

Poor Whites Struggle by in Zimbabwe

Author: [Joseph Nhlahla](#)

After the departure of many white people, those who remain in the country often face economic hardship. An elderly white man sits behind the steering wheel of an old van with “National Railways Zimbabwe” emblazoned on its doors. As he and the group of black men with him disembark from the van, people start pointing and passing comments about him.

Slightly unkempt, with a rough beard and a stooping back, the old man trudges to the Bulawayo offices of National Railways Zimbabwe, NRZ - once the envy of other rail companies in sub-Saharan Africa but now a run-down shadow of itself after years of mismanagement.

Someone in the crowd of onlookers at Bulawayo station asks why the old man is still around when so many whites have fled the country to settle elsewhere, after the ruling ZANU-PF threw them off their farms in President Robert Mugabe’s land-grab policy.

Another man says he is surprised the railwayman is actually an employee rather than employing others as has generally been the case in this former British colony.

The responses come fast and furious, “He is from that group of poor whites who have nowhere to go”; “He has no choice but work for the NRZ or he would be out on the streets as a vagrant”; “He never owned a farm because if he did, he would have left the country after it had been taken over by the war veterans.”

Everyone has an explanation for the apparent oddity of a white man holding down a “proper” job alongside blacks. The increasingly common sight of white men working on the railway is taking locals some time to get used to.

The plight of white people has changed ever since Zimbabwe’s current political and economic crisis set in. Some say it began with the seizure of white commercial farmland in 2000.

For many whites, the going has never been this tough since they settled here decades ago.

Although the minority white group continued to enjoy some of its class and race privileges into the post-independence period, members have also borne the brunt of President Mugabe’s anger. He has frequently accused them of stealing African land in the past, and also of working with his political foes to depose him.

In 2003, former government junior minister Jonathan Moyo, who has since fallen out with Mugabe, said whites should leave the country because they were behind the creation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

These accusations stemmed from reports that the MDC was being funded by white commercial farmers, with state television showing footage of MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai allegedly receiving a cheque donation from white farmers.

The white population has plummeted over the last two-and-a-half decades. Following independence from Britain in 1980, some figures put the white population at over a quarter of a million. However, by 2004, various estimates – including the last census – put the figure at under 30,000.

A Bulawayo-based historian and researcher told IWPR that much has changed over the years for whites in Zimbabwe. Those remaining in the country are often there because they have little alternative.

“While whites have always been a minority, their mass exodus after 2000 has meant those who remained may have been less wealthy, with no relations outside Zimbabwe, and unable to relocate,” he said.

As Zimbabwe prepares to go to the polls, the bulk of the white minority is likely to vote for the MDC, as has happened in previous elections.

Yet there are still whites who support ZANU-PF, taking part in national galas organised by the ruling party where songs extolling the virtues of the regime fill the air.

Despite Mugabe’s vitriol towards whites, senior government officials have maintained strong relationships with white business people. Mugabe has also appointed whites to prominent public posts, notably Timothy Stamps, a former health minister who now acts in an advisory capacity in the ministry, and Stuart Hargreaves, the director of veterinary services.

An American professor of journalism working in Bulawayo says whites still enjoy some privileges.

“We still do get preferential treatment,” she said. “We see it in queues where whites who decide to jump the queue are not taken to task; in shops where shop assistants are very ingratiating.”

Hayes Mabweazara, a Zimbabwean academic based in Scotland, said the year 2000 saw whites becoming victims of “reverse racism” which forced many to retreat from public life.

“The post-2000 political upheavals following the farm invasions ignited an unprecedented form of ‘reverse racism’ that naturally forced whites to withdraw from public visibility purely for security reasons. A great many of these lost their relatives and friends in the farm invasions,” he told IWPR.

“Those who have stayed on remain hopeful that one day sanity will prevail and they will find their feet again. It is a particularly sad story for many who have known no life outside Zimbabwe.”

A white missionary priest who adopted Zimbabwean nationality in the Eighties says white citizens still have a place here, despite efforts by the regime to marginalise them.

“While a few remain, whites still have a place and a role to play in the creation of a better Zimbabwe,” said the priest.

“Unfortunately, their involvement in national discourse or politics has been met with hostility by the regime. It is possible that those who were forced to leave the country will come back, but others will obviously decide to move on with their lives in their adopted countries.”

Joseph Nhlahla is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

Location: Africa

Topic: Zimbabwe

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/poor-whites-struggle-zimbabwe>