This is a story about the deepening of hardship and hunger, which creates impetus for the growth of landless people’s movements and drives land reform from below. A countrywide campaign of land invasion and occupation moves the land reform agenda in a populist direction and destabilizes the political landscape. Ultimately the Constitution is amended to allow for the confiscation of land without compensation, which has a major impact on investment and commercial farming.

“IZWE LETHU – IT’S OUR LAND, TAKE IT BACK”

It is 2016 and South African society is politically volatile. Racial inequality is rife with people living in vastly different social and economic conditions. The majority experience poverty and insecure employment or unemployment, especially the youth who face dismal low prospects owing to their poor education. In contrast, the growing middle class and the wealthy maintain their standard of living.

The economy is growing at a sluggish 1 per cent, well below the 5 per cent required to address the 25 per cent unemployment rate. Low growth is aggravated by the severe drought gripping most northern and eastern parts of the country. Falling tax revenues threaten public spending on state programmes such as education and health. The social grant system, the main safety net for the poor, is under strain.

There is much debate about the centrality of land reform in addressing inequality, but few meaningful policies are in place. It is uncertain how land reform will be funded amidst competing priorities. As people seek better livelihoods, the idea of land occupation is spreading: ‘#LandMustFall’ is already trending. Political parties that support land redistribution without compensation latch on to this groundswell and some young people invade properties in rural and peri-urban areas. They are forcefully evicted through the courts.

Meanwhile, rising food prices dominate the media headlines and conversations. Urban and rural poor, already vulnerable, are facing serious hunger, as a number of country-wide studies indicate. The government criticises commercial farmers for profiting from high food prices. Commercial farmers accuse the retail sector for squeezing them and hiking the price of food after it leaves the farm gate. The retail sector blames the state for trying to interfere. Many simply blame climate change.

2019-2029

The 2019 national elections take place in the midst of a national debate about food security. However, few political parties understand the root causes of food insecurity, nor do they propose viable solutions. The ruling party holds on to power; but achieves an outright majority in only six of the nine provinces. South Africa has a new president.
In 2020, as South Africa commemorates 30 years since the release of Nelson Mandela, there is loud dismay at the slow pace of land reform. Activists cite the latest research showing that patterns of land ownership have changed little between 1990 and 2020 and that a small number of white farmers dominate food production. Land policy is failing to place productive and well-located land into waiting hands, partly because the budget for land reform remains at less than 1 per cent of the total national budget. The price of commercial farmland is soaring, due mainly to the demand for food production. There is a drive towards self-sufficiency, supported by mobilisation through ‘#FarmersMustFall’ and ‘#WeCanFeedOurselves’.

As the economy continues to struggle, unemployment rises to 40 per cent of the working age population, its highest level since 1994. This continues to put pressure on public spending. The sense of crisis is deepened by a government announcement that social grants will not be increased because this is unaffordable.

Many different groups of people want land for a wide variety of purposes: market-oriented black farmers are keen to enlarge the scale of their enterprises, former farm workers want small plots to grow food for themselves, and people in certain communal areas want land in the face of population pressure. Some have either had their restitution claims rejected or are still awaiting the outcome of their claims. With an eye on productive neighbouring farms, they dismiss government’s promises to improve livelihoods in the former homelands as ‘an attempt to keep us quiet. We want to go to where we were before. That is our land.”

The drive to act is fuelled by youthful agitators who are social media savvy and take advantage of free internet access being rolled out by leading technology companies. Although there is no ‘landless people’s movement’ as such, they play a strong role in connecting what might otherwise appear to be random acts across the countryside. Under the banner of “Land! Food! Jobs!” the invasion and occupation of land in urban and peri-urban areas spills into the countryside. These local spontaneous actions snowball into a concerted land invasion campaign marked by property damage and violent confrontation with security forces.

Some of the occupiers are land claimants; others cannot lay claims on the basis of historical dispossession, but believe they deserve to own their own land. Some former farm workers and migrants from rural areas who occupy peri-urban farms see small-scale farming as a strategy that can supplement urban employment. Empty plots of private land within the cities are occupied by the urban poor.

In the face of growing hunger, some occupiers target unused farmland and immediately start preparing the soil for planting as they take on the role of ‘guerrilla farmers’. Existing production systems are severely disrupted. Spade in one hand and mobile device in the other, a young guerrilla farmer boasts that she has a Twitter following of 40,000 and links the struggle for land with other struggles such as quality education and jobs.

The state clamps down on occupiers in order to protect property rights. The world sees images of police and private security personnel breaking down shacks, destroying
vegetable gardens and beating people. Observers suggest that these images are reminiscent of apartheid era policing and the Marikana massacre. Invaders are subject to harassment and the clampdown extends to residents of nearby informal settlements who fall victim to security force harassment and thieves alike. Despite widespread denunciation by politicians, business media and international investors, sporadic occupations continue across the country.

2022

The fact that people have taken land reform into their own hands triggers soul searching within the ruling party. At its 2022 national policy conference, many delegates invoke the land clause of the Freedom Charter, which seems as relevant now as it ever was. Nelson Mandela’s conciliatory strategies are denounced and sympathy is voiced with Robert Mugabe’s legalisation of land occupations in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s. Reviewing post-colonial struggles across Africa, there is growing consensus in the ruling party that inherited colonial structures must be ‘forcibly destroyed’ in order to enable transformation. Proponents of this view cite several examples across the continent where the fruits of such actions are now starting to be realised, including the agricultural sector in Zimbabwe.

The stage is set for a dramatic reconfiguration of the constitutional framework for land reform. The ruling party and smaller parties to the left harness their collective power in an extraordinary sitting of Parliament to amend the property clause in the Constitution and vote to legalise the confiscation of land without compensation. From now on only compensation for improvements on the farms will be paid. The parliamentary debate also leads to a decision to scrap targets originating from the 2013 National Development Plan (NDP), on the basis that these pursued a ‘neo-liberal agenda’. A new redistribution target of 80 per cent of commercial farmland within five years is adopted.

The next day, a newspaper opinion piece suggests that the constitutional amendment has allowed the state to bypass the onerous and unaffordable trajectory of land reform that it was following, and avoid anarchy.

The business community in South Africa is in uproar. There is a further devaluation of an already weak rand. Foreign direct investment in South Africa plunges. Rating agencies demote the country’s bonds to junk status and capital flight intensifies.

Large commercial farmers attempt to sue the state in a series of high profile court cases. There is a rise in violent crime including farm killings of both white and black commercial farmers. Many farmers begin to emigrate to countries north of the Limpopo River. They take with them skills and capital to set up operations in countries that create more favourable and secure environments in which to live and work. Leaders of several African countries indicate that they can accommodate at least some of the farmers.

In the midst of an economic meltdown, the government initiates negotiations with its BRICS counterparts to seek alternative sources of investment in agriculture. There is talk of a fundamentally revised tenure for land reform.

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system based on state leasehold and an alternative land registration process. Rumour has it that these negotiations started a long time ago and that land confiscation was a temporary and convenient move, riding on the back of an inevitable increase in land invasions.

The landless people’s movement starts organising around the notion of food sovereignty. The Latin American food sovereignty movement Via Campesina and other global peasant movements begin to support radical agrarian reform and small-scale, self-organised farming in South Africa.

In the meantime, overall levels of agricultural production have plummeted and agriculture infrastructure has all but collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of farm occupiers as well as many of the urban poor do not know where their next meal will come from. The urgent need to rejuvenate national food production is widely acknowledged within the movement and more broadly.

On the swaths of land that have been forcibly occupied, the situation is mixed. On some farms production is virtually at subsistence levels, whereas on others a sizeable surplus is marketed. On a few farms the productivity of small-scale producers is as high as that of large-scale commercial producers. Their potential is clear, but there is a long way to go before the agricultural sector achieves the levels of output seen in the mid-2000s. Overall there is increasing reliance on expensive imported food.

The swelling of the landless people’s movement triggers changes in the country’s political landscape. In the 2029 elections, left-wing opposition parties claim credit for transforming the system of land ownership and effect a shock defeat of the ruling party. South Africa has new political leadership for the first time since the advent of democracy in 1994.
The situation in 2030

The land reform system is dramatically altered from what it was in 2016. The new government has to confront a radically changed agrarian structure, with 60 per cent of commercial farmland now in the hands of black South Africans.

The country lacks a clear constitutional framework for dealing with land. There is an urgent need for new agriculture and land reform policies, but the political leadership comprises members of a variety of left-wing groupings with diverse views on land and agriculture that have to be reconciled.

The people have taken land reform into their own hands and have made a new beginning, but the future is uncertain.

The landless people’s movement starts organising around the notion of food sovereignty.