

Farm Attacks or ‘White Genocide’? Interrogating the unresolved land question in South Africa

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Abstract

Apartheid South Africa was noted for historical land dispossession, domination by the white group and disempowerment of the black population. Post-apartheid South Africa has struggled to address the land-related structural and physical violence in the country. Despite the implementation of land reform programmes since 1994, land inequality and impoverishment of black South Africans persist. The government’s failure to use land reform as instrument for socio-economic empowerment has engendered frustrations among those craving for land reform. This has found expression in farm attacks and murders. The subsequent instability in the farming sector and the categorisation of farm attacks as ‘white genocide’ have demonstrated the acute dynamics of the conversation, and the urgency to combat farm attacks, ameliorate the racial discourse and resolve the land question. Through unstructured interviews with key actors involved in the land and farm conflicts, the article engages the land attacks and ‘white genocide’ discourses and provides a more nuanced understanding of conflict recurrence in South Africa. It is claimed that unequal access to land and other intrinsic

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factors account for the destruction of lives and property on farms. It is concluded that, while white farmers are the major victims of farm murder, a conceptualisation of such as 'white genocide' does not adequately characterise the reality. One step among others would be for the government to inaugurate a 'Panel of the Wise', comprised of well-respected elders from all races, who would contribute to land reform and conflict-resolution strategies for the farms and agricultural sector.

Keywords: Farm attacks, farm dwellers, inequality, land reform, South Africa, white genocide

Introduction

Land is a decisive factor in the South African socio-political and economic spheres. It is 'a signifier of both material resources and collective identity (family, clan, community and nation), and thus a tenaciously unsettled matter of concern in contemporary South Africa' (Walker 2017:22). The land and agricultural sectors are historically divided between the white group (who are predominantly owners of farms and land) and black South Africans (who are farm labourers and mostly landless). During colonialism and apartheid, Africans were disposed of land and restricted to the former 'homelands' and Bantustans, which were unliveable, and tagged an 'ecological Hiroshima' (Resane 2018:3).

After apartheid, the minority white population owned 87 per cent of the entire land (Walker and Dubb 2013). In 1996, South Africa was home to 40.5 million people (Black – 76,7 per cent, White – 10,9 per cent, Coloured – 8,9 per cent, Indian/Asian – 2,6 per cent, and Unspecified/other – 0,9 per cent) (Lahiff 2007:3). By 2012, the white group owned 67 per cent of the land, black communal areas comprised 15 per cent, the state owned 10 per cent, while 8 per cent was used for other purposes, including urban areas (Walker and Dubb 2013). Land inequality during apartheid and at present has engendered 'systematic denudation and impoverishment of African people' (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2011:3). Bob (2010:50) maintains that unequal access to social resources results from socio-economic and political processes that concentrate resources in the hands of the minority.

Throughout Africa, colonial settlers gained control over land through 'agreements', conquests and appropriation. In South Africa, the minority

white group gained direct control of land through conquest (African Union Commission-Economic Commission for Africa-African Development Bank [AUC-ECA-AfDB] Consortium 2010:6), and this was consolidated by the Apartheid regime. While the post-Apartheid state has made efforts to redistribute land through a reform scheme, black South Africans are still relegated to the background in terms of land ownership and access, particularly in the farming sector. As noted by Obeng-Odoom (2012:165), 'land tenure in the Apartheid days was marked by segregationist policies which concentrated land in the hands of White people'. South Africa's settler-colonial experience was characterised by violence and domination, inequality and land dispossession. Thus, the society is driven by guilt, historical injustice and contemporary inequality, fear, anger and disillusionment (Thiven 2015). Thiven's conception of the land atmosphere forms the foundation upon which farm conflicts should be approached.

Building upon the foundations of the 1997 White Paper on Land Reform, the 2011 Green Paper on Land Reform notes that one of the central motivations against colonialism and apartheid was the repossession of land lost through force or deceit (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2011:2). Thus, 'the long-term goal of land reform is social cohesion and development. In this text, the concept "development" refers to shared growth and prosperity, relative income equality, full employment and cultural progress' (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2011:4).

The reform scheme was founded on the model of willing (black) buyers and willing (white) sellers, facilitated and sponsored by the state (James 2007). On the other hand, the African Union's template for equitable land reform on the continent recommends the provision of adequate measures. This was to ensure that increased market-driven policies of land development would favour vulnerable groups, particularly women who are mostly involved in farm labour, and eradicate land inequality through costly land rights transfer (AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium 2010). South Africa has failed to achieve this. Therefore, the disappointed expectations of both farmers, farm dwellers and workers, as well as other intrinsic realities, find expression in farm attacks and murders. The attempt to accelerate the pace of the reform scheme through land expropriation without compensation (LEWC) has not doused the volatility of the farming environment.

Farm attacks and murders have become a sensitive issue in contemporary South Africa. This exposes the government's failure to use land reform as an instrument of socio-political stability. The instability in the farming sector and the recent categorisation of farm attacks as 'white genocide' have shown the dynamics of the conversation and the urgency to combat farm attacks and ameliorate racial discourse in the country. What accounts for attacks/farm murders? Are farm attack/murders racial in nature? While farm attacks/murders have dominated public discourse and media, the violent character of the state and society can be located in its history. Justifications of violence by the South African police, for example, would often offer the explanation that 'actions which were violent crimes were often seen and justified by their perpetrators as a legitimate defense against political opponents and enemies' (South African Police Service [SAPS] 2003:326).

The issues around farm attacks are 'nuanced and complex' and a holistic approach is required to end the farm siege (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC] 2014:12). SAHRC (2014:12) found that farm attacks thrive due to the existence of a 'criminal environment of impunity' consolidated by ineffective security arrangements. Furthermore, farm owners and farm dwellers are the victims of farm attacks, which constitutes a human rights violation of both parties. While the ruling party has been accused of exaggerating land hunger (Jeffrey 2015), the historical land inequality persists. The quest to attain land and agrarian reform through empowering the local population faces jeopardy because of the prevalence of farm conflict and the associated consequences.

This article engages literature on the land attacks and 'white genocide' debate in order to provide more nuanced understanding of the recurring land and farm conflicts in South Africa, and offers policy options. The study combines a review of literature with reflections from a field-study carried out through unstructured interviews to elicit the standpoints of key actors in the land and agricultural sectors in KwaZulu-Natal and Northern Cape, South Africa (August 2017–May 2020). The following categories of participants were interviewed under the principle of anonymity: 2 academics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2 Directors of government agencies involved in land reform, 4 farm dwellers (2 each from the provinces), 4 farm owners (2 each from the provinces), and 4 land activists (2 each from the provinces).

Land and the reform scheme

In pre-colonial Africa, there was a communal pattern of land ownership, but contemporary African societies have been conditioned to relate to land at an individual level due to their exposures to the colonial value system. Previously, land was a social property, which engendered the social stabilisation of African communities. Resane (2018:3) maintains, 'the farming activities that included tilling the land and livestock-keeping were the centrifugal (sic) force that cemented the community or tribe. The tribal livelihood and survival depended on farming'. Foreign domination distorted Africans' relation to land through its commercialisation. It created two opposing groups in the land and farming industry: owners of land or farms who are predominantly from the white group, and the landless or farm workers who are black Africans.

Land connotes different meanings, but its importance to the livelihood of the rural population is of universal understanding. Fanon holds, 'for a colonised people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land that will bring them bread and, above all, dignity' (cited in Pretorius 2014:29). For Pretorius (2014:28), 'land symbolises the ego. If we understand ego as the self, the I, or, consciousness, then land represents political struggle, a struggle for identity, recognition, civilization'. Indeed, 'Africans have an emotional attachment to the land. Land is their treasured possession' (Resane 2018:6). The government reiterated land's importance thus; 'If you denied African people access to, and, or, ownership of, land, as has been the case under both colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa, you have effectively destroyed the very foundation of their existence' (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2011:2). Therefore, land is germane to socio-economic development.

This understanding accounts for the state's input in the reallocation of land in response to the developmental need of various states in Africa. The African Union policy framework locates land within the African development discourse and enjoins 'African governments to pay attention to the status of land administration systems, including land rights delivery systems and land governance structures and institutions, and to ensure adequate budgetary provision to land policy development and implementation' (AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium 2010:xi). Decisions on land often affect agricultural productivity.

In 2017, agriculture's contribution to the South African GDP was 2.4 per cent. The estimate for agriculture production for 2017 stood at 62.9 million tons compared to the 50.8 million tons recorded in 2016 (South African Government 2019a). Agriculture remains one of the main sources of employment for many black South Africans and, potentially, the major generator of economic growth and rural development (Resane 2018). Historically, however, 'farming has always been politicized. The politics of land in South Africa are so intertwined with farming or agriculture' (Resane 2018:3). This politicisation has aggravated the farm conflict, which has in turn curtailed the maximisation of the prospects of agriculture in the country.

The South African National Development Plan (NDP), published in 2012, was a broad vision for combating the structural violence that characterised the country's landscape: it called for elimination of poverty and reduction of inequality by 2030 (South African Government 2019b). Through NDP, the government reiterated its decision to respond appropriately to the widely differing needs and aspirations of people for land, in both urban and rural areas, in a manner that is both equitable and affordable, and at the same time contributes to poverty alleviation and national economic growth (Department of Land Affairs 1997:10). Furthermore, the policy paper aimed to 'extend security of tenure to the millions of people who live in insecure arrangements on land belonging to other people, especially in the predominantly white farming areas' (Department of Land Affairs 1997:11).

While land reform was implemented by many African states, the case of South Africa was peculiar. The reform programme was a reaction to the 1913 (June 19) Natives Land Act that saw thousands of black families forcibly removed from their land by the government at the time. The Act prevented black persons from buying or occupying land, restricted their land ownership to 7 per cent, and later 13 per cent through the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act of South Africa. The apartheid government relocated black people to poorly-planned homelands. Land reform became the instrument for addressing the historical land dispossessions and land-related inequality that had threatened economic development, racial harmony, and socio-political stability. Despite the optimism of those agitating for land reform that occasioned this scheme, the reform exercise has been very slow, ineffective and failed to redress land inequality.

Obeng-Odoom (2012:165) asserts, ‘overall, the land reforms in South Africa have not been as effective as promised. Land tenure in South Africa remains insecure and land-based inequality is prevalent’. Indeed, ‘current policy frameworks are muddled and the strategic thrust of the programme is unclear, partly because it is not seen as contributing to a wider process of agrarian reform. Little support for black smallholder farmers is offered’ (Cousins n.d.:1). For example, only 11.1 per cent of the households involved in agriculture reported getting agriculture-related support from the government. Nationally, slightly more than 2.2 per cent of the households reported to have received training and 7.0 per cent received dipping livestock vaccination services (South African Government 2019a).

Commenting on transferred land, many of the new beneficiaries opted to farm directly on the land at individual or group levels, while in other cases, lack of capital and other supporting systems (required for both small-scale and commercial farming) has forced new owners to lease the land back to the white (Hall 2004). In 2013, only about 8 per cent of the 76 000 successful land claimants had opted to have their land restored to them. The others, constituting about 71 000 (92 per cent), chose cash instead of getting trapped in farming without the required institutional support system (Akinola 2018). Christo van der Rhee, the leader of the Afrikaans Trade Institute (AHi, since 2017 the Small Business Institute) maintains, ‘existing farmers are ideally positioned to expand the value chain for agricultural products, but they are confronted by contradictory statements about land policies, unsafe circumstances, crime and increasing input costs which discourage them even more’ (Smith 2015). According to Jeffrey (2015), between 73 per cent and 90 per cent of land reform projects have failed to yield the desired results. It has left beneficiaries with neither food to sell nor employment to provide them with means of livelihood.

The reform agenda, anchored on restitution, redistribution and tenure security, was implemented through the ‘willing seller, willing buyer’ model. This was an element of the liberalisation of the country’s economy. Under the market-led approach to land reform, the state provides the funding for the purchase of land and related infrastructures, which has become a big logistical and financial challenge. Hall (2004:219) further comments on the problematic: ‘while adopting ambitious policy and targets, we have a shrinking state with inadequate institutional and

financial resources'. The willing seller, willing buyer was too costly for the government and the absence of effective institutions to manage it accounted for land policy struggle.

Data on the performances of land redistributed are not that reliable due to the difficulty in ascertaining farms privately acquired and those acquired through the government reform scheme. However, the government had claimed that 90% (but according to other empirical evidence only about 50%) of the land redistribution projects have somehow improved the livelihoods of beneficiaries (Cousins 2018). Indeed, many of the new beneficiaries of farmland have no interest in farming, while others lack institutional support such as infrastructure, skills acquisition programmes, and capital or adequate financial resources. Indeed, the black poor have no resources to purchase land. To complicate this, the price of land has continued to rise since 1999, while a section of the land acquired by the state is yet to be redistributed (Kepe and Hall 2018:83).

Furthermore, the state-sponsored approach protects the white commercial farmers and allows for maximisation of profits by land owners and other private groups that made land available for sale (Obeng-Odoom 2012:165). Overall, policy inconsistency has trailed the reform scheme, which has negatively affected agricultural buoyancy. For instance, the African National Congress (ANC) has proposed 12 000 hectares as the maximum size of land (land cap) that farmers may own and that foreigners would be denied the opportunity to own land (Akinola 2018; Jeffrey 2015; Smith 2015). This has reduced the motivation to invest in the sector.

Actors on the farm: Interests and reality

The farming community is comprised of many actors, categorised under the following groupings: farm owners, dwellers, workers, and labour tenants. The government, which is also an actor, absorbs pressures from the other actors for the attainment of their respective interests. A pro-white organisation, AfriForum, has accused the government of complicity with groups carrying out farm attacks. The organisation enjoins the government to be more proactive due to the negative effects of farm attacks on the farming communities, especially on farmers and farm labourers, who stand a greater risk of losses in the event of farm sale or farm unproductivity (AfriForum 2015).

Farm owners

Farm owners or farmers are predominantly made up of the white group who, in most cases, inherited the farms from their families. A prevailing narrative is that in most cases, these lands and farms had been forcefully taken from black South Africans during colonialism and apartheid. It may be said, therefore, that few white farmers had genuinely bought the lands, particularly in post-Apartheid South Africa. While the white group are generally the farm owners, a report establishes that since 1994, most of the black Ministers or their families owned between two and five big farms each (KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council 2009:3). This fact has received sparse attention in scholarship and public discourses.

Generally, white farmers are the victims of attacks and murders and have also experienced vandalism of their properties (some of which were not farm-related property). Many of these acts of vandalism are usually not reported to the police. The farmers have consistently faulted government policy on land, which they believe favours the blacks and is antithetical to food security and agricultural productivity.

The farmers believe that the government lacks the capacity to successfully drive the land reform process. The government lacks transparency in the registration of land claims and the officials of key agencies involved with land and agriculture, such as the Departments of Land Affairs and the Land Claims Commission, are more favourably disposed towards land claimants and farm workers. Furthermore, government has failed to compensate the farmers for improvements made on the farms after a claim has been launched. Indeed, registered land claims on a farm disqualify the farmer from obtaining bank loans, thereby curtailing productivity and farm viability. This was also identified as part of the reasons for the declining employment opportunities in farms.

Farmers have also complained about how they have been frustrated and forced out of the farming industry due to uncertain land policies and failed government promises, thereby jeopardising food security and market buoyancy. Therefore, some farmers show hostility toward the government and its agencies but are more receptive to the private sector. Few have shown willingness to share their farming skills with beneficiaries through mentorship programmes. The farmers have also complained of the unwillingness of some of the targeted populations to partake in such training or mentorship programmes. A farmer in Northern Cape noted

that, 'the present young South Africans are not willing to become farm owners. They are not interested in farming. They believe it is not as lucrative as other menial jobs'.

Farm dwellers

Farm dwellers, otherwise called farm occupiers, are made up predominantly of black South Africans, most of whom had been born and bred on the farm and regarded the farm as their home (both physical and spiritual). Most are farm workers; some only live on the farm and are working somewhere else. Many of them are children or adults living with their parents (farm or not farm workers); others have some form of relationship with the farmers. Thus, such relationships form the bases of their residing on the farms. These are the categories of people who are subjected to incessant evictions from farms, which they conceive as their homes. Usually, there is a spiritual attachment to farm settlements because some have had their ancestors buried on the farms (their graves are very visible). This accounts for their opposition to evictions.

The farmers often use farm dwellers as cheap labour or declare them a liability if they object to being used as cattle herders, sheep shearers, fence menders, tractor loaders or for any other domestic work. A civil society organisation involved in land issues, KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council, presents the relationship between the dwellers and some farmers in the following terms:

Most farm workers work throughout the month and have little free time, at month end they are paid and the truck takes all workers to the farmers' shop and then to the farmer's bottle store in the farm; in this way, the farm dwellers are in a no exit situation, and have no access to accurate information about party political developments, good health life styles or micro-economic development. Farm workers or farm dwellers are often suspected to be the perpetrators or collaborators in criminal violence experienced in farms (KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council 2009:3).

The farm dwellers are very vulnerable and their relationships with the white farmers are a combination of both respect and conflict, as the case may be. A point of major discord between them and farm owners is their exclusion from the decision-making process on the farm.

This negatively affects their negotiating power in respect of remuneration, shelter and access to infrastructure.

Farm labour

Farm labour, otherwise called farm workers, are predominantly black South Africans who are very poor, disadvantaged and landless. The majority are illiterate rural dwellers, without significant social security. Farmers poorly remunerate them, and a substantial part of the remuneration is very often in the form of food and shelter. The farms where they work are mostly the private property of white farmers, who sparingly provide educational or infrastructural facilities. Their survival is dependent on the benevolence of the farmers. The lack of human capacity opportunities constitutes what the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council (2009:3) termed 'a generational economic deprivation'. Most of the farm workers reside on farms, while very few live off the farms. While the 1997 official document on land reform identifies this group as the major target of land redistribution, they still remain, decades after the implementation of land reform, largely landless and deprived of other necessities of life.

As reported by many of the participants, the lack of access to agricultural land has turned some of these groups into 'frustrated and hostile' farm labourers, with high expectations (sometimes unrealistic) from the white farmers. Some of the workers claimed to have been trained (locally and informally) as small-scale farmers, but are still without access to land or to a support system for farming. They strongly contend that land reform should target the 200 000 market-oriented, black smallholder farmers who produce crops and livestock for sale at local markets. On the other hand, Lahiff (2008) believes that farm unproductivity is prevalent because many hitherto farm dwellers or workers who were allocated farms or land through the redistributive policy have become farmers, but are without farming management skills. These opposing standpoints are parts of the complexities of South African land reform programmes.

Labour tenants

Farm tenants are those farm workers who permanently live and work on the farms. The residential space and facilities (water, electricity, limited space for gardens, and accommodation) are provided by the farmers.

The inadequacies of these facilities are sources of conflict on farms. The tenants are constantly subjected to evictions but they opt to continue working under untenable labour practices due to the fear of losing their residential or other opportunities. While some have been relocated to new lands and farms, many have been evicted while their claims await official attention (Lahiff 2008:4). Undeniably, they are the most neglected actors on the farm. Despite the government's assurances that the most serious and desperate needs would command its urgent attention (Kepe and Hall 2018:45), the situation on the farms, decades after this promise, has remained unchanged.

Labour tenants constitute the most vociferous actors on the farm. Some farmers subject them to the most inhumane lifestyle. Their major grouse against the farm owners centre on the poor service delivery that characterises settlements. In their perspective, the farmers are exploiting their vulnerability by engaging in untenable labour practices. The farmers, on the other hand, blame the government and some non-state actors for extending to the workers unattainable expectations and promises. It is indeed so that Government officials and NGOs have proclaimed many changes in farmer-worker relations without due consultation with the farmers.

Reality of farm murder

Farm attacks are not an illusion but a reality. While the white farmers have been the major victims of farm murders since 1994, there are few cases where black South Africans have become the victims. For instance, on 30 November 2019, a white farmer allegedly shot and killed Anele Hoyana, in a manner that suggests racism as motive. One of the opposition parties, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), vowed to 'expropriate' the farmer's land and property (Head 2019). This nearly became a racial confrontation. But such recent racialisation of farm attacks/murders has focused the attention on the meaning and scope of farm attacks. Swart (2003:40) maintains,

The concept 'farm attack' is a comprehensive concept which covers various actions which are directed at causing damage and pain to farmers and their dependants, workers, property and possessions. A farm attack is a situation in which the inhabitants of a farm are physically attacked with a specific objective in mind. This objective may be to murder, rape,

rob or to inflict physical harm.

Furthermore, the South African Police Service (2003:417) defines farm attacks as

... acts aimed at the person of residents, workers and visitors to farms and smallholdings, whether with the intent to murder, rape, rob or inflict bodily harm. In addition, all actions aimed at disrupting farming activities as a commercial concern, whether for motives related to ideology, labour disputes, land issues, revenge, grievances, racist concerns or intimidation, should be included.

Farm attacks in the country are characterised by ‘calculated military precision, the presence of strangers in the area, black and white farmers as victims, gang activities, threats, vulnerability, the status of the victim, false identification, ambushade, arson, the time of attack and organised crime’ (Strydom and Schutte 2005:115). According to one of the victims of farm murders:

Farm murders have become a very unique phenomenon in South Africa, not only in terms of the extremely high frequency at which South African farmers (of which the vast majority are from minority communities) are murdered, but also the extreme levels of brutality and torture that characterise these crimes. Unfortunately, this is also a phenomenon that the South African government mostly chooses to ignore (AfriForum 2015:3).

Farm attacks became a major concern in the new South Africa a few years after the end of apartheid. The rise in farm attacks from 433 in 1997 to 767 in 1998 compelled President Nelson Mandela to convene the Rural Safety Summit on 10 October 1998 (SAPS 2003:15). The Summit aimed ‘to achieve consensus around a future process to deal with rural safety in general and farm attacks in particular and to improve existing strategies and to develop new plans of action’ (SAPS 2003:15).

The Guardian (2018) captures the main underlying motive of farm murders since 1998. South Africa, ‘has 9% of its population controlling a little bit more than 70 percent of farmland in the country ... That 9% is overwhelmingly white’ (The Guardian 2018). The World Bank attests to the fact that ‘the chronically poor group is almost exclusively made up of black and coloured South Africans’ (Greenwood 2018). In 2015, the University of South Africa revealed that the top one per cent of South

Africans own 70.9 per cent of the country’s wealth while the bottom 60 per cent only own 7 per cent (Greenwood 2018). Thus, there is always friction between the wealthy farmers and poor farm workers, which finds expression in farm attacks. After the 1998 peak period during which 153 farmers died, there was a steady decline in the rate of farm attacks/murders until 2011. The table below presents the rate of farm murders in the country.

Table 1: The rate of farm murders

Year	Farm Murders
2003–2011	About 80 at average
2015/2016	64
2016/2017	71
2017/2018	68

Sources: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 2018; The Guardian 2018.

While it is crucial to understand farm attacks within the entire socio-political and economic interaction in the revolutionary and post-apartheid atmospheres, it is also important to reveal the broad criminal nature of the South African social landscape as shown in Table 2. This is mostly attributed to the poor socio-economic conditions, particularly in rural areas. However, there are compelling reasons to identify certain trends and patterns that point to specific motives (Swart 2003). Thus, this study presents the general trend of murders (including farm murders) in the country. Based on the SAPS report, there were 19 016 documented murders in South Africa in 2016–17 (BBC 2018). According to the mid-year estimate for 2016, there were 55 908 900 people in South Africa, and based on this projection, there were 34 murders for every 100 000 people in the country (BBC 2018).

Since 2012, there has been a total of 3 059 attacks reported to police, averaging 510 attacks a year in which 338 people – roughly 56 a year – were killed (Chothia 2018). Based on the statistics released by SAPS, there has been a 35 per cent rise in murders since 2011/12 and a 3.4 per cent rise since 2017/18 (SAPS 2019:16). The table below reveals the nature and rate of crime in the country in 2018/2019 and 2019/2020.

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Year	2018/2019	2019/2020	Average deaths per day in 2019/2020
Contact Crime	617 210	621 282	1 702
Murder	21 022	21 325	58
Robbery with aggravating circumstances	140 032	143 990	394
Burglary at residential premises	71 224	67 713	186

Table 2: Crime statistics in South Africa

Source: SAPS 2020:5-6. Average deaths per day were calculated by the author.

The 2018/19 and 2019/20 crime statistics released by SAPS on violence on farms and small holdings revealed 47 and 49 murders, respectively (SAPS 2019:37; SAPS 2020:31). The police also had their own share of the rising murders. In the year under review, 35 on-duty police officers and 38 off-duty police officers were murdered (SAPS 2020:28). These statistics reveal the high incidences of crime and murders in South Africa in general.

Farm murder and ‘White Genocide’ discourse

Over the years, South Africa has continued to downplay the resurgence of racism; however, the attacks on farms and murders of white farmers have led to the racialisation of farm conflict under the tag, ‘white genocide’. Genocide relates to the deliberate killing of a large group of people of a particular nation, race or ethnicity. The ultimate aim of such killings is the complete extermination of the group. In South Africa, large-scale farming is associated with the white race, and so any issue relating to such farming would involve the white group. As reinforced by Resane (2018:3), ‘farming is a white business, and although the black people are still struggling to regain the land, commercial farming is still a white monopoly’. Thus, racism is a construction that is closely associated with the South African historical reality: history of land disposessions, evictions and dehumanisation of farm workers. The government, trusted by the black population, has found itself trapped between radicalism and liberalism.

South Africa opted for a ‘radical liberal democratic constitution’ after apartheid (Thiven 2015:2). As a constitutional democracy, the extent to which the government can continue its rhetoric of the radicalisation of the economy is highly compromised. Despite the rhetoric about black empowerment and affirmative action, gross inequality and disempowerment continue. Therefore, the government has failed to deliver on land reform. Thiven (2015:13) maintains, ‘Inequalities of the past are reproduced, and despite a superficial black cultural assertiveness, blacks are still subordinate in all the areas that matter, from economics to media, literature and the arts.’ South Africa is comprised of a dual society: ‘one white and rich and one black and poor’ (Pretorius 2014:28). That is, there is a vast black majority who live in frustration, anger and abject squalor, and a white minority who live in guilt, fear and wealth (Thiven 2015).

While the government has realised the imperative of adopting the LEWC as the most viable instrument for redressing land inequality, the white farmers, investors, bankers and white-dominated civil society groups such as AgriSA and AfriForum continue to be pessimistic about its implementation. The government maintains that contrary to expectations, expropriation would enhance food security and land productivity, promote equitable spatial justice and redistribution of wealth. Antagonists of the LEWC keep raising fundamental questions on the appropriateness of the policy and the uncertainties surrounding its implementation (Akinola 2020:13-14). The amendment of Section 25 of the Constitution and the publication of the summary of the expropriation bill – on 9 October 2020 – have revealed the conditions for and guidelines on LEWC (Department of Public Works and Infrastructure 2020). Despite these, there is still raging opposition from the white minority who claim that LEWC has been politicised and remains a tyrannical policy that reinforces racial discrimination. However, it remains unclear how LEWC would facilitate peaceful relations between the predominantly white farmers and black farm workers.

Despite the persistent recurrence of apparently racial farm attacks during the first decade of democracy, the 2003 SAPS report deracialised farm attacks and conceptualised them together with other forms of crime. One of the participants, Director in the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform at Kimberley, opposes any attempt to apportion special attention to farm attacks:

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Why is farm conflict treated differently and generated much public attention? How is it different from any other societal conflict in the country? There are all kinds of violent conflict in the society that did not attract such attentions. People are being killed in different settlements, informal structures, domestic violence is rising, and violent protests continue to take lives of many. There is the need for government to approach land conflict like other crime in the society. The privileged position of the whites has led to the sensitisation and politicisation of farm conflicts. It has been blown out of proportion to generate pity from the population and external actors. Indeed, it has become a strategy for emotional blackmail.

The Transvaal Agricultural Union South Africa, comprising mainly white farmers from the former Transvaal Farmers' Union, has been critical of the government for not swiftly and directly responding to the spate of murders on farms, and categorising it as a national emergency (BBC 2019; Erik 2019). President Cyril Ramaphosa responded to the allegation of passivity in the face of increased murders of farm workers, condemned the racialisation of farm murders and maintains that, 'every life in the country has equal value and every murder, every violent crime, must be equally and unequivocally condemned' (Erik 2019). No doubt, the white farmers are the major victims, but they are part of the white minority group who predominantly owns the commercial farming industries.

Despite the attempts to deracialise farm attacks, the white farming communities continue to raise alarm over the increasing farm murders, their brutality and what they consider to be 'white genocide'. They hold the perspectives that farm attacks deviate from 'normal crimes' principally because of the 'military precision' exhibited by the attackers, the complicity of the police, and the apparent targeting of the white minority. They concluded, 'that farm attacks were politically inspired and that the real aim was to drive the (white) farmers off the land so that the land could be occupied by the (black) majority' (SAPS 2003). South Africa Today (2016) presents detailed accounts of nine farm murders that occurred in a gruesome manner, and led to the politicisation and racialisation of farm attacks.

The non-categorisation of farm murder as special crime has inflamed the politicisation of farm murders, which have found expression in racism. 'White genocide' has become a racially-inclined rhetoric, which

depicts farm murders as systematic acts orchestrated by the black race and supported by the black-led government – with the purpose of gradually exterminating the white farmers and ultimately inheriting their farms and other private property. However, the reality reveals a contrary conversation.

Factors responsible for farm attacks

The most decisive complexity around the farm conflict narrative are the diverse perceptions of the land conflict. A deep-seated belief of the farmers is that they have rightful claims to the land they occupy. They continue to reject the link between the apartheid history of land dispossession and their land wealth. Farmers are living under both real and unreal threats to their lives and property. They believe that both the black population and government officials relate to them through a racial lens. However, the landless farm workers see this as the height of blatant distortion of history, arrogance, injustice and impunity. A farm activist in Pietermaritzburg submits:

The major cause of farm conflict is the maltreatment and dehumanisation of farm labourers. It is structural violence at its peak. Apartheid may have politically ended. Apartheid may have been removed from the cities and parliament. But, in the farm, the employer-labour relations that existed during the apartheid regime still persists in the farms. The discussions should be directed more at the cause of farm conflict and not the outcomes of farm violence.

The justice system has failed to protect farm dwellers, or act against the highhandedness of landowners, and the inability to provide free legal aid as mandated by the 2001 Nkuzi judgement has presented an obstacle to the reform scheme (Lahiff 2008:4). Farm dwellers believe that the portion of the land on which they stay, and work is rightfully theirs. They keep protesting against the commercialisation or monetisation of access to land, which they conceive as their birthright. In their perspective, land is an inalienable possession, hence they fail to understand why they should purchase what naturally belongs to them (James 2007:24). In other instances, farm workers accused the farmers of apportioning to them lands that have been harvested. The revitalisation of such land requires many resources. Agriculture is the heartbeat of rural economy in the country, and land is a factor of production and an economic

resource. An academic in the University of KwaZulu-Natal puts it clearly: ‘denials of land and its produce engenders (sic) poverty and disillusionment, and these are grounds for aggressions against farm owners. The point to note is, farm dwellers strongly believe that the land they work originally belong to them’.

John L. Dube presented the crux of the conflict, ‘The black ox has nowhere to feed, and the white ox has all the pasture’ (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2011:11). The above-mentioned academic further reinforces this analogy and explains,

Farm conflict is the consequence of decades of un-addressed land inequality in the country, and particularly in the farms. It is reaction against oppressions in the farm. It is the height of an expression of consistent abuse of the rights of farm workers or labour tenants. Violence should be condemned in all ramifications in the farms, but we all know why it happens.

Generally, the following are the identifiable motives for farm attacks and murders: the institutionalisation and pervasiveness of violence, increasing poverty, unemployment and socio-economic crisis, retaliation, history of land dispossession and forceful evictions, untenable labour practices and labour-employers power relations, free access to armament, failed land reform schemes, breakdown of community policing, and ineffective security apparatus (AfriForum 2015; Kepe and Hall 2016; Akinola 2018; KwaZulu Regional Christian Council 2019).

The white farmers have particularly blamed the police and judicial system for ineffective policing and injustice. According to the findings of AfriForum, ‘in more than half of cases investigated, the criminals escaped. Of the 41% of suspects that were arrested, 39% were charged but only 23% were sentenced’ (2015). The table below gives more understanding of the frustrations of the white farmers against the police and judiciary.

Table 3: Trends in the prosecution of alleged attackers on farms

Escaped	52%
Apprehended	45%
Arrested	41%
Released	7%
Charged	39%
Appeared in Court	29%
Convicted	23%
Sentenced	23%

Source: AfriForum 2015:18.

As shown by the table, the police did not convict a majority of the perpetrators, which fuels the notion that the police are especially complicit. In contrast, farm workers have also accused the police of favouring farm owners. Thus, the police have not been regarded as neutral, which complicates the quest for peace and harmony on farms (KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council 2009).

Furthermore, most of the participants unanimously hold the government responsible for farm conflicts. Some accused the government of lacking the political will to confront the white farmers and expropriate their land, while others have opposed such an act and claimed that the political class actually aggravated social and racial tensions on farms through their 'negative' oratory prowess. For instance, the use of the slogan, 'Kill the boer, kill the farmer!' by politicians is 'illwilled' (sic) and constitutes a 'dangerous ideology' (AfriForum 2015:4). A farmer in Richards Bay area pointedly accused the EFF of trying to incite the poor to engage in land grabbing and forcing the white farmers off the land. While this appeals to the masses, it would jeopardise food security and aggravate the unemployment crisis that has rocked the country, and particularly the farming sector. The participant submits, 'All conflict on the land question and all agitation by the blacks are directed at 'inheriting' whites' commercial land, period'.

A study revealed that about 33 per cent of the economically active population of a local municipality in KwaZulu-Natal work in the white-dominated agricultural sector (KwaZulu Regional Christian Council

2019:2). This report highlighted the cordial relationship between farmers and workers in parts of KwaZulu-Natal. The report reveals, 'apart from providing job opportunities, farmers have built schools, provided facilities to promote the culture of learning and teaching and also provided internships opportunities for those pursuing a career in agriculture' (KwaZulu Regional Christian Council 2019:2). And from their side, the workers offered security and protection to the farmers, their families and property. But over time, this flow of mutualism was distorted, which engendered a new wave of 'acrimonious relations between farm dwellers (people born in farms and grew up there and have no other homes) and new farm owners' (KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council 2009:2). Usually, if the principal worker becomes incapacitated or reaches retirement age, labour is transferred to siblings who continue to work on the farm. Vice versa, white farmers usually transfer farm ownerships to their children and new buyers. These new actors on the farm (farmers and workers) have failed, in many cases, to uphold the cordial relationship between each other.

Conclusion: Combating farm attacks and deracialising farm murders

The study has located the land conflict and 'white genocide' in historical and contemporary contexts. My argument would question and advise avoidance of the use of the tag 'white genocide' as a representation of the reality of land attacks. Indeed, farmers have experienced consistent attacks, which are condemnable. However, the general trend of crime in the country calls for concern. The government needs to invest in security and diffuse the hostility between farmers and dwellers through an effective land reform scheme that benefits all the actors. It should include enlightenment programmes which provide verifiable historical facts in order to correct negative perspectives. Examples of such negative perspectives are that when there is a conflict between a dweller and farmer, the former mobilises members of the black community (either on-farm or off-farm) against the latter and other farmers in the locality. And vice versa, the farmers sometimes display hostility to all workers and other farm dwellers when one of the workers has defaulted.

Land reform has faced the challenge of sketching out long-term planning scenarios or effective implementation strategies. Also, the scourge of

criminality and instability on farms has the potential to cripple the shaky agricultural community. Moreover, South Africa occupies land that is predominantly infertile. This accounts for the scramble for fertile lands, mostly found in higher rainfall areas in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. As noted by Lahiff (2008), the drivers of the reform agenda have particularly neglected dwellers on commercial farms, (including farm workers and their dependents), and labour tenants in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga Provinces. More than a decade after the reform agenda was publicised, the government is yet to address this.

The agitations of the rural poor are not too complex to grasp, but the government and other stakeholders should develop a better understanding of the perspectives of white farmers on issues pertaining to farm conflict, labour relations, criminality and land claims. The emotive support for the landless, the victims of hostile labour relations on farms and other demands by black South Africans are so strong that they dwarf the frustrations and plights of the white farmers. All parties should be united for effective resolution of the conflict. The conversation, most times, ignores the overriding interest of the state: agricultural sustainability, economic development, political stability and social cohesion. Land reform is a prerequisite for peace and justice in the country, and also reinforces the importance of the land and agricultural sectors to socio-economic development.

Apartheid has ended, and from a political standpoint, the government continues to promote non-racial cultures, but a greater number of the farming communities have not been decolonised. The unequal power relations between farmers and black workers remain unchanged. Any attempt to separate 'farm attacks' from other forms of crimes might reinforce the 'seeming' importance of the victims of attacks, and strengthen the perception that the white group is still the privileged group in post-Apartheid South Africa.

While there are accusations and counter-accusations between farmers and dwellers, the consensus shows the deep-rooted fear and mistrust amongst the farming communities, which negatively affect the social cohesion between farmers and farm occupiers. This aggravates the fragility of their co-existence and jeopardises social cohesion and agricultural productivity. Experience has shown that effective land management can engender improvement in agricultural productivity in

developing countries (Obeng-Odoom 2012). In contrast, distorted land policy and farm conflict will curtail agricultural productivity. Indeed, the loss of lives during violent conflicts reduces the availability of skilled personnel on farms and impedes future racial harmony in the country.

Both white farmers and black farm dwellers acknowledge the failure of the land reform scheme. The farmers support the enhancement of their property rights and the security of their lives and property, while the farm dwellers advocate for their land rights and implementation of LEWC. This is predicated upon the belief that the land and its farms originally belong to black Africans. The argument 'we have heavily invested our resources on the land and farms' has no place in the hearts of many of the farm dwellers and South African blacks in general. Thus, they do not consider the theft of the farmers' property and physical assaults as criminal acts.

The perspectives of the two divides are antithetical to enduring peace and harmony on the farms. There is need for compromise in resolving the land question. The farmers, when required, should be willing to genuinely engage with other stakeholders, even when part of their land assets could face redistribution, while farm dwellers should be willing to accept the farmers as partners in the post-conflict reconstruction of the 'new' South Africa. Overall, the government has the responsibility to balance the quest for justice, social harmony and state survival.

Specific recommendations

The land question is still unresolved. Land inequality persists in South Africa. While the onus to address farm attacks/murders rests mostly on the government, the government should be neutral and implement policies that are proactive and do not inflame the volatility of the tension-filled farming environments. It is important to engage with all the actors on the farm before any policy interventions take place. The government should adopt a pragmatic approach to redistributing land through expansive consultations with landowners and the landless.

Another means of addressing the land question is through the implementation of policy that will enhance the gradual integration of many of the workers into the farming business. Capacity workshops and training should be organised by state and non-state actors involved in the peace and development of the farming community. The government

and non-state actors should facilitate skills transfers from the white farmers to emerging farmers, including identifiable farm dwellers.

The government may favour mechanised farming under the management of highly skilled farmers, but must also provide support systems for the development of small-scale farming, which remains a main source of livelihood for the rural population. Thus, agrarian reform should be revisited.

The government should facilitate the convergence of information on farm attacks/murders and status of land reform, among all the stakeholders such as AgriSA, AfriForum, the police and government departments. A sustainable policy is based on accurate information, and this is clearly lacking.

While government is seriously considering a policy shift, an effective peace between farm owners and workers depends on the revocation of the willing seller, willing buyer model, which has complicated the quest for land redistribution. Black South Africans who are predominantly farm dwellers have no financial capacity to compete in the land market, and this generates frustration and aggression against farm owners.

There is a need to de-politicise farm attacks. Thus, farm murders/attacks should be declared 'a special crime' and an emergency, just like 'gender-violence'. Issues on farm attacks should not be used for scoring political points. Furthermore, a special police unit should be trained and empowered to deal with the complexity of crimes on the farm, and those guilty of farm attacks/murders should be prosecuted by the judiciary.

The landless and historically disadvantaged should be provided with more access to land, particularly arable land. This is the right step in deracialising land discourse and farm conflict. The government should also change the land narratives from the racist lens to the imperativeness of creating a just and equitable society.

Government and non-state actors should invest in workshops to implant civil and peace education into the consciousness of actors on the farms.

Government should be more decisive on implementing inclusive land policy and refrain from creating policy uncertainty as that which currently exists.

Government must inaugurate a 'Panel of the Wise', comprised of well-respected elders from all races to be involved in the peace processes on the farms.

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