

Wednesday,
15th February,
2023

The Myth Of The Rainbow Nation

Issue #08

Xenophobia in South Africa



The attacks on foreign nationals in May 2008 shocked the world, thousands of foreign nationals were displaced, businesses and homes were looted and almost 70 people died. Once again in 2015 and 2019 xenophobia culminated in violence against foreign nationals. What is driving this? In a country that nicknames itself the 'rainbow nation,' [how can xenophobia be so rampant?](#)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu first coined the term 'rainbow nation' in 1994 to describe post-apartheid South Africa. The idea of South Africa as a rainbow nation implied diversity, multiculturalism, acceptance and cohesion. The free elections were a new beginning for South Africa and the term was used to unite South Africans, recognising the suffering of apartheid but relegating it to the past. The term was subsequently popularised by Nelson [Mandela's inauguration speech](#) in 1994:

'We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both Black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity - a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.'

Its use in this speech inspired hope and committed South Africa to pursuing a non-



Bandwagon, Daily Maverick, 26 January 2022.



Xenophobia in South Africa - Shock by Two Important Icons in South Africa, Mail & Guardian, 22 May 2008.

racial society. It is a national myth that continues to permeate South African society despite the social problems that plague the country. Critics of the rainbow nation narrative point to inequalities, and the political visibility and economic prosperity of only a small proportion of the Black population to challenge the trope.

[South Africa's constitution](#) has been acclaimed internationally as being one of the most progressive in the world. It enshrines human rights and demonstrates a commitment to equality. [Despite this South Africa has failed to put an end to xenophobia.](#) Xenophobia has been defined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) as 'attitudes, prejudices, and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity.' The 2006 Southern Africa Migration Programme (SAMP) Xenophobia Survey showed that South Africa exhibits levels of intolerance and hostility to outsiders unlike virtually anything seen internationally. Alarming, opposition to immigration increased in the post-apartheid state. Three rounds of the World Values Survey (WVS) support the SAMP's findings that immigration is widely opposed in South Africa and that opposition to foreigners has increased in the post-apartheid period.

What has made South Africa so anti-immigrant? South Africa's [culture of violence and counter-violence](#) - the result of a violent history of colonialism and apartheid - cannot be separated from its current problem with xenophobia. The colonial state used divide-and-rule tactics to pit different ethnic groups against one another and created deep societal inequalities. These were entrenched by the apartheid state which set up a hierarchical state, built upon, what Jonathan Crush describes as, 'racial and class divisions, animosity, racist immigration policies, a siege mentality and attitudes of uniqueness and superiority' towards the rest of the African continent. South Africa's sense of nationhood has seen many permutations; the South African Communist Party argues that, it reflects and has been shaped by its 'convoluted history of colonisation, resistance politics and glorified togetherness in the aftermath of apartheid.' The current narrative of unity does little to acknowledge the legacies of South Africa's exclusionary and violent history and fails to address the problems that arise as a result. South African migrants have been used as scapegoats; encouraged by in-fighting on immigration policy, irresponsible political statements and an uncritical xenophobic press, xenophobia in South Africa has flourished. Crush argues that attacks on immigrants have become less random and have taken on the character of ethnic cleansing campaigns in other parts of the world as a result of the impunity of perpetrators.

Introduction to [South African Immigration Laws](#)



Alon Skuy, Johannesburg, March 2020
Law enforcement officers conduct random searches as xenophobic unrest sweeps through central Johannesburg

Apartheid Legislation: Aliens Control Act 1991 - the law handed down heavy penalties for illegal immigration; it gave immigration authorities new powers to carry out search and arrests.

1994-2002 - No proactive immigration policy. Despite its base in the apartheid era, the Aliens Control Act remained in place for several years and was responsible for hundreds of thousands of deportations and arrests. Most (90%) were sent to countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Bilateral labour supply agreements with South Africa's neighbours remained in place. This framework formed the 'two-door' policy for immigration: a clearly defined temporary pathway for black migrant workers and a more liberal one for white immigrants looking to stay permanently.

The Refugees Act of 1998 allows asylum seekers to move freely, work, and study in the country during the lengthy adjudication process. However, partly in response to concerns that the asylum system was being used by people without legitimate fear of persecution in order to secure work status, subsequent amendments to the law in 2008, 2011, and 2017 sought to curtail these rights.

2002 - The Aliens Control Act was replaced by the Immigration Act of 2002. This law maintained a posture of preventing irregular migration and promoted skilled labour migration. Amended in 2007 and 2011, the law continues to possess elements of the apartheid era's focus on excluding specific categories of immigrants - mostly low-skilled workers from the SADC region.

Salat Abdullahi [Somalia](#)



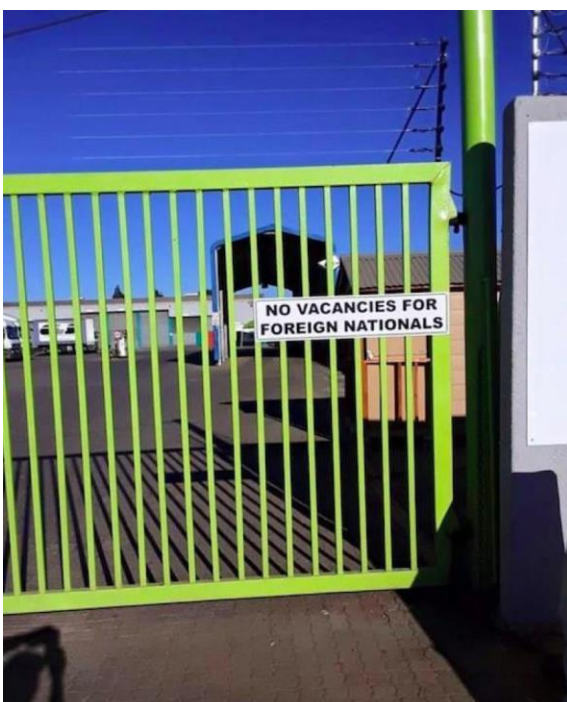
'We can be attacked anytime here in the shop. It is like an ambush attack. We are not safe here.'



Trio of traffic cops walks away while South African citizens loot a foreign-owned business.



Attacks on truck drivers along the N3 between Johannesburg and Durban.



Sign at the gate of a trucking company in Durban that reads, "No Vacancies for Foreign Nationals."

The SAMP report on xenophobia found that South Africans had the most negative perception of African migrants - in 1999, 48% of South Africans believed migrants from neighbouring countries posed a criminal threat. It also concluded that migrants from North America and Europe were regarded more favourably than Africans and Africans from the SADC were more favourably regarded than other Africans. However, these references are purely relative as the majority of South Africans hold a generally negative perception of all migrants regardless of their origin.

Both the SAMP and the WVS found that they could not characterize the typical xenophobe in South Africa, rather xenophobia is so pervasive that it is present in every stratum of society, regardless of race, class or language. These attitudes towards immigrants are mostly informed by the media, hearsay, and other representations rather than actual interactions with foreign nationals. The [South African media](#) has been accused of exacerbating rather than mitigating the spread and intensity of xenophobic sentiment by the SAMP.

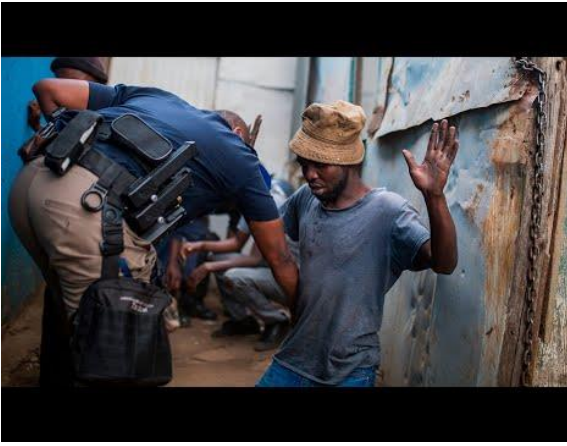
Xenophobia in contemporary South Africa

Isolated incidents of xenophobic violence have been well-documented [since the 1990s](#), however, the incidence of violence has increased dramatically. [The violence of May 2008](#) which broke out in Alexandra, Johannesburg and rapidly spread to seven other provinces, resulted in the deaths of over 60 people, destruction and looting of foreign-owned businesses and property, and displacement. Despite the glaringly obvious xenophobic motivations for these attacks, South African government officials claimed that this was a [criminal incident and South Africans are not xenophobic at all](#). The government appears to believe that criminality and xenophobia are mutually exclusive, consequently the narrative they adopted in the aftermath completely ignored the fact that these attacks were the manifestation of xenophobia.

The government's reluctance to address the xenophobic roots of this violence has created a [culture of fear](#) among immigrants as they anticipate the next attack. Xenophobic sentiment culminated in violence yet again in [2015](#) - in January, 4 people were killed in the course of a week in which looting of foreign-owned businesses was rampant in Soweto. In April, 5 people were killed and hundreds were displaced in Durban. Tensions over limited resources and economic hardship were said to be the root of this violence. Comments made by the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, that foreigners should leave the country have also been said to have triggered the unrest. In the aftermath of these attacks the then [President Jacob Zuma condemned the violence](#) and stated that the government was working on addressing South African citizens' complaints about illegal immigrants who they perceived to be taking over local businesses and perpetrating crime. He also maintained that many of the foreign nationals living in South Africa were there legally and were contributing to the economic development of the country. Despite the acknowledgement of the xenophobic motivations of the attacks little action was taken to stop further violence.

In [2019](#), South Africa was once again plagued by intense [xenophobic violence against foreign truck drivers](#) and foreign nationals. At least 12 people were killed, thousands were displaced and looting of foreign-owned businesses was widespread. It is a familiar story of violence. The impunity of those responsible for xenophobic violence encourages the continuation of scapegoating and attacks on foreign nationals. Simply [condemning xenophobic violence is not enough to stop it](#).

In all of these attacks government and security responses have been reactive and haphazard. There is a general lack of capacity in intelligence gathering, continuing problems with public order policing and increasing political polarisation which have resulted in apathy and paralysis in the on-the-ground police response to xenophobia, despite the systems and legislation that have been put in place. Responding to the sporadic attacks against migrants the South African government launched its National Action Plan to combat xenophobia at the end of March 2019. This was [indicative of the government's commitment to ending the cycle of violence](#) which has plagued the country. However, this measure has failed to put an end to xenophobic violence. South Africa continues to be a hotspot for xenophobic violence, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing social inequalities. Only a year after the plan was launched, Operation Dudula, a xenophobic,



Human Rights Watch video about recent violence against foreign nationals in South Africa.

vigilante organisation, was launched in South Africa. What began as an online movement has since manifested into a physically violent group, the UN has attributed [‘violent protests, vigilante violence, arson targeting migrant-owned homes and businesses,’](#) and the [murder of foreign nationals](#) to the group. Small right-wing populist parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), the Patriotic Alliance (PA), and ActionSA have exploited the positions of migrants to their own political gain. These parties employ violent rhetorics and have contributed to the marginalisation of minorities. The PA’s leader, Gayton Mckenzie, has advocated for the [denial of healthcare to immigrants](#), and has committed the PA to deporting all illegal immigrants in the country if the party was to come to power.

It is unclear how South Africa can escape the cycle of violence it is caught in. However, the first step is accepting that these attacks are not purely criminal and have xenophobic motivations. Next, the government should ensure that perpetrators of crime are punished consistently and political parties that are promoting xenophobia are reprimanded.