



THE MEANING OF LIVING IN SOUTH AFRICA: VIOLENCE, CONDEMNATION AND COMMUNITY AFTER 5-11

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July 2008

**Migration Studies Working Paper Series #39
Forced Migration Studies Programme
University of the Witwatersrand
<http://migration.org.za>**

Migration Studies Working Paper Series

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THE MEANING OF LIVING IN SOUTH AFRICA: VIOLENCE, CONDEMNATION AND COMMUNITY AFTER 5-11¹

Loren B. Landau

Refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, illegals, border jumpers, displacees, Nigerians, aliens, amakwerekwere have long been on South Africans' minds. For many they were primarily a group to be feared, disdained, occasionally pitied, and often exploited. Seen by many as a threat to the country's wealth and health, the country's government and much of its civil society turned a blind eye to foreigners' systematic marginalisation, mass deportation (close to 300 000 people in 2007), and the ever more rapid and rabid murders at the hands of the country's citizenry. When the government did react to violence against foreigners, its responses were often two-faced: chastising communities for their intolerance while accelerating arrests and removals.² In a nationally broadcast speech on 25 May, President Mbeki encouraged South Africans to "...build on the tradition of many decades of integrating our foreign guests within our communities."³ Given the history of exploitation, alienation, and expulsion, It is hard to imagine where he (or anyone else) got the idea that government or citizens have ever promoted the peaceful integration of migrants into South African society.

But my concern here is less with the long-term disregard for migrants' rights and welfare. Nor do I wish to condemn the initial denialism of crisis or the tardy and ineffective efforts to help those who were violently displaced.⁴ Rather, this piece considers what the responses by South African citizens and institutions reveal about being from and living in South Africa. Two reactions to the violence are puzzling. The first is the uncharacteristically impressive reaction from civil society—particularly middle class South African society—and the normative content of that reaction. The second is the strange dichotomy officials made between xenophobic and criminal motivations and their insistence that what took place was criminal.⁵

¹ This paper was first presented at a Seminar on Xenophobic Violence in South Africa. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (28 May 2008).

² 'Legal group condemns Itireleng arrests' *Cape Times* (22 February 2008). Online at <http://www.capetimes.co.za/?fSectionId=&fArticleId=nw20080221231957529C634536#> (accessed 24 February 2008).

³ Quotation is from an address on Africa Day (25 May 2008). Online at <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08052608451001.htm> (accessed 27 June 2008).

⁴ Minister of Safety and Security Charles Nqakula initially responded to the attacks in Alexandra by claiming, "It is only a problem, but if it were a crisis, it would be happening right across the country", *Pretoria News* (14 May 2008).

⁵ In a South African Government statement condemning the attacks, Minister of Home Affairs Mapisa-Nqakula wrote that, "The picture is that foreigners are under siege, but the fact is that criminal elements are clean-sweeping everybody in the community," (in 'Govt slams xenophobic attacks' *South Africa Info*, 16 May 2008 <http://www.southafrica.info/about/democracy/xenophobia-160508.htm> (accessed 26 May 2008). See also 'ANC: Sinister forces at work' *News 24* (14 May 2008). http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/News/0,,2-7-1442_2322013,00.html (accessed 22 May 2008).

As a moment of crisis when the security of residents' bodies, possessions, and values came under question, the violence serves both to destroy and create. Speaking in the most general and aggregated terms, the attacks have helped generate three incompatible views of life in South Africa. The first is a renewed, if circumscribed, commitment to cosmopolitan nationalism by elements of South Africa's middle class and government elite: to respect the rights of all living in the country. This is countered by what is undoubtedly the far more prevalent perspective: killing foreigners may not be right, but South Africa must remain the domain of those who have sprung from its soil. Removed from debates over who belongs sit the migrants themselves. Rejecting aspirations of or claims to membership, they will further distance themselves from the citizenry while claiming rights to be in South Africa but not part of it. Unless we address the ethical and practical tensions reflected in these views over how we live together and relate to our neighbours, violence will always be just around the corner.

Before exploring the reactions and the competing visions of South Africa they represent, it is worth noting two ironies that were undoubtedly lost on the third-force masterminds behind 5-11: First, by drastically reducing remittances from South Africa to Zimbabwe, the murder and displacement of migrants may have killed one of the last lifelines to our northern neighbours. Without even the meagre material migrants in South Africa provide to families in Zimbabwe—soap, cash, cooking oil—more people will starve and others will flee. Rather than staying home and living off South African made products, many of them will undoubtedly end up in South Africa where they will stay for the foreseeable future. Second, while few of the foreigners displaced by the violence had ever accessed state support or services in the past (even when they were legally entitled to them),⁶ tens of thousands ended up in state run shelters where they were almost fully dependent on the state for months. If the South African government eventually establishes semi-permanent camps to protect foreigners from the citizenry, refugees will finally receive the free food and shelter that South Africans have long accused them of getting. Even if the international community picked up the tab, the lost labour, taxes, investments, and moral authority will eventually cost South Africa both cash and jobs.

Turning now to middle class civil society and its uncharacteristically immediate and forceful outrage, in some respects their response is easy to explain. While murder is a daily occurrence and the government regularly displaces South Africans from informal settlements, addressing these sorts of problems requires sustained political critique and engagement. Many have neither the time nor the energy to undertake such campaigns. Others remain wary of criticising the ruling coalition, either out

⁶ See Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, 2008, *Protecting Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (online at www.cormsa.org.za).

of ideological sympathy or for fear of being publicly condemned.⁷ Moreover, sustained engagement means confronting uncomfortable issues about crime, redistribution, and our willingness to live side by side with a rapidly urbanising – but still desperately poor – citizenry. It is also far easier to support people who are unequivocally the victims of violence rather than the poor struggling for survival in not-quite acceptable ways. Paradoxically, the acts levelled against these ‘illegal’ immigrants have legitimised foreigners’ rights and presence in South Africa in a way that their long-standing economic, political, and cultural contributions never have. A widely condemned category of freeloaders and criminals is now a group to be pitied and protected.

But I suspect there is a more complex explanation for the rapid awakening of some within the slumbering middle class civil society. With the transition to democracy, many activist went silent, either brought into lucrative government positions or deeply sympathetic to a legitimate government that was clearly committed to righting past injustice. Others simply moved on, content to turn their attention to domestic and material pursuits now that the key battle was won. However, reticence could only be justified if South African society was becoming more equal and more tolerant. The overt and violent discrimination we witnessed in the middle of May highlights the degree to which the poor remain deeply and inequitably, well, poor. It also reveals that the grander project of social inclusion is far off track. Until it is back on course, more fundamental threats to values and privilege are just below the horizon.

The dangers lying ahead are particularly acute for White and Indian members of the country’s middle class. For some, the redistributive impulse implicit in the mobs threatens long-standing positions of privilege. For others—many who support a more radical redistribution agenda—it is the nativism behind the attacks and other more formal political developments⁸ that is most concerning. While it may not immediately threaten middle class lives, it threatens their position in a future South African society. Coupled with anxieties over Zuma, and Zimbabwe just up the road, few need to be reminded of what can happen if xenophobic nativism migrates from the streets into mainstream policy. For many, condemning the violence is one way that an economically powerful political minority can protest that possibility, defending tolerance to migrants already in the country becomes a proxy claim for themselves in a diverse South Africa

As for government leaders, they clearly share the middle class anxieties over the overt challenges to constitutional values and the rule of law. For those close to President Mbeki, they also worry about their place in South Africa. Undoubtedly, heeding the populist mobs would quickly strip them of the entitlements to which they have only just become accustomed. But that does not explain

⁷ See, for example, the response to Raymon Suttner’s criticisms by SACP spokesman, Malesela Maleka in the *Business Day* (4 May 2006), Online at <http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/article.aspx?ID=BD4A194585> (Accessed 15 July 2008).

⁸ See T. Nevin 2006. ‘New Club Triggers Race Tensions.’ *African Business*. August/September; ‘South Africa: Land and Race,’ *Business Day* (5 September 2007). Media 24, ‘Zuma OK with ‘No Whites’ Rule. Online at http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/Politics/0,,2-7-12_2275834,00.html (accessed 24 June 2008).

their insistence that the violence was more criminal than xenophobic. Like the middle class whose protests also serve to defend their future in South African society, the motivations for proclaiming criminality are at least in part about protecting officials' domestic and international legitimacy. One might think that the general corruption, lawlessness, and poverty would already have done irreparable damage to their international credibility (as it evidently has done among the mobs). But among the politically empowered, the international community, and the poor, the government has successfully hidden behind a language of 'progressive realisation' and 'implementation capacity.' Even crime is packaged as a problem of police transformation, not as a symptom of more fundamental fault lines. To the degree that government can code the events as criminal, they protect their legitimacy as champions of transformation.

Conversely, labelling these as xenophobic attacks threatens officials' international and domestic position as the poster-children for progressive social change. Around the world, people look to the South African miracle and exalt our leaders for their remarkable achievements. Rob them of these achievements and people who are now received as heroes, sit on human rights panels, and lecture on South Africa's progress— which is considerable —will be thrown in the basket with the rest of Africa. Given many South African officials' disdain for what happens elsewhere on the continent, despite the rhetoric of pan-Africanism, there can, in their eyes, be little worse. Given that many of them also have business interests that depend on South Africa's reputation, there is the added threat to their bank balances.

The reactions and counter-reactions among the mobs, the middle class, government and migrants are helping to cement three visions for life in South Africa. Among the middle classes and government officials, we will likely see increasing cosmopolitanism creeping into the ethical basis of their nationalism. Now that xenophobia has been elevated to the likes of racism, sexism, and homophobia, people will be reluctant to speak in overtly nationalistic terms. At the very least, it will reaffirm the idea that South Africa belongs to all who *live* in it. (Although many would prefer to place far greater limits on just who gets the chance to do that.)

Such cosmopolitanism is by no means universal among South African residents. As the violence has shown, many South Africans cling to a deeply territorialised understanding of the South African project. That South Africa should become a far more controlled space, if not an exclusively a South African domain, is no longer in question. Calls for stronger border controls from the Democratic Alliance, the Human Sciences Research Council, the Institute for Security Studies and even the Institute for Race Relations bespeak a broader process of territorial control linked to a view that South African resources—land, jobs, and grants—must be reserved for those who can claim South African origins or those explicitly approved by them. This may not yet be an ethnic

nationalism, but it is an overt assertion of a territorially bound community.⁹ For the mobs and those sympathetic to them, the Fanonian violence will go a step further, strengthening the principle that South Africa belong to all who were *born* in it.

And where does this leave the international migrants? I suspect that South Africa will increasingly host alien populations that are shaping their own idioms of transient superiority. Clinging to the status afforded those belonging to the mobile classes, they will continue to sit just outside (or above) South African society, emotionally orienting themselves elsewhere. Instead of seeking integration and legibility within South Africa's society and politics, many will strive for a kind usufruct rights: a form of self-exclusion that is at least partially compatible with the kind of social and political marginalization they have experienced.¹⁰ To their potential detriment, this lack of commitment to South Africa may only further enrage those already prepared to do them harm.

The divisions among self-exclusion, cosmopolitan citizenship, and ethnic nationalism are dangerous one. Not only as differences in values, but because they map so closely with class, race, and nationality. As such, they provide fault lines that may spawn greater conflict. With an increasingly centralised and unpopular political party mandated to span the divides, it may not be long before we hear more than the distant roar of battle.

⁹ See Statement by the South African Institute of Race Relations on causal factors behind the violent unrest in and around Johannesburg (20th May 2008). Online at <http://www.sairr.org.za/press-office/archive/statement-by-the-south-african-institute-of-race-relations-on-causal-factors-behind-the-violent-unrest-in-and-around-johannesburg-20-may-2008.html> (Accessed 8 June 08); Human Sciences Research Council, 2008. Citizenship, Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Perceptions from South African communities. Pretoria: Human Science Research Council; Jakkie Cilliers. 2008. Xenophobia, Conspiracies and the Absence of Leadership (20 May 2008). Online at http://www.issafrika.org/index.php?link_id=4059&slink_id=5959&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3 (Accessed 9 June 2008). For indication of the Democratic Alliance position, see 'Zille Warns Against Opening of Borders,' in which the Democratic Alliance leader is quoted as, "The recent wave of xenophobic attacks is a direct result of the government's failure to properly control immigration into South Africa," *Mail and Guardian Online* (27 May 2008). Online at <http://www2.mg.co.za/article/2008-05-27-zille-warns-against-opening-of-borders> (accessed 17 June 2008)

¹⁰ See Loren B. Landau (2006) 'Transplants and Transients: Idioms of Belonging and Dislocation in Inner-City Johannesburg.' *African Studies Review*. Vol. 49(2): 125-145.