

Afrophobia in South Africa: A General Perspective of Xenophobia

Malesele J Masenya¹

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to discuss the discriminatory acts of the South African citizens towards foreign nationals. The phobia of losing inter alia job opportunities and market has left South Africa citizens with nothing except to attack expatriates from neighboring countries with the intention of petrifying them so that they can return back home; whilst, these foreigners left their countries in pursuit of economic opportunities. Xenophobia is characterized by a wide range of looting, killing and attacking foreign national homes, shops and markets. In South Africa, xenophobia ascended because of the perceptions of citizens alleging that foreign people are invading their opportunities: employment, markets as well as services amongst other. The fear of foreign nationals taking over in almost everything has led to animosity and greediness. Thus, xenophobic attacks were seen as the only solution to the problem. In that context the paper looks at the general perspective of xenophobia in South Africa focusing on the main reasons why local citizens attack foreign nationals. Furthermore, the paper recommends some strategies that can be used to prevent South Africans attacking foreign nationals. The paper concludes that xenophobic attacks in South Africa are caused by the anxiety and belief of citizens that foreign nationals are taking over what they are supposed to have. Therefore, the paper recommends that the government should work together with the people so that the attacks can be prevented through campaigns amongst others.*

Keywords: xenophobia, discrimination, violence and economic opportunities

Introduction

Xenophobia is derived from the Greek words “xenos” and “phobos” which mean “strange or foreign” and “phobia” respectively (Crush and Ramachandran, 2009; Fatoki, 2014). Xenophobia can be viewed as attitudes, prejudices, and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity. According to the

¹ Department of Development Planning and Management, University of Limpopo, Turfloop Campus.
Email: malesele.masenya@ul.ac.za

Concise Oxford English dictionary (2004), xenophobia is an “intense or irrational dislike or fear of people from other countries”. Xenophobia is simply the fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers; it is embodied in discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, and often culminates in violence, abuses of all types, and exhibitions of hatred (Akindès, 2004). The studies on xenophobia have revealed that the hatred to foreigners has a number of causes: the fear of loss of social status and identity; a threat, perceived or real, to citizens’ economic success; a way of reassuring the national self and its boundaries in times of national crisis; a feeling of superiority; and poor intercultural information (Danso and Macdonald, 2000). Xenophobia fundamentally derives from the sense that non-citizens pose some sort of a threat to the recipients’ identity or their individual rights, and is also closely connected with the concept of nationalism: the sense in each individual of membership in the political structure as an essential ingredient in his or her sense of identity (Akindès, 2009). To this end, a notion of citizenship can lead to xenophobia when it becomes apparent that the government does not guarantee protection of individual rights. This is all the more apparent where poverty and unemployment are rampant.

Evolution and Cases of Xenophobia in South Africa

Xenophobia started back in 1980s where the hostilities in the neighboring countries had led to an estimated 250,000 to 350,000 immigrants fleeing to South Africa (Danso and McDonald, 2001). The government authorized refugee status back in 1980s, but they were technically allowed to settle in the Bantustans or (black homelands) created by the apartheid government (Dodson, 2010). However, irrespective of being allowed to stay in South Africa, the reality was more varied depending upon the homeland. With the homeland of Lebowa (Limpopo Province) Mozambican settlers were dismissed outright while Gazankulu (some part Limpopo and Mpumalanga Province) welcomed the refugees with support in the form of land and equipment (Gordon, 2010). Those in Gazankulu, however, found themselves confined to the homeland and liable for deportation should they enter South Africa proper and access to economic resource were also denied (Gumede, 2015).

Xenophobic violence against foreign nationals in South Africa has worsened since 1994 in provinces such as Gauteng, Western Cape, Free State and KwaZulu Natal (Gumede, 2015). There has been this and much speculation of the causes and triggers of the violence. A number of reports have highlighted various issues contributing to xenophobia; some of which include poor service delivery and competition for resources (Harris, 2001). The type of leadership within communities might have an impact on whether or not xenophobic attacks occur in certain communities, which talks to issues of governance. The issue is not only about foreign nationals and their rights, but about the safety of all who live in South Africa. Most incidents of violent attacks have been carried out by black South Africans (Kalitanyi and Visser, 2010; Gumede, 2015). South Africa is Africa’s most industrialized country, and it attracts thousands of foreign nationals every year, seeking refuge from poverty, economic crises and war and government persecution in their home countries (Hussein and Hitomi, 2013). While the majority of them are from elsewhere on the

continent, such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Ethiopia, many also come from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The tendency of perceiving all foreigners especially black African foreigners in South Africa as illegal immigrants is a root concern. This has created a narrative whereby there is a distinction between 'us' (South Africans) and 'them' (foreigners or *makwerekwere*) (Gumede, 2015).

Prior to 1994, immigrants from neighboring countries faced discrimination and even violence in South Africa, though much of that risk stemmed from the institutionalized racism of the time due to apartheid (Kalitanyi and Visser, 2010). After democratization in 1994, contrary to expectations, the incidence of xenophobia increased. According to a 1998 Human Rights Watch Report immigrants from Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique living in the Alexandra township in Johannesburg were physically assaulted over a period of several weeks in January 1995, as armed gangs identified suspected undocumented migrants and marched them to the police station in an attempt to 'clean' the township of foreigners (McDonald and Jacob, 2005). The campaign, known as "*Buyelekhaya*" (go back home), blamed foreigners for crime, unemployment and sexual attacks.

Between the year 2000 and March 2008, at least 67 people died in what were identified as xenophobic attacks (McDonald, 2008). In 2000 seven foreigners were killed on the Cape Flats over a five-week period in what police described as xenophobic murders possibly motivated by the fear that outsiders would claim property belonging to locals (Mogekwu, 2005). In October 2001 residents of the Zandspruit informal settlement gave Zimbabweans 10 days to leave the area. When the foreigners failed to leave voluntarily they were forcefully evicted and their shacks were burned down and looted (Morapedi, 2007). Community members said they were angry that Zimbabweans were employed while locals remained jobless and blamed the foreigners for a number of crimes. In May 2008, a series of riots left 62 people dead; although 21 of those killed were South African citizens (Morapedi, 2007). The attacks were apparently motivated by xenophobia. The main reasons behind these attacks were: relative deprivation, specifically intense competition for jobs, commodities and housing; group processes, including psychological categorization processes that are nationalistic rather than superordinate; South African exceptionalism, or a feeling of superiority in relation to other Africans; and exclusive citizenship, or a form of nationalism that excludes others (Schwartz, 2009).

In 2015, another nationwide spike in xenophobic attacks against immigrants in general after Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini said that "foreigners should go back to their countries". This led to fuelling of locals looting foreigners' shops and attacked immigrants in general, forcing hundreds to relocate to police stations across the country. The King claims that he was cited out of context after his attributes led to citizens attacking foreign nationals. Thus, prompting a number of foreign governments to begin repatriating their citizens (Gumede, 2015). The practice and narrative of labeling foreigners as

'*Makwerekwere*' or the hostile 'other' should be questioned and condemned by government and fellow South Africans. Seeing foreigners as the other or outsider in relation to the 'self' can promote a culture of exclusion, rejection and unease rather than accommodation and integration. This can perpetuate a culture whereby the 'other' is seen as the existential threat to the 'self'.

Causes of Xenophobia in South Africa

Public Perceptions and Political Influences

Reasons for the attacks differ, with some blaming the contestation for scarce resources, others attribute it to the country's violent past, inadequate service delivery and the influence of micro politics in townships, involvement and complicity of local authority members in contractor conflicts for economic and political reasons, failure of early warning and prevention mechanisms regarding community-based violence; and also local residents claims that foreigners took jobs opportunities away from local South Africans and they accept lower wages, foreigners do not participate in the struggle for better wages and working conditions (Mogekwu, 2005; Schwartz, 2009; Zouandé, 2011). Other local South Africans claim that foreigners are criminals, and they should not have access to services and police protection. Foreigners are also blamed for their businesses that take away customers from local residents and the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Other South African locals do not particularly like the presence of refugees, asylum-seekers or foreigners in their communities. Foreigners are used as the convenient scapegoats and mask for individual and government failures (Mogekwu, 2005). As long as the South African government and those involved in the attacks do not take responsibility for their failures, this unfortunate situation is likely to be prolonged.

Access to Economic Opportunities

In South Africa immigrants are seen to threaten the jobs of locals as well as undermining wages in an economy that has high levels of unemployment, poverty, and income inequality (Mogekwu, 2005). The South African citizen's micro-enterprise faces sales, and therefore income, fluctuation more than a person employed in a regular job. In some months sales are very high; in others, they drop radically (McDonald and Jacob, 2005). The owner must balance cash inflows with the outflows so that there is always enough money to meet expenses. Sometimes this requires the owner to take a short-term loan to help the business get through a tough period. Almost every microenterprise has sales fluctuations. On the other hand, foreign national's micro-enterprises are not affected as they sell cheap materials or products, thus, they can reduce the prices so that customers or buyers can come to them, and that leads to micro-enterprises of South African citizens drowning down.

Societal and Cultural Beliefs

When the xenophobic violence in South Africa occurred, the victims were not only foreigners in the sense of a different nationality are attacked but in fact everybody not belonging to the dominant ethnic groups in the main cities, Zulu or Xhosa was attacked. Members of smaller ethnic groups in South Africa are also viewed as foreigners by fellow South Africans (Mogekwu, 2005; Gumede, 2015). White people are not viewed as foreigners in the context of xenophobic violence. There had been attacks on South Africans who 'looked foreign' because they were 'too dark' to be South Africans (Mogekwu, 2005). Societies continues to perpetuate xenophobia by not accepting their children to get married to foreign nationals whom they refer to as *makwerekwere*, this is usually experienced by girls where they are impregnated by foreign national, then when girl want to marry the foreign man her parents would not allow the marriage to take place because of their stereotype perceptions of foreign nationals from their elders.

Failure to Maintain the Rule of Law

The government is completely responsible for xenophobia in South Africa (Danson and Macdonald, 2000; McDonald and Jacob, 2005). However, due to its repeated failures to bring levels of violent crime under control, which contributed to an environment which saw people resort to violence without fear of arrest or successful prosecution, the incidences of xenophobia persisted. In failing to maintain the rule of law, the government conditioned many poor communities to violent behavior (Akindès, 2009). The failure to protect communities from criminal elements and to remove those elements allowed criminals to take full advantage of chaos and disorder to rob rape and loot during the violent uprisings.

Potential Damage of the Country's Image Globally Due Xenophobic Attacks

The manifestation of xenophobia undermines social cohesion, peaceful co-existence, and good governance, and constitutes a violation of human rights (Akindès, 2009). Furthermore, as South Africa is part of international human rights and humanitarian treaties, especially on expatriates and refugee seekers, obligations to combat xenophobia have both a legal and a moral force. As a liberal democratic country fostering the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Africa Union (AU), South Africa is barely in an ethical or an economic position to close its borders (McDonald, 2005; Kalitanyi and Visser, 2010). Therefore, the moral implications of allowing xenophobia to continue unabated should be an additional worry for the government to its international image.

The South African expression of intolerance towards their fellow Africans has attracted analysis from all over the globe due to its somewhat hypocritical nature (Kalitanyi and Visser, 2010). Migration is a sign of South Africa's emergence as Africa's preeminent economic, educational and cultural centre; and from an international perspective it is seen as something of a duty to share this prosperity with its African counterparts (Kalitanyi and Visser, 2010; Zouandé, 2011; Hussein and Hitomi, 2013; Gumede, 2015).

To allow citizens of one member state to think and act in xenophobic ways about citizens of another, is ultimately extremely destructive of regional cooperation and harmony.

President Jacob Zuma said “South African blacks should not behave as if they were typical blacks from Africa. The African National Congress Secretary-General, Gwede Mantashe, blamed foreigners for stoking unrest in South Africa’s platinum belt. Small business development minister Lindiwe Zulu, said the businesses of foreign Africans based in township could not expect to coexist peacefully with local business owners unless they shared their trade secret”. King Goodwill Zwelithini said “African migrants should take their things and go”. Whether intentional or not, such rhetoric and narratives constructed by South African elites and government officials can be a powerful polarizing and inflammatory force to incite xenophobia from below. This raises questions regarding leadership at the local and national level in South Africa, and its role whether conscious or not in inciting violence against black Africans. Particularly, government reluctance to strongly condemn the role of King Zwelithini in inciting the violence also leaves much to desire about South African leaders’ response to the crisis.

The routine persecution and exploitation of foreigners facilitated by their inability to summon the protection of the state has legitimized their status as deserving targets of outrage and expropriation (Hitomi, 2013; Gumede, 2015). However, the rest of the world, especially Africa, is watching as South Africans mistreat their fellow Africans in a country that preaches ‘ubuntu’ and togetherness (Akindès, 2009; Hitomi, 2013; Gumede, 2015). The need for transformation cannot be overstated. There is a need for collective reflection to come up with a sustainable solution to xenophobia. Responsible leadership is crucial. South Africa and other African countries need to think about immigration and relations of social interconnectedness on the continent, especially at a time when immigration is becoming a major security debate both continentally and internationally.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the discriminatory acts of the South African citizens towards foreign nationals. The paper examined the historical origin of xenophobia in South Africa and found that most important reasons behind the prevalence of xenophobia in South Africa are economic opportunities and the tendency to criminalize foreigners. Existing explanations in terms of economic crises, political transition, relative deprivation, or remnants of apartheid all contain an element of truth but are not in themselves sufficient. Proclamations from politicians coupled with media reporting on drug syndicates, prostitution and human trafficking, all feed and in turn feed off a popular perception that migrants are bad for South African society and its economy. The paper also found that it is all too easy for the media and the government to place blame on immigrants for crime, unemployment and housing problems, however, it is not a lasting solution can only be detrimental for the economy, culture, society and international image of South Africa.

In order to curb xenophobia the following measures are recommended: first and foremost, it must be made clear that the primary challenge that the government faces is an educational one, as it is unable to focus on any one group in society. The government has to take duty of providing citizens with vicarious knowledge of migrants, immigrants and refugees as people through the media. This would also be helpful to encourage a greater sense of continentalism and internationalism through the media and through the public pronouncements of opinion-makers. This can be achieved by working with schools, colleges and universities to include issues such as citizenship and xenophobia in their curricula, and to stress the positive impact that immigration can have on South Africa's economy and society.

The government has to go beyond detecting, detaining and deporting migrants in order to tackle crime, disease and joblessness. These issues need to be treated completely separately from that of migration. One important aspect of xenophobia is the virtual absence of any sense of solidarity with other countries in the SADC; the government must work with other SADC countries in order to improve, or even create, a real sense of regional consciousness amongst citizens and policy makers. The starting point could be for individual state and regional organisations to devise and implement public education programmes that emphasize tolerance and common interests.

References

- Akindès, F. (2004). The roots of the military-political crises in Côte d'Ivoire. UPPSALA: The Nordic Africa Institute. Pp. 27-30
- Akindès, F. (2009). South African mediation in the Ivorian crisis. In *Africa's peacemaker? Lessons from South African conflict mediation*, edited by Shillinger, K. Johannesburg: Fanele. Pp.118-130.
- Concise Oxford English dictionary. 11th ed. (2004). Oxford University Press.
- Crush, J and Ramachandran, S. (2009). *Xenophobia, International Migration and Human Development*. Human development paper no. 2009/49. United Nations Development Programme: New York.
- Danso, Rand Macdonald, D. (2000). *Writing xenophobia: Immigration and the press in post-apartheid South Africa*, Canada: SAMP.
- Danso, R and McDonald, D. (2001). *Writing xenophobia: Immigration and the print media in post-apartheid South Africa*. *Africa Today*, 48(3):122-131.
- Dodson, B. (2010). Locating xenophobia: Debate, discourse, and everyday experience in Cape Town, South Africa. *Africa Today*, 56(3):3-22.
- Fatoki, O.O. (2014). Working capital management practices of immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa. *Journal of Social Science*, 5(10):52-57.
- Gordon, L. S.(2010).Migrants in a state of exception: Xenophobia and the role of the post- apartheid state. *Contemporary social issues in Africa*, African Institute of South Africa,Pretoria. Pp. 45-64.

Gumede, W. (2015). South Africa must confront the roots of its xenophobic violence. Internet:<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/20/south-africa-xenophobic-violence-migrant-workers-apartheid>. Accessed: 27 August 2015.

Harris, B. (2001). A foreign experience: Violence, crime and xenophobia during South Africa's transition. Centre for the study of violence and reconciliation, Braamfontein; violence and transition series.

Hussein, S and Hitomi, K. (2013). Xenophobia in South Africa: Reflections, narratives and recommendations. *Southern African Peace and Security Studies*, 2(2):2-30.

Kalitanyi, V and Visser, K.(2010).African immigrants in South Africa: Job takers or job creators?.*South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 13(4):376-384.

McDonald, Mand Jacob, S.(2005). (Re) writing Xenophobia: Understanding press coverage of cross border migration in Southern Africa. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 23(3):296-327

McDonald, M. (2008). Securitization and the construction of security. *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:563-587.

Mogekwu, M. (2005). African Union: Xenophobia as poor intercultural information. *Ecquid Novi*, 26(1):5-20.

Morapedi, W. G. (2007). Post-liberation xenophobia in Southern Africa: The case of the influx of undocumented Zimbabwean immigrants into Botswana. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 25(2):233-235.

Schwartz, M. (2009). The hyper-securitization of identity and pro-acted social conflict: The case of Cyprus. New York: The new school graduate program in international affairs. Pp. 3-16.

Zouandé, S.F. (2011). Governance and democratic transition in Africa: Understanding Ivoirité and the ethnicity challenges to citizenship and nation-building in Côte d'Ivoire. Washington: Howard University.