

# WHEN STRANGERS COME TO TOWN: A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT SOUTH AFRICA'S 'XENOPHOBIA' PROBLEM

By Patrick Pierson

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much has been written about the prevalence of anti-foreigner violence in South Africa. Despite an abundance of theories and proffered explanations, violence persists. Departing from prevailing analyses, I suggest that purported xenophobic events are overdetermined and manifest under conditions of contested social belonging and permissive opportunity structures; this is not unique to xenophobia, but anticipates collective violence more broadly across contexts, countries, and cultures. This brief focuses on 'political opportunity structures' and local norms of 'social belonging' to anticipate collective violence – including, but not limited to, attacks against foreign nationals – in South Africa. I conclude with a number of key implications for policymakers, many of which contradict prevailing education and awareness campaigns.

## UNDERSTANDING ANTI-FOREIGNER VIOLENCE

In February, a wave of attacks against Nigerian-owned business erupted in Pretoria, provoking calls for both the African Union and South African government to take proactive measures to protect Nigerian nationals residing in South Africa (*Premium Times* 2017). Unfortunately, such stories are all too common; most notably, South Africa's 'problem' with xenophobia rose to the fore amidst large-scale anti-immigrant riots in 2008 and 2015.

Explanations for these violent outbursts are not lacking; at least a dozen theories are commonly espoused to explain hostility towards foreigners in South Africa (Claassen 2017). At present, the proliferation of theoretical arguments provides limited purchase for curtailing violence, as evidenced by the persistence of attacks. Further, prevailing theories fail to

account for a number of distinctive elements of purported xenophobic violence:

- First, extensive survey data reveals a persistent, entrenched anti-foreigner sentiment among all South Africans. And while anti-foreigner attitudes may be ubiquitous, violence against foreigners is not (Crush 2001, 6). A key question then emerges: why do some individuals and communities mobilize for collective violence towards foreigners while others do not?
- Second, current analyses fail to address the fact that South African nationals are often killed in these violent episodes (Hassim et al 2008). If large numbers of South African citizens are killed in the midst of violent attacks, is 'xenophobic' an accurate, precise conceptualization of the violence?
- Third, existing theories fail to address the fact that all foreigners are not equally subject to violent attack, both within and among ethnic groups (Crush et al 2013, Morris 1998). The vast majority of victims of purported xenophobic attacks are black Africans and, to a lesser extent, immigrants from India and Asia. Other nationalities or ethnicities, especially those of European or British-colonial descent (such as Australia or New Zealand), rarely fall victim to xenophobic attacks. Furthermore, attacks also reveal high degrees of in-group variation, suggesting that all Nigerians, for example, are not equally susceptible to violence. If attacks are

truly xenophobic in nature, what explains such in-group variation in susceptibility to violence?

For this brief, I employ the definition of xenophobia put forth by the United Nations and related agencies in preparation for the 2001 “World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.” Accordingly, xenophobia “describes attitudes, prejudices, and behavior that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity” (International Labour Organisation 2001). Conceptually, it is important here to distinguish between what I term ‘attitudinal’ and ‘violent’ xenophobia. While attitudinal xenophobia is concerned with anti-outsider attitudes and perceptions in the work place, on the street, etc., violent xenophobia is concerned with instances in which individuals or groups face physical harm based on their perceived status as an outsider or foreigner. This brief is particularly concerned with understanding the prevalence of violent xenophobia in South Africa.

## IN THE WAKE OF VIOLENCE

Xenophobia is not confined to particular eras, groups, or nations. As evidenced by the recent rise in hate crimes in both the United States (Smith and Trotta 2017) and Britain (Forster 2016), xenophobia is alive and well in a variety of countries and contexts. While xenophobic violence is not exclusive to South Africa, both the scale and persistence of the phenomenon are unique (for a thorough timeline of major episodes of xenophobic violence between 2008-2013, see Crush et al 2013, Appendix, p. 52). The prevalence of purported xenophobic attacks is of import for policymakers, practitioners, and government actors for a number of reasons.

1. Migrants represent one of the most economically and politically marginalized populations in South Africa, often hailing from politically unstable countries such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Any effort to address poverty and inclusive growth in the country must take these communities into account.

2. Social and communal violence often results in significant levels of internal displacement, placing strains on limited government and NGO services while also heightening the vulnerability of some of the country’s most marginalized

residents.

3. South Africa’s role as the preeminent economic power in the SADC region highlights the importance of South Africa’s stability for the greater region. As Mozambique recovers from a long civil war, Zimbabwe remains politically unstable under President Mugabe, and Zambia is (arguably) moving towards a more authoritarian regime, the stability of South Africa is critical for the wider region’s progress.

## BACKGROUND

South Africa’s history is one of migration and the negotiation of identity for who does – and does not – belong (Klotz 2013). From the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in April 1652 (Lester 1996) up until the late 19th century, successive waves of in-migration from Europe and India produced an, “...imbroglio of peoples of disparate African, Asian, and European origins and cultures” (Thompson 2014, 109).

The demographic make-up of South Africa in the late 1800s became even more diverse with the discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1860s-80s (Thompson 2014, 115). The prospect of riches and wealth attracted African communities from further afield, as well as fortune seekers from Europe, the United States, and Australia – these white immigrants became known as *Uitlanders* (Thompson 2014, 111). Contested notions of belonging and struggles for power between the *Uitlander* and Afrikaner communities eventually helped to precipitate the Boer Wars of 1899-1902.

South Africa’s legacy of contested belonging and outgroup marginalized reached its apogee with the coming to power of the National Party government in 1948. Under the government’s apartheid, or ‘Apartness’, scheme, a society was envisioned which would maintain ever more stringent barriers between black and white populations (Giliomee 2009).

While apartheid proved untenable as a political and economic system, its legacy endures. In short, competing narratives of what constitutes “South African-ness” – who does and does not belong – were an essential part of the apartheid program (in addition to the preceding Anglo-Boer Wars) and continue into the present day.

Despite the transition to a new, democratic-era under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and the ANC, the post-

apartheid era has continued to witness contestation over rights and claims to belonging in South Africa. Beginning in the mid-1990s, a series of surveys from the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) revealed both the depth and pervasiveness of anti-foreigner views across South African society. Survey data suggest that, broadly speaking, South African citizens hold some of the most exclusionary and unwelcoming attitudes towards foreigners of anywhere in the world (Crush et al 2008, 1). In 1996, for example, roughly 50% of survey respondents were in support of the deportation of foreign nationals, to include those with legal residence in South Africa. Furthermore, almost 75% of respondents noted that foreigners should be required to carry some form of personal identification on their person at all times, reflecting an eerie semblance to the pass law legislation under apartheid. South Africans also displayed a hardening of views over time (from surveys conducted in 1999 and 2006), with a greater number of respondents reporting migrants as a key source of social ills such as crime and disease (Crush et al 2008, 3).

### A NEW APPROACH

This brief opened by noting characteristics of purported xenophobic attacks for which current explanations fail to account. Recognizing these challenges to prevailing explanations, I conducted a number of primary source interviews with leading academics, policymakers, and practitioners in South Africa.

Drawing from this research and the strength of existing social violence literatures, I present a framework to demonstrate the conditions under which one would anticipate intergroup and/or interpersonal violence more broadly.

This simple 2x2 matrix highlights the interplay between political opportunity structures and local norms of social

**Figure 1: Vulnerability-Based Violence Matrix (VBV)**

	Political Opportunity Structure	
	High Opportunity	Low Opportunity
High Vulnerability	High Opportunity, High Vulnerability	Low Opportunity, High Vulnerability
Low Vulnerability	High Opportunity, Low Vulnerability	Low Opportunity, Low Vulnerability

belonging which help to explain the likelihood of conflict, xenophobic or otherwise. In broad terms, ‘high’ political opportunity structure exists when there is a lack of formal state institutions and mechanisms for conflict mitigation, intergroup dispute resolution, etc. For example, in areas where the state is unable to provide sufficient police protection and fair, impartial access to the judicial system, the political opportunity structure provides local actors with significant leeway to take policing and judicial matters into their own hands.

‘Social belonging’ refers to one’s social embeddedness in the local community, and the extent to which a given individual or group is seen as ‘belonging’. While the ‘xenophobic’ lens for interpreting violence appeals to one’s national citizenship as the means for determining social belonging, one can imagine a number of variables – language (Brown and Ganguly 2003), religion (Gaikwad and Nellis 2017), indigene status (Sayne 2012), etc. – which, in certain conditions, are much more salient for understanding one’s degree of social belonging.

This orienting framework elucidates a set of conditions under which myriad forms of violence are expected to emerge, not just ‘xenophobic’ events. One implication is that xenophobic attacks may be largely overdetermined, with one’s foreignness forming a constitutive, but not determinant, role in violence.

Recognizing these inconsistencies, does an application of the Vulnerability-Based Violence framework provide more analytical purchase? To answer this question, I highlight three key attributes of ‘political opportunity structure’ in the South African case to help explain and anticipate xenophobic violence as well as other forms of violent public contestation.

**1. Geography.** Incidences of ‘xenophobic’ violence reveal that one’s geography is a primary determinant of the likelihood of falling victim to anti-foreigner violence. Most cases of xenophobic violence take place among informal settlements and townships (von Holdt et al 2011, Misago 2016) and, not surprisingly, violence against foreigners is not the only type of violence to manifest in these areas. On the contrary, “Collective/group violence

takes place in very particular areas. When you look at the statistics in South Africa, it is not a random distribution of murder rates. It is in very particular places” (interview with Gareth Newham, July 26, 2016). Given that policing is often weak or ineffectual in these areas (not to mention the lack of basic services such as healthcare, electricity, running water, etc.), this clearly presents an opportunity structure conducive to political entrepreneurship and violence as a means of securing ingroup security and status.

**2. Perceptions of Impunity.** Economic competition – and perceived economic and social threats – from ‘others’ exists, to varying degrees, in all countries around the globe. This confrontation does not, however, escalate into vigilante violence in the vast majority of cases. In the South African case, selective and ineffectual protection of foreigners by state security services is a key mitigating variable which encourages the manifestation of violence towards this particular group of ‘outsiders.’ It should come as no surprise then that large-scale xenophobic violence often targets small groups of foreigners who live in isolated, unprotected areas where perpetrators have little fear of retribution in response to attacks (Bekker 2015). “Looking at the xenophobic attacks of 2008, one can easily see the way in which selective and ineffectual policing impacts patterns of violence. As violence grew and spread, poor foreign families residing in Cape Town’s townships flocked to police stations in wealthier neighborhoods rather than going to the police precinct that was located in their own community” (interview with Simon Bekker, July 22, 2016). Such trenchant mistrust of local police clearly suggests an environment in which foreign migrants believe they will not be protected from ‘xenophobic’ violence. On the other hand, such conditions send a signal to would-be aggressors that violence against foreigners will be met with limited resistance and, more than likely, perpetrators will not face arrest or prosecution for their crimes.

**3. Purchasing Protection.** The purchasing of protection via private security contractors and other personal security services is a key feature of South African society. Most immigrants to South Africa come as political and economic refugees with little in the way of financial or social support, ultimately finding shelter among informal settlements. For those with significant financial and material resources, however, security can be purchased. Private security provision is big

business in South Africa and has been well-documented in both popular (Violence and Private Security in South Africa 2014) and academic outlets (Lemanski 2004; Baker 2008). While 131R billion (~10.3 billion USD) is spent annually on the criminal justice system in South Africa, approximately 50R billion (~3.9 billion USD) is spent on private security (interview with Gareth Newham, July 26, 2016). The ability of those with significant financial resources to purchase protection, however, suggests that vulnerability associated with one’s ‘foreignness’ can be overcome.

In addition to understanding political opportunity structures in the South African context, one must also understand local criterion for determining who does – and does not – belong. Specific examples of this are provided below.

### *The Vulnerability-Based Violence Model in Action*

Let us take one example of purported ‘xenophobic’ attacks to elucidate the ways in which this label obscures, rather than clarifies, causal drivers of violence.

Much of the violence directed towards foreigners in the post-apartheid era takes the form of collective violence targeted at small businesses located within informal settlements. Excluding the large-scale violence of 2008, the data reveals more than 250 episodes of collective violence against immigrant businesses from January 1994 – August

**Figure 2: Frequency of Collective Violence Against Migrant Businesses**

Year	Number of Attacks
Pre-2005	9
2005	4
2006	9
2007	9
2008	19
2009	17
2010	46
2011	22
2012	25
2013	36
2014 (up to Aug)	32

Source: Crush and Ramachandran, “Migrant Entrepreneurship, Collective Violence 2014, and Xenophobia in South Africa.” Migration Policy Series No. 67.

2014 (Crush and Ramachandran 2014) (Figure 2).

Examining this data, the key question emerges: are these instances of collective violence against foreigners driven by the fact that the victims are foreign nationals, or is the 'foreign-ness' of victims simply a constitutive part of what makes individuals vulnerable to violence more generally – namely, that interpersonal violence manifests when motivated offenders, suitable targets, and an absence of effective guardians obtain (Cohen and Felson 1979)? As the VBV matrix suggests, these 'xenophobic' attacks occur primarily among informal settlements (high opportunity structure) where foreigners possess limited social capital and therefore low levels of social belonging.

A number of case note that violence against foreigners is often a spill-over/contagion effect in the disorder and disarray of public service delivery protests and other expressions of civil discontent (Dlamini 2011). In these settings, violence is not a bureaucratic process – while some attacks may be calculated and planned in advance, many of the 'xenophobic' attacks are not choreographed or meticulously executed. "Such attacks lack the coordination and long-term strategy to translate a moment of rage into a 15km bus ride across town to attack individuals or groups perceived as more 'deserving' of violence. Instead, violence is meted out against the most vulnerable within the local community context" (interview with Pierre du Toit, July 22, 2016). In such instances, foreign nationals are not attacked because they are foreign nationals, they are attacked because their foreignness makes them particularly vulnerable to violence in a context characterized by political opportunity structures conducive to exploitation by 'violence entrepreneurs' (Misago 2016). Should these individuals' social setting, wealth, or access to equitable policing change, they would be much less likely to experience violence despite the fact that their identity as a foreign national has remained unchanged.

In other instances, however, wholly different criterion emerges as determinant of one's social belonging and, as such, a different group is targeted. For example, one-third of the victims of large-scale 'xenophobic' riots in 2008 were South African nationals (Hassim et al 2008). In this instance, individuals were targeted because they could not correctly identify body parts in isiZulu (Everatt 2011), one of South Africa's eleven national languages and one which plenty of

South African nationals are unable to speak. Characterizing this violence as 'xenophobic' misses the key fact that the stamp in one's national passport is often not the most important criterion for determining one's 'other-ness'.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Much has been written about the prevalence of anti-foreigner violence in South Africa and, subsequently, an abundance of theories attempt to explain the phenomenon. This brief departs from other analyses by suggesting that purported xenophobic events are overdetermined and largely manifest under conditions of contested social belonging and permissive opportunity structures; this is not unique to xenophobia, but anticipates collective violence more broadly across contexts, countries, and cultures. Critically, this observation is not merely one of theoretical clarification or academic parlance; rather, it presents a number of key implications for policymakers at various levels of government, NGO, and civil society leadership.

- Interventions and programs designed to target attitudinal xenophobia (ie xenophobic attitudes alone), while important in their own right, largely miss the mark when it comes to mitigating violence perpetrated against foreign nationals (Misago et al 2015). This is critically important when one notes the prevalence of such approaches, as evidenced by the Rollback Xenophobia Campaign (Parsley 2003) launched by the South African government in the early 2000s. Even more recently, President Zuma – in May 2016 – launched a campaign to promote pan-African unity and celebration of the African culture and the African diaspora (Louw-Vaudran 2016). Targeting political opportunity structures – rather than xenophobic attitudes per se – may prove a more efficacious intervention for curtailing violence.
- Violence against foreigners is not randomly distributed; rather, episodes of 'xenophobic' violence occur primarily among informal settlements where state authority is limited, ineffectual, and often biased against foreigners (Bruce and Newham 2000). Focusing services on these areas is likely to decrease attacks

against foreign nationals while also curtailing other forms of interpersonal violence, such as robberies or gang-related crime, which also persist in these areas. In particular, the SAPS must make efforts to address biased policing towards perceived outsiders, eliminating the impunity that perpetrators of violence associate with their crimes.

- Interventions must understand what constitutes 'foreignness' in a given community or context. Especially among highly diverse and heterogeneous societies such as South Africa, a whole host of identifying characteristics may determine one's belonging. This implies that, in some instances, internal migrants may be more susceptible to violence than their foreign counterparts, as evidenced by the killing

of many non-isiZulu speakers amidst 2008 violence (Everatt 2011).

- Legislation should consider the impact of South Africa's resettlement policies, noting that both internal and international migrants naturally gravitate towards poor, peripheral urban areas to find accommodations upon arrival. This places greater strain on resources in already under-served areas, thereby heightening the potential for confrontation. Recognizing this, improved policing and security measures should be considered alongside efforts to promote human security via improved service provision (housing, education, water access, etc.)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Pierson is a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science at Emory University. He has an MA in International Studies from the Josef Korbel School where he was a Sié Fellow. Patrick's research focuses on the politics of informal governance, service provision by non-state actors, and the politics of identity.