

Xenophobic Attacks of 2008

Abstract: The 2008 South African xenophobic attacks marked the peak of violence against foreign nationals since the end of apartheid. While migrant labor has long been an integral part of the South African economy, xenophobia materialized in 1994 due to false perceptions of foreign nationals and dysfunctional immigration policies. Since 2008, xenophobia continues to resonate in South Africa.

Keywords: Foreign nationals, human rights, immigration, migrant laborers, xenophobia, 2008.

Xenophobia, the fear or hatred of something perceived as abnormal or strange, is commonly used to describe the fear of a group of people who, as a result of xenophobic thoughts, have become alienated within a societal setting (Centre for Human Rights, 2009). Xenophobia arises as stereotypes against the specific group and can escalate into extreme actions that provoke persecution and violence. In 2008, xenophobic attacks in South Africa marked the climax of violence against foreign nationals since the end of [apartheid](#). This xenophobic phenomenon is not unique to South Africa, but has happened in several localities throughout history. The most notorious, the Holocaust, resulted from a continued fear of ‘European Jewry,’ with origins traced back to the eleventh century Crusades. Other examples of extreme xenophobia include, but by no means are limited to, Japanese internment camps in the United States during World War II, the Rwandan genocide, and the suppression of culture and expulsion of land occupied by indigenous North Americans.

As with historic examples of xenophobia, the 2008 xenophobic attacks were not instantaneous. Paradoxically, migrant workers have been the backbone to South Africa's economy since the nineteenth century, but it was not until 1994 when xenophobic sentiments against migrants surfaced and resulted in violent clashes. Scattered attacks on foreign nationals gradually intensified and climaxed in May 2008, where more than 60 people were killed and thousands became displaced. These attacks reflect the negative feelings towards migrant workers due to various perceived disparities between South African locals and immigrants. Continued xenophobic feelings and sporadic outbreaks of violence reveal the government's lack of initiative to mitigate these destructive thoughts.

A large part of South Africa's history was the constant movement of people that enviably mixed cultures. According to historian Patrick Harries, this was certainly the case with the Khoi and San people, who not only moved east when Europeans arrived in the Cape, but also mixed among themselves (i.e. [Khoisan](#)) and soon came into contact with Bantu-speaking nations. While nations fought, contact also marked the exchange in cultural practices and values, languages, and economies. Chiefdoms served as the center of this mixture of culture and many grew from absorbing displaced people (Harries, 1994). Growing conflicts over materials and resources ultimately facilitated fluidity of nations across the South African landscape. Pressure from western European expansion, along with tensions between chiefdoms and nations, resulted in some of the most violent conflicts in central and east South Africa. This conflict over resources and land vaguely mirrors the contemporary perception of competition for resources between migrants and South Africans, which was a substantial driver of the 2008 xenophobic attacks.

In the late nineteenth century, the [discovery of diamonds](#) at the Kimberley Mine and gold at the Rand Mine brought migrant laborers from neighboring countries. Even as late as the

1960s, foreign laborers made up eighty percent of the mineworkers, who arrived mainly from Mozambique, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, but also from Zimbabwe and Malawi (Human Rights Watch, 1998). Income from the mines allowed migrants to economically provide for families and increase their social status back home. Like the mixing of cultures caused, in part by the arrival of the Europeans and the presence of chiefdoms, mines served as a means of conglomerating people from various parts of Africa, but ultimately divided the men according to their nationality. Administrators of the mine compounds enforced segregation among nations in order to exert more effective control and to increase competition. As a result, ethnic consciousness played an important role in the organization and daily life at mining compounds (Harries, 1994). Stereotypes and other generalizations were likely a part of the daily banter and added to the competitive atmosphere of the mine. It was perhaps this ethnic consciousness among migrants that may have served as the origins for xenophobic sentiments. Likewise, white domination in apartheid-era South Africa was essential in facilitating racial awareness.

South Africa continues to attract migrants from neighboring countries. For migrants who come from surrounding poverty-stricken nations, South Africa offers the potential for economic advancement and access to social provisions like education, infrastructure, and healthcare (Friebel *et al.*, 2013). Other migrants seek asylum from their home countries, like refugees from Zimbabwe and Somalia fleeing from economic and political crises (McConnell, 2009; York, 2009; de Jager & Hopstock, 2011).

According to Human Rights Watch, South African officials became alarmed with migration rates after the end of apartheid in 1994 and were worried that an influx of foreigners would negatively impact the transition from apartheid to democracy (Human Rights Watch, 1998; McConnell, 2009). Further reasoning explained that illegal migrants would strain

infrastructure without benefiting South Africa as a whole. Government officials also equated increased immigration with enlarged crime levels (Human Rights Watch, 1998). These ‘masked’ xenophobic statements gave South African citizens faux reasoning to not only feel threatened by immigration, but an excuse to have anger towards migrants and inevitably push back with violence. Since 1994, xenophobia has materialized and resulted in South Africans harassing hundreds of foreign nationals with violence (de Jager & Hopstock, 2011). Just one year after the end of apartheid, South Africans in the [Alexandra township](#) launched the campaign known as ‘*Buyelekhaya*’ (Go Back Home), in which serious attacks against non-South Africans occurred through forced evictions (Human Rights Watch, 1998). South Africans rationalized these attacks by blaming undocumented migrants for crime, unemployment, and other social problems. The Immigration Act, in 2005, was the government’s attempt to manage migration and mitigate xenophobia, but the legislation had two unintended results. According to development researcher Christy McConnell, the Act’s increased enforcement of illegal migrants exacerbated xenophobic sentiments and increased undocumented immigrants, inevitably pushing illegal migration further underground (McConnell, 2009).

While the roots of xenophobia can be traced back to South Africa’s history of exclusion through the promotion of ethnic and racial consciousness, the immediate causes of the 2008 attacks ignited from surfacing community perceptions and xenophobic sentiments. During the transition from an apartheid government to democracy, South Africans had expectations of improved access to resources such as education, infrastructure, healthcare, and employment (de Jager & Hopstock, 2011). However, poverty continued to plague communities, as inequality between citizens increased (McConnell, 2009). As a result, South Africans felt as though the government was neglecting social problems and had not taken action to provide for its people

(Human Sciences Research Council, 2008). Migration rates inflamed xenophobic feelings, as foreigners were blamed for the perceived inability of the government to provide aid and were therefore seen as antagonists (de Jager & Hopstock, 2011). In addition, South Africans considered migrants as competition for these already limited resources and a perceived shortage of jobs (Sharp, 2008). However, this common belief that every job occupied by a migrant means one less job for a South African carried no evidence and was at times downright false, as some migrant work actually increased employment opportunities for South Africans in various job fields (McConnell, 2009). Foreigners in South Africa were also associated with increased crime rates, the spread of disease, and other social issues; beliefs likely formulated after government statements regarding the control for immigration as a solution for ‘migrant’ crime (Centre for Human Rights, 2009). Inefficient immigration policy also aggravated xenophobic feelings among citizens, as the [African National Congress](#) (ANC) failed to make constructive changes to existing policies. Instead, the government approached immigration control reform through enforcement and deportation, rather than effective border control (de Jager & Hopstock, 2011). As seen with the 2005 Immigration Act, this legislation increased undocumented migrants and also intensified xenophobic actions. The 2008 amendments to the Act did little to improve immigration policy or the relations between South Africans and migrants. Community members took it upon themselves to perform forced removals with the justification of helping the government crack down on undocumented migrants (Human Rights Watch, 1998). This lawlessness only encouraged xenophobia towards foreign nationals and resulted in the increased growth and intensity of violent episodes leading up to the 2008 xenophobic attacks.

Xenophobic violence peaked in May 2008 as attacks began in the Alexandra township and spread across [Gauteng province](#), but quickly extended throughout the country. Rioters

targeted migrants living in townships and informal settlements on the outskirts of urban areas (Friebel *et al.*, 2013). News of unimaginable brutality included reports of several migrants burned to death, raped women, and destroyed properties (Mail and Guardian, 2008a). An isolated report from Actonville's police spokesperson Constable Godin Nyathi reported that the owner of a Benoni construction company died inside his house when protestors lit the structure on fire. This stemmed from mob allegations that claimed he hired foreign workers over local South Africans (Mail and Guardian, 2008a). Lasting until June, this xenophobic violence resulted in the death of approximately 60 migrants, with hundreds injured. (McConnell, 2009; de Jager & Hopstock, 2011). Another report from spokesperson Zweli Dlamini of the Ekurhuleni metro police stated that after the xenophobic attacks began, 'Hundreds of foreigners [were] housed at the local community centre [in Boksburg]. The number [...] rapidly escalat[ed] and [the police had to] look for another shelter' (Mail and Guardian, 2008a). Once the attacks ceased, authorities estimated that hundreds of thousands were displaced (McConnell, 2009; de Jager & Hopstock, 2011).

Responses to the xenophobic violence were equally shocking. Media sources appeared outraged by the event and condemned the acts of the attackers, but had the tendency to dehumanize the attackers by producing dramatized headlines like " 'War on the Streets' and 'All Hell Break[ing] Loose' (from the *Sowetan*, 19 May 2008)" (Sandwith, 2010). Too concerned with the actual acts of violence, the media failed to address xenophobic feelings and perpetrators were ambiguously masked as an inconceivable mob of criminals. Therefore, some South African citizens were unable to grasp the gravity of the xenophobic attacks, nor the fact that many perpetrators were neighbors and fellow citizens. Other media sources, like popular *The Daily Sun*, reported the violence with headlines entitled 'War on Aliens' and failed to denounce the

attacks through biased and unbalanced reporting (Mail & Guardian, 2008b). The continued use of the term ‘alien’ was considered derogatory and thought to perpetuate xenophobic feelings toward foreign nationals (Media Monitoring Project, 2008). Commonly read by the working-class, the *Daily Sun* ‘endorse[d] the view that South Africans had good reason to hate foreigners, given their alleged involvement in crime’ (Sandwith, 2010). This irresponsible coverage caused the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) to report *The Daily Sun* to the Press Ombudsman and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHCR) (Media Monitoring Project, 2008). Most sources did not address xenophobia as a national problem, nor challenge the government’s passivity to solve the problem.

The ANC’s issued statements reveal government complacency, as immediate solutions to ending the xenophobic violence included merely, ‘support[ing] the police in their work they must do to rid our streets, hostels, and informal settlements of criminals’ (Mantashe, 2008). The ANC sought to cleanse itself of any responsibility when [Gwede Mantashe](#), the Secretary General of the ANC stated, ‘our policies are not at fault...’ (Mantashe, 2008). Even [President Thabo Mbeki](#) denied that the violence was from xenophobia, but rather blamed the ‘people who acted with criminal intent’ (AFP, 2008). The government defined the xenophobia attacks as representations of criminal activity and bigotry, which had the potential of ‘revers[ing] and undermin[ing] [South Africa’s] historical achievement’ (Cabinet Meeting Statement, 2008). Like the media, the ANC blamed the xenophobic attacks on obscure perpetrators who were comprised of ‘youth’ and ‘hooligans...running amok’ (Bapela, 2008). While government-funded human rights groups proposed programs to tackle issues of xenophobia, the ruling party has yet to directly combat xenophobia. Director of the African Centre for Migration and Society Loren Landau contends

that the ANC's strategy to mitigate xenophobia was to 'severely restrict immigration and foreign business ownership.' National discussions regarding 'social cohesion and discrimination almost entirely exclude[d] questions of ethnicity and immigration,' which are key factors in addressing xenophobia (Landau, 2013).

Despite overall South African government complacency in the wake of the 2008 attacks, many non-profit, non-governmental, and foreign government funded organizations began to analyze xenophobia through interviews with citizens and migrants to gain perspective on the attacks. These organizations all concluded their research with similar policy recommendations, which included the reconfiguration of immigration policies (Human Sciences Research Council, 2008; Centre for Human Rights, 2009) and the implementation of criminal sanctions and proper prosecutions for those guilty of xenophobic actions (Centre for Human Rights, 2009; Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative, 2009). Other organizations found that law enforcement and community education to address stereotyping, profiling, and other xenophobia issues would greatly reduce xenophobic attitudes (Human Sciences Research Council, 2008; Centre for Human Rights, 2009; Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative, 2009).

Just one year after the 2008 xenophobic attacks, refugees were still targeted for their foreign identities. Still without shelter, many refugees sought safety in overcrowded churches, away from hostile South Africans (York, 2009). The South African government promised temporary migrants easy access to employment, healthcare, and education for six months, but many 'are still denied the healthcare and schooling that they are legally entitled to receive' (York, 2009). The CoRMSA reported in 2008 that the exclusion of rights and services was extremely likely because of delayed implementation (McConnell, 2009). Unfortunately, this idea of the government attempting to provide aid for foreign nationals only provides fuel to ignite the

xenophobic fire once again, and therefore, many foreign nationals continue to live in a state of constant fear (Figure 1).



Figure 1: “Patricia leans out of her shack in Masiphumelele settlement to look for her next-door neighbour Beauty. The shacks consist of one room and cost R500 a month to rent. This is double the price that locals pay. They live together in a small community of Zimbabweans within the township – as a minority group they still fear potential repercussions from the wave of xenophobia that swept through South Africa in 2009. They have electricity, but no running water. The toilets are communal” (Rixon, 2011). *Paved with Gold*, 26 February 2011. Photograph by Nikki Rixon. Permission: [Africa Media Online](http://AfricaMediaOnline.com).

Mainly threatening foreign national shopkeepers, attacks in 2011 resulted in approximately 120 deaths; 2012 resulted in approximately 140 deaths, and the death tolls continue to rise in 2013 (Landau, 2013). In 2013, at least three major incidents are being reported each week, and like the 2011 attacks, most are ‘rooted in business competition’ between South Africans and foreign nationals (Landau, 2013). Like the government’s response in 2008, the spike in 2013 violence was labeled ‘criminal in nature, rather than xenophobic’ (Patel, 2013).

While Department of International Relations and Cooperation Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane spoke of the government's 'strongest condemnation of the recent attacks and killing of Somali and other foreign nationals in [South Africa],' the minister confirmed the government's belief that xenophobia stemmed from criminal-based violence (Patal, 2013). Many speculate that the remedy to end xenophobia can only begin with open and honest dialogue between local communities (both citizens and migrants) and government officials to discuss and formulate strategies to help end the reoccurring violence (Human Sciences Research Council, 2008).

South Africa's history of exclusion through ethnic and racial consciousness has greatly influenced the current perceptions of foreign nationals. These negative perceptions have resulted in xenophobic violence and reflect the negative feelings towards migrant workers due to various perceived disparities between South African locals and immigrants. The 2008 xenophobic attacks marked the most brutal and extensive xenophobic violence in South Africa's contemporary history. Xenophobia continues to plague the townships of South Africa and reveals both the government's lack of initiative to mitigate these destructive thoughts and the lack of civilian accountability to combat xenophobia.

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