

It can't be xenophobia!

Rajohane Matshediso believes xenophobia does not properly describe the violence South Africa saw in May. He posits some convincing arguments for why the violence erupted.

The violence that South Africa has witnessed from 11 May is shameful and inexcusable yet I refuse to label it xenophobia.

WHAT IS XENOPHOBIA?

The definition of xenophobia is an intense fear or dislike of foreigners, their customs, and culture, or even foreign artefacts. So if the attacks were inspired by xenophobia then South Africans would not have allowed foreigners to settle close to them or even engaged in platonic and sexual relations with foreigners from other parts of Africa. Moreover, if South Africans are so xenophobic, then why are they accepting of foreign culture and food? It is misleading to call the attacks 'xenophobic violence'.

The definition of a foreigner is somebody who was born in, or comes from, a different country. Being a foreigner can also mean somebody who does not feel or is not considered a part of a particular group. I provide these definitions in the light of some people saying that Africans cannot be regarded as foreigners anywhere in Africa. This is rhetorical and historically incorrect.

Human beings do not exist as an undefined entity but as groups sharing common practices. In the past, for example, an expression of belonging was to declare allegiance

to a chief, king, queen or other forces. Anyone coming from outside the group was a foreigner; and any member of the group rejecting the shared beliefs and practices was a traitor.

Moreover, being a foreigner implies denial of certain privileges and abiding by certain conditions in order to receive privileges. Today we call it citizenship with accompanying rights. However, the limits to belonging and privilege often remain contested because human beings have long differentiated themselves. There is nothing wrong with calling someone a foreigner.

So what then is the problem with the violence against African foreigners in South Africa?

LOCALS SEPARATING FROM IMMIGRANTS

Our government was naïve to think that poor South Africans could *share poverty* with other destitute and largely unskilled African immigrants. When resources, life chances and social status are at stake humans tend to imagine, invent or draw identity lines. These lines function to maintain privileges or to draw attention to the unfair distribution thereof. Seen in this way it was easy for poor locals to separate themselves from African immigrants and then accuse them

of receiving the resources that they were impatiently waiting for.

It is interesting to note that some local residents from informal settlements went to displaced immigrants' makeshift tents to ask for food, which they believed they deserved too! They maintained that if the government could take care of the immigrants then it should take care of poor South Africans.

The middle classes also took an interesting and hypocritical position. They rightly spoke against the violence and xenophobia and called for reintegration. However, they disapproved of immigrants' tents being erected near their suburbs because it would lower their property values.

Moreover, they questioned the speed with which government provided resources to displaced refugees. They wanted to know why the government was relatively quick to provide shelter, food and security for immigrants but has failed South Africans in terms of crime, social development and electricity capacity. So is this xenophobia or people drawing identity lines to protect privileges?

Three factors allowed locals to differentiate from immigrants. Firstly, previously disadvantaged South Africans have just acquired democratic citizenship and have been disappointed by deepening

poverty and poor public administration.

Secondly, Africans have always been regarded as an inferior 'race' by the standards of Western civilisation. In addition, the apartheid government brainwashed black South Africans to think they were better than those across the Limpopo River. Finally, popular images of the rest of Africa are of war, unemployment, famine, disease, savagery and corruption.

So, the 'encounter' between South Africans of any 'race' and African immigrants has been that of South Africa hosting immigrants escaping from crumbling states and seeking greener pastures in South Africa. It was never an encounter of equals!

Such encounters are not new to post-apartheid South Africa. They were present as far back as the introduction of migrant labour in southern Africa. The institutions of colonisation made it legally and ideologically clear that migrant labourers were foreigners in South Africa. They used ethnic differences to divide workers within and outside compounds. Migrants knew that in the scheme of things they were the lesser 'race' bounded by the common colonial white enemy.

The struggle to be free of the yoke of colonialism invoked Pan-Africanist notions of sister and brotherhood. The euphoria of South Africa's freedom echoed across the continent. Africa was free at last from colonial political domination. South Africa was also the inspiration and hope for the emancipation of other African states from the bonds of post-colonial dictatorships and poverty. One way to fulfil these hopes was to migrate to South Africa.

What African immigrants did not know was that conditions in South Africa were inadequate to host them. Materially, South Africa has

not been able to provide for its poor citizens partly because of its neo-liberal economic policies and because of its poor and corrupt public administration. Consequently migrants are regarded as uninvited guests in the new South Africa.

For a poor South African their frustration with deepening poverty is caused by the influx of a lesser and hungry 'race'. This 'race' steals their jobs, causes crime, spreads infectious diseases and settles instead of visiting and leaving. This violent reaction is not xenophobia against African immigrants. It is towards people who were vulnerable soft targets long before our democracy. They are vulnerable because they have been dehumanised by both their colonial and post-colonial masters. They are further exploited as unskilled labour in South Africa. Their situation is insecure in and outside their countries of birth. Their vulnerability makes them criminal suspects and targets of violence.

CONFRONTING REALITIES

In the light of this outbreak of violence we need to examine the realities facing South Africa's fragile democracy. There are three considerations.

Firstly, violence is embedded in South Africa's history of political struggles. We have also done nothing around moral regeneration. Recall how ordinary South Africans in recent times have expressed their frustration. In November 2005 Kabelo Thibedi held a Home Affairs staff hostage with a toy gun in response to his frustratingly long wait for an ID; in 2006 some trains were turned into death coaches when members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union engaged in industrial action; in 2007 residents of Moutse in the Sekhukhune

district municipality protested against their incorporation into Limpopo by burning ANC T-shirts emblazoned with the picture of President Thabo Mbeki; in 2008 immigrants are killed!

Secondly, South Africa is obsessed with being the darling of the world. South Africa wants to please everyone without taking into account possible tensions or implosions. Ignoring the realities and consequences of poverty in the name of the African Renaissance and African brotherhood has tarnished the South African image of which attacks on innocent immigrants are a part. Ignoring racism and the history of exploitation and adopting global neo-liberal economic policies has only deepened poverty and widened inequalities in South Africa.

Finally, the government of former President Nelson Mandela mistakenly confused a liberation fighter with a government official. Public administration should be a professional career, not a token of appreciation for having been part of the anti-apartheid struggle. Governance requires both skill and virtue to administrate for the country's citizens, visitors and friends.

In light of all this to think that local South Africans will be persuaded by recent appeals to integrate with foreign nationals in the light of deepening poverty, disappointment and widening inequalities is socially uniformed.

It is in this context that I understand the 11 May attacks on immigrants from other parts of Africa.

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