South Africa – Xenophobia or Inequality?

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1. Introduction

South Africa's recurring xenophobic demonstrations and attacks against foreign nationals have become one of the country's most pressing social and political challenges.

In April and May 2026, widespread, aggressive anti-immigration demonstrations were held across major South African cities. These protests rapidly deteriorated into vigilante violence, public assaults, and the looting of foreign-owned properties, resulting in the deaths of multiple nationals.

The history of South Africa is well known. Apartheid officially began in 1948 with the Afrikaner-dominated National Party. Following the end of Apartheid, South Africa became a major destination for migrants and refugees from other African countries due to its relatively stronger economy and political stability. Migrants arrived from countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, and Ethiopia seeking employment, safety, and better living conditions.

However, despite the democratic transition, many South Africans continued to experience poverty, unemployment, inequality, and poor service delivery. Frustration among citizens gradually created hostility toward foreign nationals, who were often accused of "taking jobs," increasing crime, and overburdening public services.

2. Spill over from Apartheid and Economic Failure

Xenophobia in South Africa is not a new phenomenon. Although South Africa is often celebrated as the "Rainbow Nation" after the end of Apartheid in 1994, tensions between local citizens and foreign African nationals have existed for decades. Many immigrants especially from other African countries moved to South Africa in search of economic opportunities, political stability, and safety. South Africa's relatively stronger economy and industrial development made it one of the most attractive destinations on the continent.

However, since 1998 South Africa has experienced a devastating trajectory of anti-immigrant violence that escalated from localized, lethal incidents into large-scale, internationally recognized crises in 2008 and 2015. The subsequent major outbreak in September 2019, which resulted in 12 deaths and widespread commercial destruction, underscores how these recurring cycles of violence inflict severe humanitarian tolls while actively fracturing South Africa's critical regional diplomatic relationships.

2021-2024 also saw constant anti-immigrant riots and attacks on foreign nationals. A full-blown movement was formed known as Operation Dudula ("to force out" in Zulu).

The consequences of these attacks continued to extend far beyond local tensions, affecting South Africa's economy, diplomatic relations, and standing across the African continent.

During Apartheid, the majority of the country were shut out from economic opportunity, education and even segregated into ghettos. Since the end of Apartheid, a concern still remains that inequality still exists, with the majority of people not having access to these promised opportunities of democracy.

South Africa is described as one of the best African countries maintaining a good position in the developing global 4IR (Fourth industrial revolution technologies) landscape, which was estimated in 2019 to create up to 4.5 million new jobs by 2030. Yet the unemployment rate has continued to rise.

This suggests the roots of xenophobia are deeply linked to historical, economic, and social inequalities. Today, South Africa has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, particularly among young people, with an unemployment rate of 27.6% and youth unemployment standing at 55.2% according to the Quarterly Labour Force survey by Statistics South Africa in 2019. In such an environment, frustration often turns into anger directed at foreigners, who are seen as competitors for jobs, housing, healthcare, and small business opportunities. And since 2024, the worsening socioeconomic conditions have fuelled anti-immigrant activism and the rise of additional groups like March and March.

Yet, according to former Apartheid-era negotiator Roelf Meyer, South Africa's post-Apartheid national unity and democratic reconciliation did not fail, but the country's persistent economic failures are what continue to fuel social division and frustration across its communities. In a similar argument, Thebe Ikalafeng writing for Newafrican Magazine argued that anti-immigrant violence in South Africa is part of a broader, historically failed continental pattern of "Afrophobia" and scapegoating, where leaders weaponize legal or ethnic identity to blame migrants for structural economic problems that actually stem from deep failures of domestic governance, with examples like Nigerians being expelled from Ghana in 1969, and the reserve in 1983.

3. Illegality of these attacks and Economic Consequences

South Africa's constitution guarantees fundamental human rights, dignity, and equality to all individuals within its borders, rather than restricting these protections solely to citizens. Furthermore, South Africa is a state party to both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Both frameworks legally obligate the state to protect everyone within its jurisdiction from violence motivated by discrimination, including bias based on ethnicity, social origin, or birth. South Africa is also a signatory to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

And it is important to emphasize that most foreign nationals who have fallen victim to these attacks have their proper documentation and have no links to any crime, further rendering illegal the unauthorized deadline of June 30 by some of these anti-immigration groups for foreigners to leave the country.

During periods of unrest, widespread looting of shops, destruction of businesses, and severe disruptions to commercial activity occur. Consequently, the economic toll of xenophobic violence in South Africa has been profound. Foreign nationals own a significant share of small businesses in townships and urban centres.

Beyond localized losses, xenophobic violence actively deters foreign direct investment and diminishes tourism. Investors are increasingly reluctant

to commit capital to a market perceived as unstable or socially fractured. Repeated outbreaks of violence foster systemic uncertainty, eroding confidence in South Africa's capacity to maintain social stability and safeguard vulnerable populations. Moreover, the physical destruction of businesses and infrastructure during these riots puts severe financial strain on already struggling local economies. Ultimately, xenophobia undermines regional economic integration across the continent. As one of Africa's largest economies, South Africa depends heavily on trade and labour mobility within the Southern African region. Hostility toward migrants severely strains these bilateral economic relationships and weakens collective cooperation within broader African economic frameworks.

4. Diplomatic and International Relations

Historically, migration has always been part of Southern Africa. During the colonial and Apartheid eras, migrant labour systems brought workers from neighbouring countries into South African mines and industries. Ironically, many African countries also supported South Africa's liberation struggle against Apartheid. Countries such as Zambia, Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe hosted South African exiles and liberation movements like the African National Congress (ANC). This history makes modern xenophobic violence particularly painful for many Africans, who view South Africa as a country that once benefited from continental solidarity.

South Africa's diplomatic relations with other African countries have periodically suffered because of xenophobic attacks. Countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique have strongly condemned attacks on their citizens living in South Africa. In some cases, protests have erupted outside South African diplomatic missions abroad, while political leaders across Africa have criticized the violence. Ghana, for example, summoned the South African envoy regarding the attacks on foreigners.Meanwhile, Nigeria announced a "voluntary repatriation" program for its nationals after two were killed as part of the recurring violence in April by personnel of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in Port Elizabeth. One of them, identified as Ekpenyong Andrew, was arrested, and days later, his corpse was discovered in the Booysens area of Pretoria. The other, Amaramiro Emmanuel, died due to injuries he sustained from an attack by the security personnel. Nigeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bianca Odumegwu-Ojukwu, disclosed that 130 Nigerians in South Africa have already indicated their willingness to return home.

Ghana already evacuated 300 of its citizens amid rising safety concerns.

5. Government Response to Xenophobia

Despite these tensions, South Africa has continued to maintain diplomatic engagement with neighbouring states and regional organizations such as

the African Union and the Southern African Development Community. The government has frequently reassured African partners that xenophobia does not represent official state policy. Diplomatic efforts have focused on preventing long-term regional fallout while emphasizing cooperation on migration, security, and economic development.

The South African government has consistently condemned xenophobic violence publicly, describing it as criminal behaviour that contradicts the values of the country's constitution. Foreign Minister Ronald Lamola recently warned against civilians taking immigration enforcement into their own hands; but critics say prevention is weak, arrests are limited, and political rhetoric sometimes fuels tensions instead of easing them.

The government has also faced criticism for inconsistencies in migration policy and political rhetoric surrounding undocumented immigration and anti-immigration. Some politicians have adopted stricter language on immigration in response to public frustration, while civil society groups warn that such rhetoric can indirectly legitimize xenophobic attitudes. While others have simply called out videos and reports of xenophobic attacks as fake news intended to further damage South Africa's international reputation as a bastion of human rights. Recall that South Africa had in 2024 taken a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This global human rights posture, however, faces sharp geopolitical friction and challenge even as the Trump administration still aims to pursue claims of an unfolding genocide of white South Africans.Minister Khumbudzo Ntshavheni said, without specifying which footage she was talking about, that "the fake videos and images are not only fake, but they are intended to undermine the good reputation of South Africa internationally and undermine the country's pursuit of a better Africa agenda".

In recent years, courts and civil society organizations have increasingly challenged anti-immigrant activism. Like earlier mentioned, the South Gauteng High Court issued an injunction against supporters of Operation Dudula, preventing them from blocking migrants from accessing healthcare facilities. Organizations such as the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa have continued advocating for migrant protection and social cohesion.

In April 2026, South Africa promised a crackdown on xenophobic attacks after Ghana protests, but the violence and tensions are still growing. Serious actions are yet to be seen. Migrants fear for their lives, and it seems they do not feel protected, as these vigilantes are rarely arrested, in some cases, law enforcement is even helping the aggressors.

6. Conclusion

The xenophobic demonstrations in South Africa reveal the deep socioeconomic frustrations that continue to shape post-Apartheid society. While migrants are often scapegoated for unemployment and inequality, the roots

of these tensions lie in structural economic challenges and unresolved historical inequalities. So, to the question behind this entire brief – xenophobia or inequality? The answer is not very simple, but to try to put it simply, there are elements of both. While economic challenges are at the root of the anti-immigration sentiment, experts have revealed that domestic failures are to blame and positions against foreign nationals does not improve the situation, rather the consequences of xenophobic violence damage South Africa's economy, weakening regional diplomacy, and undermining its image as a champion of African unity and global human rights. Addressing these issues will require not only stronger protection for foreign nationals, but also long-term economic reforms and efforts to reduce inequality and social exclusion.

Furthermore, repeated violence creates cycles of hatred and instability that affect future generations. Instead of addressing the real issues, xenophobia risks becoming a dangerous distraction that divides ordinary Africans against one another.

Ending xenophobia requires more than police intervention. It requires political leadership, education, and economic reform. Leaders must avoid inflammatory language and promote social cohesion. Schools and media should educate citizens about African history, migration, and the importance of continental solidarity. Governments must also improve border management and immigration systems fairly and transparently, while addressing unemployment and poverty among South Africans themselves.