

# TRAGEDY OR FARCE?

## XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE AGAINST FOREIGN NATIONALS AND OTHER “OUTSIDERS” IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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*The Migration Issue Briefs are a resource for practitioners. They summarize research and are intended to inform discussions and debates surrounding migration in Southern Africa.*

## Key Messages

- Violence against foreign nationals and internal migrants has been an ongoing feature of post-Apartheid South Africa and while the most intense period of attacks took place in May 2008 and April 2015, it has been a part of the South African socio-spatial fabric since the late 1990s.
- While the violence is often portrayed as something perpetuated by the poorest members of society, it is important to note that the violent breakouts DID NOT occur in sites with the highest percentage of poverty, unemployment, low education and/or the highest of foreign nationals<sup>1</sup>.
- Violence against foreign nationals typically occurs in locales with high (but not highest) levels of economic deprivation, high percentage of male residents, high levels of informal residences and high levels of language diversity (South African and foreign)<sup>2</sup>.
- The key triggers for violence in specific locations is localized competition for political (formal and informal) and economic power where leaders and aspirant leaders mobilize residents to attack and evict foreign nationals within the local communities. In many instances, violence has been organized by business owners with intentions of eliminating competition<sup>3</sup>.
- Violence against foreign nationals and ethnic minorities [‘outsiders’] is a symptom of broader challenges of legitimate and accountable local governance, especially in informal settlements.

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<sup>1</sup> Polzer, 2010

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

- Although government has made some effort to address impunity and scapegoating, the violence is likely to continue if no further efforts are made to effectively hold accountable those in power and criminalize xenophobic attacks<sup>4</sup>.

## Defining Xenophobia

- Although contested in its meaning, xenophobia generally refers to the fear of and hostility towards a foreign ‘stranger’. Despite entrenched prejudices against non-nationals in South Africa, it remains unclear whether violence against them is always motivated by sentiments and attitudes of hatred.
- While anti-foreign or anti-outsider sentiments may not be a direct cause of violence, they serve as a resource for mobilization for ethnic, economic, criminal and political reasons. Outsiders can become scapegoats for economic hardship and are vulnerable to robbery and attack, with little support and protection from residents; the police and the state. Although a majority of the South African population suffers from high levels of precarity, economic and otherwise, outsiders are particularly more vulnerable to ordinary and ‘hate’ crimes<sup>5</sup>.
- While xenophobia and xenophobic violence seem to be topics that emerge in the public media more so during violent attacks (2008 and 2015 etc.), they shape immigrants’ and migrants’ everyday lives and how they negotiate their access to resources and space in South Africa, especially in more urbanized spaces. It is important then to capture and locate major events into the everyday dynamics of “being” an immigrant and/or migrant.
- In the context of xenophobic violence, while there is a plethora of narratives of the struggles and victimized<sup>6</sup> reality of being a migrant and/or immigrant, much is yet to be done on South Africans and their perceptions of migration, migrants and immigrants and

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> This means that any crime targeted at a foreigner *because* they are foreign can be considered xenophobic

<sup>6</sup> Issues of Representation: While it remains true that migrants and immigrants are victims of xenophobic violence, there is a critique of this perspective which neglects to tell multiple sites of people’ lives

how they not only construct difference but also how they conceptualize their relationship to other African countries.

## Background

Xenophobic attacks in South Africa are not exclusively a recent phenomenon<sup>7</sup>. Due to long-standing patterns of labour migration, conflict and economic hardship in neighbouring countries, South Africa has become a primary destination and transit point for many migrants throughout the region and the numbers are likely to increase in the coming years. Despite its promise of democracy and human rights-for all those who live in it- a significant proportion of the country’s population remains highly xenophobic<sup>8</sup>.

The country has, in the last decade, witnessed extreme forms of xenophobic violence. In May 2008, foreign nationals and ethnic minorities were attacked in at least 138 sites across the country, resulting in 62 reported deaths, a third of which were South African citizens from ethnic minorities. Property and belongings were looted and/or destroyed and more than a 100,000 displaced<sup>9</sup>. Hundreds of women and children were attacked and dozens were reported raped<sup>10</sup>. Since then, there has been at least one attack on foreign nationals every month.<sup>11</sup> Many of these have been fatal.

In January 2015, more violent attacks took place in Gauteng and spread to Cape Town with hundreds displaced and at least 178 arrested in connection with the attacks<sup>12</sup>.

In April of 2015 another wave of xenophobic attacks took place in Durban and Gauteng where thousands were again displaced. Up to eight foreign nationals were reported dead and thousands

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<sup>7</sup> Nyamnjoh 2006 in Bekker, 2015

<sup>8</sup> Landau *et al.*, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Landau, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Nord and Assubujji, undated

<sup>11</sup> Landau *et al.*, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Haffejee, 2015

were repatriated and deported. Temporary refugee camps were also set up by the various provincial and local governments<sup>13</sup>.

The attacks apparently started a week after *King Goodwill Zwelithini* was reported saying that foreigners “should pack their bags and go home”<sup>14</sup> and while the violence broke out in small towns and informal settlements in Durban, it quickly spread to other provinces including Gauteng. Zwelithini later hosted an “anti-xenophobia *imbizo*” which was met with mixed responses<sup>15</sup>.

While the general public and international community asked why perpetrators have not been charged, others called for the King to be charged and held accountable for the attacks, with representatives of other African countries calling for South Africa to be banned from the African Union (AU).<sup>16</sup>

In response to the attacks, the government’s inter-ministerial Committee on Migration launched<sup>17</sup> “Operation Fiela” (“Operation Sweep/Clean”), a national task-team established first as an anti-xenophobia initiative to a fight against crime<sup>18</sup> which later morphed into an entity broadly aimed at eliminating criminal activities. The team has been criticized by some for allegedly targeting foreign nationals in their raids<sup>19</sup>, a “state-sponsored xenophobia”<sup>20</sup>. Over two days, a total of 2,908 arrests were made, 1,123 of which were undocumented immigrants, and more than 15,000 undocumented immigrants repatriated-majority of which had opted to be sent back to their home countries (*ibid*). Along with Operation Fiela, government responded to violence against non-nationals with a call for more restrictive borders.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bekker, 2015

<sup>14</sup> Haffejee, 2015

<sup>15</sup> Qukula, 2015

<sup>16</sup> Scales and Sanpath, 2015

<sup>17</sup> Bekker, 2015 and

<sup>18</sup> Nicolson, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Qukula, 2015

<sup>20</sup> Maromo, 2015

<sup>21</sup> Landau and Chiume, 2015

In response to the xenophobic violence, other African States, particularly the sub-Saharan states threatened to deport South African nationals and businesses in their countries while others sent buses to repatriate citizens from South Africa<sup>22</sup>.

### Research by the African Centre for Migration & Society

Studies done by the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) complicate the understanding and more superficial understandings of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Common conceptions of what causes xenophobic violence include poor socio-economic conditions, competition for resources, poor service delivery, organized crime and a “third force”<sup>23</sup>. Bekker (2015) argues that both the 2008 and 2015 xenophobic incidents were a result of the frustrations of unfulfilled expectations post-democracy and not a result of xenophobic sentiments. Such perceptions, irrefutable as they are, have in some way led to the dismissal of xenophobia and xenophobic violence as a matter of urgency.

While xenophobic violence has been understood as a result of unemployment and poverty and/or dismissed as an act of criminality, the work produced by the ACMS has shown that the following factors: percentage of residents in absolute poverty; high levels of unemployment; percentage of youth; percentage of people with low education and the percentage of foreign nationals **do not** explain differences in sites that experience violence and those that do not. Violent sites were characterized by: high levels of **economic deprivation**; above average percentages of **male residents**; high levels of **informal housing** and high levels of **language diversity**-including South African and foreign<sup>24</sup>.

### Triggers

Despite the persistence of xenophobia and xenophobic violence in South Africa, little has, until recently, been done to understand triggers of violence against foreign nationals and ethnic minorities. Based on in-depth and rigorous field work in communities around the country, two

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<sup>22</sup> Bekker, 2015

<sup>23</sup> Polzer, 2010

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 4

factors emerged as key triggers: **competition for formal and informal local leadership positions** and **competition for business opportunities**. This, according to findings, happens in places where formal structures of local governance are weak or considered illegitimate by the local community<sup>25</sup>.

- Leaders and aspirant leaders mobilise residents to attack and evict foreign nationals as a means of strengthening and legitimizing their power base in the local community.
- These include leaders who are either elected as formal representatives including ward councillors, CPF members etc. and/or those who are informal i.e. self-appointed, business owners etc. It is important to note that these leaders were not recognized as legitimate by all residents of the areas they were based in<sup>26</sup>.
- Business owners mobilize township communities to organize the eviction of foreign traders, threatening foreign-owned shops with forced closures and drastic measures<sup>27</sup>.
- A climate of impunity regarding everyday violence and persecution of non-nationals and other marginalized members of society lowers the perceived cost of mobilization against them<sup>28</sup>.

In cases of legitimate leadership, local leaders prevented and contained violence against foreign nationals.

- Areas adjacent to those where violence occurred prevented it from spreading by either protecting foreign nationals and/or assisted them to temporarily evacuate while protecting

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Misago and Wilhem-Solomon, 2011 in Segatti and Monson, 2011

<sup>28</sup> Polzer, 2010

their belongings despite the areas having similar, if not greater, levels of poverty, unemployment and service delivery backlogs.<sup>29</sup>

### Implications and recommendations

Violence against foreign nationals and ethnic minorities is a symptom of broader challenges of legitimate and accountable local governance, especially in informal settlements. This, amongst other things, includes the lack of trust/social capital amongst the black population in post-apartheid South Africa<sup>30</sup>. Misago and Monson (2009) further argue that the constant repetition of xenophobic violence against foreign nationals is due to the state’s reluctance to offer protection and assistance to foreigners, perpetuating social instability, violence and injustice.

The work produced by ACMS highlights xenophobic violence as a symptom of vigilantism, violent service delivery protests and incidents of political violence at the local level. As a result, interventions that improve accountability and oversight of local government structures and community-level governance structures, including monitoring local government election campaigns, are crucial for minimizing and possibly preventing violence<sup>31</sup>.

Despite the uncertainty of its effectiveness, the provision of training and education within local government<sup>32</sup> and in the general public has also been flagged<sup>33</sup> as a possible and major remedy to the mediation of violence against foreigners. However, other scholars argue that “Without a radical socio-economic transformation, the country will remain beset with unresolved challenges rooted in the past.”<sup>34</sup> Yet one is left wondering if such assertions are based as much on ideology as empirics.

Further research needs to be done in understanding how difference is constructed in everyday life in ways that lead to violent attacks on foreign nationals and other ethnic minorities. Much of the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Steenkamp, 2009

<sup>31</sup> Polzer, 2010

<sup>32</sup> Palmary, 2004

<sup>33</sup> Solomon and Kosaka, 2013

<sup>34</sup> Everatt, 2011



research that currently exists focuses on immigrants’ and migrants’ victimized realities. More research also needs to be conducted in understanding cases where xenophobic violence does not occur, what is it about these spaces which makes them different? What could potentially be learnt from them?

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