**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, karrekoana (demon), you won't stay in this country anymore – you will run back to your own country. Then they took turns to rape you.'

The South African who told a researcher of this brutal attack had no expectation that the perpetrators would bother to bring him to justice.

Vigilante xenophobia is a regular feature of life in South Africa, where everyday animosity frequently spills ever 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 eyewitness – but most remain invisible and unexplored.

The Southern African Migration Programme has been monitoring the perceptions and attitudes of South Africans towards immigrants and refugees for close to two decades. Its programme is based on a longitudinal evidence of deep-rooted and pervasive hostility towards immigrants and refugees in the country. The programme's most recent attitudinal survey found that South Africans particularly hold both migrants from Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Somalia. Perceptions of an increase in the number of migrants (often represented with aquatic metaphors such as “woods” and “tidal waves”) intensify the levels of threat attached to them.

Rights and entitlements for residents are directly and in a substantial majority 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 about 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 illegal 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 denigration shifts the blame from xenophobia to the state's failure as a duty, 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 can resolve its xenophobia if immigration controls can be considered either soft or lenient.

The perception that the state has intensified border and immigration enforcement and, even at the height of the 2008 violence, officials were not deporting displaced victims they claimed had entered South Africa illegally. South Africa's internal and international relations have 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 correlates with the geography of poverty. But this simply begs the question of why not all poor areas were not attacking each other with similar ferocity. The economic insecurity of the offenders may be a signifier of a broader, deepening social crisis tied to intense competition for scarce resources such as jobs and other forms of property. According to this view, the effects of the inadequate post-apartheid transition, especially the rapid and acute marginalization in urban areas where much of the violence has occurred and where deprivation has become the site around which the palpable anger and frustrations of those left out has been expressed.

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