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South Africa

Beyond mere 'be-nice' appeals: South African Xenophobia requires root-cause critique and strategic resistance

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Political symbols in South Africa are here today, gone tomorrow, but oppressive political economy endures. At surface level, an explosion of anti-racist activism amongst the most enlightened South Africans – up-and-coming black scholars trying to break various ceilings of residual apartheid power – is occurring at the same time a xenophobic implosion is wreaking havoc on the bottom socioeconomic ranks.

In mid-March at the University of Cape Town (UCT), undergraduate politics student Chimani Maxwele threw a bucket of excrement onto the statue of colonial mastermind Cecil John Rhodes, catalyzing a revolt against white-dominated power structures there and beyond. Less than three weeks later, a revolt by the poorest urban South Africans in the country's two other major cities – Durban and Johannesburg – was aimed at a layer just as poor and oppressed: immigrants, mostly from elsewhere in Africa.

At least ten thousand people were displaced within days. With South Africa hosting an estimated five million foreign nationals living within its 53 million residents, terror has struck those with darker skins and the misfortune to live in the lowest-income areas: urban-peripheral shack settlements or near inner-city migrant labor hostels.

Rhodes falls but his borders keep rising

The #RhodesMustFall campaign caught fire at UCT, the main site of South Africa's bourgeois class reproduction, with protesters demanding curriculum changes, racial equity in the professoriat and the resignation of university leadership. They were quickly victorious against at least one telling symbol: a huge statue of Africa's most notorious English looter. The bronze Rhodes was removed from a central campus base within a month, carted off by university authorities to what will eventually be a lower-profile setting.

The campaign set the emergent 1 percent elites of UCT against the old 1 percent power structure. Historical recollections of Rhodes' diamond monopoly-making fortune surfaced, leaving bourgeois commentators and news organs like Business Day rattled.

Rhodes, after all, helped establish many early systems of exploitation – including migrant labor (and women's role in cheap labor provision), illogical African borders, dependency upon minerals extraction, land grabs, environmental destruction and the ultra-underdeveloped rural Bantustans – that persist today. Indeed they are now often found in even more profitable and amplified forms (casualized labor, mining house prerogatives), fully endorsed by South Africa's current political and economic rulers no matter their skin hue.

However, the 99 percent versus the 99 percent in the shack settlements also frightened South Africa's top 1 percent, mainly because of the hard-hitting impact on the national 'brand', a source of repeat elite panic. World public opinion is frowning on Pretoria, and, encouragingly, the rest of the continent has taken this long-overdue opportunity to channel myriad grievances against the regional hegemony.

Across Africa, broadcast and print media remind audiences of how the Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini had set off the pogroms when on March 20 at a 'moral regeneration' rally, he referred to immigrants as 'lice' and 'ants': "you find their unsightly goods hanging all over our shops, they dirty our streets. We cannot even recognize which shop is which, there are foreigners everywhere... We ask foreign nationals to pack their belongings and go back to their

countries.”

Within ten days, that call had been taken up by Zulu loyalists in Durban, including the president’s son, Edward Zuma (born in Swaziland), who claimed immigrants “are the reason why there are so many drugs in the country” (he was prosecuted for illegal tobacco importation and tax fraud last year). Backed by most politicians, Zwelithini went into denial, first, complaining of media misinterpretation, and claimed he meant no harm against legal immigrants.

Yet the mass meeting of 10,000 mainly male Zulu traditionalists he assembled at the main Durban stadium on April 20 reverberated with xenophobic chants and booing of ambassadors from Africa. Zwelithini told the gathering he wanted an end to violence. But to achieve that required much more: Zuma finally deployed the army in Durban and Johannesburg hotspots the next night, as the police were proving incompetent.

Backlash

The fakery behind the image of a “Rainbow Nation” was unveiled, as happened in 2008 and 2010 when xenophobia also reached critical mass. But for many years prior, the rest of the continent already knew South African predators. Grievances include exploitation by Johannesburg mining houses, retail chains, cellphone businesses and breweries, and the difficulty of getting a visa to even visit South Africa, especially from Kenya and Nigeria, the two main Anglophone competing powers on the continent (diplomatic-level tit-for-tat is one reason.)

Popular disgust across Africa at how little the South African state was doing to protect immigrants reverberated especially strongly where the refugees mainly hailed from: Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In many capital cities across Africa, the 99 percent lined up in marches, protests and boycotts against Africa’s sub-imperialist 1 percent.

On more than a dozen occasions, the targets were South African High Commissions and the branch plants and shops which transfer profits back to Johannesburg corporations. In some cases, like the South African shops that Walmart uses to penetrate Africa, the profits go further away still. In Mozambique’s natural gas fields, more than 300 South African workers employed by the oil company Sasol had to flee home as local residents complained the firm didn’t give jobs to locals.

Back in Durban and Johannesburg, immigrant resistance to lumpen-proletariat proto-fascism is uneven. In Durban, the city centre’s Congolese, Nigerian and Zimbabwe immigrants attempted a non-violent march against xenophobia, which was viciously broken up by municipal police on April 8.

As a result, hundreds of immigrants armed themselves and briefly skirmished with police and xenophobic mobs in Durban’s Point zone a few days later, just a few blocks from the city’s world-class aquarium and water park. Some even threatened urban guerrilla war. In Johannesburg’s Hillbrow inner-city zone, the immigrants’ geographic density was too intimidating for mobs from nearby (Zulu-dominated) migrant labor hostels to penetrate.

But in less concentrated sites in shack settlements, mainly in the Durban residential periphery, xenophobic attacks occurred repeatedly. Even now, nearly a month later, it appears unsafe for most immigrants to return to homes and businesses. As a result of ongoing danger, more than 1000 have been voluntarily repatriated to neighboring countries. There is nothing more tragic than witnessing the long-distance buses load up from refugee camps, choc-full of traumatised people who have lost everything.

South Africa's 1% doesn't get it

Yet South Africa's state leaders repeatedly demonstrated they hadn't really internalised the crisis. On April 24, President Jacob Zuma claimed to immigrant groups, South Africa's moral high ground still remains intact. The same day, the secretary-general of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), Gwede Mantashe, repeated a controversial suggestion: "Refugee reception camps must be used to make sure that everyone who comes to South Africa is registered, they should be screened and get vetted," though he admitted, "I know that the idea has been attacked viciously."

Also that day, Deputy Police Minister Maggie Sotyu revealed how stressed South Africa's elites had become, when she pleaded, "There are worse things happening in other countries but you will never see them in the media. The media is part of the community, so please, it must be biased when it comes to South Africa."

These remarks reflected the widespread public shaming of Zuma's government and its defensiveness. Indeed Zuma initially did very little to resolve or even properly band-aid the situation. State-supported anti-xenophobia media adverts, marches, speeches and campaigning generally missed the point: the impoverished young men doing the attacking had little patience for sanctimonious preaching.

On the one hand, a few middle-class NGOs and religious faith leaders provided vital emergency charity aid to refugee camps; in combination with some labor leaders, their anti-xenophobia marches during April briefly reclaimed central city spaces. On the other hand, the petit-bourgeois moralistic politicians and public commentators had no obvious way to get messages through to the lumpen-proletariat. One reason: an inability to analyze, much less address, the underlying conditions.

Jobs, housing and retail competition

Immigrants from the rest of Africa and from Asia (especially Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and China) in search of work are typically young males with networks that give them entry to residential areas, sometimes to informal employment, and sometimes even to shop-keeping opportunities. Because wives and children typically stay behind, the male migrants can at least temporarily accept much lower wages than local residents who usually must support larger families.

They also can save money by quadrupling up in small inner-city apartments or township shacks – often sleeping in shifts – which puts upward pressure on rental rates. Unscrupulous employers or landlords increase their own power by threatening to tell authorities about the illegal immigrants, as a weapon of super-exploitation often used especially on farms to avoid wage payments.

Another structural cause of xenophobia is excessive township retail competition: "overtrading." This results from immigrants – especially from Somalia, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Bangladesh – using home-country syndicates to gain collective credit and bulk purchasing power from wholesalers. They then easily undercut the spaza shops run by local residents, and their operations have efficiently spread to nearly every corner of South Africa.

Internecine battles between petty capitalists soon move from price wars to physical intimidation, mostly against the immigrant shops. Scores of "service delivery protests" by communities against their municipal governments have turned into xenophobic looting sprees against immigrants.

These root causes can be solved only by redirecting state resources towards meeting needs (like housing) and creating jobs. Corporate taxes could be raised and vast budgets shifted away from white elephant infrastructure projects: a US\$30 billion coal export railroad, a new (unneeded) US\$25 billion Durban port, US\$100 billion for nuclear reactors and the like. Without a massive attack on inequality, the daily degradation of life for the 54 percent of South Africans who are below the poverty line will continue.

Zuma's ANC government is at fault not only for neoliberal, pro-corporate, job-killing policies, but for tightening immigration regulations the last few years, which compels refugees to live under illegal informality. Zuma has continued his predecessors' sub-imperial policies in the region in order to secure contracts for favored corporations, including his nephew's US\$10 billion oil deal in the eastern DRC, not far from where 1600 SA army troops are deployed against rebel competitors.

Zuma also gives continual fraternal support to repressive regimes in the region such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, the Swazi tyrant monarch Mswati and the corrupt Congolese regime of Joseph Kabila. More refugees result.

What pressure can reverse the root causes?

Mere 'be-nice' appeals and marches are not making any dent in the root causes of xenophobia or in state policies. What would be needed to change the Zuma government's approach? What power can activists leverage?

The most obvious factor in recent weeks was the reputational damage (including to tourism) that the government and big business are feeling. Apparently only such damage can compel Zuma to act.

As Bandile Mdlalose from the Community Justice Movement wrote in Pambazuka, the continent's main ezine, "We in Durban civil society should consider a boycott campaign." With Durban the only candidate for the 2022 Commonwealth Games, she argued that one target should be a "Commonwealth decision, expected on September 2, to give the 2022 Games to our undeserving city." Durban authorities say they will also bid for the 2024 Olympic Games.

Protesters in many other countries are tackling South Africa at this level, so as to force the Pretoria regime to adopt more humane policies. The question is whether, pitted against ANC politicians, local corporations and fast-rising Zulu ethnicism, a still-stunned layer of South African progressives can join the debate how best to shift from mere moralizing towards standing up alongside African protesters.

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