

Zimbabwe and Pan-African Liberation

By [Gregory Elich](#)

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An interview with Netfa Freeman, Director of the Social Action & Leadership School for Activists

Netfa Freeman is one of the more dedicated and clear thinking political activists committed to making the world a better place. Working primarily on issues relating to Africa and the African Diaspora, he is also an organizer in the No War on Cuba Movement and an advocate for the anti-imperialist cause in general.

There is a dearth of first-hand information on Zimbabwe, so when I learned that Netfa had recently returned from a trip to Zimbabwe, I contacted him and suggested an interview so that he could share his thoughts on his trip. He was kind enough to take time from a busy schedule to answer the following questions.

[Q] You've just returned from Zimbabwe, where you visited the Ujamma Youth Farming Project. Before we talk about your trip, please tell us about the organization you head, the Social Action and Leadership School for Activists (SALSA).

[Freeman] Yes, I am the Director of the Social Action & Leadership School for Activists (a.k.a. SALSA), but SALSA is not an organization unto itself. SALSA is actually a program of the larger Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). Since 1963 IPS has sought to transform ideas into action for peace, justice, and the environment by linking and strengthening social movements. IPS is a Washington DC based non-profit, multi-issue think tank that has been working with movements from the U.S. Civil Rights era onwards.

SALSA is just one of several programs/projects of IPS which was started in 1994 as successor to IPS' Washington School. I've been with SALSA and IPS since 2000. SALSA is a skills training program that offers classes or workshops in various aspects of social justice activism and organizing. Secondly, SALSA offers free public political education forums on various issues ranging in scope from the local DC area, to national and international. The skills classes fall under general categories, such as organizational development, communications, money matters, leadership and management, techno-activism, etc. We generally refer to the forums in the political education category as our "policy" forums. There are no confines as to what subjects we cover in our policy forums but because the program basically reflects my own ideological leaning, the forums tend to have a more revolutionary regard that is more left than liberal.

Frankly, although IPS and my colleagues at IPS often refer to themselves as liberal, I'm not a liberal. Personally I'm definitely more left than liberals tend to be. In fact the organization I voluntarily belong to, which better reflects my affinity for, and commitment to Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular is PALO, the Pan-African

Liberation Organization. Instead of a philosophy, PALO regards “pan-Africanism” as an objective, which is the total liberation and unification of Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora under scientific socialism. This is in line with the practical and theoretical contributions of the late President Kwame Nkrumah.

[Q] Kwame Nkrumah’s revolutionary theory continues to be an inspiration for the pan-African movement, and many regard Zimbabwe as the focal point of that struggle. What are your thoughts on the role of Zimbabwe in the pan-African movement?

[Freeman] As Africa herself must be the land base for the pan-African Movement, it’s crucial for there to be at least one beacon of revolutionary progress and resistance against imperialism for Africa’s people, scattered and suffering around the world. Zimbabwe’s anti-imperialist stance makes her that beacon. Nkrumah referred to such bases as liberated zones and urged pan-African revolutionaries to protect our liberated zones at all costs. This is because such zones are to serve as the launching pads of the struggle for a Unified Socialist Africa.

Zimbabwe has a very pivotal role in this neocolonial phase of the pan-African Movement for several reasons. Not the least of which are the land reforms that have boldly swept the country. Nowhere on the continent have Africans taken as radical a measure toward land reform as we have in Zimbabwe. And not only have Zimbabwe’s land reforms been an inspiration for people in other African states, they have gained respect in Diasporan countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has publicly praised Zimbabwe’s land reform process as a model he would like to emulate in that country. Another thing that makes Zimbabwe pivotal is its role regarding our sister states: such as aiding Mozambique against the foreign inspired counter insurgency of RENAMO; military assistance for SWAPO’s liberation struggle in Namibia; recently helping the Congo to secure its borders against CIA backed incursions; and lending troops to the AU mission to stabilize Sudan. No other African state is upholding such a cooperative position at this time. Zimbabwe even strategically held off on its land reforms at the request of South Africa and other Southern African states, so not to strengthen the belligerence of white settler colonialists in those countries. And they did this at great cost to the integrity of their own struggle. These things are concrete expressions of pan-African cooperation.

Furthermore, President Mugabe is a leader who also publicly keeps the inspiration of Kwame Nkrumah alive. That is, not only have all the aforementioned things been done under the leadership of Mugabe, he also often mentions Nkrumah and his ideals in speeches addressing other Africans. He is not afraid to speak of socialism at a time when no other African leader dares utter the word. President Mugabe openly condemns imperialism with the boldness and clarity we have only come to expect from leaders such as Fidel Castro or Hugo Chavez. That is why President Mugabe receives such resounding applause wherever he goes on the continent of Africa or when he speaks at UN or AU summits. No other African leader is doing what he is doing right now, and because he is, Zimbabwe stands as an inspiration to African people the world over. We need to see and hear such things. They serve as political education for pan-Africanism.

[Q] You’ve put your ideals into action through, among other things, your work with the Ujamma Youth Farming Project. Tell us about that project, and your purpose in visiting it.

[Freeman] An integral part of any genuine social justice movement or revolution is the empowerment of the working class, the women in society and the youth. The Ujamma Youth

Farming Project (UYFP) was established in June 2005 by a group of Zimbabwean university students who saw Zimbabwe's land reform as a means to empower youth. The project is an African youth-led farming cooperative that has secured a 100-acre plot in the central city of Gweru under the government's A1 resettlement program and is registered under the Ministry of Youth, Gender and Employment Creation. (1) Led by the project's chairman and cofounder, Kwanisai Mafa (age 32), the leadership core of UYFP is a very socially conscious group that stands against poverty and for the development of the African family, nation and continent toward their fullest potential. Our mission is to empower African youth through gainful farming initiatives so that they're able to get the essential skills necessary to function as lifelong productive citizens in Africa's development.

The first goal is to grow into an agribusiness that can eventually offer produce to wholesalers and retail outlets in and around Midlands province in Zimbabwe. But a longer-term goal is to establish a training program so that youth of African descent from outside of Zimbabwe and even outside of Africa will be able to visit, meet, train/work, and bond with their youth counterparts on the farm. I began working with the UYFP from here in the U.S. in August of 2005, serving as U.S. liaison to help raise mostly pan-African support for it. Since the formation of UYFP we've learned that our biggest challenge has been in mobilizing resources to kick-start the project. So that has been my main role: to secure resources and promote the project. While we have every intention of becoming self-sufficient, we don't qualify for loans from local banks and the land can't be used as collateral because it was acquired under the A1 village development scheme for non-commercial farmland.

My purpose for recently visiting the project is basically to finally see first hand what I've been supporting since last year and also to get first hand experience of Zimbabwe's political situation; the effects of U.S. and British sanctions, etc. This, because I've also been working as an organizer with PALO to expose the misinformation against Zimbabwe by Britain, the U.S. and Western world in general. I've become pretty familiar with the political situation through my own research into the things a person can glean from historical and geopolitical context, but I wanted to also fortify that knowledge with a physical visit to the country. As you're well aware Greg, there is an intense propaganda assault of misinformation and lies being waged against Zimbabwe, and so many people only respect what someone has to say about a place when the person has been there. So I went there, to do a site visit of the farm and to see what else I could learn about the political situation. Although UYFP does not refer to itself as a political initiative, the political implications of the project are obvious to me and that is what really motivates my work with it.

[Q] There is indeed an unrelenting propaganda campaign by Western governments and media. You saw a good deal of the country while you were there. As an eyewitness to the current situation in Zimbabwe, how does what you saw compare with reports in the corporate media? I am also interested in your assessment of the impact of Western sanctions on the nation, as well as how well the spirit of the people is holding up under that onslaught.

[Freeman] Well, there is no short answer to that question but I'll try. Yes, we did see a good deal of the country, my partner and I. We were able to travel from what's basically the northeast of the country — Harare — into the center provinces where Gweru is, further south to Bulawayo, then up toward the northwest to the great Mosi-oa-Tunya Falls (what the settlers renamed Victoria Falls), then back through all those areas to Harare again. We did all this taking the people's public transportation, buses and what are called kombis (2).

It was a very educational and gratifying trip to say the least. Politically, Zimbabwe is in an intriguing situation that is grossly misrepresented by the Western World and even by too many so-called progressives, Africans alike. As you say in your book, Greg, complexity and context are neglected in the analysis/information that is readily available about Zimbabwe. The police and the state news media (at least TV news) consist overwhelmingly of young people, below the ages of 30, and many women. Now in my view, youth and women are generally the sectors of society that are too zealous about justice and too courageous to be in the majority in carrying out the maintenance of a repressive state. Claims of an atmosphere of repression and volatility that are propagated by British and U.S. media are pure lies. From what we saw, life is relatively peaceful. The police don't even carry guns, as they all do in the U.S. What kind of dictator or repressive government is it when the police don't even carry guns? In fact, we barely saw any uniformed police presence in the cities we visited. They were mostly on the main roads where they had checkpoints trying to catch smugglers of currency and foreign exchange.

The sanctions have exacerbated a shortage of foreign exchange and also, as a result, instigated a black market in exchange of Zimbabwean currency for foreign currency. This is reaping crippling effects on the economy, making foreign currency that much more scarce for the government and banks, which of course need it to conduct business in the international economy. Because the Zimbabwean currency had become too physically cumbersome to carry and complicated to calculate, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe introduced a new currency while we were there that slashes three zeros from the bills. They were phasing in this new currency while phasing out the old. The measure wasn't expected to reduce the hyperinflation but merely to make currency more manageable.

Western reports regularly imply that there is repression of news media that is not state-owned. But we saw opposition papers being sold openly on the streets by vendors and we saw people reading them. However, more people seemed to be reading the *Herald* and the *Sunday Mail*, the state's papers. The state-owned news — TV or print — also reports on corruption among government officials. So the suggestions that the state's news institutions are less reliable simply on the grounds that they are state-run is bogus in my view. It's the content of the news that should be the gauge of reliability, not just the source. We also found that people are very distrustful of foreigners. They know that there is a propaganda assault on their country and that people have come there for video footage and interviews as a means to present things out of context. We had several people urge us that when we returned to the U.S. to tell the truth about Zimbabwe. It was disheartening to have my own African sisters and brothers hold this level of skepticism about me but I understood it.

The effects of the illegal and immoral sanctions are evident. I refer to sanctions as "war without guns or bloodshed." Only the imperialist powers have the ability to enforce sanctions and are therefore always exempt from them. Because of this reason sanctions are always immoral. It's a blatant lie that the sanctions are confined to travel and financial assets of government officials. (3) In fact maybe I should not say it's a lie because those imposing the sanctions publish public information that would easily dispel such a misrepresentation. Basic needs such as gasoline have become scarce, making it susceptible to exploitation on the black market. While the black market offers national currency at much lower than official rates, it offers gasoline for triple, sometimes four times, the official market price. People need gasoline, so if they have the money, they pay it. Almost everywhere we went there were power outages. Because the country imports electricity the outages are a means of conserving energy. In spite of all these things the people seemed to

adjust to the challenges and for many sanctions seem to harden them with either animosity and/or the resolve to oppose the governments of Britain and the U.S.

The fuss over Operation Murambatsvina is another propaganda ploy. (4) Western news hasn't ceased mentioning the government's demolition of shantytowns in Zimbabwe last year. But what is always neglected is Operation Garikai, which I've seen with my own eyes. (5) This noble operation is rebuilding brand new homes for all those displaced by Operation Murambatsvina that are of course far better than their previous homes. You can see that construction of the homes has been interrupted by sanctions, but why does no one even talk about it? I've taken video footage of them. Is it ignorance or intentional omission? I tend to believe the latter because when I've presented these facts to so-called progressives they all but physically run from them. We cannot let the enemies of Africa and enemies of all humanity dictate how we see the world or Africa. They've become very sophisticated in how they advance their misinformation so we must become that much more sophisticated in how we get ours.

[Q] That is beautifully put. You've touched on a curious aspect of a segment of the Western Left. It rightly condemns U.S. intervention in the Middle East, while simultaneously favoring sanctions, covert operations and war against other manufactured enemies, such as was the case with the bombing of Yugoslavia, or as is happening today with the economic strangulation of Cuba, North Korea and Zimbabwe. It often seems that there are those on the Western Left who have lost their bearing, and are thus prey to appeals to support imperial adventures under the pretext of human rights, when in fact other motives are at play. How does Western policy against Zimbabwe relate to the invasion and occupation of Iraq? And finally, is there anything else you would like to add concerning Zimbabwe or the pan-African Liberation struggle?

[Freeman] This is a complicated question that is directly related to ideology. On the one hand there is the class in the West that is reflected by governments and business corporations, and which are incestuous in many ways. We can refer to this as the capitalist class. This class has the power to imbue society with its ideas and values, fooling much of society into believing that they share the same economic and political interests as the capitalist class. Then there are others in society who unwittingly adopt those values and ideas, or else see the contradictions in them and reject that. Many on the Western Left have chosen to adopt enough of these values and ideas that they cannot go far enough left. They're stuck in a middle ground trying to reconcile things that are irreconcilable.

More simply put, Western policies against both Zimbabwe and Iraq are not motivated by any desire to see democracy or justice for the people of those countries. They are in fact motivated by the need to dominate and exploit the labor and resources of those countries. Because the West is so much less than democratic or just, exploitation is the only thing that can motivate its policies. Yet many on the Western Left cannot accept this fact. Even though all facts and history reveal this, they cannot accept that the ideas and values of democracy and justice are complete hypocrisies and lies on the part of these governments and corporations. On some level they acknowledge the injustices of the policies but on another level they believe these are isolated incidents or merely the result of shortsightedness. If they didn't believe this, then they would have to reassess their understanding of reality in general. For example, often we hear from those among the Western Left denouncing such things as the U.S. blockade against Cuba, saying "It's a failed policy"; "It has failed to bring freedom and democracy to Cuba," as if the policy is really to bring those things to Cuba. Moreover they would not dare consider that Cuba is already a democracy. Even when

this Left doesn't accept Western policies against a country, they generally do accept some degree of demonizing propaganda, whether true or false. We can see this with Zimbabwe, Cuba and even Venezuela to an extent.

A practical reason is that most of this Left works through non-profit organizations or NGOs. And because most get their funding from, either their government, a corporate foundation, or some rich individual(s) with no interest in seriously challenging the system or world order, the West has effectively co-opted the Left by funding its activities. They then are torn between biting the hand that feeds them — that is, speaking complete truth to power — or acquiescing to merely an acceptable level of protest against them by speaking only select truths to power.

So more to the relationship between policies toward Zimbabwe and Iraq, you also have varying factors at work such as the racial stereotypes and what the people will put up with. The Arab world is effectively stereotyped as fanatical terrorists that have irrational hatred for the West and everyone in it. They can be bombed and outright invaded because the outcry will not garner enough support to effectively stop it. Yugoslavia was and still is to a large extent unknown by the masses in the U.S., so bombing that nation was not such a big deal; especially since some of the blame can be shared with NATO and there is no obvious racism that would upset anybody. But for Africa it is a different story. While most Africans/Black people around the world are politically disorganized and too imbued with Western values and ideas to take an effective stand against Western policies toward Africa, the easiest way to get us organized and energized around Africa would be for the West to bomb or invade her. Somalia did not go well or last long and Zimbabwe stands out more as a Black Liberation struggle against racist settler colonialism. So instead they use covert operations by mercenaries and the fostering of internal destabilization. This works because our stereotype is a bit different from our Arab sisters and brothers. We are pegged as not being able to get along and being naturally violent toward each other. You can see this regarding our populations, even within the Western countries themselves, and many of us have accepted this stereotype and self fulfill the prophecy if you will.

So in short, policies toward all these countries are essentially the same: to maintain Western hegemony over countries that refuse to dance to its tune. And the dilemma of the Western Left essentially is to try protesting against the injustices of those policies while at the same time not upsetting the powers that be too much, or questioning their own class privileged perceptions of reality and stereotypes. They can only appeal for the powers that be to simply become a little less oppressive and “more benevolent,” instead of working to organize and fight “with” (instead of “for”) the people who are under subjugation in order to completely transform the world order. That is, fight to dilute the dominance of the powers that be and turn them into ordinary folk who are no longer capable of exploitation and oppression.

The one thing I would like to add about the pan-African Movement is that revolutionary anti-Africanism recognizes the interconnectedness of humanity. All just people around the world must recognize the value in a United Socialist Africa. I'd like to quote Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam who said simply, “The Liberation of Africa is the Liberation of man.”

For further information, contact:

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The No War On Cuba Movement

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The Ujamma Youth Farming Project

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To make a donation to the Ujamma Youth Farming Project

<http://ujammafarming.org/donate.htm>

Gregory Elich is the author of *Strange Liberators: Militarism, Mayhem, and the Pursuit of Profit*

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1595265708/sr=8-1/qid=1156814483/ref=pd_bbs_1/002-5343377-5198403?ie=UTF8

Notes

(1) There are two programs comprising Zimbabwe's land reform process. The A1 model is intended to create small family farms for landless peasants or those previously farming in areas unsuitable for agriculture. The aim of the A2 model is to create commercial farms for those who have the means to become rapidly productive.

(2) Kombi - a mini-van bus

(3) On December 21, 2001, President Bush signed into law S. 494, the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001. Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, the one-time supporter of apartheid Rhodesia, sponsored the bill. The law instructed American officials in international financial institutions to "oppose and vote against any extension by the respective institution of any loan, credit, or guarantee to the government of Zimbabwe," and to vote against any reduction or cancellation of debt. The law also authorized President Bush to fund opposition media and organizations in Zimbabwe. U.S. officials in international financial institutions were joined by British and Western European officials in ensuring the near-total cutoff of foreign currency flowing into Zimbabwe, a crippling blow for a nation that had to import 100 percent of its oil and 40 percent of its electrical power supply.

(4) Operation Murambatsvina was the first phase of a program to improve living conditions for the urban poor. In this phase, squalid slum dwellings were torn down.

(5) Operation Garikai is the second phase of that effort, in which new homes are being constructed for the urban poor. The intent is to provide decent housing installed with plumbing to former slum dwellers. It is indicative of the nature of Western reporting that much emphasis was given to Operation Murambatsvina, while Garikai has been almost entirely ignored. Western media thereby managed to deliberately distort the project and portray it as simply a malevolent effort to drive people into homelessness.

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