

**XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN SOUTH – AFRICA: IMPLICATION FOR SOUTH
AFRICA – NIGERIA RELATIONS, 2008 – 2021**

BY

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FACULTY OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

BENIN CITY

OCTOBER, 2025

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN,
BENIN CITY IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
AWARD OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A) HONOURS DEGREE IN
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND DIPLOMACY.**

OCTOBER, 2025

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this research project was carried out **SHARON ONOME ZEGAR** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

Dr. Collins Edigin
(Project Supervisor)

Date: _____

Prof. J.C. Nwaka
(Head of Department)

Date: _____

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated, first and foremost, to GOD Almighty, the source of all wisdom, knowledge, and strength, whose grace has carried me through every challenge and whose blessings have made this accomplishment possible.

To the cherished memory of my beloved mother, Late Mrs. Stella Collins Zegar, whose love, prayers, and sacrifices laid the foundation for everything I am today. Though you are no longer here, your faith in me and your unwavering support continue to inspire and strengthen me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I give thanks to Almighty God for His guidance, wisdom, strength, and protection throughout the course of this project.

I extend my profound appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Collins Edigin, for his invaluable guidance, patience, and expertise. His constructive feedback and unwavering support have been instrumental in shaping this work.

I am also grateful to Prof. J.C Nwaka, Head of Department, History and International Studies, for her administrative expertise. My sincere thanks also go to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Prof. O. B. Osadolor, your leadership and vision have been truly inspiring.

To my Course Advisor, Mr. Victor Aiguobarueghian, your dedication to the academic success of every student is admirable and has been a source of motivation. I also acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of Prof. Eddy Erhagbe whose support greatly aided the success of this research.

I am equally grateful to the distinguished lecturers of the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, who have shaped my academic journey and left lasting imprints on my life. In particular, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Williams E. Orukpe, Prof. E. A. Ifidon, Dr. Frank Ikponmwosa, Dr. Charles Osarumwense, Dr. Daniel Iweze and Dr. Wesley Osemwegie. Your dedication, depth of knowledge and commitment to

excellence have been a true inspiration, and I feel privileged to have been taught and guided by you.

To my favorite person, my late mother, Mrs Stella Collins Zegar, words cannot express my gratitude. Your unconditional love, prayers, and sacrifices remain my greatest source of strength even in your absence. Your belief in me carried me through my most challenging moments. I love you so much, and I pray Heaven is kind to you forever.

To my beloved father, Mr. Roxy Omoh Collins Zegar, thank you so much for your endless love, encouragement, support, and prayers throughout my school years. Your presence kept me grounded, motivated, and focused, and I remain deeply grateful.

To my other favorite people, my dear siblings, Gabriel Collins Zegar, Gloria Collins Zegar and Gideon Collins Zegar, thank you all for your constant encouragement, understanding, and for always being there when I needed support. Your presence in my life has been a source of comfort and motivation.

To my backbones who were always there, James Blossom and MacDaniels, thank you for your friendship, emotional support, and for believing in me even when I doubted myself. Your encouragement during difficult moments kept me going.

To my dear friends and cousins, Cassandra Benedict, Cynthia David, Hillaria Adesanwo, Abolajo Mase, Ruky Joseph, Omah, Divine and Faith I say a very big thank you to you guys. Your presence and support in my life means a whole lot.

I also wish to acknowledge my mentors, Ambassador Aliyu Bin Abbas and Mr. Ayuba Shettima, for their guidance and encouragement, which have helped shape my academic and personal growth. To my late guardian, Mrs. Comfort Anunobi, thank you for your love, prayers, and for filling a void in my life. You will always be remembered with love.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who, in one way or another, contributed to my personal and professional development during this period. While it may not be possible to mention every individual by name, please know that your impact has not gone unnoticed and your kindness will forever remain etched in my heart. Thank you all.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa has emerged as one of Africa's leading economies and a symbol of democratic transition. However, the country has been plagued by recurring incidents of xenophobic violence, particularly targeting African migrants. Among the most affected groups are Nigerians, who have migrated to South Africa in significant numbers for economic, educational, and social opportunities. "The phenomenon of xenophobia in South Africa is not a recent development, but it reached alarming levels from 2008 onwards, resulting in widespread violence, looting, loss of lives, and diplomatic strains with other African countries, most notably Nigeria."¹ The 2008 xenophobic attacks marked a turning point, drawing international attention to the deep-seated frustrations among segments of the South African population. These frustrations were largely tied to poverty, unemployment, inequality, and the perception that foreigners, especially other Africans, were responsible for the socio-economic hardships faced by locals. Nigerian nationals, often stereotyped and accused of criminality or economic dominance, became primary targets in several of these episodes. "In 2015, 2017, and again in 2019, waves of violence against foreign nationals were reported, leading to diplomatic protests, mass evacuations, and retaliatory actions in Nigeria against South African businesses."²

Nigeria and South Africa, as two of Africa's major powers, share a complex relationship shaped by history, diplomacy, trade, and regional leadership. Nigeria was a vocal opponent of apartheid and played a key role in the liberation of South Africa. However, the post-apartheid era has seen growing tensions exacerbated by xenophobic violence. These tensions threaten not only bilateral relations but also the broader vision of African unity, regional integration, and cooperation as envisioned by the African Union. "Between 2008 and 2021, successive South African governments have been criticized for their perceived slow response and leniency toward perpetrators of xenophobic attacks."³ Nigerian authorities, on the other hand, have consistently condemned the violence and called for greater protection of their nationals. The repeated cycles of violence have necessitated diplomatic interventions, emergency consular responses, and in some cases, the recall of ambassadors. These actions indicate the seriousness of the issue and its implications for international diplomacy.

This study seeks to explore the underlying causes of xenophobic violence in South Africa and analyze how these events have impacted South Africa–Nigeria relations between the period of 2008 and 2021. It investigates the socio-political and economic dimensions of xenophobia, assess governmental responses from both countries, and evaluate the broader regional and continental implications. By examining these dynamics, the study aims to provide insights into how the two nations can foster more harmonious relations and address the root causes of xenophobia through cooperative policies and mutual understanding. Ultimately, the significance of this research lies in its contribution

to conflict resolution, international diplomacy, and the promotion of pan-African solidarity. In an era where regional integration is increasingly important, understanding the strains within South Africa–Nigeria relations due to xenophobic violence is crucial for shaping a more unified and stable African continent.

Xenophobic violence has emerged as a recurring and deeply troubling phenomenon in post-apartheid South Africa, drawing both regional and international condemnation. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa has struggled with issues of economic inequality, unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion—challenges that have contributed to growing tensions between citizens and foreign nationals. Among the most prominent targets of these hostilities are African migrants, particularly Nigerians, Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, and Somalis, who are often scapegoated for taking jobs, committing crimes, or overburdening social services. These sentiments have occasionally erupted into violent attacks, looting of foreign-owned businesses, and the destruction of property, leading to displacement, injuries, and loss of lives.

It should be noted that the period between 2008 and 2021 witnessed multiple waves of xenophobic violence in South Africa, beginning with the large-scale attacks of May 2008 that left over sixty people dead and thousands displaced. Subsequent episodes in 2015, 2017, and 2019 saw renewed outbreaks of violence, frequently fuelled by inflammatory political rhetoric, socio-economic frustrations, and media sensationalism. While South African authorities have often downplayed the xenophobic nature of these attacks—framing them instead as crimes driven by general criminality—there is clear evidence that

foreign nationals, particularly black Africans, have been disproportionately affected. Nigeria, as one of the leading African nations with significant diaspora presence in South Africa, has taken keen interest in the protection of its citizens abroad. The violent episodes have strained diplomatic relations between the two countries, raising concerns over the safety and rights of Nigerians residing in South Africa. These tensions have led to diplomatic protests, recall of ambassadors, emergency evacuations of Nigerian nationals, and increased calls for stronger bilateral cooperation on immigration, security, and human rights. The xenophobic attacks have also sparked widespread outrage among the Nigerian public, leading to retaliatory actions, protests, and calls for boycotts of South African businesses operating in Nigeria.

This study explores the causes, manifestations, and impacts of xenophobic violence in South Africa, with a specific focus on its implications for South Africa–Nigeria relations between 2008 and 2021. It seeks to critically examine how repeated violence against Nigerian nationals has influenced diplomatic engagements, bilateral cooperation, public sentiment, and regional solidarity within the African continent. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on intra-African migration, pan-Africanism, and the challenge of building cohesive, inclusive societies in a globalized yet divided Africa.

Furthermore, the recurring xenophobic violence in South Africa raises pressing questions about the contradictions within post-apartheid South African identity and the broader vision of African unity as championed by the African Union (AU). South Africa, a nation that once received support from numerous African countries—including Nigeria—

during its liberation struggle, now finds itself at the center of a crisis that undermines pan-African ideals. The irony of former allies becoming victims of intolerance highlights the erosion of solidarity that once defined the continent's collective resistance against colonialism and apartheid. At the heart of the tensions is a complex interplay of economic and social grievances among the South African poor, who often feel marginalized in a system that has failed to deliver the promises of freedom and prosperity. In many of the townships and informal settlements where the violence occurs, high unemployment, crime, and inadequate housing persist. Against this backdrop, foreign nationals are viewed not only as economic competitors but also as symbols of a failed state apparatus. This resentment, when inflamed by political opportunism or media distortion, escalates into violent expressions of nationalism and exclusion. For Nigeria, the violence against its citizens is more than a consular or diplomatic issue—it is a national concern that touches on the dignity, safety, and rights of its people. The Nigerian government has had to respond at multiple levels—politically, diplomatically, and practically. The repatriation of affected Nigerians, pressure on South African businesses in Nigeria, and repeated calls for justice and compensation reflect a foreign policy that is increasingly responsive to the welfare of its diaspora. At the same time, South Africa has had to manage the dual burden of addressing the root causes of xenophobia domestically while maintaining cordial relations with fellow African states.

The implications of these strained relations are far-reaching. They affect trade, migration policy, regional cooperation, and public diplomacy. Both nations are leading

economies and political influencers in Africa, and their ability to collaborate—or fail to—has consequences for regional stability, integration, and the future of African diplomacy. If left unresolved, xenophobic violence could undermine the foundations of African unity, weaken shared development goals, and embolden exclusionary nationalism. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to an informed understanding of xenophobic violence not merely as isolated criminal acts but as a socio-political phenomenon with deep historical, economic, and diplomatic consequences. By focusing on the South Africa–Nigeria relationship from 2008 to 2021, it offers insight into how violence against foreign nationals can affect bilateral ties, alter public perception, and challenge continental aspirations. Ultimately, the work underscores the urgent need for inclusive governance, people-centered diplomacy, and renewed commitment to African solidarity as antidotes to xenophobia and its destabilizing effects.

The central aim of this study is to critically examine the phenomenon of xenophobic violence in South Africa and to evaluate its implications for the diplomatic, economic, and socio-political relations between South Africa and Nigeria between 2008 and 2021. The study seeks to explore how recurring xenophobic attacks—particularly those targeting Nigerian nationals and other African immigrants—have affected bilateral relations, regional cooperation within the African continent, and the broader vision of African unity and integration. It also aims to identify the underlying causes of the violence, the responses of both the South African and Nigerian governments, and the role of regional bodies such as the African Union in mitigating tensions arising from such violence.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the extent in which Xenophobic Violence in South Africa has affected the inter-relationship between South Africa and Nigeria Relations between 2008–2021, while the specific objectives of the study include:

1. To examine the historical background and root causes of xenophobic violence in South Africa.
2. To analyze the emergence and patterns of xenophobic violence in South Africa.
3. To assess the impact of xenophobic violence on diplomatic relations between South Africa and Nigeria.
4. To investigate the economic and social implications of the violence for Nigerian migrants in South Africa, including loss of lives and property, forced displacement, and disruptions to trade and investment.
5. To evaluate the role of regional and international actors, especially the African Union and civil society organizations, in addressing xenophobic violence and in fostering peace, reconciliation, and improved diplomatic ties between South Africa and Nigeria.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the phenomenon of xenophobic violence in South Africa and its far-reaching implications for diplomatic, economic, and sociocultural relations between South Africa and Nigeria from 2008 to 2021. The scope of the study is delimited to a 13-year period, beginning in 2008, a pivotal year marked by one of the most violent outbreaks

of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, and ending in 2021, by which time repeated episodes had significantly strained bilateral relations. Within this timeframe, the research critically examines specific incidents of xenophobic violence, their immediate and long-term consequences, and the responses by both the South African and Nigerian governments.

Thematically, the study encompasses key dimensions such as the root causes of xenophobia in South Africa—including economic hardship, competition for jobs, and social inequality—as well as the construction of negative stereotypes about African migrants. It also explores the historical ties and tensions between South Africa and Nigeria, particularly how xenophobic incidents challenge the vision of African unity and Pan-Africanism that once bonded the two nations. The research further investigates how these violent outbreaks have affected trade relations, people-to-people exchanges, continental cooperation efforts (e.g., within the African Union), and mutual perceptions among citizens.

Furthermore, the scope includes the analysis of diplomatic communications, policy changes, and intervention strategies employed by both governments and regional bodies to address the issue and restore bilateral goodwill. It also considers the role of media coverage, civil society advocacy, and public opinion in shaping the discourse on xenophobia and foreign relations.

Methodology

The research design is historical and analytical in nature. It involves the systematic collection and interpretation of past events, with a focus on patterns and trends in xenophobic violence and diplomatic interactions during the selected timeframe. This

design enables the study to identify causal links, trace the evolution of bilateral relations, and examine how both countries have responded to violent incidents involving foreign nationals, particularly Nigerians residing in South Africa.

To achieve the collection of data, this research will adopt the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources will include interviews and opinion sampling. Interviews will be conducted with experienced individuals.

The secondary sources will include online publications, textbooks, journals as well as other relevant sources. Information obtained from these sources will help to guide and supplement the materials obtained from primary sources. These sources will help to provide materials for accurate historical analysis of the study.

Literature Review

M. Neocosmos in his book titled, *From Foreign Natives to Native Foreigners*⁴, offers a deep philosophical and political analysis of xenophobia in South Africa, arguing that it stems from post-apartheid nationalism and exclusionary citizenship. His ideas provide a foundational framework for understanding state complicity in violence against foreigners, especially Nigerians. Neocosmos offers a rigorous and groundbreaking analysis of the xenophobic violence that erupted in South Africa in May 2008, during which at least 62 individuals were killed simply for being perceived as “foreigners,” and thousands more were displaced. Neocosmos shifts the debate from socio-economic blame and cultural misunderstanding toward a systemic, political discourse. He argues that xenophobia must be understood as a discursive and political practice, deeply embedded in longstanding

debates over citizenship, identity, and the formation of the post-apartheid state. Neocosmos traces the roots of xenophobia back to apartheid's migrant labour system, which deliberately "de-nationalised" black African labourers and confined them to Bantustans via pass laws—essentially treating them as members of an ethnic internal diaspora. In his concluding chapter, Neocosmos calls for a rethinking of citizenship as an active political identity, one grounded in collective political agency rather than identity alone.

J. Crush & S. Ramachandran in their work *Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: Denialism, Minimalism, Realism*⁵, the authors analyze government and public denial of xenophobic violence and emphasizes the need to acknowledge the systemic nature of attacks. It is crucial for exploring how denial shaped South Africa's diplomatic stance toward Nigeria during crises. The book explained that xenophobia denialism argues that attacks on migrants are not driven by prejudice, but by crime—isolated acts perpetrated by criminal elements, and that the South African government, initially stunned by the May 2008 violence, adopted this stance, framing the violence as opportunistic criminality rather than xenophobia. Furthermore, and that officials attribute blame to migrants themselves for entering illegally or lacking proper documentation. This narrative allows authorities to sidestep accountability and avoid acknowledging the deeper roots of xenophobic sentiment.

B. Harris, in her book, *Xenophobia: A New Pathology for a New South Africa*⁶? Helps us to understand post-apartheid xenophobia as a deep societal problem. The book helps explain the cultural and psychological drivers that later shaped violence against

Nigerians. Harris critiques the tendency to label xenophobia as a “psychopathology” or disease, that is, an abnormality to be “cured”. Harris explores how media and state discourse depict xenophobia as a societal “disease,” isolating it from broader systemic conditions. She illustrates how representations of “Africa” in the national imaginary often paint it as backward and undifferentiated—reinforcing xenophobic sentiment. Harris therefore calls attention to the social roots of xenophobia, which is grounded in inequality, historical isolation, and cultural markers, while challenging the notion that it is a psychological aberration. She urges a broader, sociopolitical understanding to address and dismantle it.

J. P. Misago in his book, *Politics and Governance in South Africa's Xenophobic Violence*⁷ explores the link between local political leadership and outbreaks of violence. This is important in assessing how governance failures affected Nigeria's perception of South Africa and led to diplomatic tensions. In *Politics and Governance in South Africa's Xenophobic Violence*, Misago thus offers a deeply analytical and evidence-driven exploration of the structural and political underpinnings of xenophobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa. Contrary to conventional portrayals of such violence as spontaneous and irrational acts by poor South Africans, Misago argues that xenophobic attacks are embedded within a broader context of state failure, political manipulation, and governance deficits. His central thesis is that these violent outbreaks are not merely grassroots expressions of frustration but are often enabled, if not orchestrated, by political actors seeking to gain legitimacy or control within local and national power structures. The

book begins by tracing the historical and socio-political evolution of xenophobic sentiments in South Africa, particularly after the end of apartheid in 1994. Misago contends that the transition to democracy brought with it high expectations for socioeconomic transformation, which the government failed to meet, especially for the poor and marginalized. This failure created fertile ground for scapegoating foreign nationals, particularly African migrants, who were perceived as competitors for scarce resources such as jobs, housing, and services. One of Misago's most significant contributions is his emphasis on the role of governance—especially at the local level—in shaping the patterns and persistence of xenophobic violence. He highlights how municipal governments and local political elites often either ignore early signs of anti-foreigner sentiment or actively exploit them to consolidate power. In some instances, officials provide tacit or even explicit support for attacks on migrants, viewing them as a means of deflecting criticism of their own governance failures or of mobilizing local constituencies through populist rhetoric. Misago also critiques the national government's inconsistent and often denialist stance toward xenophobia. Instead of acknowledging the political and institutional dimensions of the violence, the state frequently reduces it to criminality or portrays it as isolated incidents.

This minimalist approach, he argues, undermines effective responses and emboldens perpetrators by fostering a climate of impunity. Through extensive fieldwork and case studies—including the 2008 and 2015 waves of xenophobic attacks—Misago demonstrates that violence tends to occur in areas marked by political contestation, weak governance, and high levels of socioeconomic deprivation.

A. O. Akinola in his book, *South Africa's Xenophobic Attacks and Nigeria–South Africa Relations*⁸, Akinola focuses on how xenophobic attacks eroded diplomatic relations between the two African giants. His work directly engages with Nigeria's reactions, including boycotts and threats of reprisal. In his work, Akinola delves into the volatile nexus between periodic xenophobic outbursts in South Africa and their ripple effects on Nigeria–South Africa diplomatic, economic, and social ties. He chronicles how these recurrent crises — occurring notably in 2008, 2015, and 2019 — have saddled the relationship between two of Africa's most influential countries with tension and distrust. Akinola underscores how the economic struggles of black South Africans, who still bear the brunt of apartheid-era inequalities and soaring unemployment, have created fertile ground for xenophobic sentiments. Frustrated locals increasingly see foreign nationals especially educated Nigerians as taking their jobs and dominating small-scale business sectors. Akinola points out how misinformation and disinformation ranging from fabricated attacks to inflammatory rhetoric spread rapidly online, intensifying public anger and triggering reprisals on both sides. Such narratives reinforce stereotypes: Nigerians are often unreasonably labelled as criminals or exploiters, while South Africans are painted as intolerant and ungrateful.

The recurrent crises undermine diplomatic trust and economic cooperation. Economic ties—such as Nigerian labor contributing to South African sectors—have been disrupted, affecting business continuity and investment flows. Proposals like boycotting South African companies (e.g., MTN, Shoprite) reflect rising nationalist backlash in

Nigeria. These developments highlight how social tensions easily spill into policies and economics. Akinola's study paints a sobering portrait: economic inequities and xenophobia in South Africa do more than ignite violence—they strain inter-African solidarity, disrupt economic exchanges, and threaten regional stability. Ultimately, stabilizing Nigeria–South Africa ties hinges on resolving systemic socioeconomic grievances, enhancing cross-border collaboration, and fostering a shared African identity that stands resilient against divisive scapegoating. This book therefore synthesizes Akinola's analysis and situates it within documented incidents and diplomatic responses, illustrating how xenophobia transcends individual attacks to shape the broader trajectory of one of Africa's most critical bilateral relationships.

T. Ngwane in his book titled, *Service Delivery Protests and Xenophobia in South Africa*,⁹ Ngwane links xenophobic violence with grassroots dissatisfaction over poor service delivery, showing how Nigerians and other foreigners became scapegoats in communities facing poverty and inequality. Ngwane employs close-up ethnographic techniques to study protests in working-class townships. He focuses on how protest leaders perceive themselves and how they situate their activism within historical and structural contexts. Frustration over sanitation, housing, water, electricity, and slow municipal services fuels these protests. Such protests are a form of fragmented resistance against unmet promises from the post-apartheid government. Ngwane contextualizes these grassroots struggles within the transition from apartheid to neoliberal democracy. He argues that a demobilized working class and the absence of coherent leadership limit the

protests' potential to pose a serious challenge. When protests lack a cohesive vision or strong leadership, they can veer into xenophobic scapegoating, mob justice, and other forms of anti-social or populist behavior. Ngwane warns that xenophobia can emerge if social anger is misdirected. He emphasizes that effective protest movements require a positive, collective vision—one that transcends individual grievances, embraces inclusivity, and presents a coherent alternative. Without this, xenophobia can fill the vacuum. Ngwane advocates mainstreaming anti-xenophobia education in protest politics. He spotlights initiatives such as community-level cross-cultural events and solidarity programming that include immigrant needs in broader demands. Ngwane argues that service delivery protests reflect deep socio-economic frustrations and are vital forms of working-class resistance. However, without a systemic organizing vision and purposeful leadership, these protests can devolve—leading to xenophobic violence. His key recommendation is clear: to sustain democracy and foster justice, protest movements must develop a shared vision of a fair society, rooted in solidarity and political education. The book is a powerful call to channel legitimate anger into collective, inclusive, and vision-driven social action—otherwise, the void risks being filled with division and intolerance.

P. Vale & M. J. Mphaisha, in their book titled, *South Africa and Nigeria: Partnership or Rivalry*¹⁰ provides historical context for the rivalry and mistrust between both countries. The book delves into the multifaceted relationship between Nigeria and South Africa—two continental powerhouses with shared histories, divergent ambitions, and complex interdependencies. Spanning politics, economics, culture, and diplomacy, the

authors explore whether the relationship leans more toward cooperative partnership or competitive rivalry. The bond between Nigeria and South Africa has deep roots in the fight against apartheid. Nigeria's early diplomatic, financial, and moral backing of liberation movements including scholarships, "Mandela Tax," and UN advocacy cemented its role as a steadfast ally to South Africa's freedom struggle. This solidarity laid a foundation of trust and reciprocity following South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994. The authors highlight how state-led commercial outreach and private investment bolstered mutual growth: South African firms like MTN, Shoprite, and DSTV penetrated Nigeria, while Nigerian giants such as Dangote and Oando listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Yet disparities persist. South African companies enjoy smoother market entry in Nigeria, while Nigerians face regulatory and xenophobic hurdles in South Africa. This imbalance fuels resentment, suspicion, and policy friction. It should be noted that Vale and Mphaisha emphasize a dual-edge in the cultural sphere: on one side, Nigerians and South Africans share vibrant artistic exchanges—Afrobeats, Amapiano, Nollywood, and music collaborations celebrate pan-African identity on the other, xenophobia, stereotypes, and social distrust—particularly against Nigerians in South Africa—threaten harmony. These social undercurrents often derail diplomatic goodwill and economic cooperation. The authors conclude with cautious optimism. Both nations possess complementary economic strengths: Nigeria's oil base and entrepreneurial spirit, alongside South Africa's diversified industrial capacity. Together, their combined GDP constitutes over 30 % of Africa's economy. The book urges both nations to transcend zero-sum competition, harness

institutional architecture, and invest in mutual respect. Only then can they lead a united, prosperous Africa—the very ideal both fought to realize during their shared liberation era.

O. Ibeanu, & A. Momoh in their book *State, Citizenship and Xenophobia in Africa*¹¹ provide comparative insights, showing how South Africa's violent xenophobia differs in intensity and diplomatic implications particularly in the Nigerian context. The book offers a rich and nuanced exploration of how the concepts of statehood, citizenship, and belonging are constructed and contested across the African continent, particularly in contexts marked by deep social, economic, and historical fault lines. Ibeanu and Momoh situate their argument within the inherited legacies of colonial rule—artificial boundaries, centralized bureaucracies, and exclusionary frameworks of belonging. Citizenship, they argue, became the bedrock of modern African state-building, but one often defined along narrow lines—juxtaposing 'indigenes' against 'outsiders'. These distinctions, rooted in notions of blood-line and birthplace, have shaped policies, identities, and political mobilizations in ways that frequently undermine inclusivity and exacerbate inequality. Through a close examination of Nigeria's federal character principle, the authors illustrate how constitutional provisions intended to ensure equitable representation paradoxically institutionalize indigeneity. They note how citizens who lack ancestral connection to a particular region—despite lifelong residence—can be legally and practically excluded from opportunities like civil service jobs or scholarships. Such arrangements entrench stratified citizenship and fuel resentment, undermining rights and social cohesion. Ibeanu and Momoh delve into the multifaceted nature of xenophobia in Africa. They trace its

emergence from colonial-era anxieties over the “outsider” to contemporary scapegoating tied to economic insecurity and political opportunism. Drawing on ethnographic and political-economic insights, they show how xenophobic rhetoric and policy—targeting migrants, refugees, even citizens considered “foreign” serve to distract from structural failures and legitimize exclusionary nationalist sentiment. While much scholarly focus has centered on South Africa, Ibeanu and Momoh broaden their lens.

In *Understanding Xenophobia in South Africa: The Individual and Structural Determinants*¹² by V. Ojakorotu, & H. Zimble, the authors analyze individual attitudes and structural inequality as dual forces behind anti-Nigerian sentiments. Their findings help contextualize why Nigerians are often targeted. Ojakorotu and Zimble explore why xenophobia in South Africa persists despite the country's democratic foundations and constitutional protections. Through a blend of theoretical frameworks and empirical insights, they examine both individual attitudes and broader structural factors that drive hostility toward foreign nationals especially African immigrants. The authors root South African xenophobia in the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. During apartheid, the state isolated itself from other African nations and enforced racial categorization, with citizenship reserved for whites. This “isolation hypothesis” suggests that historical seclusion bred deep mistrust and Afrophobia, which persisted even after democracy. Post-apartheid, despite constitutional rights, immigrants continue to be marginalized and excluded. The authors also pointed put economic inequality and unemployment—especially among black South Africans—fuel resentment toward immigrants.

A. Adeleke, in his work *Pan-Africanism and the Crisis of Intra-African Xenophobia*¹³ discusses the contradiction between Pan-African ideals and recurring xenophobic violence in South Africa, drawing attention to how this affects regional unity and Nigeria's foreign policy. Adeleke opens by establishing Pan-Africanism as both an enduring ideology and a political movement aiming to foster unity among African peoples on the continent and across the diaspora. Drawing on historical foundations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Adeleke emphasizes its dual goals: resisting external oppression and forging an internal sense of shared identity and purpose. The book then moves to the central tension: while Pan-Africanism initially served to unify Africans against colonialism and slavery, contemporary intra-African xenophobia especially in countries like South Africa and Nigeria threatens to unravel these solidarities. Local and regional identities, economic competition, and political scapegoating have fuelled hostility toward African migrants.

Adeleke examines recurring xenophobic violence such as attacks on African migrants in South Africa and periodic expulsions of foreigners in Nigeria. He attributes these incidents to economic crises, social anxieties, and political calculation. For example, economic downturns provoke fears of job scarcity, which are redirected into scapegoat rhetoric against migrants. Adeleke offers a sobering /but clear-eyed appraisal: Pan-Africanism's foundational promise is under threat from within. He contends that unless xenophobia is confronted head-on—via educational, political, and economic reforms, Pan-African unity may collapse under its own contradictions. Adeleke's analytical

blend of historical context, case studies, and normative proposals makes a compelling call to safeguard continental solidarity. Adeleke's book is both a wake-up call and a roadmap. By illustrating how xenophobia undermines Pan-African unity, he challenges scholars, politicians, and ordinary Africans to reinvest in the vision and to ensure it includes all Africans, not just those born within narrowly defined borders.

In the book *Xenophobic Attacks and Nigeria–South Africa Relations*, by P. Dzimiri and D. N. Mlambo¹⁴, the authors assess the impact of the 2008, 2015, and 2019 xenophobic incidents on bilateral relations, noting Nigeria's diplomatic protests, economic threats, and calls for African solidarity. The book offers a concise yet powerful analysis of how anti-immigrant violence in South Africa, especially against Nigerians and other Africans, severely undermines the socioeconomic and political ties between the two leading African nations. The authors begin by charting the trajectory of xenophobic incidents in South Africa—from the initial post-apartheid outbreaks in 2008 to the more recent waves in 2015, 2017, and beyond. Drawing upon credible datasets like Xenowatch, they cite alarming figures: between 1994 and 2021, there were 796 recorded attacks resulting in over 120,000 displacements, nearly 4,700 shops looted, and close to 600 deaths. Focusing sharply on the Nigerian diaspora, the authors highlight the profound human toll ranging from loss of life and property to pervasive insecurity and the chilling effect these assaults have on Nigerians living and investing in South Africa. Central to the study is an exploration of root causes using theoretical frameworks including frustration-aggression and rational choice theories. High unemployment, pervasive poverty, competition for limited resources,

and the lingering psychological legacy of apartheid are cited as key drivers behind the xenophobic violence. Politically and diplomatically, these incidents have manifested as repeated crises. Nigeria recalling its High Commission, boycotting summits, and urging South Africa to apologise and take strong security measures. Economically, trust between investors has eroded, with Nigerian businesses becoming increasingly hesitant to operate in South Africa, and vice versa. Despite the gravity of the situation, Dzimiri and Mlambo are not without hope as they propose pragmatic solutions—bilateral early-warning mechanisms, more collaborative migration management, and refugee protection frameworks tailored to uphold regional integration. These are designed not only to secure the lives of Nigerian citizens but also to fortify the broader Nigeria–South Africa developmental partnership. More so, the book is both an empirical study and a call to policy action: it details the magnitude and multi-layered impacts of xenophobia while urging both governments to engage in coordinated, structural responses.

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN AFRICA

Introduction

Racial discrimination refers to the unjust or prejudicial treatment of individuals based on their race or ethnicity. It manifests in various forms, including direct discrimination, where individuals are deliberately treated less favorably because of their racial identity, and indirect discrimination, which occurs when policies or practices that appear neutral disproportionately disadvantage people of certain races¹. This form of discrimination can be evident in multiple settings such as employment, education, healthcare, and housing, leading to significant socio-economic disparities. Understanding the mechanisms and impacts of racial discrimination is crucial for promoting equity and social justice.

Africa's history is deeply intertwined with racial discrimination, with colonial legacies profoundly shaping contemporary societal structures. The colonial period, which began in earnest in the late 19th century, was characterized by the exploitation and subjugation of African peoples by European powers. Colonial administrations often imposed racial hierarchies, privileging Europeans and discriminating against indigenous populations.² Following independence movements in the mid-20th century, many African states faced the challenge of reconciling modern national identities with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, but the scars of colonial rule persisted. Ethnic tensions, often

exacerbated by colonial divide-and-rule tactics, have led to conflicts in various regions, such as Rwanda in the 1990s and continued tensions in countries like Sudan and Nigeria.³

Understanding racial discrimination in Africa is vital for several reasons. First, it allows for a comprehension of ongoing socio-political conflicts which, while often framed in ethnic terms, are frequently underpinned by historical racial inequalities⁴. Addressing these underlying injustices is critical for lasting peace and stability. Second, racial discrimination contributes to persistent economic inequalities, which can stifle the development of whole nations. Acknowledging and countering these disparities is essential for achieving equitable growth and development.⁵ Third, a profound understanding of racial discrimination informs policy-making and can facilitate frameworks aimed at healing and reconciliation, crucial for countries in transition from conflict or colonial legacies. Therefore, confronting racial discrimination is not only a moral imperative but also a practical necessity for fostering inclusive societies in Africa.

Pre-Colonial Racial Dynamics

Pre-colonial Africa was marked by rich and complex racial, ethnic, and cultural dynamics long before European intervention. Contrary to the colonial narrative that portrayed Africa as a primitive and homogeneous continent, African societies possessed deeply rooted political systems, sophisticated social structures, and intricate relationships across regions. These dynamics were shaped by ethnic diversity, evolving social hierarchies, inter-group conflicts and alliances, and a continuous flow of cultural exchanges and assimilative processes that contributed to the continent's vibrant social fabric.⁶ Pre-

colonial Africa was ethnically diverse, comprising thousands of ethnic groups with distinct languages, customs, belief systems, and governance structures. From the Hausa-Fulani in the West to the Zulu in the South, and the Swahili coast in the East to the Berbers in the North, the continent represented a mosaic of identities. These groups often occupied specific ecological zones which influenced their economic systems, such as the agrarian societies in the forest zones and the pastoralist communities in the savannahs and semi-arid regions.⁷

This diversity fostered the development of various social hierarchies within and between groups. Many societies were organized along kinship lines, where clans or lineages determined leadership, social status, and inheritance. In centralized states like the Kingdom of Benin, the Ashanti Empire, or the Kanem-Bornu Empire, monarchs and nobility occupied the apex of society, while commoners, artisans, and at times, slaves occupied the lower rungs. Slavery in pre-colonial Africa was a significant aspect of social hierarchy, though it was often different from the chattel slavery instituted during colonial times. Slaves could sometimes rise in status, marry freely, or gain their freedom, depending on the cultural context.⁸

Pre-colonial African societies were not isolated or static; they constantly interacted with one another, sometimes through peaceful relations and at other times through conflict. These interactions were driven by competition over land, trade routes, resources, or political dominance. For instance, the Fulani Jihad in the 19th century led to the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate, which transformed the political landscape of northern Nigeria

through religious and military campaigns. Similarly, the expansionist wars of Shaka Zulu in Southern Africa initiated a period known as the Mfecane, which caused significant population displacements and the reconfiguration of many states in the region. Despite these conflicts, alliances were also common. Neighboring kingdoms often engaged in diplomatic marriages, trade pacts, or military coalitions to secure mutual interests. For example, the Mali and Songhai Empires engaged in extensive trade and sometimes cooperated militarily against common enemies. These alliances helped maintain relative peace and facilitated interethnic cooperation and the sharing of governance strategies, particularly in trade centers like Timbuktu and Gao.⁹

Cultural interaction was a defining feature of pre-colonial African racial dynamics. Through trade, migration, warfare, and intermarriage, African societies exchanged languages, religious practices, art forms, and governance systems. For instance, the Swahili coast developed as a melting pot of African, Arab, and Persian cultures due to centuries of trade across the Indian Ocean. This gave rise to a unique Swahili identity characterized by a Bantu linguistic base enriched with Arabic vocabulary and Islamic cultural norms.¹⁰ Assimilation processes were also common, especially in multi-ethnic empires. The Yoruba people, for instance, absorbed various smaller ethnic groups through a combination of military conquest and cultural integration. In many cases, conquered peoples retained their local customs while adopting the dominant group's language or religious practices. Such syncretism fostered tolerance and reduced ethnic tensions in diverse polities. African oral traditions, religious festivals, dress styles, and culinary practices reveal a long history of

borrowing and adaptation across ethnic lines. Cultural institutions such as age-grades, secret societies (e.g., Ogboni among the Yoruba or Ekpe among the Efik and Ibibio), and market networks further reinforced communal ties beyond ethnic boundaries¹¹. These structures served as channels for conflict resolution, economic cooperation, and social integration, showcasing the sophisticated and adaptable nature of pre-colonial African societies.

Colonial Era and Racial Discrimination

The colonial era in Africa marked a significant transformation in the continent's socio-political and racial dynamics. European colonization, which formally began in the late 19th century with the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, not only altered traditional political structures but also institutionalized racial discrimination in ways that had long-lasting effects on African societies. Colonization introduced exploitative systems that prioritized European dominance, leading to economic exploitation, cultural alienation, and systemic racial inequalities. The European colonization of Africa was driven by multiple motives, including economic gain, political competition, religious evangelism, and a belief in European racial superiority. The "Scramble for Africa," formalized at the Berlin Conference, saw European powers, primarily Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, and Italy carve up the continent without regard to indigenous ethnic, linguistic, or cultural boundaries¹². Colonization was often justified by the ideology of the "civilizing mission," which presented Africans as backward and in need of European enlightenment and governance.

European control was established through treaties (often deceitful), military conquests, and the installation of colonial administrations. The colonial states were structured to extract resources, minerals, agricultural products, and labor for the benefit of the metropole. Indigenous institutions were either dismantled or co-opted to serve colonial interests, and traditional rulers were integrated into indirect rule systems that prioritized colonial objectives over local welfare¹³. This foreign dominance drastically reshaped African political, economic, and social systems. One of the most defining features of colonial rule was the establishment of rigid racial hierarchies that placed Europeans at the top and Africans at the bottom. These hierarchies were embedded in legal, economic, and social structures, institutionalizing white supremacy and African subjugation. Europeans occupied the highest positions in colonial administration, owned most of the land, and had exclusive access to quality education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Africans were generally restricted to menial labor, lived in segregated areas, and received inferior public services.¹⁴

Colonial policies codified racial discrimination in many territories. For instance, in settler colonies like Kenya, South Africa, and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), land was confiscated from indigenous populations and redistributed to white settlers. Africans were subjected to pass laws, curfews, and taxation systems that undermined their freedom and economic autonomy. In French colonies, the policy of assimilation sought to impose French culture and values while still maintaining a distinction between French citizens and colonial subjects, thereby reinforcing racial inequality under the guise of cultural

upliftment.¹⁵ Education was another tool used to reinforce racial hierarchies. Colonial education systems were designed to produce a small elite of Africans who would serve as intermediaries between the colonizers and the local populace, rather than to empower Africans or promote critical thinking. African history and languages were either omitted or vilified, and European history and culture were glorified, fostering a sense of inferiority among Africans.¹⁶

The impact of colonial rule on indigenous African populations was disturbing and far-reaching. Economically, colonization led to the exploitation of African labor and resources for the benefit of Europe. Africans were subjected to forced labor, heavy taxation, and land alienation, which disrupted traditional economies and impoverished local communities. Cash crop economies were established, forcing Africans to grow products like cocoa, cotton, and rubber for export, often at the expense of food security.¹⁷ Colonialism also undermined traditional institutions and social cohesion. Colonial powers often manipulated ethnic divisions to maintain control, fostering rivalry and mistrust among groups, a legacy that continues to affect post-independence African states. The imposition of foreign legal systems, languages, and religions also eroded indigenous cultures and values, leading to cultural disorientation and identity crises among African populations. Politically, colonial rule denied Africans the right to self-governance and participation in decision-making processes. Africans were largely excluded from the political arena, and resistance was often met with violent repression. This exclusion laid the groundwork for political instability and authoritarianism in the post-colonial period, as

newly independent states struggled to replace colonial institutions with inclusive, democratic structures.

Post-Colonial Challenges

The post-colonial period in Africa, which began in the mid-20th century as nations achieved independence from European colonial rule, was marked by high hopes for self-determination, economic growth, and social transformation. The legacies of colonialism including racial stratification, economic dependency, and ethnic divisions continued to haunt many African states. Rather than disappearing, racial discrimination and ethnic conflicts were often reconfigured and intensified in the post-colonial context, contributing to political instability, civil unrest, and socio-economic underdevelopment across the continent. Following independence, African countries were left to grapple with artificial borders drawn by colonial powers that grouped together diverse and sometimes antagonistic ethnic communities. These arbitrary boundaries, combined with colonial policies that had favored certain ethnic groups over others, sowed deep-seated mistrust and competition for political power and economic resources. In many countries, ethnic favoritism and marginalization replaced colonial racial hierarchies as post-colonial elites manipulated ethnic identities to secure political dominance.¹⁸

Racial discrimination did not vanish with the end of colonialism, especially in countries with significant settler populations. In some cases, white minority communities retained control over critical sectors of the economy, including land ownership, industry, and finance, perpetuating economic and social inequalities. In Zimbabwe and Namibia,

land distribution remained highly skewed in favor of white settlers decades after independence, fueling demands for land reform and contributing to political unrest¹⁹. Ethnic conflicts also emerged as major post-colonial challenges, especially in multi-ethnic societies where power-sharing arrangements were either absent or poorly managed. The rise of ethnonationalist movements and the politicization of ethnicity often led to violent clashes, secessionist attempts, and even genocides. These conflicts were not only driven by historical grievances but were also exacerbated by weak governance structures and external interference.

South Africa provides one of the most glaring examples of institutionalized racial discrimination in a post-colonial setting. Although the country achieved nominal independence in 1910, it remained under white minority rule until the dismantling of apartheid in the 1990s. The apartheid system, formally implemented in 1948, legally enforced racial segregation and discrimination against the black majority population. Black South Africans were denied voting rights, restricted to inferior education and healthcare systems, and forcibly relocated to racially segregated townships²⁰. Despite widespread resistance led by figures like Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC), the apartheid regime persisted for decades, leaving lasting scars on South African society. Another tragic illustration of post-colonial ethnic conflict is the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Rooted in colonial classifications of the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups, Belgian colonialists had historically privileged the minority Tutsis over the majority Hutus. After independence, this hierarchy reversed, leading to political tensions, repression, and eventual mass

violence. In April 1994, following the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana, extremist Hutu militias launched a genocide that resulted in the deaths of over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in just 100 days²¹. The Rwandan case underscores how colonial legacies, when coupled with political manipulation and weak state institutions, can culminate in catastrophic ethnic violence.

The persistence of racial and ethnic divides in post-colonial Africa has had severe socio-economic consequences. Racial and ethnic favoritism in government appointments, education, and employment opportunities has often resulted in uneven development, marginalization of minority communities, and disillusionment with national unity. In many states, entire regions have been neglected in terms of infrastructure, education, and healthcare due to their ethnic or political affiliations, thereby reinforcing cycles of poverty and underdevelopment.²² In South Africa, the economic impact of apartheid continues to be felt today. Although legal apartheid has ended, socio-economic disparities between white and black South Africans remain stark. The majority of wealth and land is still concentrated in the hands of a white minority, while black South Africans disproportionately experience unemployment, poverty, and limited access to quality services²³. These divides continue to generate tension and fuel calls for economic justice and redistribution. Ethnic violence and civil wars have led to mass displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and humanitarian crises. Countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia have experienced prolonged conflicts

with devastating human and economic costs. These conflicts often deter foreign investment, drain national resources, and divert attention from critical development agendas.

Racial Discrimination in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the colonial period (1861–1960) introduced racial stratification largely driven by British imperial interests. The British colonial administration implemented policies that placed Europeans at the apex of the social and economic hierarchy, while indigenous Nigerians occupied subordinate positions. Although racial segregation in Nigeria was not as formalized or codified as in South Africa, it manifested in subtle but pervasive ways. European expatriates lived in exclusive areas with better amenities, while Africans were confined to underdeveloped neighborhoods with limited infrastructure²⁴. Job opportunities and administrative positions were racially skewed, with Europeans occupying top roles and Nigerians relegated to clerical or menial duties.

Education served as a critical tool of discrimination. Missionary schools, often sponsored by colonial governments, promoted Western values and ideas of racial superiority. Indigenous knowledge systems were marginalized, and only a small fraction of Nigerians had access to quality education that could elevate their social status²⁵. Racial discrimination also permeated legal and social systems. African customs and institutions were often deemed “primitive,” and indigenous courts were placed under British authority, undermining the autonomy of native governance structures. Post-independence Nigeria inherited many of these inequalities, which transformed into ethnic tensions. The absence of a clearly defined racial enemy (such as the white settler in South Africa) meant that post-

colonial tensions became more ethnically than racially defined. The root of ethnic marginalization and division can be traced to the racialized colonial experience that privileged certain groups over others for administrative convenience.²⁶ The "divide-and-rule" strategy created lasting divisions, particularly among the major ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—which later contributed to conflicts such as the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970).

Racial Discrimination in South Africa

South Africa's experience with racial discrimination is one of the most extreme and institutionalized in African history. Colonized initially by the Dutch and later by the British, South Africa became a settler colony where racial segregation and white supremacy were deeply entrenched. Racial discrimination reached its apex under the apartheid regime (1948–1994), which legally enforced the separation of races and systematically oppressed the black majority population. Under apartheid, South Africans were classified into racial categories—White, Black, Coloured, and Indian, with each group subjected to different rights and restrictions. The white minority controlled political power, land, education, and economic resources. Laws such as the Population Registration Act (1950), Group Areas Act (1950), and Bantu Education Act (1953) institutionalized racial discrimination, restricting black South Africans to "homelands" and denying them access to quality education, health care, and employment.²⁷

The apartheid system also suppressed resistance through violent means. The Sharpeville Massacre (1960), where 69 peaceful protesters were killed, and the Soweto

Uprising (1976), where hundreds of students were gunned down, exemplify the brutal enforcement of racial segregation. Despite international sanctions and widespread condemnation, apartheid persisted until the early 1990s. The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the subsequent negotiations led to democratic elections in 1994, marking the official end of apartheid and the beginning of a new era under the African National Congress (ANC). However, the legacy of apartheid continues to influence contemporary South Africa. Economic disparities remain deeply racialized, with white South Africans still holding a disproportionate share of wealth and land. Despite policies such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action, structural inequalities persist, underscoring the long-term impact of institutionalized racial discrimination.

Present-Day Struggles and Reforms

The post-independence period in Africa has witnessed both progress and persistent challenges regarding racial and ethnic equality. While colonial-era structures have been dismantled in many regions, their legacy continues to influence contemporary realities. Today, racial and ethnic discrimination manifests in new forms, often intertwined with socio-economic inequality, identity politics, and global racial discourses. However, this has also spurred a wave of human rights activism and policy reforms aimed at promoting social justice, equality, and inclusive development.

In modern-day Africa, racial discrimination is less institutionalized than it was during the colonial or apartheid eras, but it still exists in both overt and subtle forms. In countries with a history of settler colonialism such as South Africa and Namibia racial

inequalities continue to shape access to land, education, employment, and wealth. Despite legal reforms, white minorities still hold a disproportionate share of economic power, while the black majority faces systemic disadvantages²⁸. In many African states, ethnicity has become a proxy for race, with political leaders mobilizing support based on ethnic affiliations. This ethnic favoritism often leads to marginalization of minority groups, uneven development, and civil unrest. In Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Cameroon, for instance, ethnic-based political appointments, electoral violence, and resource allocation disparities remain significant challenges.²⁹

Xenophobia, particularly against African migrants by fellow Africans, has also become a concerning trend, exemplified by recurring attacks on non-South African nationals in South Africa, which reflect a racialized form of economic anxiety and nationalism. In response to ongoing discrimination, numerous human rights organizations, civil society groups, and grassroots movements have emerged across the continent. These groups advocate for the protection of minority rights, equal access to resources, and inclusive governance. South Africa's post-apartheid constitution, considered one of the most progressive in the world, guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, or religion. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) plays a vital role in monitoring racial issues and ensuring compliance with anti-discrimination laws. Pan-African and continental organizations such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) have also taken up the mandate of combating racial and ethnic injustice. Through legal frameworks like the African Charter

on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), the Commission investigates violations and encourages state compliance with human rights standards. In countries like Rwanda, following the 1994 genocide, the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions and national unity programs has been instrumental in promoting inter-ethnic harmony and healing.³⁰

The rise of youth-led social media activism—like the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria and student protests in South Africa (e.g., #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall)—has brought attention to issues of inequality, historical injustice, and marginalization. These movements are reshaping public discourse and pressuring governments to act against structural discrimination. Education and inclusive policymaking remain central to addressing racial and ethnic discrimination in Africa. Education not only equips individuals with the skills to participate in economic and political life but also shapes values, attitudes, and intergroup relations. Many African countries have initiated curriculum reforms aimed at promoting multiculturalism, tolerance, and African historical awareness. For example, post-apartheid South Africa introduced a more inclusive history syllabus that incorporates African perspectives and challenges colonial narratives³¹.

Affirmative action policies have also been implemented to address historical injustices and socio-economic disparities. In South Africa, the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) initiative aims to redistribute wealth and business ownership to historically disadvantaged groups. Although controversial, these policies are designed to bridge economic gaps and promote racial equity³². In East Africa, Kenya's 2010

constitution includes provisions for ethnic inclusivity in public appointments and equitable distribution of resources, while Rwanda's government has banned ethnic identification in official discourse to promote national unity. Additionally, anti-discrimination laws and institutions such as ombudsman offices and national human rights commissions have been established to monitor violations and promote social justice. Despite these initiatives, challenges persist. Poor implementation, corruption, political interference, and lack of public awareness often undermine the effectiveness of anti-discrimination policies. There is a growing need for stronger civic education, legal literacy, and community engagement to foster a more egalitarian society. Africa continues to grapple with the enduring legacies of racial and ethnic discrimination. Through a combination of human rights advocacy, educational reforms, and inclusive policymaking, significant strides are being made to confront these issues. The path toward equality requires not only legal protections and institutional reforms but also a deep cultural shift toward unity, mutual respect, and social justice. Ultimately, a commitment to inclusive development and democratic governance will be critical in overcoming the challenges of inequality and building a just African society.

Conclusion

Racial discrimination in Africa, rooted in the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, has had profound social, political, and economic impacts on the continent. Ultimately, the history of racial discrimination in Africa serves as a reminder of the need for justice, inclusivity, and unity in building a more equitable society.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE EMERGENCE OF XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN SOUTH-AFRICA

Introduction

Xenophobic violence in South Africa has emerged as a troubling phenomenon that continues to challenge the country's democratic ideals and social cohesion. Despite the country's celebrated history of overcoming apartheid and embracing a constitution grounded in human rights, post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed recurring waves of violence directed at foreign nationals, particularly those from other African countries. These attacks are often brutal, targeting immigrants perceived to be threats to economic opportunities, social services, and cultural identity. The contradiction between South Africa's liberation struggle, which drew solidarity from across the African continent, and the present-day hostility toward African migrants reveals deep-rooted socio-economic and political tensions that have been left unresolved.

“The emergence of xenophobic violence can be traced to several factors. Chief among them is the enduring problem of poverty, unemployment, and inequality that plagues many urban and informal settlements across the country. In these marginalized communities, immigrants are often scapegoated for the lack of jobs and basic services, breeding resentment and hostility. Compounding this is a fragile state apparatus that has, at times, failed to adequately respond to early warning signs of violence or hold perpetrators accountable.”¹ Hence, the failure to implement comprehensive immigration

policies, as well as weak law enforcement, has created a volatile environment where foreign nationals are vulnerable to abuse and discrimination.

Moreover, xenophobic violence in South Africa is not merely a spontaneous reaction to socio-economic hardship; it is also fuelled by political rhetoric and institutional negligence. Political leaders and local authorities have, on occasion, made inflammatory statements that frame immigrants as criminals or economic parasites. Such narratives legitimize public aggression and further deepen divisions between citizens and non-citizens. Also, the media's portrayal of migrants often reinforces stereotypes, contributing to the stigmatization and marginalization of foreign nationals.

It should also be noted that the emergence of xenophobic violence in South Africa is a complex issue rooted in historical, economic, and political dynamics. It reflects the nation's ongoing struggle to forge a unified identity amid profound socio-economic disparities. Understanding this phenomenon requires not only examining the immediate causes of violent outbreaks but also addressing the structural inequalities and ideological constructs that sustain them. A concerted effort by government, civil society, and the international community is essential to counter xenophobia and promote a more inclusive and tolerant South African society. It has been observed that efforts to curb xenophobic violence in South Africa have received mixed results with numerous policy interventions and campaigns struggling to address the root causes of the issue. While government responses have included public condemnations, community dialogues, and law

enforcement crackdowns, these actions are often reactive rather than preventive. Furthermore, the absence of sustained educational initiatives aimed at promoting intercultural understanding and tolerance continues to hinder meaningful progress. Without systemic change and genuine political will, many of these measures fall short of creating lasting peace and security for foreign nationals residing in South Africa.

Civil society organizations have also played a critical role in responding to xenophobic violence. Non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, and advocacy groups have provided legal aid, humanitarian support, and platforms for intercultural dialogue. These efforts, however, are often limited by resource constraints and a lack of coordinated support from the state. While grassroots movements have been instrumental in fostering peaceful coexistence in some communities, the overall impact remains insufficient in the face of recurring outbreaks of violence and systemic exclusion.

It is observed that “the psychological and social effects of xenophobia on foreign nationals are profound. Victims of xenophobic attacks frequently suffer from trauma, displacement, and a loss of livelihood. Many are forced to live in constant fear, with limited access to justice or protection from the state. Children of migrants, in particular, face discrimination in schools and social environments, hindering their development and integration.”² Such marginalization not only affects the well-being of individuals but also undermines the broader goal of social unity in a diverse South Africa.

In essence, the emergence of xenophobic violence in South Africa is a deeply rooted challenge that reflects unresolved socio-economic grievances, political manipulation, and a lack of comprehensive social integration. It calls for a multi-dimensional response that addresses both the symptoms and the underlying causes of intolerance. Moving forward, South Africa must recommit itself to the principles of Pan-African solidarity and human dignity that once defined its liberation movement. Only through inclusive development, ethical leadership, and sustained civic education can the nation hope to overcome the scourge of xenophobia and build a society where all, regardless of origin, are treated with respect and equality.

The Emergence of Xenophobic Violence In South Africa

The phenomenon of xenophobic violence in South Africa has become an alarming and persistent issue in the country's social and political landscape. This violence, largely directed at African foreign nationals, has its roots in a complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and political factors that have fuelled resentment and hostility among certain sections of the South African population. It is argued that "while South Africa is celebrated for its multiculturalism and for overcoming the dark era of apartheid, the emergence of xenophobic violence has starkly contradicted the nation's commitment to human rights and pan-African unity."³

Historically, South Africa's journey from apartheid to democracy in 1994 came with high hopes for a better life for all its citizens. However, the legacies of economic disparity,

social inequality, and limited access to basic services persisted. These challenges, compounded by the failure of the government to deliver adequate housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities, created a fertile ground for discontent. “Foreign nationals, many of whom migrated from neighbouring African countries such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Somalia, were often scapegoated for these socio-economic hardships. Locals began to perceive immigrants as competitors for scarce resources and jobs, despite evidence that foreign nationals often created employment and contributed meaningfully to the economy.”⁴

The emergence of xenophobic violence can also be attributed to poor integration policies and weak governance. A lack of proper immigration regulation, combined with inadequate civic education and law enforcement, allowed negative stereotypes and misinformation to flourish. Many South Africans believed that foreigners were responsible for rising crime rates, the spread of diseases, and the strain on public services. Political leaders and public figures have at times exacerbated the situation by making inflammatory statements, either directly or through veiled rhetoric, thereby legitimizing public hostility and violence against immigrants. “Notable outbreaks of xenophobic violence occurred in 2008, 2015, and 2019, resulting in the loss of lives, destruction of property, and the displacement of thousands. These violent attacks were often marked by looting, arson, and brutal assaults, particularly in townships and informal settlements where unemployment and poverty are most acute. These incidents drew widespread condemnation from the

international community and highlighted the urgent need for South Africa to address the root causes of xenophobia and to promote social cohesion and tolerance.”⁵

To further understand the persistence and escalation of xenophobic violence in South Africa, it is important to examine the role of systemic inequality and how it shapes social attitudes. “South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with a large portion of the population still living in poverty. In many urban informal settlements and townships, basic infrastructure is lacking, and unemployment rates are extremely high, especially among the youth. In such conditions, frustration and despair easily morph into resentment, and foreigners, who are often perceived as outsiders benefiting from limited opportunities, become easy targets for misplaced anger.”⁶

The media and local narratives also play a significant role in shaping public perceptions. Sensationalist reporting and unverified claims about the involvement of foreigners in criminal activities or drug trafficking have fuelled negative stereotypes. Social media platforms have further exacerbated the situation by spreading misinformation and inciting hatred, often without consequences. In many instances, the state’s failure to counter these narratives or hold perpetrators accountable has emboldened xenophobic sentiments and actions. It is observed that “civil society organizations, human rights activists, and religious leaders have consistently condemned xenophobic violence and advocated for more inclusive policies. They emphasize the shared history and struggles of Africans, pointing out that during the anti-apartheid era, many African countries provided refuge and

support to South African liberation fighters.”⁷ This historical solidarity, they argue, should form the basis for African unity rather than division. Moreover, many migrants bring valuable skills, entrepreneurship, and cultural diversity that enrich South African society. Their integration should be seen not as a threat but as a contribution to nation-building. Although, the South African government has taken some steps to address the issue, such as establishing inter-ministerial committees, initiating dialogues, and launching campaigns to promote social cohesion, however, critics argue that these efforts are often reactive, poorly implemented, and lack the necessary long-term vision. Hence, there is a growing call for more proactive measures, including educational reforms to promote tolerance, better policing and legal frameworks to punish hate crimes, and policies that foster economic inclusion for both citizens and migrants.

In sum, the emergence of xenophobic violence in South Africa cannot be isolated from the broader socio-political and economic context. It is a symptom of deeper structural issues such as inequality, unemployment, weak governance, and social fragmentation. Combating this form of violence requires more than condemnation; it demands transformative action at every level of society. South Africa must reaffirm its commitment to human rights, justice, and Pan-Africanism by building a more inclusive, informed, and united society where diversity is celebrated rather than feared. Only then can the cycle of xenophobic violence be truly broken.

Historical Background and Context of Xenophobia in South Africa

Xenophobia in South Africa is a deeply rooted and complex phenomenon, with its origins traceable to both historical injustices and contemporary socio-economic challenges. To understand the emergence and persistence of xenophobic violence in the country, it is essential to examine its historical background and socio-political context. While xenophobia is not unique to South Africa, the severity and frequency of attacks against foreign nationals especially African immigrants, have drawn global attention and concern. “Historically, South Africa's apartheid regime, which lasted from 1948 to 1994, laid a significant foundation for the current manifestations of xenophobia. During apartheid, the country was politically and economically isolated, and movement of people, both citizens and foreigners was tightly controlled. This isolation created a society where racial division and suspicion of the "other" were normalized.”⁸ It should be noted that the apartheid system also institutionalized inequality and limited economic opportunities for the majority black population, a legacy that continues to influence South Africa's socio-economic landscape today.

“Following the end of apartheid and the birth of democracy in 1994, South Africa experienced an influx of immigrants, particularly from other African countries such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Somalia, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many of these migrants came in search of better economic opportunities and safety, as South Africa was viewed as a relatively stable and prosperous country within the continent.”⁹ However, this migration coincided with high levels of unemployment, poverty, and

inequality among South Africans, particularly in informal settlements and urban townships. These socio-economic challenges have often fuelled resentment among local populations, who perceive foreign nationals as competitors for scarce resources, jobs, housing, and social services. In many communities, foreign shop owners and workers have been accused of “stealing jobs” or “undermining local businesses,” even though there is little evidence to support such claims. The perception that migrants are responsible for crime and social decay has also been promoted by some political leaders and media narratives, further deepening divisions between South Africans and foreign nationals.

The failure of the South African government to effectively manage immigration and address the root causes of poverty and unemployment has also contributed to rising xenophobic sentiments. Inadequate border control, corruption within immigration services, and the absence of a comprehensive integration policy have created a vacuum where fear, misinformation, and scapegoating flourish. Moreover, weak law enforcement responses to xenophobic violence have emboldened perpetrators and fostered a culture of impunity. Notable outbreaks of xenophobic violence, such as those in 2008, 2015, and 2019, highlight the recurring nature of the problem and its devastating consequences. These attacks have resulted in the loss of lives, destruction of property, and displacement of thousands of migrants and refugees. Moreover, they have tarnished South Africa's image as a champion of human rights and pan-African solidarity, given its history of receiving support from other African countries during the anti-apartheid struggle. In essence, the historical background and context of xenophobia in South Africa are deeply interwoven with the

country's apartheid legacy, socio-economic hardships, and governance challenges. Xenophobia in South Africa is not merely a result of individual prejudice but a symptom of deeper structural issues, including poverty, inequality, and lack of effective leadership. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach that promotes social cohesion, strengthens institutions, and ensures inclusive economic development for both citizens and non-citizens alike.

Furthermore, understanding the historical context of xenophobia in South Africa requires acknowledging the psychological impact of apartheid-era segregation and nationalism. "Under apartheid, national identity was largely defined along racial and ethnic lines, fostering an "us versus them" mentality. Even after the dismantling of apartheid, these divisive attitudes did not simply disappear; they persisted in new forms, with foreign nationals, particularly black Africans, becoming the new targets of exclusion and blame. Unlike white expatriates or tourists, black immigrants are often perceived as indistinguishable from local citizens until they speak or reveal their origin, making them more vulnerable to suspicion and hostility."¹⁰ Another contributing factor is the post-apartheid state's struggle to deliver the promises of freedom, equality, and improved living standards. Many South Africans, especially the youth, feel disillusioned with the slow pace of economic transformation and social upliftment. In the absence of tangible improvements in their lives, foreign nationals are often used as scapegoats, falsely believed to be the reason why employment and social services remain limited. This frustration, when left unaddressed, creates fertile ground for xenophobic ideologies to take root and escalate into violence.

In response to repeated outbreaks of xenophobic violence, regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have called on South Africa to address the issue with urgency and responsibility. Many African countries, whose nationals have been affected, have also expressed concern and, in some cases, diplomatic protest. These reactions highlight the contradiction between South Africa's foreign policy, which promotes Pan-Africanism and solidarity, and the domestic realities of exclusion and intolerance toward fellow Africans. In essence, the historical and contemporary context of xenophobia in South Africa reveals a nation still grappling with the aftermath of its divided past and the challenges of building a more inclusive future. While democracy brought political freedom, the social and economic justice promised by the post-apartheid vision remains elusive for many. Xenophobia, therefore, must be seen not merely as an isolated or irrational hatred of foreigners, but as a symptom of deeper structural issues that require long-term, systemic solutions – solutions that promote equality, dignity, and unity among all who live within South Africa's borders.

Socio-Economic Causes of Xenophobic Violence

Xenophobic violence, particularly in South Africa, has become a troubling phenomenon that reflects deeper socio-economic issues facing the nation. While xenophobia may appear as mere hostility toward foreign nationals, especially those from other African countries, its roots lie in a complex web of economic frustrations, systemic inequalities, and social discontent. Hence, this essay explores the socio-economic causes

of xenophobic violence, with a focus on unemployment, poverty, competition for resources, inequality, and state failure to address grassroots challenges.

One of the primary socio-economic drivers of xenophobic violence is the high rate of unemployment in South Africa. Despite being one of the most developed countries in Africa, South Africa struggles with widespread joblessness, particularly among the youth. Many South Africans perceive foreign nationals as competitors who take away limited job opportunities. Immigrants, often willing to work for lower wages, are frequently employed in the informal sector, which creates resentment among the local population. This economic frustration is easily redirected into hostility, with foreign workers becoming scapegoats for the structural problems of the South African labour market.

Closely linked to unemployment is the issue of poverty, which remains pervasive in many South African communities. In the face of economic hardship, individuals tend to seek tangible sources to blame for their suffering. Foreigners, especially those perceived as economically successful, become targets of envy and frustration. “The perception that immigrants are thriving while locals languish in poverty intensifies feelings of exclusion and injustice. These emotions often translate into violent actions, driven by the belief that ridding communities of foreign nationals will alleviate their socio-economic burdens.”¹¹

Another significant factor is the competition for basic services and resources. Many South African townships and informal settlements are overcrowded and under-resourced. Public services such as housing, healthcare, education, and social grants are stretched thin.

The presence of immigrants in these areas intensifies the struggle for access to these services. Local residents frequently believe that foreigners benefit unfairly from government provisions, further fuelling resentment. This sense of economic rivalry creates fertile ground for xenophobic sentiments, especially when combined with misinformation and political manipulation.

Furthermore, it has been observed that inequality also plays a vital role in exacerbating xenophobic violence. “South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with vast disparities in wealth and opportunity. The poor and marginalized, often living in neglected urban areas, feel abandoned by both the state and the elite. This neglect creates a vacuum of trust and hope, leading to anger and disillusionment.”¹² And when politicians or community leaders stoke anti-immigrant sentiments, it resonates with a populace already primed by years of inequality and neglect. Violence, in this context, becomes a misguided form of protest against a system that appears to serve only a few.

Lastly, the failure of the state to adequately address these socio-economic challenges has contributed significantly to the rise of xenophobic violence. The inability to provide quality education, create sustainable employment, deliver essential services, and promote inclusive economic growth has left many citizens disempowered. In such a climate, anti-immigrant narratives offer simplistic explanations for complex problems, diverting attention from government shortcomings. Moreover, weak law enforcement and a lack of

accountability for perpetrators of xenophobic violence embolden communities to repeat such acts without fear of consequences.

To further understand the socio-economic causes of xenophobic violence, it is important to consider the role of urbanization and informal economies in shaping community tensions. “Rapid urban migration, both by South Africans from rural areas and by foreign nationals seeking better opportunities, has overwhelmed cities like Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. This influx of people has outpaced infrastructure development, leading to increased competition for housing, jobs, and other urban services.”¹³ This is because informal settlements have grown rapidly, and the resulting scarcity often leads residents to view foreigners not only as economic threats but also as contributors to urban decay and crime.

More so, the role of leadership, both political and traditional, also contributes significantly to the socio-economic dynamics of xenophobic violence. In times of political instability or electoral campaigning, some leaders exploit anti-immigrant sentiments to gain support. They may frame foreigners as the cause of economic decline or promise to take back jobs from immigrants to win votes. Such rhetoric not only deepens division but also legitimizes xenophobic attitudes among the population. The lack of strong counter-narratives or social cohesion campaigns from government authorities further allows these sentiments to fester unchecked.

It should be noted that the socio-economic causes of xenophobic violence in South Africa are multifaceted and deeply entrenched in the country's broader struggles with inequality, poverty, and institutional failure. Xenophobia thrives in environments where economic opportunities are scarce, public services are limited, and political leaders fail to provide inclusive and visionary governance. Solving this issue requires not only addressing the immediate triggers of violence but also confronting the structural and systemic inequalities that lie at the root of people's frustrations. Economic empowerment, social inclusion, quality education, and responsible leadership are essential components of any long-term solution to xenophobic violence in South Africa.

The Role of Politics and Media in Shaping Xenophobic Attitudes

Xenophobia, defined as the irrational fear or hatred of foreigners, has long been a socio-political issue across many nations. In the South African context, it has manifested in violent attacks, discrimination, and the marginalization of immigrants, particularly from other African countries. While economic hardship and social inequality are key contributors, the role of politics and media in fuelling and shaping xenophobic attitudes is both significant and often underestimated. Political rhetoric and media narratives not only influence public perception but also provide a platform for the legitimization and normalization of anti-immigrant sentiments.

Politically, leaders and government officials have often used migration as a scapegoat for the systemic failures of the state. In South Africa, for example, some

politicians have made public statements blaming foreign nationals for high crime rates, unemployment, and the strain on public services. Such rhetoric shifts the blame for deep-rooted socio-economic challenges from government inefficiencies to vulnerable foreign populations. Moreover “in election seasons, anti-immigrant messaging becomes a convenient tool to rally support among local populations by appealing to nationalist and populist sentiments. This politicization of migration fosters an "us versus them" mentality, intensifying social divisions and perpetuating xenophobic ideologies.”¹⁴ The media, particularly tabloids and social media platforms, plays an equally pivotal role in shaping public attitudes. Sensationalist reporting often frames immigrants as criminals, job thieves, or burdens on the state, reinforcing negative stereotypes. Headlines that emphasize the nationality of suspects in criminal cases or disproportionately focus on crimes involving foreigners contribute to moral panic and fear. The repetition of such narratives, even without factual basis, leads to the internalization of prejudice among the public. Furthermore, social media platforms, with their unregulated content and algorithm-driven echo chambers, amplify hate speech and misinformation, further entrenching xenophobic beliefs.

Moreover, the media often fails to provide balanced reporting that includes the voices of immigrants or highlights their contributions to society. The lack of positive representation fosters a one-dimensional view of foreigners as threats rather than as human beings with complex stories and legitimate aspirations. “When media coverage does not critically challenge xenophobic narratives or hold political leaders accountable for

inflammatory statements, it becomes complicit in normalizing discrimination and violence against foreign nationals.”¹⁵

To further deepen the understanding of how politics and media shape xenophobic attitudes, it is essential to examine the historical context and structural dynamics within which these institutions operate. Post-apartheid South Africa, for instance, inherited deeply rooted inequalities and fractured community identities. In this fragile social fabric, both political discourse and media influence have operated within a space of contestation over resources, identity, and national belonging. As citizens continued to struggle with poverty, unemployment, and housing crises, immigrants became convenient scapegoats. This narrative, perpetuated by political elites and media outlets alike, helped distract attention from governance failures and corruption.

In sum, it should be noted that the synergy between political rhetoric and media representation significantly shapes and sustains xenophobic attitudes in society. Both institutions have the power to influence public discourse, either positively or negatively. When misused, they can promote fear, division, and violence. However, when guided by ethical standards and a commitment to truth and justice, they can also promote understanding, solidarity, and social progress. It is therefore imperative for policymakers, journalists, civil society, and the general public to recognize their roles in either perpetuating or dismantling xenophobia. Only through conscious, collective effort can we build societies that value diversity and uphold the dignity of all people, regardless of origin.

Impact of Xenophobic Violence on Victims and Society

Xenophobic violence, often fuelled by fear, prejudice, and political manipulation, has severe and far-reaching consequences for both its direct victims and the broader society. In countries like South Africa, where incidents of xenophobic violence have been recurrent, the impact is multifaceted, affecting psychological well-being, economic stability, social cohesion, and international relations.

First and foremost, the most immediate impact of xenophobic violence is the physical and emotional trauma suffered by the victims. Foreign nationals, especially from other African countries, often bear the brunt of such hostility. They are subjected to verbal abuse, physical attacks, destruction of property, and in extreme cases, murder. Survivors frequently experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and a constant sense of fear and insecurity. Families are displaced, businesses are looted or destroyed, and lives are permanently altered. For many victims, the violence shatters any hope of safety or economic advancement that initially motivated their migration.

Economically, xenophobic violence disrupts livelihoods and undermines development. Many foreign nationals contribute significantly to local economies by operating small businesses, providing affordable services, and filling labour gaps. When violence erupts, these enterprises are often targeted and destroyed, leading to job losses not only for migrants but also for local employees. The destruction of property and the interruption of commercial activity result in financial losses and reduced investor

confidence. In the long term, persistent xenophobia can deter foreign investment and tourism, both of which are vital to a country's economic health.

Socially, xenophobic violence breeds division and erodes the social fabric. It deepens mistrust between different communities, fosters an environment of fear, and normalizes intolerance. For young people growing up in such climates, it may encourage a culture of exclusion and violence, weakening the moral and ethical foundations of society. Additionally, it challenges the ideals of multiculturalism, unity, and Ubuntu — a philosophy of shared humanity deeply rooted in African traditions. Moreover, the impact extends beyond national borders. Xenophobic violence can strain diplomatic relations between countries, particularly when citizens of neighbouring states are targeted. It undermines regional integration efforts and fosters resentment among African nations. Internationally, a country known for xenophobic incidents risks damaging its global reputation and may face criticism from human rights organizations and foreign governments.

Furthermore, “the psychological toll of xenophobic violence extends beyond the direct victims to affect entire communities. Witnesses of such violence, including children, neighbours, and local citizens may experience secondary trauma, fear, or desensitization to cruelty. In the long term, this can result in a society where aggression is normalized, and empathy is eroded.”¹⁶ It should be noted that the rise in fear and suspicion among both

foreigners and locals fosters an atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust, which weakens community ties and the potential for cooperative development.

Educationally, xenophobic violence also affects children of foreign nationals, many of whom are forced to drop out of school due to fear or displacement. Some schools may become inaccessible during periods of unrest, disrupting the academic calendar and damaging the education system's credibility. Children who experience or witness such violence may also develop psychological problems that affect their ability to learn, interact, and grow in a healthy environment. This disrupts their development and limits their future contributions to society, reinforcing a cycle of poverty and marginalization. Another significant consequence is the undermining of legal and human rights structures. When xenophobic violence is allowed to occur with little or no accountability, it signals a failure of the justice system and weakens the rule of law. Perpetrators often go unpunished, which emboldens future acts of violence and diminishes public trust in the state's ability to protect all its inhabitants equally. This selective justice further divides society and fuels grievances among affected communities, which may escalate into retaliatory acts or increased hostility. "In political terms, xenophobic violence can be manipulated by leaders seeking to divert attention from domestic problems such as unemployment, crime, and corruption. By scapegoating foreigners, they deflect responsibility and gain short-term political favour, often at the expense of national unity and peace. This politicization of xenophobia perpetuates harmful narratives and encourages discriminatory policies that can have long-lasting consequences for social justice and equality."¹⁷

In summation, the impact of xenophobic violence is deep, pervasive, and long-lasting. It affects not only those who are directly targeted but also destabilizes entire communities and countries. The emotional scars, economic setbacks, weakened institutions, and broken international relationships caused by such violence call for urgent and sustained action. Addressing the root causes such as poverty, misinformation, inequality, and political manipulation while promoting a culture of respect, solidarity, and human rights is essential. Only through inclusive dialogue, responsible leadership, and community empowerment can societies overcome the devastating impact of xenophobia and build a more just and peaceful future for all.

Efforts Toward Resolution and Prevention of Xenophobic Violence in South Africa

Xenophobic violence has been a persistent issue in South Africa, drawing national and international concern. While the causes of this phenomenon are complex and deeply rooted in historical, socio-economic, and political dynamics, multiple efforts have been initiated to address and prevent its occurrence. These efforts encompass government interventions, community-based initiatives, civil society activism, and regional cooperation. Hence, this project work has the duty to critically examine the various strategies aimed at resolving and preventing xenophobic violence in South Africa, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and the way forward.

It should be noted that the South African government has played a central role in responding to xenophobic violence through policy measures, public statements, and law

enforcement. Following major outbreaks of violence, the government has often condemned such acts and reaffirmed its commitment to protecting the rights of all who live in the country, regardless of nationality. “Institutions such as the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) have been pivotal in monitoring human rights abuses and advocating for victims of xenophobic attacks.”¹⁸ More so, law enforcement agencies have conducted arrests and launched investigations into violence and looting associated with xenophobic incidents. However, critics argue that government responses are often reactive rather than preventive, and that political leaders sometimes make inflammatory statements that reinforce anti-immigrant sentiments.

Community-based initiatives have also emerged as effective means of addressing xenophobia at the grassroots level. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious institutions, and local leaders have organized dialogues, workshops, and cultural exchange programs aimed at fostering tolerance and mutual understanding between South Africans and foreign nationals. These initiatives often emphasize shared values, common struggles, and the contributions of migrants to South African society. Such efforts help to dismantle stereotypes and reduce the fear and suspicion that often fuel xenophobic attitudes. Nevertheless, the reach of these programs is sometimes limited by funding constraints and the localized nature of their operations.

Civil society also play a crucial role in both advocacy and humanitarian response during episodes of xenophobic violence. Human rights organizations like Lawyers for

Human Rights and the African Diaspora Forum have been vocal in condemning xenophobia and providing support to affected individuals. These organizations engage in litigation, public education, and lobbying to promote the protection of migrants' rights. They provide temporary shelter, legal aid, and psychological support to victims of violence. Civil society efforts are vital in holding the government accountable and ensuring that victims receive justice. Yet, the challenges remain daunting, particularly in addressing deep-seated prejudices and systemic socio-economic inequalities.

On a broader scale, regional and international cooperation has been instrumental in addressing xenophobic violence in South Africa. The African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and foreign governments have consistently urged South Africa to address the issue and uphold the principles of Pan-Africanism and African solidarity. Diplomatic engagement, regional forums, and mutual development projects can contribute to reducing the tensions that often lead to xenophobic violence. However, sustained collaboration and political will are necessary to translate these commitments into tangible outcomes.

To build upon these existing efforts, it is crucial to focus on education and public awareness as long-term strategies for change. Educational institutions should integrate values of tolerance, diversity, and human rights into their curricula. From an early age, students should be taught to appreciate cultural differences and understand the historical context of migration and integration in South Africa. Such education can counteract the

misinformation and myths that often feeds xenophobic attitudes. More so, public awareness campaigns using media, art, and storytelling can play a transformative role in reshaping public perception about immigrants and their contributions to the country's development.

Another important area is the economic empowerment of disadvantaged communities. Xenophobic violence often stems from competition over scarce resources, especially in impoverished urban areas where unemployment and inequality are rampant. Thus, efforts to reduce poverty, create jobs, and improve service delivery can help address the root causes of resentment that sometimes get projected onto foreign nationals. Government and private sector collaboration on job creation and entrepreneurship, particularly targeting the youth, is essential to diffusing the tensions that drive violence.

Furthermore, it is imperative to reform immigration policies and practices in a way that is both humane and efficient. Delays and corruption in the asylum and visa systems can create frustrations for both citizens and immigrants, leading to social strain. A transparent and fair immigration system that upholds the rights of migrants while also managing public concerns can reduce tensions. The Department of Home Affairs must improve its services and ensure that the legal status of foreign nationals is clearly documented and respected, thereby reducing the vulnerability of these individuals to exploitation and violence.

Finally, robust data collection and research on xenophobia are necessary for informed policy-making. Government institutions, universities, and research centers

should collaborate to gather evidence on the prevalence, causes, and consequences of xenophobic violence. This data can help identify high-risk areas, monitor the effectiveness of interventions, and shape responsive, evidence-based strategies. Without accurate information, efforts to resolve and prevent violence risk being superficial or misdirected.

In conclusion, while xenophobic violence in South Africa is a deeply rooted and complex challenge, it is not insurmountable. A genuine and sustained commitment to inclusive governance, economic justice, human rights, and community engagement can pave the way toward lasting peace and coexistence. As South Africa continues to define its identity in the post-apartheid era, it has the opportunity and the responsibility to demonstrate that unity in diversity is not only possible but powerful.

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CHAPTER FOUR

IMPLICATION OF XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE ON SOUTH AFRICA – NIGERIAN RELATIONS

Introduction

Xenophobic violence in South Africa, particularly against African migrants, has had far-reaching consequences on its diplomatic, political, and socio-economic relations with Nigeria. While both countries share a long history of solidarity in the struggle against apartheid and have maintained leadership roles within Africa, the recurrent attacks on Nigerians and other African nationals have strained bilateral trust and cooperation for the fact that diplomatic relations have been severely affected. Nigeria, being one of the largest African nations with strong economic and political influence, has often expressed dismay over the mistreatment of its citizens in South Africa. In response to xenophobic attacks, the Nigerian government has on several occasions summoned South African envoys, issued travel advisories, and even threatened diplomatic sanctions. This has created an atmosphere of tension between two countries that should ideally work as partners in continental development.

Furthermore, economic ties have suffered setbacks due to the fact that Nigerian businesses and nationals in South Africa have been frequent targets of violence, leading to loss of lives, destruction of property, and disruption of commercial activities. Multinational companies of South African origin operating in Nigeria such as MTN, Shoprite, and Multichoice have also faced backlash, including boycotts and retaliatory attacks. This has

weakened investor confidence and undermined trade relations between the two biggest economies in Africa. Xenophobic violence has created deep resentment among ordinary Nigerians toward South Africans, fuelling narratives of betrayal given Nigeria’s historic role in supporting South Africa during the apartheid era. Such hostility makes cultural exchange, academic collaboration, and tourism less attractive between the two countries. Moreover, “continental leadership and regional integration have been undermined. This is because Nigeria and South Africa are expected to drive the African Union’s vision of unity and development, especially within frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).”¹ However, mistrust born from xenophobic crises has weakened cooperation and diminished their collective ability to champion African solidarity on global platforms.

In essence, xenophobic violence has gone beyond being a domestic South African issue—it has become a regional and continental concern that directly affects South Africa–Nigeria relations. Unless deliberate efforts are made through stronger diplomatic engagement, civic education, and policy measures to protect foreign nationals, the recurring violence will continue to strain bilateral ties, weaken economic cooperation, and hinder the dream of a united and progressive Africa. Below are some implications of xenophobic violence on South Africa – Nigerian relations:

Diplomatic Implications of Xenophobic Violence on South African – Nigerian Relations

“Xenophobic violence has far-reaching consequences beyond the immediate social and economic disruptions it causes within the affected country. It undermines diplomatic

relations, weakens regional cooperation, and damages a nation's international reputation. When foreign nationals are attacked, displaced, or even killed, the affected states are compelled to react, often in ways that strain bilateral and multilateral relations."² Such violence therefore represents not just a domestic challenge but also a significant diplomatic crisis. One of the most immediate diplomatic implications of xenophobic violence is the erosion of trust between the host country and the countries whose citizens have been attacked. For instance, when South African citizens have engaged in xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and other African migrants, Nigeria and other states have frequently expressed outrage, summoning ambassadors, issuing travel advisories, and at times recalling their envoys. These actions create tension between states and weaken the bonds of mutual cooperation and understanding.

Furthermore, xenophobic violence complicates regional integration efforts. "In contexts such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), xenophobic attacks contradict the ideals of African unity and free movement of people. States experiencing such violence are often accused of undermining collective security and regional solidarity."³ As a result, trust in regional agreements and frameworks is diminished, making it more difficult to pursue initiatives such as cross-border trade, infrastructural projects, and shared security arrangements. Diplomatically, xenophobic violence also undermines a country's soft power and international image. A state known for allowing or failing to curb such violence is seen as unsafe and intolerant, which diminishes its attractiveness for foreign investment, tourism, and international

partnerships. Moreover, it provides foreign governments with justification to criticize, sanction, or disengage diplomatically from the affected country, thereby isolating it in the global community.

Moreover, xenophobic violence may provoke retaliatory measures by affected countries. For example, governments whose nationals have been attacked might choose to expel the host country's citizens, restrict trade relations, or limit diplomatic cooperation in order to protect their own interests and demonstrate disapproval. These actions can escalate into full-blown diplomatic conflicts that affect not just governments but also ordinary citizens who rely on international cooperation for trade, education, and employment. We can therefore say that xenophobic violence poses serious diplomatic implications that transcend the boundaries of the host country. It damages bilateral relations, threatens regional integration, undermines a nation's international reputation, and creates a cycle of retaliatory measures among states. Addressing xenophobia, therefore, is not only a moral or domestic necessity but also a crucial step toward maintaining peaceful and productive diplomatic relations in an increasingly interconnected world.

Economic Consequences on Bilateral Trade and Investment between South Africa and Nigeria

South Africa and Nigeria, as two of the most influential economies in Africa, play a pivotal role in shaping the continent's economic trajectory. Nigeria, with its vast oil resources and large population, represents a major consumer market and energy supplier, while South Africa remains a hub of industrialization, financial services, and advanced

infrastructure. The bilateral economic relationship between these two nations has evolved over time, marked by periods of cooperation, tension, and competition. In other words, the economic relationship between South Africa and Nigeria, as two of Africa's largest economies, has long been a central axis in shaping continental growth and cooperation. Both countries serve as economic powerhouses—South Africa being an industrial and financial hub, while Nigeria stands as Africa's most populous nation and a leading oil exporter.

However, the bilateral trade and investment ties between the two nations have experienced both periods of growth and tension, influenced by domestic policies, regional politics, and socio-economic challenges. The economic consequences of this relationship are profound, reflecting opportunities for mutual growth as well as persistent vulnerabilities. "One of the significant economic consequences of South Africa–Nigeria relations is the expansion of bilateral trade flows. South Africa exports manufactured goods, machinery, vehicles, processed foods, and services to Nigeria, while Nigeria primarily exports crude oil and related petroleum products."⁴ This trade structure underscores a complementary economic relationship: Nigeria relies on industrial imports while South Africa depends on energy resources. Over time, trade has created opportunities for diversification and market access for businesses on both sides. However, challenges such as trade imbalances, foreign exchange restrictions in Nigeria, and tariff-related barriers have sometimes limited the full potential of these economic exchanges.

Investment has also been a defining feature of bilateral ties, particularly through South African multinational corporations operating in Nigeria. Companies like MTN, Shoprite, and Multichoice have played significant roles in Nigeria's telecommunications, retail, and entertainment industries. Their investments have contributed to job creation, technology transfer, and improved consumer services in Nigeria. Conversely, Nigerian investment in South Africa has been relatively limited, largely concentrated in the energy and finance sectors. This uneven investment flow reflects disparities in economic development and infrastructural capacity between the two nations, but it has also spurred debates over equitable benefits and reciprocity in bilateral relations. Despite the gains, tensions arising from socio-political issues, particularly xenophobic violence in South Africa have had economic consequences on trade and investment with Nigeria. Several Nigerian-owned businesses in South Africa have been attacked, while Nigerian authorities have, at times, threatened retaliation through economic measures. Such tensions undermine investor confidence, disrupt supply chains, and strain diplomatic goodwill necessary for smooth economic relations. These incidents highlight the fragility of economic partnerships when not supported by strong political and social cohesion.

Moreover, the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a new framework that could strengthen economic relations between South Africa and Nigeria. If effectively implemented, it could reduce trade barriers, expand intra-African trade, and encourage industrial integration between the two economies. This holds the potential to mitigate existing trade imbalances and foster a more sustainable and mutually beneficial

economic partnership. However, realizing this potential requires overcoming protectionist policies, regulatory hurdles, and infrastructural deficiencies in both countries. In essence, the economic consequences of bilateral trade and investment between South Africa and Nigeria reveal a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. While trade and investment have fostered growth, job creation, and technology transfer, underlying tensions and structural imbalances remain obstacles to deeper integration. The future of their economic relationship depends on political stability, social cohesion, and a commitment to regional cooperation through frameworks like the AfCFTA. Strengthening economic ties between the two giants will not only benefit them but also contribute significantly to Africa's broader economic transformation.

In other words, South African investment in Nigeria has been particularly significant in sectors such as telecommunications, retail, and entertainment. MTN Nigeria, for example, has emerged as one of the largest contributors to Nigeria's telecommunications industry, providing jobs, boosting connectivity, and contributing substantially to government revenue through taxes and license fees. Similarly, South African retail giants like Shoprite and media firms like Multichoice have expanded consumer choices and created employment opportunities. In contrast, Nigerian investment in South Africa has been relatively modest, largely focused on the oil, banking, and energy sectors. This asymmetry reflects differences in industrial development and business infrastructure between the two economies. While South African companies thrive in Nigeria's large consumer market, Nigerian businesses face regulatory and operational

challenges in South Africa. Nonetheless, this investment flow has generated economic interlinkages that bind both countries together.

Despite the mutual benefits, bilateral trade and investment have been hindered by recurring tensions. Xenophobic violence in South Africa, often targeting African immigrants, has strained relations with Nigeria. Nigerian-owned businesses in South Africa have suffered losses, and retaliatory threats from Nigeria have occasionally affected trade and diplomatic cooperation. Such instability undermines investor confidence and disrupts economic ties. Also, both countries struggle with bureaucratic red tape, regulatory inconsistencies, and infrastructural inadequacies that impede smoother trade relations. Currency volatility in Nigeria, coupled with restrictive foreign exchange policies, has also discouraged foreign investors, including South African firms.

Political Tensions and Regional Cooperation as an Implication of Xenophobic Violence on South Africa–Nigerian Relations

Xenophobic violence in South Africa has had far-reaching consequences not only on the domestic front but also on its relations with other African states, particularly Nigeria. As two of Africa's largest economies and political powerhouses, the relationship between South Africa and Nigeria is critical to continental stability, trade, and integration. However, recurring xenophobic attacks against foreign nationals, including Nigerians, have strained diplomatic ties and raised questions about the future of regional cooperation within Africa.

“One of the major implications of xenophobic violence is the heightened political tension between South Africa and Nigeria. The violent targeting of Nigerian nationals has

sparked widespread outrage among Nigerian citizens and policymakers, often leading to the summoning of ambassadors, diplomatic protests, and temporary closure of diplomatic missions.”⁵ On several occasions, the Nigerian government has threatened economic and political retaliation, reflecting a deep erosion of trust. These tensions weaken the political goodwill necessary for both countries to cooperate on pressing continental issues such as peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, and sustainable development.

Furthermore, the persistence of xenophobic violence undermines the spirit of regional cooperation within platforms such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). “Nigeria, as a leading voice in West Africa, plays a central role in advocating for African solidarity, while South Africa is influential within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Tensions between them, therefore, ripple across regional blocs, making it difficult to foster unity on matters such as the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), collective security mechanisms, and cross-border investment policies.”⁶ Instead of strengthening regional integration, xenophobic violence fosters suspicion, nationalism, and protectionism, undermining the vision of a united Africa.

However, xenophobic violence has also created opportunities for renewed dialogue and cooperation. Both South Africa and Nigeria have, at different times, set up bilateral commissions to address grievances, improve migration management, and promote people-to-people relations. The crises have also drawn attention to the need for stronger continental frameworks on migration and the protection of African citizens across borders. Thus, while

the violence fuels immediate political strain, it also highlights the urgency of collective action against intolerance, poverty, and inequality—root causes of hostility towards foreign nationals.

From the above, we can see that xenophobic violence has dual implications for South Africa–Nigerian relations: it generates political tensions that threaten diplomatic trust, while simultaneously pushing both countries toward deeper cooperation in pursuit of regional stability and integration. The way forward lies in addressing socio-economic grievances in South Africa, protecting the rights of migrants, and building stronger African institutions that uphold solidarity over division. Only then can South Africa and Nigeria, as continental leaders, turn a history of friction into a shared commitment to unity and development.

Implications for African Unity and Continental Leadership

“The phenomenon of xenophobic violence in South Africa, particularly when directed at Nigerians and other African nationals, has far-reaching consequences beyond bilateral relations. It strikes at the very heart of African unity and threatens the vision of continental solidarity promoted by the African Union (AU) and Pan-Africanist ideals.”⁷ South Africa and Nigeria, as two of the continent’s largest economies and political powerhouses, are expected to spearhead regional integration and leadership. However, recurrent xenophobic attacks and the diplomatic rifts they cause undermine this collective mission, casting a shadow over Africa’s prospects for unity and effective continental leadership.

One major implication of xenophobic violence is the erosion of trust among African states. The African Union was founded on the principle of solidarity and cooperation, yet xenophobic incidents in South Africa challenge these ideals. When Nigerians, who historically supported South Africa's liberation struggle, become targets of hostility, it creates a perception of betrayal. This weakens the bonds of brotherhood that should unify African nations, replacing them with suspicion, bitterness, and disillusionment. Such erosion of trust undermines Africa's ability to build the solidarity necessary for confronting common challenges like poverty, insecurity, and underdevelopment. Furthermore, xenophobia undermines the credibility of African leadership on the global stage. "Both Nigeria and South Africa occupy influential positions in regional organizations such as the AU and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and they often present themselves as spokesmen for Africa in global forums like the United Nations and the G20."⁸ However, when these countries are embroiled in diplomatic spats and accusations of negligence in protecting African migrants, it diminishes their moral authority to advocate for Africa's collective interests. A continent struggling with internal disunity loses bargaining power and risks being marginalized in global politics.

It is remarkable to note that xenophobic violence poses a direct threat to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a flagship project of the AU aimed at deepening economic integration. For such a project to succeed, free movement of people, goods, and services across borders is essential. Hostility toward African migrants in South Africa directly contradicts this vision, discouraging mobility and cross-border investment. If

unresolved, such violence can slow the progress of AfCFTA, thereby delaying Africa's economic transformation and diminishing the continent's global competitiveness.

Another implication lies in the symbolism of leadership. Nigeria and South Africa are often regarded as the "twin pillars" of Africa, expected to jointly provide direction for the continent. However, xenophobic tensions weaken their partnership and fuel rivalry rather than cooperation. Instead of jointly championing Pan-Africanist ideals, their relationship becomes defined by blame, reprisals, and defensive diplomacy. This leadership vacuum creates opportunities for external powers to exploit African divisions and diminishes the continent's ability to act collectively in addressing continental crises.

From the above, it can be seen that xenophobic violence threatens the Pan-Africanist dream of African unity espoused by leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Nelson Mandela. Also, the AU's Agenda 2063 envisions "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens."⁹ is also being undermined by xenophobia this as xenophobia fosters exclusion and disintegration. It must be stated clearly here that if South Africa and Nigeria cannot rise above domestic challenges and present a united front, the dream of a united Africa risks remaining a distant aspiration. Hence, xenophobic violence in South Africa has implications that transcend bilateral tensions with Nigeria; it threatens the foundations of African unity and undermines the continent's leadership potential. It erodes trust among African states, weakens continental credibility in global affairs, jeopardizes economic integration, and diminishes the cooperative leadership of Africa's two strongest powers. For Africa to achieve its aspirations of unity and global relevance, both South

Africa and Nigeria must overcome xenophobic divides and recommit to Pan-African solidarity. Only through unity can the continent assert itself effectively in the twenty-first century.

Strained Diplomatic Relations and the Erosion of Mutual Trust

One of the most profound implications of xenophobic violence on South Africa–Nigerian relations is the strain it imposes on diplomatic ties and the gradual erosion of mutual trust between both nations. South Africa and Nigeria, as two leading powers on the African continent, have historically shared a relationship marked by cooperation, particularly in the post-apartheid era when Nigeria played a crucial role in supporting South Africa’s liberation struggles. However, the recurrent episodes of xenophobic violence targeting Nigerians and other African nationals in South Africa have threatened this bond. Nigerian citizens, who often fall victim to violent attacks, perceive these acts as a direct assault on national dignity, thereby compelling the Nigerian government to react with diplomatic protests, summoning South African envoys, and at times threatening retaliatory measures. Such tensions undermine the spirit of African unity and fraternity envisioned by both nations in their regional and continental engagements.

Furthermore, “repeated incidents of violence create a climate of suspicion, reducing the willingness of governments and citizens alike to foster people-to-people and state-to-state cooperation.”¹⁰ The erosion of trust does not only damage bilateral relations but also diminishes the collective leadership capacity of both countries in championing continental agendas such as the African Union’s vision of integration and peace. Thus, xenophobic

violence becomes more than an isolated social crisis; it morphs into a diplomatic fault line that destabilizes cooperation between South Africa and Nigeria, threatening their shared responsibility in shaping Africa's political and economic future. In other words, Xenophobic violence in South Africa has had a recurring and destabilizing effect on its diplomatic relations with Nigeria, gradually eroding the mutual trust that once characterized their partnership. Historically, Nigeria and South Africa enjoyed cordial relations, especially in the aftermath of apartheid when Nigeria provided enormous financial, moral, and diplomatic support for South Africa's liberation struggle. "Nigeria's role in championing sanctions against the apartheid regime, funding the Southern African Relief Fund, and offering scholarships to South African exiles built a foundation of solidarity between both nations."¹¹ This historical bond created expectations of reciprocal respect and cooperation. However, recurrent outbreaks of xenophobic violence, particularly against Nigerians, have strained this legacy of goodwill and cast doubts over South Africa's commitment to African brotherhood.

At the diplomatic level, incidents of violence often lead to heated exchanges between officials of both countries. The Nigerian government has, on several occasions, summoned South African diplomats to register its displeasure over the maltreatment of its citizens, while calls for boycotts of South African businesses in Nigeria have further inflamed tensions. These diplomatic spats weaken trust, as both nations interpret each other's responses as either inadequate or hostile. In some cases, Nigeria has recalled its ambassadors, and South Africa has had to issue repeated reassurances, which highlight the

fragile state of their bilateral relations. Such tensions reduce the possibility of effective collaboration on broader African issues, since suspicion and resentment overshadow dialogue.

Moreover, the erosion of trust extends beyond government officials to the broader public perception in both nations. Nigerians often see South Africa's inability to curb xenophobic attacks as indifference, or even tacit approval, of the violence. This sentiment fuels resentment and creates pressure on Nigerian leaders to adopt tougher stances against South Africa. On the other hand, some South Africans, driven by socio-economic frustrations, view Nigerians and other African migrants as competitors for limited resources, which reinforces the cycle of hostility. When these public perceptions spill into the diplomatic space, they complicate reconciliation efforts, as governments must balance domestic political pressures with the need to sustain international cooperation.

It should be noted that the long-term danger of strained diplomatic relations and eroded trust is the weakening of Africa's two largest economies as partners in continental leadership. Both nations are pivotal within the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and their inability to present a united front undermines continental cohesion. Their frequent disagreements provide opportunities for external powers to exploit divisions within Africa, thereby diminishing the continent's bargaining power on the global stage. Thus, xenophobic violence is not just a domestic South African crisis but

a continental problem that compromises the vision of a united, peaceful, and cooperative Africa.

Threats to People-to-People Relations and Social Cohesion

Beyond formal diplomacy and trade, xenophobic violence directly affects the everyday interactions between South Africans and Nigerians, fostering hostility and mistrust among ordinary citizens. Nigerians living in South Africa often face discrimination, harassment, and violence, which in turn shape negative perceptions about South Africa back home. These hostile experiences create barriers to cultural exchange, educational cooperation, and migration flows. For instance, Nigerian students and professionals, who once viewed South Africa as a hub for quality education and employment, now express reluctance to relocate due to safety concerns. Similarly, South Africans visiting or working in Nigeria sometimes encounter resentment as a result of retaliatory attitudes. Such social fragmentation erodes the possibility of building strong people-to-people networks, which are essential for sustaining long-term cooperation. Instead of fostering unity, xenophobic violence entrenches stereotypes and antagonism, making reconciliation even more difficult.

Xenophobic violence in South Africa also extends beyond the spheres of diplomacy and economics to deeply affect people-to-people relations, thereby undermining the social cohesion that should exist between Nigerians and South Africans. Historically, both societies share cultural ties forged through migration, education, business, and popular culture. Nigerian professionals, students, and entrepreneurs have long viewed South Africa

as a land of opportunity, while South African businesses and entertainers have equally benefited from Nigeria's vast market and cultural influence. These everyday exchanges are crucial for building solidarity between citizens and fostering continental unity. However, recurrent episodes of xenophobic attacks erode this goodwill, fostering mistrust, resentment, and hostility among ordinary people.

“For Nigerians living in South Africa, the experience of xenophobia is not only physical but also psychological. Many faces harassment, exclusion, and the constant fear of violence, which creates a sense of alienation in a country that once symbolized liberation and African solidarity. Nigerian traders, students, and professionals often find themselves stigmatized, labelled as job stealers, criminals, or exploiters, despite their legitimate contributions to South Africa's economy and society.”¹² This hostile environment breeds trauma and forces many Nigerians to reconsider their long-term future in South Africa, reducing opportunities for integration and peaceful coexistence. Families are disrupted, communities live in fear, and a generation of Nigerians grows up associating South Africa not with Pan-African unity but with rejection and violence.

The effects of xenophobic violence are also felt in Nigeria, where public anger toward South Africa often translates into resentment toward South Africans and their businesses. Protests against South African companies such as MTN, Shoprite, and Multichoice during waves of xenophobic attacks reflect how ordinary Nigerians internalize these tensions and redirect them against South African interests. This climate of hostility fosters reciprocal suspicion, making it difficult for South Africans and Nigerians to interact

without bias or fear. In the long term, such animosity threatens cross-cultural collaboration, educational exchange, and even tourism between the two countries.

Conclusion

A critical casualty of this social tension is the weakening of Pan-African solidarity. People-to-people relations are at the heart of African integration projects such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. These initiatives rely not only on state agreements but also on the willingness of African citizens to live, trade, and cooperate across borders. When South Africans view Nigerians as threats, and Nigerians perceive South Africans as hostile, the vision of a united Africa becomes increasingly unattainable. Instead of fostering brotherhood, xenophobic violence entrenches stereotypes, widens divides, and creates barriers to mutual respect. Furthermore, xenophobia creates an intergenerational challenge to social cohesion. Younger Nigerians and South Africans growing up in this climate of hostility are more likely to inherit resentment and prejudice, making reconciliation even harder in the future. This cycle undermines cultural diplomacy, academic partnerships, and people-centered initiatives that could otherwise strengthen bilateral relations. Unless addressed through deliberate social education, inclusive policies, and cultural exchange programs, xenophobic violence will continue to poison people-to-people relations and erode the social fabric that binds Africans together.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, xenophobic violence in South Africa between 2008 and 2021 presents not only a profound domestic challenge but also a significant impediment to the nation's external relations, particularly with other African states. The recurrent attacks against African migrants exposed contradictions within South Africa's democratic ideals, as the country oscillated between its constitutional commitment to human rights and the persistent socio-economic inequalities that fuel resentment among marginalized citizens. While poverty, unemployment, and perceptions of economic competition are often cited as root causes, the violent manifestations have been far more damaging than their origins, as they eroded the sense of pan-African solidarity that was instrumental in South Africa's liberation struggle.

The implications for South Africa–South relations during this period are deeply troubling. On a diplomatic level, the violence strained bilateral ties with countries whose citizens were victims of the attacks, leading to protests, temporary recalls of ambassadors, and widespread criticism across the continent. Economically, it threatened regional cooperation and undermined integration initiatives such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), as trust and goodwill essential ingredients for collaboration were weakened. Socially and politically, xenophobia created an image of South Africa as a hostile environment for

fellow Africans, tarnishing its moral authority as a continental leader and destabilizing the spirit of African unity enshrined in the African Union.

More broadly, these developments demonstrate how internal social crises can reverberate beyond national borders, complicating foreign policy objectives and creating rifts in regional solidarity. For South Africa, the challenge of addressing xenophobic violence is not only about safeguarding human rights within its territory but also about protecting its credibility as a leader in Africa's collective development agenda. To move forward, South Africa must balance domestic socio-economic reforms with stronger regional diplomacy, demonstrating through concrete action that its prosperity is tied to the prosperity of its neighbours. Without such a recalibration, xenophobic violence will continue to undermine South Africa's standing in Africa and hinder the broader vision of continental integration, peace, and shared growth.

In essence, xenophobic violence in South Africa from 2008 to 2021 should not be understood merely as sporadic outbursts of intolerance but as symptomatic of deeper structural and socio-economic crises that have been inadequately addressed since the end of apartheid. The persistence of inequality, unemployment, poor service delivery, and political disillusionment has created fertile ground for scapegoating foreigners, particularly African migrants, who are wrongly perceived as competitors for scarce opportunities. This reality points to a governance challenge, where the state's failure to provide sustainable livelihoods and inclusive economic growth has inadvertently allowed resentment to be directed toward vulnerable groups instead of the systems that perpetuate inequality.

The implications for South Africa–South relations during this period extend beyond strained diplomatic exchanges to the erosion of the very ideals of African solidarity. Many African states that once stood firmly with South Africa during its liberation struggle expressed disillusionment at the violent treatment of their citizens, interpreting it as a betrayal of the pan-Africanist vision of unity, freedom, and mutual support. This fracture has not only weakened trust between South Africa and its neighbours but has also complicated regional cooperation, trade, and security arrangements. In the context of continental aspirations such as the African Union’s Agenda 2063, xenophobia directly undermines efforts toward integration, mobility, and collective prosperity, replacing them with suspicion, division, and fragmentation.

Furthermore, xenophobic violence has tarnished South Africa’s global image, diminishing its moral authority as a beacon of post-apartheid reconciliation and human rights. The very principles of Ubuntu, once celebrated as a philosophy of inclusiveness and shared humanity, appear contradicted by recurrent episodes of hostility against fellow Africans. Unless deliberate efforts are made to confront this contradiction, South Africa risks further isolation within Africa, which could have adverse economic and political repercussions, especially as other emerging African economies compete for influence and partnerships on the global stage. Hence, we can see that xenophobic violence is both a domestic crisis and a continental problem. For South Africa to reclaim its rightful position as a leader in Africa, it must demonstrate a genuine commitment to eradicating the socio-economic conditions that fuel intolerance, while investing in education and awareness

campaigns that promote tolerance and African unity. In addition, stronger diplomatic mechanisms should be established to reassure neighboring countries of South Africa's commitment to protecting their citizens and to fostering cooperation based on mutual benefit. A failure to address this issue comprehensively will not only jeopardize South Africa's internal cohesion but will also continue to damage its external relations, thus undermining the broader dream of a united and prosperous Africa.

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