Comparing Land Reform Developments in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe

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This paper focuses on the land issue in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The choice of these three southern African countries is not by accident. They are unique in sharing a similar background of race based minority rule characterised by extensive land expropriation during the colonial era. All the three countries experienced some form of armed struggle, ostensibly over land. They all experienced a negotiated settlement for new political dispensations. These political settlements ensured that indigenous people did not forcefully grab land from the landed elite who happened to be white. In all the three cases, the settlement meant legal mechanisms that granted a peaceful route to resolving land problems. For instance the three countries have constitutions that entrenched rights to immovable property (especially land) and an independent judiciary to enforce that right. All have pressures for land distribution. Things started unravelling as some groups of indigenous people with the active support of the government in Zimbabwe embarked on land invasions aimed at ultimately changing the land ownership picture in that country. Few people know that there have been attempted land invasions in Namibia and South Africa. The reactions of these governments to land invasions have however, been very different from the Zimbabwean government. What are the dynamics at play in encouraging the forceful distribution of land in Zimbabwe but not in South Africa and Namibia? Why have the three countries embarked on very different paths to redistribution, settlement and restitution of land rights? This paper deals primarily with the approach by the three countries to land reform in terms of redistribution, resettlement and restitution of land rights. The paper points to the fact that South Africa has large tracts of land in state hands, a population that is mostly based in urban areas and a higher industrial profile. It points to the fact that Namibia is the driest country in sub-Saharan Africa (and crop, but not livestock farming is a tough proposition) it is a large country with a population of under two million people and although largely rural, it has a varied ethnic picture in which some groups but not others suffered land expropriation the aim is to look at the dynamics at play in encouraging the forceful distribution of land. In particular we compare the dilemmas that the three countries face and speculate on the likelihood of Zimbabwean style land invasions occurring in Namibia and South Africa.