

Zimbabwe's Socialist development experiment 1980-1989

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Abstract: *The paper examines the post-independence socialist experiment in Zimbabwe. Upon attainment of independence the ZANU PF government articulated a scientific Marxist-Leninist policy. This policy was predicated against the huge colonial racial inequalities between the minority whites and majority blacks in all spheres of life. At independence, for instance, about 4000 white farmers owned 75% of the country's richest arable land while the black majority was confined to the poorest agricultural land. The same pattern ran across all other sectors of the economy; industry, the civil service, private sector and the social services sector (education and health). In the education sector Africans were relegated to a very few poorly resourced schools and institutions. Thus at independence the majority Africans were thirst for education. The paper therefore examines the efforts that government made at independence to redress the situation through the socialist policy framework. It is concluded that although there was great commitment to advance the aspirations of the black majority, not much was achieved except in the social services sector.*

Key words: *socialist experiment, colonial inequalities, post independence*

I. The Historical Basis of Socialism

Before the attainment of independence the socio-economic and political landscape was dominated by white settlers. Racialism was the order of the day. The whites monopolized socio-economic and political space in the country. They dominated parliament and top government posts, appropriated the best land using a plethora of legal instruments and generally enjoyed the best social amenities available in the country. On the other extreme end of this spectrum blacks were relegated to the margins. They were poorly represented in parliament, hardly had any rights and had limited access to socio-economic amenities. It was these racially entrenched biases that ZANU PF and PF ZAPU militarily fought and defeated. During the liberation struggle ZANU PF was supported by China while PF ZAPU was funded by the Soviet Union (SU). The ideological orientation towards socialism is therefore not difficult to account for. Racial inequalities and the Eastern world were the bedrock on which socialism was founded.

Independence Euphoria

The attainment of independence in Zimbabwe in April 1980 raised great hopes for the people. They expected and hoped for the major changes in their lives. Their expectations were justified. As Andre Astrow avers the African masses had not fought a bitter war for so many years simply to see the replacement of a white government with a black one. They had real expectations which would see an improvement in their lives. Different people had different expectations. The rural peasants hoped for land redistribution while the urban workers expected to get a decent living from improved wages and working conditions. The country at large hoped to see the replacement of settler colonialism by socialism.

The ZANU PF government that emerged in 1980 found itself in an ambivalent position. While its ideological orientation was Socialist, it on the other hand did not want to see a repeat of the Mozambican scenario where whites had left the country enmass on the eve of independence leaving a very big skills gap in the country. The Premier, R G Mugabe therefore articulated the policy of racial conciliation where yesterday's friends and foes would join hands together to rebuild the new state. The question of "who really owed what to whom" was not supposed to be asked as it were so as not to be retributive in outlook. This was to place the new government in some strictures in its pursuit of Socialism.

At independence the Mugabe regime proclaimed itself to be committed to scientific Marxist-Leninist socialism. The government first articulated its policy in a document known as 'Growth with Equity: An Economic Policy Statement' (Nyaruwata, 1988). Among other things the objectives of 'Growth with Equity' were to establish a Socialist democratic and egalitarian society. It aimed at removing imperialist exploitation, create and maintain high employment levels, improve and extend the economic base and social infrastructure and to reform the fiscal and monetary systems. These aims were reinforced in the Transitional National Development Plan (TNDP) of 1982/83-1984/85. According to the TNDP: the triumph of liberation has given the

people and government of Zimbabwe an opportunity to create a new order ,to rid the Zimbabwean society of vestiges of exploitation ,unemployment ,poverty, disease, ignorance and social insecurity, with its institutions and infrastructure has in the past served a minority ,it would be simplistic and indeed naïve to suggest that it should ,therefore be destroyed in order to make a fresh state-----.(Sylvester,1985). Clear contradictions can be discerned from the above proclamation. The state would extend the fruits of Rhodesia to the suffering majority without eliminating capitalist property relations.

Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Surface

While the post independence government wanted to extend the fruits of independence to the generality of the population, it had to contend with the hurdles imposed by the Lancaster House conference of 1979. The Lancaster House conference had prescribed that if Zimbabwe “were to retain its economic links, including economic aid, with the capitalist world, its (Lancaster House Conference) policy would have to remain acceptable” (Stoneman, 1988). The Lancaster House constitution stated that:

“No matter how land or mining concessions had originally been obtained, they could only change hands now on a willing seller willing buyer basis.”

Quite simply this meant that the minority whites and foreign investors would continue owning about half or more of the economy—most of the productive land, nearly all mines and nearly all the manufacturing industries and other businesses.

Parallels with the Zimbabwean scenario can be discerned from elsewhere. During the independence negotiations in London in the early 1960s, the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) government accepted the principle of “fair and just compensation” despite the fact that such a principle ran counter to the needs of the people. The principle of ‘willing seller willing buyer’ was also accepted by the Kenyatta government. In a bid to allay the fears of the investors and stop the attendant capital flight Jomo Kenyatta talked of ‘hakuna cha bure’ (nothing for nothing) and that “the government of an independent Kenya would not be a gangster government”. A gangster government was presumably one that would repossess land and redistribute it to landless majority in order to create an egalitarian society. Racial tolerance was good, white racism could not be replaced by black racism but to the extent that the policy left the skewed property relations intact, and then it was to sow the seeds for future revolutions.

By the end of the first decade of Zimbabwe’s independence the historical wrong of unequal land distribution had not been adequately addressed. Yet, as early as 1979 during the liberation struggle ZANU PF had stated ‘each peasant will be allotted enough land to meet his requirements for food. The Marxism ‘land to the tillers’ will be fully implemented.’ more bluntly RG Mugabe had declared that:

I am calling for the abolition of the present land system in Rhodesia, the redistribution of land is inevitable. From the point of view of distribution, there must be a complete overhaul of the present system.

But due to the terms of the Lancaster House conference especially the ‘willing seller willing buyer’ clause the Mugabe government was not able to fulfill its promises.

It was estimated that the carrying capacity of the rural areas was 275 000 households but already by 1977 there were 675 000 families living there (Macharry, 1994). To further illustrate the lack of equity in land ownership, in Mashonaland for example, on the eve of independence, each cow of a commercial farmer was allocated 3-5 hectares of land, which was equal to double what the average peasant household had, without considering quality differences (Weiner, 1988). In 1980, the government had promised to resettle 162 000 landless families by 1985. However, according to Robin Palmer, by June 1989 only a total of 52 000 families had been resettled (i.e. 32% of the national target) and by the end of the same year a total of 2 713 725 ha of land had been bought for resettlement (i.e. 16% of the area owned by the white commercial farmers) (Palmer 1990). On the whole, by the time the Socialist experiment was officially abandoned in the early 1990s the land question had not been solved and squatting therefore continued especially in Mashonaland. A combination of factors explains this. While the buyer often lacked the cash the seller was also not always willing to sell his/her land.

Despite the problem of over crowdedness, agricultural productivity in the communal areas increased, although regionally. This was the result of enhanced extension services, the use of inorganic fertilizers, research and peasants’ access to marketing boards. Thus, the emphasis had been placed on improvement rather than re-distribution of the land. In the meanwhile by 1990 (and even beyond) white commercial farmers still held large underutilized tracts of land. Even by 1994 the Minister of Agriculture and Water Development K Kangai stated that Natural Region 1, 11 800 ha 339 300 ha in Region 2 and 416 800 ha in Region 3 owned by

commercial farmers were underutilized (i.e. about 25% of the large-scale commercial farmland in the country) (Macharry, 1994). From a moral and economic point of view this was unfair given the fact that overcrowded peasants had been settled in Region 4, which according to Macharry could better be left for wildlife. The above land distribution pattern was such that if the whites had wanted to run game parks they should have been given the marginal agro-ecological areas of Region 4 while the peasants should have been given the better endowed areas.

For subsistence purposes the government depended on communal farmers but for export revenue it depended on exports from the large scale commercial farmers. This made commercial farming indispensable to the government. The Mugabe government clearly stated that "large-scale farmers are welcome" while articulating a desire to return lost land to the peasantry. In the run-up to the general elections of 1990, to win the support of both the peasantry and the commercial farmers, Mugabe, in 1989 advocated a revolutionary land reform programme. At the same time he assured the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU) that "land acquisition should not be vindictive, nor should it be a wanton land grabbing exercise" (Palmer, 1990). This led one commercial farmer to conclude that "Mugabe's was the best government for farmers that this country has (ever) (my emphasis) seen." The stance of the government was clearly contradictory. Revolutionary distribution of land could not go hand-in-glove with the upholding of the land rights of the commercial farmers. One notes that by agreeing to the terms of the Lancaster House Conference the political leaders of Zimbabwe accommodated imperialism.

Developments in the Industrial Sector

In the industrial sector inequalities were also evident by the end of the first decade of Uhuru. Settlers and international capital were a lot more confident at the end of the 1980s. They now believed that the government was a toothless bulldog as it had merely talked about socialism but left the economy in their hands. But for the African entrepreneurs the 1980s were certainly a lost decade as the state did very little to assist them. Workers were not a lot better either.

In 1980 there were huge wage disparities between whites and blacks, and between blacks in the private sector and those in the public sector. The government in pursuit of its socialist policies tried to use the labour market to try and redress wage differences and other issues in the economy such as poverty. The labour market was used to re-distribute income. This was done through the Minimum and Maximum Wages Act of 1980 but these differed from sector to sector. This Act was meant to try and narrow the wage differentials between the highest and lowest paid workers. The policy can also be called the Compression policy. Wages at the bottom increased more rapidly while those at the top increased sluggishly. However, huge salary differences continued especially between public and private sector employees. Among others, this was because the government lacked the machinery to effect the policy in the private sector. It could easily control salaries in the public sector because it was the employer.

The burden of taxation flew in the face of workers' expectations for a rise in their salaries and standards of living. In a move that clearly undermined workers' disposable income the government in 1983 imposed a 92% tax on wages equal to or above Z\$100.00. In addition, sales tax on general goods rose from 2 to 18% and sales tax on higher rated goods went up to 23 % (Slyvester, 1986). However, in 1984, the government lightened the burden on the poor by cutting sales tax on consumer goods and general commodities by 3%. Company taxes were slightly increased and it was argued that:

The minister hopes that this gentle treatment of the companies will encourage private investment in general and attract private foreign investment in particular.

It is therefore clear that government was prepared to sacrifice workers at the altar of attracting investment into the country.

Apart from heavy taxation, workers' conditions did not improve as evidenced by the several waves of strikes. Between March 1980 and June 1981, there were a total of 177 recorded strikes. Llyod Sachikonye described these strikes as 'wild cat' strikes. Yet, in spite of these pointers to the need to improve conditions, the Labour Minister, Kangai remarked that, "If anything Zimbabweans must work harder and longer hours than before." (Herald 2 April, 1980). Maurice Nyagumbo concurred that, "we never promised instant pay increases. We said that the only way to get results was by working hard." (Astrow 1983). Later on Kangai, responding to the Swift Transport Service strike, boldly stated: "I will crack my whip if they do not go back to work. They must go back now." Thus the use of coercive measures reminiscent of the colonial times was not uncommon in Mugabe's regime in the first decade of independence (and even beyond).

Another move that was undertaken to reduce exploitation of workers was the promulgation of the Employment Act of 1980. Prior to independence African workers were exposed to oppressive and

discriminatory labour practices and laws and this new Act was meant to redress some of these imbalances. According to the Employment Act ministerial approval had to be sought before firing workers and seeking it was quite cumbersome. The approval also took so long to come and this process was often costly to employers. In letter and spirit this Act was meant to protect workers' employment. However, the regulation had a negative impact on employment because employers became hesitant and reluctant to hire workers for fear of remaining stuck with them. The result of this was casualisation of labour since casual workers could be hired and fired anytime, even without ministerial approval.

From 1980 up to 1988 there was some sort of marriage between government and trade unions. The government was responsible to the setting up of the national labour centre-the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade unions (ZCTU). At its inception some of the leaders were Albert Makwarimba and Albert Mugabe, a relative of the Prime Minister. This was meant to have some advantages to government. Unions could not disrupt economic activity and they could not confront government. For some years this honeymoon lasted. The Labour Relations Act (LRA) of 1985 was a culmination of this marriage. This Act granted workers a number of shop floor rights such as the right to collective bargaining at the workplace. During this government-labour marriage the Prime Minister could announce salary increments sector by sector, while the ZCTU could just rubber stamp what government said. Divorce came about in 1988 when a new radical leadership that included Morgan Tsvangirai and Jeffrey Mutandare came to the helm of the ZCTU. These began to confront government accusing it of corruption and being patronizing.

The Legal Age of majority Act (LAMA) was promulgated to raise the status of women, including the right to employment. This Act granted anyone 18 years of age and above the right to vote, enter into contracts on their own and the right to sue and be sued without the consent of their fathers or legal guardians. Before it women were often taken as minors who could not enter into contracts or sue or be sued without the knowledge of their fathers, husbands or legal guardians. Women hailed this piece of legislation since it went quite some way in empowering them. Once in employment they could now receive the same salaries and wages as their male counterparts, yet in prior years they received less even with equal training and experience. From the point of view of black industrialists and business people in general, the 1980s can aptly be described as a lost decade. This was because government did not put in place particular packages to assist the growth and development of this class. Very little was done to support them. In fact government discouraged the growth of this class because it was seen as an enemy of the elite.

Developments in the Social Services Sector

It was in the provision of social services that perhaps the government recorded the highest achievements during its flirtation with the Marxist-Socialist ideology. Phenomenal achievements were made in the education and health sectors although the education was criticized as being too academic. The provision of these social services was also said to have driven government deep into the abyss of debt.

One area to which the post-independence government directed its effort was health. Prior to independence the racist dual development policy had made sure that the best health facilities such as Harare Central and George Flemming (Parirenyatwa) hospitals were for whites. In order to improve the quality of life for the majority of the population a number of local, district and provincial health institutions were constructed. A 1992 World Bank study cited by AS Mlambo noted that more than 500 health centres had either been built or upgraded since 1980. The percentage of children that had been fully immunized had nearly tripled from 25% in 1980 to 67% in 1988 (Mlambo, 1995). Life expectancy was reported to have increased from 55 to 59 years, while infant mortality rate declined from 82 to 72 per 1000 live births in the same period. These impressive statistics are due to huge capital outlays devoted to the sector. By 1990 most of the country's rural population was now within a 10km radius of a health centre. Zimbabwe was therefore internationally acclaimed as a shining example of a developing country committed to the progress of its people.

Apart from health, phenomenal strides were also made in education. The government was cognizant of the racist policies that had obtained in education during colonialism. Education was therefore used as a tool to decolonize the population as well as to prepare the country for national development. The ZANU PF 1980 election manifesto clearly outlined its objectives as far as education was concerned: A non-racial generation had to be created and free and compulsory education, primary and secondary, had to be put in place. Education was supposed to be important in transforming the society. R Zvobgo (1987) hailed the government for noting that education was at the centre of national development. It had to produce the skilled personnel necessary for manning important posts in the country.

The governments' decision to democratize education resulted in quantitative increases in enrolments. Less than a year after primary education had become free, enrolment increased phenomenally by 232%. Between 1980 and 1982 secondary schools enrolment rose by 33% while the demand for teachers saw teacher education enrolment skyrocketing by 254%. Similarly university enrolment figures ballooned. However, the number of educational centers did not increase correspondingly although efforts were made in that direction. What needs to be emphasized is the fact that government realized that education was the *sine qua non* upon which a social and economic revolution could be based. To quote R Zvobgo (1987), "the task of transforming an essentially capitalist economic system would not be achieved except through a socialist education and through socialism itself." (Zvobgo, 1987). Education reform was therefore a pre-requisite to the dismantling of capitalism. This fact was succinctly observed by the Prime Minister RG Mugabe, who said:

Capitalism cannot annihilate capitalism -----it is the antithesis to capitalism that can effectively overhaul capitalism and institute people-oriented reforms. That antithesis is socialism. (ibid p334)

Developments in the health and education sectors were unparalleled in post-independence African history. Zimbabwe was hailed internationally as advancing the cause of human development. However, these developments were not without their own problems. This represented social expenditure and not investment in productive sectors. The result was indebtedness and this was to throw grit into the socialist experiment as the country turned to the IMF/World Bank for rescue packages.

The Collapse of the Socialist Experiment

The collapse of the socialist experiment was inevitable given the ambivalent position in which government found itself. While trying to please its multitude of workers and the general populace it also sought to retain the confidence and support of capital, local and international. In fact, capital realized that what the ZANU PF leadership had advocated for was a mere take-over of political power and nothing beyond that. The leadership had become partners in the economy though junior partners to capital.

The Socialist ideology in post-colonial Zimbabwe was more of rhetoric than a policy pursued to its ultimate conclusion. While articulating a socialist policy, capital was in the meanwhile having a free rein in the economy. Even within the first few months of independence, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund came to the country to push on loans and advise on policy. The loans were across a spectrum of sectors of development. While the loans were directed everywhere, it was perhaps in the area of land re-distribution that they were most noticeable. They were conspicuous in the manner they upheld the status quo. Not much was availed to buy farms for resettlement. Both the multilateral institutions and the farm-owners were not so keen to pursue the re-distribution agenda. The land owner was thus an unwilling seller.

The phenomenal provision of social services like health and education were not without great cost to the country. Since these were not productive services, the overall result was increased balance of payments. To deal with this increased budget deficit in the economy, the government turned to the Bretton Woods institutions. In 1990 the ZANU PF government adopted the IMF/WB sponsored Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP). According to Patrick Bond the government was unequivocal in its articulation of policy. It said:

The overall model chosen to integrate the economy into the international markets-----should aim at avoiding the appropriation of rents by suppliers of non-tradables and workers. That is they should maintain the real wage low, so that excess profits accrue to capital ----.in carrying out all these activities, a close alliance between government and private agents must be developed (Bond and Manyanya, 2002, p23).

This sounded the death knell to the Socialist experiment in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwean Socialist experiment was bound to fail because government was trying to achieve socialism without socialists. The political leadership was busy looting during the night while preaching socialism by the day. confirmation to the self-aggrandizement of the political leaders is the much publicized Willowgate scandal in which Ministers bought cars cheaply from the state parastatal Mazda Motor Industries and resold them at inflated prices. In the end one of the implicated minister committed suicide. The ZANU PF leadership code stipulated that no government minister should hold land in excess of 50 ha of land. Despite the leadership code the leadership was busy amassing land for itself.

That a socialist experiment had taken a detour by the end of the 1980s cannot be disputed. Even some of the ZANU PF Members of Parliament (MPs) expressed dissent at how the leadership dispensed with the leadership code. A vocal MP of the ruling ZANU PF party confirmed the demise of the Socialist experiment in 1989:

The socialist agenda has been adjourned indefinitely. You do not talk about socialism in a party that is led by people who own large tracts of land and employ a

lot of cheap labour. When the freedom fighters were fighting in the bush they were fighting not to disturb the system but to dismantle it. And what are we seeing now? Leaders are busy implementing those things which we were fighting against. (Sunday Mail, 10 Dec 1989)

Therefore even officials acknowledged that the flirtation with socialism had died.

It is not by sheer coincidence that by the time of collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union was the very time that the experiment was virtually declared dead. With the collapse of Socialism in its godfather the satellite countries did not have a source of motivation to look up to. M Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika resulted in the collapse of the ideology in the Soviet Union. The former superpower then turned West, and this is what the Soviet Union's satellite states did. They looked up to the West for policy and monetary support.

II. Conclusion

In the final analysis it can be said that by the end of the first decade of Zimbabwean independence the socialist experiment had failed. The Mugabe regime's socio-economic policies revealed more continuity than discontinuities with the earlier Smith regime in its impact on the socio-economic aspects of the majority of the Africans. Capital was wholly left under the control of whites and multi-national companies. The resettlement programme had not met the target by 1990 and the African squatter problem had worsened. It is, however, in the social sectors like education and health that government achieved tremendous strides that benefitted the majority of the blacks. By the 1990s white capital, local and international, was consolidating itself. By and large, the implementation of the scientific Marxist-Leninist programme failed because it was like trying to give birth to socialism through a capitalist womb.

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