

## **Welcome contribution to scholarship on Zimbabwean land seizures**

**Charles Laurie, *The Land Reform Deception: Political Opportunism in Zimbabwe's Land Seizure Era***

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Charles Laurie's book *The Land Reform Deception* is a welcome contribution to the debate on land reform in Zimbabwe. As the title of the book suggests, Laurie interrogates and examines the land reform process in the context of political opportunism. To construct this argument, he draws from an extensive set of primary evidence that includes wide ranging interviews with farmers and government officials, as well as surveys. He presents these in a well-argued 398-page monograph. The book is divided into ten chapters and begins with an overview of the land seizure era and concludes with an examination of the impact of the land reform on commercial agriculture production.

The central question that Laurie seeks to answer was whether the land seizures represented a genuine desire by the ZANU PF government to redistribute land to the landless majority of black Zimbabweans and in the process, correct the colonial land imbalances, or whether it was just part of a large-scale political strategy and grandstanding exercise by the ruling party. To answer these questions and more, Charles Laurie takes the reader through an intricate investigation of the genesis of the land invasions and tries to draw the connection, or lack thereof, of the farm seizures and the hand of the government in the whole process. He explains how the government almost lost control of its initial plan of farm takeovers, a reason which he gives as partly explaining the violence that rapidly took centre stage in the invasions.

To place his story in its proper historical context, Laurie's first chapter gives an overview of the historical trajectory that offset the commandeering of commercial farms and this explanation goes a long way towards establishing the significant political and socioeconomic dynamics that prefaced the takeovers. His second chapter deals with the key protagonists of the land invasions, the war veterans, and tries to provide pointers that explain their role, motivation and most importantly, their relationship with Robert Mugabe. For Laurie, Mugabe's relationship with the war veterans holds the explanation for the direction that the land invasions took.

Chapter Three explains government action on the decision for farm takeovers and discusses the crucial turning point at which, Laurie argues, the government almost lost control. For Laurie, in as much as war veterans were not "operating completely independent of the government's political objectives or those of the state security services" they put the government in a tight squeeze and it lost control of its initial plan to seize a few farms for political mileage. Instead the exercise escalated into a full scale, countrywide violent takeover of land (p 57). What is important is that Laurie does not

make these claims in a vacuum but provides compelling evidence explaining exactly how the government lost control of its original plan and how those orchestrating the takeovers were responsible for the subsequent, rapid escalation of violence and land-grabbing.

The pivotal argument that brings together the book's core hypothesis is contained in Chapter Four which examines the tactics set up by the farm invaders especially their modus operandi in selecting and taking over farms. Laurie puts together a detailed description and explanation of the kind of people who were involved in particular farm seizures and how the nature and character of the leading individuals in an invading group determined the actions taken. The chapter also chronicles the violence of the farm seizures, competition for resources among farm invader groups, and attempts by white farmers to enter into deals with invaders to protect themselves and their properties.

In Chapters Five and Six, Laurie discusses the two key objectives of the farm invaders, namely to suppress the opposition and to seize land and agricultural property. For him, the first objective was achieved through targeting farm workers and farmers; and the second aim was accomplished mainly through unmitigated violence. The last three chapters discuss the emergence of extortion and the protection schemes that were organised; the realisation by the farm invaders that there was an opportunity to abuse the whole exercise for profit; farmer eviction methods which chronicles the intimidation, fear and coercion the farmers were subjected to; and the overall impact the whole exercise had on agriculture in Zimbabwe.

All in all, Laurie's book is a moving account of the controversies of Zimbabwe's land reform exercise. It is well-timed, informative and accounts for the political nexus of the land reform programme as opposed to the much extolled story propagated by the Mugabe led government that land reform was designed to "redress colonial land imbalances". The major strengths of *The Land Reform Deception* lie in its attention to detail as it weaves a thread through the complexities of the land reform exercise. Laurie puts forward a very convincing argument that it was never the intention of Mugabe and his government to carry out such massive land redistribution. The book also makes a strong case of how the ZANU (PF) government lost control over what was supposed to be a small scale movement instigated by the desire to gain political mileage. In his attempt to demonstrate and downplay the intentions and claims of ZANU PF with regard to the land reform, however, there are instances where Laurie tends to overstretch the point. However, that is perhaps to be expected when handling a topic that is as contentious as this one. The book is a refreshing read, well researched and with evidence that it was written by someone with detailed knowledge of the turbulent story of Zimbabwe's land question.

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