

by Chris Kabwato

When the xenophobic violence broke out on 11 May 2008 I recalled the prescient warning that I had received from my cousin when I first came to live permanently in South Africa. He told me to dress like a local. I had given him a waistcoat from West Africa years back and it still hung in his wardrobe – unworn. To wear that would have marked him out. He also gave me further advice – do not live in the township. He lived on Bree Street in Central Johannesburg. But he had gone further – he spoke Zulu fluently. So he was very much at home in Joburg. This was a decade ago.

What caused the mayhem?

Since the eruption of the violence there has been a lot of soul-searching. The answers to this question have been varied. They start with the economic competition between migrants and the South African working classes. The arguments here are that with the government, having failed to create employment, provide housing and adequate education, has enabled more mobile migrants to secure jobs/income at the expense of locals. Employers are also accused of taking undocumented foreign nationals because they can be paid lower wages and are not unionised. Added to this argument is the reported pressure on education, medical facilities and housing by the “tsunami” of migrants as the *Saturday Star* described them.

The other argument is that apartheid

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had created a legacy of a people cut off from the continent but also deeply divided along ethnic lines. The isolation of South Africa created a sense of exceptionalism and ignorance of what lay north of the Limpopo. You fear or hate that which you do not know seems to be the core of this argument. Indeed one minister bewailed that his government had neglected to educate its population on Africa and other Africans.

But if you hate people does it have to translate to violence? That was also explained by pointing out that South Africa had a deeply rooted culture of violence emanating from the brutal nature of the apartheid state. Violence permeated the fabric of South African society, so this argument goes. The home, the school and the streets are scarred by the scourge of violence.

And why did the violence spread so rapidly from the cauldron of Alexandra to other parts of Gauteng and then to the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal?

The first scapegoat was the media – if the newspapers and television had not carried images of the inferno in Alexandra the violence would not have spread. The other scapegoat was the mobile phone – texting was blamed for this.

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by Sim Kyazze

On 29 January 2007 I travelled on an SAA flight from Entebbe International Airport in Uganda to OR Tambo International in Johannesburg. Somehow, I had forgotten, ignored or failed to travel with my Yellow Fever Certificate and an Immigration Officer let me have it.

“You are not going through here unless you get a Yellow Fever certificate,” she said, in response to an embarrassing display of excuse making. I had three choices, she said: one was to be deported, at my cost: R4 500; two, be quarantined at the airport for at least a week: R600 a day or R4 200; and three, get a government-issued vaccine at the airport: US\$88 (or R700). There are no prizes

and most efficient economy. It has indeed often been said that because South Africa’s first world economy is managed by a third world state institution, the contradictions complicate all explanations, including those for the recent violent attacks against foreigners that left at least 60 people dead.

You have to marvel at a state that has the capacity to impose its will on all who live in the republic (citizens and foreigners alike) in some instances, but fails so miserably in others. Foreigners who have attempted to regularise their status in South Africa (getting jobs, work, study or refugee permits, permanent residence, etc) know how long and tedious the processes are. Yet, it’s not too long ago that a local television broadcast an investigative piece during which they trailed

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for guessing which I chose. Unfortunately, the vaccine combined with an existing illness to keep me morose and bed-ridden for most of 2007.

The same day I learnt that I would never walk through OR Tambo without a Yellow Fever certificate, hundreds of illegal immigrants slipped into South Africa through its porous borders with Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. For the rest of South Africa’s neighbours, the attractions of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town are largely economic. The country has Africa’s largest, most dynamic

a Zimbabwean woman with a hidden camera, and recorded how easily she was able to get seven genuine ID books after paying small bribes at Home Affairs offices in different parts of the country.

South Africa was given less than 10 years to prepare for 2010 and all indications are that the most critical infrastructure (the Gautrain, stadia, etc) will be ready before the world’s best footballers jet in. Over the last 14 years however, the same state institutions have somehow failed to provide adequate housing of the most basic kind – just four walls and a roof – to the majority of South Africans.

It is imperative that public intellectuals are

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But the government went a bit further and blamed the violence on criminal elements and an unnamed “third force”. A few days later the “third force” thesis was withdrawn.

Soul-searching?

But the soul-searching was at once filled with sincerity and with hypocrisy. There was an attempt to portray xenophobia as rooted in the working classes and the poor. But for foreign nationals like me who have had to deal with immigration, Home Affairs and the police we know that xenophobia is located within the state and in various spheres of society. If the people of Alexandra had grown accustomed to the police stopping any black person and asking them silly questions in a local language and then bundling them off to Lindela deportation centre, who were they to behave differently? A migrant is a not a person. So you can sing

a song *Makverekwere* and it will be hit.

Violence against migrants had long been institutionalised and it was time to democratise it so people could also participate. To the Somalis in Khayelitsha they might as well have shouted: “One Somali, one bullet” but despite the regular killings the police did not move in nor did the local community leadership protect them. The displaced Zimbabweans I spoke to in Cape Town told me of how they were given warnings to leave within two weeks before the Alexandra violence. The warnings were done on the trains and by neighbours. The street committees and their leadership did not stop the violence. They seem to have abetted it.

The dominant media raised critical debate around xenophobia via talkshows, opinion columns, letters etc. However, one thing was absent in the debate. What was the value of migration to any economy and what did the global studies indicate, for example in the US? So whereas there was the charity and Pan-Africanist dimensions in the debate, hard questions were not asked that broke the stereotype of the foreign national as an unskilled individual forging a South African identity card.

The other unresolved question was around semantics. Was this xenophobia or Afro-phobia? Was it self-hatred? If Polish migrants were living in Alexandra would they have been attacked as well?

There was some skirting around uncomfortable issues as when there was a furore from the middle classes in northern Johannesburg when some camps for the displaced were moved into their

neighbourhoods. Issues of crime and hygiene were raised by the same classes that had condemned the violence. Good if those migrants keep to Alex and come in occasionally do the garden or serve us in the sushi bar.

In other media there was a condemnation of tabloids such as the *Daily Sun* for having fanned the flames of xenophobia with use of terms like “aliens” and lukewarm condemnation of the violence. In his usual style Deon du Plessis, *Daily Sun* publisher, responded by stating that the paper simply spoke the language of “the man in the blue overalls”. If the “man” used the word alien and did not like foreign nationals then the *Daily Sun* would capture that exactly. Period.

But what was not probed was whether the media as a whole was clean on the xenophobia issue. Over the years the same media have raised the spectre of the millions of migrants overwhelming the South African social welfare system and called for effective policing of the borders. The same foreign nationals had been blamed for the high crime rates – everytime a robbery occurs I actually pray that there is no Zimbabwean involved because you know what will come next.

The disconnect

The xenophobic violence has revealed the disconnect between the “ubuntu” rhetoric and the reality. A president-poet who clearly loves Africa and has premised his foreign policy on the political

and economic revival of Africa has been betrayed in his own backyard. The rhetoric of “South Africa belongs to all who live in it” rings rather hollow. So as the middle classes chatter over a glass of red wine and condemn the violence and its implications, the communities where the foreign nationals lived remain largely unengaged. The approach now is to dismantle the camps because they are an obvious embarrassment and to push for “reintegration”. The catch is the foreign nationals do not wish to go back. Some of those who have gone back have been robbed again. So the president can apologise and most foreign nationals seem to appreciate his sincerity but they are also cognisant that something has changed irrevocably. Their suspicions of black communities, which used to linger uneasily below the surface, have now been pushed to the fore.

In all this mess the main eye is on the World Cup in 2010 and the need to spruce up South Africa’s image. It is no longer easy to say “2010 is Africa’s World Cup”so expect a lot more PSAs and feel-good programmes on Africa and how we all belong.

We will be going to bed with one eye open.

and reality

vocal in their condemnation of the perpetrators of these xenophobic attacks. But to pretend that these displays of impotent rage against foreigners were simple criminal acts is a fallacious failing and fuels the worst fears of those who think that the government of South Africa as it is currently constituted, has a rather large set of tin ears which prevent it from hearing the anguish of its citizens.

South Africa’s poor are often worse off than the continent’s other haves-not mostly because the majority can’t subsist off the land. For better or worse, this is another apartheid-era scar. Moreover, it was apartheid that disenfranchised millions of people of colour, denied them a decent education and access to rare skills, confined them to townships and low-paying menial jobs, and

for raw materials has in turn buoyed resource-rich countries in Latin America, Russia, the Middle East and Africa.

Sassen (1995: 63) argues that “economic globalisation denationalises national economies; in contrast, immigration is renationalising politics”. Indeed across the world, people are increasingly demanding more information flow and capital at the same time as they are demanding tighter border controls. This has happened in the US, Australia, in continental Europe and in Russia. Zimbabwean illegals are therefore not any different from the millions of Mexicans and other Latin Americans who have snuck into the United States over the years.

because the action confers upon the foreigner a certain status almost equal to his own. The case of other Africans in South Africa is even more complicated because many sacrificed a great deal to help get rid of apartheid.

Essentially, this is the story of xenophobia, nationalism and identity in South Africa. The rise of Brazil, India, China and Russia, together with the unpredictable nature of globalisation have combined to create spectacular wealth for a few, and extreme hardship for millions around the world. Some of both happen to be in South Africa. The worry is the trajectory of these spontaneous outbursts of popular anger. Once they are done

it defies simple analysis

generally beat down their spirits. For these people, 1994 could not have come sooner. Unfortunately, the right to vote does not put food on the table. Neither does it create jobs, pay for healthcare, or transform a largely unskilled workforce into inventors. These most basic needs of people are the responsibility of government.

Unfortunately, the ANC government has been more successful in dominating the political arena. The recent economic success has been mostly due to good macro-economic management by the Finance Ministry and the Reserve Bank, as well as the global boom that has seen China and India become economic juggernauts. Their insatiable demand

Ten years ago, there were about 200 million immigrants, with just half of them in the West (Sassen 1995). The rest (refugees or illegal immigrants) were scattered around the South (from the SADC region into South Africa; from West Africa into Libya; from Rwanda into Tanzania and Uganda; from Palestine and Iraq to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, etc).

By its very nature, immigration creates a tension between the protection of human rights (for refugees or highly-skilled workers), and the preservation of national sovereignty. To put it crudely, a man in Polokwane seems justified to think that granting a Zimbabwean refugee status “devalues” his own rights as a South African citizen

with foreigners, who is to say that they will not pick on the new black middle class; or big business; or whites?

The next ANC government (probably led by Jacob Zuma) will have the unenviable task of raising the spirits of a large constituency of poor South Africans, while at the same time dealing with a new global order in which skills and capital are more portable. Put simply, there will be more foreigners in South Africa in years to come. The difficulty is how they will be managed.

References

Sassen, S. 1995. *Losing Control? Sovereignty In An Age of Globalisation*. New York: Columbia University Press.