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Mugabe's Slow Move Toward Socialism

by Bowden Quinn

SALISBURY, ZIMBABWE -- Two years after Prime Minister Robert Mugabe came to power promising to create a socialist state, radicals here are more displeased with his government's progress than capitalists are.

Mugabe's overwhelming election victory in April 1980 shocked and frightened the conservative white community here. Mugabe, a self-proclaimed Marxist, was head of the largest guerrilla movement fighting for control of what was once white minority-ruled Rhodesia.

His party, ZANU-PF, won 63 percent of the black vote and 57 seats in the 100-member parliament. Mugabe promised to create a socialist, egalitarian and democratic society.

But the major social reforms instituted so far are accepted practice in most Western countries, and even the more radical changes have the support of at least some industrialists.

The most sweeping legislation of the new government has introduced free primary education, free health care for persons earning less than Z\$150 (US\$202) and a 67 percent hike in the minimum wage to \$50 (US\$67) a month.

The government froze consumer prices at the start of the year and at the same time put a lock on salaries of more than \$20,000 (US\$27,000) a year. A thaw in prices is expected before the end of April, and Mugabe has told business leaders he will release the hold on top salaries when it starts to hurt their companies.

A law setting up a government-run Minerals Marketing Corporation that could control all mining exports raised the most protests from local capitalists, but according to Roger Riddell, an economist with the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries, the mining companies have started reconciling themselves to the plan.

The law is broad and the industry's reaction will depend on how much control the government decides to exert. The government has controlled gold sales for years without complaints from Lonrho, the multinational company that owns the gold mines.

Another innovation with a socialist ring to it is the creation of workers' committees to represent labor in all sectors of the economy. Most manufacturers now praise the committees for promoting better employer-employee relations, though farmers and mine owners still haven't gotten used to the idea.

The government has made little entry into the private sector, and fears of nationalization of industry, if any such fears remain, appear groundless.

The state has moved to buy offered shares in companies where it saw further foreign ownership as contrary to the nation's interests.

It has taken over the nation's leading newspapers. Though

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control is lodged in a purportedly autonomous trust, the press faithfully supports government policies. A London-based magazine on Africa accused the two leading papers of tempering public reaction to the crackdown on a black opposition party, ZAPU, with a concerted attack that made the government's action appear less severe than it otherwise would have.

The government also has bought a controlling interest in one of the country's banks, but the private sector still has two-thirds of all assets in the banking industry.

It has large holdings in several manufacturing and mining companies, but has shown no indication that it wants to control any of the sectors of the economy where private enterprise is now dominant. Most of its participation in industry began under Rhodesian rule when the government invested heavily to counteract the stifling effect of international sanctions against the country.

When the white minority government was trying to hold on to power, it claimed Rhodesians were fighting to preserve their free enterprise system against the onslaught of communism, a cry echoed by the South African government today. Yet the Rhodesian government got involved in the economy to an extent that would have been undreamed of in the U.S. even before the advent of Ronald Reagan.

Publicly owned food-processing companies gave government six percent of value added in the manufacturing sector in 1978, the year before the start of the transition to black rule. Government participation in other industries, including steel, pharmaceuticals and car assembly, brought the strictly private sector's share of manufacturing value added down to 85 percent.

Where the Rhodesian government saw the need for state support of a vital industry, such as the creation and later the preservation of steel-making capacity, it didn't hesitate to participate.

The Rhodesian government also set up monopoly corporations to provide necessary services such as national air and rail transportation and the provision of electricity and water. Agricultural marketing boards bought and marketed most farm products at government-set prices.

Stringent government regulations in such areas as price and wage levels, foreign exchange and the transfer of funds for investment and profit repatriation far exceeded government overview in the economies of Western industrialized countries.

Taken in this light, the Mugabe government's socialization of the economy has only been a slight change in degree.

However, in the long term the shift may prove more substantial. A government economic development plan for 1982-85 calls for \$4 billion in investment to be 55 percent public and 45 percent private. This would reverse the investment ratio of 1974-78, when Rhodesian government participation was at its highest.

Government domination of investment is probably inevitable in impoverished countries that seek massive improvements in standards of living. The Rhodesian government largely ignored the black population's need for decent housing, education, health services and basic infrastructure such as electricity, paved roads and clean water.

The Zimbabwean government will probably become more involved in the productive spheres of the economy, especially in energy.

In a February speech to the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church, Mugabe outlined the kind of society he envisions:

"The socialist thrust will...express itself through either the collective modality of cooperatives in agriculture, industry and commerce or through state enterprises and state action as in the case of parastatal bodies, state farms or agro-industrial complexes, as well as in the form of state social services. The ownership or control of the enterprises...will vest in the workers or the peasants, or, especially in regard to crucial or strategic or capital-intensive industries, in the state."

He said he didn't see Zimbabwe achieving this level of socialism within the three years of the economic development plan for three reasons: lack of funds, shortage of management and technical skills and the need for a political education campaign to get the people to accept socialism.

Another reason for the delay may be lack of government direction. The development plan was supposed to run from 1981 to 1984, but the government failed to get it out on time. The government recently has made tardy or last-minute decisions on agricultural prices, rent and price controls and a trade agreement with South Africa, which have brought criticism from whites more for their suddenness than for their substance.

The disruption appears to be in ZANU-PF rather than in the government. Mugabe seems to have firm control of the executive and legislative branches, leading them in a pragmatic rather than an ideological direction.

In his recent cabinet shuffle, besides ousting his potential political rival Joshua Nkomo, he strengthened the power of moderate members and demoted a leading radical.

But Mugabe hasn't shown the same amount of control of the party he nominally heads. ZANU-PF has been without a secretary-general since last year. Dissatisfaction of party members with the development plan is said to be the cause of the delay in its appearance.

Mugabe has repeatedly said he wants a one-party state. The creation of a new ministry of legal and parliamentary affairs is designed to bring this about, but if he can't control the party he has now, broadening it probably won't help him run the country more efficiently.

In his speech to the Justice and Peace Commission, Mugabe said his party believes in "scientific socialism based on Marxist-Leninist principles". This meant, he said, that "socialism is not a fortuitous process...but a systematic doctrine following a given pattern in the course of which serious contradictions are corrected and socialist or people-oriented goals are fulfilled."

Despite the totalitarian sound of this, he has repeatedly said that the move to socialism will be voluntary. One indication that he means it has come from the land resettlement program that gives former white-owned land to black peasants. The government wants the peasants to form cooperative or communal farms, but most of them have opted for individual tenure.

So far, better than 90 percent of the 10,000 resettled families are individual plotters, and government planners now say they expect this percentage to be maintained through the three-year plan period.

On the other hand, when bus drivers struck for higher pay last month, the government moved swiftly to quash the action, firing all of the strikers and throwing hundreds of their leaders in jail. For a supposedly people-oriented government, whose party election manifesto promised the "freedom of...demonstration and strike action", the response seemed severe and undemocratic.

Mugabe is said to favor the Yugoslavian model of socialism. While this model may be less repressive than some other brands of socialism in the East, the biggest difference between eastern and western socialism is that in the West the people have a chance to modify or reverse their government's decisions through the ballot box.

No one-party state, no matter how democratic it claims to be, has allowed voters to question basic government policies. Mugabe's moves on the political front may be a better indicator than those on the economic front of the pace and direction socialism will take in Zimbabwe.

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