



The Politics of Resentment: The Ideological Source of Xenophobia in South Africa

Description

Introduction

[During October last year](#), the Gauteng provincial government released draft legislation that would prevent foreign nationals from opening and operating certain businesses in the provincial townships. Ironically, a year before this, the [Gauteng province was the epicenter of xenophobic violence](#) in South Africa, particularly in the townships.

This is not an isolated incident. Xenophobia has maintained a consistent presence in South Africa for more than 2 decades. [The earliest record of xenophobia was in 1995](#), when Malawian and Zimbabwean immigrants were attacked in the Alexandra township, during a campaign that became known as *Buyelekhaya* (go back home). [In 2005](#), 20 Somali workers were murdered by South African locals. [In 2008](#), attacks on foreigners consumed several cities and townships throughout the country for weeks. 62 deaths were recorded and over 100,000 people were displaced. Xenophobia has also over the years manifested itself through policy making. Apart from the policy decision mentioned above, immigration law has created several hurdles that make it extremely difficult, and perhaps close to impossible, for foreigners to stay in South Africa and obtain a residency visa. The golden key to staying in South Africa has become the critical skills visa. Most of the other avenues are notoriously difficult.

A key question that arises is why exactly xenophobia is so deeply embedded in South African society. It will be argued that xenophobia in South Africa has nothing to do with the effects that foreigners have on South African society. If anything, foreigners make an arguably significant contribution to the South African economy and are well-documented avenues for job creation. It will be argued that the cause of xenophobia in South Africa is ideological. It is in fact a direct consequence of the rampant identity politics which has given birth to political resentment towards foreigners (mostly African nationals) in South Africa. This is what has primarily created the environment for xenophobia to fester and grow.

Telling Lies

Xenophobia is essentially fear towards foreigners for one reason or another that manifests into an

attack by nationals of the country in question on foreigners. While xenophobia has commonly been associated with physical attacks on foreigners, it may also be concretized in the policies and laws of a nation. These policies and laws are built to ensure foreigners do not stay in that country, or at least make their lives difficult if they do.

Often [what drives this fear of foreigners](#) is the idea that they will take the jobs of local nationals and drive up unemployment rates. It is also driven by the fear that the foreigners crossing the border are criminals. The fear is that foreigners will engage in drug trafficking, armed robbery, murder and make the country in question more unsafe and dangerous in general. This sentiment about the dangers presented by foreigners is a commonly held view in South Africa. For example, [the attacks on Malawians and Zimbabweans](#) in the Alexandra township mentioned above was largely driven by the view that these foreigners in particular were engaging in criminal activities and were the root cause of unemployment.

As the sub-headings suggests, this narrative is a lie. There is very little evidence, if any, to prove that foreigners cause unemployment and crime rates to rise in South Africa. Even on the most generous view, the effects of foreigners on unemployment and crime rates is very minimal. What data does suggest is quite the opposite. [A study done by the World Bank](#) showed that immigrants had a positive impact on employment and wages in South Africa between 1996 and 2011. The study highlighted the fact that immigrants were more likely to start businesses that, if successful, would increase job opportunities and contribute to South Africa's economic growth. Further, the study highlighted the fact even where immigrants were employed, their jobs were more likely going to complement those jobs given to South Africans rather than compete with them for their jobs. The primary reason for this is because, as explained above, the golden key for residency in South Africa is the critical skills visa. [The visa scheme aims to fix shortages in key sectors or professions](#) that local nationals have been unable to fill. In respect of sectors or professions where one cannot obtain a critical skills visa, employers are only allowed to employ a foreigner [if the employer has tried and failed to fill that position with another deserving South African](#). A [more recent study compiled in the OECD-ILO Market Impact Analysis report](#) concluded the same as the World Bank. That is, there is no evidence to suggest that foreigners have had a significant (negative) impact on employment in South Africa.

The same can be said for the impact of foreigners on crime rates. [There is very little evidence, if any,](#) to suggest that there is a link between immigration and crime rates in South Africa. The evidence that does exist suggests that foreigners come to South Africa to trade and work, and do not engage in criminal activities. [In June 2017 for example](#), approximately 6.4% of people in South African prisons, either convicted or remanded for a crime at the time, were foreign nationals. Keeping in mind the fact that in majority of cases, these foreign nationals are arrested for being undocumented or illegal aliens.

In summary, the data shows that majority of foreigners create rather than take jobs in South Africa. Further, even in the cases where foreigners are given jobs, the jobs they are given are those that more likely than not will complement the jobs that South Africans vie for. Thus, foreigners contribute to the South African economy and pay taxes. In addition to this, there is no evidence that suggests that foreigners contribute to the crime rates in South Africa, at least for violent crimes. If anything, a case can be made out for undocumented immigrants contributing to crime rates in South Africa by virtue of their status. Therefore, the alleged fears that drive xenophobia in South Africa are largely unfounded. They mask the primary reason for xenophobia in South Africa.

Telling Truth

[Francis Fukuyama in his book *Identity*](#) describes the “politics of resentment” as the phenomenon where “a political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that [a certain] group’s dignity has been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded”. He explains that “a humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing economic advantage”. He concludes that “in all cases, a group believes that it has an identity that is not being given adequate recognition either by the outside world, in the case of a nation, or by other members of the same society.” This, for Francis Fukuyama, is how identity politics manifests itself.

When identity politics reaches the point of resentment, it becomes very dangerous. The group that feels disparaged by other members of society may do anything and everything to seek the restitution it feels it deserves. It will treat their identity as superior to all else, and only see the other group as perpetrators. We see this very fact playing out in the case of xenophobia in South Africa. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, because the [apartheid era created a deep distrust of foreigners in South African communities](#). The freedom felt within South Africa in 1994 came with the ideology that the country must be protected from outsiders. Foreigners became the group of perpetrators who posed a threat to the newly created South African identity. Secondly, [because of the rampant inequality in South Africa](#). There is a huge economic divide between the lives of black South Africans and white South Africans. The former largely lives in poverty while the latter largely lives in a relatively wealthier environment. [South African townships, for example, are overwhelmingly populated by black South Africans](#). Black South Africans in general may feel that as a group, they have benefitted the least from the constitutional democratic era because inequality has only worsened since 1994. They may feel disparaged and disregarded by other members of society, especially by foreigners.

As a result, foreigners become an easy target for resentment. It comes as no surprise therefore that in majority of cases, xenophobia largely manifests itself in the townships, the epicenter of inequality in South Africa. This is only worsened by the fact that [political leaders congregate their followers around the idea that foreigners are the problem](#). This only fuels identity politics and increases resentment towards foreigners.

If all of this is true, then it means that xenophobia largely is not driven by the supposed reality that foreigners are taking jobs and contributing to increasing crime rates. Rather, foreigners are perceived as an affront to the identity of South Africans. They are obstacles to the 1994 promises of transformation and substantive equality. They are remnants of apartheid era problems. The root cause is ideological, not factual.

Conclusion

If xenophobia is to be combatted in South Africa, two facts needs to be recognized. Firstly, that foreigners make a positive contribution to the South African economy. They create jobs and complement the jobs given to South Africans. They largely do not contribute to the crime rates in South Africa and are especially not to blame for violent crime rates. Any local leaders and politicians that suggest otherwise need to be challenged and held accountable. Communities need to be educated about these facts.

Secondly, the idea that foreigners are an affront to the South African identity needs to be tackled. It needs to be emphasized that foreigners are not enemies of black South Africans. They do not fuel inequality in South Africa, but rather play a role in challenging it.

Until this mindset is challenged, we will only see violent xenophobia continuing in a country where inequality continues to increase, especially because of the effects of COVID-19.

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