Zimbabwe: A Class Still in Need of Solidarity

Dave Renton

LAST JUNE, the news was filled with reports from the frontline in Zimbabwe. The opposition Movement for Democratic Change had called mass demonstrations designed to topple the government of Robert Mugabe. The movement was exhausted, however, and the police took back control of the streets. I can recall the images, which were vivid. The cameras showed lone demonstrators being attacked by thugs with batons. One long-distance shot showed police dragging students from a moving lorry. Another scene portrayed an elderly woman journalist, who was sat in her car screaming, while a single figure tried to break through the glass in her car windows. The implied racial dynamics were hardly subtle. As the story broke, I was already packing for a trip to the same country. What a stupid place to visit.

On arriving in Harare, the first building I saw was a giant new aircraft terminal opened only the year before. I was in the city for more than 48 hours, before I saw my first uniform. Driving through the business district in Harare, all I could see were skyscrapers, holding banks and international agencies, built in the very period that the Western governments had been arguing for sanctions. Where had this money come from? The papers in Britain reported daily that the entire population of Zimbabwe was poor and destitute, even starving. It made no sense.

Robert Mugabe has held the Presidency for twenty years, ever since the defeat of the previous, white Rhodesian state. For the first five years or so, the new Zanu-PF regime did attempt to grant certain reforms, if only to establish its own popular legitimacy. Yet, even in this period, there were purges of dissidents, many of them linked to the rival pan-African party, Zapu. In one particular notorious incident, Mugabe's troops killed 30,000 people loyal to his enemies.

The colonial power with responsibility for Zimbabwe was Britain. Our government has traditionally seen its responsibility as being to safeguard the interests of the white minority. The Lancaster House Accords that accompanied the transfer of power accepted that there should be a transfer of white-held land towards black farmers. The UK promised tens of million of pounds to facilitate this process, and enable black farmers to purchase land at market rates. Such aid never arrived.

Despite occasional diplomatic rows, the international community accepted Mugabe's government long into the 1990s, ignoring the murders and the regime's increasingly autocratic aspect. The argument was that Mugabe could "do business". He respected the limits of neo-liberalism. It has been Mugabe's recent populist turns against white interests that have so angered the British press in particular.

Robert Mugabe is evidently a tyrant. Yet over time I concluded that he could not be quite the stupid one, portrayed in the papers here. By squeezing the vast estates of the white farmers for every penny, he had endeared himself to a significant number of poor black farmers. They remember how the land had been stolen from their parents, during the white wars of re-conquest in the 1970s.

Meanwhile, Mugabe's government seemed to have negotiated a certain compromise with significant sections of foreign capitalist interests. The white farmers had seen their lands expropriated, but white businesses remained untouched. In June, George Bush travelled to South Africa. He publicly refused to call for Mugabe's overthrow, or even to criticise the South African government for its "softly-softly" approach towards him. Meanwhile UN agencies sent corn in vast quantities. Boiled corn (*sadzo*) is a miserable diet, but it kept at least some of the people fed.

The greatest victims of Mugabe's rule had not been white. Instead, the last ten years had witnessed the practical destruction of the black urban economy. The numbers of workers in trade unions had fallen by half. Unemployment has been the majority experience. The markets were empty all summer. Queues formed for bread, sugar and even for bank notes. One of the two teachers' unions was on indefinite strike, calling for wage rises

above their current salary of just thirty dollars per month. I stayed at the offices of the International Socialist Organisation, whose comrades are sacrificing everything to build up the unions and the democracy movement. But still Mugabe survived. Still he enjoyed the passive support of a rural majority.

At the start of June, the MDC launched a series of mass protests. In the run-up to this so-called "final push", the situation was confused in the extreme. The MDC enjoys a mixed history. It had originally been formed by the trade unions, but had then sought to bring white workers behind a programme amenable to foreign capitalism. By spring 2003, the MDC had failed to call mass actions for twelve months, before relaunching itself through protests. Its leaders remained fearful of working-class action. They advertised their protests "by remote", placing ads in the press rather than rebuilding the structures that had previously linked them to the townships. Meanwhile, Mugabe had been more willing than his opponents to swing left. Articles in the government's *Daily Herald* condemned US foreign policy. The MDC allowed itself to be presented as having a more moderate programme than the state's. Yet, despite everything, the MDC had shown that it enjoyed a decisive majority among voters in the towns. Every urban election had gone their way. More than once, it had called mass strikes, which had threatened to overturn the state. The Zanu-PF government had survived by means of peasant support. Neither the government nor the opposition were strong enough to land a decisive blow.

In the last week, I travelled for a week with a friend Leo to the ruins of Great Zimbabwe. The stone structures date back to the eleventh century, and are among the tallest stone structures in Africa. Some are twenty foot high and five foot thick. They are a symbol of an extraordinary society, a confederation of peoples united by the trade in cattle. The goods found on the site have included presents to the rulers of Great Zimbabwe, donated by states in Central and West Africa. The country itself took its name from the Shona words for such stone forts, *dzimba dza mabwe*.

Leo and I decided to travel south by way of Mutare, Zimbabwe's fourth city. The train was an overnight sleeper, cheap and busy. Friends in Mutare showed us a local paper mill thriving on South African money and the nearby game park, replete with a family of elephants, one giraffe and two white rhino.

The mill was supposedly maintained by money from a nearby forestry college, which sent its students there for training. In reality, all cash flowed from the private business into education coffers. The plant had benefited from a series of special grants. At the time of the handover, it had enjoyed generous state backing. Later, the regional institutions of Southern African economic co-operation had provided additional funds. More recently still, a number of North American businesses had bought into South African timber, hoping to export wood across the Atlantic. The whole sector was awash with dollar grants. The Zimbabwean plant was able to afford the latest tools imported from Italy. Its machines had been purchased in the last ten years, and were far newer than ones I have seen used in England.

The bus from Mutare to Masvingo was clean and efficient. Congolese music burst from the speakers. The bus collected workers in blue overalls, mothers with quiet babies strapped to their backs, youngsters in green and white bobble hats. This was no "chicken bus". Instead there were signs of certain prosperity, in the thick wool sweaters and new black backpacks worn by the commuters around us.

From Masvingo, a local bus took us to the site itself. Great Zimbabwe's ruins surrounded a hill to the southeast of the city. To access the ruins, we walked through a field of traders, selling giant wooden carvings, masks, ornate chess sets. The African women left their huts to view us tourists, with our strange grey blankets and our foreign ways. The path leads through a glamorous-looking hotel, all SUVs and then there was a gate, a hefty fee to pay and the museum.

The most impressive buildings were those in the plains surrounding the hill. Their walls were curved, in grooves and buttresses. They were covered in the past with plaster and painted. At one time, there were probably fifty such houses in the valley, holding officials of the court and their families. The shock I felt at the first sight of the city was real. The bird-tower was a huge structure composed of almost 15,000 tons of individual bricks, built without foundation and sections of the wall still reached more than ten metres high. It was truly a "bird tower". The centrepiece of it all was an imposing giant stone that obscured all others and was shaped distinctly as a bird, with a large protruding beak. It was easy to imagine another generation of arrivals, seeing this giant rock for the first time and planning the whole city around it.

We took a bull-trap and then a bus back to Masvingo. Our fellow travellers were farmers, taking three large sacks of corn to sell in town. They shivered in the cold and we encourage them to sing to keep up as all warm. Their songs are in Shona, English. "Jesus number one, Jesus number one." We joined in shaking two plastic maracas bought from a street-kid in Mutare. Leo tried to sing along. "Jesus number two, Jesus number three." He then lost the farmers in a horribly convoluted explanation. "I am the devil, I am pretending, you have to shout me down."

The farmers were certainly poor, but they seemed no worse off to me than their equivalents in South Africa. They had corn enough to sell,

and no great worries for the year ahead. What kept them going? No one mentioned the land distribution schemes. By all accounts, anyway, they have mostly benefited the regime.

The best explanation I could find was that international agencies (NGOs and the UN) were supplying such large quantities of emergency food aid, and distributing it so well, that disaster had been averted. To put it another way, the very international statesman who have been so busily denouncing Mugabe have financed the measures that keep his people alive. You could call it hypocrisy, perhaps even a necessary display of double standards. Indeed in the short term, there is no other alternative to foreign aid, other than mass starvation. This situation should remind us, though, that many of Africa's problems can still be found outside her borders. ■

THE VALLEY AWAKES

Yousuf (Joe) Rassool provides a synopsis of his novel *The Valley Awakes*. The book can be ordered from Joe for £12 (inc. p&p). Phone 0118 375 1786. Email: y.rassool@ntlworld.com

THE YEAR is 1978. The Apartheid regime is again experiencing rebellion: first the students in 1976, and now in the Eastern Cape. This is the background when Hennie Van As, newly qualified teacher, decides to return to the farm school where he'd begun his schooling. Shortly afterward a black farm worker is killed in the vineyards by a "coloured" convict labourer. Hennie is asked to speak at the funeral. His speech inflames the mourners, who stone the police. They return with reinforcements to punish those whom they suspect. Some of the young blacks decline to hide in the dongas of the Hex River Mountains and decide to ambush the police. Three are killed and three wounded. The Head of Security suspects the incident is related to the unrest in the Eastern Cape. He arranges for an undercover black agent to investigate. He also suspects that the "coloured" school teacher is involved.

The spy is uncovered and is severely beaten. He dies in the cabin where Hennie stays. The police return to take all the black workers to Brandvlei prison on the outskirts of Worcester. They flatten the black workers' camp. This outrages the "coloured" workers, who with the help of the farmer's son and daughter rebuild the camp. There is a new spirit of solidarity among the workers. It is the height of the harvest season and there is now a labour shortage, for which the "coloured" workers refuse to cover. The school children also go and hide in the foothills so as not to be dragooned. Such a situation cannot be tolerated and the army is sent in. The workers in the valley refuse to scab and congregate in the rebuilt sheds. Hennie's brother leads a group to try to escape across the mountains. They are trapped in a cave. One of the young men clambers on to the hilltop and dislodges a boulder that destroys an army helicopter. He is machine gunned. All this is recorded by the press.

In the meantime, Hennie is taken in for questioning as is his friend, who teaches in Worcester, Victor Walther. The third person wanted is Solomon Kunwayo; he attended Hewat as Solomon Conway. This convinces the Special Branch of the Eastern Cape connection. Walther's father is a priest at Mamre. He calls on the churches to protest. The Anglican Archbishop calls upon the church leaders in England and soon it is an international incident. A mass meeting is held in the Market Square in Worcester attended by the Archbishop and all the local churches including the African Methodist Episcopal. The international press is in full attendance. Annette, the farmer's daughter, also attends, and feels emotionally drawn to the call for freeing the Hennie and Samuel.

Solomon Conway evades the police and escapes across the border. Without him there are no grounds to detain Hennie and Victor. However, the Coloured Affairs Department decides to transfer Hennie to teach in Upington. Reluctantly Hennie decides to go. There is a mass turn out at the station. Annette tearfully declares her love, and promise to keep in touch. The train departs taking Hennie away from the Valley.

The synopsis cannot fully express what it was like to teach under the Coloured Affairs Dept. It can only be told by one who actually taught in the "coloured" schools. A synopsis cannot convey how Hennie begins to hold house meetings to help the workers to understand how the system of apartheid works. The role of the spy is significant. He pretends to be with them, and talks of "land for the tillers of the land". It cannot show how events begin to affect the farmer's son, Theuns, and changes him from a dyed-in-the-wool supporter of Apartheid to one questioning the morality of the system. The growing bond of friendship between Annette, the farmer's daughter and Hennie is a sub-theme. The development of empathy and the importance of reconciliation are two major themes that run through the story. Through their experiences everyone begins to learn to see one another as human beings.