

From the Leader or From the Led? Populist Xenophobia in South Africa

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ABSTRACTS

Ernesto Laclau argues that populism is not intrinsically anti-democratic, as it can facilitate the political inclusion of sections of a population that had been omitted from political representation. He further posits that, whether the constitution of the will of 'the people' flows more (or less) from the leader to 'the people' than the other way around, determines whether the politics in question is more or less democratic. In light of these theoretical observations, how should the rise of populist xenophobia in South Africa be understood? Since the transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, tens of thousands of Africans have been killed, injured, intimidated, displaced and robbed because they were stigmatized as foreign migrants. Thousands have fled South Africa. On the face of it, against the background of persistently high socio-economic inequality, the clamour of a section of South Africans for greater inclusion has taken a xenophobic form, that is, their inclusion seems reliant on the violent excision of another group of socio-economically excluded people on the grounds of the latter's 'foreignness'. However, what complicates matters, is that the language of xenophobia is also used to ethnically and racially mark certain South Africans as different to 'locals'. Nationality, ethnicity and race are converged through what emerges as Afrophobic othering in which a discourse about migrancy is applied to both foreigners and certain South Africans to signal outsider status. The article pursues the following questions: Is this populist xenophobia/Afrophobia a creation of political elites, effectively pitching poor sections of the population against one another with an autochthonous framing of certain black people as 'not belonging' and hence abject? Or is it the other way around, in which mass-driven populist xenophobia/Afrophobia is a bottom-up version of burgeoning patronage-clientelist relations in which otherwise excluded poor sections of the population access resources through claims of indigeneity that political elites meet, based on an Afrophobic convergence between the led and the leader? The article also considers whether these dynamics can be understood as a continuation of the racial logic of the colonial state.

Ernesto Laclau argumentiert, dass Populismus nicht per se antidemokratisch ist, da er die politische Einbeziehung von Teilen der Bevölkerung erleichtern kann, die zuvor von der politischen Vertretung ausgeschlossen waren. Er vertritt ferner die Ansicht, dass die Frage, ob die Konstituierung des Willens „des Volkes“ mehr (oder weniger) vom politischen Anführer ausgeht und Richtung „Volk“ fließt als umgekehrt, darüber entscheidet, ob die betreffende Politik mehr oder weniger demokratisch ist. Wie ist vor dem Hintergrund dieser theoretischen Überlegungen der Anstieg der populistischen Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Südafrika zu verstehen? Seit dem Übergang von der Apartheid zur Demokratie im Jahr 1994 wurden zehntausende Afrikaner:innen getötet, verletzt, eingeschüchtert, vertrieben und ausgeraubt, weil sie als ausländische Migrant:innen stigmatisiert wurden. Tausende sind aus Südafrika geflohen. Vor dem Hintergrund der anhaltend großen sozioökonomischen Ungleichheit hat der Ruf eines Teils der Südafrikaner:innen nach mehr Inklusion eine fremdenfeindliche Form angenommen, d.h. ihre eigene Inklusion scheint von der gewaltsamen Ausgrenzung einer anderen Gruppe sozioökonomisch ausgegrenzter Menschen auf Basis ihres „Fremdseins“ abhängig zu sein. Was die Sache jedoch noch verkompliziert, ist die Tatsache, dass fremdenfeindliche Sprache auch verwendet wird, um bestimmte Südafrikaner:innen als ethnisch und „rassisch“ (*racially*) anders als „Einheimische“ zu kennzeichnen. Nationalität, ethnische Zugehörigkeit und „Rasse“ (*race*) konvergieren in einem afrophoben „Othering“, in dessen Rahmen ein Diskurs über Migration sowohl auf Ausländer:innen als auch auf bestimmte Südafrikaner:innen angewendet wird, um einen Außenseiterstatus zu suggerieren. Dieser Beitrag geht den folgenden Fragen nach: Ist diese populistische Fremdenfeindlichkeit/Afrophobie eine Schöpfung der politischen Eliten, die die armen Bevölkerungsgruppen mit einer autochthonen Rahmung bestimmter schwarzer Menschen als „nicht zugehörig“ und daher verachtenswert gegeneinander aufbringen? Oder ist es umgekehrt, dass die von den Massen vorangetriebene populistische Fremdenfeindlichkeit/Afrophobie eine von unten nach oben gerichtete (*bottom-up*) Version aufkeimender klientelistischer Beziehungen ist, in denen ansonsten ausgeschlossene arme Bevölkerungsgruppen durch ihre Selbstbezeichnung als autochthon einen Anspruch auf Ressourcen erheben, dem die politischen Eliten auf der Grundlage einer afrophoben Konvergenz zwischen den Geführten (*the led*) und dem Anführenden (*the leader*) nachkommen? Der Beitrag geht auch der Frage nach, ob diese Dynamik als eine Fortsetzung der rassistischen Logik des Kolonialstaates verstanden werden kann.

1. Introduction

Ernesto Laclau¹ argues that populism is not intrinsically anti-democratic, as it can facilitate the inclusion of sections of the population that had been previously omitted from political representation. He provides a useful theoretical frame to ascertain whether populism is democratic by tracing the directional flow between the leader/the representative and the led/the represented. Theoretically, democratic populism flows from the led to the leader, extending and deepening democracy by constituting the identity of the people as

1 E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005.

inclusionary. In light of these theoretical observations, how should the rise of xenophobic populist politics in South Africa be understood? Since the transition to democracy in 1994, tens of thousands of people have been killed, injured, intimidated, displaced, and robbed because they were stigmatized as foreign migrants. The rise of populism in South African politics from the 2000s onwards is entangled with a marked shift in party positions across the political spectrum to xenophobic discourse and practices. Is populist xenophobia a creation of the political elite, effectively mobilizing the masses into a people that positions foreign Africans as abject? Or is it the other way around, in which mass-driven populist xenophobia is a permutation of burgeoning patronage-clientelist relations but in a bottom-up version in which the masses make resource demands that the political elite meets, based on a xenophobic convergence between the led and the leader? If the latter, it would be an example of Laclau's bottom-up populism, but works in this case to pitch marginalized and vulnerable sections of the people against one another, dividing the poor on the basis of nationality and, evidence suggests, race and ethnicity. Would the terms of these divisions suggest the continuation of the racial logic of the colonial state?

To answer these questions, this article consists of the following sections. After providing the context, formal and informal xenophobia since 1994 is briefly discussed. This is followed by a consideration of elite and mass dimensions with reference to Laclau's theory on the interplay between the leader and the led. The next section highlights the identity categories of race, ethnicity, and place acting alongside nationality in the marking of outsiders. The article concludes that populist xenophobia serves as a platform for a complex interplay of elite and subaltern initiative and impetus involving material resources and recognition.

2. A Fraught Democracy

Mbembe² points out that many South Africans live as if betrayed by democracy, the constitution, and the law. This is due to feeling deprived of life possibilities, a feeling of disappointment and defeat. A tension exists between the country's nascent democracy and the expectations imposed by its "miracle transition" from apartheid.³ But this is not limited to South Africa: Brown⁴ describes the neo-liberal destruction of the "good life" in which all human endeavour and expression becomes limited to the mode of homo oeconomicus, which dictates that "there are no motivations, drives, or aspirations apart from economic ones, that there is nothing to being human apart from 'mere life'." Hence, democracy's political elements are converted into economic elements, which entails "the

2 A. Mbembe, *Democracy as a community of life*, in: J. de Gruchy (ed.), *The humanist imperative in South Africa*, Stellenbosch 2011, pp. 187–194.

3 Van der Westhuizen, C. *South Africa's 1994 "Miracle": What's Left?*, in: *The Conversation Africa*, 25 April 2021, <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-1994-miracle-whats-left-159495> (accessed 12 December 2022).

4 W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York 2015, p. 44.

dramatic curtailment of public values, public goods, and popular participation in political life”, the massive empowerment of corporations to undermine the public interest in their own interest, and the displacement of plural social interests by economic metrics.⁵ In South Africa, this has meant that much-needed developmentalism, with a focus on job-creating industries, was not pursued.⁶ For example, the calamitous consequences of neo-liberal deindustrialization after 1994 deprived rural homesteads of migrant labour wages and stripped them of their livelihoods.⁷ This provoked a cultural response, with socioeconomic devastation misattributed to the democratic transition. Anti-democratic positions were advanced by local notables that reactivated colonial understandings of ethnicity and gender to reinstate hierarchies.⁸

These developments should be read against the backdrop of dehumanization through slavery, colonization, and apartheid. In Africa, and particularly South Africa with its rapacious form of capitalism, “black life [was turned] into waste”.⁹ Democracy was thus founded on “racial dispossession and inequality inherited from a past of racial brutality”.¹⁰ Mbembe argues persuasively that, because of historical black dispossession, self-understanding in the democratic era is filtered through wealth, poverty, and property. South African capitalism left in its wake the most pronounced socioeconomic inequality in the world, as measured by the Gini coefficient. The resultant relative deprivation, creating a “logic of excess” juxtaposed with a “logic of scarcity”, made wealth and property highly contested as the means through which life chances are either afforded or withheld.¹¹ Corruption emerged as politics by other means.¹² Patronage and clientelism were replicated in innumerable networks that criss-cross the South African state.¹³ This was, in part, due to shifts in the political culture of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), which had become self-seeking and inward-looking, focused on accessing material rewards while preserving its hold on state power and, hence, state resources.¹⁴ These networks were epitomized by the practices of “state capture” associated with Zuma: the “extensive repurposing of state institutions to redirect rents away from development and into the hands of an increasingly confident power elite that intentionally operates in

5 Ibid.

6 M. Swilling, J. Musango, and J. Wakeford, Developmental States and Sustainability Transitions: Prospects of a Just Transition in South Africa, in: *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 18 (2015) 5, pp. 1–23, <https://markswilling.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/JEPP.pdf> accessed 20 December 2022).

7 J. Hickel, *J. Democracy as Death. The Moral Order of Anti-Liberalism Politics in South Africa*, Oakland 2015, p. 142.

8 Ibid., p. 133.

9 Mbembe, *Democracy*, p. 188.

10 Ibid., p. 192.

11 Ibid.

12 C. van der Westhuizen, S. Dube, and Z. Jolobe, *Beyond Democracy's Travails Towards Just Inclusion: Re-memorizing the Demos*, in: C. van der Westhuizen, S. Dube, and Z. Jolobe (eds.), *The D-Word: Perspectives on democracy in theory and practice* (forthcoming), Stellenbosch.

13 State Capacity Research Project, *Betrayal of the Promise: How South Africa is Being Stolen*, Johannesburg, Public Affairs Research Institute (2017), <https://pari.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Betrayal-of-the-Promise-25052017.pdf> (accessed 19 December 2022).

14 N. De Jager and C.L. Steenkamp, *The Changing Political Culture of the African National Congress*, in: *Democratization* 23 (2016) 5, pp. 919–939.

extra-legal and anti-constitutional ways”.¹⁵ The concept “democracy capture” is also useful, as developed by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development in its study of Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria. Democracy capture involves “distortion” and “corrosion” of democratic politics, principles, and institutions to favour elites at the expense of populations, including through a “stranglehold” on state institutions and resources to undermine democratic political culture or prevent it from emerging.¹⁶ In the South African context, neo-liberalism and corruption went hand in hand, with an acute decline in state capacity at local, provincial, and also national levels. This decline was evident in the poor education and healthcare outcomes, failing service delivery, and collapsing infrastructure, which includes rolling power and water outages and the pollution of water resources with raw sewage. These issues affected not only far-flung rural towns but also the country’s economic centre of Johannesburg and other metropolises such as Cape Town and Nelson Mandela Bay. In response, protests in poor neighbourhoods became “an almost daily feature”, reaching proportions that held the potential of a “rebellion of the poor” but lacking systematic organization at the national level.¹⁷ Apart from service delivery complaints, the protests were frequently aimed at eliciting accountability from local government officials.¹⁸ This clashed with the command culture of the ruling ANC and its alliance partner, the South African National Civics Association, which works from “the top structures to the bottom, with accountability framed upwards to higher structures rather than the other way around”.¹⁹ With the state “perceived as being absent, indifferent, and unfair”,²⁰ direct action came to be deemed as more effective than voting to communicate grievances to politicians.²¹ Protests became more violent over time, marked by arson and vandalism, as the excluded forged a “political society” to exert pressure and claim recognition through a politics of spectacle – instead of using normative “civil society” law and rules-based modes of engagement with power.²² It is within this context that populist xenophobia arose.

15 State Capacity Research Project, p. 3.

16 Ghana Center for Democratic Development, Democracy Capture in Africa: Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Report (September 2021), http://democracyinafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Democracy-Capture-Report_WITH-DESIGN-AND-FORMATTING_THIS-ONE.pdf (19 December 2022), p. 10.

17 J. Daniel, The politics and challenges of delivery, in: J. Daniel, P. Naidoo, D. Pillay, R. Southall (eds.), *New South African Review* 1 (2010), pp. 160–161; P. Alexander, A massive rebellion of the poor, in: *Mail & Guardian* (13 April 2012), p. 34.

18 T. Lodge and S. Mottiar, Protest in South Africa: motives and meanings, in: *Democratization* 23 (2016) 5, p. 812.

19 L. Piper and F. Anciano, Party over outsiders, centre over branch: how ANC dominance works at the community level in South Africa, in: *Transformation* 87 (2015), p. 82.

20 H. J. Dawson, Patronage from Below: Political Unrest in an Informal Settlement in South Africa, in: *African Affairs* 113 (2014) 453, p. 538.

21 Civic Protest Barometer 2007–2014, Dullah Omar Institute, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town (2015), <https://admin.dullahomarinstitute.org.za/acsl/barometers/20150219-civic-protest-barometer-published-dp.pdf> (15 December 2022); S. Booysen, SA crying out for new political future but where are the building blocks?, *News24*, 18 August 2022. <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/fridaybriefing/susan-booysen-sa-crying-out-for-new-political-future-but-where-are-the-building-blocks-20220818> (accessed 18 December 2022).

22 Civic Protest Barometer, 2018; T. Reddy, *South Africa, Settler Colonialism and the Failures of Liberal Democracy*, London 2015, pp. 32–34.

3. Post-apartheid Populist Xenophobia: Discourse, Violence, Corruption, Informalization

Xenophobic discourse and violence marked post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that by the 2020s "discrimination against foreign nationals in South Africa has been institutionalised both in government policy and broader South African society".²³ The result, accordingly, was the violation of a swathe of rights, ranging from life, physical integrity, and health to exposure to violence through arbitrary detention, torture, and refolement.²⁴ While institutionalization of xenophobia reached new levels in the 2020s, it was not a new phenomenon. In 1998, Human Rights Watch reported that the deportation of migrants had increased annually after the transition to democratic rule in 1994, with almost 200,000 deportations by 1997.²⁵ These deportations aligned with the utterances by the then minister of home affairs and leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, Mangosutho Buthelezi, in a speech to the South African parliament in 1994: "If we as South Africans are going to compete for scarce resources with millions of aliens who are pouring into South Africa, then we can bid goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme."²⁶ The "aliens" in question were mostly from other African states. This stood in contrast to official expressions by the ANC after winning the first democratic election in 1994. "It saddens and angers me to see the rising hatred of foreigners. We cannot blame other people for our troubles", said then president Nelson Mandela in 1995 while visiting the black township of Alexandra in Johannesburg after migrants' homes had been destroyed.²⁷ "I am an African", declared Thabo Mbeki in 1996, deputy president and later president, in a widely quoted speech reviving the pan-Africanist idea of an African renaissance. He delivered the address to the country's Constitutional Assembly, a body of elected representatives tasked with drafting the democratic constitution.²⁸ The constitution, adopted in 1996, protects the rights of all the country's inhabitants, including foreigners. South Africa's reorientation away from the apartheid regime's hostile posture towards the continent to a position of embracing the country's Africanness, as articulated by Mbeki, could be said to be reflected in the Refugees Act of 1998. This law ensured rights-based treatment for people recognized as refugees, thereby codifying South Africa's obligations in terms of international legal instruments.

23 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, South Africa: UN experts condemn xenophobic violence and racial discrimination against foreign nationals, Press Release, 15 July 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/south-africa-un-experts-condemn-xenophobic-violence-and-racial> (accessed 17 November 2022).

24 Ibid.

25 Human Rights Watch, Prohibited Persons – Abuse of Undocumented Migrants, Asylum-Seekers, and Refugees in South Africa (1998), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/s/safrica/safri983.pdf> (accessed 17 November 2022).

26 D. Goggins, Xenophobic Violence in South Africa, in: *The Researcher*, Refugee Documentation Centre 3 (November 2008) 2, p. 27.

27 The Economist, South Africa has Taken a Dangerously Xenophobic Turn, 9 June 2022, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/06/09/south-africa-has-taken-a-dangerously-xenophobic-turn> (accessed 21 December 2022).

28 E. K. Bongmba, Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30 (2004) 2, pp. 291–316.

Nevertheless, counter to the law and Mandela and Mbeki's assertions, community-level xenophobic violence continued: local street traders attacked their migrant counterparts in Johannesburg in the late 1990s in an escalation of violence against foreigners.²⁹ In May 2008, community-level violence against African migrants led to 62 deaths, thousands injured, and 50,000 displaced, together with foreign-owned property being looted and vandalized. While "incidences of violence towards migrants or their properties have been recorded ever since 1994 and continue to happen", the eruption in 2008 is described as "unprecedented and unsurpassed in scope and intensity", with 40,000 foreign nationals leaving the country.³⁰ At the time, the shack dwellers' activist organization Abahlali BaseMjondolo described how community xenophobia was reflected in official xenophobia:

*We need to be clear that the Department of Home Affairs does not treat refugees or migrants as human beings. Our members who were born in other countries tell us terrible stories about very long queues that lead only to more queues and then to disrespect, cruelty and corruption. They tell us terrible stories about police who demand bribes, tear up their papers, steal their money and send them to Lindela – a place that is even worse than a transit camp. A place that is not fit for a human being.*³¹

Lindela is a detention centre west of Johannesburg where undocumented foreign migrants are detained for deportation. Established in 1996, it set the scene for the convergence of xenophobia, violence, and corruption in African nationalist politics in the post-apartheid era. Under suspicious circumstances, the Department of Home Affairs awarded the tender for the development of the centre to a company, Dyambu Operations, owned by the ANC Women's League. After public controversy about the league's involvement, Dyambu changed its name to Bosasa, which two decades later was implicated in grand-scale corruption by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture.³²

As also seen in both the Global South and North, politics in South Africa took a populist turn in the 2000s³³ with the ascent of Jacob Zuma as Mbeki's successor, becoming leader of the ruling ANC in 2007 and subsequently the country's president in 2009. Zuma's

29 Goggins, *Xenophobic Violence*, pp. 27–29.

30 T. Monson, K. Takabwirwa, J. Anderson, T. Polzer Ngwato, and I. Freemantle, *Promoting Social Cohesion and Countering Violence Against Foreigners and Other 'Outsiders': A study of social cohesion interventions in 14 South African Townships*, Johannesburg 2012; Human Rights Watch 2009 World Report – South Africa, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2009/country-chapters/south-africa> (accessed 21 December 2022).

31 Abahlali baseMjondolo, *Statement on the Xenophobic Attacks in Johannesburg*, 21 May 2008, <https://abahlali.org/node/3582/> (accessed 12 November 2022).

32 T. Van Lennep, *Lindela and South Africa's Defective Deportation Regime*, in: Helen Suzman Foundation Briefs, 15 November 2019, <https://hsf.org.za/publications/hsf-briefs/lindela-and-south-africa2019s-defective-deportation-regime> (accessed 22 December 2022); *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture 3 (2022) 1 (Bosasa)*, https://www.statecapture.org.za/site/files/announcements/649/Judicial_Commission_of_Inquiry_into_State_Capture_Report_Part_3-1.pdf (accessed 22 December 2022).

33 L. Vincent, *Seducing the People: Populism and the Challenge to Democracy in South Africa*, in: *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29 (2011) 1, pp. 1–14.

ethnopolitism attempted to activate both class and ethnic identities towards electoral mobilization across urban/rural divides.³⁴ As elsewhere, this version of populism had a distinct xenophobic inflection, notably directed at foreign Africans. Statements include Zuma in 2013 telling a university audience: “We can’t think like Africans in Africa generally. We’re in Johannesburg [...] This is not some national road in Malawi.”³⁵ In Zuma’s wake, several populist leaders emerged, also in the second largest political party, the Democratic Alliance (DA) – an arguably unexpected development because of its liberal orientation. The DA shifted to pursue immigration as an election issue, with its Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba making populist xenophobia a primary political plank between 2016 and 2019. Mashaba’s xenophobic utterances were followed by actions within the city targeting African migrants. The Johannesburg metropolitan police would selectively provide crime statistics disaggregated according to foreign African nationalities, which Mashaba would tweet.³⁶ Among his tweets were statements such as, “We are not going to sit back and allow people like you to bring us Ebolas in the name of small business. Health of our people first. Our health facilities are already stretched to the limit.”³⁷ In 2015, Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini’s speech telling “foreigners [to] pack their bags and go home” led to xenophobic violence in which seven people died and more 5,000 were displaced.³⁸

Official xenophobia found policy expression in amendments in 2017 to the Refugees Act, which withdrew protection from refugees by “severely restricting access to the asylum regime and by denying asylum-seekers substantive rights that were previously available to them”.³⁹ This affected refugees’ abilities to seek work to sustain themselves. Their rights to free association and expression were limited to the extent that their refugee status could be withdrawn. The government could revoke a person’s refugee status if they sought the consular services of their country of origin while living in South Africa, even when applying to obtain a birth certificate.⁴⁰ The apparent schizophrenia in official responses to foreign migrants manifested again when the cabinet adopted the National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2019.⁴¹ The plan was developed as part of a commitment to enacting the resolutions of

34 N. Cheeseman, *Populism in Africa and the Potential for ‘Ethnically Blind’ Politics*, in: C. De la Torre (ed) *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, Oxon 2019, pp. 357–369.

35 News24, *Zuma: Don’t Think Like Africans in Africa*, 22 October 2013, <https://www.news24.com/news24/zuma-dont-think-like-africans-in-africa-20150429> (accessed 21 December 2021).

36 J. Bornman, *Mashaba’s Xenophobic Legacy*, in: *Mail and Guardian*, 7 November 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-11-07-00-mashabas-xenophobic-legacy/> (accessed 21 December 2021).

37 Ibid.

38 D. Smith, *Zulu leader suggests media to blame for South Africa’s xenophobic violence*, in: *The Guardian* 20 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/south-africa-xenophobic-violence-zulu-king-goodwill-zwelithini> (accessed 18 December 2022).

39 R. Ziegler, *Access to Effective Refugee Protection in South Africa: Legislative Commitment, Policy Realities, Judicial Rectifications?*, in: *Constitutional Court Review* 10 (2020), p. 65.

40 P. de Wet, *Foreign Refugees in South Africa Have Just Been Banned from Political Activity – As SA Builds “A Paper Wall” Against Immigration*, in: *Business Insider*, 3 January 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/rules-update-bans-refugees-in-south-africa-from-politics-2020-1> (accessed 3 December 2022).

41 Ziegler, *Access to Effective Refugee Protection*.

the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001), but took almost two decades to develop and adopt. The year 2019 saw another spate of xenophobic violence in which 18 people were killed and more than 147 shops were looted in Durban and Johannesburg, with the Nigerian government offering free passage to more than 300 fleeing expatriates.⁴²

By the 2020s, most political parties had adopted a hostile orientation towards African foreigners, including Mashaba's new party ActionSA, and other new opposition parties such the Patriotic Alliance and the Cape Coloured Congress. The exception was the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the third largest political party. Since its founding in 2013, the EFF has claimed to support a pan-Africanist approach. Its populist leader, Julius Malema, once a protégé of Zuma's when he was the leader of the ANC's youth wing, in 2019 encouraged delegates at a party conference to open their doors to victims of xenophobic attacks: "We say don't attack Africans because once you finish Africans, you will go for each other."⁴³ However, the EFF manifesto for the 2019 national election suggested banning foreign land ownership and limiting foreign ownership in financial institutions.⁴⁴ These clauses do not specify whether these foreign owners would be from Africa or elsewhere.⁴⁵ By 2022, the EFF contradicted its "pan-Africanist" policy when Malema embarked on a campaign to physically intimidate Johannesburg restaurant owners into employing South Africans.⁴⁶ This shift confirmed that xenophobia had become an important political ticket, as the EFF action was in response to a xenophobic community-level campaign called Operation Dudula.⁴⁷

The year 2021 was a turning point for the worse in the advancement of populist xenophobia. Violence targeting migrants and their property shifted to a newly concerted mode in which "the masses" were rallied around targeted actions at the community level. Operation Dudula (meaning "push out" in Zulu, the most commonly spoken language) launched its first major action in June 2021 in Soweto, Johannesburg's largest black township. Three weeks later, after Zuma's arrest for contempt of court, large-scale violent unrest was unleashed between 8 and 17 July 2021 in KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng provinces, leaving more than 350 people dead and damage of about €2.8 billion due to sabotage, looting, and arson. Whether these events were organic expressions of resistance

42 O. Tade, *Xenophobia in South Africa: how family members influenced Nigerians to flee or stay*, in: *The Conversation Africa* 16 March 2022), <https://theconversation.com/xenophobia-in-south-africa-how-family-members-influenced-nigerians-to-flee-or-stay-177590> accessed 18 December 2022).

43 C. du Plessis, *EFF Wants Borderless Africa, With "One Federal Government, One Federal Army"*, *Daily Maverick*, 17 December 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-12-17-eff-wants...20one%20federal%20government%20one%20federal%20army> (accessed 21 December 2022).

44 *Economic Freedom Fighters, Peoples' Manifesto and a Plan of Action*, 2019, p. 28, p. 95, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019-EFF-MANIFESTO-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 21 December 2022).

45 Another clause specifically mentions "foreign, especially Western, domination of African economies" (p. 167).

46 F. Haffajee, *Bitter Taste: Malema Hops onto Anti-Foreigner Band-Wagon*, in: *Daily Maverick*, 19 January 2022, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-01-19-bitter-taste-malema-hops-onto-anti-foreigner-band-wagon/> (accessed 3 December 2022).

47 *Ibid.*

against increasing precarization of already vulnerable sections of the population is in question. Former defence or intelligence force figures can be linked to both Operation Dudula and the July 2021 conflagration, and both feature a charismatic, ostensibly grassroots actor going by the name Nhlanhla “Lux” Dlamini.⁴⁸

The age of social media manipulation further complicates the determination of whether impulses seemingly emanating from “the masses” indeed have “the masses” as their source. Operation Dudula’s origins can be traced to social media through a “Put South Africans First” hashtag popularized by Sifiso Jeffrey Gwala, formerly a lance corporal with the 121st South African Infantry Battalion in KwaZulu-Natal’s Mtubatuba, masquerading on a Twitter account as “Lerato Pillay” with more than 80 fake accounts in tow.⁴⁹ Whereas “Put South Africa First” failed to marshal significant numbers at their demonstrations during 2020, Operation Dudula managed to harness and direct disparate ad hoc xenophobic actions at the local level, with groups of people gathering and targeting foreigners with deadly force, especially in the Gauteng province.⁵⁰ Using iconography and slogans associated with the struggle against apartheid, Operation Dudula flyers were first circulated on social media and to foreign-owned shops in Soweto in advance of the 45th anniversary of the Soweto uprising on 16 June 2021. The flyers announced, “We will be removing all illegal foreign nationals by force!!!”⁵¹ This was followed on the day by armed groups of people intimidating people across Soweto, led by Dlamini, whose Twitter feed showed him in tactical gear. On a video titled “Making Soweto great again!”, he shoots a firearm.⁵² Operation Dudula gained impetus from the July unrest when Dlamini, armed and wearing military camouflage, attracted media attention as a self-styled “defender” of a Soweto shopping mall. The July 2021 unrest started with attacks targeting foreign drivers of long-haul trucks moving between KwaZulu-Natal, which hosts South Africa’s main ports, and Gauteng, the country’s economic centre.

An expert panel appointed by the country’s president Cyril Ramaphosa, Zuma’s successor, to investigate the factors leading to the unrest found it “inexplicable” that the intelligence services did not know that the violence would happen, or the form it would

48 J. le Roux, Xenophobic Twitter Campaigns Orchestrated by Former South African Soldier, in: Medium.com, 23 September 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/xenophobic-twitter-campaigns-orchestrated-by-former-south-african-soldier-9e7702433176> (accessed 18 December 2022); C. Paton, Zondo Hears that Ramaphosa’s Neglect of Intelligence Crisis Linked to July Insurrection, in: BusinessLive, 12 August 2021, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2021-08-12-zondo-hears-that-ramaphosas-neglect-of-intelligence-crisis-linked-to-july-insurrection/> (accessed 18 December 2022).

49 BusinessLive, Editorial: Echoes of Rwanda in SA, 17 September 2020, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/opinion/editorial/2020-09-17-editorial-echoes-of-rwanda-in-sa/> (accessed 18 December 2022); Le Roux, Xenophobic Twitter Campaigns.

50 T. Myeni, What is Operation Dudula, South Africa’s anti-migration vigilante?, in: Al-Jazeera, 8 April 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/8/what-is-operation-dudula-s-africas-anti-immigration-vigilante> (accessed 21 December 2022); J. de Villiers, “Removing foreign nationals by force”: What is Operation Dudula?, in: News24, 15 February 2022, <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/analysis/in-depth-removing-foreign-nationals-by-force-what-is-operation-dudula-20220215> (accessed 18 December 2022).

51 J. Bornman, Operation Dudula pushes ahead with hateful politics, in: New Frame, 24 June 2021, <https://www.newframe.com/operation-dudula-pushes-ahead-with-hateful-politics/> (accessed 21 December 2022).

52 Ibid.

take.⁵³ The panel heard evidence that confirmed that, similar to the origins of Operation Dudula, “the riots bore the hallmarks of a group of people being behind the organisation thereof, using technology as the primary mode of organisation”.⁵⁴

As one of the measures taken after the July unrest, Ramaphosa moved the Ministry of Intelligence to his office and instituted an investigation into “rogue intelligence agents” who had remained aligned with his predecessor.⁵⁵ Still the xenophobic talk of ANC leaders continued, ranging from stigmatizing foreign minorities, to justifying xenophobic practices by the police, to openly defending Operation Dudula. The transport minister Fikile Mbalula, a former police minister, accused Pakistani nationals, who had been targets in xenophobic attacks, of being “the biggest loan sharks around [...]. They [...] loan you and your whole pension is going to the Pakistanis”.⁵⁶ Mbalula defended his statements as not xenophobic: “The business of spaza shops that used to belong to our people have been taken over by Pakistanis. They can no longer survive”.⁵⁷ Curiously, Mbalula made his comments on the eve of commemoration of the 1976 Soweto uprising, a year after Operation Dudula used the same commemoration to launch itself.

In a similar vein, in 2022, defence minister Thandi Modise justified police identification of criminals by nationality, claiming that poor municipal service delivery was the fault of foreign criminal syndicates.⁵⁸ At that time, police minister Bheki Cele also publicly supported Operation Dudula’s “right” to make citizens’ arrests.⁵⁹ Home affairs minister Aaron Motsoaledi had to answer a parliamentary question after utterances by him suggesting that his department worked with Operation Dudula, with him denying that was the case but indicating that Operation Dudula members can provide evidence on cases against illegal immigrants.⁶⁰ In 2022, a package of laws and policies with xenophobic intent was tabled: the Labour Migration Policy and Employment Services Amendment Bill, the Employment Services Amendment Bill, the National Small Business Act, and, at the provincial level, the Gauteng Township Economic Development Act. These policies and laws enable quotas for employment of foreigners and prohibitions on foreigners starting businesses.⁶¹ The next section discusses populism as emanating from the ruling ANC elite and associated actors.

53 Report of the Expert Panel into the July 2021 Civil Unrest, 29 November 2021, p. 130.

54 *Ibid.*, p.49.

55 Paton, Zondo.

56 Myeni, What is Operation Dudula.

57 *Ibid.*

58 U. Nkanjeni, “It Does Not Make Us Xenophobic”: Modise Defends Police Identifying Suspects by Nationality, in: TimesLive, 28 February 2022, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2022-02-28-it-does-not-make-us-xenophobic-modise-defends-police-identifying-suspects-by-nationality/> (accessed 21 December 2022).

59 *Ibid.*

60 Question NW1252 to the Minister of Home Affairs, in: Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 29 April 2022, <https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/18590/> (accessed 21 December 2022).

61 D. Steyn, One week left to comment on South Africa’s new labour migration policy, in: GroundUP 23 May 2022), <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/one-week-left-to-comment-on-south-africas-new-labour-migration-policy/> (accessed 19 December 2022); V. O’Regan, New law promises a boost to Gauteng’s township businesses – but could it spark more xenophobic attacks?, in: Daily Maverick, 5 May 2021, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/>

4. Populist Xenophobia as Platform: Elite Extraction versus the Battle for Inclusion

Laclau argues that populist politics is not necessarily anti-democratic, because populists may rearticulate previously excluded demands and enable their integration into institutional power.⁶² To differentiate between populisms in terms of inclusionary and therefore democratic potential, Laclau points out the interaction between the leader/representative's constitution of the will of the led/the represented and vice versa. If the political movement from the represented to the representative in their quest for institutional representation prevails over the converse, then the politics is more democratic.⁶³ Taking inspiration from Laclau's analysis, is populist xenophobia in South Africa elite-driven? What does the South African case say about the possibilities for democratic populism? How does one make sense of the apparent racial dimension to the attacks?

Thiven Reddy writes that the ANC's instrumentalist approach to "the masses" means mobilizing subalterns only when it suits the party or factional interests; mostly, however, the ANC seeks their demobilization.⁶⁴ Its relationship with the historically excluded majority has been marked by a "rigid, uncreative and topdown effort".⁶⁵ As the promised improvement in lives failed to materialize for subalterns after 1994, the party's authority was eroded, and it has been unable to contain mass aspirations within formal channels of politics, such as parliamentary processes. The politically sanctioned police massacre of 34 mine workers at Marikana in 2012 symbolized the divergence in interests between the African nationalist political elite and "the masses" it seeks to command. It is in this context that populist xenophobia arises.

As shown, xenophobic discourse from political leaders can be traced back to the country's entrance into democracy in the mid-1990s. This is not limited to the national level, but can also be seen at the local level, where xenophobic discourse is translated into violence against people identified as foreign nationals. This reveals an interconnectedness of national, provincial, and local political systems in the advancement of populist xenophobia. Local and provincial governance structures are firmly implicated in xenophobic violence, with governance here referring to both formal and informal structures aimed at establishing or maintaining social order and control.⁶⁶ Jean Pierre Misago shows, based on empirical data, that

article/2022-05-05-new-law-promises-a-boost-to-gautengs-township-businesses-but-could-it-spark-more-xenophobic-attacks/ (accessed 19 December 2022).

62 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 75, pp. 177–180.

63 *Ibid.* pp. 157–158.

64 Reddy, *South Africa, Settler Colonialism*, p. 33.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

66 J. P. Misago, *Linking Governance and Xenophobic Violence in Contemporary South Africa*, in: *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 1 (22 July 2019), <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/linking-governance-and-xenophobic-violence-in-contemporary-south-africa/> (accessed 5 January 2023), p. 5.

*while macro- and micro-level socio-economic and political circumstances are important elements in heightening tensions and creating collective discontent, anger and resentment towards foreign nationals, it is the mobilisation of this discontent – and not the discontent itself – that triggers collective violent attacks. Mobilisation is the vital connective tissue between discontent and collective violence. As a trigger, mobilisation helps explain the pathways from collective discontent and/or instrumental motives to collective violent action.*⁶⁷

Hence, in exploring the conditions for such mobilization, Misago uses the term “micro-political opportunity structures”, which includes both local authorities directly involved in xenophobic violence and, where community leadership is weak, “violent informal leadership groups”.⁶⁸ These non-state actors provide “violent alternative governance” by using force to secure and legitimize their positions and to defend or restore local socioeconomic and political orders.⁶⁹ Such unelected forces, exemplified by Operation Dudula, were empowered to instruct councillors and police and therefore functioned as a form of indirect rule similar to that of apartheid-era traditional authorities that the ANC government entrenched through post-apartheid laws to exercise control in the rural areas.⁷⁰ These findings lead Misago to challenge the generally accepted notion that xenophobic violence occurs where there has been a breakdown in order. Rather, he argues, the evidence reveals xenophobic violence arising in contexts with strong social controls, whether formal or informal.⁷¹ Regarding the actual modes of mobilization, these include community meetings organized by local police, “comrades” (referring to local community leaders), and local business leaders. Instigators bait community members with aggressive and othering discourse and rumours to elicit hatred and fear and spur them on towards violence.⁷² The other factor in xenophobic mobilization is patronage, in the form of local notables paying community members to lead the attack on foreigners.⁷³ Misago’s insights expose the pivotal role of local elites in xenophobic violence, whether in formal or informal structures.

Increasing examples can be found in aggressive xenophobic talk or in defensive xenophobic talk where national politicians rationalize and legitimize xenophobic violence – such as the statements by Mbalula and Modise quoted above. Such talk links national and local elites and provides the conditions for local mob action against migrants. Utterances at the national or provincial level are followed by violence at local level, such as in 2015

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., p. 9.

69 Ibid., p. 6.

70 L. B. Landau and J. P. Misago, Rising vigilantism: South Africa is reaping the fruits of misrule April 2, 2022), *The Conversation Africa*, <https://theconversation.com/rising-vigilantism-south-africa-is-r...sm%20South%20Africa%20is%20reaping%20the%20fruits%20of%20misrule> accessed 13 November 2022).

71 Misago, Linking Governance and Xenophobic Violence.

72 J. P. Misago, Political Mobilisation as the Trigger of Xenophobic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa, in: *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 13 (2019b), <https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-3118> (accessed 5 January 2023), pp. 1–10.

73 Ibid.

after Zwelithini's incendiary remarks. There is also evidence of xenophobic movements adopting national and provincial politicians' and police commissioners' discourse as basis for their actions. #PUTSAFIRST was influenced by a statement by the Gauteng police commissioner in 2017 that 60 per cent of those committing "violent crime" were "illegal immigrants".⁷⁴ Operation Dudula leaders openly take their cue from national and provincial leaders, including a decision to target legal immigrants:

*Dudula is against illegal immigrants [...]. But now we have learnt that the ministers have said that the local businesses are only for South Africans [...]. Even if you are legal in the country, if [you do not have] a scarce skill then you cannot be working.*⁷⁵

Politicians of the ANC and other political parties equate migrants' clashes with police with attacks on South Africa's sovereignty as a state, a discourse taken up by local-level politicians.⁷⁶ The defence of state sovereignty has also featured in Operation Dudula's nationalist rhetoric that justifies their actions.⁷⁷

Partha Chatterjee asserts that poor and marginalized people in post-colonial conditions necessarily have to ascertain where and how to apply pressure – despite the rules.⁷⁸ At the subnational level, corruption provides middle-ranking ANC members access to salaries and state resources divvied out to family members and other clients.⁷⁹ Politics is thus emptied out into clientelist relations. A "battle from below for patronage" ensues in which local patronage politics works as a political strategy.⁸⁰ Therefore, in conditions of extreme inequality where politically connected individuals act in their own narrow interest, poor people assert citizenship by strategically demanding access to state resources at the local level in a "de facto form of accountability", which supplants abstract ideas about equality. The state is therefore approached "as a relational system of reciprocal dependence and obligation".⁸¹ On the margins, the demands for the ejection of foreigners are on a par with demands for services.⁸²

Rather than Laclau's suggestion of a left populism due to an impetus from below, the version of populism rampant in South Africa is radically exclusionary of marginalized

74 J. Bornman, #Putsouthafricansfirst Relies On False Claims, in: New Frame, 4 November 2020, <https://www.newframe.com/putsouthafricansfirst-relies-on-false-claims/> (accessed 23 December 2022).

75 P. Nombembe, Operation Dudula Warns Legal and Illegal Immigrants Are Now in its Crosshairs, in: Business Live, 15 May 2022, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2022-05-15-operation-dudula-warns-legal-and-illegal-immigrants-are-now-in-its-crosshairs/> (accessed 21 December 2022).

76 J. P. Misago, Is the state complicit in xenophobic violence in South Africa?, in: Daily Maverick (2019), <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-08-13-is-the-state-complicit-in-xenophobic-violence-in-south-africa/> (accessed 23 December 2022).

77 Marxist Workers Party, Operation Dudula and Capitalist Reaction: How should the working class understand and respond to organised xenophobia?, in: Izwi La Basebenzi, 4 (Autumn 2022).

78 P. Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York 2004, p. 66.

79 I. Cooper, Zuma, Malema and the provinces: Factional conflict within the African National Congress, in: *Transformation* 87 (2015), pp. 151–174, here p. 168.

80 Dawson, *Patronage*, p. 538.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 539.

82 Reddy, *South Africa, Settler Colonialism*, p. 38.

groups, despite the use of anti-apartheid struggle rhetoric and symbolism. Populist xenophobia enables the creation of a platform on which the estranged political elite can reconnect with “the masses” in an ostensible cross-class alliance. Mouffe’s analysis⁸³ of right-wing extremism in Europe assists in making sense of these developments. Right-wing extremisms in Europe grew out of a “deep crisis of political identity”. While the conditions are different, a crisis of political identity also arose with the transition to democracy in South Africa. Mouffe diagnoses a “blurring of political frontiers between left and right” as discouraging political participation.⁸⁴ This phenomenon, exacerbated by the ANC’s demobilization of communities due to its fear of the masses, has taken the form of a rapid decline in voter participation in South Africa.

This disillusionment among particularly ANC voters is primarily a consequence of the limited effect that ANC policies, such as Black Economic Empowerment, has had on socioeconomic inequality, as Roger Southall argues.⁸⁵ This is because, despite its professed commitment to a developmental state, it remains too beholden to white-dominated capital and access to state contracts to take the necessary steps to address socioeconomic exclusion. In that sense, the ANC fits Frantz Fanon’s description of the nationalist bourgeoisie as a weak and insecure class pursuing an empty nationalism while demobilizing the masses out of fear.⁸⁶ The result has been the factionalization of the party due to the competition for state resources, with a further result of “outright looting of the public purse”.⁸⁷ The ANC’s pursuit of state resources for nefarious gain at both the personal and party level has introduced it into a post-ideological mode beyond left and right, despite its continued use of leftist rhetoric.⁸⁸ Particularly, with Zuma came a changing coterie of “financial, ethnic, and clientelistic interests rather than a fixed ideological tendency”.⁸⁹ The operationalization of populist xenophobia is a primary example of this process. Populist xenophobia is part of a degeneration into “uncivil discourses”, as “popular support is filtered through charisma and loyalty to individual personalities and/or factions”, with those outside these circles vilified.⁹⁰ The right wing finds “the enemy within” in the form of immigrants, who are regarded as a danger to both cultural identity and sovereignty.⁹¹ As shown, the threat that migrants ostensibly pose to sovereignty forms part of ANC xenophobic rhetoric. This is because of, as Mouffe indicates, the blurring of ideological lines leads people to seek new enemies, hence a reversion to an anti-democratic embrace of ethnic, nationalist, or religious identities.⁹² Such created others are not op-

83 C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London 1993.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

85 R. Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa*, Woodbridge/Scottsville 2013.

86 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York 1963.

87 Reddy, *South Africa, Settler Colonialism*, p. 81.

88 I. Cooper, *Zuma, Malema and the Provinces*; Southall, *Liberation Movements*.

89 Cooper, *Zuma, Malema and the Provinces*, p. 168.

90 Reddy, *South Africa, Settler Colonialism*, p. 34.

91 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*. p. 5.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

ponents to contend with, but enemies to be destroyed, she argues. This explains the murderous dimension of xenophobia, officially sanctioned, in South Africa.

Moreover, as can be seen in South Africa, Mouffe points out the enabling conditions such as marginalization, which creates an underclass outside of the political community.⁹³ Mouffe warns that attempts to contain the political within institutional channels and processes run the “risk that the excluded may join fundamentalist movements or become attracted to anti-liberal, populist forms of democracy”.⁹⁴ The rise in xenophobic politics in the form of violent protests that include the killing of foreign Africans can be read as one such outcome.

5. Black Life to Waste: A Continuation of the Colonial State’s Racial Logic?

The end of apartheid did not bring about the end of the racial imagination.⁹⁵ A Human Rights Watch study revealed that authorities early on in the democratic dispensation were using biological and cultural markers in ways akin to the apartheid regime to “determine” foreignness.⁹⁶ The turn of the excluded to enemy-seeking populism reflects the weaponization by political entrepreneurs of human diversity. Worsening economic conditions are exploited through divisive discourses to create or exacerbate social cleavages.⁹⁷ Leveraging of inequality highlights how elites capitalize on the misalignment of present and future political and economic benefits, exacerbating political destabilization.⁹⁸ Being “too black”, walking “like a Mozambican”, having a foreign name or accent, or not knowing vernacular words such as “elbow” in Zulu led to arrests and detention.⁹⁹ Indigeneity, read through culture, and race, read through biology, had become the determinants of insider/outsider status, with “pitch blacks” subjected to language tests.¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch calculated that up to 20 per cent of those arrested by the late 1990s were South Africans or lawful residents.¹⁰¹ Abahlali baseMjondolo pointed out during the 2008 conflagration that South Africans from the northern-most province

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Z. Erasmus, *Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa*, Johannesburg 2017; C. van der Westhuizen, *White Afrikaans Women in Postapartheid South Africa*, Scottsville 2017.

96 Human Rights Watch, *Prohibited Persons – Abuse of Undocumented Migrants* (1998); Abahlali baseMjondolo, *Statement on the Xenophobic Attacks in Johannesburg* (21 May 2008), <https://abahlali.org/node/3582/> (accessed 12 November 2022).

97 C. van der Westhuizen, *Populism as African fascism? Examining the Economic Freedom Fighters in Postapartheid South Africa*, in: *Africa Today* 69 (2023) 3, pp. 2–25; B. Levy, *How Inequality and Polarization Interact: America’s Challenges Through a South African Lens*, Washington 2022.

98 Levy, *How Inequality and Polarization Interact*.

99 Human Rights Watch, *Prohibited Persons – Abuse of Undocumented Migrants* (1998), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/s/safrica/safri983.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2022); Abahlali baseMjondolo, *Statement on the Xenophobic Attacks*.

100 L. van Bruggen, “Kick out the Foreigners”: Understanding the May 2008 violence in the Johannesburg area 2015, B.A. Thesis in Conflict Studies, Utrecht University.

101 Human Rights Watch, *Prohibited Persons – Abuse of Undocumented Migrants* (1998).

of Limpopo were targeted, as well as amaMpondo from the Eastern Cape.¹⁰² A third of those killed in 2008 were South African.¹⁰³ The so-called tests of indigeneity are reminiscent of the pencil test and language tests conducted by apartheid officials to determine racial categorization before 1994. The attacks resonate with the “black on black” violence of the 1980s and early 1990s, when ethnic groups were engaged in “mini-wars” at the local level.¹⁰⁴

Camalita Naicker finds in her empirical research in three provinces¹⁰⁵ that the language of xenophobia is used with the category of “migrant” to mark certain South Africans ethnically and racially as being different to locals. For example, partly due to the colonial migrant labour system and partly due to movement seeking livelihood, amaMpondo from the Eastern Cape province work on the mines in the North West province.

*People are clear that xenophobia, far from being spontaneous or sudden violence, is something that your councillor, mayor and local government official remind you about on a regular basis. They remind you who is an insider and who is an outsider, whether you are Mpondo or Zimbabwean – the language is the same.*¹⁰⁶

In a similar vein, Operation Dudula’s evictions of certain Sowetans in 2021 were justified by a local representative of the South African National Civic Organization (SANCO): “They are foreigners. They are from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Limpopo. See, this guy is from Limpopo.”¹⁰⁷

Hence, discourses of race “directly traceable to Apartheid and its race classification categories, have become readily available, because citizens are already socialized into them and given South African settler-colonial history, the nationalist elite and the masses can take them for granted. The former aims to retain its mass support and the latter to understand its plight in ‘racialised’ terms”.¹⁰⁸ Reddy, drawing on Fanon, associates populist xenophobia with shallow post-colonial nationalism that trumps much-vaunted African unity. Old hostilities are resurrected as the political elite propagates “xenophobia, tribalism, and the continued circulation of ideas of ‘race’ and racism under the cover of transforming and unravelling the legacies of the past”.¹⁰⁹ Nationality, ethnicity, and race converge through xenophobic othering in which migrancy is applied to both foreigners and certain South Africans to signal outsider status.

102 Abahlali baseMjondolo, Statement on the Xenophobic Attacks.

103 Human Rights Watch, 2009 World Report – South Africa, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2009/country-chapters/south-africa> (accessed 21 December 2022).

104 Reddy, South Africa, Settler Colonialism, p. 20.

105 C. Naicker, The Languages of Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Reviewing Migrancy, Foreignness, and Solidarity, in: *Agenda* 30 (2016) 2, pp. 46–60.

106 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

107 Bornman, Operation Dudula pushes ahead.

108 Reddy, South Africa, Settler Colonialism, p. 177.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

6. Conclusion: Afrophobia and the Bantustanification of Post-apartheid South Africa

Mbecke asserts that xenophobia “is an embarrassment to the new South African Government, which is considered the leader of African unity, democracy, good governance and development by some governments in the world”.¹¹⁰ This article problematizes the assumption of embarrassment, as the discursive flows and violent actions discussed above suggest a complex interplay between, instead, elite and mass impetuses with populist xenophobia as a platform.

Susan Booysen’s “brick and ballor” thesis that protest augments electoral participation, rather than representing a systemic challenge, has been questioned by Marcel Paret, who shows, similarly to Peter Alexander, that electoral support moved away from the ANC in protest-intensive areas.¹¹¹ However, the subsequent decline in ANC votes and overall voter participation over the past decade necessitate a reconsideration. Rather, an informalization of political relations has taken place. Protests elicit quicker results, as Booysen suggests, but protesters increasingly circumvent democratic processes altogether by mass withdrawal from the ballot box. The intensification of populist xenophobic talk, violence, and vigilantism presents another change over the past decade.

It is difficult to separate the directional flows between political elite and the masses or the leader and the led, as per Laclau, into neatly discrete formations. The demobilization pursued by ANC political elites during the first post-apartheid decades, where “citizenship [was] reduced to the passive role of beneficiary”,¹¹² seemingly has shifted to a selective mobilization in response to the demands for patronage from below. The populist activation of xenophobia forms part of ANC factional fights as a tactic for corrupt groupings to stage their return or wrest back control over state resources, as most spectacularly demonstrated with the July 2021 unrest. However, one also does not want to err by removing “autonomous intellectual and programmatic agency to those who engage in xenophobic attacks or mobilisations”, as Moses E. Ochonu criticizes those who adopt the economic argument as the sole reason for mass-based xenophobia.¹¹³ Thomas A. Koelbl’s summary of Chatterjee’s argument about populism as “the effective mode of politics in the post-colonial world” captures the dynamics set in motion:

110 P. Mbecke, *Anti-Afrophobia Policy Shortfall and Dilemma in the New Partnership for Africa’s Development and South Africa*, in: *Td The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 11 (December 2015) 4, special issue, pp. 71–82.

111 S. Booysen, *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power*, Johannesburg 2011; M. Paret, *Contested ANC Hegemony in The Urban Townships: Evidence from the 2014 South African Election*, in: *African Affairs* 115 (2016) 460, pp. 419–442, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adw025> (accessed 21 December 2022); P. Alexander, *Rebellion of the Poor: South Africa’s Service Delivery Protests – A Preliminary Analysis*, in: *Review of African Political Economy* 37 (2010) 123, pp. 25–40.

112 T. Lodge, *Neo-Patrimonial Politics in the ANC*, in: *African Affairs* 113 (January 2014) 450, pp. 1–23.

113 M. E. Ochonu, *South African Afrophobia in Local and Continental Contexts*, in: *Journal of Modern African Studies* 58 (2020) 4, pp. 499–519, here p. 501.

*Since the communities in political society find themselves in a constant struggle both with other communities over scarce resources distributed by the state and with the representatives of the state over access to those resources, the politics of mobilization, of spectacular attention-seeking, and of a political rhetoric that claims universality when making specific claims on behalf of a community become the most effective form of gaining attention and therefore a rule of exception in favor of the community conducting the protest.*¹¹⁴

The elite and the masses in South Africa reconnect in uncivil politics through populism and the battle from below for patronage, and foreign African nationals are caught in the crossfire. The multiple impetuses from both poles point to a reconnection of the leader and the led on xenophobia as platform: populist xenophobia acts to re-suture the torn relations into a dominant bloc that is not constituted through democratic institutions and processes such as elections and parliament, but through informalized and violent practices of racialized othering.

Populist xenophobia therefore becomes a platform through interactive and reciprocal processes between the leader and the led. This is frequently accomplished through informal leaders that become de facto power brokers at the local level, determining the actions of the police and elected authorities. Such unelected “community leaders” would only be legitimated as community representatives if aligned with the ANC and its allies.¹¹⁵ These informal structures are akin to the system of indirect rule in the form of traditional authorities that the ANC government inherited from the colonial and apartheid regimes and which it has since strengthened with various laws. As a form of populism, these practices allow both ANC leaders and ANC supporters to sidestep formal institutions, laws, and regulations to ensure direct institutional response to demands of supporters to address socioeconomic conditions by removing foreigners. This links to the political culture of the ANC of clientelist patronage, which is increasingly taken up by new parties, partly in response to the demand from below for patronage by black urban poor people. Therefore, where votes are transferred to new opposition parties rather than withdrawn, this does not necessarily portend a change to the dynamic, as many parties have both adopted populist xenophobia and corruption as part of their repertoire.

Following Laclau, democratic populism would be the drawing of previously excluded groups into institutional representation. This is not the case here. Ochonu contextualizes South African xenophobia within decades-long nationalist mobilization of “intra-Africa animus” in post-colonial African states. As the latest example of this xenophobia, or more appropriately Afrophobia, “membership in a South African nation [is] still understood in the apartheid lexicon as a special place in Africa that must not be contaminated by unwelcome, unapproved Blackness”.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the question arises as to the features of “the people” being constituted through the populism in question. Danielle Resnick’s

114 T. A. Koelble, *The politics of violence and populism in postcolonial democracy: The role of political society in South Africa*, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Discussion Paper 2018, SP V 2018-102.

115 Piper and Anciano, *Party over outsiders, centre over branch*, p. 81.

116 Ochonu, *South African Afrophobia*, p. 500.

contention that populist politics facilitated the inclusion of economically marginalized constituencies in South Africa but weakened democratic institutions does not tell the full story.¹¹⁷ While it is correct that democratic institutions were weakened, inclusion of the poor was selective to the point of necropolitics, given the life-destroying effects for certain categories of persons. The effect of populist xenophobia is the radical rejection of vulnerable people on the basis of nationality and, as discussed, race and ethnicity. In this case, protesters' plight as an underclass is addressed by confirming their institutional inclusion through measures such as job reservation, on the one hand, and police raids and arrests of foreigners, on the other. Hence, "the people" is constituted through South Africanness, with the poor radically divided on the basis of nationality. Peering more closely at the terms of this constituted "people" reveals a South Africanness reminiscent of the apartheid imagination. Victims of both official and informal xenophobia include poor South Africans who are of the "wrong" ethnicity, degree of "blackness", or political affiliation, or in the "wrong place". State agents in the form of the police and local councillors continue harassing and violating the rights of not only foreigners for being in the "wrong country", but also South Africans for being in the "wrong province". Given Landau and Misago's findings on government reliance on informal and frequently criminal local leaders, similarly to the ANC's indirect rule of the rural areas via continuing traditional leadership, these elements amount to a post-apartheid Bantustanification of the urban landscape.

117 D. Resnick, *The Influence of Populist Leaders on African Democracy*, in: C. De la Torre (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, Oxon 2019, pp. 267–280.