Land Distribution in South Africa

What is the issue?

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- South Africa’s land redistribution issue has gained focus with a recent tweet of the U.S. President.
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- It is imperative at this juncture to understand this crucial issue which is worsening South Africa’s inequality.
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What is the recent happening?

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- U.S. President recently contended that white farmers are being killed on a large scale in South Africa, and farms and lands are being expropriated.
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- This has led to renewed racial tensions within and outside South Africa.
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- In response, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa made it clear that South Africa was a profoundly unequal society.
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- He pledged to address this inequality resulting from land dispossession during the colonial and Apartheid eras.
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What is the land redistribution issue?

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- The inequality of land distribution in South Africa is rooted in the colonial 1913 Natives Land Act.
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- The Act reserved almost 93% of the land for the white minority in South

Africa.
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- It thus legalized the historical dispossession of the African population.
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- The 1936 Native Trust and Land Act slightly decreased that share to 87%.
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- Nevertheless, the vast inequality of land ownership persists even today.
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What after democracy?

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- The constitution adopted in 1994 made possible the transition from apartheid to democracy.
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- It was specified that land should be restituted to those dispossessed during the colonial and Apartheid eras.
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- It stipulates that there should be just and equitable compensation for expropriated land.
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- This inspired the “willing-seller, willing-buyer” land redistribution policy of previous governments.
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- Under such a market-based approach, the government would purchase and redistribute land to the dispossessed people.
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- However, progress has been slow for many reasons.
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- These include property owners' refusal to sell, exorbitant prices, and inadequate dispute resolution mechanisms.
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- The slow pace of the implementation led to doubts on the effectiveness and constitutionality of the policy.
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What is the current scenario?

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- **Growth** - The annual growth rate of the country is poor and unemployment

hovers around 25%.
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- South Africa has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world.
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- **Land** - 72% of farms and agricultural holdings are owned by whites.
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- But notably the whites make up only 8.2% of the population.
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- Black South Africans comprise around 80% of the population, but own just 4% of the land.
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- Clearly, land ownership patterns remain skewed against the black majority.
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- But official statistics on land holdings among racial groups are contested on their details.
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Why is land distribution crucial?

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- The World Bank, in its recent study, noted that inequality in South Africa was exacerbated by the
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i. limited titling of property
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ii. limited access to finance
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iii. weak property rights
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iv. limited land valorization
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v. lack of sustainable investment, etc
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- WB has rated unequal distribution and access to land as South Africa’s second greatest obstacle to reducing poverty, after skill deficits.
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- A well-managed system of land distribution is thus crucial to redressing the

country’s economic inequality.
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- Productive land use among the poor is inevitable to curb rising poverty levels.
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- It is also essential to reversing the high unemployment and inequality conditions.
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- The government is thus considering certain land policy reforms.
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What are the recent proposals?

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- The parliament has passed a bill in 2016 under the presidency of Jacob Zuma.
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- It was aimed at ending the “willing-buyer, willing-seller” approach to land reform.
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- It enabled the government to pay at adjudicator value and expropriate land for the public interest.
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- In 2017, a resolution to redistribute land without compensation was backed by the parliament.
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- The proposals target unutilised land, informal settlements, and abandoned inner-city buildings.
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- The implications of these changes for the mining sector could be significant.
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What is the way forward?

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- Trump’s tweets incorrectly suggest that land distribution process is disorderly and unlawful.

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- But certainly, land reform in South Africa is an emotive, complex, and important issue.
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- The competing and conflicting interests have to be balanced for the greater good.
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Source: The Hindu, Brookings

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