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THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

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By Stephen Ndoma

XENOPHOBIA'S SHADOW: A THREAT TO SOUTH AFRICA'S FUTURE

South Africa is an economic giant of Southern Africa and stands out as a preferred top destination for migrants from within and beyond the region. In 2023, South Africa had an estimated total of 2 860 495 officially recognised immigrants (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023). Due to its socio-economic and political status, South Africa attracts foreign migrants for economic, safety and security reasons (Patel & Essa, 2015). It is also home to many refugees and asylum seekers from various African countries.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR) reports that there were 250 250 refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa, although the figures may be inaccurate due to the presence of many undocumented refugees (UNCHR, 2025 and Freedom House, 2022). These refugees and asylum seekers are driven away from their countries of origin due to poverty, political violence and war. These countries include Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, and Zimbabwe (The Conversation, 2020, UNCHR, 2025).

South Africa's Elephant in the Room – Migration and Xenophobia

Some of the benefits that accrue to destination countries due to migration include the filling of labour gaps, while countries of origin can also benefit from remittances (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023). However, destination countries normally face unbearable pressure due to the influx of foreign migrants, and South Africa has not been spared from this. The country faces a number of challenges due to a burgeoning number of immigrants, including those seeking political refuge.

A parliamentary monitoring group highlighted some of these challenges, including xenophobic violence, unequal access to opportunities, health care, and education, as well as migrant and refugee policies (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019). To buttress this, three foreign nationals were killed in the Eastern Cape province in May of this year following violent revenge attacks, while hundreds of women and children were driven from their homes (Mahamba, 2025, Chirume, 2025).

With a long and bloody history, xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa often leaves a trail of destruction. Xenophobic attacks in May 2008 saw about 62 people killed and thousands displaced (Patel & Essa, 2015). Similar clashes between South Africans and foreigners in 2015, mainly in Durban and Johannesburg, forced a number of foreign immigrants to close their business operations and request voluntary repatriation to their home countries (Myeni, 2022).

Reports of foreign migrants being denied healthcare services also abound (Gonye, 2021, Sobuwa, 2023, Bulawayo 24News.com, 2025). These attacks partly stem from local perceptions that foreign immigrants place pressure on already strained resources. Groups like Operation Dudula have made calls for prioritising South Africans and have blamed migrant workers for rampant crime and for contributing to the country's high unemployment rate by taking jobs away from locals (Fihlani, 2022).

These episodes have a negative impact on South Africa's post-apartheid vision of an inclusive, non-racial democracy, while also tarnishing its international image. To compound matters, discrimination, particularly against African immigrants, casts a dark shadow on the country, strains diplomatic relations, and threatens regional cooperation and economic integration initiatives.

Speaking at a recent summit of liberation movements in Southern Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa called for a rejection of xenophobia, and emphasised that migration is "a consequence of underdevelopment, war, and global inequality, and not a moral failing of those who migrate in search of hope" (Mokwena, 2025). He also urged liberation movements to advocate for "people-centred regional migration policies that affirm dignity, rights, and solidarity as well."

The Numbers Tell a Story: Afrobarometer Insights on Tolerance

While citizens who engage in xenophobia may have their reasons, how tolerant is South African society towards immigrants and foreign workers? Public opinion data can help unpack this puzzle. To better understand the scope and implications of this issue, Afrobarometer[1] survey data is used to gain valuable insights into public perceptions on tolerance and their potential impact on xenophobic tendencies.

This was gauged through questions measuring citizens' attitudes towards immigrants or foreign workers and their acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers.

Survey data shows that the South African society is generally tolerant to immigrants or foreign workers, a view shared by 58% who said they do not care or at least like having them as neighbours, while 39% disliked it. On the downside, above half (53%) expressed opposition to a scenario where asylum seekers are accepted and protected in South Africa, while 24% endorsed such a scenario.

About seven out of 10 adult citizens (71%) agreed that employers should prioritise locals when job opportunities are scarce, while 62% had negative assessments about government's performance in terms of ensuring that this is respected.

These findings provide evidence that South African society can be susceptible to xenophobia given what the data shows about citizens attitude towards immigrants and foreign workers, and the reluctance to accept asylum seekers. Calls for locals to be considered first when job opportunities are scarce and perceptions that government is not doing enough in terms of giving preference to those born and bred in South Africa are also likely to fuel xenophobic attitudes.

Building Bridges, Not Walls: A Call to Action

South Africa is undoubtedly an economic hub that will continue to attract migrants from beyond its borders, as people flock to the country in search of opportunities to improve their socio-economic well-being. This will continue to place pressure on the resources that are already under strain. Citizens have made their voice heard: while there is general tolerance towards immigrants or foreigners, there is low acceptance of the protection of asylum seekers.

Many believe that employers should prioritise locals first when job opportunities are scarce and feel that government is underperforming in that respect. The South African government is therefore urged to handle the matter in a delicately, with the aim for a win-win outcome that benefits both locals and foreign immigrants in order to ensure stability and social cohesion. The following measures could be key in the fight against xenophobic tendencies:

- Promoting cultural exchange and education through organising cultural events, workshops and programmes that showcase diverse cultures and traditions.
- Supporting inclusive language and media representation – this can be achieved through advocating for inclusive language and representation in the media, highlighting the contributions and experiences of diverse communities.
- Fostering community engagement by encouraging community-led initiatives that bring people together, with the ultimate goal of promoting social cohesion and building trust between diverse groups.
- Provision of social support services for migrants and refugees to help them integrate into their new communities.
- Supporting research and data collection on xenophobia in order to inform evidence-based policies and interventions.
- Review of immigration and refugee policies to ensure they are fair, humane and aligned with international human rights standards.
- Prosecuting politicians and influencers who incite xenophobia and alleviation of root causes of xenophobia, e.g. inequality.
- Stepping up diplomatic roles within the region through helping to resolve problems in neighbouring countries, which often compel foreign nationals to flock to South Africa and exert pressure on resources.

PREVIOUS ISSUE

THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

11 August 2023 Column

By Crystal Orderson

WHAT DOES IT TAKES TO BRING PEACE TO EMBATTLED SUDAN?

Some years ago, while working as a journalist for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), I was on assignment in Sudan. I recall being in the capital, Khartoum, where I had to pay for everything, including my hotel, in US dollars as no credit cards were accepted. At the time, the country was under international sanctions and excluded from the international SWIFT payment system. This was during the Omar al-Bashir regime, the former Sudanese leader who was later ousted from power. The Sudanese people I met were unwilling to speak in public about the regime, not even in their own homes. There was a culture of fear and distrust—something the Bashir regime was successful in creating with the constant threat of arrest.

I also travelled to Darfur, about 1,000 kilometres from the capital, to visit a UN refugee camp. I was escorted by several UN soldiers, who happened to be South African. During our journey, the soldiers pointed out the militia members of the rebel group Rapid Support Forces (RSF). They carried sniper rifles, but because we were part of a UN envoy, we were safe in that moment. The soldiers did warn us, however, that the militia were young, and some did not follow the rules of war.

I often reflect on this reporting assignment, as Sudan is a beautiful country despite its troubled history. For the past two years, however, it has been plagued by a war that has devastated many parts of the nation. Sudan, Africa's third-largest country, shares borders with Egypt, Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Eritrea.

Many Sudanese people have fled the country, becoming refugees and facing a humanitarian crisis. Millions have been displaced, and some

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What Does It Take To Bring Peace To Embattled Sudan?

[1] Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,580 adult South Africans in November- December 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

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