

Xenophobia or Afriphobia?

A worldview revealed



MSN News, Thursday 16 April: At least five people were killed and dozens arrested in South Africa in recent days as residents of the coastal city of Durban began attacking foreigners, their homes and places of business.

The anti-foreigner violence in the busy port city is reminiscent of the 2008 attacks in Johannesburg that killed more than 60 people and displaced thousands. Since Friday, police clashed with protesters, and stores owned by foreign nationals have been targeted and looted, the *BBC* reports. A teenager was among those killed since the fighting started two weeks ago, the South African Police Service said Wednesday.

Disgruntled locals have harassed and attacked foreigners living in Durban, saying they cause social and economic harm and should leave, South African newspaper *The Mail and Guardian* reports. According to *Bloomberg*, police say the attacks began after a group of Durban residents accused a supermarket of replacing its workers with foreigners.

In recent weeks, the violence has forced foreigners living in the towns near Durban out of their homes. Many have ended up in transit camps set up by nonprofit groups. Between 1,272 and 1,472 people are now living in three camps, Police Minister Nkosinathi Nhleko told reporters.

South African President Jacob Zuma has assigned a team of three ministers to end the attacks and has strongly condemned the violence. But he is refusing to call the attacks xenophobic because he says the violence is not directed at all nationalities. South Africa's police minister echoed the president's comments during a press conference on Wednesday. "I can tell you now that this so-called xenophobia is not that. It's more 'Afrophobia'. It's ideologically driven. It is African-on-African. It is not on other nationalities."

SOURCE: <http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/south-africa-grapples-with-xenophobic-attacks/ar-AA4b40dA?ocid=ansNewsweek11>

Beyond xenophobia

Mr Nhleko's comments that the violence is "ideologically driven" are correct. According to *dictionary.com*, the word **xenophobia** means "hatred or fear of foreigners or strangers or of their politics or culture". If the attacks were truly xenophobic and motivated by a fear of **all** foreigners, the attacks would also have been directed at Europeans, Chinese, Indians and Pakistanis (who have escaped most of the current attacks). This would suggest that the fear or hatred in South Africa is not directed at all foreigners.

Media reports indicate that locals are accusing foreigners of causing social and economic harm and are insisting that they leave. The alleged comments made by Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini and Edward Zuma, son of President Zuma – implying that "migrants should pack their bags" and leave – are also significant. Mr Edward Zuma's remarks that "South Africa is a ticking time bomb of foreigners seeking to take control of the country" may have been a critical spark that led to the recent attacks.

There are, however, a multitude of factors that have contributed to the current violence. Poverty and deteriorating economic structures are key considerations. The 'open border' policy of the South African government has also contributed to the intolerance towards foreigners. But perhaps the sudden explosion of violence can also be explored

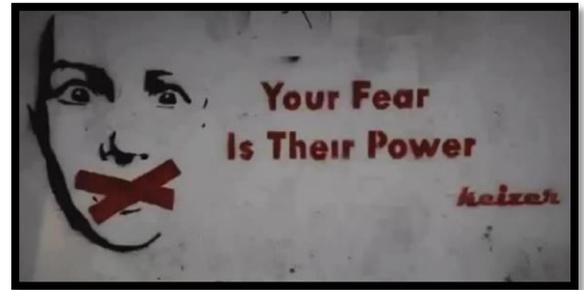
from another angle, not only seen as hatred of foreigners (xenophobia). A scenario seldom explored is the worldviews shared by both victim and aggressor in this context.

Power and fear

Roland Muller, in his book *Honour and Shame: Unlocking the Door*, gives a revealing account of how worldviews determine cultural behaviour and ultimately translate into society and social expressions.

All cultures are rooted in worldviews, and Muller suggests that there are “three basic planes on which worldviews function”, creating extremes and tensions. These three core worldviews are differentiated as:

- guilt and innocence
- shame and honour
- fear and power



Muller explains that these worldviews determine our cultural behavior, and the world today could loosely be divided as follows:

- **Western society** is dominated by a worldview of ‘right and wrong’ or ‘guilt and innocence’, and political convictions in the Western world are based on ‘right policies’ and ‘acceptable politics’.
- **The Middle East and Arab world** operate largely according to a worldview of ‘honour and shame’. While individualism is accepted and admired in the West, conformity to the group is celebrated and pursued in Middle Eastern and Arab countries.
- **Africa, Central and South America** are primarily fear-based cultures, as well as some islands in the Far East.

Violent political conflict in Africa often originates when the leading political party and the official opposition are both rooted in a power-based culture that finds the ultimate solution for conflict in displays of power through violence. A perfect example of a power/fear worldview was seen during the years of the freedom-struggle in South Africa. The popular slogan chanted at every opposition meeting and gathering was “**AMANDLA!**” which translates as “power”. The picture of Mr Mandela on his day of release in 1994 with his fist lifted in the air and the crowds chanting the words “*Amandla!*” still lives vividly in the hearts of many South Africans. The cry was never expressed as “justice” or “freedom”, or as “rights” or “democracy”. The power/fear worldview included and represented the majority sectors of South African society.

What made South Africa unique in an African context during the years of transition was the fact that the two leading political parties – the one who took power and the one who relinquished power – functioned according to two different worldviews.

The current violence, however, relates to an opposite scenario. The ‘Afrophobia’ is, in part, rooted in the fact that different nationalities are operating according to a shared worldview. Mr Edward Zuma’s comments that “foreigners are seeking to take control of the country” imply that South Africans feel a decrease of power and are fearing for the future. The attacks are not rooted in a fear or hatred of foreigners focused on cultural intolerance but in a fear of losing power: socially, economically and politically.

South Africa, as a nation in which 84% of the population professes to be Christian, should weep before the Lord and repent for transgressing one of the basic foundations of the Christian life – love for neighbours and hospitality given to strangers.

Spiritual xenophobia



Sadly, it did not take long for Christian social media to add fuel to the fire. On 16 April, the following email was sent to prayer networks in South Africa:

"Boko Haram gives South Africa 24 hours to stop xenophobia. Boko Haram has released a tape stating that they are giving the South African government 24 hours within which to make the xenophobic attacks come to an end. If the South African government does not contain the situation, they will execute all South Africans living in Nigeria, Chad, Niger and other surrounding countries, even the South African embassies in the African countries."

On 17 April, another message appeared on WhatsApp:

"Breaking News!!! Tomorrow is D-Day for all foreign nationals. South Africans are planning a massive attack like never before! Please stay away from Actonville, Benoni town and other areas. As they said to be entering into schools, save your children and keep them at home. They will be stopping taxis and beating up all foreign nationals found. Help combat it by sending this message to all your contacts. Act NOW and FAST!!!"

These emails and messages do not help to "combat" the tragic situation in South Africa. In the light of the current situation, we need to be aware of the relative (yet far more subtle) danger of 'spiritual xenophobia' (often disguised as 'spiritual alertness'). While these particular messages are focused on South Africans attacking foreigners, other messages in a similar tone highlight the dangers that foreigners are posing to the country (and the 'foreign agenda' for South Africa).

Xenophobia often involves disinformation, and a major source of concern with emails of this kind is the misrepresentation of facts and unsubstantiated rumours. More concerning, however, is that these kinds of messages create animosity directed at people we are called to love and who should be the beneficiaries of God's grace. These emails distract us from the real issues, and cause us to play into the strategy of the enemy. Often these 'warning' messages create an enemy image of every foreigner and are counter-productive to the Great Commission. Creating suspicion and fear has no place in a Christian life, even if it is done in the name of 'Christian alertness'.

We find in Scripture that aliens were listed along with orphans and widows as the members of society to whom God gave special attention and care:

- *Deuteronomy 10:17-19 "For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and **loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.** Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."*
- *Deuteronomy 27:19 "Cursed is the one who perverts the **justice due the stranger**, the fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say 'Amen!'"*

There is a desperate need for the South African Church to be visible and audible at such a time as this, offering tangible love and help to both the foreigners now living in fear and to those behind the attacks. We need to remember that we either give life or we drain life—there is no neutral exchange. We cannot pray for revival on one hand and be instruments of division on the other. While sending a message is 'not enough' relative to the need for practical love-in-action, we also need to be aware of the damage that prejudiced messages can do in terms of creating suspicion and fear.



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