You are too Black: Nationalistic and Ethnic Dimensions of Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper argues that xenophobia in South Africa is a result of intersecting historical, economic, and socio-political factors specific to the South African nationalist project embarked upon after independence. It will show how a confluence of the aforementioned factors in the country have, for the most part, contributed to an environment which is fertile for xenophobia and its expression through physical violence, especially towards other black Africans. This argument is significant because xenophobia is usually viewed from a resource scarcity perspective.

Keywords: xenophobia, nationalism, violence, Africa.

Introduction

In 2008, violent attacks on African foreign nationals in the townships of South Africa left many dead, and thousands displaced throughout the country. The most poignant image representing the manifestation of these xenophobic attacks was the image of a man wrapped around burning tyres, which captured the attention of many international media houses. This image, no doubt, put on the spotlight the unstable relationship between black South Africans and other Africans, mainly from central and West-Africa. Against this backdrop, the paper asks, why has the South African post-independence period experienced xenophobia and violent attacks associated with it? It proposes that xenophobia in South Africa is a result of intersecting historical, economic, and socio-political factors specific to the South African nationalist project embarked upon after independence.

Therefore, this paper will show how a confluence of the aforementioned factors within South Africa have, for the most part, contributed to an environment which is fertile for xenophobia and its expression through physical violence, especially towards other black Africans. The paper will begin with a brief overview of nationalism, ethnic identity and citizenship. It will then locate the phenomenon of xenophobia within this broad literature. Lastly, it will turn to the case study of South Africa, studying closely the manifestation of xenophobia in the post-apartheid era.

Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity

There is a general consensus in nationalism literature that nationalism is a recent phenomenon whose roots can be traced from the post-1789 French Revolution period, and the subsequent consolidation of the modern day state system (Hobsbawm, 1985). The author further argues that before 1884 nationalism, or precisely, the nation, meant something different—it incorporated both the local and the 'foreigner'. At its core is a "political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Gellner, 1983, p.1). This means that there is a desire

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for the state to be ruled by a specific people belonging to that 'nation'—however defined—in pursuance of the interests of that group.

The 'nation', or rather 'national identity' is a complex identification which changes its form in different states and also shaped by historical experience. In that sense it "involves some sense of political community, however tenuous" (Smith, 1991, p.9). This belonging to a nation, especially in Europe—whose development fostered nationalism—was intimately tied with the nascent political institutions of the modern-state era.

Hobsbawm (1990, p.18) supports this by emphasizing how in France, post-1789, there came an emphasis on the 'people' as "one and indivisible. The nation was the body of citizens whose collective sovereignty constituted them as a state which was a political expression." In essence this led to the solidification of belonging to a place and a people intimately linked to state institutions, a phenomenon which had been hardly present in the era of empires where belonging to a nation did not necessarily imply a political connotation. Burbank and Cooper (2010) argue for example that in empires, different nationalities co-existed under a loosely defined political structure. And because of the weak relationship of nationalities with the institutions of the state, which ordinary people hardly experienced because of the relative autonomy of their communities, national identity did not have the political implications it has today.

Having said that, could we say that nationalism as defined above was ubiquitous? Such an assumption would be anything but accurate. Smith (1991, pp. 9 -12) suggests that there are two forms of nationalism or nation formation processes: the "Western and, or civic model" and the "non-Western ethnic conception of the nation." The first aspect of the Western model insists on a territorial aspect—a fixed (historical) land to which a people have belonged to for generations. The second aspect is that this community shares mutually binding laws aimed at fostering a functional political unit.

It is noteworthy that this distinction identified by Smith blurs in practice. In reality, different forms of nationalisms exhibit a range of combinations of these characteristics. These combinations are also influenced the historical processes that that particular nation has undergone. For example, French and German nationalism in the past differed in the measure that the former emphasized an inclusive idea of 'French-ness' based on citizenship, whereas the latter emphasized 'German-ness' from an exclusive ethnic point of view (Brubaker, 1992). This explains why people of the colonies of France could acquire French citizenship overtime, whereas such a possibility did not exist for British subjects in the colonies.

From the discussion above, we can see that defining who belongs to a nation also entails identifying those who do not belong. Arising from this then is the nationalist sentiment—the feeling of resentment produced by the non-compliance to the principle, or the emotional satisfaction aroused by its achievement (Gellner, 1983). This means that nationalism incorporates both the positive and the negative within itself. And this is important to note because negativity of nationalism has tended to be located outside itself, especially in popular discourse.

The positive side of nationalism is evoked in the popular myths that every nation creates for itself—it's supposed uniqueness and superiority, and its human and technological advancement. The negative manifests itself in the contempt that is sometimes shown towards those who are seen as not part of the nationalist project—at home and abroad. If those that do not belong share the same territorial space with the nation, the latter's discrimination may lie dormant and seldom be expressed explicitly. However, it is in periods of transition or change that nationalism intensifies. And this negative response toward the other can be seen as xenophobia.

Xenophobia, argues Hobsbawn and Kertzer (1992, p. 6), can be loosely defined as the hatred of foreigners, and involves the exclusion of "foreigners by setting up 'our own state', and being against them by excluding them from 'our' already existing state." Such an idea may take a virulent form such as the case of Germany, during Hitler's rule, purportedly concerned with the maintenance of racial purity of the Aryan race. It can also take subtle forms such as racial slurs, profiling, and other methods that may pass unnoticed under the wider political lens. In essence, xenophobia is the other face of nationalism projected towards those the nation sees as unwanted.

This is the identification of the 'other' and that discrimination can be based on ethnic terms. Ethnicity is not necessarily a politicized concept, but can be used a potent tool for fostering national and xenophobic feelings, especially if the ethnic coincides with the national (Hobsbawm and Kertzer, 1992). However, these scholars further submit that in the Third World, the national political program has tended to denounce the ethnic and tribal identities as divisive and a remnant of imperialist rule, and has favoured a national identity based on shared oppression of those indigenous to the colonies, regardless of ethnic affiliation. This has certainly been the case of many nationalist independence movements in Africa from the 1950s onwards.

It is on this rather broad—albeit shaky—base that nationalism and xenophobia has manifested themselves in South Africa. The nationalistic sentiment of 'South African-ness'—real or perceived—which has been fostered by the democratic government that rose to power in 1994 has also yielded negative results in the form of xenophobia, or more precisely, xenophobic attacks towards the 'other'. And because the 'other' is "recognizable by colour, or other physical stigmata, or by language" (Hobsbawm and Kertzer, 1992), the discrimination on them has been acute.

Nationalism, Xenophobia, and Violence in South Africa

The following sections deal with the (violent) manifestation of xenophobia in the political discourse of South Africa. The explanation presented below will hinge on multiple factors and their relevance in South African political discourse. These will include a historical dimension, economic dimension, political dimension and cultural dimension. It will argue that a synthesis of all of these processes has resulted in xenophobia towards other black Africans, and that there is no single dimension or theory that explains it fully. Lastly, it will try to account for the violent manifestation of xenophobia in the country.

Historical Dimension of Xenophobia: A Legacy of Apartheid

It would be remiss to begin an analysis of xenophobia in South Africa without looking at the history of the country, especially the so-called apartheid rule that preceded the ushering in of democracy in 1994. At the core of apartheid was separation of 'races' and a tight immigration policy that inadvertently discriminated against people of colour. And as Hopstock and Jager (2011, p.124) put it, "xenophobia was expressed through laws and policy, which led to strict controls over anyone who was seen to be different." Immigration at this time favoured the settlement of white people in South Africa as opposed to people of colour (Hopstock and Jager, 2011).

However, the ushering in of democracy in 1994, and its creation of a new South African identity incorporating previously disenfranchised black South Africans had the effect of creating a sense of nationhood among the black majority. The citizenship rights springing from this new dispensation have been jealously protected against those who are perceived as the 'other'. As this paper argues that "xenophobia is not a consequence of nationalism but…an integral part of it" (Harris, 2002, p.180), the developments in South Africa are not surprising, from a historical

perspective. Xenophobia has managed to reproduce itself, to a certain extent, within the legacy of exclusion left by the apartheid regime.

The above assertion can be observed in terms of language in popular discourse relating to immigrants in the country. Whereas the apartheid state's greatest danger to the country's stability was the '*Swart Gevaar*' (an Afrikaans term meaning 'Black Danger' coined by the white minority government to refer to black people as a danger to white people's survival)—and even more derogatory, the *kaffir*—black Africans foreigners are seen posing a similar threat to the new South Africa. And dehumanizing references towards black African foreigners abound. They are collectively referred to as "*Amakwerekwere*", an offensive onomatopoeic word that loosely refers to unintelligible idioms unknown to South Africans. There is thus an overwhelmingly negative perception towards black African foreigners. They are seen collectively as unwelcome (Nyamnjoh, 2006). Indeed, these foreigners represent the '*swart gevaar*' of the present day, as they stand for all that is considered uncivilized and backward.

The foregoing section has succinctly established above some historical influences on xenophobia in South Africa now reproducing themselves in a new era where the majority of black South Africans have been emancipated by from the shackles of the apartheid state. But why does xenophobia overwhelmingly target black Africans foreigners? The paper critically examines that question in the following sections.

Economic Dimensions of Xenophobia

This section considers xenophobia from the perspective of the theory of relative deprivation. This theory suggests that lack of certain basic goods and services is an important psychological factor in social discontent. "This arises from a subjective feeling of discontent based on the belief that one is getting less than one feels entitled to" (De la Rey, 1991, p. 41).

The ushering in of democracy in South Africa raised hope of economic opportunities for a previously disenfranchised black majority. The pro-poor policies of the African National Congress (ANC) were supposed to create a better life for all (Seekings, 2002). However, the slow trickling-down of opportunities of advancement and the continued immiseration of the majority has resulted in cracks on the walls of the "Rainbow" nation project.

The following quote from Seekings (2003, pp. 1 – 3) is insightful in highlighting the socio-economic issues in South Africa since independence:

> (There is a general) consensus that income poverty worsened in the late 1990s. Despite steady economic growth, income poverty probably rose in the late 1990s before a muted decline in the early 2000s. (Also) income inequality has probably grown, and life expectancy has declined.

Also according to official statistics, unemployment in the country has remained stubbornly high; estimated around 22.9 % in 2008 when violence against foreigners occurred (StasSA, 2009). It must note that these are often conservative estimates that usually do not include people who are in the workforce but have completely given up in finding any work in the formal economy.

These harsh conditions, coupled with the steady inflow of black immigrants (Hopstock and Jager, 2011) searching for economic opportunities in the country has influenced to a certain extent the anti-immigrant feeling directed towards foreigners. These authors argue that a conservative estimate of actual foreign population in South Africa is between 1.6 and 2 million. 3-4 per cent

of the national population, which is significantly small. Nonetheless, black African foreigners are seen as putting a strain on an already overburdened public system comprising of schools and hospitals, depriving poor locals who struggle to make ends meet (Nyamnjoh, 2006).

Most of these foreigners who cannot secure employment in the formal sector usually set up operations in the informal sector in spite of the fact that they may be highly skilled and educated. And the relative success of their businesses results in rhetoric of them 'taking' locals' opportunities (Hopstock and Jager, 2011), rhetoric that the government has largely left unchecked. Thus, the resentment towards them generally grows. They are seen as unduly benefitting from the stability and economic opportunities of South Africa that rightly belong to local people. Indeed, those targeted during the May 2008 xenophobic attacks ran small businesses in poor townships in which they also resided. For example, Alexandra, one of the townships where xenophobic attacks occurred in 2008, is one of the poorest locations in Johannesburg, where foreign nationals live and ply different trades. Human Rights Watch (2009) reports that the violence which began in this township spread to all 9 provinces of the country and resulted in 62 deaths. About 40 000 foreign nationals left the country and some 50 000 were internally displaced.

Here we see relative deprivation at play. The perceived better economic position—largely untrue—of the foreigner invites indignation from the local population who see themselves as legitimately part of the nationalist project promulgated in 1994, from which they have not yet benefited. There is also a wider context of deprivation involved. Locals are exposed to the glamour of the cities to which they live close, and the media exposes them to the positive developments in the country, which they do not experience. This further increases their frustration.

There is a feedback loop between this dimension and the political and cultural dimension which is tackled below.

The Role of Politics and Media

At best, the South African government has been reactionary in attending to the problem of xenophobia in the country. One response by the government, argues Harris (2002), is that xenophobia has been "pathologised"; that is, identified as a new and unhealthy habit that is outside of South African popular discourse. However, in practice the actions of the state towards foreign Africans reinforces attitudes of suspicion towards this latter group. The state and the leadership is complicit in the prevalence of xenophobic attitudes in the country.

Neocosmos (2010, p. 77), expanding on a point made earlier in this discussion, argues that:

> the process of 'nation-building'…is not simply about the creation of 'national unity' around a common political project, it is also about demarcating that unity from others…it is a fundamentally socio-material object embedded in social relations and is experienced as such, most obviously by 'strangers'/'foreigners' who are excluded from community rights and access to resources.

In light of this, the policies of the democratic government have tilted towards a hard demarcation between foreigner and local, with its pursuit of the rainbow nation project. This is reflected in immigration legislations in the country.

While the triumph of a majority party signalled an end to white minority, the new state did not change the immigration policy it inherited from its nemesis—the apartheid state. Hence the Aliens Controls Act of 1991 (amended), became the bedrock of ANC immigration policy for

several years into independence (Hopstock and de Jager, 2011). It was under this legislation that the post-apartheid government built its 'rainbow nation' project, which, arguably, fostered hostility towards migrants, especially black Africans. Although the government enacted a new Immigration policy in 2002, hailed as progressive for its easing of skilled labour transfer, it made little mention of the problem of xenophobia in the country (Hopstock and de Jager, 2011). Instead of viewing immigration in a positive light, the ruling authorities have seen it as undesirable and therefore have framed immigration policy reform to tighten the screws on foreigners entering the country and also to enable them to jet out those who are already in the country (Nyamnjoh, 2006).

It is this narrow-based conception of citizenship and the nation which has promoted an unhealthy environment towards black migrants. And the result has been that the rainbow nation has been replaced by the onion nation whose structure of belonging is layered around an acceptable national core (Hassim et. al., 2008). Following this analogy, the black African foreigner is the peripheral layer around the core of the new South African nationalist project. Consequently, the 'other black' bears the brunt of this exclusionary immigration and citizenship conception, because of his perceived laziness, backwardness and poverty. In this new dispensation the 'foreign black' takes the place the most blacks held under the apartheid regime.

Government officials have also weighed in on the issue of foreigners in the country with unreliable and unverifiable information. For example, Neocosmos (2010, p. 85) quotes an African National Congress (ANC) ex-Director General of Home Affairs giving this outlandish remark regarding foreigners in the country:

> Approximately 90 % of foreign persons, who are in RSA (Republic of South Africa) with fraudulent documents, i.e. either citizenship or migrant documents, are involved in other crimes as well…

The same author also provides this comment by Mangosuthu Buthelezi, then minister of Home Affairs (1994 – 1998):

> If we as South Africans are going to compete for scarce resources with millions of aliens who are pouring in to South Africa, then we can kiss goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme.

The minister alleged that there was no xenophobic sentiment in the country, and that foreigners wanted preferential treatment. Ten years after he had said this, a study by Afrobarometer (2009) showed that 33 per cent of South Africans supported immigration laws, especially those that target black African foreigners, suggesting a cumulative increase in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Media representation of black Africans has not been flattering and has bordered on the line of irresponsible reporting. Nyamjoh (2006) argues that South African mainstream media was for a long time an ally—perhaps unwittingly—to the "service of degrading and disempowering foreign African nationals. He further points out that rifts and conflict among different groups of black people serves white media interests well, as some of the latter continue to hold fixed and essentialist positions on race and identity. Articles discussing African migrants announce themselves with hyperbole, such as the following captions from some South African media houses: "Foreign *influx*: citizens fear for their job prospects after *hordes descend* on the country from the troubled north (Sowetan, 29 July 1993, in Harris, 2002); "Xenophobia rife as Africans *flood* SA …" (Sunday Times, 28 August 1994, in Harris, 2002).

The italics in the quotes above belongs to the author in order to highlight that the choice of words such as 'floods', 'torrents', 'descend' and 'hordes', depict a chaotic situation that etches itself in the memories of people, and significantly increases negative perceptions towards the 'other'. Thus the sight of an African foreigner is to behold the "illegal, and therefore, (the) criminal" (Harris, 2002). This is in spite of statistics that reveal that so far as crime is concerned, South African citizens are more to blame than African foreign nationals.

Now it leaves us to explain why xenophobia has manifested itself in physical violence toward black Africans. Hatred or distrust for another is not synonymous with inflicting physical violence on the other. This last section considers this aspect more closely.

Xenophobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa

Many scholars have argued that South African society is characterized by a culture of violence. "The culture of violence can be described as a situation in which social relations and interactions are governed through violent, rather than non-violent means" (Harris, 2002, p.178). This itself is a legacy of apartheid where the black majority's interaction with the state was characterized by harassment and physical violence. Thus, continues Harris (2002), even though political violence waned after independence, this culture has been transferred to criminal violence. Although these explanations give us an insight in the history of violence in South Africa, it stills fall short of the question why black Africans are disproportionately victims of physical violence.

An interesting way to understand physical violence against the foreigner, especially in the South African context, is to view violence as possessing cathartic effect for those who use it. It is perceived as a literal and figurative means of destroying what is seen as undesirable in society to restore an equilibrium in that society. This proposition is linked to how Girard (1972) explains the nature and function of violence in the civilizations and religions of the world. Among other things, Girard's theory proposes that violence in society is regulated through a ritual of prohibition that reigns in natural competition that exists among human beings which sometimes deteriorates to chaos. Failure to respect these taboos then requires a scapegoat to bear the blame of the disturbed societal equilibrium. In order to restore equilibrium, the scapegoat—a person or a group –is sacrificed. His/her death signifies a new peaceful beginning in that community's relations. And this process then tends to replicate itself overtime; a new dysfunction requires a new scapegoat.

Although xenophobic attacks have not resulted in improved conditions of ordinary South Africans—the bulk of whom are involved in these attacks—they have managed to capture the attention of the state, the latter which they see as responsible for improving their social conditions. As we have seen above, some elements in the state and media have continued to portray the black African foreigner as a social ill, which if society is rid of, the national project could get back into track. Violence can potentially be a response for cleansing the national project of these unwanted 'alien' impediments perceived—to be sure, mistakenly—as the source of all the country's trouble.

The focalization of violence towards the foreigner often shields government's colossal failure to provide for the basic needs of ordinary South Africans. That is why government officials have tended to issue ambiguous comments on the problem of xenophobia in South Africa. So long as the people search for the reasons of bad governance elsewhere, the ruling elite is somewhat shielded from the blame. Indeed, the free reign given to vigilante groups such as Operation Dudula is testimony to government's complicity to violence against the black African foreigner.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that xenophobia is the other side of the nationalist project. It has proposed a multi-pronged approach to understanding it as it manifests itself in South African post-independence politics. Also, it has argued that the South African post-independence nationalist project, though trying to dissociate itself from its apartheid predecessor, has unwittingly replicated some aspects of the colonial past in present day. Among these, is the clamp-down on black migrants and relatively easy access to the country that white people have. Because of this reproduction of unfair representation of black African foreigners, suspicion towards them has grown, as new black citizens see this group as a threat to their newly-gained privilege. Lastly, it has proposed a different way of understanding the component of physical attacks on foreigners going beyond explanations of criminality.

What is clear is that without a concerted effort by the state and other relevant stakeholders to change public discourse relating to black African immigrants, and to actively create a more proactive and inclusive immigration policy, xenophobia and the attacks associated with it may spike in recent years to come.

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