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Fractured Unity: Xenophobia, Racial Backlash, and Identity Politics in South Africa

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Abstract

In the past decade, global migration has surged due to economic instability and recession, prompting host nations to react with growing resentment and discrimination toward incoming migrants. In South Africa, this has translated into widespread xenophobic violence, particularly against fellow African nationals. Perceived competition over scarce resources has fueled these tensions, often erupting into attacks. Despite local, regional and international frameworks aimed at curbing xenophobia and racism, enforcement has been ineffective. This study adopts Relative Deprivation Theory to explain how economic frustration and inequality fuel anti-migrant sentiments. Using qualitative methods, data were sourced from journals, reports, and media articles covering the period 2008–2025. Findings show that systemic governance failures and weak accountability mechanisms have intensified prejudice against Black foreign nationals. Notably, recent years have also seen sporadic racial tensions involving attacks on white South Africans, suggesting that South Africa's race relations are becoming increasingly volatile across multiple fronts. While such incidents differ from xenophobic attacks in origin and scale, they highlight the broader challenge of unresolved racial inequality and political manipulation of identity. To address this, the study recommends holding public officials accountable for incitement or inaction, ensuring police neutrality, and investing in genuine reintegration programs. African nations must also improve local economies to reduce emigration pressures. Should reforms fail, stricter immigration policies guided by realist principles may be justified. Lasting solutions require balancing national interests with human rights imperatives.

Keywords: Xenophobia, identity politics, relative deprivation, migration, racial inequality

1. Introduction

Xenophobic violence has become a recurring crisis in post-apartheid South Africa, undermining social cohesion and the country's image as a "rainbow nation." Since 2008, waves of

attacks against foreign nationals mostly Black African migrants have erupted, driven by local perceptions that immigrants are taking jobs, housing, and other scarce resources (Human Rights Watch, 2009). The first major outbreak in May 2008 left over 60 people dead and tens of thousands displaced, as mobs targeted migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Somalia, and other African countries (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Similar spasms of violence followed in 2015, 2019, and intermittently throughout the 2010s, indicating that anti-immigrant sentiment is deeply entrenched (Patel, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2019). These attacks occur amid high unemployment, poverty, and one of the highest inequality rates in the world which are conditions that breed resentment among disadvantaged South Africans (World Bank, 2022). Indeed, South Africa is ranked as the most unequal country globally, with a Gini coefficient around 0.67 and stark racial and class disparities (World Bank, 2022).

In this context, many impoverished South Africans view foreign Africans as competitors for limited opportunities, which provides a fertile ground for xenophobia. Compounding the economic drivers are political and social factors. A legacy of apartheid-era isolation and enduring racial hierarchies has fostered an “in-group vs out-group” mentality in some communities. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, expectations for improved livelihoods have been high among the Black majority. Frustration with continued hardships has often been redirected toward vulnerable outsiders as scapegoats. Weak governance and impunity have exacerbated the problem. Despite South Africa’s strong constitutional framework and its accession to international anti-discrimination conventions, authorities have struggled to prevent or prosecute xenophobic violence effectively. Perpetrators of past attacks have rarely been held accountable, creating a climate of impunity (Amnesty International, 2019). At times, officials have even amplified tensions by echoing populist rhetoric blaming foreigners for crime and strain on services (Amnesty International, 2019).

Such identity-based scapegoating is not confined to xenophobia against immigrants, it also manifests in periodic racial flashpoints between Black and white South Africans, fueled by unresolved injustices and political opportunism. This study investigates these intertwined phenomena of xenophobia and racial backlash through the lens of Relative Deprivation Theory. The central argument is that feelings of economic injustice and unmet expectations are critical in inciting group hostility, but that these feelings are often manipulated by political actors and exacerbated by governance failures. The following sections outline the theoretical framework, methodology, key findings, and recommendations for addressing the challenge of xenophobia and identity-based conflict in South Africa.

2. Theoretical Orientation

Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative Deprivation Theory provides a useful lens to understand the roots of xenophobic violence and other identity-driven conflicts in South Africa. At its core, the theory posits that people may feel deprived not just by absolute poverty, but by a gap between their expected or deserved conditions and their actual living conditions, especially in comparison to others (Runciman, 1966). This perceived deprivation can generate frustration and resentment, which under certain conditions lead to aggression or violence (Gurr, 1970). In other words, it is not simply objective hardship that causes social unrest, but the subjective sense of being left behind or unfairly denied what one is due

relative to reference groups. The concept of relative deprivation was first systematically articulated by W.G. Runciman (1966), who distinguished between “egoistic” deprivation (an individual feeling deprived compared to other individuals) and “fraternal” deprivation (group-based comparisons, where one’s in-group feels deprived relative to other groups). Later, Ted Robert Gurr (1970) applied the idea to political violence, arguing in *Why Men Rebel* that the potential for collective violence increases when a gap widens between expected and achieved welfare.

The core assumption is that when expectations (for economic well-being, social services, etc.) rise or solidify, but the reality falls short or when one group sees another group faring better, anger and hostility mount. This frustration can seek an outlet, often finding one in blaming another identifiable group for the perceived injustice. The well-known “frustration–aggression hypothesis” underpins this mechanism, suggesting that unmet needs or blocked goals produce aggression, though not always directed at the true source of the frustration. Relative Deprivation Theory builds on this by explaining how the target of aggression is often determined by social comparisons and narratives of blame (Smith and Pettigrew 2015).

In the South African context, the theory helps explain why poor Black South Africans might lash out at foreign nationals. Oni (2018) argued that many citizens had high expectations that democracy and the end of apartheid would swiftly bring jobs, housing, and economic upliftment. Decades later, however, large segments of the population still live in poverty and face chronic unemployment. They witness a small minority (including a largely white economic elite and some immigrants) living in relative comfort, which sharpens a sense of injustice (Claassen, 2017). Moreover, even within poor townships, some immigrant entrepreneurs and workers appear to be “doing better” at running shops, finding employment, or accessing government housing which can stoke local envy.

According to Relative Deprivation Theory, this scenario is a powder keg: locals who feel entitled to a better life see others (outsiders) seemingly achieving it instead, engendering a belief that they have been wronged or “cheated” out of their rightful opportunities (Crush et al., 2018). When applied to xenophobic attitudes and violence, relative deprivation operates through a three-step cognitive process (Niyitunga, 2024). First, an individual or group compares themselves to another group in this case, South African citizens compare themselves to immigrant groups. If no comparison is made, feelings of deprivation remain dormant. The second step is a perception of disadvantage where the locals come to believe that their group is worse off or denied benefits relative to the foreigners.

Many South Africans, for example, perceive that immigrants “take jobs for lower pay” or “occupy RDP houses” that should belong to locals, thus viewing themselves as the disadvantaged group (Tella & Ogunnubi, 2014; Masenya, 2017). The final step is the assessment that this disadvantage is undeserved or unfair. Once people conclude that “we deserve better and it’s unfair that they (foreigners) have it,” anger and resentment intensify (Niyitunga, 2024). At that point, the stage is set for xenophobic hostility where the aggrieved locals now identify the presence of foreigners as the unjust barrier to their own prosperity, rather than impersonal factors or government failures. This chain from comparison to perceived relative deprivation to a grievance of injustice has been observed as a driver of anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa (Niyitunga, 2024; Yahaya, 2020).

Relative deprivation also dovetails with the “scapegoating” theory of xenophobia. Because the true sources of poverty and joblessness (such as structural economic inequalities, or poor governance) are diffuse or challenging to confront directly, frustrated individuals redirect their

aggression toward more convenient targets. Foreigners, especially undocumented or socially marginalized ones, become easy scapegoats for frustration over unemployment, crime, or inadequate services (Harris, 2002). They are visible “outsiders” who lack political power and can be attacked with relative impunity. As Tella and Ogunnubi (2014) note, xenophobia often flourishes in times of economic and political instability, when people seek someone to blame for their deprivation. In South Africa’s low-income areas, where service delivery has been slow and jobs scarce, foreign nationals are blamed for “stealing” jobs, houses, and even spouses or opportunities, essentially serving as a frustration scapegoat for the unmet promises of post-apartheid society (Tella & Ogunnubi, 2014; Dodson, 2010).

The theory of relative deprivation thus provides a psychological and social explanation for why such scapegoating gains traction. In essence, it is the perceived breach of the social contract (expectations vs. reality) that breeds hostility, which then is channeled against foreigners as the presumed culprits for that breach. Numerous studies have found that feelings of relative economic deprivation correlate with xenophobic attitudes in South Africa. Survey data indicate that individuals who view themselves as worse off compared to others are more likely to want immigrants barred from certain jobs or expelled from the country (Gordon, 2015; Afrobarometer, 2017). Qualitative accounts from townships also reveal resentment when locals see migrant shopkeepers thriving in their communities, a belief arises that “immigrants are progressing at our expense” (Gelb, 2008; Field, 2017).

Indeed, violence has frequently flared in economically blighted informal settlements where frustration is highest (Field, 2017). One study found that the 2008 pogroms were concentrated in communities with high unemployment and inequality, supporting the link between deprivation and anti-foreigner aggression (Misago et al., 2009). Community members interviewed after attacks often cite competition for jobs, housing, or business as reasons for their animosity (Crush, 2008). These patterns align with Relative Deprivation Theory’s expectations. While Relative Deprivation Theory sheds light on underlying motivations, it is not without critiques. One critique is that deprivation alone does not automatically lead to violence; after all, many severely impoverished societies do not experience xenophobic riots. Additional factors such as political mobilization, leadership incitement, or triggering events are usually needed to translate grievance into collective violence.

3. Methods

This study relied solely on secondary data source. Given the sensitivity and breadth of the topic spanning over 17 years (2008–2025) of events, a secondary approach was appropriate to gather diverse perspectives and scholarly narratives. Materials were gathered from a range of credible sources, including academic journal articles, research reports, literature, and reputable media coverage. In particular, reports by human rights organizations (e.g. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International), inquiries and commissions (such as the 2015 Judge Pillay panel report on xenophobia). Media articles from outlets like Al Jazeera, Reuters, and local South African news were used to capture contemporary accounts of specific events (e.g. the 2019 riots, Operation Dudula activities in 2022–2023). All sources as mentioned above were complemented with The Relative Deprivation Theory as the theoretical orientation for this study.

4. Patterns of Xenophobic Violence (2008–2025): The Case of South Africa

Xenophobia, emanating from two ancient Greek words, Xenos translates to foreigner, stranger, or outsider, while Phobos depicting fear or insecurity. From the two Greek words, one can effortlessly conclude that “xenophobia, translates to extreme dislike or hatred for strangers and foreigners, or any other person that is perceived to be strangers, outsiders, or a group of people, based on their colour, gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or on any other grounds” (Ijisakin & Fakanbi 2019). Xenophobic attacks date back to 1995 when immigrants from Southern African region Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique living in the Alexandra township were “physically assaulted over a period of several weeks in January 1995.

As such, Xenophobic violence in South Africa has followed a distressing pattern of recurrence, often erupting in intense waves and then subsiding without the underlying issues being resolved. The first large-scale wave in May 2008 was unprecedented in its brutality and scope (Hankela, 2014). Hankela further identified some derogatory nomenclature constructs for black African migrants in South Africa. In Alexandra for instance, non-South Africans were known by and given a wide array of insidious yet insulting names. These slurs carried racial, ethnocentric and xenophobic connotations. Some of these were outright degrading and defaming; others are jocular but offensive nonetheless.

These labels emanate from culture contact, a result of the presence of other people of other identities and ethnic groups. Each of the tags is value-laden; all denote the social and cultural origin of the carrier. Such nomenclatures include ‘Makwerekwere’, which is the oldest label used for black immigrants who speak different languages and have completely different phonetic sounds as compared to the South Africans. Also, ‘Magrigamba’ became a name given to West Africa men who are presumed to come into South Africa without any valuables and after some time in South Africa, returned to their countries with monies, wealth, and properties. What began in Alexandra township in Johannesburg soon spread to seven of the nine provinces, as local mobs attacked immigrants and looted foreign-owned shops.

By the end of that spate of violence, at least 62 people were killed, among them both foreign nationals and several South African citizens mistaken for foreigners, and tens of thousands were displaced (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Investigations into the 2008 violence found that it was fueled by a perfect storm of factors aligning with relative deprivation and scapegoating theories, rising food and fuel prices, high unemployment in informal settlements, competition for low-wage jobs and government housing, and rumors that foreigners were behind local crimes (Crush & Pendleton, 2008; HSRC, 2008). Locals in affected areas often voiced grievances such as “foreigners are stealing our jobs/houses/women,” indicating a belief that limited resources were being usurped by outsiders.

Despite the shock and condemnation that greeted the 2008 attacks both domestically and internationally, efforts to address their root causes were halting. The government’s response was largely ad hoc such as temporary shelters for displaced migrants, police arrests of some perpetrators, and public statements decrying xenophobia. However, few of those arrested were ever successfully prosecuted, leading to a climate of impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Many victims eventually drifted back into the same communities that had attacked them, often without any reconciliation or justice. Importantly, the systemic issues (poverty, unemployment, poor service delivery) remained largely unaddressed in subsequent years.

In this context, xenophobia flared again. In early 2015, a new wave of attacks broke out, this time starting in the coastal city of Durban (KwaZulu-Natal) before spreading to Johannesburg and other urban centers. The 2015 violence, while less widespread than 2008, was still severe. At

least seven people were killed and thousands displaced between March and April 2015 (Patel, 2016). The immediate trigger was widely reported to be incendiary comments by Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, who in late March 2015 was quoted as saying that foreigners should “pack their bags and leave” South Africa (Patel, 2016). Although the King later claimed misinterpretation, his remarks came amid mounting local frustrations in Durban’s townships. Mobs subsequently attacked immigrant-owned shops and foreign residents in areas like Umlazi and Isipingo.

A government-commissioned inquiry led by former UN High Commissioner Navi Pillay found that the 2015 attacks were rooted in unresolved tensions dating back to 2008 and earlier (Republic of South Africa, 2016). The commission’s report noted that underlying socioeconomic challenges especially competition for employment, housing, and business opportunities had “laid the foundation” for violence (Patel, 2016). It also faulted law enforcement for lapses as police were unprepared and slow to intervene, and intelligence services failed to anticipate the attacks. Moreover, the spread of misinformation via social media heightened panic. False rumors of imminent attacks circulated widely, creating a tinderbox atmosphere (Patel, 2016). A disturbing aspect of the 2015 episode was the repetition of impunity. Dozens were arrested during the unrest, yet very few were convicted of any crime.

This lack of consequences may have emboldened further aggression. Human rights groups warned that failure to punish perpetrators and address community grievances would likely result in future attacks, a warning that proved prescient (Amnesty International, 2019). Indeed, xenophobic violence surged yet again in 2019. In August and September of that year, Johannesburg and Pretoria were hit by another wave of riots and looting targeting foreign-owned businesses. This outbreak resulted in at least 12 deaths (including South Africans and foreigners) and massive property destruction (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The pattern was by now grimly familiar. Crowds of locals chanting anti-foreigner slogans such as “foreigners must go” while ransacking shops and hunting down migrant residents. Particularly notable in 2019 was the targeting of African and South Asian immigrant shopkeepers in downtown Johannesburg and surrounding townships, reflecting that not only black African foreigners but also Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other immigrant groups were now seen as economic threats in the informal business sector (Niyitunga, 2024). Immediate catalysts included socio-economic triggers (e.g. a sluggish economy with rising unemployment and protests against drug dealing, which were blamed on Nigerian migrants in Pretoria), as well as political rhetoric (several local politicians crudely blamed “foreigners” for crime and joblessness).

The 2019 violence also had a new dimension as it followed a series of attacks on foreign truck drivers earlier that year. Dozens of long-haul trucks driven by foreign nationals were torched or drivers assaulted on highways, amid protests by South African truckers’ unions claiming foreigners were taking their jobs (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This indicates that xenophobic resentment had spread to multiple sectors and locales, not just poor residential areas. One of the most consequential aspects of the 2019 attacks was the international backlash it provoked. Other African nations expressed outrage.

Nigeria, for instance, evacuated hundreds of its citizens from South Africa after Nigerian-owned businesses were looted. Zambia and Madagascar cancelled football matches with South Africa in protest, and there were reports of retaliatory attacks on South African businesses in countries like Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Diplomatic relations became strained, compelling President Cyril Ramaphosa to dispatch special envoys across Africa to

apologize and assure that South Africa was tackling the problem. In March 2019, coincidentally just months before these attacks, the government had adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Government of South Africa, 2019).

The NAP laid out strategies for public awareness, stronger law enforcement, and better monitoring of hate crimes. However, critics argue that the NAP remained largely on paper with minimal implementation (Genocide Watch, 2020). The events of late 2019 underscored that reality. Despite the formal plan, on the ground very little had changed. By the early 2020s, new manifestations of xenophobia were emerging, some in more organized forms. A notable development was the rise of Operation Dudula in 2021–2022 which started as a vigilante-style movement (later a political party) advocating the expulsion of undocumented migrants. “Dudula,” meaning “drive back” in Zulu, began with residents in Soweto conducting marches and “inspections” to force the closure of foreign-owned shops and evict undocumented migrants from neighborhoods (Mabasa, 2023).

The movement gained traction amid the economic slump of the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed South Africa’s unemployment rate to record highs (above 30%). Operation Dudula members often echo the refrain that foreigners are to blame for crime, drug trafficking, or job scarcity, mirroring long-standing scapegoating narratives. Although Dudula’s leaders insist they are only assisting law enforcement, their tactics which include forcible evictions, harassment of immigrant street vendors, and inflammatory slogans like “Put South Africans First” have been widely denounced as xenophobic vigilantism (Mabasa, 2023).

The rise of such groups indicates both the depth of anti-immigrant frustration at the grassroots and the failure of the state to proactively manage immigration and social tensions. Where citizens feel the government has not “protected” them from perceived foreign competition, they have taken matters into their own hands, often with violent outcomes. This development also shows how xenophobia has become somewhat normalized and mainstreamed in political discourse, as even some elected officials flirt with the rhetoric espoused by Dudula to win favor with disaffected voters. Across the 2008–2025 periods, each cycle of xenophobic violence has built on an unresolved legacy of the previous one. After 2008, no comprehensive accountability or reconciliation occurred; after 2015, no robust prevention mechanisms were institutionalized; after 2019, promised improvements like the NAP saw little follow-through. Consequently, the grievances and prejudices simply persisted and evolved.

Community-level studies find that many South Africans in poor areas continue to harbor negative stereotypes of foreign Africans, often fed by myths (e.g., that immigrants are prone to crime or that they undercut wages) (Gordon, 2015; Afrobarometer, 2017). These stereotypes harden when economic stress intensifies. Furthermore, political actors have at times tacitly or overtly encouraged these beliefs, whether by making disparaging comments about “foreigners burdening our health system” (as a former Health Minister did in 2018) or by blaming immigrants for housing shortages during local election campaigns (Amnesty International, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In the run-up to the 2024 elections, several politicians again scapegoated foreign nationals for South Africa’s socioeconomic woes (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Such rhetoric from the top arguably lends legitimacy to xenophobic attitudes on the ground. In summary, xenophobic violence in South Africa is not a series of isolated incidents but rather a structural problem woven into the country’s social fabric. Economic hardship sets the stage (relative deprivation), ineffective

governance and opportunistic politics supply the sparks and a legacy of impunity ensures that the cycle continues. The victims have predominantly been black African and other marginalized migrants, a phenomenon often termed “Afrophobia” to highlight that the hostility is mostly directed toward African foreigners, paradoxically by African hosts.

Migrants from Europe or wealthier countries have largely been spared physical attack, reflecting how xenophobia in South Africa intertwines with race and class biases. It is the poor black “outsider” who is targeted by the poor black local. This dynamic is a tragic inversion of pan-African solidarity and underscores how deeply unresolved the challenges of poverty and identity remain (Tafira 2011).

5. Governance Failures and Identity Politics: A review of Literature

A recurring theme in our analysis is the role of governance failures, especially the lack of accountability and the political manipulation of identity in exacerbating xenophobia. Over the years, numerous observers have noted that South African authorities often respond to xenophobic violence with a mix of denial, deflection, and half-measures (Misago, 2019; Neocosmos, 2010). For a long time, officials were even reluctant to label these attacks as “xenophobia,” preferring euphemisms like “community unrest” or insisting the violence was simple criminality unrelated to prejudice (Neocosmos, 2010; Masenya, 2017).

This official denialism hampered the development of proactive solutions. If the state won’t name the problem, it cannot effectively tackle it. Moreover, when leaders themselves engage in anti-immigrant scapegoating, it signals that xenophobia is politically acceptable. For example, Amnesty International (2019) documents how certain politicians have stoked resentment. For instance, in 2016, Johannesburg’s then-mayor Herman Mashaba infamously called undocumented migrants “criminals” who were “hijacking” the city, effectively endorsing the notion that foreigners are to blame for urban decay. In 2018, then-Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi claimed foreign nationals were overcrowding hospitals and “burdening” the healthcare system, feeding a narrative that immigrants drain public resources (Amnesty International, 2019).

Such comments by high-level figures not only deflect responsibility (implying that service delivery woes are due to foreigners rather than government shortcomings) but also lend credence to xenophobic myths among the public. As one legal scholar observes, “Political rhetoric uttered by top politicians in South Africa... incites hatred towards foreign nationals... Scapegoating foreign nationals for the country’s socioeconomic woes is not only dishonest but is a form of political corruption.” This is a damning assessment. It suggests that some leaders use identity politics, pitting “us” (citizens) against “them” (foreigners) as a convenient distraction from their own governance failures.

The consequences of years of impunity and official finger-pointing are evident at the grassroots. Many perpetrators of xenophobic violence genuinely believe they are doing nothing wrong or even that they are performing a patriotic duty. According to Human Rights Watch (2020), not only have prosecutions of anti-immigrant violence been rare, but police themselves have sometimes been complicit or passive. There are accounts of police officers standing by while mobs attack immigrants, or even participating in abusive raids targeting foreigners (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This erodes trust in law enforcement among migrant communities and sends a

message to perpetrators that they can act with little risk. The absence of a strong legal deterrent, essentially a failure of governance keeps the cycle going.

The South African Human Rights Commission, among others, has repeatedly called for a dedicated hate crimes law and better training of police to handle xenophobic incidents impartially. While draft legislation exists, political will has been lacking to push it through. In parallel, poor governance in socio-economic terms has fed the very deprivation that drives xenophobia. In many townships and informal settlements, residents still lack adequate housing, jobs, or basic services. Local governments often fall short in meeting these needs due to limited capacity, corruption, or mismanagement. This creates fertile ground for resentment. Rather than hold elected officials accountable for these failures, frustrated citizens sometimes find it easier to blame “outsiders” who live among them. It’s a diversion of anger from the powerful to the vulnerable. Populist local leaders have been known to encourage this diversion.

For instance, community councilors or party operatives have at times whispered that “if it weren’t for all these foreigners, you’d have a house/job by now,” thus shifting blame away from the state and onto migrants (Romola 2015). This manipulation of identity, defining true citizens in opposition to foreign “others” serves short-term political ends but deeply damages social cohesion. Governance failures also manifest in contradictory or weak policy implementation. For example, even as the government publicly condemns xenophobia, some of its actions send the opposite signal. In 2020, authorities introduced more restrictive asylum rules (via an amendment to the Refugees Act) that, among other things, barred asylum-seekers from engaging in political activities and made it easier to revoke their status. Critics argued that these rules, justified as preventing abuse of the asylum system, also legitimized a view of asylum-seekers as “undesirables”, potentially reinforcing xenophobic attitudes.

Similarly, periodic police operations targeting undocumented migrants often accompanied by sensational media coverage have been criticized for casting all foreign nationals as criminals. The gap between South Africa’s lofty policies (like the NAP or its human rights treaties) and the implementation on the ground reflects an accountability problem as institutions are not following through, and leaders are not held responsible for results. In a way, xenophobia has thrived in this gap Tarisayi and Manik (2020). Communities see that violence against foreigners usually goes unpunished and sometimes even appears tacitly state-sanctioned (when officials make anti-foreigner remarks or when policing focuses on migrants).

This has normalized the idea that the lives and property of foreign nationals are not as worthy of protection which is a direct contradiction of South Africa’s laws and commitments. The interplay of identity politics extends beyond xenophobia against non-nationals; it also touches on South Africa’s complex internal racial dynamics. Notably, recent years have seen sporadic racial tensions involving attacks or threats against white South Africans Newham (2025). While these incidents differ from xenophobic violence in origin and scale, they stem from similar feelings of grievance and can be exploited by political actors in analogous ways (Maharaj 2022). One high-profile example was unrest around so-called “farm murders.” Violent crime in rural areas (often targeting farmers) has been a long-standing issue.

In 2020, the murder of a young white farm manager in the Free State province sparked outrage among white farmers, who alleged that whites were being targeted due to race. At a court hearing for the suspects, groups of angry white farmers stormed the courthouse, and in response, the left-wing Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) mobilized Black supporters to face off in what became an emotionally charged, racially polarized standoff (Cocks, 2020). Although physical

clashes were averted by police, the rhetoric on both sides was heated including chants by some Black protesters referencing an old liberation song about “shoot the Boer,” met with white protesters brandishing apartheid-era flags (Cocks, 2020). The episode highlighted how unresolved racial resentments can flare into confrontation.

Black activists pointed out the continued racial inequalities in land ownership and wealth, a lingering legacy of apartheid, while white farmers felt under siege and abandoned by the state. Both groups felt a sense of injustice not unlike the township residents and immigrants in xenophobic clashes, though the historical context differs. What unites these cases is the narrative of victimhood each group feels and the ease with which political figures can fuel an “us vs. them” mentality. The EFF’s firebrand leader, Julius Malema, for instance, routinely employs racially charged rhetoric, positioning his constituency of poor Black South Africans against what he terms “white monopoly capital” (and sometimes against foreign African traders too, depending on the audience). On the other hand, van Zyl-Hermann (2018) asserts that some right-wing Afrikaner groups amplify fears of “white genocide” to stoke their base. In both cases, identity politics is used to paper over more complex socio-economic issues and to rally support by invoking fear or resentment of another group.

It is important to stress that the scale and frequency of anti-white incidents are not comparable to the systemic xenophobic attacks against foreign African nationals. The latter has been far more widespread and deadly in the period studied. However, the fact that any racial targeting occurs and can become a touchstone in national debates suggests that South Africa’s journey of reconciliation is far from complete. It also indicates that multiple fault lines of identity-based conflict exist. Economic inequality is at the heart of many of these tensions, whether it’s poor black South Africans feeling deprived relative to immigrant shopkeepers, or poor black farmers feeling dispossessed relative to white landowners (and vice versa, white farmers feeling targeted by a Black-led government), the thread of relative deprivation runs through (Desai 2023). In each case, perceptions of who is the legitimate “owner” of resources and opportunities come into play.

This is why some analysts speak of recontextualizing the concept of rights of occupancy or territorial ownership, essentially, debates over who has the right to live or make a living where (Majavu 2022). In xenophobic discourse, one hears the notion that “South Africa belongs to South Africans,” implying foreigners have no equal claim to safety or prosperity in the country. In racial discourses, one hears that certain spaces (like farmland or suburbs) belong to one group or another. All of this points to an unresolved negotiation of belonging in the post-apartheid era. In summary, governance failures from the inability to deliver services and jobs, to the failure to punish violence, to the indulgence in demagogic rhetoric have greatly aggravated xenophobia and other identity conflicts. The violence is not merely a spontaneous upwelling of popular anger, it has been enabled, and at times exacerbated, by those in power.

The antidote must therefore include not just economic change but political and institutional reform, as we discuss in the recommendations. Until leaders are held to account and choose principled leadership over populist scapegoating, the cycle of “us versus them” is likely to continue, with devastating consequences for South Africa’s social cohesion.

6. Conclusion

South Africa's struggle with xenophobia and identity-based conflict between 2008 and 2025 reveals a nation still coming to terms with the meaning of solidarity and equality in a post-apartheid context. Despite the optimistic vision of a "rainbow nation," the past decade and a half have been marred by episodes that starkly contradict that vision. This study set out to examine why, despite an abundance of local and international frameworks and the lessons of history, such violent exclusion of "outsiders" has persisted and even intensified. Using the Relative Deprivation Theory as a lens, we found that feelings of economic injustice and unmet expectations are indeed central to these tensions. Yet, they are channeled and intensified through narratives of othering and facilitated by governance failures.

A core conclusion is that systemic frustration born of inequality, poverty, and unfulfilled promises has continually sought an outlet, and in the absence of adequate outlets (jobs, services, peaceful political expression), it has found release through scapegoating vulnerable groups. Poor and marginalized South Africans, feeling left behind in their own country, have been susceptible to messages that blame foreign nationals as the reason they are not achieving the "better life" promised since 1994. This is where identity politics enters. It is far easier for a populist to blame an identifiable outsider than to tackle structural problems or admit governance shortcomings. There is growing recognition that lasting solutions require balancing national interests with human rights imperatives.

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