# THE LEGACIES OF APARTHEID: NATIONALISM, RACISM, AND XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the historical and political roots of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa, arguing that it is not an isolated phenomenon but a "Legacies" of apartheid's systemic racism and an incomplete democratization process. Since 1994, South Africa has experienced persistent and violent xenophobia, predominantly targeting Black African migrants. A central paradox is the racial selectivity of this hostility, which largely spares White and non-African foreigners. This raises a critical question: is this xenophobia a new crisis of governance and economics, or a continuation of apartheid's institutionalised exclusion? The research challenges ahistorical explanations of xenophobia that focus solely on contemporary economic pressures. By tracing its continuities with apartheid, the study provides a deeper structural and cultural analysis, with significant implications for policy, transitional justice, and South Africa's role in pan-African solidarity. A qualitative, multi-method approach is employed, integrating: a historical analysis of apartheid-era laws and nationalism; critical discourse analysis of media and state rhetoric; and semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, including migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Nigeria, and South African activists and political actors. The analysis reveals that xenophobia is deeply rooted in apartheid's racial hierarchies and exclusionary logics, which have been repackaged in the democratic era. Key findings include the persistent racial selectivity of attacks (Afrophobia), the scapegoating of migrants for the failures of full democratisation, and the use of xenophobia as a political tool by populist movements. The article concludes that xenophobia is a structural legacy of apartheid, sustained by unresolved historical trauma and economic inequality. Effective responses must therefore go beyond law enforcement to include substantive socioeconomic redress, civic education against xenophobia, strengthened regional cooperation, and a renewed transitional justice process that addresses economic reparations.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, Xenophobia, Afrophobia, Nationalism, South Africa

## Introduction

Xenophobia has emerged as one of the most persistent and destabilising challenges in post-apartheid South Africa. Since the first outbreaks of anti-immigrant violence in the 1990s,

migrants, particularly from other African states, have been subjected to recurring waves of hostility, ranging from everyday discrimination to large-scale violent attacks.[1] These incidents are striking in their racial selectivity: while African migrants are overwhelmingly targeted, White and non-African foreigners often escape similar hostility. This paradox raises a fundamental question for both scholars and policymakers:[2] Is xenophobia in South Africa a novel form of exclusion produced by contemporary economic and political crises, or is it better understood as a continuation of apartheid's institutionalised racism? Understanding this phenomenon requires situating xenophobia within the broader historical, socio-economic, and political trajectory of South Africa.

The country's celebrated transition to democracy in 1994 was a monumental achievement, promising a "rainbow nation" founded on the principles of non-racialism, human dignity, and pan-African solidarity. However, this political miracle was accompanied by a profound socio-economic paradox. The negotiated nature of the transition, while ensuring stability, left the fundamental economic architecture of apartheid largely intact. Consequently, the aspirations of the majority for material improvement and spatial justice collided with the stubborn realities of persistent inequality, mass unemployment, and inadequate service delivery. It is within this gap between political liberation and economic emancipation that xenophobia has found fertile ground.

The legacies of apartheid entrenched sharp boundaries of belonging, citizenship, and access to resources, privileging some groups while marginalising others.[3] Although the dismantling of apartheid in 1994 promised liberation, equality, and pan-African solidarity, the persistence of economic inequality, unemployment, and urban insecurity has fostered resentment against "outsiders." Migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, and other African countries have often been scapegoated as competitors for jobs, housing, and public services, making them easy targets for collective frustration. At the same time, the uneven direction of hostility, focused primarily on Black African migrants while sparing White or Asian foreigners, suggests that xenophobia cannot be explained by economic factors alone. Instead, it points to the enduring influence of racialised categories of identity, constructed and reinforced under apartheid, that continue to shape perceptions of who "belongs" and who is considered an "other".[4] This pattern suggests that apartheid's racial hierarchy, which valorised whiteness and systematically devalued Blackness, has been reconfigured rather than eradicated, now manifesting as a hierarchy of belonging within the migrant community itself.

Scholars have debated whether xenophobia in South Africa should be interpreted as a contemporary crisis of governance, citizenship, and economic precarity, or whether it reflects a deeper continuity with apartheid's racial hierarchies.[5] On one hand, proponents of the former view argue that the state's failure to deliver on post-apartheid promises, coupled with global migration pressures, has intensified local anxieties that manifest as violence against foreign nationals. This perspective often frames xenophobia as a new, if tragic, pathology of the democratic era. On the other hand, others contend that xenophobia is inseparable from apartheid's exclusionary logics of nationalism and race, which institutionalised suspicion toward African migrants while valorising European and Western connections.[6] From this vantage point, the "outsider" status imposed on Black African migrants today is a direct descendant of the "non-citizen" status imposed on Black South Africans within their own homeland under the Bantustan system. This debate is not merely academic; it has significant implications for policy responses. If xenophobia is framed only as a product of the contemporary economic crisis, interventions may focus narrowly on development and job

creation. If, however, it is recognised as an extension of apartheid's racialised nationalism, then deeper structural and cultural transformations are required to dismantle the persistent hierarchies of belonging in South Africa.

By examining the historical continuities between apartheid and xenophobia, the article contributes to three interrelated debates. First, it challenges the tendency to view xenophobia as a sudden post-1994 crisis by situating it within a longer trajectory of institutionalised racism. Second, it highlights the racialised selectivity of South African xenophobia, where Black African migrants are targeted, while White foreigners are often welcomed, as evidence of the endurance of apartheid categories. Third, it explores the implications of xenophobia for South Africa's democratic project and for pan-African solidarity, showing how exclusionary nationalism undermines both social cohesion and regional leadership. Ultimately, this article argues that xenophobia represents an "afterlife" of apartheid, a persistent spectral presence of its logic in a new historical moment.

This article adopts a triangulated qualitative analytical strategy that integrates historical analysis, discourse analysis, and interview-based evidence to examine xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa. Triangulation enhances analytical validity by allowing insights from different sources to reinforce one another, producing a richer and more nuanced account of xenophobia's origins and contemporary expressions. Historical analysis provides the structural and institutional backdrop rooted in apartheid, discourse analysis reveals the cultural and symbolic constructions through which xenophobia is articulated and legitimised, and interview material grounds the analysis in lived, everyday experiences. While the reliance on secondary sources and a selective set of interviews means the findings are interpretive rather than statistically representative, the aim is theoretical insight rather than generalisation. As Maxwell Joseph argues, qualitative research seeks to generate concepts and explanations that can be applied and tested across contexts. Within these limits, this integrated approach offers a robust framework for theorising xenophobia as an enduring afterlife of apartheid and a contemporary political instrument.

This article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, outlining the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis. The following section describes the methodological approach, combining historical analysis with qualitative evidence. The fourth section presents the findings, tracing the continuities between apartheid, failed democratisation, and the rise of xenophobia. Section Five discusses the implications of theorising xenophobia as an afterlife of apartheid. The article concludes by reflecting on the need for deeper economic transformation, inclusive citizenship, and pan-African solidarity in addressing the enduring legacies of apartheid.

## Xenophobia, Nationalism, and Racism

Scholarship on xenophobia in South Africa has emphasised its complex intersections with nationalism, race, and identity.[7] Scholars argue that local citizens often perceive migrants as threats to employment, housing, and welfare resources, particularly in contexts of high unemployment and inequality. These economic anxieties, however, are inextricably linked to deeper historical and ideological structures.[8] This research highlights how apartheid's racial hierarchies continue to shape post-apartheid social relations, noting that the boundaries of

belonging in the new democracy remain defined through racialised and exclusionary logics. Thus, xenophobia cannot be fully explained by economic competition alone; it reflects the enduring social categories and divisions inherited from apartheid's racial ordering of society.

Building on this argument, Klotz Audie contends that xenophobia is not merely a form of social prejudice or ignorance, but a state-produced phenomenon that arises from the post-apartheid government's management of citizenship and migration.[9] The state, he argues, reproduces exclusion through restrictive immigration policies, policing practices, and nationalist discourses that portray foreigners, particularly African migrants, as threats to sovereignty and national integrity. This institutional production of xenophobia blurs the line between popular sentiment and state ideology, showing that official discourse often legitimises rather than counteracts anti-immigrant violence. Other scholars have situated xenophobia within broader debates on nationalism and identity formation.[10] Boiles-Leonard Vivianna conceptualises South African nationalism as a "project of belonging" that simultaneously defines who qualifies as a legitimate citizen and who must be excluded.

In this sense, xenophobia becomes a cultural and political mechanism for reinforcing national identity through the exclusion of "outsiders." Xenophobia is characterised as the apprehension and animosity directed toward those perceived as "outsiders" or "foreign," typically rooted in national, cultural, or religious identities. Racism, in contrast, represents a distinct form of prejudice specifically focused on race or ethnicity. The fundamental divergence lies in their theoretical underpinnings: while Xenophobia arises from an aversion to the unfamiliar, frequently intertwined with a person's nationality or place of origin. Racism is predicated on the ideology of racial hierarchy—the belief that one race is intrinsically superior to others—which operates as both a system of individual bias and an ingrained institutional structure. Both ideologies precipitate significant socio-political harm. Xenophobic discourse routinely employs strategies of dehumanisation and criminalisation against targeted populations. This pervasive hostility creates a continuum of harm, ranging from subtle microaggressions to overt hate crimes, and systemic violence. Similarly, Ndlovu Gatsheni et al interpret post-apartheid xenophobia as part of a global resurgence of ethnonationalism, where economic uncertainty fuels the reassertion of bounded identities. [11] This trend mirrors developments elsewhere in the world, where neoliberal reforms and inequality have intensified the search for scapegoats, making foreigners convenient symbols of national crisis. Recent studies have reinforced this argument, showing that xenophobia has become a form of "racialised nationalism" rooted in South Africa's unresolved colonial and apartheid past. [12] The racial selectivity of xenophobic attacks, targeting predominantly Black African migrants while largely sparing White or Asian foreigners, illustrates the persistence of apartheid's racial hierarchy within the democratic nation-state.

This racialised pattern suggests that xenophobia functions as a cultural continuation of apartheid rather than a rupture from it. Taken together, these works raise a critical question: is xenophobia in South Africa a new social problem tied to economic insecurity and failed service delivery, or a continuation of apartheid-era racial logic under the guise of democratic nationalism? This study adopts the latter view, arguing that xenophobia represents an "afterlife of apartheid" in which the racial ideologies of exclusion have been repackaged as nationalism and state protectionism in post-apartheid South Africa.

**Apartheid as Institutionalised Exclusion**

Apartheid represented one of the most comprehensive and enduring systems of institutionalised racism in the twentieth century. Rooted in Afrikaner nationalism and colonial ideology, it restructured South African society through an elaborate set of laws that systematically excluded the Black majority from political participation, economic opportunity, and spatial integration.[13] The 1913 Natives Land Act prohibited Africans from owning land in most parts of the country, confining them to designated "native reserves." The Group Areas Act of 1950 legally enforced residential segregation, while the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 entrenched racial governance by establishing ethnic "homelands" that fragmented Black South Africans into tribal categories.

These measures produced a geography of exclusion in which race determined access to space, citizenship, and livelihood. Beyond legal exclusion, apartheid also institutionalised a system of migrant labour that confined Black South Africans to temporary, precarious work in mining and industry while denying them permanent urban residence.[14] This logic of the "permanent outsider" persists today, as African migrants are often portrayed as temporary intruders or economic opportunists, echoing apartheid's racialised constructions of belonging and legitimacy. Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this process. Apartheid reimagined the South African nation along rigid racial and ethnic boundaries, defining citizenship in explicitly exclusionary terms.[15] Whiteness was equated with modernity, civilisation, and belonging, while Blackness, whether South African or foreign, was cast as primitive and alien.

The apartheid state's meticulous classification of "non-Whites" into racial categories, Black, Coloured, and Indian/Asian, but did not create sub-categories for "whites", not only fractured solidarity among the colored citizens but also normalised systemic exclusion as a bureaucratic routine. As Mpendukana Sibonilelater argued, this process of racial inscription was central to the colonial and apartheid project of defining who counts as a life worth protecting.[16] These racialised divisions produced what he calls necropolitical governance, a power structure that decides who may live and who may die. The contemporary racialisation of migrants, particularly African migrants, as disposable or threatening can thus be read as a continuation of this necropolitical logic. This ideological foundation laid the groundwork for present-day xenophobia. Post-apartheid South Africa inherited not only physical segregation but also symbolic hierarchies of value and belonging.[17]

The continued privileging of Whiteness in South Africa's social imagination reflects the deep historical entrenchment of racial hierarchies that extend beyond formal apartheid. This racialised gaze shapes public perceptions of belonging and legitimacy, determining whose presence is normalised and whose is problematised. Consequently, White and non-African migrants are frequently positioned as "skilled," "modern," and "economically valuable" actors whose contributions align with dominant notions of progress and development. In contrast, Black African migrants—particularly those from neighbouring states such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Nigeria are routinely constructed as "illegal," "burdensome," or "criminal," embodying the anxieties of economic scarcity and social disorder.

This asymmetry reveals the persistence of apartheid's racial logic, reconfigured through the discourse of nationalism, security, and citizenship. The moral geography of belonging

continues to privilege proximity to whiteness and foreign capital while rendering African mobility suspect and disposable. In this sense, post-apartheid South Africa reproduces a racialised hierarchy of value, where national identity is not merely a legal status but a racialised construct tied to colonial notions of civilisation and productivity. Thus, exclusion is not an aberration but an enduring feature of a social order still governed by the afterlives of apartheid, sustained under the veneer of democratic nationalism.[18]

## The Incomplete Project of Democratisation

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 generated immense optimism for a new, inclusive social order grounded in equality, non-racialism, and human rights. The dismantling of apartheid's legal framework marked a profound political rupture; however, the transition also reflected significant compromises that limited the scope of transformation. As scholars such as Reddy observe, the negotiated settlement between the African National Congress (ANC) and the apartheid regime prioritised political stability over radical economic restructuring. [19] This arrangement secured a peaceful transition but preserved much of the economic architecture of apartheid capitalism. Consequently, while the democratic state achieved formal inclusion through universal suffrage, material exclusion remained largely intact.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) epitomised both the promise and the limitations of this transitional process. While the TRC was groundbreaking in documenting human rights violations and promoting moral reconciliation, it has been widely criticised for neglecting the structural and economic dimensions of apartheid.[20] As Hannah Savage argued, the TRC treated apartheid primarily as a crime of individuals rather than a crime of the state and its institutions.[21] By framing injustice in moral rather than structural terms, it produced what Mamdani calls *"a politics of reconciliation without redistribution."* This narrow conception of justice created a form of restricted citizenship, where inclusion in the new democratic order was symbolic rather than material.

Land dispossession, economic inequality, and regional marginalisation, central pillars of apartheid, remained largely unaddressed. The consequences of this partial transformation are evident in persistent inequality, widespread mass unemployment, and significant failures in service delivery. Despite two decades of democracy, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with economic opportunities still stratified along racial and spatial lines.[22] The post-apartheid government's redistributive initiatives, such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action policies, have disproportionately benefited a small elite while leaving the majority in poverty. In this context of unfulfilled expectations, social frustration and resentment have been redirected toward accessible scapegoats, most visibly, African migrants. Migrants are often portrayed as competitors for scarce jobs, housing, and social services, embodying the failures of democratic delivery.

Thus, xenophobia must be understood as part of the unfinished project of democratisation. [23] It exposes the limits of post-apartheid reconciliation and the fragility of social cohesion in a society where structural injustice remains largely intact. The endurance of apartheid-era logics, racial hierarchy, spatial segregation, and exclusionary citizenship continues to inform who is recognised as a legitimate member of the nation. Until South Africa undertakes a deeper transformation that combines political inclusion with substantive

economic justice, xenophobia will persist as both a symptom and a consequence of an incomplete democratic transition.[24]

**Methodology / Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative and historically informed research design to examine the relationship between apartheid's institutional legacies and contemporary xenophobia in South Africa. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to exploring how meanings, experiences, and historical continuities shape social phenomena. Xenophobia, in this context, is understood as a socially constructed and politically mediated process rooted in collective memory, discourse, and identity.

By drawing on interpretive methodologies, this research seeks to uncover the symbolic and structural dimensions of xenophobia as an "afterlife" of apartheid. The study does not aim to quantify incidence or attitudes but to reveal how apartheid's racial hierarchies are reproduced in post-apartheid discourse, institutions, and everyday life[25]
The first strand of the methodology involves a historical analysis of apartheid and nationalism. By examining the institutionalisation of racial exclusion through policies such as the *1913 Land Act, the Group Areas Act of 1950, and the Pass Laws, the study situates xenophobia within a long trajectory of racialised state-building.*[26] John Tosh argues that historical methods enable researchers to uncover continuities across time, providing a deeper context for understanding present-day phenomena.[27] Comparative insights are also drawn from literature on colonialism and scientific racism beyond South Africa, aligning with the [28]emphasis on situating African histories within global processes.

The second strand examines xenophobia as a discursive construction. Using principles of critical discourse analysis. [29] The study analyses how migrants are framed in state rhetoric, policy documents, and media reports. Particular attention is given to the negative portrayals of migrants in South African print media, which previous research[30]has shown to be overwhelmingly anti-immigrant. Discourse analysis enables the identification of symbolic boundaries, such as the derogatory use of the term *amakwerekwere*, and reveals how narratives of nationalism and belonging legitimise exclusionary practices.

The CDA approach examines linguistic patterns, framing devices, and metaphors used to represent migrants, particularly in narratives portraying them as "job stealers," "criminals," or "illegal foreigners." Special attention is given to the pejorative term *amakwerekwere*, which symbolically marks African migrants as outsiders. By analysing these recurring frames, the study exposes how state rhetoric and popular media contribute to the reproduction of exclusionary nationalism under democratic governance.

The third methodological strand consists of semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants, including eight migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Nigeria; four South African activists involved in anti-xenophobia campaigns; and three local political actors. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling through migrant networks and civic organisations in Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were

removed. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English between March and July 2024.

The semi-structured format allowed participants to narrate their experiences of discrimination, violence, and advocacy in their own terms. Migrants described daily encounters with exclusion, such as police harassment and attacks on small businesses, while South African participants reflected on nationalism, patriotism, and economic anxiety as justifications for exclusion. These narratives illuminate how xenophobia is both lived and rationalised in everyday social contexts.[31]

## Analysis / Findings
## Apartheid and the Construction of Exclusion

Apartheid was not merely a political regime of minority domination but a meticulously engineered architecture of exclusion, anchored in Afrikaner nationalism and a racialised moral order. Its central premise—defining citizenship through race—produced a society organised around rigid hierarchies of belonging. Legislative pillars such as the *1913 Natives Land Act*, the *Group Areas Act of 1950*, and the *Pass Laws* systematically excluded the Black majority from land ownership, mobility, and political participation.

The apartheid state's *imagined community* was one in which "whiteness" was equated with civilisation, citizenship, and modernity, while "blackness," whether South African or foreign, was cast as inferior, dependent, and alien. Beyond law, apartheid constructed a spatial and economic geography that institutionalised dependency. The migrant labour system confined Black South Africans to temporary, precarious roles in mining and industry while preventing permanent settlement in urban centres. This logic of the "permanent outsider" laid the ideological foundation for post-apartheid constructions of African migrants as "illegal," "burdensome," or "undeserving."[32]

As one South African activist explained, *"The idea that foreigners don't belong didn't start now—it's inherited. During apartheid, they told us who was allowed in the city and who wasn't. That same thinking continues, just with different targets."*[33]Such testimonies underscore how apartheid's racial categories have been repurposed in the democratic era, shaping both institutional practices and public consciousness.

## The Failure of Full Democratisation

The 1994 democratic transition dismantled apartheid's formal architecture but failed to eradicate its structural and economic underpinnings. As Mahmood Mamdani observes, the *negotiated settlement* prioritised political stability over radical economic transformation. While universal suffrage and constitutional democracy marked profound progress, material exclusion persisted through what [34] terms the "continuity of racial capitalism."

Policies such as *Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)* and affirmative action succeeded in creating a small Black elite but did little to transform the broader economic landscape. Land ownership and wealth distribution remain starkly unequal. According to Mahmood Mamdani, the top 10 percent of the population controls more than 85 percent of household wealth, a pattern that mirrors apartheid's economic structure. [35]

The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)*, though innovative in moral terms, is widely criticised for privileging symbolic reconciliation over material justice.[36] It addressed apartheid as a moral aberration rather than a systemic economic order, leaving historical grievances unresolved. As one migrant respondent from Zimbabwe noted, *"They say apartheid ended, but we can feel it in how we are treated here. It's the same system, just wearing a new name."*[37]

These accounts reveal that the failure of full democratisation created fertile ground for scapegoating. The unmet promises of equality and opportunity have led to widespread frustration, which has been redirected toward visible "outsiders." In this sense, xenophobia functions as a displacement of unaddressed inequality, a form of what Michael Neocosmos calls *political subjectivity under exclusion.*[38]

**Xenophobia in the Post-1994 Era**

Post-1994 xenophobia intensified as the state struggled to deliver the material benefits of democracy. African migrants became convenient symbols of socioeconomic failure. While political rhetoric initially invoked pan-African solidarity, public discourse gradually shifted toward securitisation and control. Immigration policies such as the *Immigration Act of 2002* and subsequent amendments institutionalised restrictive measures, framing migration as a threat to sovereignty.

Empirical studies by Crush and Ramachandran confirm that public attitudes toward migrants remain overwhelmingly negative, with perceptions linking them to unemployment, crime, and housing shortages.[39] Yet, this hostility is racially selective, directed almost exclusively at Black Africans. White expatriates and Asian investors are often regarded as "contributors" or "professionals," reflecting a continuation of apartheid's valuation of whiteness and foreign capital.

A Nigerian trader interviewed for this study remarked *"When violence breaks out, they don't attack Europeans or Chinese—they attack us. It's not just about jobs; it's about skin and history."*[40] This observation captures the racialised nature of xenophobia in contemporary South Africa, a phenomenon better described as Afrophobia,[41] rooted in the symbolic hierarchy of apartheid.

**Peculiarities of South African Xenophobia**

Although xenophobia is not unique to South Africa, it carries distinctive features. Surveys by the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) in 1997 and 2006 revealed that nearly a quarter of South Africans favoured a total ban on immigration, while another quarter supported the expulsion of all foreigners. Yet hostility was overwhelmingly racialised: Black Africans were constructed as *amakwerekwere*, a derogatory term marking them as outsiders, while Europeans and other non-Africans often avoided such treatment.

This selective racial xenophobia is particularly ironic given South Africa's liberation history. Many of the countries whose nationals are now targeted, such as Mozambique,

Zimbabwe, and Nigeria, provided crucial support to the African National Congress (ANC) during its years in exile. The shift from solidarity to hostility underscores the fragility of pan-African unity and the enduring power of apartheid-era divisions in shaping South African identity. Although xenophobic sentiment is present in many postcolonial societies, its expression in South Africa is particularly violent and racially defined. Surveys by the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP 2006) found that nearly half of respondents supported restrictions on African immigration, while few expressed hostilities toward Western migrants.[42]

This contradiction is especially poignant given South Africa's liberation history. Nations such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria provided crucial support to the African National Congress (ANC) during the struggle against apartheid. Yet, migrants from these same countries are now targeted in acts of collective amnesia. The shift from solidarity to hostility exemplifies what Falola Toyin and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni term *the coloniality of belonging,* the endurance of colonial hierarchies within postcolonial identities. [43]

An activist in Johannesburg reflected: *"We were helped by Africa during apartheid, but now we close our doors to Africa. That's not liberation; that's memory loss."*[44]This moral inversion underscores how xenophobia represents both a betrayal of historical solidarity and a reactivation of apartheid's racial grammar.

**Voices from the Ground**

The qualitative interviews provide human depth to the structural and discursive analysis. Migrant participants recounted experiences of arbitrary arrest, extortion, and police harassment. One Mozambican shop owner described being told by local officials that his business permit "does not belong to real South Africans," while a Nigerian entrepreneur noted being labelled a "criminal" in media narratives.

South African respondents, particularly those involved in populist movements like *Operation Dudula*, framed their actions as a patriotic defence of scarce resources. A local community organiser explained: *"We are not against Africans; we are protecting our own first."*[45]This rationalisation reflects the internalisation of exclusionary nationalism, where belonging is defined through opposition to "foreigners."

These narratives reveal xenophobia as both a structural legacy and a lived social practice, a manifestation of what Achille Mbembe calls necro politics, [46] where the state and society decide whose lives are valued and whose are expendable. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that xenophobia in South Africa cannot be reduced to unemployment or economic competition. It is the product of historical continuity, racialised nationalism, and unresolved trauma. The persistent racial selectivity of xenophobic violence, the scapegoating of migrants for governance failures, and the mobilisation of exclusionary rhetoric in political discourse all indicate that apartheid's hierarchies of value remain operative.

Thus, xenophobia in the democratic era represents not a rupture from the past, but its reconfiguration, an *afterlife of apartheid* in which the logic of exclusion persists beneath the veneer of constitutional equality.

This study demonstrates that xenophobia in South Africa cannot be reduced to an immediate response to unemployment or economic insecurity. Rather, it is best understood as an afterlife of apartheid, in which racial hierarchies and exclusionary logics persist in new forms. A striking feature is its racial selectivity: while European or Asian migrants are often accepted, African migrants are constructed as undesirable outsiders. This racialisation mirrors apartheid's hierarchies and reveals the endurance of colonial categories of belonging. Comparative evidence suggests both uniqueness and continuity.

For instance, xenophobic violence in Côte d'Ivoire during the 2000s was closely linked to discourses of *ivoirité*, which narrowed the boundaries of national belonging and rendered migrants politically suspect. Ghana and Nigeria have likewise witnessed episodes of hostility towards migrants from both countries, particularly during periods of economic downturn. Yet South Africa's experience remains distinctive in both its intensity and its recurrent violence. This exceptionalism reflects the enduring scars of apartheid, the racialisation of belonging, and the incomplete nature of the democratic transition, in which formal political inclusion has not been matched by substantive socio-economic transformation. Policy responses that rely primarily on law-enforcement crackdowns, therefore, risk addressing symptoms rather than causes, leaving the deeper structural and historical drivers of xenophobia intact. Effective interventions require addressing structural inequalities through equitable land reform, education, and housing access, while simultaneously launching nationwide civic education campaigns against xenophobia. At the regional level, revitalising pan-African institutions such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to strengthen labour mobility frameworks could help reduce tensions and rebuild solidarity.

**Discussion**

One of the most striking findings is the racial selectivity of xenophobic violence: while migrants from other African states are frequently targeted, White and Asian foreigners are largely spared. This pattern reveals that the boundaries of belonging in the democratic era remain defined by apartheid's racial logic, which equated modernity and legitimacy with whiteness and foreign capital.

Achille Mbembe's concept of the *post-colony* [47]illuminates this continuity. He argues that postcolonial states often reproduce colonial hierarchies through new languages of citizenship and modernity. South Africa's treatment of African migrants exemplifies this dynamic; the old racial categories of apartheid re-emerge as cultural and economic hierarchies of "value." Xenophobia thus becomes not merely prejudice but a mode of governance, a mechanism for maintaining order through exclusion.

As one South African activist in this study observed, *"We are told to love Africa, but the system still teaches us to fear Africans."*[48] This paradox encapsulates the unresolved tension between the constitutional ideal of non-racialism and the enduring social power of race. Xenophobia also functions as a projection of historical trauma. The violence directed toward African migrants represents a displacement of collective frustration over the unfulfilled promises of liberation. Frantz Fanon described this process as the "internalisation of colonial violence," where the oppressed redirect anger inward or toward other marginalised groups. [49]

In South Africa, the persistent inequalities inherited from apartheid, high unemployment, poverty, and urban insecurity create fertile ground for scapegoating. Migrants become symbolic stand-ins for the socioeconomic injustices that remain unresolved. As a Zimbabwean respondent noted, *"People attack us because we remind them that freedom did not bring equality."*[50]

This projection underscores the importance of psychosocial and historical reconciliation alongside economic reform. Without confronting the emotional and historical residues of apartheid, structural interventions alone will be insufficient to dismantle xenophobic attitudes.

**Xenophobia as Political Tool and Cultural Expression**

Beyond personal sentiment, xenophobia has become a political instrument employed by populist movements and state actors to consolidate support amid crises of legitimacy. Groups such as *Operation Dudula* and *Put South Africans First* mobilise exclusionary nationalism by framing migrants as obstacles to progress. These discourses draw upon the same symbolic repertoire that apartheid used to define belonging through exclusion.

Michael Neocosmos conceptualises this phenomenon as *"state-derived xenophobia"*, where official rhetoric and policies legitimise popular hostility. [51] The state's selective enforcement of immigration laws, periodic crackdowns, and inflammatory political statements all reinforce a sense of authorised exclusion. Xenophobia thus operates simultaneously as a cultural narrative and a political technology, a way to produce unity through the identification of a common enemy.

As one interviewee, a South African community leader, expressed: *"When politicians fail, they point to the foreigner. It unites people through anger, not justice."*[52]This demonstrates how xenophobia serves as both a symptom and an instrument of political fragility in the post-apartheid state.

**Implications for Democracy and Social Cohesion**

The persistence of xenophobia poses a profound threat to the integrity of South Africa's democratic project. It undermines the constitutional values of equality, human dignity, and non-racialism that were central to the liberation struggle. By allowing racialised exclusion to persist under new guises, the state risks reproducing what Falola Toyin and Ndlovu Gatsheni call *"coloniality within decolonisation,"* a situation in which colonial structures of power survive beneath democratic rhetoric. [53]

Furthermore, the normalisation of xenophobic discourse erodes trust in public institutions and deepens social fragmentation. It also exposes the limitations of transitional justice mechanisms such as the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)*, which prioritised moral catharsis over economic and structural repair. As Ifi Amadiume argued, reconciliation without redistribution risks producing "citizens without substance", a democracy of form rather than content. [54] Reinvigorating democratic legitimacy thus requires not only institutional reform but also a renewed ethical project grounded in inclusivity, solidarity, and shared accountability for the continent's liberation history.

**Toward a Historical Reckoning**

Ultimately, the persistence of xenophobia reveals that South Africa's transition, though politically transformative, remains historically incomplete. The legacies of apartheid, economic stratification, spatial segregation, and racialised citizenship continue to structure everyday life. To address xenophobia meaningfully, the nation must undertake a deeper reckoning that unites truth, justice, and redistribution.

Such a project would extend the unfinished work of the TRC by recognising socioeconomic injustice as a form of historical violence. It would also embrace the kind of *"transformative remembrance"* [55]that links memory to material change. Only through such holistic reconciliation can South Africa transcend the afterlives of apartheid and build a democratic order rooted in genuine equality and continental solidarity.

**Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that xenophobia in South Africa is not a spontaneous or isolated post-apartheid development but rather an afterlife of apartheid's systemic racism, a historical legacy that continues to shape patterns of exclusion, belonging, and identity in the democratic era. By tracing the continuities between apartheid's racial hierarchies and post-apartheid nationalism, the study has shown that xenophobia functions as both a social pathology and a political instrument. It reproduces long-standing structures of inequality under the guise of protecting citizenship and national sovereignty, revealing how deeply embedded racial ideologies persist within contemporary governance.

Three central conclusions emerge from the analysis. Xenophobia, first, represents a continuity rather than a rupture, as the racialised categories of belonging that structured apartheid remain influential in defining post-apartheid citizenship. Second, the racial selectivity of xenophobic violence, where Black African migrants are disproportionately targeted while White and non-African foreigners are generally spared, demonstrates the endurance of apartheid's symbolic and material hierarchies. Third, xenophobia exposes the incomplete nature of South Africa's democratisation, in which political inclusion has not been accompanied by substantive economic transformation or equitable redistribution.

Addressing xenophobia requires acknowledging and dismantling its historical, structural, and psychological roots. The problem cannot be resolved through policing or border control alone but demands a deeper project of historical reckoning and socioeconomic redress. This involves fostering civic education that promotes pan-African solidarity, implementing reforms in land ownership, housing, and education to reduce inequality, and advancing regional labour frameworks that ensure fair mobility and mutual benefit. It also requires a renewed commitment to justice and reconciliation that goes beyond the symbolic achievements of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to include material reparations and community-based healing.

Moreover, South Africa must reclaim its role as a moral and political leader on the African continent by strengthening regional cooperation and reaffirming the principles of pan-Africanism that guided its own liberation. Restoring solidarity with neighbouring states that

once sheltered South African exiles is not only a moral imperative but also essential for building a cohesive regional order grounded in mutual respect and shared progress.

In sum, xenophobia in South Africa persists because the legacies of apartheid remain unresolved. The democratic state, while politically inclusive, continues to operate within the racial and economic structures inherited from its past. Overcoming this condition demands more than policy reform; it requires a profound historical reckoning that unites truth, justice, and redistribution in pursuit of a genuinely inclusive and decolonised African future.

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## Notes

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