

Not Just a Hitler Moustache

Zimbabwe's anti-foreigner policy evokes the worst of times

In 1990 an American lawyer called Mike Godwin produced a maxim that is now contained in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, appearing as Godwin's Law. This states that "as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1". In other words, it is too easy, as well as being intellectually lazy, to take an action or statement to which one is opposed, and to liken it to something from Hitler's Germany.

But this week the President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, now in his 90th year, did something that evokes the Reich of the 1930s with an eerie precision. Readers will recall that Mr Mugabe won a landslide victory in the presidential election last July. They may not know that one of the platforms on which he stood was the prosecution of a policy for what he calls the "indigenisation" of the Zimbabwean economy.

Put simply indigenisation means that any foreign-owned business in what has been designated a "reserved sector" of the economy must be handed over to native Zimbabweans. Reserved sectors turn out not to be businesses of strategic value to the Zimbabwean state or linked to the country's security, but more or less anything worth any money that can be sequestered without

the economy immediately falling apart.

So beauty salons, hairdresser's, barber shops, estate agencies, bakeries, greengrocer's, craft shops, tobacconists and many more are on a long list of those businesses that foreigners are no longer allowed to own. This week the Mugabe Government announced — at a joint meeting of the “Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Youth, Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment” and the “Thematic Committee on Indigenisation and Empowerment” — that foreign businesses had a month to shut up shop and get out.

The relevant minister told the committees that “some non-indigenous entities are still operating in the reserved sectors” but would face prosecution if they were still operating by January 1. In the meantime, he said, the Government was in the process of identifying native Zimbabweans who could take over these businesses.

So, by 2014 Zimbabwe's rulers will, on the basis of the owners' origins, take businesses away from those who had the ideas for them, who started them up, who invested in them and successfully ran them, and will hand them over to “indigenous” people who — whatever their other qualities — have done none of these things.

This will be a straightforward act of xenophobic theft and in that sense recalls the Nazi campaign of “Aryanisation” that saw the number of Jewish-owned businesses fall by two thirds between 1933 and 1938. Shamefully it was not an unpopular policy. Nor is Mr Mugabe's.

In human rights terms this is a disgrace. It is also staggeringly and tragically stupid. It makes Zimbabwe a place where it would literally be madness to invest or start a business, even if you were a native Zimbabwean. For who knows when the Government, for expedient or populist reasons — citing some invented imperative — might not demand your business be turned over to the State?

The result is far more likely to be impoverishment than “indigenisation”. But by the time those chickens all come home to roost, even Mr Mugabe may have relinquished his iron grip both on Zimbabwe and on life.