



Migrants and Refugees in 2026: Prospects and Potholes

*"Xenophobia has become a significant tool in global electoral politics, frequently used by politicians to scapegoat foreign nationals for local socioeconomic issues, such as unemployment and crime, in order to gain political advantage. This trend is global, spanning from Europe to South Africa, where anti-migrant sentiments and the rise of exclusionary governments are increasingly common during election campaigns."*¹

1. Introduction

To begin with a statement of global application: "Disaffected voters are blaming establishment political leaders for economic stagnation, unwanted immigration and perceived national decay. They are retreating into fierce nationalism encouraged by populist leaders who are challenging the *status quo*."² Such are the times we live in.

The January 2026 edition of Human Rights Watch makes the following comments as background for assessing the events in the first weeks of 2026 and their implications for the South African local elections in 2026. Leaning into their 2025 findings, they state: "In July 2025, the South African government issued a statement expressing concern at the violations of migrants' constitutional rights. They committed to strengthen collaboration between the police and the departments of Health and Home Affairs, and to prosecute individuals who take the law into their hands."³

However, more incidents of blocking migrants' access to health services, in particular, and more recently of blocking access to education, especially basic education, have taken place. Proof of this is seen in the following: "In March 2026 the Gauteng High Court instructed the government to comply with a December ruling that ordered the state to take firm action against vigilantes blocking immigrants from accessing clinics."⁴ This followed on a sequence of events. "In an interim order on 4 December, the court directed the respondents to take reasonable measures to ensure safe and unhindered physical access

to clinics. They were ordered to stop vigilante blockades, ensure that there was adequate security at entrances, and to report all incidents to the police. The police were ordered to provide all necessary assistance to ensure compliance with the order. But weeks later, groups of xenophobic vigilantes continued to threaten patients without resistance from security or staff at the clinics."⁵

This goes to show very convincingly that a strong culture of impunity, popular racism, and a broadening, unquestioning acceptance of exclusivism, is on the rise. This bodes ill for the environment in which the 2026 local elections will take place and thus for the sustainability of our democracy.

2. The Present Context: Shaping the Political Terrain

This is being written just two days after a march of thousands of people in Durban calling for the expulsion of illegal foreigners from the country, blaming them for the loss of jobs, drug dealing and 'taking over the country', and especially for the spiking of crime. Of significance was that the march, organised by groups such as Operation Dudula and March and March, was this time strongly supported by three major political parties, namely ActionSA, the Inkatha Freedom Party and the MK Party.⁶ Herman Mashaba, the leader of ActionSA, which promises to tighten immigration control, captured the mood when he said, "People can call us names but we cannot allow a situation where our country is being destroyed before our very own eyes."⁷ This must to some degree signify political parties positioning themselves to draw voters into their folds on the

grounds of push-back against tolerance of foreign nationals. As observed in the 2024 national election, the issue of illegal foreign nationals became a central drawcard for voters. Thus we see, months before the 2026 local elections, a strongly hegemonising popular culture with a spirit of exclusion at the heart of emerging campaigns. At the same time, the 'othering' of foreigners is emerging as a key component of the exclusivist narrative, with divisive political rhetoric and strong indications of personal biases already setting the scene for what could be seriously fractious elections.

To add to this troubling picture, the latest GovDem Survey of the Inclusive Society Institute found that South Africans harbour high levels of mistrust towards African foreign nationals, and that anti-immigration sentiment is rising. Seventy-three percent of respondents reported not trusting immigrants from Africa 'at all' or 'not very much'. These hard attitudes drive harmful rhetoric, misinformation, and vigilante campaigns against foreign nationals. The report concludes that, if left unaddressed, societal divisions may deepen.⁸

This, again, does not bode well for the country as it gears up for local elections. There is a well-known but anonymous saying: "Foreigners do not make our country less safe but xenophobia, fear and hate do."

3. Some Framing Issues

It is quite obvious that populism emerges in situations that have particular preconditions which nurture populist political options. A visibly high proportion of foreigners in any society beset by economic and societal problems turns migrants into scapegoats for a raft of other failings. However, once immigration is put high on the media agenda and framed in a way that advances populists' interests, it becomes difficult to promote a different framing. Immigration becomes the scapegoat for many of the pre-existing or independently occurring conditions. Part of populism's mass appeal, especially among the economically disadvantaged or those harbouring a sense of being marginalised, is its promotion of simplistic and scapegoating narratives to explain complex socioeconomic conditions and deficits. Not only are migrants used as scapegoats, but it may be entirely in the interests of populist parties – when in government or close to power – to actively obstruct reforms or to instigate new pol-

icies which exacerbate a sense of crisis around immigration and asylum. In this context and with these dynamics, it is hardly surprising that the salience of migration as an issue in Europe, after the 2015-2016 mass movements of migrants and refugees into the bloc, also coincided with the rise in anti-migrant populist parties.⁹

It is worth noting that recent elections have often been the trigger for more aggressive xenophobia. Indeed, there is a history of such interconnections. This is driven by political rhetoric and socio-economic anxiety. Sadly, hate speech aimed at foreigners tends to spike during election periods. A pattern exists between xenophobia and these comments. The 2008 xenophobic violence was directly related to inflammable political rhetoric by a political leader. The 2015 violence was again linked to inflammatory public statements. In this instance it was largely understood that the root of the upsurge stemmed from remarks by King Goodwill Zwelithini, a prominent political player in South Africa, that "foreigners should pack their bags and go." Although he later denied he meant it in the way it was taken up, it still became the rallying point for the later attacks and provided political cover for xenophobic activities.¹⁰

The 2019 tensions were also linked to political messaging about migrants. Most of the tension was blamed initially on the death of a lorry driver, which morphed into a protest against all foreign lorry drivers and the claim that South Africans were being deprived of such jobs due to the presence in the sector of so many foreigners. This later took on partisan political dimensions and led to serious tensions between South Africa and Nigeria and Zimbabwe.¹¹ Researchers thus specifically note that, with steep competition for votes, election campaigning can become a trigger for xenophobic outbursts. The following paragraphs speak directly to this point with regard to the 2024 national elections:

"Politicians are using immigrants as pawns, without regard for their safety, in an attempt to score votes ahead of the general elections," said Nomathamsanqa Masiko-Mpaka, South Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Electoral Commission of South Africa, as an independent constitutional body which manages free and fair elections, should explicitly condemn the harmful rhetoric directed towards foreign nationals." The authorities should enforce the electoral code of conduct to address harmful anti-immi-

grant rhetoric by government officials and candidates who are not only addressing legitimate issues of border control and irregular migration, but are making foreign nationals targets of abuse.”¹²

“Candidates are pushing a narrative not just that migration is out of control, but blaming undocumented migrants for the country’s ills and engaging in xenophobia,” Human Rights Watch said. ‘South Africa’s electoral code of conduct, which every candidate is required to abide by, prohibits language that provokes violence and requires candidates to speak out against political violence. In a country where xenophobic violence, including lethal violence, has been a persistent problem, rhetoric that scapegoats foreign nationals can all too easily spark violence.’”¹³

We need to be aware that if we wish to combat the scourge of xenophobia then the GovDem Survey’s findings form an important basis for policy work, restoring social cohesion and dialling down the inflammatory language that largely goes unchallenged in the public space. All of these issues need facts – empirical evidence – and not fears and fabrication in order to provide responsible governance and fair comment on such contentious issues. Commenting on the growing distrust between South Africans and people from other parts of Africa, the Survey notes the following (which is of singular interest when gauging the political dynamics within a community and thus has to be considered when assessing the precarious nature of the environment as elections approach):

“Notably, this distrust is not confined to one segment of society, but is broadly shared across South Africa’s racial groups. Among white respondents, 72.48 percent expressed distrust, among black respondents, it was 73.17 percent, among Indian respondents, 75.22 percent and among coloured respondents it was 72.61 percent. The sentiment therefore cuts across the racial divide, reflecting a widespread national attitude rather than an isolated viewpoint within a particular community.”¹⁴

“When analysing the survey results by age, it also emerges that all age groups reflect similarly high levels of distrust towards immigrants from elsewhere in Africa. Among the youngest group, 18–24-year-olds, 74.12

percent indicated that they did not trust immigrants. For 25–34-year-olds, the figure was 71.22 percent, for those aged 35–49, 71.74 percent and among respondents over 50 years old, 76.16 percent. These results show that the sentiment is broadly uniform across generations, with only marginal differences.”¹⁵

“Where a more marked differentiation emerges is between those respondents who are employed and those who are not. Among respondents who reported being in employment, 70.06 percent indicated distrust of immigrants. By contrast, among those who reported being unemployed, the figure rises to 77.31 percent. This could suggest that joblessness intensifies the negative perceptions that local communities have of African immigrants, which is most probably due to the belief that they, the immigrants that is, are competing in the labour market to the detriment of the local job seekers.”¹⁶

“Finally, when comparing survey results by gender, a slight divergence is evident, with men expressing distrust in immigrants from Africa at a rate of 71.39 percent, while women reflect a slightly higher distrust at 74.33 percent. Women are thus marginally more concerned about the presence of African immigrants in the country than their male compatriots, but, as already said, the gap is relatively small.”¹⁷

4. Conclusion

Things look dismal. We would do well to heed the words of the United States Bishops’ Conference as we begin to chart a way forward for protecting mobile communities, especially during periods of high tension and competitiveness: “We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement. We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants. We are concerned about the conditions in detention centers and the lack of access to pastoral care. We lament that some immigrants in the United States have arbitrarily lost their legal status.” The bishops also said, “We oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people,” and they prayed “for an end to dehumanizing rhetoric and violence, whether directed at immigrants or at law enforcement.”¹⁸

As we consider the emerging landscape surrounding the upcoming local elections, perhaps the important question to ask is this one, posed by Somdeep Sen of the University of Pretoria: “Why are we so keen to give in to xenophobic narratives and policies? In part because they are convenient. They allow governments and soci-

eties to externalise domestic failures, offering an easy explanation for problems that are far more complex and often rooted in political and economic mismanagement at home, in austerity, deepening inequality and precarious work rather than in the arrival of strangers.”¹⁹

This has a ring of truth to it.

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¹ <https://tinyurl.com/4tcxk3a4>

² <https://tinyurl.com/59537arc>

³ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/south-africa>

⁴ <https://groundup.org.za/article/court-warns-government-to-comply-with-order-to-protect-clinic-access-for-all-patients/>

⁵ <https://groundup.org.za/article/court-warns-government-to-comply-with-order-to-protect-clinic-access-for-all-patients/>

⁶ <https://today.rtl.lu/news/world/south-africa-police-clash-with-anti-immigrant-protesters-964929959>

⁷ <https://today.rtl.lu/news/world/south-africa-police-clash-with-anti-immigrant-protesters-964929959>

⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/south-africa>

⁹ <https://mixedmigration.org/publications/mmr/2024/the-instrumentalisation-of-migration-in-the-populist-era/>

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/14/dispatches-xenophobic-violence-rages-durban-south-africa>

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/3axv57bn>

¹² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/06/south-africa-toxic-rhetoric-endangers-migrants>

¹³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/06/south-africa-toxic-rhetoric-endangers-migrants>

¹⁴ <https://www.inclusivesociety.org.za/post/rising-distrust-govdem-survey-shows-sharp-increase-in-anti-immigration-sentiment-in-south-africa>

¹⁵ <https://www.inclusivesociety.org.za/post/rising-distrust-govdem-survey-shows-sharp-increase-in-anti-immigration-sentiment-in-south-africa>

¹⁶ <https://www.inclusivesociety.org.za/post/rising-distrust-govdem-survey-shows-sharp-increase-in-anti-immigration-sentiment-in-south-africa>

¹⁷ <https://www.inclusivesociety.org.za/post/rising-distrust-govdem-survey-shows-sharp-increase-in-anti-immigration-sentiment-in-south-africa>

¹⁸ <https://www.usccb.org/news/2025/pope-calls-treatment-migrants-us-extremely-disrespectful>

¹⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/4tcxk3a4>