



South Africa's Xenophobic Violence: Foreigners as Scapegoats for Failing Economy

OE Watch Commentary: The outbreaks of violence in the South African cities of Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Ekurhuleni have largely been directed against foreigners. However, as the excerpted accompanying article from the South African *Institute for Security Studies* points out, this xenophobia is unwarranted. Many of the problems the people are angry about, especially the country's growing unemployment and inequality, are not caused by foreigners but are the results of government actions, or in many cases, inactions.

To be sure, there is a strained relationship with the people and the government. Many distrust the government, and especially the police, who are frequently seen as corrupt. However, it is the foreigners, not the government, who are presently bearing the brunt of the physical violence. The article claims that most South Africans are not xenophobic, but a sizable minority is, and they are finding foreigners an easy target. Aggravating the situation are politicians who are looking to distract from their own failures to find scapegoats in non-South Africans.



"While marches against xenophobia in South Africa have occurred, such as this one in 2015, lately there has been an uptick in violence against foreigners."

Source: Dyltong/Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:People%27s_March_Anti_Xenophobia.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

That xenophobic minority includes police officers, who turn a blind eye as foreigners are attacked. Taking advantage of the situation, criminals loot shops owned by foreigners, knowing that amidst the chaos and hatred they will likely go unpunished.

According to the article, the key to preventing this xenophobic violence is rebuilding the rule of law. The article makes five recommendations, beginning with ensuring the police and other security forces have the financial resources necessary to do their job. Second, corruption in the police department must be rooted out in order to restore public trust. Third, government officials, especially those in senior positions, must speak with one voice condemning xenophobia and explain that the country's economic hardship is not the fault of foreigners. Fourth, peace-building networks must be established. The final recommendation is that evidence-based violence prevention projects be implemented.

This is not the first time in recent years that wide-scale public violence has occurred. In 2008, it was so bad that the military had to be called up. South Africa is hoping to prevent a recurrence of that, but so far, as the article explains, the country is struggling to change direction. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

"The violence is driven by a toxic mix of increasing unemployment and inequality, deteriorating trust in government and especially the police, and growing desperation among the poor and jobless."

Source: Gareth Newham, "South Africa's Problems Are Not Caused by Foreigners," *Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)*, 5 September 2019. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/south-africas-problems-are-not-caused-by-foreigners>

Levels of public violence in general are rising, and foreign nationals living in under-developed and crowded areas are particularly vulnerable when the poor face increasing hardship and frustration. In the medium to long term, prioritizing economic growth and fixing basic service delivery are key. In the meantime, government needs to act decisively to counter public violence, often directed at foreign nationals, by strengthening the rule of law.

The violence is driven by a toxic mix of increasing unemployment and inequality, deteriorating trust in government and especially the police, and growing desperation among the poor and jobless.

This situation is exacerbated by a decade of 'state capture' and high-level corruption during which law enforcement agencies were hollowed out to enable the large-scale theft of many hundreds of billions of rand meant for public upliftment. While attempts to rebuild parts of the intelligence service and criminal justice system are under way, the going is slow and inadequate resources are proving to be a major stumbling block.

Unscrupulous politicians, looking to distract from their failures, fuel xenophobic sentiments.