

Spooked by Zimbabwe

CURRENT events in Zimbabwe are touching a raw nerve in the psyche of white South Africans, evidenced by a new wave of pessimism. Pres Mbeki's silence on Mugabe's outrageous actions and the ambiguous utterances of Deputy Pres Zuma are adding to the problem.

But I have a suspicion the problem cuts deeper than that. At the heart of it, it concerns our social contract in South Africa – the pre-94 contract has been cancelled and the post-94 contract is not yet fully established. Large uncertainty is the result.

Let's deal with Zimbabwe first.

The facts are this: in Zimbabwe it is the government who is stealing its citizens' land. That is the regime's policy and it applies this perversion with the full might of the state machinery at its disposal. This is no spontaneous revolt by poor people desperate for a share of the land.

In South Africa, things are different.

So far, Government has bought 1.4 million ha from whites for transfer to black owners – about 70% of the size of the Kruger National Park. The official target, as stated by Pres Mbeki, is to deal with all land claims within the next three years. But even if it takes six years, that would still bring finalisation to all land claims in SA within a decade and a half after transition.

And all these land deals are being concluded on the basis of willing seller and willing buyer. Owners are properly imbursemented while fiscal discipline remains in place. And Agri SA is making a constructive contribution to the process.

While distribution is taking place, Government is maintaining property rights: land invaders at Bredell were firmly removed; as were invaders near Kuruman, those in Mpumalanga and people attempting to take over urban land in Gauteng and the Western Cape. As recently as last week, people were removed from hostels in Johannesburg.

These actions speak louder than any words by the president or his deputy. Keep the words; show me the actions.

We should do ourselves the favour of avoiding superficial comparisons with Zimbabwe. In South Africa we are dealing with legitimate land claims and redistribution governed by the rule of law.

But are we doing enough?

It seems to me we need something more. We need a new social contract that will make it possible for all South Africans to live together – a coexistence where property rights are recognised, land needs are satisfied and sustainable economic growth is supported.

In many places in our country such a social contract is not currently in place. I am increasingly coming to the conclusion that many farm murders are more than ordinary crime. They are a form of land war. The continuous theft of livestock, the cutting of fences, torching of pastures and fields, destruction of machinery and general intimidation of farmers – that is more than crime. Jonny Steinberg with his book *Midlands* has convinced me of that.

He has also convinced me that there is no overall strategy or major political agenda. Two separate value systems are rubbing against each other and there is no social contract to regulate behaviour.

This is the opposite of what is happening in Zimbabwe and, in a way, it is worse.

The pre-94 social contract was that the white man calls the tune and any challenges were met with strong sanctions. People lived together under that status quo, albeit uncomfortably and in the long run unsustainably. That contract is dead. In its place, as the new social contract, came our Constitution – but many South Africans have not yet bought in. And we see the results in the regular symptoms of conflict.

The consequences are serious. At micro level some farmers have stopped producing and are withdrawing from their farms. Investment is lost and jobs are destroyed. At macro level there are doubts about our ability to find lasting solutions to our land problems and some see the ghost of Zimbabwe in our future. Investment is lost and jobs are destroyed.

And so we experience a renewed wave of pessimism in our land.

But that is not the full picture. Indeed, we also see evidence of a new social contract taking root here and there:

In the Tsitsikama whites are farming on land that used to belong to them but has since been sold to their black neighbours. They carry on with their business much as before, except that they now pay rent to the tribe living next to them. There is no conflict.

On the borders of some national parks deals have been struck with the local people, whereby they get some of the animals to slaughter as food, they share in the benefits of tourism and they have free access to the graves of their forefathers in the parks.

A survey commissioned by the daily newspaper *Beeld* shows that 70% of ANC supporters do not support the land grabs in Zimbabwe.

A minority does regard Mugabe as a hero, and they are disproportionately represented on the TV news. Equally, a minority in the white community refuses any kind of partnership with their black countrymen. But in South Africa overall, such people are fringe phenomena.

The bottom line is leadership and initiative. The old social contract is dead. The new one needs to be firmly established.

Then it is up to us, ordinary people – organised agriculture, development institutions, business people in our towns and cities. We have the opportunity to be more than victims in Africa, we can help create the future here.

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