

Zimbabwe and the Steep Road to Vindication

By [Netfa Freeman](#)

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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Western corporate media assaults on Zimbabwe often center on the alleged corruption and recklessly “anti-white” nature of the country’s land reform program. But a recent British academic study tends to refute European and North American propaganda, arguing that land reform has not been a failure, and is not designed to benefit political cronies. Another study shows that, “compared to rural and urban violence in South Africa, Ireland or Brazil, the level in Zimbabwe has been quite low.”

When Zimbabwe initiated fast track land redistribution in 2000 it was big news for corporate media to echo several patented denunciations, characterizing the process as rife with corruption, violence, and inefficiency and doomed to fail. More than eager to join the fray was the liberal left whose pseudo analysis reiterated the same line accompanied by an aversion to anything that seemed even remotely favorable to Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe and his ZANU PF party.

Given all that media fanfare, it would be easy to assume an independent study examining results from the last ten years of land reform would get the same attention. Not likely. In fact we can be sure more attention will be given to the dispatches from the U.S. Embassy in Zimbabwe publicized by WikiLeaks. One cable by former U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe, Christopher Dell reveals nothing unexpected or compelling except Dell’s aptitude for writing subjective diatribes that are able to pass for concrete information to the politically uncritical eye. Ambassador Dell’s publicized cable exposes the lack of confidence he has for many of the leaders in their neo-colonial pawn party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) that he and the U.S. brazenly support along with the rest of the Western powers. A friend of mine had this to say about the cable “I think it’s funny that they’ve been predicting his [Mugabe’s] imminent demise for so long. I’ve always said that the biggest Achilles’ heel of the imperialists is that they actually believe their own horse****, especially since the aforementioned [the Dell cable] self-delusional horse**** is oftentimes the basis for their actions.”

Dell dispatched the cable in 2007 and at this point most if not all of the assertions in it have been disproven over time, bringing us to the real meat of this article – meat that will be overshadowed in Western press by the recent WikiLeaks release. Not that they would endeavor to report this at all even in the absence of WikiLeaks.

You see, the major study of 10 years of land reform in Zimbabwe actually exists and was released in mid November. As we said, if one assumed it would get big media coverage they would assume wrongly since such a study doesn’t conform with the acceptable and imposed imperial narrative. It appears the study, released by Institute for Development Studies fellow Ian Scoones at Britain’s University of Sussex and detailed in the book *Zimbabwe’s Land Reform Myths & Realities*, was able to lure the usual Mugabe and ZANU PF detractors into

resuming their typical propaganda pot-shots, indicating that something unfavorable to them is afoot. An article by staunch Mugabe critic Patrick Bond in the online magazine Counterpunch, "A New Tyranny: Will Zimbabwe Regress Again?" was published just as the new study evaluating the land redistribution program in Zimbabwe was released. It almost seemed that Bond's article was meant to serve as damage control from the revelations of the study.

Before assuming the land study is the topic of Bond's article, revealingly not one mention of the study was in the article. While this was interesting it was not surprising, given that the study contradicts a collection of major narrative myths Bond has been complicit in popularizing. The study "challenges five myths through the examination of the field data from Masvingo province:

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"By challenging these myths, and suggesting alternative policy narratives, this book presents the story as it has been observed on the ground: warts and all."

Over the past year or so things had been relatively quiet on the ZANU PF-Mugabe vilifying front, leaving one to wonder about the timing between the land redistribution study and any new ZANU PF-Mugabe vilification resurrecting its ugly head. Even more deafening is the silence over the study by Western media and the Western beholden civil society organizations, right wing or "progressive." While Bond does deal quite a bit in his article with land redistribution it is mostly to continue the notion that it was a disingenuous exercise that was largely a failure. Just like Ambassador Dell's cable to the US State Department, Bond backs none of this up with the type of information that can be either proven or disproven.

And even with the wholly inadequate coverage the land study has gotten, like that of the BBC, coverage tries to divert attention to a "process which these farms were seized off white farmers, often very, very violently," as remarked by the host of BBC News Worldwide while interviewing Ian Scoones. Lacking the sensitivities that come from identifying with the indigenous African's from which the land was brutally stolen in the first place using methods exponentially more violent than any used to reclaim it by the African descendants who have the only rightful claim to it, Scoones could not articulate the more fitting come-back for such Euro-centrally biased questioning.

The imperialists, along with their pseudo-progressive civil society organizations, must believe that if they just keep repeating the same lies and misrepresentations over and over they will transform them into truths. Like the facts of the 2008 elections whose depiction is another obstacle in Zimbabwe's road to vindication. In his article Bond repeats the refutable claim that "Since paramilitary violence forced Tsvangirai to pull out of the mid-2008 run-off presidential election (after winning the first round – but, claimed Mugabe's vote-counters,

with less than 50%),...” When one’s purpose is only to generate unsubstantiated assertions it’s easy to pack a lot of misinformation into a single sentence.

The devil, or shall we say the real truth is in the details. While Bond’s assertion follows the standard imperialist propaganda line, facts reveal that the results of that election were not under the control of “Mugabe’s vote-counters” but instead a Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) that included representatives, ballot counters, and poll watchers from all the political parties of the country who each had to sign off on the results during each stage of tallying. Bond also claims his imperialist-backed MDC presidential candidate Morgan Tsvangirai was the winner even though the country’s constitution dictates that there is only a winner when a candidate receives over 50% of the vote. Instead of a claim by “Mugabe’s vote-counters” as Bond put it, it was even according to the figures peddled by the MDC at the time a run off was warranted. Unlike Bond, an April 4, 2008 article in the Zimbabwe Guardian clarified this fairly recent history with more concrete and verifiable information, saying:

“Morgan Tsvangirai might aspire to be president of Zimbabwe, but he has difficulty with simple mathematics. Yesterday, he claimed to have won 50.3 per cent of the vote in Zimbabwe’s election. This figure is vital because it puts him just above the crucial 50 per cent threshold needed to avoid a second round against Robert Mugabe.

“But anyone with a calculator can work out that someone got their sums wrong. According to the MDC, Tsvangirai took 1,169,860 votes against Mugabe’s 1,043,451 and Simba Makoni’s 169,636.

“These figures appear in an official statement carried on the MDC’s website today, along with the claim that “President Tsvangirai has 50.3 percent of the total Presidential vote and he has won the election with no need for a run-off.”

Get out your calculator and check the percentages. In fact, the MDC’s voting figures show Tsvangirai with 49.1 per cent, Mugabe with 43.8 per cent and Makoni winning 7.1 per cent.

So on the MDC’s own figures, a second round is needed.”

These weren’t the only shenanigans the MDC attempted during the first round of voting and conveniently overlooked by Bond. Some may recall the long time it took for the results of the first round of voting to be released, emboldening the opposition and Western forces to claim ZANU PF was stalling in order to put in the fix. And the pitiful Christopher Dell cable released by WikiLeaks actually adds to misleading the public about the real context of that time. For example, that some ZEC officials were “arrested on allegations of tampering with election results and prejudicing ZANU-PF presidential candidate President Mugabe of 4,993 votes cast in four constituencies in the just-ended harmonized elections” as reported in an April 8th 2008 article in Zimbabwe’s The Herald. The article went on to detail that investigations around the same improprieties were taking place in “two other constituencies in Manicaland where the Zanu-PF presidential candidate was also allegedly prejudiced of 1,392 votes.

“In Mashonaland Central, it is alleged, the same candidate was prejudiced of 773 votes while investigations also revealed that the same candidate lost 1,000 votes in two Matabeleland North constituencies and 1,828 votes in Masvingo...

“...The anomalies were detected following a close scrutiny of V11 and V23 forms.

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After the signing of the V11 form, information is then recorded on the V23 forms that collate polling station results within a ward.

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“The Sunday Mail reported at the weekend that at Rimbi Primary School in Manicaland Province, the V11 form showed that President Mugabe got 612 votes but the V23 form that was forwarded to the National Command Centre shows that the President received 187 votes.

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Instead of believing the false, typical and unsubstantiated claim that paramilitary violence forced Tsvangirai to withdraw from the 2008 run-off that followed the first round of voting, a real and more plausible explanation is detailed here.

So while it is easy to foster confusion with grandiose, albeit brief, assertions barren of concretely verifiable information, it often takes pages of critically assembled information to unravel it. To properly digest the WikiLeaks released cable of Dell we can learn from CISPES, Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. In looking at the WikiLeaks cables from the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, CISPES has made some very astute observations. It would be wise for us to consider that much may be similar regarding Zimbabwe and El Salvador: “While Wikileaks’ release of leaked diplomatic cables provides an unprecedented opportunity to reveal the workings and motives of U.S. foreign policy, the process grants large international news agencies the decision-making power as to which cables to release and the opportunity to craft the first analysis that the public will hear.”

CISPES continues: “Considering more than 1,000 cables about El Salvador were reportedly leaked, we must ask what criteria were used to select these particular cables for first publication; cables that right-wing Salvadoran news sources are now using in a continued attempt to undermine new government.” ... “Overall, the cables reveal an Embassy that is out of touch with the leading role played by the FMLN in El Salvador’s current political reality.”

The IDS land study in Zimbabwe does provide what could be considered an unbiased account of land reform in Zimbabwe. However, much of what it reveals had already been documented by anti-imperialist author Gregory Elich and in many ways more comprehensively. IDS fellow Ian Scoones insists that his study focused only on the results of land reform over time, occasionally seeming to accept the Western narrative on the means by which the redistribution took place. Zimbabwe’s land issue is consistently characterized by unprecedentedly and indiscriminately violent takeovers from white landowners deliberately instigated by Mugabe and ZANU PF. Elich refutes this in his meticulously researched and referenced book *Strange Liberators; Militarism, Mayhem, and the Pursuit of Profit*, showing that farm “invasions” involved “temporary visits of a few days and sporadic repeat visits. They [did] not entail the extended stays” and that the farms targeted tended to be those of landowners who “had mistreated workers, paid excessively low wages or

exhibited overt racism.” Regarding the use of violence Elich also showed that “...compared to rural and urban violence in South Africa, Ireland or Brazil, the level in Zimbabwe has been quite low.” Incidents perpetrated by those who were legitimately dissatisfied with what had been inadequate land delivery were curtailed by the ZANU PF fast track land redistribution program.

The IDS study merely validates Elich’s job of disproving the myth that beneficiaries of the land reform had been political “cronies” of Mugabe and that the process was largely corrupt. Elich also pointed out that land confiscated by the Zimbabwe government for redistribution was “unused land, underutilized land, land owned by absentee owners, land owned by a person possessing multiple farms, land exceeding size limits (which varied by region), and land contiguous with communal lands.” Rather than Mugabe being in cahoots with what in reality was a miniscule 0.3 percent of cases where the process was abused (5% according to the IDS study), Elich demonstrates something different. The investigation that uncovered such abuse and corruption in the process by government and party officials was actually initiated by the President’s Land Resettlement Committee. (Elich, p. 343-344)

While Patrick Bond’s writings and WikiLeaks documents might seem a compelling source of truth, such truth is unfortunately harder to come by. One “wiki-leaked” cable indicates that because “many MDC-T local councilors and parliamentarians elected in 2008 had no independent income...they were now turning to graft.” Such disclosures don’t tell the relevant complicity of the World Bank in secretly bankrolling MDC-T officials. While the IDS study on the land reform pushes Zimbabwe further down the road to vindication an anti-imperialist and revolutionary perspective of Zimbabwe’s struggles will continue to require a very scrutinizing and critical approach.

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