Xenophobia

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE POLITICS OF XENOPHOBIA: Race, National Groups and the Anti-Immigrant Violence in South Africa.

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Abstract

The recent anti-immigrant violence that erupted in South Africa in May 2008 did not only shake that country to its roots, but also shocked the rest of the world. Before that ugly incident, South Africa was often referred to as the 'rainbow nation', a term originally coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the country's revered cleric and Nobel laureate, to describe the country's heritage as a land of diverse cultures[1]. In the aftermaths of this latest violence in South Africa, the country has acquired a new reputation as one where xenophobia holds sway.

Xenophobia refers to "the strong feeling of dislike or fear of people from other countries"[2]. It is the citizen's disapproval of foreigners living in one's own country or earning a living in one's country. From this viewpoint, it is obvious that the events of May 2008 in South Africa were clearly xenophobic violence. It must be noted however that those events were not the first of its kind as xenophobia has a particularly long history, even in Africa. In the 1980s, Nigeria was awash with anti-immigrant feelings that ultimately culminated in the expulsion of Ghanaians from the country. In the 1990s, it was the turn of Nigerians to be expelled from Equatorial Guinea amid tales of violence and intimidation.

Further back in history, xenophobia has always been a topical issue. Rome had experienced severe stresses after non-Roman members of the empire settled in the capital, and on many occasions, anti-immigrant actions were undertaken by citizens to curtail the influx and influence of foreigners. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, Japan had isolated itself from the outside world in order to prevent the infiltration of foreign ideas into the fatherland[3]. And in the 19th and early 20th centuries, America was the setting for so much ill-will

against the influx of Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants, this providing the basis for landmark racist laws in the country's past[4].

Introduction
Historical and Theoretical Background to Xenophobia in South Africa.

The xenophobic violence that ravaged South Africa has firm roots in the country's history. This history dates back to more than 350 years when the first white adventurers conquered the territories that are today the Republic of South Africa. From that moment, the society was divided along the two lines of White and Black, Colonialist and Native. From this moment also, the society was marked by tensions along these lines, tensions rooted in the differing opportunities available to the divides. The Whites were the rulers, and the Blacks were the ruled, the Whites were the owners of productive enterprises while the Blacks were the labourers.

These tensions meant that the black natives saw the white rulers as usurpers, foreigners who had come to take away their land and resources. Three hundred years later, this view was compounded and the tensions aggravated when the whites instituted a policy of Apartheid. Apartheid segregated the races in South Africa, and meant that political, social and economic opportunities abounded for the whites and were almost non-existent for blacks[5]. These policies of segregation were applied rigidly by the whites, and as time went by, blacks were increasingly driven into violence as a means of obtaining the socio-political and economic concessions they demanded.

From the foregoing, it is clear that violence and racial tensions have always been intricately linked in the history of South Africa. The push of the whites to gain control of the territory of South Africa brought about violence from the blacks who opposed them. When this control was transformed into apartheid, even more violence resulted from black struggles for concessions and majority rule. Majority rule was eventually achieved in 1994 amid euphoria and high hopes for economic well-being for all the citizens of South Africa. But despite majority rule, South Africa has remained racially imbalanced, perhaps as a legacy of the more than 350 years of colonial domination and over 50 years of apartheid.

The laws of the new South Africa have outlawed institutionalized discrimination, but notwithstanding, the country has remained, in the words of President Thabo Mbeki himself "a country of two nations; one rich and white, the other poor and black"[6]. Although made in 1998, this statement remains valid even

today, and the situation has produced a great deal of insecurity on the part of the black, disadvantaged population. The economic disempowerment of blacks in South Africa has made day-to day survival increasingly difficult and unpredictable for the members. Economic disempowerment has thus brought about existential insecurity among blacks in South Africa – the feeling that survival is not guaranteed for citizens.

It is within this broad reality of existential insecurity that xenophobia in South Africa can be located. According to Inglehart and Welzel, there is a persuasive tendency for existential insecurity to produce intolerance and xenophobia[7]. When resources are scare such that it is a question of one group or the other surviving, discrimination and violence against outsiders become prevalent[8]. Thus, xenophobia becomes commonplace when threats to survival dominate people's lives and these threats usually "force people to focus on the well-being of one's in-group, viewing outsiders with suspicion and distrust"[9].

Viewed this way, it becomes possible to explain the May 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. In the years following majority rule, the government of South Africa has been unable to address the legacy of colonial rule and apartheid. The black majority have as a result continued to be disempowered. This disempowerment has been much more in the area of technical jobs and other jobs requiring high level skills. Although unskilled jobs are relatively more available, South Africans have been reluctant to take these up especially considering that many of these jobs are associated with apartheid-era limitations of blacks and connote low status. Foreigners from other African countries have no such qualms and have readily taken up these menial Jobs. Over time however, the seeming buoyancy of these foreigners have attracted suspicion, and distrust against them from South Africans, ultimately leading to violence.

A further, complementary theoretical explanation of xenophobia in South Africa can be made as the inability of existing democratic processes to mitigate conflicts and the failure of the political system to channel people's grievances into formal structures for debate and engagement[10]. As resentment grew against the presence of foreigners in South Africa, the government apparently failed to address it. This failure can be attributed to a number of reasons. There is obviously the absence of adequate political structures through which people can express their fears, misgiving and preferences. There is also the issue of the apparent lack of

understanding on the part of ordinary South Africans as to how they can make themselves heard in legitimate ways. Then there is the problem of a political reality whereby the dominance of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) makes debate and dissent seem unnecessary in the foreseeable future[11]. Left with little or no room for letting off steam as it were, the result was the violent explosion that was witnessed in the country.

Race, National Groups and the Politics of Xenophobia in South Africa.

The politics of xenophobia in South Africa in its latest phase can be traced to the assumption of the Presidency of the country by Thabo Mbeki. Before then, Nelson Mandela's Presidency, the first of the new South Africa, emphasized reconciliation and non-racialism[12]. In contrast, Mbeki's Presidency has been marked by attempts to transform the South African society through an affirmative policy of black economic empowerment, land reform, job creation and provision of housing. Nevertheless, his Presidency promised to make all groups feel comfortable and part of the nation.

The South African government also adopted an uneven but favourable policy towards immigrants, especially from other African countries. Thus, although an immigration policy actually exists that seeks to limit the immigration of foreign nationals, there seems a deliberate attitude among South African officials against its implementation[13], perhaps owing to the history of the country. In the heady days of the black struggle for majority rule in South Africa, several African countries had supported this struggle with resources, and bases and refuge within their territories[14]. It is only logical that an independent South Africa would open its doors to nationals of these countries who sacrificed so much for her freedom. And in response, numerous people have flocked into South Africa from these African countries.

In the years following majority rule, South Africa pursued its affirmative policy amid so much hope and promise. However, the goals of this policy were never achieved. The Black Economic Empowerment programme seemed to favour only the elite, and poverty became widespread. Land holding continued to be in the hands of the few, and even the housing scheme of government has been described as "the next generation of slums"[15] in the country. Unemployment in the country is at 30 per cent and rising.

Other statistics are even more awful. Over the past six years, there have been 119, 305 reported murders in South Africa. In 2007

alone, the figure was 19,202. In Johannesburg and neighbouring Pretoria, about 5,000 murders are committed each year according to the police. According to United Nations (UN) crime statistics, one in three Johannesburg residents has been robbed, with 250,000 South African residences reporting burglaries in 2007. Women's groups estimate that a woman is raped every 26 seconds and a child every 15 minutes in South Africa. The police service gives a slightly lower estimate of one woman every 36 seconds, which is still one of the highest levels in the world[16].

But even as black economic empowerment has failed to achieve its avowed aims, other segments of society have continued to feel marginalized by affirmative action. Whites feel increasingly disempowered, although President Mbeki has tried to explain this away by saying his government has to address the injustices of apartheid by reserving jobs for blacks, among other affirmative actions. But many young white school leavers and graduates feel particularly aggrieved that they are being made to pay for the sins of their fathers[17]. A growing number of coloured people have also become frustrated by ANC's policies, with many of them feeling shortchanged in the provision of jobs and housing at the expense of blacks[18].

Confronted by the seeming failure of their policies, the ANC government's first response was to deny any such reality. But when the government could no longer continue to deny the grim realities confronting the nation, it next proceeded to respond in two ways. The first response has been with regard to forces that are largely internal. In the last few years, affirmative action has increasingly assumed a racist character. As Xolela Mangcu has pointed out, the Mbeki Presidency has taken South Africa back to race-based politics. "The government is using the tool of race to explain away their mistakes and round on their critics"[19]. The government is more than ever playing up the injustices of the past as a justification for its discriminatory polices such that all shades of the political divide now agree that South Africa is beset by an obsession with race.

The second response of the South African government has been to shift blames, especially to the many foreign nationals who have migrated into the country in the years following majority rule. In a country of 49 million people, whose mineral-based economy has centered largely on foreign labour, the presence of an estimated between three million and five million immigrants should ordinarily not pose problems. But with unemployment very high and up to 20 percent of the population of townships being immigrant, these foreign

nationals became convenient scapegoats for the failures of government policies[20].

Xenophobia and Violence in South Africa and the Aftermaths.

As pointed out earlier in this paper, South Africa has witnessed a high level of immigration in the years following majority rule. This is attributable to a number of factors, including the relative buoyancy of the South African economy, especially at the time that majority rule was instituted. This was at a time when the economies of many other African countries were going down. As a result, immigrants have flowed in from countries such as Mozambique, Zambia Kenya and Malawi, and even from far-flung countries as Nigeria, Ghana and other sub-Saharan African countries.

Immigration into South Africa was also fuelled by the euphoria that followed the take-off of majority rule. Many African countries had supported the long struggle against apartheid with huge resources and the provision of refuge and bases for the then rebel groups and their leaders. It was these rebel groups and their leaders who went on to secure victory in the South African struggle and assume the mantle of leadership. It was thus, understandable that many of the nationals of these supportive African countries would troop into a free South Africa in search of greener pastures.

In the beginnings, these foreigners were welcome, and South Africa even prided itself as the country of 'Ubuntu' – Zulu for hospitality to strangers. This was of course in the heady days of freedom when all appeared alright and it seemed there was enough for everyone. This euphoria was even boosted by the many ambitious programmes which the ANC-led government launched in furtherance of black empowerment. Had these programmes worked, there were supposed to be enough jobs and houses and other social services for everyone.

But these affirmative programmes did not work. As a consequence of the failures of black empowerment programmes, unemployment rose and new slums sprang up. And these were happening even as more immigrants trooped into the country. With unemployment very high and slums everywhere, crime soon became a problem. Crime initially consisted mainly of drug peddling, and foreign nationals living in the country were mostly blamed. The South African government did not however take strong actions, and soon, citizens organized into vigilantes with the aim of curtailing crime. A prominent vigilante of the early period was the notorious

PAGAD (People Against Gangsterism, Arms and Drugs), whose outings were always accompanied by tears and blood[21].

The vigilantes held sway only few years into majority rule, beginning around 1998. In retrospect, this was the real beginnings of xenophobic violence in South Africa, but at the time, it was explained away as a citizens' reaction to a real social problem. The vigilantes did not stop crime though, and drug peddling was soon joined by car jacking, burglaries and armed robberies. And even though these latest crimes were clearly not to be blamed on immigrants, the vigilantes continued to target foreigners. The government continued to keep silent, and soon, every social stress was conveniently blamed on foreigners living in the country. In 2006, when a community was to be reallocated to another provincial government, violence broke out in the town of Khutsong, west of Johannesburg, and foreigners were targeted[22].

Ever since, attacks on foreigners have been very frequent, aggravated by the prevailing unemployment in the country which has exacerbated the competition for jobs between native South Africans and foreign immigrants. These attacks have also been furthered by the perceived success of the immigrants, although this may be explained by their obvious willingness to take up menial jobs and labour that native South Africans would ordinarily not touch. Earnings from such jobs have helped to make the immigrants look prosperous vis-à-vis their unemployed South African counterparts.

The most devastating of these anti-immigrant attacks took place in May 2008. The violence began on May 11 in Alexandra, a poor township north of Johannesburg, and soon spread to the main city and the surrounding region, and then to other parts of the country, including Cape Town and the coastal province of Kwazulu-Natal. For two weeks, gangs of jobless South Africans armed with machetes and firearms descended on immigrants from other African countries whom they accused of stealing jobs and raising the level of crime[23]. Footages on international television showed unrestrained youths on rampage, killing and maiming people, destroying and looting property.

Once again, the government did nothing to halt the violence. It was only after much procrastination, despite outcries, that the Mbeki government eventually called in the army to assist the ineffective police to quell the violence. Then in a belated national broadcast, President Mbeki described the violence as a national shame. But by this time, the damage was already done. More than 60 people had been killed and about 600 wounded, and tens of

thousands had lost their property or fled their homes. Thousands of immigrants turned churches and police stations into refugee camps, and many thousands more preferred to flee home to their countries.

In the aftermaths of the violence, an uneasy calm has prevailed in South Africa. The country's reputation as a leader on the African continent and a proponent of human rights and cooperation was tarnished. Its democracy was exposed as being incapable of channeling conflict into the marketplace of ideas rather than onto the battlefield. The country has tried to rise up to the occasion though, and efforts have been stepped up to resettle the displaced and brutalized immigrants in the short run and to re-integrate them into the South African society in the long-run.

Xenophobia and Anti-Immigrant Attacks in South Africa and Other Countries of the World: The Way Forward.

There is no doubt that this latest xenophobic violence was the climax of an anger that has been bottled up for so long until it exploded. The South African population had felt abandoned and neglected for long and was only waiting for a spark to burst. An uneasy calm as in after a storm now pervades the country. But even as the country strives to come to terms with this latest gory outburst, the level of insecurity in the country continues to remain very high. The crime infested suburbs and townships remain largely unprotected, while the atmosphere and structure of fear continues to abound throughout South Africa, especially in the wealthy parts of the cities where the architecture is even reflective of fear, with the wealthy living behind high walls and electric fences and in houses protected by alarm systems and other security devices[24].

The foregoing only shows that urgent action is needed in South Africa as well as every other country experiencing xenophobia in order to stem the problem. Long term solutions must be found to prevent future xenophobic outbursts and catastrophes. Consistent with the theoretical perspective of this paper, relevant solutions must be economic and political. On the economic front, the South African government must involve all stakeholders in lifting the majority of its citizens out of poverty. In this regard, the government must evolve a practicable and sustainable programme of social services to provide the people with food, shelter, jobs and healthcare.

The Black Economic Empowerment programme must be overhauled and repackaged for effectiveness. It is obvious that private sector contribution to the programme is little and the government can only do so little in that line. For black empowerment

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to actually be a reality, a policy must be evolved to tackle the skill deficiencies and educational backwardness of blacks, something that is easily a legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Black education and skill acquisition must therefore be vigorously pursued so as to make the vast majority of the country's youths employable and thus empowereable. Nothing much can really be achieved if the majority of blacks do not have jobs.

On the political front, the first thing that the South African government must do and urgently too, is to exorcise the demons of the past and return the ruling ANC to its roots of non-racialism. This will help make all groups, and not just blacks, feel comfortable and part of the nation. Then the government itself must reorganize its structures and create new ones that will be adequate for people to express their grievances and views. For instance, the members of parliament are chosen based on party lists and do not formally represent geographical constituencies. Yet, immigration is largely a geo-political issue as immigrants enter the country in certain places as well as settle in certain areas, and anti-immigrant resentment often starts from these geographical flash points. With adequate representation for such areas, these sentiments will almost always be highlighted and tackled before it explodes.

Even the ruling party itself must open up and concretely allow a more vigorous opposition. Its present attitude of gobbling up opposition parties into its fold only creates the view in the long-run that alternative views are not welcome. A constitutional democracy must promote the idea that citizens are bound to respect the law, but on clear provision that they also have the right to challenge policies and laws with which they disagree, within the law. Any other attitude on the part of those who operate the system will only encourage people to choose other ways of expressing grievances, as we have seen in South Africa recently, and in many other parts of the world.

In fact, immigration issues are prominent in several parts of the world today, and parties and politicians holding strong views on these issues are prominent in the United States, France Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Denmark. Even in Africa, the influx of Zimbabweans into Botswana and a few other countries in Southern Africa has led to resentment[25], just as Cote d'Ivoire has regularly deported foreign nationals from Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea[26]. But serious as these issues have seemed in these and several other countries, there have been no clear policies for tackling illegal immigration. Instead, policies have varied from 'shoulder –

shrugging' approaches in some countries to 'get tough' policies in others.

Either way however, it is the immigrant who ultimately suffers as he is made an easy target for whatever stress a particular country is undergoing. Countries have a right to determine who and how many aliens to allow into their territories, but it must be pointed out here that this is best done at the borders, where those not wanted in a country should be turned back. Once inside a country however, it is advocated that instead of the country engaging in often expensive attempts to arrest and deport these illegal immigrants, or worse still, demonizing them and making them appear as undesirables, it would be better if they are documented and allowed to stay, at least on temporary basis.

In this regard, countries could expand the categories of alien documentation, such that at least one such category will allow illegal aliens to be documented and formally monitored. This way, those immigrants who engage in unwholesome practices could easily be picked up and deported, instead of every immigrant being criminalized and often made easy targets for xenophobic violence. Here again, strong democratic institutions could help mediate immigration and xenophobic concerns by enabling effective policy engagement. Policy engagement enables the government to put across the options and solutions, and the citizens to air their views and preferences.

Effective policy engagement also teaches citizens the limitations of preferred solutions, such as the closing of the borders to immigrants or the expulsion of aliens, as difficult and expensive to enforce, or enforced only at the cost of other social services or international status. Thus well informed, engaged citizens could then understand why they may have to tolerate aliens in their midst and live more amicably with them without recourse to xenophobia and violence at the earliest stress.

Summary and Conclusion.

This paper has tried to trace the course of xenophobia in South Africa leading up to the recent violence in that country and its implications and solutions. We have seen that xenophobia has been part of human history – people have always aggregated in well-off countries and cities at every point in history. However, once the situation in these places gets worse, these immigrants have usually been targets of those who consider themselves the owners of the land. In South Africa as in other places, we have seen that the

primary cause of xenophobia is economic, but it is usually aggravated by politics. Violence is usually the end result of xenophobic feelings of a people towards out-groups.

But as this paper has shown, the way forward is not recourse to distinctions and discriminations based on race, national or ethnic groups. Instead, it must be based on the conscious admission of policy failures on the part of the government and the cooperation of all – the governed as well as the rulers, nationals as well as aliens – towards solving the common problems confronting particular societies such that the existential security of every individual is guaranteed.

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