FROM RAINBOW NATION TO SCAPEGOAT NATION: XENOPHOBIA AND THE TARGETING OF AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA © 2026

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Melanie Nathan is Executive Director of the African Human Rights Coalition (AHRC), a South African-born human rights advocate, writer, and expert witness specializing in migration, xenophobia, LGBTQI+ rights, and country conditions across Africa.

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ABSTRACT

South Africa emerged from Apartheid with a promise that inspired the world. The transition to democracy was founded upon principles of equality, human dignity, freedom, non-racialism,[1] and human rights. Yet more than three decades later, a troubling contradiction has taken root. A nation that once stood as a global symbol of resistance to discrimination now confronts a persistent and escalating pattern of xenophobia directed largely against fellow Africans.[2]

This article examines the historical, political, economic, and social conditions that have contributed to the growth of anti-foreigner sentiment in South Africa, with particular focus on the experiences of Nigerian nationals and other African migrant communities. It explores how unmet democratic expectations, chronic unemployment, inequality, corruption, crime, service-delivery failures, and political rhetoric have combined to create an environment in which foreign nationals are increasingly blamed for problems rooted in structural governance challenges.

Drawing upon human rights reporting, media accounts, government statements, diplomatic responses, and documented patterns of violence, this article argues that xenophobia in South Africa can no longer be understood merely as a series of isolated outbreaks. Rather, it has evolved into a recurring and increasingly organized phenomenon characterized by intimidation, vigilantism, discrimination, economic exclusion, displacement, and violence. The rise of movements such as Operation Dudula and March and March reflects a broader normalization of anti-foreigner narratives that increasingly threaten the safety, security, and human rights of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and even documented foreign nationals.

The article further examines the failure of state protection, the regional implications of growing anti-migrant hostility, and the human cost borne by those who sought opportunity, safety, and dignity in a country once celebrated as the embodiment of democratic transformation.

This article is written amid a rapidly escalating xenophobia crisis in South Africa. At the time of writing, organized anti-foreigner movements have called for undocumented migrants to leave the country by 30 June 2026, contributing to widespread fear, displacement, economic disruption, and growing humanitarian concerns among migrant communities. As these developments continue to unfold in real time, this article represents a contemporary assessment of conditions and will be updated periodically to reflect significant new events and emerging trends.

[1] **Non-racialism** is the constitutional principle that all individuals should be treated equally regardless of race and that race should not determine a person's rights, opportunities, or place in society. Adopted as a foundational value of post-Apartheid South Africa, non-racialism represents a rejection of the racial hierarchy and exclusion that characterized Apartheid and reflects a commitment to building a democratic society based on equality, dignity, and shared citizenship.

[2] The irony of contemporary xenophobia is that it challenges the very principles of non-racialism and human dignity upon which democratic South Africa was founded. A constitutional vision intended to overcome exclusion now confronts new forms of exclusion directed at those perceived as outsiders.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa occupies a unique place in the global human rights imagination.

Few countries have undergone a political transformation as profound as the dismantling of Apartheid and the birth of a fully inclusive constitutional democracy founded upon equality, dignity, and freedom. The election of Nelson Mandela in 1994 symbolized not merely the end of racial oppression but the triumph of hope over division. South Africa became a model of reconciliation, demonstrating that even the deepest historical wounds could be addressed through democratic institutions, constitutional protections, and a commitment to human rights.

Yet history often presents difficult ironies.

Today, South Africa faces a challenge that strikes at the very values upon which its democracy was founded. Across the country, foreign nationals, particularly migrants from elsewhere on the African continent, have become targets of hostility, exclusion, discrimination, and violence. In townships, informal settlements, business districts, and increasingly in national political discourse, migrants are portrayed as competitors, intruders, criminals, and burdens. They are blamed for unemployment, crime, housing shortages, pressure on public services, and economic decline.

The reality is considerably more complex.

South Africa's contemporary challenges did not originate with migration. The country continues to grapple with profound structural inequalities inherited from centuries of colonialism and decades of Apartheid. Unemployment remains among the highest in the world. Youth unemployment is particularly devastating. Poverty, crime, corruption, failing infrastructure, electricity shortages, water crises, and governance failures have generated widespread frustration among ordinary South Africans.

In such circumstances, societies often search for visible targets upon whom to project collective anxieties.

Foreign nationals have increasingly become those targets.

This article does not seek to justify xenophobia. Rather, it seeks to understand how xenophobia became normalized, why it persists, and what it reveals about the broader social and political tensions confronting South Africa today.

THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY AND THE BURDEN OF EXPECTATION

The end of Apartheid generated expectations that extended far beyond political freedom.

For millions of South Africans who had endured generations of discrimination, segregation, injustice, and economic exclusion, democracy represented the promise of transformation. It promised employment, housing, education, healthcare, and meaningful economic participation.

Many expected that liberation would be accompanied by prosperity.

Those expectations were understandable. Apartheid had denied the majority population access to opportunities enjoyed by a privileged minority. Democracy appeared to offer a pathway toward correcting those historic injustices.

While significant political gains were achieved, economic transformation proved far more difficult.

Three decades later, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Entire generations have grown up after Apartheid without experiencing the economic advancement they were promised. Service-delivery failures remain widespread. Infrastructure has deteriorated in many communities. Load shedding became a defining feature of daily life. Corruption scandals repeatedly undermined public confidence in government institutions., impacting investment in the country.

For many citizens, frustration gradually turned into anger. That anger increasingly sought a target.

THE MAKING OF A SCAPEGOAT

South Africa's xenophobia crisis did not emerge in a vacuum. To understand its persistence and escalation, it is necessary to examine the economic, political, and social conditions that have contributed to the construction of foreign nationals as convenient scapegoats for broader societal problems.

More than three decades after the end of Apartheid, South Africa continues to face extraordinary socio-economic challenges. The country struggles with persistent unemployment, particularly among youth, deep inequality, poverty, housing shortages, failing infrastructure, high levels of crime, corruption scandals, and chronic service-delivery failures. While South Africa possesses one of the continent's most advanced economies, many citizens continue to experience severe economic insecurity and limited opportunities for advancement.

In periods of social and economic uncertainty, vulnerable populations often become targets for public frustration. In South Africa, foreign nationals increasingly came to occupy that role.

Public discourse gradually shifted toward narratives portraying migrants as competitors for jobs, housing, business opportunities, healthcare, education, and other scarce resources. Politicians, commentators, community leaders, and activists increasingly linked migration to unemployment, crime, pressure on public services, and economic decline. While these problems are rooted in complex historical, structural, and governance-related factors, foreign nationals became visible and accessible targets upon whom broader frustrations could be projected.

Particular attention has often focused on Nigerian nationals. Public perceptions of Nigerians have frequently been shaped by stereotypes associating them with organized crime, drug trafficking, fraud, and other forms of criminal activity. Although such generalizations are unsupported by evidence and ignore the diversity of the Nigerian community, they have become deeply embedded within segments of South African society. As a result, Nigerian migrants often occupy a prominent place within xenophobic narratives.

At the same time, xenophobic hostility has never been limited to Nigerians alone. Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Malawians, Somalis, Ethiopians, Ghanaians, Congolese, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and other migrant communities have repeatedly experienced discrimination, intimidation, displacement, and violence. Across successive waves of unrest, the common denominator has not been nationality itself but foreignness. Individuals are frequently targeted because they are perceived to be outsiders, regardless of their legal status, duration of residence, or contributions to South African society.

The danger of scapegoating lies in its simplicity. Complex societal problems become reduced to a single explanation. Structural failures become personalized. Public anger is redirected away from institutions and toward vulnerable communities. Once migrants become viewed not as individuals but as symbols of broader social anxieties, exclusion becomes easier to justify and hostility becomes increasingly normalized

WHAT XENOPHOBIA LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Xenophobia in South Africa is no longer adequately described as prejudice against foreigners. It has evolved into a recurring pattern of exclusion, scapegoating, vigilantism, organized anti-migrant mobilization, economic destruction, forced displacement, and collective violence that has left hundreds dead, thousands injured, well over one hundred thousand displaced, and countless others living in fear.

For many foreign nationals, xenophobia is not an abstract social attitude. It is a lived reality with tangible and often devastating consequences. Foreign-owned businesses have been looted, vandalized, and burned. Migrants have been assaulted, threatened, displaced from their homes, deprived of livelihoods, and, in some cases, killed. Entire communities have been subjected to campaigns demanding the removal of foreign nationals, while refugees, asylum seekers, permanent residents, workers, students, and business owners have all found themselves caught within the same cycle of hostility.

The major outbreaks of 2008, 2015, 2019, and the escalating tensions of recent years demonstrate a recurring pattern rather than isolated incidents. Each wave has been characterized by anti-foreigner rhetoric, attacks on businesses, public intimidation, displacement, and violence directed at migrant communities. While the immediate triggers may differ, the underlying narratives remain remarkably consistent: foreigners are portrayed as competitors for jobs, burdens on public resources, contributors to crime, and obstacles to economic opportunity.

Importantly, these attacks rarely distinguish between documented and undocumented migrants. The determining factor is often not legal status but perceived foreignness. Accent, language,

nationality, appearance, or community reputation frequently become markers through which individuals are identified as outsiders. Zimbabweans, Nigerians, Mozambicans, Malawians, Somalis, Ethiopians, Ghanaians, Congolese, and other migrant communities have all experienced forms of hostility rooted in this perception.

This distinction is critical because it demonstrates that the threat extends beyond immigration enforcement and enters the realm of identity-based exclusion. In practice, foreign nationals are often targeted not because of what they have done, but because of who they are perceived to be.

Understanding how this environment developed requires examining not only the violence itself but also the narratives that helped make such violence possible.

WHEN RHETORIC BECOMES VIOLENCE

Words matter.

In societies experiencing economic hardship, political frustration, and social uncertainty, repeated narratives identifying a vulnerable group as the source of collective problems can gradually reshape public attitudes. South Africa's xenophobic history reveals a troubling pattern in which anti-foreigner rhetoric expressed by influential leaders has often preceded outbreaks of intimidation, vigilantism, and violence directed at migrant communities.

One of the most widely cited examples occurred in 2015 when the late Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini reportedly stated that foreign nationals should "pack their bags and go back to their countries." Although the King later denied encouraging violence, his remarks generated widespread controversy and occurred shortly before a major outbreak of xenophobic attacks in Durban and Johannesburg. At least seven people were killed, thousands were displaced, and foreign-owned businesses were looted, vandalized, and destroyed.

Similar narratives have periodically emerged from government officials. Former Minister of Home Affairs Mangosuthu Buthelezi repeatedly warned that undocumented migrants were placing unsustainable pressure on South Africa's resources and undermining national development objectives. Such statements reinforced public perceptions that migrants were responsible for broader socio-economic challenges facing the country.

In more recent years, anti-immigrant rhetoric increasingly entered mainstream political discourse. Former Johannesburg Mayor Herman Mashaba became one of the country's most prominent political figures linking undocumented migration to crime, urban decay, and lawlessness. Migration scholars and human rights advocates have argued that such messaging contributed to a broader environment in which foreign nationals became associated with criminality and social decline.

During the lead-up to the 2019 national elections, anti-immigrant rhetoric became increasingly visible across the political spectrum. Political leaders promised crackdowns on undocumented migration, while activists and community organizations amplified calls to prioritize South Africans over foreign nationals. Shortly thereafter, violence swept through parts of Johannesburg and

Pretoria. At least twelve people were killed, hundreds of businesses were looted or destroyed, and Nigeria evacuated hundreds of its citizens amid growing fears for their safety.

The significance of these statements lies not merely in the words themselves but in the environment they help create. When migrants are repeatedly portrayed as criminals, burdens, competitors, or obstacles to national progress, exclusion becomes easier to justify. Intimidation becomes normalized. Vigilantism begins to appear legitimate. Violence becomes easier to rationalize.

Responsibility for xenophobic attacks rests with those who commit them. Yet history demonstrates that inflammatory rhetoric can create conditions in which hostility flourishes and violence becomes more likely. South Africa's experience demonstrates that the distance between words and action is often far shorter than many are willing to acknowledge.

The anti-foreigner narratives advanced by political leaders, public figures, and community activists did not remain confined to speeches, campaign platforms, or media interviews. Over time, they evolved into increasingly organized forms of anti-migrant mobilization.

THE NORMALIZATION OF ORGANIZED XENOPHOBIA

Perhaps the most alarming development in South Africa's contemporary xenophobia crisis has been the transition from sporadic outbreaks of anti-foreigner violence to increasingly organized and sustained anti-migrant mobilization.

Groups such as ‘Put South Africa First,’ ‘Operation Dudula’, and, more recently, ‘March and March’ have transformed anti-immigrant sentiment from isolated community frustrations into coordinated political and social campaigns. What distinguishes these movements from earlier episodes of xenophobic unrest is not merely their visibility, but their ability to normalize the idea that foreign nationals are responsible for many of South Africa's most pressing social and economic challenges.

These organizations have conducted marches, community patrols, business inspections, document checks, public demonstrations, social media campaigns, and direct confrontations with foreign nationals. Human rights organizations, United Nations experts, migrant advocacy groups, and journalists have documented incidents in which foreign-owned businesses were threatened, migrants were intimidated, homes were searched, and communities were pressured to identify and remove foreign nationals.

Operation Dudula, which emerged in Soweto in 2021, became one of the most visible manifestations of this trend. Originally presenting itself as a movement against crime and undocumented migration, it organized community actions targeting migrant-owned businesses and demanding documentation from individuals suspected of being foreign nationals. Human rights organizations have documented allegations of intimidation, harassment, assaults, and vigilante activity associated with anti-migrant mobilization linked to the movement. In 2022, United Nations human rights experts warned that South Africa was approaching a dangerous tipping point and specifically identified Operation Dudula as contributing to a climate of xenophobia, racism, and violence directed at migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

The emergence of the March and March movement during 2025 and 2026 has raised similar concerns. The movement has organized demonstrations across multiple provinces demanding the removal of undocumented migrants and publicly issued a deadline of 30 June 2026 for undocumented foreigners to leave South Africa. Human Rights Watch and other observers have reported that demonstrations associated with the movement were accompanied by intimidation, attacks, business closures, and growing fear within migrant communities. Several African governments subsequently issued warnings, facilitated repatriation efforts, or publicly expressed concern regarding the safety of their citizens residing in South Africa.

Perhaps most troubling is the extent to which distinctions between documented and undocumented migrants have increasingly disappeared in practice. Foreign nationals are frequently identified not by legal status but by nationality, language, accent, appearance, or community reputation. Refugees, asylum seekers, permanent residents, students, workers, and business owners have often found themselves targeted alongside undocumented migrants. In practice, it is perceived foreignness rather than immigration status that frequently determines vulnerability.

The danger today lies not only in isolated acts of violence but in the gradual normalization of a worldview that portrays an entire category of people as a threat to national well-being. Once that process takes hold, the line separating lawful governance from mob enforcement begins to erode. Foreign nationals cease to be neighbors, workers, students, business owners, or fellow Africans. They become scapegoats.

History shows that this is precisely the point at which discrimination becomes persecution, exclusion becomes policy, and rhetoric becomes organized action.

A REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS

The implications extend far beyond South Africa's borders.

Several African governments have expressed concern regarding the treatment of their nationals. Repatriation efforts, travel advisories, diplomatic protests, and public condemnations reflect growing regional alarm.

When citizens begin voluntarily returning to countries they previously left in search of safety or opportunity because they no longer feel secure in South Africa, the issue ceases to be merely domestic.

It becomes a continental human rights concern.

The growing anxiety among migrant communities illustrates the extent to which fear has become embedded within daily life.

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The implications are particularly profound for LGBTQI+ individuals seeking safety within Africa. South Africa occupies a unique position on the continent. Its Constitution is widely regarded as one of the most progressive in the world and remains the only national constitution in Africa that expressly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. Through its constitutional framework, jurisprudence, and legal protections, South Africa has long represented a rare beacon of hope for LGBTQI+ Africans fleeing persecution elsewhere on the continent.

This role is especially significant given that more than thirty African countries continue to criminalize consensual same-sex conduct, while several have recently adopted or proposed even harsher measures. Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act, Ghana's Human Sexual Rights and Family Values legislation, Nigeria's Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, and newly emerging anti-LGBTQI+ laws and proposals elsewhere in Africa have intensified risks for LGBTQI+ individuals, activists, and human rights defenders. For many, South Africa has represented one of the few realistic destinations within Africa where legal protection, dignity, and equal treatment might be attainable.

Yet the growth of xenophobia increasingly undermines that promise. When migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are targeted because they are perceived as foreign, constitutional protections alone may be insufficient to guarantee safety. LGBTQI+ individuals who flee criminalization, violence, family rejection, forced marriage, corrective rape, or state persecution elsewhere on the continent often arrive in South Africa carrying multiple layers of vulnerability. They may face discrimination not only because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but also because they are foreign nationals.

In this sense, xenophobia does more than threaten migrants. It weakens one of Africa's most important protection mechanisms. As hostility toward foreign nationals increases, South Africa's ability to serve as a place of refuge for some of the continent's most vulnerable populations is diminished. The result is a profound human rights concern: individuals escaping persecution may find that one of the few jurisdictions capable of protecting them is becoming increasingly inaccessible in practice, despite remaining protective in law.

The erosion of South Africa's role as a refuge state has implications far beyond its borders. For LGBTQI+ Africans fleeing criminalization and persecution, the loss of meaningful access to safety in South Africa narrows an already limited range of options for protection on the continent and leaves many with nowhere else to turn.

A TEST OF SOUTH AFRICA'S DEMOCRATIC IDENTITY

South Africa's struggle with xenophobia ultimately raises a larger question.

Can a democracy founded upon resistance to exclusion remain faithful to its constitutional values while tolerating exclusion directed at others?

The answer will shape not only the future of migrants and refugees but also the integrity of South Africa's democratic project itself.

The challenge confronting South Africa is not immigration alone. It is whether economic frustration, political disappointment, and social anxiety will continue to be redirected toward vulnerable outsiders rather than addressed through meaningful structural reform.

History teaches that scapegoating rarely solves the problems it claims to address.

It merely creates new victims.

The tragedy of contemporary xenophobia is that many of those now targeted are fellow Africans who came seeking precisely the freedoms, opportunities, and dignity that democratic South Africa once promised the world.

CONCLUSION

South Africa's xenophobia crisis did not emerge overnight. It is the product of decades of unmet expectations, economic hardship, political failures, social frustration, and the gradual normalization of anti-foreigner narratives. Yet understanding its origins must never be confused with excusing its consequences.

Today, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and foreign nationals face a climate in which discrimination, intimidation, vigilantism, and violence have become recurring realities. The rise of organized anti-immigrant movements signals that xenophobia is no longer simply episodic. It has become institutionalized within parts of public discourse and increasingly embedded within broader political debates.

For a nation whose democratic identity was built upon the rejection of exclusion, this should serve as a profound warning. The answer to South Africa's challenges lies not in scapegoating foreigners, but in demanding accountability from those entrusted with governing the country. Only leadership prepared to address the root causes of economic hardship, insecurity, and social frustration can prevent further erosion of the constitutional values upon which South Africa's democracy was founded.

The measure of South Africa's constitutional promise has never been how it treats the powerful. It has always been how it protects the vulnerable. The future of the Rainbow Nation may ultimately depend on whether it remembers that lesson.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This article draws upon a review of government reports, United Nations materials, Universal Periodic Review submissions, human rights documentation, academic literature, migration studies, media reporting, and field observations accumulated over more than a decade of research into migration, displacement, xenophobia, and human rights conditions in South Africa. A selected bibliography appears below.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Nathan is the Executive Director of the African Human Rights Coalition (AHRC), an international human rights organization providing advocacy, humanitarian assistance, protection services, and legal support to LGBTQI+ individuals, refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable populations across Africa. A South African-born former attorney, human rights

advocate, writer, and expert witness, she has spent more than a decade researching, documenting, and reporting on human rights conditions, forced displacement, migration, xenophobia, persecution, and protection issues throughout the African continent.

Nathan has authored numerous country conditions reports and expert declarations for immigration and human rights proceedings in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Europe, and other jurisdictions. Her work draws upon field engagement, humanitarian operations, direct case experience, government reports, academic research, and international human rights documentation. She writes frequently on democracy, the rule of law, migration, human rights, LGBTQI+ rights, antisemitism, and African affairs.

ABOUT AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS COALITION

The African Human Rights Coalition (AHRC) is an international human rights organization dedicated to protecting and advancing the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals and other vulnerable populations across Africa. AHRC provides humanitarian assistance, advocacy, country conditions expertise, refugee and asylum support, emergency interventions, and human rights reporting throughout the continent. (africanHRC.org)

Contact Information

Melanie Nathan
Executive Director
African Human Rights Coalition (AHRC)
AfricanHRC.org
nathan@africanHRC.org