

# New government must redress wrongs of past 300 years

argues **Cosmos Desmond**

This opinion piece was written by Cosmos Desmond in response to ANC president Nelson Mandela's statement that white farmland would not be touched and that instead an ANC government would use SADF land for redistribution. Since then, the SADF has also responded.

The views expressed in this article are not those of AFRA. We welcome views on the issue of land restoration and redistribution under a new government from our other readers.

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The ANC has already assured animal lovers that no land will be excised from the National Parks to make room for people. Now Mandela has promised white farmers that no land will be taken from them.

On the other hand, the ANC has said, "the redistribution of the land is the absolute imperative in our conditions, the fundamental economic demand. It will have to be done even if it involves some economic cost".

Demand cannot be met without land being taken from whites, since they lay claim to over 80% of all farmland and nearly 90% of potentially arable land. The land owned by such bodies as the SADF, which Mandela says could be made available to blacks, is minimal, when compared to the 83 million hectares "owned" by white farmers.

According to the World Bank report, Options For Land Reform, the total area of unoccupied state land suitable for farming is only 320 000 hectares.

Redistribution of land extends far beyond compensating those forcibly removed by the Nationalist

government. It is a question of redressing wrongs that go back over 300 years.

If only dispossessed people who have a legally recognised title to ownership are to be able to claim land, the proportion of land for african occupation would soar to 14,3% of the country. The addition of available state-owned land would increase this by 0,25%.

Most of the estimated 3,5 million people who were forcibly removed held no legal title to the land. They had already been dispossessed by white conquest and deceit. Their forced removal deprived them of what little hold on the land they had, destroyed their communities, reduced them to utter poverty and condemned many of them to death.

They were, and still are, the real "victims of apartheid" because they had no choice and no way of avoiding their fate. And if "white-owned" farmland is to be protected by a constitutional right to private property, as Mr Mandela has promised, they will remain such.

When landowners were forcibly removed, title deeds counted for nothing. Now, in the "new South Africa", they are sacrosanct.

The reason in both cases is the same: to protect the interests of whites. That is what apartheid was all about. What has changed? The effect will be the same. The only difference is that it will now be down in the name of upholding western, liberal values, rather than of racism.

Discarding the flimsy ideological cloak of racism might at least lay bare the essentially capitalist nature of apartheid, which will persist into the future South Africa and continue to be of great benefit to the elite, which will now include a few more blacks.

The effect of the removals cannot be reversed by the proposed move away from racism. The political and economic causes must also be addressed. This is not the place to do that. But one fundamental point must be stressed: land redistribution cannot be resolved within the framework of a western, liberal understanding of the concept of private ownership of property.

There is a much older, and nobler, tradition which sees land as a resource to be respected and nurtured for the sustenance of all. In african society, land does not belong to people, people belong to the land.

But then there is nothing remotely african about any of the proposals for a "new South Africa". Neither is there very much new. Perhaps it should just be called South.

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Cosmos Desmond is a freelance writer and researcher. During the 1960s and 1970s he did research and writing around forced removals. He worked as a priest until 1973.