

Education – ethnic cleansing Mugabe style

It began in the early 1980's with Gukurahundi – Mugabe's brutal suppression of the people of Matabeleland – and on the pretext of putting down "dissidents" in this region his North Korean trained troops mercilessly killed between 20,000 and 30,000 innocent civilians. Mugabe had dealt with the threat to his hold on power posed by Joshua Nkomo and his party, ZAPU, which had secured a huge majority among the minority Ndebele people in the 1980 elections. Ethnic cleansing by any other name. Later ZAPU was to be swallowed up in the merger of the two parties in ZANU PF.

It surfaced again in the year 2000 when the newly-formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) campaigned vigourously against the new constitution proposed by Mugabe and won a stunning victory in the national referendum on this issue. Mugabe was humiliated and shocked to discover that the MDC constituted a real threat to his hold on power. In a brilliant tactical move he then turned the nation's attention to the land issue and exploited the latent sense of injustice at the colonial pattern of land distribution (which his own government had done virtually nothing to address in 20 years in power). The unlawful and violent seizures of white-owned farms began under the guise of correcting an historical injustice – though it didn't take long to realize that the real beneficiaries of the so-called "fast-track" land reform were not the landless peasants at all but rather the ruling elite chefs. The whole nation suffered the most dire consequences as the once thriving commercial agriculture sector went into terminal decline and the spectre of famine stalked the land. White farmers made an easy target. They had little influence where it mattered, were still associated in the popular mind with the worst aspects of colonial rule, and therefore could hardly defend themselves against the tirade of propaganda directed against them by the state media. Over the airwaves and in the state-controlled dailies there was an outpouring of anti-white hate speech. At the same time the propaganda machine did its best to link the white farmers to the MDC, hoping to discredit both by so doing. A second wave of ethnic cleansing was under way.

In the Parliamentary elections later that year despite ZANU PF's resort to violence, intimidation and vote rigging on a massive scale the MDC came close to winning the majority of contested seats (legal challenges to the official results are still awaiting judgment three years later!) The MDC achieved an almost clean sweep of all the major urban centres across the nation, while ZANU PF retained control of its traditional rural power base. Clearly the urban vote, including most of the middle class, was going to the opposition and no amount of smoke-screening could hide this fact. The Presidential Election of 2002, the stolen election in which the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai was cheated of victory by the most blatant electoral irregularities, served at least to confirm the same trend. ZANU PF had effectively lost the support of urban dwellers.

The middle class therefore – largely black though including a tiny white remnant – stood out as the most significant group opposed to the perpetuation of ZANU PF hegemony. If Mugabe was to go on to maintain his hold on power he must somehow undermine the influence and morale of this group.

Large numbers of middle class Zimbabweans have already left the country because of the melt-down of the economy, the loss of jobs, the sustained attack upon civil liberties and the apparently indefinite postponement of democratic change. Yet this haemorrhaging - which continues with devastating effect - still leaves a significant power base outside the ruling party's control. So begins the next phase of ethnic cleansing – with a minimum of actual violence this time, but equally deadly in its effect upon the group concerned.

It is against this background that the assault upon the private school sector, taken up in earnest this week must be seen. The second school term was due to start on Tuesday (4th). On Monday the heads of a number of private schools received a visit from the police who informed them that their schools must remain closed. The pretext given for this sudden (and certainly unlawful) move was that the schools had dared to increase their fees before obtaining the permission of the Minister of Education. When the heads sought clarification from the Ministry it became apparent that the most senior education officials knew nothing of it. Clearly a political instruction had been issued at the very highest level, by-passing all the relevant authorities and sending the police out to enforce a directive which was unconstitutional and illegal.

By Tuesday it was apparent that nearly all the private schools across the country, including some of the most prestigious names, had been forcibly closed. School boards met in emergency session, and chairmen and headmasters conferred to consider their response. Bulawayo schools joined together to make an urgent application to the High Court seeking a declaration that the closures were unlawful and an order to re-open pending the determination of the constitutional issues. Schools in and around Harare mounted a similar legal challenge.

I have to admit to a personal interest here, not only as the parent of one of the children now barred access to school but as a member of the board of one of the schools affected. Petra High School (with its sister school Petra Primary) was opened just over ten years ago. It was set up by a group of local churches, including the Methodist Church, to provide a quality, non-elitist education within a specifically Christian ethos. Over the years the Petra Schools acquired a well-deserved reputation academically, on the sports field and as centres of Christian nurture. Just recently it became necessary to introduce a waiting list for prospective students. These schools were run on a strictly non-profit making basis, keeping school fees to a minimum consistent with paying the teachers a salary, below the norm but on which they could still live.

Despite the fact that the provision inserted in the Education Act requiring private schools to seek government approval for fees is itself almost certainly unconstitutional, the Petra Schools adhered to the rules carefully, submitting each proposed fee increase first for the approval of the parent body and then to the Ministry. The fee increases for the first term had in fact been approved in writing by the regional director of education, and the application for the approval of the second term fees was submitted in early April. With inflation running at around 600 per cent it is little wonder that schools are bound to seek significant fee increases term on term. The delay of the ministry in approving such applications can hardly be blamed upon the schools and in the past it was routine to apply for an increase and implement it pending ministry approval. How else indeed could the schools continue, given that some applications dating back months or even years are still awaiting determination ?

Which prompts the question why the sudden and dramatic change of policy – a move which clearly prejudices middle class children most. And one must remember that 80 per cent of students in the private schools are black. The other 20 per cent are composed of the minority white population together with mixed race students and other nationalities. Ironically the children of practically all the ruling elite, including Robert Mugabe and his entire cabinet, attend private schools.

Worse was to follow. With the High Court applications still pending on Wednesday night the police started to visit heads of the various schools and to arrest them along with certain members of their governing boards. The Rector of Peterhouse was one such, as were two members of the school's board who tried to intervene on his behalf. The headmistress of another school in Marondera was also arrested and held overnight as was the board chairman of that school. The

chairman, Dr Kevin Martin, was allowed to carry out an operation in his hospital on Thursday morning on condition that he returned to police custody that afternoon. The head of Falcon College near Bulawayo and the deputy chair of his board were also detained . And this is not all. Fearing imminent arrest many other school heads and board chairmen have gone into hiding.

On Thursday, the police returned in force to some of the schools which were already closed to students, including the Petra Schools, ordering the clerical and administrative staff to vacate the sites forthwith. To give some idea of the chaos spreading through urban centres, a gymnasium in Bulawayo was broken into overnight. On discovering the break-in the following morning the manager called the police to the premises. They said this would not be possible because all available units were busy closing down schools.

A break-through for the schools occurred when a parent body of one of Harare's schools obtained a court order on Thursday, declaring the forced closure unlawful and ordering the school to be re-opened. It is understood however that when advised of this decision the Minister of Education, Aeneas Chigwedere, commented that notwithstanding any court orders all schools would remain closed until the level of their fees complied with the wishes of his Ministry. Effectively the Minister is asserting the right to set the fees for private schools and serving notice that any court orders to the contrary will be ignored. He also indicated that any private school which refuses to fall in line with this unlawful policy will be taken over by the state forthwith.

Such is the situation as I write. The Ministry of Education is in a state of total confusion, police are patrolling the schools to enforce an order which is manifestly unlawful, while others are harassing responsible school heads and members of boards, and over it all there hangs a pall of fear and anger. Who can doubt that all this mayhem is part of a carefully orchestrated campaign designed to undermine the morale of the middle class, to sap their energy, and finally either to drive them out of the country or into cowed submission to the ruling party ? Ethnic cleansing Mugabe style.

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