

Xenophobia: sickness of poverty, fear and apartheid

The simple dictionary definition of xenophobia is a fear of strangers. Yet according to **Shilaho Westen Kwatamba** the causes of xenophobia are complex and in South Africa, he argues, the apartheid legacy makes a large contribution.

A couple of years ago, a colleague at the University of the Witwatersrand told me he was surprised to learn that as the only black student in a graduate class, his white classmates referred to him as 'that black guy in our class'. Being a non-South African, my colleague had not been made conscious of his race before. I use this story to illustrate that due to the legacy of apartheid, most people in South Africa are particular on the race to which they belong – nationality and skin colour can be emotive issues.

However, there is nothing inevitable about this approach to citizenship. Just as it was possible to dismantle institutionalised apartheid, it is also possible to overcome these effects.

RATIONAL BASE TO XENOPHOBIA

The term xenophobia means a fear of strangers and it comes in many different forms. It is not peculiar to South Africa. Many countries in the world and in Africa have experienced this problem. Xenophobia directed against 'foreigners', for instance, took place in Nigeria against Ghanaians, in Ghana against Nigerians and in Libya against West African immigrants. The intensity of

violence, however, that accompanied the May xenophobic attacks probably distinguishes South Africa in this regard.

The definition 'fear of strangers' is incomprehensible. Any serious analysis of xenophobia in South Africa reveals that it has a rational base grounded in people's grievances that relate to deprivation and a mindset as a result of apartheid.

The violence that xenophobic tendencies have assumed since the beginning of 1994 democracy is morally indefensible, but it would be difficult to deny that frustrations and fear among the poor feed into xenophobia.

However, the question is why if the issue is appalling living conditions and poor service delivery did people regard those they have lived with for years as enemies deserving gruesome deaths?

WHY SUCH ATTACKS?

Xenophobia in South Africa stems from a contestation over the definition of citizenship. In this contest, emphasis is placed on the question of belonging. The question is who is 'indigenous' and who is a 'foreigner'? This question does not exist in isolation. It is posed against

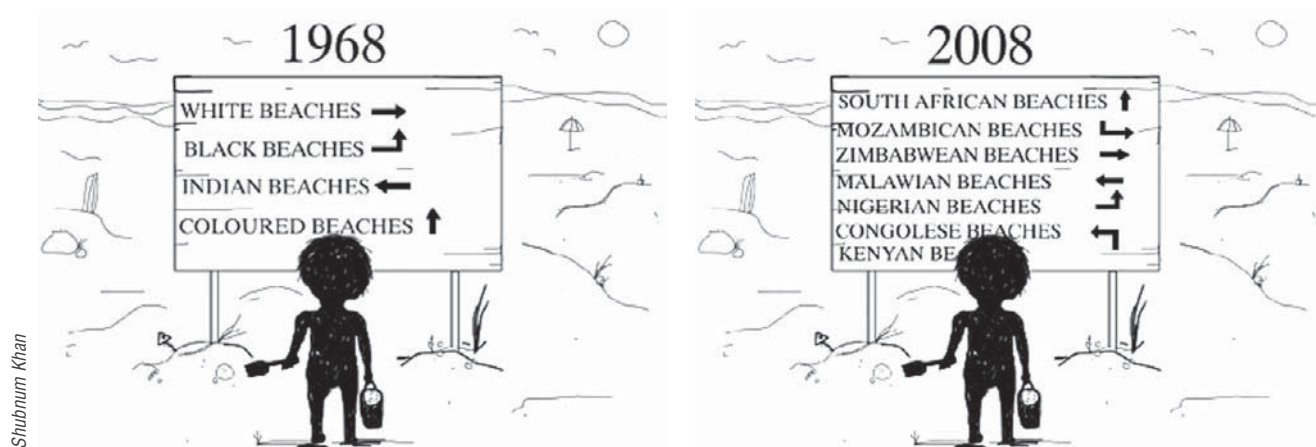
a background of stiff competition over scarce resources such as housing and jobs.

Immigrants from Africa, especially from southern Africa, have long come into South Africa. After the end of apartheid this movement increased. But studies show that this movement is not a 'flood'. The immigrant population is a drop in the ocean compared to the total population.

Immigrants are driven by economic as well as political factors and it is not easy to distinguish one from the other. Bad governance, for instance, which falls in the realm of politics, hinders economic growth. Civil strife in some African countries sends refugees into South Africa leading to a contest over resources and the way they are allocated by the authorities.

The legacy of apartheid in which most of the black population is confined to the margins of the economy lingers on. Some urban poor have protested against the government's lack of concern for their plight and have clashed with the police. It is amongst this group that xenophobia has taken root.

Xenophobic violence was confined to informal settlements where people had waited long for improvements to their living



Shubnum Khan

standards. African immigrants were targeted because people saw them as frustrating their chances of getting housing or jobs in the informal sector.

EXPECTATIONS AND WEALTH GAP

Xenophobia is linked to globalisation where economies are interconnected. But globalisation is an unequal system which is dependent on inequalities among nations.

Partly due to globalisation and as a response to its history, the ANC government adopted various policies over recent years such as the Redistribution and Development Programme (RDP), Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), which attempted to eradicate the effects of the apartheid system. The government has made tremendous steps in its attack on poverty. Its record in water provision, electricity supply, housing and social grants for those without is impressive. Senior government ministers take pride in the ANC's record of responding to the well-being of the poor. It argues, for example that it is the only government in the world to provide free housing.

These efforts have to be acknowledged. However, the glaring inadequacy of these policies is manifest in the gap between rich and poor, which has increased at the same time as attacks on poverty.

The greatest danger to South Africa's democracy and stability lies in relative deprivation where people find it hard to reconcile what they have with what they think they are entitled to in a country which shows economic progress and deprivation in equal measure.

APARTHEID LEGACY

The question of foreignness assumes a greater resonance in South Africa because of the legacy of apartheid which made people foreigners in their own country. Unfortunately South Africa has yet to overcome this way of seeing. The attacks expressed themselves in a racist way. Even some indigenous citizens fell victim to the violence because, on the basis of their skin colour, they were presumed foreign.

The fact that some South Africans were mistaken for foreigners by marauding gangs, underscores that xenophobia has the capacity to destroy everyone in its path since prejudice has no room for legal documents that identify people. It operates at a basic level of physical appearance, language, the pronunciation of words, dress codes and even gait: 'He is walking like a foreigner!'

Racist thinking still permeates South Africa. Recently David Masondo, previously attached to the Department of Political Studies at the university, told me of his ordeal at the hands of xenophobic police after they accosted him while jogging. They mistook him for a

foreigner because he spoke Shangaan, which is spoken both in South Africa and Mozambique, and did not have an identity card with him. In fact he hails from Limpopo province. Presumed to be a foreigner, he was beaten and later locked up.

Xenophobia, prejudice and the culture of violence in South Africa has to be assailed. Bigots will violently exploit socio-economic and political exclusion to achieve their own ends. Mass frustrations become dangerous once they find resonance with popular leadership. The link between strong talk and mass anxieties is often noted in the aftermath of violence such as pogroms, genocide and ethnic cleansing in other parts of the world.

The notion that foreigners are 'taking our women and jobs' is a cover for deep anxieties arising out of economic exclusion. Violence poses a serious threat to South Africa's young democracy. The country will be a safer place if it gives these grievances proper attention. The government needs to give attention to the lot of the poor and to cultivate broad-based civic norms among people. If it fails to do so conflicts, xenophobic attacks and gender oppression will torpedo the country's new democracy. LB

Shilabo Westen Kwatamba is a senior researcher on the Peace Building Programme at the Centre for Violence and Reconciliation (CSV).