

XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA – A BRIEF SUMMARY by Alice Wamundiya

SOUTH AFRICA AND XENOPHOBIA

Xenophobia in South Africa is a phenomenon synonymous with violence and hatred towards 'foreigners'. Yet despite its notoriety, xenophobia in South Africa has been one of those phenomenon that are little understood and under researched, and seem to only attract attention when they result in violent outbreaks. So what is xenophobia, and most importantly, how has it risen and evolved does it fit in within the South African Society?

Xenophobia is defined by Heinemann English Dictionary as fear or hatred of foreigners or people from different cultures. In general xenophobia is a phenomenon that has become familiar both in South Africa and abroad. However, as concerns South Africa, the phenomenon is much more complex as the types of foreigners who are often targeted by xenophobic actions are black 'foreigners' from Africa, despite South Africa being host to foreigners from all over the world.

HISTORIC OVERVIEW ON XENOPHOBIA

PRE - 1990s

The so called 'fear and dislike' of foreigners was expressed in the form of hostile anti-immigration policies which favoured white labour immigrants while at the same time discouraging black immigrant workers. The Mozambican and Lesotho migrant workers, especially mine and farm workers of that time bore the brunt of these race driven policies, remaining undocumented and unintegrated until the dawn of democracy in 1994. This systematic targeting and denoting of the 'other' as different and unequal resulted in the beginning of subsequent overt xenophobic tendencies, expressed namely through negative stereotypes of black Africans and the derogatory naming of them as '*Amakwerekwere*', allegedly based on the linguistic noises they made in their foreign languages.

1994 - Post 1994, the opening of South Africa's borders to the world for the first time in decades resulted in increased migration flows to South Africa, and subsequently an increased visibility of these so called 'foreigners' within South African society. Most importantly, black immigrants from the continent and elsewhere moved into historically black communities, bringing them into close contact with their local counterparts. Integration of these immigrants into local communities or townships proved to be a severe problem, given South Africa's history of divisive policies, which had not been addressed. This only served to exacerbate existing tensions and stereotypes concerning 'foreigners'.

2000s – CURRENT

The fading post election euphoria of the 1990s, in South Africa, characterised by growing inequality between the haves and the have-nots, high unemployment rates, high crime levels and

other social economic ills produced a new wave of anti - black immigrant sentiment in South Africa, as black immigrants become the most convenient and reachable targets.

Most importantly the perception that black 'foreigners' who had settled in South Africa post 1994 had become financially and economically more successful compared to their local counterparts, (mainly through illegitimate means) served to exacerbate these tensions and increase antagonisms.

By the time the 2008 financial crisis reached its zenith globally, local tensions against migrants had similarly reached boiling point, and by the the first outbreak of xenophobic violence, killing many migrants of African origin, and the displacement of thousands others.

Two well-documented examples are the xenophobic violence that took place in May 2008, which left more than sixty refugees and other foreign nationals dead and thousands more displaced. The second example were the threats and violence targeting foreigners post the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup (News24, 2010). Others are subjected to having their properties and shops looted by locals (News24, 2010), and sometimes shop owners are killed.

In periods between 2010 and 2015, sporadic xenophobic violence targeted towards black immigrants have persisted, evidenced by looting and burning of foreign owned shops and property.

In 2015, public comments from Zulu King Zwelithini condemning the "influx of foreigners" and calling for the "deportation of foreign nationals ... to prevent [them] from inconveniencing locals" unleashed another wave of xenophobic violence, concentrated mainly in the KwaZulu Natal area.

Most recently in early 2017, widely circulated anonymous social media messages began to appear, calling for the ousting of 'illegal foreigners' from South Africa. Subsequently, xenophobic violence once again broke out in the capital city of Pretoria, producing more of the same in terms of violence and looting and displacement of black immigrants.

RESPONSES TO XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

From 2008 onward, many stakeholders, from the international community to regional bodies and the private sector; national government, civil society organizations, religious organisations and migrants organisations have repeatedly condemned xenophobic violence in South Africa.

In particular, migrant organisations have continuously led the many peaceful protest marches organised towards condemning xenophobia and it's accompanying violence.

Some of these protests have led to clashes with some locals who hold opposing views to that of the migrants, often requiring police intervention to restore peace.

2017 saw another iteration of the continued xenophobic violence against immigrants of African origin living in South Africa. However, two new elements emerged.

First, protesting locals were able to, for the first time in a long time, articulate the so called 'targets of their protests', by claiming to only being interested in ousting so called 'illegal immigrants', and not simply all foreigners. Although this in itself is less than desirable situation, as migration control falls within the ambit of the state, it is however a positive step towards the locals' understanding of the different types of migrants and immigrants living in South Africa, and said migrants' accompanying rights.

Secondly, in addition to organising peaceful protests marches against xenophobia, immigrants targeted and caught in the February 2017 attacks have elected to protect themselves and also retaliate, should they be personally targeted.

Finally, Africans in other countries have shown solidarity with black immigrants in South Africa experiencing xenophobia, by allegedly targeting South African owned businesses abroad.

Going forward, it is clear that the issue of xenophobia in South Africa is far from being resolved. Much still needs to be done, although consensus on how and by whom remains elusive.