

Book Review – Understanding Zimbabwe: From Liberation to Authoritarianism by Sara Rich Dorman

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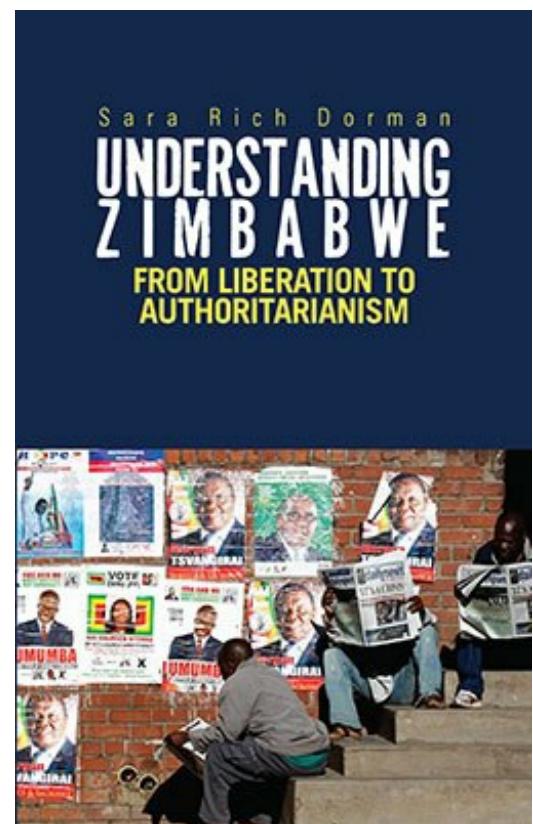
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Sara Rich Dorman has produced a remarkably original, expansive and analytical text. Understanding Zimbabwe: From Liberation to Authoritarianism is also an extremely timely contribution given the recent resurgence of civic activism in the country. In highlighting contestation between society and the state, this book will surely launch new debates both in Zimbabwe and among its scholars, says Nick Branson.

There is no shortage of academic books on Zimbabwe. Few, however, resemble Sara Rich Dorman's monograph. The author focuses on the intricacies of state-society relations, rather than the coercive tendencies of President Robert Mugabe, and his party, ZANU-PF. Her depiction of urban mobilisation also provides a welcome antidote to a literature dominated by accounts of land reform and the agrarian economy.

Understanding Zimbabwe offers unique insights into the operation of "counter-hegemonic" forces – primarily the churches, civil society, and opposition parties. Dorman analyses how these groups have interacted with the regime since independence. She tackles big issues such as citizenship, political identities, and the construction of the Zimbabwean nation. Corruption scandals and electoral chicanery, often invoked as evidence of increasingly prebendal and autocratic governance, are instead framed as catalysing popular mobilisation. Attempts to build an inclusive state are presented as prompting Zimbabwe's unravelling, rather than it being predetermined.

This is a significant departure from the literature, much of which stresses the legacy of violent struggle, and the coercive capacity of the Rhodesian state apparatus, inherited by ZANU-PF in 1980. In her chapter on the politics of liberation, Dorman acknowledges that "nationalist movements generate particular kinds of discourses and norms of political behaviour"; however, she downplays their explanatory power. Notably absent is reference to the liberation movements' pursuit of external recognition and resources, the legacy of the relationships forged during the struggle, or of the tensions that persist with Western states.



Analysing "societal demobilisation" post-1980, the author reveals how a "ruling nationalist coalition" was assembled through a confluence of common interests and ideology, backstopped by the threat of coercion. Suggesting parallels between 1987 and 2008, she argues that moves to "foster national unity and delegitimise autonomous political action" came to normalise the formation of inclusive coalitions. Early decisions on land also came to determine later practice. Dorman argues that initially land reform "was not designed to provide restitution to those who had lost land, nor was it redistributive. It followed a particular developmental logic." She however avoids debating the temporary restrictions inserted in the Lancaster House constitution and the limited funding made available for land acquisition.

Examining the period 1987-1997, Dorman points to the exhaustion of resources – fiscal and ideological – as undermining the stability of the ruling coalition. She argues that the privileging of certain groups over others precipitated "a dramatic polarisation of society". The author provides fascinating accounts of ZANU-PF MPs attempting to assert their independence in the legislature and to make parliament a more effective, autonomous and open institution. She surveys the dubious contests organised by the Registrar General, Elections

Directorate, and Elections Supervisory Commission, and documents successful legal challenges. Remarkably, she explains that until the early 1990s, “only urban residents who were property-owners (and who likewise tended to be male) could vote in local elections.” The extension of the franchise prompted the emergence of residents’ associations and enabled the nascent opposition to win ground in high-density suburbs.

In her chapter on the tumultuous period of 1998-2000, Dorman focuses on the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), which laid the ground for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Constitutional debate is portrayed as capturing popular attention in an “unexpected way” and provoking “an entirely unintended public process of deliberation.” This spurred an “unanticipated” debate in which civil society’s influence was “unprecedented.” The government’s decision to launch its own constitutional review process forced NGOs to publicly align with either the NCA or the state, setting the tone for later periods. Peculiarly, the author skims over the regime’s decision to send troops to DR Congo in 1998. She emphasises “Mugabe’s concern to present himself as the leader” of SADC and “substantial outstanding loans” owed by the Kabila regime; yet, no mention is made of the diamonds which came to determine the troops’ location or the duration of their mission.



Harare, Zimbabwe
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Dorman then examines how the regime re-established itself following a sustained economic and political crisis, and its bid to mobilise erstwhile supporters through material rewards – land, contracts, and employment. Two groups excluded from this renewed pact were farm owners (predominantly white) and labourers (many with roots in Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia). Dorman states that “30,000 farm-workers were estimated to have been displaced by August 2000” and that 20 per cent of the land reallocated went to “war veterans”. Rather than portraying the land invasions as being spontaneous or anarchic, she argues that “elite intellectual forces masterminded much of [the violence] and state institutions implemented it.”

Her account of the government of national unity (GNU), formed following the 2008 elections, is remarkably short. Dorman does not engage with how the global political agreement (GPA) was negotiated, stressing instead the manner in which it “created space in which the dominant party was able to re-assert itself.” Anyone who has discussed this period with Zimbabweans will be struck by the absence of a regional dimension. Thabo Mbeki, tasked with mediating between the parties until he was “recalled” as South Africa’s president, is mentioned only in passing. Instead, the reader is guided through the predicaments facing local NGOs, increasingly detached from the MDC and unsure how to engage with the regime.

Attendant with this perspective is her critique of the Constitutional Parliamentary Committee (COPAC), which “took over the political stage” and “catalysed divisions within civil society.” No mention is made of the popular

consultation which launched the COPAC process, presumably because it sidelined NGOs. A more charitable observer might present the successful negotiation and popular endorsement of a new constitution as the GNU's singular achievement, or at least as the MDC completing a process initiated by the NCA.

Given the author's interest in how NGOs and opposition parties "position themselves and legitimate their role," it is curious that the text never explicitly questions the neutrality of these actors. Regardless of the context, one cannot assume that the agenda advanced by organised civil society is an accurate representation of common interests. Rather, one might view the failure of the GNU and/or NGOs to meet popular aspirations as driving the (re-)politicisation of the churches, and most recently the emergence of a new civic activism in the form of [#ThisFlag](#).

Regardless of these minor points, *Understanding Zimbabwe* is a remarkably original, expansive and analytical text. The author is to be commended for presenting issues thematically, rather than falling into a narrative trap. The signposting could have been improved, but chapters are extensively referenced and the volume contains a comprehensive bibliography. Dorman also points to lacunae in the literature ("the urban experience of the war years... missing from the historical record") and nascent archival research. In highlighting contestation between civil society and the state, this book will surely launch new debates both in Zimbabwe and among its scholars.

[Understanding Zimbabwe: From Liberation to Authoritarianism. Sara Rich Dorman. Hurst Publishers. 2016.](#)

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