



Struggling To Take Back the Narrative

1. Introduction

"Since 2008 – when 62 people, including 21 South Africans, 11 Mozambicans, 5 Zimbabweans and 3 Somalis, were killed – South Africa has been grappling with intermittent but widespread xenophobic harassment and violence against African and Asian foreign nationals living in the country, whether refugees, asylum seekers, or both documented and undocumented migrants".¹ This pattern continues with increasingly toxic consequences, both for those vulnerable groups most victimised but also for our democracy, the future of 'the politics for the common good', and the soul of South Africa. Events over a few days in early and mid-May 2026 brought this to the fore in sharp relief.

2. On X: The Reasons and Responses

On 14th May, the South African government published a post on X with a single message which stated: "South Africa is not alone in facing the pressure of undocumented migration; many nations are navigating similar tensions."² Several reasons prompted this post. It is fair to say that it was surely aimed at allaying the widespread negative publicity that has recently intensified, especially the bolder, more sustained critical responses of other African countries to the treatment of their nationals in South Africa.³ They clearly perceive that the South African government has been weak in its resolve to protect foreign nationals caught up in the crosshairs of these attacks. The international responses have also included action at the diplomatic level. Ghana and Nigeria⁴ have both summoned the South African High Commissioners for formal discussions on this topic, registering their deep concern around the treatment of their nationals and xenophobia in general. Ghana has gone even further: it has conducted a small-scale

evacuation of 300 nationals and has called for a debate around xenophobia in South Africa at the next AU Summit in Cairo in June 2026.⁵

The South Africa Foreign Ministry [DIRCO] issued a lengthy response. The points covered included an emphasis on the minister's attempts to deal with some of the issues diplomatically. It read in part: "Since the outbreak of these unfortunate incidents, Minister Ronald Lamola has had intensive engagements with a number of fellow African Foreign Ministers and resident African Ambassadors regarding these developments to assure them that these matters are receiving the attention of the relevant authorities in South Africa. Specifically, Minister Lamola engaged his Ghanaian and Nigerian counterparts, and reaffirmed South Africa's commitment to protect the rights of nationals, residents and visitors in line with the rule of law, and to strengthen bilateral co-operation."⁶

The statement added as a caution: "Whilst South Africa supports the overall objectives of both the SADC Protocol and the AU Free Movement of Persons Protocol, we recognise that the slow progress towards their ratification and entry into force is due to several challenges faced by member states. These challenges include economic and social pressures, governance and policy difficulties, security challenges, and pressure on border management systems. Some of these challenges are acutely pronounced in South Africa as the host of the largest number of immigrants on the continent."⁷

Of considerable weight this time round is the reproach issued by the spokesperson of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who released a statement in the Secretary-General's name which criticised South Africa with regard to xenophobia, on Freedom Day 2026:

"The Secretary General is deeply concerned by reports of xenophobic attacks and acts of harassment and intimidation against migrants and foreign nationals in parts of South Africa, including in KwaZuluNatal and Eastern Cape Province. He strongly condemns these criminal acts perpetrated by individuals inciting violence and exploiting socio-economic conditions. Violence, vigilantism and all forms of incitement to hatred have no place in an inclusive, democratic society governed by the rule of law and respect for human rights. The Secretary General recalls that South Africa's struggle against apartheid was sustained through international and African solidarity, and that the country's social and economic development has long been shaped by the coexistence and contributions of people from South Africa, the African continent and beyond. He notes the clear public messages by South African authorities reaffirming that no individual or group has the right to take the law into their own hands and that those responsible for criminal acts will be investigated and held accountable in accordance with the law. The investigations must be prompt, thorough, independent and impartial."⁸

3. The President Responds: Towards a Middle Ground

Little wonder, then, that President Cyril Ramaphosa's Freedom Day Speech made considerable reference to the growing war of words on xenophobia and migration rampant in the public domain. It was a clear attempt to wrestle control of the migration narrative as a whole and the reality of xenophobia in particular. He made clear, if not entirely decisive, references to 'ubuntu', and to the much-repeated argument of other African countries having helped South Africans in the fight for liberation and having housed exiles at great cost to themselves. It was clearly a speech aimed at trying to recover some of the lost moral high ground associated with South Africa being a 'home for all.' It was also clearly an attempt to reclaim some of the considerable reputational loss that the country has suffered due to what is seen as a weak response to xenophobia. The President said,

"We did not walk alone into freedom. We were carried by a tide of solidarity from the nations of Africa, among many others. These countries opened their borders to our liberation fighters. They shared their bread and their homes. They spoke for us when we

could not speak for ourselves.

The leaders and people of Africa kept our struggle alive. It cannot be, and it must never be, that we trample into the dust the African fellowship that made our freedom possible. We are a people who live the value of ubuntu. We should never allow the legitimate concerns of our communities about illegal migration to breed prejudice towards our fellow Africans. We must not allow these concerns to give rise to xenophobia, directed towards people from other African countries or other any parts of the world. Instead, we must insist that the law be upheld and enforced. That is why we are clamping down on illegal migration and on businesses that flout our laws by hiring undocumented persons at the expense of our citizens.

We are actively rooting out corruption in our immigration system. We will not allow people to take the law into their own hands. We extend hospitality to those who are guests in our country, with the expectation that generosity is honoured with respect for our society and its laws. As a nation that defeated colonialism and apartheid through international solidarity, we carry a responsibility to advance constitutional values beyond our borders."⁹

In summary, the President's speech (which was in part an echo of his State of the Nation Address earlier this year) sought to be clear that nobody should take the law into their own hands, treat others violently, or unilaterally decide on who has or does not have access to constitutionally guaranteed rights. It was a definite condemnation of those who use and abuse other people's vulnerability to create political platforms for xenophobic violence. On the other hand, he also acknowledged undocumented migrants as a problem and made promises to deal with this aspect as a separate but urgent issue.

The question of reputational damage as an embarrassment and a political millstone for South Africa was also seen clearly in the minutes of the first cabinet meeting in May. "Cabinet condemned the opportunistic attempts to hijack the genuine concerns of South Africans about high unemployment and limited economic opportunities by mobilising South Africans to destabilise the country, including mobilising attacks on foreign nationals. They are intended

to undermine the good reputation of South Africa internationally and undermine South Africa's pursuit of a better Africa agenda."¹⁰

From the above, it may be concluded with some considerable certainty that the conglomeration of events, and the responses to them as seen in the above speeches, plus the increasing focus on us internationally, continues to harm South Africa's image and its long-time boast of being the custodian of a strong human rights tradition and a progressive constitution.

4. Conclusion

From the early days of the anti-foreigner outbursts South Africa has been criticised for its tepid response to xenophobia. The general view could be stated as follows: "South Africa's government response to xenophobia has been widely criticized as weak, reactive, and inconsistent. Authorities frequently downplay the violence as mere criminality while enforcing restrictive immigration policies that indirectly validate the scapegoating of foreign nationals."¹¹ In the present moment, as we approach the local elections in November, the political rhetoric is already pregnant with anti-foreigner language. This follows the recent trend that anti-migrant political parties have garnered high numbers of votes in by-elections; hence parties are vying with each other to assure voters of their anti-foreigner policies. A second aspect is that the weak response of government has given populists and anti-foreigner groups the latitude to act with growing impunity. Populism is thus easily able to morph into regular politics.

The political commentator Ralph Mathekga writes: "'South Africa, like many countries worldwide, is grappling with a populist anti-immigration phenomenon that has infiltrated governance on an unprecedented scale. In the country's general elections in May 2024, anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiment

dominated the public discourse. Political parties drew attention to foreign nationals, claiming they were the chief cause of a range of problems, including public health failures. The country's politicians seem unable to address the socio-economic challenges the general population is experiencing and are turning to anti-immigrant populism to satiate the masses."¹²

Sipho Mthathi, a veteran social justice activist, points perceptively to the same political danger in populist anti-foreigner narrative, and to the lack of accountability for what is said and done in this regard in the public space: "When Limpopo Premier Phophi Ramathuba stood beside the bed of a Zimbabwean woman in pain and berated her for the cost of her treatment, she did not lose her job. She did not face censure. The video circulated. Some public figures defended her. A lesson was learned: there is no political cost to humiliating a foreigner in public. There is political reward. That is a lesson other politicians have learned. What follows is no longer a fringe. It is a market – and it is growing. A competition across parties for who can speak the most uncompromisingly about deportation, removal and exclusion."¹³

There must surely also be a fear that, as the xenophobic narrative continues to intensify and to appear as if it is a homogenous position across South Africa, there is also a deepening anxiety that the basic trust which is the very core of the social fabric of South Africa is in short supply; that this trust is also, through these xenophobic attitudes, being torn apart. This would be in every way disastrous for our country.

The last two commentators make the point that the government's failure to act promptly, and the sidestepping and denialism that it has engaged in, have not only revealed a deep prejudice against 'others', but have created a vacuum for others with darker motives to occupy. This cannot be good for democracy and it is not good for building trust, public honesty or a cohesive future for our nation.

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¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/05/20/south-africa-new-waves-of-xenophobic-attacks>

² <https://x.com/GovernmentZA/status/2054797607176896693>

- ³ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-05-04-escalating-xenophobia-in-sa-sparks-diplomatic-protests-by-african-nations/>
- ⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/articles/cn0pxy78z0yo>
- ⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2045550482690499>
- ⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2045550482690499><https://dirco.gov.za/south-africas-response-to-the-request-by-the-republic-of-ghana-for-a-debate-at-the-au-on-the-xenophobic-attacks-in-the-republic-of-south-africa-against-african-nationals/>
- ⁷ <https://dirco.gov.za/south-africas-response-to-the-request-by-the-republic-of-ghana-for-a-debate-at-the-au-on-the-xenophobic-attacks-in-the-republic-of-south-africa-against-african-nationals/>
- ⁸ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-04-27/statement-attributable-the-spokesperson-for-the-secretary-general-the-situation-south-africa>
- ⁹ <https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-2026-freedom-day-27-apr-2026>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.gov.za/news/cabinet-statements/statement-cabinet-meeting-6-may-2026-07-may-2026>
- ¹¹ <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/south-africa-populism/>
- ¹² <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/south-africa-populism/>
- ¹³ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2026-05-08-south-african-xenophobic-violence-when-the-state-retreats-something-else-governs/>

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