farmers in Zimbabwe. But it is possible to stretch the logic too far. The growth of Chinese agriculture probably owed a great deal to the end of the Second World War and the Chinese Civil War. And don’t forget there was massive failure and famine when ideology went into overdrive in the 1960s. A lack of private ownership of land has in recent years been identified as a significant brake on Chinese agriculture.

In Zimbabwe, the success of some tobacco farmers should be offset against the ongoing need for food aid (some 38% of the rural population, according to a recent estimate)²², and the difficulties in procuring inputs. Zimbabwe has paid a high price. Its economy shows the impact of general retardation, with extraordinary levels of inflation, widespread unemployment and the migration of millions to seek a living elsewhere.

Zakaria is correct about the contribution that land reform made to the development of countries such as South Korea and Taiwan. Their experiences are at times invoked by proponents of EWC in South Africa. Wittingly or otherwise, they are conflating these experiences of land reform with the perilous course that South Africa is set on. (Which is also the mistake that Zakaria makes.)

Land reform in South Korea and Taiwan was successful because it distributed land chiefly to people who were already farming it, enhancing their property rights and the incentives associated with them. (It was not ‘doled’ out, incidentally, but sold to new owners, albeit on favourable terms.²³) In time, government support played a valuable role in supporting agricultural production. Land reform was part of competently run (if imperfect) development and modernisation programmes that has ultimately allowed most South Koreans and Taiwanese to seek more varied and lucrative careers. Economic prosperity, education and so on – ‘good land reform policies help build a middle class’ – helped push demands for democratisation.

All would be good and well if South Africa approximated this, but it doesn’t. At one level, South Africa’s land reform schemes have suffered from administrative ineptitude, corruption and a failure to provide necessary support after transferring land – ironically given the stress on who owns what in South Africa, procuring land is a relatively easy part of the process. Government sources admit that much of the failure of land reform stems from a failure to provide beneficiaries with the support they need to make a success of farming. It has not been willing to put its money where its ideological mouth is (a common failing of land reform programmes, when they fail to reckon appropriately with the totality of the costs involved).

Expanding property ownership is not government policy, quite the contrary.

Indeed, there is some evidence – admittedly, not conclusive, but nevertheless concerning – that the envisaged outcome of this train of events is not just to expand the latitude of the state to seize assets (ultimately not limited to land), but to vest all land in the state. This view was expressed by a senior official in the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform before an audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos.²⁴ He has never been repudiated.



In the end the case for land reform in South Africa is not merely a moral one. Properly and sensibly executed, land reform is also good economics and good politics.

Correct. But note the qualifiers, ‘properly and sensibly executed’, which his comments failed to interrogate. The proposals under the guise of land reform fail to meet this criteria. They fail to address the real problems confronting land reform, and pose a threat not solely to farming but to the country’s economic future. We at the IRR have heard repeated concerns from investors, both local and international, that EWC is rendering the country ‘uninvestable’. President Ramaphosa’s own investment envoys have also reported that the issue is a hindrance to their efforts.²⁵

This is tragic, since a land reform programme – ‘properly and sensibly’ designed and executed – does hold benefits for the country. The direction of policy, driven by ideology and wearing the cloak of historical justice, will take South Africa in the opposite direction.

The observations of a pair of World Bank officials are worth keeping in mind: ‘Although redistributive policies have the potential to benefit the poor both directly and indirectly, they will do so only if redistribution does not jeopardise investment – this may be one explanation for the observation that, in the past, redistributive policies such as land reform have often failed to help the poor.’²⁶

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