

State facilitating xenophobia by attributing violence to ‘criminality’

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“THREE men came into my shop and asked me for money. I gave them everything I had. They then told me to go into my room that was behind the shop. They said: ‘When we’re done with you, *kuerekwere* (foreigner), you won’t stay in this country anymore – you will run back to your own country.’ Then they took turns to rape me.”

The Somali woman who told a researcher of this brutal attack had no expectation that the perpetrators would bother to hide, let alone be brought to justice.

Violent xenophobia is a regular feature of life in South Africa, where everyday animosity frequently spills over into violence against migrants and refugees and their economic

enterprises. Some incidents reach the scrutiny of the media and officialdom – such as the attack on a Nigerian man by Cape Town police officers in March that went viral after it was recorded by an onlooker – but most remain invisible and unremarked.

The Southern African Migration Programme has been monitoring the perceptions and attitudes of South Africans towards migrants and refugees for close to two decades. Its periodic surveys provide unequivocal evidence of deep-rooted and pervasive hostility towards migrants and refugees in the country.

The programme’s most recent attitudinal survey found that South Africans particularly loath migrants from Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Somalia. Perceptions of an increase in the number of migrants (often

represented with aquatic metaphors such as “floods” and “tidal waves”) intensify the levels of threat attached to them.

Rights and entitlements for residents are directly and in a discriminatory fashion linked to citizenship, drawing the boundaries between those who are seen to belong and others who are not.

The perceived threat is influenced by the myths and biases against migrant groups accepted by citizens, including that they are responsible for South Africa’s high crime rate, that they bring disease, that they “steal” South African jobs, services and resources and that they are all illegally in the country.

Violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees continues to be explained away by politicians as

criminal acts by isolated elements.

Another form of denialism shifts the blame from xenophobia to the state’s dereliction of its duties, particularly its failure to control borders. According to this view, the problem is that the state has not seriously engaged with the “foreign threat.” It is difficult to see how South Africa’s border and immigration controls can be considered either soft or lenient.

The post-apartheid state has intensified border and immigration enforcement and, even at the height of the 2008 violence, officials were deporting displaced victims they claimed had entered South Africa illegally. State agencies typically focus on identifying irregular migrants among victims of violence and deporting them, reinforcing the

biases and prejudices that fuelled the violence to begin with.

Then there are others who see the violence as a signifier of a broader, deepening social crisis tied to intense competition for scarce resources such as jobs, shelter and services. According to this view, the effects of the inadequate post-apartheid transition have been felt most acutely in marginal urban locations where much of the violence has occurred and where difference has become the site around which the palpable anger and frustrations of those left out has been expressed.

Certainly, the spatial incidence of violence in May 2008 strongly correlated with the geography of poverty. But this simply begs the question of why not all poor areas erupted or why poor South Africans

were not attacking each other with similar ferocity. The economic insecurity of the offenders may account for their extreme anxiety and heightened dissatisfaction, but it does not explain why certain groups were and are singled out for deadly assault.

The crises of governance and frustrated hopes in South Africa have little, if anything, to do with the presence of migrants. These connections need to be constructed more carefully to avoid reproducing the very prejudices that need to be confronted. One cannot deny that there is rivalry between locals and migrants. However, migrants represent a very small minority in terms of South Africa’s total population, and the detrimental effects of this economic competition have been seriously overstated.

Debate over xenophobia needs to be broadened to consider its many and varied expressions, rather than focusing only on acts of violence and whether or not they are motivated by xenophobia. By denying that xenophobia exists and attributing abuse of foreign nationals to “criminality”, the state stands outside the phenomenon, diverting attention from the embedding of xenophobia within its own structures and policies.

● *Crush, an honorary professor at the University of Cape Town, is co-author of the Southern African Migration Programme’s latest publication, “Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: Denialism, Minimalism, Realism” – available for download: <http://imrc.ca/southern-african-migration-programme/>*