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The Politics of Land Question in North Eastern Botswana in the Context of Southern Africa

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Abstract: Decades after the end of colonialism, the politics of land question has intensified and become more complex, particularly in southern Africa. This has renewed academic interest on the subject. Surprisingly, Botswana, a former British Protectorate, is one of those countries which are rarely mentioned in the ensuing literature. This gives the impression that the country does not have any land question to talk of. This study reveals that Botswana grapples with the colonial legacy of land expropriation in the north east were colonial penetration was intense. But the intensity of its land question politics is largely contained by the 'one-party dominant' hegemonic politics and rigid neoliberal framework. Botswana has been ruled, uninterruptedly, by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) since independence in 1966. This party has successfully rebuffed any suggestions to implement a radical land reform in north east. This has neutralized the land question politics compared to neighbouring states were the political leadership are in support of radical reforms. The BDP is unwilling to confront colonial injustices because it believes that market interventionist strategies are the best. It does not want to jeopardize its relations with the former colonial master and the international community. It is sensitive to the prevailing chaotic land reform politics in neighbouring Zimbabwe. The opposition parties which, at some point, advocated for radical land reform are now generally fragmented and have been co-opted in the neoliberal framework too. Because of all these complexities, the landless do suffer. Their voices are presented herein.

Key words: Land question, land reform, politics, colonization, southern Africa, Botswana

INTRODUCTION

The land question has become, decades after the end of colonialism, a hotly debated political issue at international forums and domestic politics in former Colonies and Protectorates alike. It is often complex and politically difficult to address. As Gibson (2007) remarks, it is truly an example of historical injustices colliding with the demand for contemporary fairness. In Latin America, for instance, governments are struggling to address the complex land question, which often turns into rural based insurgencies (Ampuero and Brittain, 2005). Even in Asia, particularly South and South East Asia, rural based insurgencies are also linked to the land question (Moyo and Yeros, 2005). However, East Asian countries, notably Japan (Kawagoe, 1999), South Korea, Taiwan and China have successfully implemented state-led radical land reforms, propelling them to international economic stardom. In the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), now in transition, the land question has dominated domestic politics too. But their land reforms seem positive (Lerman *et al*., 2004). The politics of land question in Africa has also been a subject of academic scrutiny (Manji, 2006).

In southern Africa, the land question is arguably the most controversial. Thus, political violence associated with it causes concern. Such violence is sometimes sanctioned by the political leadership as happened in Zimbabwe (Palmer, 2000).

The land question impasse in the Third World countries is exacerbated by neoliberal approach to it. Moyo (2004) contends that this gives much legal protection to the current big landowners; mostly white settlers, multinational companies, agribusinesses and emerging 'black' elites, to the detriment of the rural poor. Neoliberal approach is endorsed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) by emphasizing market-based Land Reforms (MBLR) (Borras, 2003). Regrettably, this has fueled the land question hostile politics in southern Africa. Surprisingly, when the land question is discussed in southern Africa, Botswana is one of those countries which are rarely mentioned.

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This gives the impression that the country does not have any land question to talk of. Truly, Botswana experienced 'mild colonialism' when compared to her neighbours. She was a British Protectorate from 1885-1966. Despite this, Botswana also grapples with the colonial legacy of land expropriation. In other southern Africa countries, the land question appears widespread, whereas in Botswana, it is concentrated in certain regions (where there was intense colonial penetration). In the north east, for instance, colonial penetration was comparable to that in the Kenyan highlands, Zimbabwe and South Africa (Tapela, 1976). It is in this region that a colonial syndicate (later known as Tati Company) expropriated 'the entire land' belonging to Africans, rendering them landless.

The politics of this issue in post-colonial Botswana has been exacerbated by Zimbabwe's land crisis. The government of Botswana, controlled by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), since independence in 1966, cautiously addresses the land question through a market interventionist policy. This is in contrast with Zimbabwe, where a market-led reform chaotically collapsed in 2000, sending into the region, political shock waves (Sachikonye, 2004).

In Botswana, the government spends millions of tax payers money to purchase land from 'willing' landlords for redistribution to the landless. This is in line with its market-oriented and neoliberal public policy. In 2007, the Government passed a bill, setting aside P30 million (roughly US $5 million), to buy land from landlords to 'augment tribal land'. But some of the absentee landlords are yet to be traced and their citizenship certified (Mmegi, 2009). This was earlier revealed by the Minister of Lands and Housing who was adamant that the 'Willing-Buyer, Willing-Seller' (WBWS) policy is the best for Botswana. However, to some opposition parties and villagers, this is waste of money (Mmegi, 2009).

Opposing voices call for the expropriation of land owned by those who unjustly acquired it through colonial laws. But the government insists on WBWS policy. This has shortcomings as the landlords demand exorbitant sums for their land. Gibson (2007) argues that southern Africa's land question will 'remain volatile and resistant to simple economic solutions'.

Politically, it is 'a highly emotive and controversial issue' (Ntsebeza and Hall, 2007). Therefore, it must be addressed more cautiously, than is the case in southern Africa and Botswana. The land question in north eastern Botswana is complex, political and sensitive. As DFID (2002) points out, land questions are sometimes too political such that they may be neglected. With regard to the north east, the existing literature focuses on the history of colonial land expropriation (Tapela, 1976; Woto, 1976; Mupindu, 1983). Therefore, the land question ramifications in the post-independence era and the influence of southern Africa's land question politics on this, have been entirely left outside the academic domain. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to analyze the land question in north eastern Botswana within the context of southern Africa

This issue can be better comprehended from this perspective. Qualitative researchers argue that Contexts are important as a means of situating action and of grasping its wider social and historical import (Dey, 1993).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is an outcome of a field work conducted in August to September 2007 and September to November 2009 in north eastern Botswana by the first researcher. The term 'fieldwork' has its 'genesis' in anthropology (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998) and is mainly used in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers believe that reality is socially constructed. Hence the researcher is the instrument of data collection (Glesne, 1999). For qualitative researchers, 'going to the people' (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998) is the only way to get rich data in the form of people's perceptions and feelings about their everyday life situations. Qualitative research methods are flexible and allow researcher(s) to easily adapt to the field conditions (Glesne, 1999).

We used qualitative data collection methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, formal and informal discussions and document analysis to analyze the land question in north east. In-depth interviews and in formal discussions were held with politicians, villagers, tribal leaders and Tati Land Board (TLB) officials. Visits to the farms/lands purchased by the government for redistribution to the landless were made. Rigorous literature review in the form of journal publications, conference papers, books, websites and newspapers was done. The north east was chosen primarily because it is the only region in Botswana which experienced intense colonialism, despite the fact that the country was a Protectorate. Colonial land expropriation was institutionalized in this part of Botswana. Its repercussions remain complex and politically sensitive. North East District is the second smallest in Botswana. It covers an area of 5,993 km^2. Tribal land covers 3,391 km^2 (56%); freehold farms 2,569 km^2 (42.9%) and state land 33 km^2 (0.5%).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The land question in southern Africa: At various World Food Summits, African Union (AU) Summits, Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) forums and local political rallies, the controversial Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe, is the only leader, so far, who have been consistently, with vim and verve, debating the land question by attacking former colonial masters for reneging on land reform promises and international donor agencies for neoliberal approach to it. Though, Mugabe's concerns are pervasive in the region, the political 'bravery' is not there among his peers to tackle the land question with such 'radicalism'. This is because Zimbabwe's radical approach has led to dire consequences; international sanctions, political turmoil and expulsion from Commonwealth. Therefore, the historical and political factors which exacerbate the land question in southern Africa deserve emphasis. Southern Africa, compared to all the regions of Africa, experienced intense colonialism. In the process, massive tracts of lands were expropriated by colonialists leading to racial domination (Palmer, 1977). And, in the 21st century, the land question in this part of Africa remains a serious threat to its political, economic and security stability. Most countries in southern Africa', though Botswana did not experienced chaotic anti-colonial liberation wars, based on struggles over land. We briefly explain the land question in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia.

Zimbabwe's land question: Arguably, Zimbabwe's land question is the most controversial in the 21st century. A market-led land reform, in operation between 1980 and 2000, failed chaotically to resolve its politically tumultuous land question (Palmer, 2000). Without helping the situation, the Zimbabwean government embarked on 'unthinkable' white-owned 'land grabbing' campaign in 2000, accompanied by political violence. The situation deteriorated to almost a 'war zone'. The former colonial master, Britain, reneged on its promise to fund Zimbabwe's land reform. At Lancaster House Conference of 1979, which discussed Zimbabwe's road to independence, the land reform was seen as an urgent step towards reconciliation.

But 'certain legal and constitutional guarantees for the protection of the white population (interests) were accepted, albeit grudgingly' (De Villiers, 2003). The British Government initially promised to contribute 75 million Pounds and the U.S.A US $500 million towards Zimbabwe's land reform. But none was in the form of written guarantee. Compared to Kenya which received 500 million Pounds from Britain for the land reform program after its independence, Zimbabwe received a paltry 30 million Pounds by 2000 (De Villiers, 2003). Just before February 2000, approximately 4,500 white commercial farmers (constituting 0.03% of the entire population) controlled 31 per cent of the entire land in Zimbabwe (Kariuki, 2004).

This gave President Mugabe the political guts to 'grab' this land. By 2004, he had expropriated 11 million ha (Sachikonye, 2004). The land question in Zimbabwe, as noted in the 1970s, would not be an easy one to resolve (Palmer, 1977). Though, internationally condemned for its approach, Zimbabwe has 'helped to re-animate the hitherto dormant debate on the land question' in the region (Kariuki 2004), including in Botswana.

South Africa's land question: Nearly two decades after attaining 'black' majority rule in 1994, South Africa is still grappling with one of the worst land question in the region. Its history of land question is complex, just like in Zimbabwe and Namibia.

In South Africa, the white minority class expropriated massive lands from Africans and forced them into artificially created 'Native Reserves'. The infamous 1913 Native Land Act resulted in about 87% of the entire land owned by the few whites (De Villiers, 2003). In 1948, the Afrikaner Nationalist Party introduced the crudest form of administration based on racial segregation. This administration further expropriated lands from Africans, forcing them into created territories called 'Bantustans'.

Assuming power in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) introduced a tripartite land reform (redistribution, restitution and tenure reform) to address colonial injustices. This was also part of a reconciliation process after decades of political persecution meted against the 'blacks'. But South Africa's land reform faces complex challenges.

There are mounting debates on whether to abandon the WBWS policy (Gibson, 2007). A typical response from landlords is that 'I will not leave my farm if I don't get full market value for it'.

In September 2005, a white farmer refused with his land despite the government patience in negotiating with him. The farmer, who owned 500 ha rejected the government offer of US $275,000, arguing that his farm worth almost twice as much. He vowed to argue his case in court. Though, its land reform is bedeviled by complex challenges, South Africa should be commended for tackling colonial injustices head-on. A top official in its Government suggested that: 'On agrarian and land reform, South Africa should learn some lessons from Zimbabwe, how to do it fast'.

Namibia's land question: In Namibia, there are increasing demands from the landless and from within the governing party for a more drastic approach to land reform, similar to that of Zimbabwe (De Villiers, 2003). German colonial rule led to expropriation of massive lands and destruction of peasant agriculture. The South West Peoples Organization (SWAPO), now the ruling party, waged anti colonial struggle until independence in 1990. SWAPO admires Mugabe's policy. Namibia's Deputy Lands Minister once said: 'We also feel that if Zimbabwe did this, we can do it in the same manner; we feel that the same colonizers are the same people who colonized Zimbabwe'. The Secretary General of Namibia Farm Workers Union (NAFWU) complained that: The constitution guarantees existing property rights but this land was stolen by the colonizers.

Constitutional guarantees complicate the implementation of historically informed land reforms, even in Botswana. Disturbed by the route which the Namibian Government wants to take, current landowners and international donors are encouraging the government to abide by a WBWS approach and not to entertain a Zimbabwean style (De Villiers, 2003). President Hifikepunye Pohamba warned in 2005 that Namibia faces a possible 'revolution', unless the white farmers give up their land. He said that patience of the 'black' population is running out and the 'have-nots could stand up and say: Enough is enough.' He added that to date (giving speech on 22 March 2005), not a single farm has been expropriated. But vowed that: the expropriation of the white-owned farms was going to happen. Pohamba told white-commercial farmers that WBWS policy means selling land to the government at fair prices as provided in the constitutions and relevant laws.

Colonization of north eastern Botswana: The British had no interest, whatsoever to colonize Botswana. Interestingly, the north east region attracted fortune seekers and concessionaires in the 1860s. Before the arrival of the militaristic Ndebele people around 1840 from South Africa and European fortune seekers, BaKalanga and BaKhurutshe were living in this area. The arrival of the Ndebele has a direct impact on the current land question. Using military power, they extended political authority towards BaKalanga-BaKhurutshe territory. Ndebele Kings awarded Concessions to European concessionaires on BaKalanga-BaKhurutshe land (Tapela, 1976).

In 1866, gold was rediscovered in the area by an Australian geologist thus attracting miners from South Africa, U.S.A and Australia. By 1869, there were nine companies at work (Schapera, 1971). Most of them gave up due to prohibitive production costs. Coincidentally, rich deposits of diamonds were discovered in large quantities along the banks of the Vaal River in South Africa (famous Kimberly). Majority of the miners in north east left to try their fortune there. While away, their Concessions expired and or were revoked by the Ndebele King Lobengula. On 2 September 1880, Lobengula revoked all the Concessions granted in the previous years. He granted a new Concession to a syndicate called The Northern Light Company (later Tati Concessions/Company), 'the sole right to seek and dig for gold' (Schapera, 1971).

Granting of Concessions by African Kings was very controversial and is still questionable from legal and cultural point of view. The contents of the Concession were written in English and explained to Lobengula by a white man cum translator. It is possible that what was said to Lobengula verbally was different from the written contents. Later, Lobengula denied ever giving out his land for good (Schapera, 1971). He was not even the rightful owner of the land in question (Tapela, 1976). The concessionaires knew the controversy of land ownership in north east. The Manager of Tati Concessions, Du Maffey, wanted the Colonial Government to accept that his Company was an autonomous entity in spite of its being surrounded by a region of British rule. The company won its autonomous status after the defeat of Lobengula in 1893 and created a 'Colony' within a Protectorate.

Tati Concessions and land expropriation: The British South Africa Company (BSAC), which promoted British colonial interests in southern Africa, crushed the Ndebele Kingdom in 1893. Taking advantage of this, Tati Concessions claimed, contrary to the Concession of September 1880 that it was the 'rightful' heir to Lobengula's territory of north east (Tapela, 1976; Mupindu, 1983). It proposed to the British Government that it should be recognized as the 'legal owner' of the disputed land. In 1894, the British Secretary of State granted the Company its wish. The new Concession, however, clearly stated that: all such grants as those that made to the company relate to waste and unoccupied lands and cannot be understood to authorize interference with pre-existing Native rights, which the crown has no power to give away. BaKhurutshe and BaKalanga were not consulted. Most had fled Ndebele incursions.

In 1895, BaKhurutshe and BaKalanga decided to return from exile to their ancestral land. Surprisingly, it was now occupied by Tati Concessions. To reoccupy it, they needed to obtain conditional permission from the Company officials. They pleaded with the company and

colonial officials that the land belonged to them but to no avail. Tati Concessions had good relations with high-ranking officials in Britain. BaKhurutshe and BaKalanga could not comprehend what Tati Concessions meant by having 'inherited' Lobengula's land. The land did not belong to Lobengula. Even if it belonged to him, no chief could sell or give away land in that manner. The King was only the custodian of land on behalf of the people. He was not the absolute owner of land in the way the colonialists understood.

Tati Concessions insisted that Africans can only settle in 'its' land on these conditions: supplying of labour to the company mines, not to hunt game and cut down trees/timber and to sell their produce and cattle/stock to the company stores at fixed prices set by the company officials. BaKhurutshe, in desperation, dragged the company to court but lost on legal technicality. The court ruled that the Concessions signed between the company and Lobengula were valid. But the legal adviser to the colonial administration, Dr. Ward differed and argued that the Concessions were signed under dubious circumstances. Willy-nilly, the court granted the company surface rights.

Proclamation No. 2 of 1911: On 21 January 1911, the British Government granted 'The Tati Concessions, its successors and assigns; the full, free and undisturbed rights as owners of all the land within the Tati District' (Proclamation No.2 of 21 January 1911). Proclamation No.2 added that:

> Tati Concessions shall have full power and authority to dispose by sale, lease or otherwise of any portion of land within the Tati District and the purchaser or lessee or occupier under any agreement with the Tati Concessions shall have the right of full, free and undisturbed possession subject to the terms of the said purchase, lease or agreement.

This Proclamation resulted in the creation of a Native Reserve (North East District), similar to other reserves in southern Africa. The colonial administration agreed to pay an annual rent of 1,000 British Pounds to the company in lieu of the latter's right to collect rent from Africans in the reserve (Tapela, 1976). The Tati Concessions zoned its land into farms and encouraged white settlers to exploit this opportunity. This was in line with settler policies in southern Africa (Palmer, 1977). Due to congestion in the reserve, some communities returned to their ancestral land, now considered Tati Concessions land. They were forced to live as tenants; paying rent to the company. Failure to comply was punishable by eviction, confiscation of livestock and other valuable property (Woto, 1976). Some communities, unable to live peacefully with the hostile company, abandoned north east and resettled elsewhere in the country. The effort to reclaim their ancestral land failed. It was frustrated by the colonial administration and the British government (both) which connived with the company to rob Africans their land. Proclamation No. 2 is still upheld as the legally binding document defining land ownership by landlords (including absentee ones). This compromises the implementation of a historically informed land reform. Using Proclamation No. 2, landlords (including the absentee ones) hold land for speculation. The government, unwilling to revoke it, finds it difficult to explain why such vast tracts of lands lie idle in the midst of landlessness.

Post-colonial Botswana and the politics of land question: When assessing the politics of land question in Botswana, it is imperative to explain the country's post-colonial politics too. Politics, particularly in sub Saharan Africa, has been the root cause of endless conflicts, corruption and poverty. In relation to the land question, politics plays a critical role in southern Africa than elsewhere in Africa (Palmer, 2000). Botswana has been administered by BDP since independence. This is not to say that it is a one party state. Instead, it is a one party dominant state (Selolwane, 2002). The reasons why this happened are myriad but beyond the scope of this study. In this study, we explain the impact of this on the land question in north east.

Botswana holds elections after every 5 years. All these elections have been hailed as free and fair by the international community. Botswana is thus described as a 'shining liberal democracy (Stedman, 1993) in a troubled continent.

Since independence, the land question has been debated but not to the intensity experienced in neighbouring states. Botswana's current debate on the land question takes place under a rigid hegemonic neoliberal framework. There is a blurred distinction between opposition parties and the ruling party. What Botswana Peoples Party (BPP), for instance, preached as radical politics of land expropriation in the 1960s has, over the years become neutralized. Botswana's opposition parties no longer raise fundamental questions of who owns the means of production but are more concerned with getting a share of the national resources (Molomo, 2008).

Botswana Democratic Party: The British colonial officials were instrumental in the formation of BDP which they

regarded as conservative and pro-British (Selolwane, 2002). Its leader, Sir Seretse Khama, was a traditional chief of the largest ethnic group, Bangwato and a trained lawyer from Balliol College in the United Kingdom (UK). Seretse also married a British woman. Therefore, he was sympathetic to British citizens unlike in neighbouring British colonies. Seretse's eldest son, Seretse Khama Ian Khama, is the current president of Botswana. In the 1960s, the overwhelming moral and financial support that the BDP received from the white settlers, Asian community and the colonial officials boosted its support base.

The BDP recruited propertied rural elites such as traditional leaders and cattle barons, who commanded huge respect. Seretse's humility and easy-going character appealed to many Batswana. At the constitutional debates in 1963-1964, held at the town of Lobatse (southern Botswana), Seretse proved to be a man of the people. His confidence, openness and liberal character stole the hearts of the colonial officials. They found, in him, a character which can be worked with. Seretse's political ambition was to build a multi-racial society. He recruited white settlers into his first cabinet. Most of these were cattle barons, who owned massive lands around the country (Fawcus and Tilbury, 2000). From the onset, BDP was a party of all races, geared towards endorsing the status quo. Today, Batswana are calling for constitutional review and BDP is not ready because it has not taken a resolution on the matter. Botswana's constitution, largely drafted with the input of the British, is seen by many as still protecting the interests of the British descendants, who still own massive lands around the country and north east in particular.

BDP position on the land question: The BDP government has approached the land question in north east with rigid neoliberal mind. This is to please the former colonial master, the West and international monetary institutions. But Botswana funds its own land reform in north east from tax payers money. Surprisingly then, the government still clung to the colonial clauses, in particular Proclamation No. 2 of 1911. This unjust clause was drafted by the colonialists and the government still finds it justifiable. In South Africa, the 1913 Native Land Act, which gave the whites nearly 90% of land has been challenged since 1994. The Land Restitution Act was passed after 1994 (Gibson, 2007). In Zimbabwe too, all colonial laws which gave white minority control of nearly 90% of land have been repealed, though chaotically (Palmer, 2000). In Namibia, there are debates going on with regard to colonial land laws (De Villiers, 2003).

However, in a shining liberal democracy called Botswana, any challenge to colonial land laws is seen as anti democratic and a witch hunt. The BDP argues that since Botswana relies heavily on the outside market for its diamonds and is hailed as an example of clean democracy, expropriation of land would mean that the country is not a democracy it is purported to be (Mmegi, 2009). Botswana is the leading producer of diamonds in the world by value, producing over 34 million carats per year (Hillbom, 2008).

Opposition political parties' views on the land question: Because of the nature of hegemonic politics in Botswana, it is tricky to explain the position of opposition political parties on the land question in the recent years. Opposition parties are fragmented, troubled by internal squabbles and prone to break ups, even few months before general elections. Expulsion of key members in some opposition parties is routine and define their divisive politics. Many voters have even casted doubts on the viability of the opposition. We explain how two opposition parties, BPP and Botswana National Front (BNF) viewed the land question in north east over the years.

Botswana Peoples Party: The formation of BPP in 1960 caught the attention of colonial officials. The BPP was radical and it advocated for the nationalization of some parts of the land in the north east and the Africanisation of the civil service. It demanded political independence from Britain. It was so radical and impatient with the colonial administration to the extent that the latter helped with the formation of a more conservative party, BDP, (Fawcus and Tilbury, 2000). The BPP also opposed the rule of traditional chiefs; seeing them as autocratic, feudalistic and colonial collaborators. This did not go down well with Batswana who revered their chiefs and were still rural and largely uneducated.

BPP's radicalism meant that the BDP which was pro chieftainship gained support from the rural masses. It was because of political radicalism of the BPP that the British decided to speedily grant Botswana independence in 1966. BPP also called for the boycott of white-owned business premises.

It became more concentrated in the cities of Lobatse (southern) and Francistown (north east) and Ngamiland region (Makgala, 2006). Its popularity waned over the years. It has been overpowered by the BDP and BNF, which became an elite party. Currently, BPP has only three councilors in the North East District Council (NEDC) out of twenty. The rest are from BDP. It is not represented in Parliament. Its political stance on the land question was/is weakened by its rapid decline as an opposition party.

BPP views on the land question: In the 1960s north east region, BPP attracted large following because it used the political slogan 'Shango', a local Ikalanga word, which means land (Kopano Maruping, BPP politician, personal communication, November 2009).

Racist attitude by Tati Company and its expropriation of Africans' land became major political issues in the 1960s. BPP exploited this and staged protests and boycotts in Francistown (Koveya, 1985). The party had enlisted in its ranks, educated elites. It was viewed by predominantly landless BaKalanga ethnic group of north east as advocating for their rights (Dr. Kealotswe, personal communication, November 2009).

BPP's initial position was radical land expropriation. This was in line with the politics of nationalism pervasive in the 1960s Africa. Some of BPP's key founding members had been activists with ANC in South Africa. Few had been imprisoned alongside the heroic Nelson Mandela. It was clear that these political figures were bent on disrupting the status quo, once assuming power. Since the north east borders Zimbabwe, it could have been easier for rural based violence to erupt. But the colonial government quickly granted Botswana independence. Zimbabwe was fighting a protracted liberation war. The BPP used this as a campaign theme to agitate for nationalization of land in north east and elsewhere in the country.

Over the years, BPP's radical stance softened. It now hardly articulates anything relating to land. But it has largely remained a regional party based in the north. However, some BPP politicians maintain that landlords must be forced to the negotiation table (Kopano Maruping and Richard Gudu, personal communication, November 2009 and September 2007).

During its political rally at Masunga, north east, just before the 2009 general elections, many issues such as unemployment, poverty, corruption and the militarization of civil service were the major political campaign themes. For over 4 h, BPP's parliamentary candidate in the region, Richard Gudu and other party officials, never mentioned anything about the land question.

However, responding to my questions on their position on the issue, Gudu blamed the government for lack of consultation on the ongoing land reform. He argued that his party believes that the issue of absentee landlords needs serious attention. He said if such landlords cannot be traced, the land should be expropriated (personal communication, 2009).

Botswana National Front: The BNF, formed in the late 1960s is the main opposition party. From its formation, it was a Marxist-Leninist movement which advocated for reforms in the socio-economic and political sectors and also pressed for constitutional review. Its ideologist, Dr. Kenneth Koma, probably the first PhD holder in Botswana, was educated in USSR. Koma adored Marxism. The South African apartheid regime kept an eye on him. Even in Botswana, the government became wary of his leftist radical views (Makgala, 2006).

Generally, BNF views on the land question in north east or elsewhere in the country are/were somehow radical and Marxist in perspective. Sadly, in 1998, just before the 1999 general elections, the BNF split. Botswana Congress Party (BCP) was formed. This was the biggest blow on opposition parties, which were promising to unseat the BDP. Later, the same BNF split again and this time, National Democratic Front (NDF) emerged. Just before the October 2009 general elections, some key members of the BNF were expelled from the party for what the party leadership termed indiscipline. Some went on to form BNF Temporary Platform and insisted that they are/were still members of the BNF despite having been expelled. The BNF has <10 MPs in Parliament.

It is difficult to say with certainty, whether the views expressed by some (expelled) politicians once associated with the BNF on the land question represent their (former) party or their persons. A key member of the BNF, Robert Molefhabangwe, recently expelled from the party had radical views on the land question. His expulsion is not related to this issue but manifests itself in the internal squabbles of BNF. He contested the elections as an independent candidate but lost to BDP. Thereafter, he defected to BDP. Similarly, Dr. Elmon Tafa, who spent 32 years in the BNF, was expelled just before the 2009 general elections. He too has radical views on the way the government is handling the land question in north east. We treat his views as personal since he made them after being expelled from the BNF. However, we acknowledge that he has been BNF's political ideologue for many years.

BNF motion on land expropriation: In 2002, the Minister of lands and housing recognized that the north east required more land for current as well as future use. And in 2003, Robert Molefhabangwe, the then Member of Parliament (MP) with the BNF, tabled a motion, calling for the expropriation of land owned by Tati Company and absentee landlords in north east. He also demanded that the company compensate the victims of colonial injustices. Compensation of the victims of colonial land expropriation has been endorsed in South Africa (Gibson, 2007). In Botswana, land restitution or radical land reform is a political taboo. The lands and housing Minister, Margaret Nasha, then contributing to the motion, told

Parliament that the government was already addressing the issue through a market-led interventionist strategy. The motion was only supported by two BNF MPs present during the debate. A BDP MP, Boyce Sebetela said that the north east land question was now water under the bridge, noting that the motion had the potential to whip up negative emotions on land reform. He could not comprehend why the BNF is concerned about history in the contemporary era. This is the policy of the BDP not to hung up on the past because if the new leaders chose pro-market policies, colonialism's dark past would not necessarily block their efforts (Beaulier, 2003).

The then MP for north east, Chapson Butale had initially requested the government to look into the land problem. But surprisingly, he wondered why the BNF had brought the motion. He however, agreed that villagers were in desperate need of land but felt there was no need for the BNF to whip their emotions. Shying from the debate, Butale concluded: 'The people of North East have suffered enough about shortage of land so I do not want to add salt to their injury. The fate of the people was thus left in the hands of the BDP to decide whether to buy or expropriate land or continue pampering landlords.

Another BDP Minister, Moeng Pheto argued that: We cannot turn ourselves into courts or investigators to find out whether the land was acquired fraudulently. But in 2005, the MP for Tati East, Guma Moyo had to invite the Minister of Lands and Housing, Ramadeluka Seretse, to witness the acute land shortage in north east. Moyo remarked, I wanted the Minister to address you (villagers) on the issue of land shortage and also to give him a chance to appreciate issues on the ground rather than being told by us (MPs). The BNF failed to sell its motion which was heavily crushed by the BDP.

Views on the land question from a politician once associated with BNF: Dr. Elmon Tafa, after being expelled from the BNF, registered for the 2009 general elections as an independent candidate in Francistown South. He contested but lost to BDP candidate. However, towards the elections, he gave a strong political message to the government and Tati Company over the land question in north east. He argued that it is politically incorrect for the government to continue buying land from Tati Company and freehold farmers using tax payer's money. His argument was/is that the government wastes money which could be invested in other sectors, more especially education. His demands were/are that the landlords must produce the receipts to prove that they bought the land in question, if they want compensation (Botswana Television, 2009 also personal communication, November 2009). Dr. Tafa's views are similar to that of many villagers in north east. Many villagers and tribal elders are stunned by the government reluctance to adopt a radical approach to the land question (Tribal elders, personal communication, August 2007). Tafa repeatedly asked this rhetorical question during the interview; 'Is Botswana independent state?' His contention is that if Botswana is independent, she must address the land question in a manner which shows that she sympathizes with the landless rather than the landlords, including absentee ones.

Voices of the weak: Villagers are agitated by the way the land question is handled. They view the current land reform as too bureaucratic. Complaints and even invasion of some of the purchased farms but not yet redistributed, are common. There is wanton vandalism of the farms' structures by the so-called squatters. Although, these people are legally defined as squatters, they do not see themselves as such. They are just desperate landless people.

The rate and nature at which the farms have been invaded and vandalized has forced Tati Land Board (TLB) (an institution responsible for land administration in the district) to hire a security company to protect at least one farm, which has a big farm house (TLB deputy secretary, personal communication, November 2009). But in some farms, farm structures have been vandalized. Vandalism, in itself, can be regarded a criminal offence. But the invasion of farms by villagers, with large herds of cattle, indicates a serious land crisis. In one of the invaded farms, one invader farmer has over 200 herds. This causes overgrazing (TLB officials, personal communication, November 2009).

Rampant vandalism prompted the District Commissioner (DC) to request the government to ensure that in future, funds for the policing of such farms are secured to avoid vandalism. The reason why the farms are vandalized is that the community is not involved in the land reform process, which is elitist. The process has been dragging on for long. Their patience is waning. The bureaucracies involved in this market-led reform are complex. In 2001, the MP for the area complained about this rigid bureaucracy. He shocked Parliament when he said that two farms which the government bought in 1987 and 1994, respectively have not yet been converted into tribal land. To minimize vandalism, villagers should be partners, who engage in participatory dialogue with TLB and government. They should not be seen only as beneficiaries. If they were/are part of this process, they would have realized the need to protect the farms and wait for official allocation. However, this reform has been removed from the community. It is made to appear like it

is an entirely government affair. One villager said there were wide-spread rumours that: first come-first-serve policy was going to be used to allocate the land (Sithembile France, personal communication, August 2007).

This is the reason why people invaded the farms. But TLB secretary argued that politicians are encouraging people to invade the farms (Benjamin Monthe, personal communication, September 2007). A villager asked rhetorically, should we do the same because really we don't have a place, where the cattle could graze. The exclusion of the community from market-led land reforms has also been noticed in countries such as Brazil, South Africa and Colombia where reforms have not delivered at the scale and speed expected and have not managed to involve the very poor, nor have they reached the most capable beneficiaries (Wegerif, 2004).

In evicting squatters, TLB resorted to the courts. Some squatters challenged the court orders and dragged TLB to court instead. Some continued to graze clandestinely (TLB secretary, personal communication, September 2007). Desperate villagers asked repeatedly: How long should we wait to apply so that we could be able to use the farms, so what's taking so long for them to be allocated'. Some villagers, out of desperation, fought for the control of these farms. The area MP intervened (Tribal elder in Themashanga, personal communication, November 2009). The MP cautioned that nobody should claim the land, saying it belonged to all. He further said land should be used for grazing and not for residential purpose.

But in one of the purchased farms near Tati Siding village, people swamped it in large numbers and established a squatter settlement. Alarmed by the state of affairs, tribal elders in the village, together with TLB officials, went to the concerned farm and requested squatters to vacate it. There was resistance. Police officers were called in to enforce order (Tribal elder in Tati Siding, personal communication, November 2009). The farms are reserved for pastures not settlements. In South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia squatting by desperate landless is also common (Kariuki, 2004).

Villagers' views on Tati Company: Villagers do not understand why the government is being lenient with Tati Company which stole their land. A Minister defended the company saying it acquired the land legally. But noted that it could have done cheaply as it was during the colonial era, using the battering system. For record sake, there was no bartering done. The land was acquired fraudulently. Villagers views differ sharply with those held by the government. In Matshelagabedi, villagers expressed their frustrations in a meeting addressed by their MP. One elder emotionally said:

> Tati Company stole the land and rendered our people destitute in the process because the people's fertile land for ploughing and cattle grazing was forcibly taken away from them. They (TC) would simply command you to take your belongings from your house and then they would set the whole homestead on fire as a form of eviction. They had no mercy, so why is government being so patient and lenient with them at our expense?. We were treated badly and lived in fear of this Company (TC) turned the whole land, which was previously tribal into private property.

These words succinctly capture the frustrations facing villagers in this region. Confronting colonial wrongs is seen as being anti West and a direct attack on neo-liberalism. These realities pose difficulties for the struggling peasants. TLB secretary shared the frustrations faced by villagers when he said: 'The landlords are unwilling to sell their land and if they decide to they only offer poor quality land (TLB secretary, personal communication, September 2007). In South Africa, Sachikonye (2004) found that the unwilling seller and unwilling buyer scenario is developing. This develops when the government cannot agree to the price demanded by the landlords and vice versa. Surprisingly, in Botswana, the government is ready to buy even the most barren land. One villager was in shock when he said, 'I could not believe that the government can buy such eroded and barren land' (Personal communication, November 2009).

The fact that vast tracts of lands are still owned by absentee landlords and Tati Company causes concern among villagers.

The government claims that it cannot locate some absentee landlords. Most left the country in the 1950s either to South Africa or Britain. They had bought the land from Tati Company. In 2005, Tati Company official refuted allegations that they refuse to sell or donate land they own in Francistown and north east. The Company General Manager, however, said that they sell land at market value though this seems expensive for an ordinary citizen (personal communication, November 2009).

CONCLUSION

In north eastern Botswana, like in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia, Africans were unjustly dispossessed of their land. They were forced to live as tenants in their

own land. And were compelled to work as cheap labourers in the white-owned mines. Settler capitalist agriculture was promoted though it did not take root. The British Government and its colonial administration endorsed Tati Concessions mendacious claim over the entire land. This created a colony within a Protectorate. Following Zimbabwe's land grabbing in 2000, the government of Botswana announced its policy of land reform 'to augment tribal land and provide the North East with a rare opportunity to plan on uncumbered land. But the on-going land reform is besieged by rigid bureaucracies; a sign of market-led reforms.

Although, there are genuine concerns and frustrations over the government reluctance to address this issue head on, expropriation may not necessarily resolve the problem. It should be a last resort. It may result in the government facing endless court cases and losing its credibility.

The government must call Tati Company and other landlords to the negotiation table. A fair deal which takes into account the government ability to purchase the land must be adopted. A WBWS policy is not working. It has failed in Zimbabwe and is under serious scrutiny in South Africa and Namibia. In north east, landlords are only selling poor quality land.

It is only after failed negotiations with landlords that radical measures can be considered. To date, no serious discussions have been done on this issue. Sadly, the ruling party seems comfortable with the state of affairs. Absentee landlordism causes even more alarm. The government must come up with clear legal mechanisms to revoke 'perpetual' ownership of land by ghost owners.

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