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## **The democratic South Africa between violence and xenophobia**

### **ABSTRACT**

This research is about the rise of South Africa's xenophobic violence after the fall of the Apartheid's segregationist regime. Since 1994 (the year democratic South Africa was born) the hope of creating a "rainbow nation" was not fulfilled and the country is still heavily afflicted by violence, corruption, poverty and unemployment, problems that are affecting a growing majority of the population, especially black South Africans. In this environment of misery and precarity, prejudices and stereotypes thrive along with the fear of foreigners, which make up just a little part of the total population but are continuously blamed for the actual situation the country is in. These popular beliefs are the center of a defamatory campaign from politicians and institutions, and have been amplified even more in these last years by social media. But if we look deeper into South African society, we'll see that xenophobia is also profoundly connected to racism and afrophobia, a particular type of xenophobia directed towards African immigrants. Therefore, xenophobia cannot be explained without looking at the political and social context in which it prevailed, nor its origin in a not so distant past, characterized by violence and racial segregation. Using a sociological approach and relying on statistics, South African and international journalistic sources and detailed reports made by the scientific world and various NGOs, this research proposes to look at xenophobia describing the social context, the attacks' timeline, the role of politician, social media and xenophobic movements; While also delving deeper into South Africans world of hate and frustration and their ways to cope with post-apartheid broken promises, a corrupted political class, and rising poverty.

**Keywords:** South Africa, Rainbow Nation, Apartheid, Ethnophobia, Operation Dudula;

### **RESUMO**

Esta pesquisa trata do aumento da violência xenófoba na África do Sul após a queda do regime segregacionista do Apartheid. Desde 1994 (ano em que nasceu a África do Sul democrática), a esperança de criar uma "nação arco-íris" não se concretizou e o país ainda é fortemente afectado pela violência, corrupção, pobreza e desemprego, problemas que tocam uma maioria crescente da população, especialmente os sul-africanos negros. Nesse ambiente de miséria e precariedade, preconceitos e estereótipos prosperam junto com o medo dos estrangeiros, que representam apenas uma pequena parte da população total, mas são continuamente culpados pela situação actual do país. Essas crenças populares são o centro de uma campanha difamatória de políticos e instituições e foram amplificadas ainda mais nos últimos anos pelas redes sociais. Mas se olharmos mais profundamente para a sociedade sul-africana, veremos que a xenofobia também está profundamente ligada ao racismo e à afrofobia, um tipo específico de xenofobia direcionada aos imigrantes africanos. Portanto, a xenofobia não pode ser explicada sem olhar para o contexto político e social em que prevaleceu, nem sua origem em um passado não tão distante, caracterizado pela violência e pela segregação racial. Usando uma abordagem sociológica e baseando-se em estatísticas, fontes jornalísticas sul-africanas e internacionais e relatórios detalhados elaborados pelo mundo científico e por várias ONGs, esta pesquisa se propõe a analisar a xenofobia, descrevendo o contexto social, a cronologia dos ataques, o papel dos políticos, das mídias sociais e dos movimentos xenófobos; Ao mesmo tempo, aprofunda o

mundo de ódio e frustração dos sul-africanos e suas maneiras de lidar com as promessas não cumpridas do pós-apartheid, uma classe política corrupta e o aumento da pobreza.

**Palavras-chave:** África do Sul, Nação Arco-Íris, Apartheid, Etnofobia, Operação Dudula;

## **1. Introduction**

The democratic rebirth of South Africa began in 1994, with the first free and fair election, resulting in Nelson Mandela becoming the first black president of South Africa. However, the promises of the first years of democratic rule quickly disappeared after Mandela's retirement in 1998 and the first critics of the modern South African nation emerged. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had the declared objective of providing justice for the victims and to accomplish that, it focused specifically on individual human rights, a fatal mistake that did not consider the oppression of Black South African as a collectivity. Yet the TRC is still glorified and admired both within the country and in the international community because it avoided an hypothetical civil (and racial) war.

Despite the progress made in the country in the last 30 years, South Africa's still not at peace. Violence and corruption are widespread across the country while inequality still affects most the Black majority in favor of the white minority. Xenophobia is just the response of the poor to the problems of South Africa, amplified by social media and politicians. Immigrants are targeted specifically in moments of crisis, resulting in hundreds of deaths in the last 15 years.

But xenophobia also reflects the structural problems of the country's history, starting with racism: black immigrants are the only targeted foreigners of these attacks, and this is why many call South Africa's xenophobia as afrophobia, a term describing best what xenophobia's really about. Apartheid's legacies can still be seen with the tribal and ethnic resentments afflicting the Black majority, still divided today by prejudices and ethnophobia forged by white supremacists during the segregation period.

The newly born xenophobic movements such as Operation Dudula are discriminating immigrants even more, blocking them from accessing healthcare and spreading fake news, resulting in an endless circle of violence and hatred that brought South Africa far away from the "rainbow nation" dreamed at the start of the democratic process.

## **2. The dream of the "rainbow nation" and the bitterness of the democratic transition**

After the elections of April 27-28, 1994, the first since the end of apartheid and the first universal suffrage elections in South African history, a government of national unity was formed, headed by Nelson Mandela and formed by the African National Congress (ANC), the National Party, and the Inkatha Freedom Party, the three parties that had reached the 5% threshold required to enter parliament (Zamponi, 2009). This shaped the political landscape of the new South Africa, which has consolidated to this day through the emergence of a pluralistic democracy centered on a strong majority party: the ANC (Zamponi, 2009), which, however,

lost its absolute majority of seats for the first time in the last elections held in 2024, forcing it to form (as had happened after the first elections) a coalition government (Sekamogeng & Blossom Egbude, 2024).

Despite the fact that the post-apartheid government of national unity lasted only until 1997, South Africa was called the 'rainbow nation' by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a term used as a desire to represent South Africa as a peaceful and multicultural society (Sall, 2018).

Desmond Tutu was the man who established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Zamponi, 2009). The TRC was created to deal with South Africa's violent, oppressive and racist past: after years of apartheid, it was considered important to record the truth about the past, to provide reparations for victims, and to bring justice to perpetrators; but there was also a need for reconciliation, to move the country forward and to build trust and sense of common belonging (Kemp, 2023). The Commission's work was built on the idea that truth was an essential first step toward healing, but it made the error of focusing only on individual human rights violations, ignoring the long term effects of apartheid's policies on all black South Africans (Msimang, 2018).

The systematic dispossession of blacks through state-enforced black poverty was a deliberate outcome of apartheid, accomplished through forced removals from cities, separate and unequal education, the deprivation of basic democratic rights, and, most important, the explicit reservation of certain kinds of jobs for whites and the exclusion of black people from certain categories of study and employment (Msingman, 2018).

South African are proud that they averted a race war by choosing talks over guns, yet the TRC failed to address the apartheid racist policies, which created a structured element of inequality that's still visible today: for example, unemployment stands at 31% for blacks and 23% among coloured, yet for whites it was just 7% (Msingman, 2018).

This growing cynicism is linked to the sense that, for whites, the end of apartheid did not signal the end of privilege: white South Africans continue to enjoy the residual comfort of a system that was created to benefit them (Msingman, 2018).

In any case, the prevailing idea was that Mandela and the members of the Commission had achieved a 'miracle' by avoiding a predictable bloodbath against former supporters of apartheid (Grove, 2007). Many had long believed that civil war would be the only true way to end apartheid rule in South Africa: because of that, the relatively peaceful democratic transition was one of the most surprisingly political developments of the twentieth century (Gibson, 2015).

However, the apartheid legacy still produces its consequences on South Africa modern society, and can be explained with the concepts of colonialism and coloniality (Mpofu, 2020). While colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, coloniality refers to long standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism: these patterns define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial

administrations(Mpofu, 2020). Coloniality survives colonialism, and the demolition of colonialism doesn't obviously exhaust the conditions nor the modes of exploitation and domination amongst people(Mpofu, 2020). This is the case of South Africa's complex relation with its past, because much of South Africa's history was characterized by violence, dispossession, land theft and codified racism against blacks (Jacobs, 2018). The results obtained by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are impressive, yet for most black South Africans there's also a feeling of bitterness towards what could have been.

### **3. Thirty years of inequality, corruption, and violence**

As the end of the 20th century approached, Mandela's era, which lasted until 1998, was also coming to an end in South Africa. However, poverty and unemployment continued to be a huge problem for South Africa, while crime was ten times higher than in Germany (Hagemann, 2020). The process of socioeconomic transformation proved to be much more complex: many of the problems from the country's history remain unresolved, and for a large part of the population, the economic situation has improved only marginally. Significant inequalities remain, but these are gradually shifting from historical differences based on race to differences based primarily on class. For this reason, many of the opportunities that were hoped for in 1994 have not yet been fully realized (Zamponi, 2009). The white majority still earns half of the entire national income, and inequalities mainly affect the black majority (Sall, 2018).

With the end of apartheid and the beginning of South African democracy, the African National Congress, aided by the social policies of the last years of apartheid crushed by sanctions, began a process of 'de-racialization' of the labor market and welfare system with affirmative action policies towards the non-white majority (Ronza, 2012). These reforms changed the composition of the upper income classes and fostered the development of a black middle class, but did not improve social inequalities in the country: despite the attenuation of racial polarization, the class gap appears essentially unchanged from the apartheid regime (Ronza, 2012). While in the 1950s and 1960s South African society appeared to be stratified into a racial hierarchy with a white elite at the top, in the early period of democracy a multiracial bourgeoisie and middle class emerged, contrasting with a vast black majority living around or below the poverty line (Ronza, 2012). In 2014, South Africa's Gini coefficient was the highest in the world (63/100), confirming the tragic reality of extreme inequality within the same national territory (World Bank, 2014). That year, around 47% of South Africans lived in poverty, a number slightly higher than in 1994 (Gibson, 2015).

For this very reason, more and more citizens are distrustful of the political class: corruption, incompetence, and lack of transparency have spread the belief among the population that democratically elected officials are not interested in helping the people (Malaquias, 2011).

Jacob Zuma is an emblematic case of endemic corruption in the South African political class: at the helm of the African National Congress since 2007, he became president in 2009 and immediately found himself embroiled in several political scandals that sparked protests across the country (Hagemann, 2020). The expulsion of Julius Malema, leader of the ANC youth league, for criticizing President Zuma, exacerbated the situation (Hagemann, 2020). In 2012,

Zuma was accused of using €20 million in public funds to expand and renovate his residence in Nkandla (Hagemann, 2020). The corruption charges against Zuma were 783 in total (Jacobs, 2018). Corruption among the political elite remained endemic: Zuma's successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, along with several other ANC leaders, appropriated public funds, preventing them from being allocated to services, poverty alleviation, and reducing inequality (Guainazzi, 05/2024).

In 2016, at the local elections, the ANC lost majority control of three important metropolitan areas for the first time since the first post-apartheid local elections, held in 1995 (Jacobs, 2018). These metros include South Africa's capital Pretoria, where the Democratic Alliance won, a party that, despite its root in white liberalism, increasingly appeals to black voters (Jacobs, 2018). ANC is losing support especially among young voters, who have no memory of apartheid and instead associate the ANC with failures and broken promises of the post-1994 period (Jacobs, 2018).

The African National Congress has been the core of South Africa's democratic system for almost 30 years, providing the stability it needed after the apartheid (Chipkin, Vidojević, Rau & Saksenberg, 2022). Yet the party failed to successfully make the transition from a liberation movement to a modern political party: is still largely a hierarchical, secretive organization that operates like it is in exile, discouraging internal democracy and debate (Jacobs, 2018). The result has been a dominant party system rather than a competitive one (Chipkin et al, 2022).

Despite this growing criticism, the ANC still enjoys enormous support among the population, as it is still remembered as the party that brought democracy (Malaquias, 2011). The party still managed to win the elections and continued to be the main party in South Africa, at least until 2024, when it lost its absolute majority in parliament for the first time since 1994, even if it remained the leading party with 40% of votes (Scriven, 2024). This was a historic defeat, given that in previous elections it had always easily exceeded 50% of the vote (Guainazzi, 05/2024).

South Africa's main party is therefore forced to govern in a coalition with other South African parties: first and foremost, the Democratic Alliance, considered the ANC's historic enemy, along with other minor political formations such as the Inkatha Freedom Party, the Patriotic Alliance, the Good Party, and others (Scriven, 2024). On the contrary, the two parties founded by exiles from the ANC itself, Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto we Sizwe, who was expelled from the party for allegations of corruption and tax evasion but is still appreciated by part of the population, and Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (Scriven, 2024), despite their good election results, remained outside the coalition executive.

The election results point to a period of crisis and political instability, given the results of some coalitions formed following provincial or city elections, such as in Johannesburg: in August 2023, a new mayor was elected, the sixth in just two years, from a party that had won only 1% of the vote in the elections (Scriven, 2024). However, the fact that the ANC immediately accepted the results remains an almost absolute first in southern Africa and demonstrates the strength of South African institutions (Guainazzi, 06/2024).

However, mistrust has been the main protagonist in the struggle for democracy, a serious sign of South Africa's political crisis. President Cyril Ramaphosa's unfulfilled promises contributed to the collapse of a party due not to the emergence of a rival party with new proposals, but to the dismemberment and decay of the ANC itself (Scriven, 2024).

The country therefore faces challenges related to poverty, rising unemployment, an economy struggling to grow at a sustained pace, and the presence of large institutionalized inequalities (Ronza, 2012). It is worth remembering, for example, what is happening in some areas of the country: Kayelitsha, one of South Africa's largest townships, is located a few kilometers from Camps Bay, home to some of the most expensive residences (Sall, 2018). Social inequalities and corruption, together with high levels of poverty among the population, have contributed to an increase in violence, transforming South Africa into one of the most dangerous countries in the world: in January 2007, a group of international observers published a report stating that 50 people were killed every day in South Africa, the second highest murder rate in the world (Hagemann, 2020). Today, the situation has not improved at all, as confirmed by more recent data (Espinosa, 2025).

Forms of violence remained constant throughout the apartheid period, but the transition period from apartheid to democracy, from 1990 to 1994, was also characterized by competition between different political parties, which manifested itself in forms of political violence such as assassinations and feuds within the parties themselves, increasing tensions (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2023). Endemic violence continues today: during the Jacob Zuma years, from 2009 to 2018, the number of rapes and armed robberies rose (Hagemann, 2020). With the increase in immigrants from other African countries, xenophobia grew, especially among the poor: it was not uncommon for illegal immigrants to be blamed for crimes (Hagemann, 2020), as they constituted a mass of cheap labor that competed directly with locals who, in periods of recurring cyclical crises, lost their jobs and lashed out against their foreign competitors.

#### **4. The events of 2008 and subsequent xenophobic attacks**

In 2001, President Thabo Mbeki issued a warning to the nation about two problems: racism and xenophobia (Mngomezulu & Dube, 2019). With the dawn of South African democracy, a steady flow of migrants had begun to arrive in this new and wealthy nation, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa (Idehen & Osaghae, 2015). Mbeki said that if these two problems entered and rooted into the South African society, they would undermine its nascent democracy (Mngomezulu & Dube, 2019).

Xenophobia refers to the fear (*phobos*) of foreigners, of 'others' (*xenos*), of what is different and unknown (Mngomezulu & Dube, 2019). It is an attitude that marks a clear distinction between one group and another and is connected with ethnocentrism and the belief that one's own group is better than another (Mngomezulu & Dube, 2019). It is closely linked to discriminatory behavior that normally culminates in violent actions, various types of abuse,

and acts of hatred (Mngomezulu & Dube, 2019). A characteristic feature of modern South Africa is precisely the widespread prevalence of xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiments, which have often taken violent turns (Tafira, 2018).

Xenophobic violence became a large-scale phenomenon with the 2008 crisis (Xenowatch, 2025), although the phenomenon was already present in the previous decade: in 1998, for example, an immigrant from Mozambique and two from Senegal were pushed in front of a moving train by a group of individuals who had just returned from a protest blaming immigrants for the rise in unemployment, crime, and diseases such as AIDS (South African History Online, 2015).

However, the episode that saw the highest number of victims and the most serious level of violence occurred at the same time as the financial crisis. On May 11, 2008, 10 days of xenophobic violence began across South Africa (Panozzo, 2008). The spark first ignited in the Johannesburg area and then quickly spread to other provinces of the country (Cinini & Singh, 2019). In the poorest townships, there was a veritable hunt for foreigners, in which 60 people lost their lives: immigrants were forced to seek shelter in police stations or churches, while their homes and shops were destroyed (Cinini & Singh 2019).

Although there had already been violence linked to xenophobia, the attacks in May 2008 shocked both the local population and the international community (Okem & Asuelime, 2015).

The violence was not only directed at immigrants: a third of the victims were South Africans who, because of their physical features, looked 'too much' like immigrants, or because they did not speak any of the most common languages in the country (Sharp, 2008). The attacks marked South Africa as a hostile and violent nation towards immigrants: but often emigrating to that country is the only option available, especially for people fleeing extreme poverty, persecution, or war in search of a dignified life (Cinini & Singh, 2019).

What happened in 2008 was not an extraordinary event: in the years that followed, similar attacks took place throughout the country, albeit on a smaller scale. In November 2009, around 3,000 Zimbabwean citizens living in a small rural settlement in the Cape Province were forced to leave after a violent xenophobic attack that systematically targeted their nationality, leaving other foreign citizens living in the same area but from other African countries such as Lesotho unharmed (South African History Online, 2015).

In 2010, 130 adults and children, mainly Ethiopian refugees, were victims of xenophobic attacks by several hundred people in a township near Johannesburg: the perpetrators destroyed many shops, which were also the refugees' homes (Cinini & Singh, 2019). The real tragedy lies in the fact that the victims of these attacks of xenophobic violence were in South Africa precisely to escape other forms of violence in their countries of origin (Cinini & Singh, 2019). In 2015, there was a wave of violence in Durban, fueled by a statement from Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini calling on the government to stop the "invasion of foreigners" in the country (Idehen & Osaghae, 2015). The 2015 attacks left seven people dead, while further violence in September 2019 claimed another ten lives (Anataloni, 2020).

Foreign women are the most vulnerable to xenophobic attacks, while South African women are criticized and even abused for having relationships with foreign men, because they are seen by nationalists and racists as bringing contamination and pollution to the pure national blood and dissolving and diluting the nation (Mpofu, 2020). This idea is also a legacy of apartheid, where different races couldn't, by law, be together (Mpofu, 2020).

An overview shows how serious the situation is in Africa's largest democracy: according to Xenowatch, a human rights association that tracks xenophobic incidents in South Africa, since 1990, more than 125,000 people have been displaced as a result of these violent attacks, while the death toll stands at almost 700 (Xenowatch, 2025). Xenophobic attacks are mainly concentrated in the two most densely populated provinces, Gauteng, home to the cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg, and Kwazulu-Natal, where Durban is located (Xenowatch, 2025). Furthermore, the attacks in 2025 were the most numerous since 2008 (Xenowatch, 2025).

The situation in South Africa is exacerbated by a culture of impunity, which is particularly evident in relation to xenophobic attacks: few perpetrators have actually been convicted to date (Cinini & Singh, 2019).

Yet, according to a World Bank report, foreigners living in the country have a positive impact on employment and wages: the report calculated that each migrant generates a multiplier effect on the labor market, creating about two jobs (Anataloni, 2020). Politicians use foreigners as scapegoats to distract attention from the country's real problems: the complex economic situation, which for years has seen the system dominated by stagnation, and corruption, now widespread not only among politicians but also among public administration officials, which weakens the economy and further increases unemployment and poverty (Anataloni, 2020).

## **5. Xenophobia, Afrophobia, Ethnophobia and Racism**

Today, there are approximately 2.4 million immigrants in South Africa, including one million from Zimbabwe alone, making up 4% of the South African population (Giovetti, 2024).

Although xenophobia is common throughout the African continent, the case of South Africa is particularly complex as it is much richer than other African countries and therefore attracts a greater concentration of migrants (Okem & Asuelime, 2015). They are often blamed for very common social problems, such as crime and unemployment (Porter, 2018). With an unemployment rate of 30%, rising to 60% for those under 25, there is a widespread perception that migrants are stealing jobs that should go to South Africans (Giovetti, 2024). Not only that, but they are also considered to be the cause of excessive pressure on the few state services (Okem & Asuelime, 2015).

Hostility towards migrants, especially African migrants, is the result of fake news spread by the political class, which has contributed to the formation of deep-rooted stereotypes about immigrants, who are accused of committing crimes, spreading infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and stealing jobs and women (Addae & Quan-Baffour, 2022). Xenophobia in

South Africa can therefore be called Afrophobia, as violence is directed almost exclusively against people from other African countries (Okem & Asuelime, 2015).

This could be explained by the historical isolation of South Africa from the rest of the African continent, which has created a sense of South African exceptionalism that produced all sorts of negative perceptions of foreign nationals from other African countries (Mpofu, 2020). But the fact that white foreigners have never been targeted by these xenophobic attacks explains that in South Africa there's still a structured racism where whiteness is the privileged racial identity (Mpofu, 2020). Exceptionalism, after all, is itself an aspect of colonialism and racism: white apartheid South Africa saw itself, because of its whiteness, as a part of Europe in Africa and not a part of black Africa (Mpofu, 2020).

For this reason, the term "xenophobia" as a simple reference to the hatred, fear, and discrimination of the foreigners does not capture the racial construction and production of the foreigner in South Africa (Mpofu, 2020).

Afrophobia is nothing more than racism against people with the same skin color, a heavy legacy of colonialism and the 'divide and rule' policy practiced by white supremacists, who for decades fueled cultural differences between the country's various ethnic groups and nationalities (Tafira, 2018). The education of black children during apartheid laid the foundations for Afrophobia: focused mainly on African ethnicity and cultural differences, the school curriculum had the hidden objective of replacing traditional African ideals of community, compassion, and cooperation with others, alien, distrustful, and fearful ones, whose heavy legacy is still present and rooted among large sections of South African society, all to legitimize white supremacy in the country (Addae & Quan-Baffour, 2022).

During apartheid, the South African population was divided into four main categories: Blacks, Whites, Coloured and Asians (Msimang, 2018). This classification was created by white supremacist and had no respect for the African indigenous communities and their heritage. Black South Africans still represent 80% of the population, yet the group is far from being homogeneous: it's divided into a number of ethnic and linguistic groups, such as the Zulus of the Xhosas (Gibson, 2015). Apartheid contributed to the tribal and ethnic divisions South Africa is witnessing today: its segregation policy was ultimately aimed at building tribal exceptionalism and superiority, which would make one tribe feel superior to the other (Masuku & Mlambo, 2023).

Under apartheid, black people were all grouped together, marginalized and discriminated into so-called Bantustans (Gibson, 2015), which were set aside in miserable and often arid areas (Msimang, 2018). They were a powerful tool of apartheid's propaganda, which wanted the international community to believe that black South Africans enjoyed high standards of living under a policy of separate development (Msimang, 2018).

While apartheid has gone, tribalism and ethnicity continue to divide south africans. This intolerance has led to hatred and disunity among black south africans (Masuku & Mlambo, 2023). The ethnic and tribal discrimination is observable through statements on social media

and, at times, by politicians and citizens. For example, saying Zulu people are violent and like conflict or Xhosa women like money, have directly given rise to intolerance and hatred (Masuku & Mlambo, 2023).

Therefore, xenophobia is directly linked to racism and ethnophobia in the country, making these problems harder to resolve: South Africa cannot stop xenophobic attacks directed toward foreign nationals without resolving the internal ethnic hate which has consolidated the hatred towards other black South Africans (Masuku & Mlambo, 2023).

More than 30 years has passed since the end of apartheid, yet the long term effects on the populations can still be perceived today in the South African society.

## **5. The role of politics**

The political class plays a key role in fueling tensions (Porter, 2018). Immediately after the fall of apartheid, the new democratic government decided to discourage the hiring of foreign workers in the country: this was intended to protect South Africans, but over time this attitude became openly anti-immigration and was pursued by a considerable number of politicians (Cinini & Singh, 2019). In addition, for more than a decade, the government and the media have spread a false perception of the actual scale of immigration in South Africa, which has contributed to making immigrants appear dangerous in the eyes of the population (Okem & Asuelime, 2015). Xenophobic violence is amplified by political leaders who blame foreigners for high crime rates, though no evidence exists to support such claims (Jacobs, 2018), while mistrust of immigrants has been amplified by the social and economic inequalities that characterize the country today and the resulting frustrations of the population, especially the poorest (Tafira, 2018). In this context, institutions such as the government, parliament, and police forces only reinforce and support the idea of an invasion of South Africa by migrants, which threatens the very survival of South African society (Addae & Quan-Baffour, 2022). Highly popular and respected figures have helped with the demonization of immigrants: for example, the Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini, refers to immigrants and refugees as “rats” (Jacobs, 2018).

This causes widespread discontent, situations in which violence emerges as an increasingly likely and justified response (Misago, 2024), with brutal consequences, such as the attacks of May 2008 (Porter, 2008).

The 2020 pandemic was an emblematic example of the institutional roots of discrimination against immigrants: during the lockdown, the government distributed food parcels to those in need, excluding migrants (Gioveti, 2024). COVID-19 was also used as a pretext by the South African government to build a 40-kilometer wall on the border with Zimbabwe to prevent “infected or undocumented people” from entering the country (Dratwa, 2024). This measure was not justified by any evidence, given that Zimbabwe had only seven confirmed cases at the time, but simply fueled the xenophobic idea of immigrants as dangerous carriers of infectious diseases (Dratwa, 2024). The connection between the increase of violence and times of crisis is

not coincidental: during such periods, economic and social deprivation (or the perception of such deprivation) increases exponentially and spreads among the population, especially the poorest and therefore most vulnerable (Misago, 2024).

The issue of healthcare is particularly interesting: post-apartheid South Africa initially adopted a healthcare approach based on a commitment to universal and inclusive care (Walker & Vearey, 2025). During that period, it signed a number of international and regional human rights declarations that enshrined the right to equal healthcare for all (Walker & Vearey, 2025). However, more recent policies have marked a step back from these commitments: in line with the restrictive policies that have rapidly spread in recent years, South Africa has also placed restrictions on access to healthcare for immigrants, reflecting the idea that the possibility of receiving care is a privilege of citizens rather than a human right (Walker & Vearey, 2025). For example, the newly passed National Health Insurance Act, based on the principle of universal health coverage, is poised to restrict access to free basic healthcare for asylum seekers and undocumented migrants (Walker & Vearey, 2024). Distress migrants, such as asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants, are unable to regularize their status and face barriers to accessing basic socioeconomic rights, including healthcare, secure housing, income-generation activities and general safety (Walker & Vearey, 2024).

The exclusion of immigrants from the healthcare system is also due to the shortcomings that the latter has suffered in recent years: an ever-widening gap has emerged between public healthcare, which serves about 84% of South African citizens, and private healthcare, which serves only a small insured minority (Walker & Vearey, 2025). Public healthcare is plagued by infrastructure decay, staff shortages, and depleted medicine stocks, all of which have undermined the quality of care and increased problems such as accessibility: immigrants are therefore scapegoated, labeled as unworthy of receiving care (Walker & Vearey, 2025). For example, in 2020 the Gauteng Province Department of Health restricted free healthcare for pregnant and lactating women and children under six years old on the basis of their nationality and documentation status, violating the South African Constitution (Walker & Vearey, 2024). Despite a court order against this decision, discriminatory practices reportedly continue unchecked (Walker & Vearey, 2024). Migrants frequently encounter discrimination, exclusion and xenophobic attitudes from health care workers, negatively impacting their mental well-being (Walker & Vearey, 2024).

However, what is not said enough is that many immigrants in South Africa do not have the proper documents because it is almost impossible for them to regularize their status, as they would like to do: they face the almost insurmountable obstacle of bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and sometimes even refusal by those in charge of administrative services to issue new residence permits (Tresoldi, 2022). South Africa immigration system is actually highly complex and nuanced: despite being open to immigration on paper, it suffers from a number of deficiencies, like the fact that only 10% of asylum seekers get the refugee status in the country every year (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2021).

## **6. The impact of social media and the new xenophobic movements**

Xenophobic and populist movements have normalized harassing behaviors such as incitement to violence, smear campaigns on social media, and attacks on clinics, sometimes with the approval of politicians themselves (Walker & Vearey, 2025).

In 2022, Elvis Nyathi, an immigrant from Zimbabwe living in Diepsloot, a township north of Johannesburg, was attacked and set on fire, apparently because he did not have a valid residence permit (Tresoldi, 2023). This episode is just one of many in townships across South Africa, where black South Africans are concentrated and where foreigners, especially Africans, have become scapegoats for social problems (Tresoldi, 2023).

Social media has played a central role in amplifying the phenomenon: in 2023, fake news spread like wildfire on social media, repeated by numerous South African politicians, claiming that there were 15 million illegal immigrants in the country (Ricci, 2023). The use of xenophobic terms and accusations on social media, mainly focused on X, led to the formation of exclusive groups of South Africans focused on the phenomenon of increased immigration, especially illegal immigration, irreparably affecting public opinion (McBrown, 2025). Openly anti-immigration hashtags are still widely used by South African users, making the issue one of the most important for voters, which has made the political world increasingly aggressive towards foreigners (Ricci, 2023). Some of the most commonly used xenophobic expressions on social media led to violent actions, particularly in the two most populous provinces, Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal (McBrown, 2025). The new xenophobic attacks are increasingly supported and promoted by anti-immigrant associations that have multiplied in ghetto cities, especially in the province of Gauteng, around the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria (Tresoldi, 2022).

In September 2022, the Put South Africa First movement, a coalition of groups and organizations that supported the idea of mass deportation of African migrants, marched on the Nigerian and Zimbabwean embassies, accusing foreigners of being responsible for social problems such as drugs, human trafficking, and arms trafficking (Sen, 2025). This coalition gave rise to Operation Dudula, a movement with explicit nationalist and racist demands, born in the township of Soweto (Chirume, 2025), whose initial goal was to stop the rise in crime and drug use, but which soon turned into an openly xenophobic national association (16) that led some of the raids against foreign citizens and gained support in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods of the metropolis (Ricci, 2023). The name Dudula means 'to remove something by force' in the Zulu language (Ngcobo, 2025).

Operation Dudula is certainly not the only movement of its kind, but it is the most famous: in 2025, its members raided the Institute for Social and Economic Rights, which helps immigrants. The action turned violent and only ended with the intervention of the police (Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa [SIHMA], 2025). Over the past year, members of the movement have also denied migrants access to numerous health facilities, checking documents and turning away those who did not have them (Chirume, 2025). This was done to draw media attention to one of the group's main demands, which is to deny access to healthcare facilities to those without valid documents; a difficult option to implement, given that around 11% of South Africans do not have an identity card (Ngcobo, 2025). The justification for these actions is that migrants take advantage of the healthcare sector at the

expense of South African citizens, 'stealing' their places and healthcare resources: arguments that have no real basis, according to several experts and activists(Chirume, 2025). However, the leader of the movement, Zandile Dabula, has other objectives, such as preventing undocumented children from attending public schools(SIHMA).

The situation quickly turned into a serious issue when the International Court of Justice itself called on the South African government to take concrete action to protect the rights of migrants and refugees, who are considered at risk in the country precisely because of violent actions by organized groups(Ngcobo, 2025).

The representations evoked by Operation Dudula, such as the need to 'clean up' communities to make them safer, or the need to 'take back control' of the country, together with the typical military clothing worn by its members, make the movement appear to be a bastion of law and justice, which could fight and rid South Africa of illegal immigrants (Mogomotsi, 2025). This search for legitimacy by Operation Dudula can also be found in the language used, which has shifted from offensive terms such as 'kwerekwere' to more refined and legal forms such as undocumented immigrant (Mogomotsi, 2025). This makes support for the movement, together with hatred towards immigrants, a kind of patriotic action on the part of South Africans to make their country better, fueling the idea that xenophobic attitudes and attacks are a civic duty to 'stop' immigrants (Mogomotsi, 2025).

## **Conclusion**

The topics discussed in this research shows how much South Africa differs from Nelson Mandela's most famous declaration(Addae & Quan-Baffour, 2022): "may this beautiful land never again experience the oppression of one towards another". More than 30 years after the end of apartheid, South Africa is still a country marked by poverty and violence. The promise of a brighter future of the first years of democratic rule quickly disappeared under corruption, violence and high crime rates. The African National Congress's popularity made it a pillar of the country's democracy, but in recent years growing criticism towards its rule and ways of governing scaled it down. In this context of violent chaos, xenophobia emerged.

Xenophobia became the excuse of politicians for all the country's problems, leading to a massive defamation campaign against immigrants, especially the "illegal" ones or refugees seeking asylum, despite foreigners having a good impact on the country's economy. Xenophobic attacks culminated with the international financial crisis: May 2008 is still remembered today as the worst xenophobic attacks in South African history, but similar episodes happened almost every year on a lesser scale. In recent years, xenophobia was also amplified by social media, which facilitated the diffusion of fake news against immigrants. Xenophobia is a response to the population's search for a scapegoat to blame for the country's problems, but does not explain alone the situation of the country today.

However, xenophobia may not be the right terminology for a phenomenon that afflicts only black, African people. For this reason, xenophobia in South Africa has been called Afrophobia. Afrophobia is directly linked to the country's past of racial segregation and black hatred created

by the white minority, which used the black population's ethnic and tribal divisions as an instrument to govern. Those racist policies are the base of the ethnophobia present today in the black population, which view their own ethnic group as better than the others, increasing the distance between itself and the rest of the population and increasing the hate felt towards whatever is perceived as different.

This feeling of intolerance and perceived cultural distances directly connect racism and ethnophobia to the negative view of immigrants, and therefore afrophobia. The roots of this hatred are found in the country's colonial past and its apartheid rule, which still unconsciously afflicts the country even though it officially ended more than thirty years ago.

For these reasons, especially in moments of crisis, foreigners get demonized by the citizens, and today are broadly discriminated against in every aspect of the country, from employment to healthcare. New xenophobic movements such as Operation Dudula actively fight the mythical "invasion" of illegal immigrants in the country, and have grown in popularity, reflecting the frustration and psychological state of South Africans.

South Africa's finds itself in a spiral of violence and hatred, where the population and the political class doesn't search for a real solution and a structural change but rather a culprit to blame for all the problems afflicting the country, continuing a circle of violence, poverty, corruption and hate that seems to have no ending.

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