



# Xenophobia in South Africa: A Consequence of the Unfinished Business of Decolonisation in Africa

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South Africa has consistently experienced cyclical xenophobic flaring that has dented its image in Africa and in the world. The country continues to receive a high number of both documented and undocumented migrants as it has become a top destination in South-to- South migration. Beyond its geographical proximity to other African states, the current migration patterns have to be understood as a consequence of history and as such the xenophobic flaring has to be read as an unfinished business of decolonisation in Africa.

History created two processes that shaped Africa's politics and economies, even up to today, creating a complex conundrum for our policy makers. Firstly, the Berlin conference created artificial borders and nations that remain problematic today. These borders were not fashioned to address the political and economic interests of Africans but the imperial powers of Europe. Institutions and infrastructure were created to service the imperial interests, and this remains the status quo despite more than four decades of independence in Africa. Secondly, Cecil John Rhodes' dream of "Cape to Cairo" became the basis upon which the modern economy was built in Africa. This created what the late Malawian political economist, Guy Mhone, called an enclave economy of prosperity amidst poverty, and resultantly created what Mahmood Mamdani termed the bifurcated state, with citizens

and subjects.

A closer look at the African state's formation history provides insights on the continuities of colonial institutions and continuous marginalisation of Africans as the state was never fashioned to address their political and economic interests from the beginning.

Drawing on classical African political economists, this article argues that, unknowingly, the South African government and in particular, the African National Congress (ANC) leadership, a former liberation movement, have fallen into the trap of the logic of the underlying colonial epistemologies informing migration debates in Africa. The Afrophobic attacks in South Africa fly in the face of Africa's founding fathers, such as Nkrumah, Nyerere, Machel, Kaunda and Mandela, and of the African Union's dream of a borderless African economy and society.

In his essay "In Defence of History", Professor Hobsbawm challenges us to read history in its totality:

*However, the new perspectives on history should also return us to that essential, if never quite realisable, objective of those who study the past: "total history". Not a "history of everything", but history as an indivisible web in which all human activities are interconnected.*

It is when we read history in its totality that we are able to make connections about the relations between the past, present and future. Looked at closely, the current xeno/Afro-phobia insurrections engulfing South Africa have to be read within the totality of history. Therefore, this piece argues that the xeno/Afro-phobia flarings that have been gripping South Africa ever since 2008, and which have cast South Africa in bad light within the African continent, are contrary to the ethos of Pan-Africanism and are largely a product of the history of the scramble and partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.

### **Whose borders? Remembering the Ghosts of Berlin**

By the beginning of the 1870s, European nations were in search of natural resources to grow their industries and at the same expand markets for their products. This prompted strong conflict amongst European superpowers and in late 1884, Otto von Bismarck, the then German Chancellor, called for a meeting in Berlin of various representatives of European nations. The objective was to agree on "common policy for colonisation and trade in Africa and the drawing of colonial state boundaries in the official partition of Africa".

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At the end of the Berlin Conference, the "European powers had neatly divided Africa up amongst themselves, drawing the boundaries of Africa much as we know them today". It was at this conference that European superpowers set in motion a process that set boundaries that have continued to shape present-day Africa. Remember that there was no King Shaka, Lobengula, Munhumutapa, Queen Nzinga, Emperor Haile Selassie, Litunga of Barotseland among many other rulers of Africa at this conference. There was Otto von Bismarck, King Leopold II and their fellow European rulers who sat down and determined borders governing Africa today.

This is the epistemological base upon which current "othering" within citizenship and migration policies are hinged. This colonial legacy has its roots in the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, where

major European powers partitioned Africa amongst themselves and formalised it with the current borders that have largely remained intact and the basis of the modern state in post-colonial Africa. Therefore, policies on identity, citizenship and migration in Africa have been largely informed by modern nation-state forms of territoriality drawn from remnants of colonial policies. These have tended to favour the elites and modernised (privileged, intelligentsia, government officials and business) at the expense of the underclass in Africa, who form the majority.

Most of the institutions and policies characterising the post-colonial African state are bequeathed by legacies of colonialism, hence the need for African states to listen to the wisdom of Samir Amin and “delink from the past” or bridge Thabo Mbeki’s “two nations” thesis and create a decolonised Africa where Africans will be no strangers.

Africa’s citizenship and migration policies remain unreformed and informed by colonial epistemology and logics. The partitioning of Africa into various territories for European powers at the Berlin Conference means most of the present-day nation-states and boundaries in Africa are a product of the resultant imperialist agreement. The boundaries were an outside imposition and split many communities with linguistic, cultural and economic ties together. The nation-state in Africa became subjugated by colonial powers (exogenous forces) rather than natural processes of endogenous force contestations and nation-state formation, as was the case with Europe.

### **Stoking the flames**

African communities are burning from Afrophobia/xenophobia, and at times this is sparked by Africa’s elites who make reckless statements based on the logics of the Berlin Conference. Africa’s poor or the underclass are the most affected, as these *xeno-insurrections* manifest physically and violently amongst poor communities. Among elite communities, it manifests mostly in subtle psychological forms.

South African leaders continue to be oblivious to the crisis at hand and fail to understand that the solution to the economic crisis and depravity facing the South African citizenry can’t easily be addressed by kicking out foreigners. In 2014, prominent Zulu King Goodwill Zwelthini had this to say and the whole country was caught up in flames:

*Most government leaders do not want to speak out on this matter because they are scared of losing votes. As the king of the Zulu nation, I cannot tolerate a situation where we are being led by leaders with no views whatsoever...We are requesting those who come from outside to please go back to their countries...The fact that there were countries that played a role in the country’s struggle for liberation should not be used as an excuse to create a situation where foreigners are allowed to inconvenience locals.*

After a public outrage he claimed to have been misquoted and the South African Human Rights Council became complicit when it absolved him.

Towards the South African 2019 elections, President Cyril Ramaphosa also jumped onto the blame-the-foreigner bandwagon by stoking xenophobic flames when he said that “everybody just comes into our country...” Not to be outdone, Johannesburg Mayor, Herman Mashaba, has been on the blaze, blaming foreigners for the rise in crime and overcrowded service delivery.

On the other hand, Minister Bheki Cele continues to be in denial as he adamantly characterises the current attack on foreigners as acts of criminality and not xenophobia. Almost across the political divide there is consensus that foreigners are a problem in South Africa. However, the exception has been the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) that has been steadfastly condemning the black-on-

black attacks and has characterised them as self-hate.

### **Whither the Pan-African dream?**

In his founding speech for Ghana's independence, Kwame Nkrumah said, "We again rededicate ourselves in the struggle to emancipate other countries in Africa; for our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent."

This speech by President Nkrumah set the basis upon which Ghana and some of the other independent African states sought to ensure the liberation of colonised African states. They never considered themselves free until other Africans were freed from colonialism and apartheid. Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere had this to say:

*I reject the glorification of the nation-state [that] we inherited from colonialism, and the artificial nations we are trying to forge from that inheritance. We are all Africans trying very hard to be Ghanaians or Tanzanians. Fortunately for Africa, we have not been completely successful. The outside world hardly recognises our Ghanaian-ness or Tanzanian-ness. What the outside world recognises about us is our African-ness.*

It is against this background that countries like Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa benefitted from the solidarity of their African brothers as they waged wars of liberation. Umkhonto weSizwe, the African National Congress' armed wing, fought alongside the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army to dislodge white supremacists in Southern Rhodesia. And Nigeria set up the Southern Africa Relief Fund that raised \$10 million that benefitted South Africans fighting against the apartheid regime. The African National Congress was housed in neighbouring African countries, the so-called frontline states of Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho and Tanzania. In some cases, these countries had to endure bombings and raids by the apartheid regime.

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The attacks on foreign nationals who are mostly African and black by black South Africans and the denial by South African government officials that the attacks are not xenophobic but criminal are attempts to duck a glaring problem that needs urgent attention. It is this denialism from authorities that casts aspersions on the Pan-African dream of a One Africa.

### **Glimmers of hope**

All hope is not lost, as there are still voices of reason in South Africa that understand that the problem is a complex and economic one. The EFF has also managed to show deep understanding that the problem of depravity and underdevelopment of Black South Africans is not caused by fellow Africans but by the skewed economic system. Its leader, Julius Malema, tweeted amidst the flaring of the September 2019 xenophobia storm:

*Our anger is directed at wrong people. Like all of us, our African brothers and sisters are selling their cheap labour for survival. The owners of our wealth is white monopoly capital; they are refusing to share it with us and the ruling party #ANC protects them. #OneAfricaIsPossible.*

Yet, if policy authorities and South Africa's elites would dare to revisit the Pan-African dream as articulated by the EFF Commander-in-Chief Julius Malema, they may be able to exorcise the Ghosts

of Berlin.

Signs of integration are appearing, albeit slowly. East African countries have opened their borders to each other and allow free movement of people without the need for a visa. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta has even gone further to allow people from Tanzania and Uganda to work and live in Kenya without the need for a visa. In addition, Rwanda and Tanzania have abolished work permit fees for any national of the East African Community. Slowly, the Ghosts of Berlin are disappearing, but more work still needs to be done to hasten the process. The launch of the African Union passport and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers further hope of dismantling the borders of the Berlin Conference. South African authorities need to look seriously into East Africa and see how they can re-imagine their economy.

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The continuous flow of African migrants into South Africa is no accident but a matter of an economic history question. Blaming the foreigner, who is an easy target, becomes a simple solution to a complex problem, and in this case Amilcar Cabral’s advice “Claim no easy victories” is instructive. There is the need re-imagine a new development paradigm in South Africa and Southern Africa in general to address questions of structural inequalities and underdevelopment, if the tide of migration to Egoli (City of Gold) – read South Africa- is to be tamed. The butchering of Africans without addressing the enclivity of the African economy will remain palliative and temporary. The current modes of development at the Southern African level favour the growth of South African corporates and thus perpetuate the discourse of enclivity, consequently reinforcing colonial and apartheid labour migration patterns.

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