

Richard Bourne (2011), *Catastrophe: What Went Wrong in Zimbabwe*, London: Zed Books, ISBN 978-1-84813-521-5, 302 pp.

Sixty-one per cent for Robert Mugabe and a two-thirds majority in parliament for his Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF): It is highly doubtful that the elections of 31 July 2013 were as “free, honest and credible” as the African Union claims. High-ranking members of Zimbabwe’s security apparatus had announced earlier that they would only recognise a president with liberation war credentials, effectively ruling out the main opposition candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai. Unlike in 2008, there was no organised violence against the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 2013. But if one trusts the evidence presented by neutral observers, manipulations and fraud occurred on a massive scale.

When Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, no one thought that the country would be on the verge of an economic and political cataclysm thirty years later. On the contrary, Zimbabwe was seen as an emerging power of the Global South, one that had played a leading role in the struggle against the South African Apartheid regime. In *Catastrophe: What Went Wrong in Zimbabwe*, Richard Bourne, a former journalist and current research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, provides the background information that is necessary to understand the instability and endemic violence that has marked Zimbabwe for more than a decade.

In the first three chapters, Bourne presents historical events and developments that have shaped ZANU-PF’s attitude toward the domestic opposition, white Zimbabweans and the West. He describes the expansion of Cecil Rhodes’ Chartered Company, and the brutal repression of local uprisings by the Ndebele and Shona.

The most engaging parts of the book deal with the 1980s and 1990s. The fourth chapter reveals the structural roots of Zimbabwe’s decline. The fifth chapter tells how these turned from latent into acute problems, whose full impact in the first decade of the 2000s is described in the sixth chapter. Under settler-colonial rule, the distribution of farmland was extremely unequal; the Lancaster House Agreement, which paved the way for independence, did not resolve this crucial issue. After independence, black urban dwellers concentrated in townships, rebranded “high-density suburbs”. Zimbabwe’s economy created jobs for less than 10 per cent of young Zimbabweans who had finished their secondary education. In 1989, 62.5 per cent of the senior managers of private companies were still white. Misinformation spread by the South Africans caused the already unstable coalition government of Zimbabwe’s two liberation movements to split, contributing to the Gukurahundi massacres, which cost the lives of at least 10,000 people in the

first half of the 1980s. Several factors aggravated Zimbabwe's situation in the 1990s: The World Bank's structural adjustment programmes stripped social services and welfare. State employees began to strike frequently, and a trade union movement arose in opposition to ZANU-PF. Compensation funds set aside for war veterans were raided by Mugabe's entourage. After the collapse of the South African Apartheid regime, Zimbabwe faced strong competition from South African enterprises. Zimbabwe's military intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1998 turned out to be a far too expensive venture. In the first decade of the 2000s, the Mugabe government sought to gain popular support by accelerating land reform. Violence against white commercial farmers and black farm workers became systematic. Food security became dependent upon international donations. Hyperinflation and increased emigration indicated an economic collapse.

In the seventh chapter, Bourne presents the numerous steps taken by the Mugabe government in order to weaken the MDC, including systematic election fraud, the torture and murder of opposition supporters, and the destruction of 650,000 to 700,000 homes of urban dwellers suspected of supporting the MDC. He shows how the education and health system collapsed around 2008, and that high-ranking ZANU-PF politicians were the ones to benefit most from the fast-track land reform. Bourne convincingly explains how the political influence of the military – whose top generals fear the prosecution that would likely accompany a regime change – has grown, and he goes on to elucidate the reasons for the stabilisation that began with the coalition government of the MDC and ZANU-PF: the former introduced sound economic policies and the latter consolidated its partnership with China. The eighth chapter provides a summary of the previously addressed factors that account for Zimbabwe's decline. In addition to the ones mentioned above, Bourne argues that ZANU-PF sees itself in an ongoing independence war, that Thabo Mbeki's quiet diplomacy failed and that Western sanctions are ill conceived. In this way, he is able to show that Mugabe's character, his affinity toward violence and his averseness to compromise, as well as devastating decisions taken individually by him, are only some amongst many causes of Zimbabwe's decline.

One of the strengths of *Catastrophe* is that it provides a largely neutral picture of a highly politicised issue. Bourne distances himself from the topic of his book more than, for example, Philip Barclay does in his *Zimbabwe: Years of Hope and Despair*. Bourne's lines of reasoning – in particular, his tracing of the roots of Zimbabwe's decline back to the 1980s – concur with other key publications, such as Carolyn Jenkins and John Knight's *The Economic Decline of Zimbabwe: Neither Growth Nor Equity*. Unfortunately, *Catastrophe* lacks analytical depth. There is no theory or conceptual framework to tie

the empirical information together. This would not be a major problem for a book written as an historical and political overview, but Bourne fails to neatly structure the factors summarised above. The eighth chapter, which is supposed to bring together the causal factors analysed earlier in the book, feels extraneous: Bourne does not elaborate on the relevance of the numerous causes of Zimbabwe's decline or their relationship to each other; rather, he describes them again, shifting almost randomly from one to another. The first three chapters in particular contain much information that does not relate to the book's guiding question. The anti-Marxist attitude of the author, including his reliance on the schema of ZANU-PF's Maoist origin and Mugabe's alleged Leninist convictions, appears outdated two decades after the end of the Cold War. *Catastrophe* nevertheless offers a comprehensive and, thanks to the author's verbal skills, very readable account of Zimbabwe's history from the times of Cecil Rhodes to the coalition government of the MDC and ZANU-PF.

- Sören Scholvin