

Xenophobia in South Africa: The Apartheid Legacy of Racism and “White Corporate Capitalism”

By [Garikai Chengu](#)

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South Africa's Apartheid regime is remembered as one of the worst crimes against humanity of the 20th century. The White monopoly capitalist system that underpinned Apartheid remains alive and well today. White monopoly capitalism is the post-Apartheid economic system, whereby Whites continue to exert disproportional and undemocratic control over the nation's economy, land, media and judicial system.

The American investment bank, Citigroup, recently ranked South Africa as the world's richest country, in terms of its mineral reserves, worth an estimated \$2.5 trillion. South African Whites and Western foreigners own a staggering 80 percent of this wealth.

South Africa is unquestionably, the world's most racially unequal society.

Whites comprise only 12 percent of the population. Thanks to the past 350 years of racist exploitation, Whites owned 87 percent of agricultural land by Independence Day, 1994. During these twenty-one post-colonial years, precious little has changed. One exception is that Black people in rural areas have lost 600,000 jobs since Independence. This has created a great wave of migration into urban townships.

South African townships have served as both the location of recent xenophobic violence, as well as the catalytic cause of the violence. During the Apartheid Era, White monopoly capitalists created the township. The process included evicting Black people from properties that were in areas designated as “White only”, and relocating them into urban townships. Blacks were forced to move into squalid, overcrowded and segregated townships, designed to mould the Black labour force into an orderly, submissive underclass.

Streets of grim “matchbox houses” were arranged in strict grids and surrounded by a fence with only one or two points of entry, allowing the White regime's police to seal off entire neighbourhoods with minimal effort. In such a setting, violence was both naturalised and easily-instigated for political purposes. To this day, Blacks in townships still have to contend with non-existent sanitation and electricity services, as well as rampant crime.

Far from being a Rainbow Nation, ongoing xenophobic violence in South Africa's townships exposes the nation's further entrenchment into two separate and unequal societies: one, predominantly Black and poor, located in the townships; the other, largely White and affluent, located in the suburbs.

What White monopoly capitalists have never quite understood, but what the Black South African can never forget, is the degree to which White capital is deeply implicated in the township. White institutions created it; White institutions maintain it; and White society

condones it.

Edgar Pietrise of the University of Cape Town explains how Cape Town for instance, “was conceived with a White-only centre, surrounded by contained settlements for the Black and coloured labour forces to the east, each deliberately hemmed in by highways and rail lines, rivers and valleys, and separated from the affluent White suburbs by protective buffer zones of scrubland.”

When Nelson Mandela was released from 27 years in prison in 1990, the Black townships exploded in endless celebration. Today, after twenty one years of the ANC government, which has been more concerned with appeasing White monopoly capital than redistributing land and resources to poor Blacks, townships have exploded into violence.

The xenophobic Black-on-Black violence spreading across South Africa is a direct result of centuries of White-on-Black violence and oppression.

Franz Fanon, who was an expert on the psychology of colonial violence noted that the historical and current system of White-on-Black violence sends messages of Black inferiority that are so powerful that many Black people succumb to them, ultimately becoming defined by them.

Internalised racism, a term first coined by Black scholar W.E.B. DuBois in 1903, involves accepting a White supremacist social order that places Black people at the bottom, and adopting society’s negative stereotypes about Blacks concerning their lack of abilities, inherent violence and low intrinsic worth.

Internalised racism is a major legacy of Apartheid. South African society historically judges violence inflicted on Blacks less harshly than violence against Whites; consequently, Black people begin to believe that their own life and the lives of other Black African people are worth very little. Thereby creating the preconditions for the ongoing Afrophobic violence.

Filtered through the racist lens of the predominantly White-owned South African media, xenophobia is portrayed as merely further examples of “Black-on-Black” violence by an inherently unruly and violent underbelly of society. The four major media houses are still largely White and male-owned; collectively, they control over 80 percent of what South Africans watch and read. The White media focuses on the symptom rather than the disease by steering the national discourse away from broader issues of income inequality and economic democratisation, towards narrow issues of vandalism, looting and general criminality.

Xenophobia can be defined as a “hatred, dislike or fear of foreigners”; combining the Greek *xenos* (“foreign”) with *phobos* (“fear”). Internalized racism demonstrates itself as the absence of attacks against White immigrants because Black African immigrants are pejoratively portrayed by the media as “foreigners”; whereas, Whites are considered “tourists” or “expats”.

Whilst Black immigrants are being brutalized in townships, White immigrants are allowed to visit townships and take advantage of cute spaces carved out for tourists among the shacks and wastelands.

Thanks, in part, to the 2010 Fifa World Cup, major cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg

offer so-called “safe streets” where tourists can enjoy the sights and sounds of ordinary township life. In Soweto, for instance, a pleasant stroll down Vilakazi Street takes in the old house of Nelson Mandela and the current homes of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Desmond Tutu, along with cafes offering cold beer and traditional African cuisine.

All that is required is that you turn a blind eye to the appalling standard of living endured by the slum’s Black inhabitants.

A few kilometers away at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, The Economist newspaper notes that among the 295 companies on the Exchange, only 4 percent of the CEOs are Black. Despite twenty years of South African democracy, five White-owned companies still control 75 percent of South Africa’s stock market. It’s the largest concentration of wealth and power on earth.

Corporate powers, which financially underwrote Apartheid in South Africa, are reminiscent of the great German companies that ran the Third Reich’s economy. The only difference between the Third Reich and Apartheid is that “reconciliation” in Germany did not leave pro-Nazi financiers in business; whereas in South Africa, those financiers are still firmly in control. These White-owned companies benefit immensely from cheap Black labour, tourist revenue and retail profits that stream out of townships everyday.

Neo-Apartheid companies in South Africa made record profits for Western shareholders since democracy in 1994; all the while, they shed hundreds of thousands of jobs. At independence, unemployment stood at 15 percent; today, that figure has skyrocketed to 25 percent. Instead of employing South Africans, major White-owned companies have sought to increase shareholder profits by outsourcing jobs abroad and hiring exploitable, African foreigners at home.

The nation’s largest labour union, Cosatu, has just said that, “White monopoly capital in the hospitality and retail industry” had deliberately chosen to employ foreigners over their South African counterparts in order to exploit foreigners. The United Nations’ Office for Refugees confirmed that the recent wave of xenophobic, “attacks began in late March following an apparent labour dispute involving South African and foreign workers”.

The tragic irony of ongoing xenophobic attacks is that at least six Africans have lost their lives, and yet those Africans all came from nations that harbored South African freedom fighters during the War of Liberation against the White Apartheid regime.

All the while, during Apartheid, Britain was the single biggest investor in South Africa, followed by the United States, both yielding the highest return on capital in the world. The United States and the other Western capitalist governments not only supported, but directly benefited from the racist Apartheid regime. To this day, a large portion of South Africa’s budget pays Apartheid-era debt to Western nations. This means that Black people pay for their oppression twice over.

The power of White monopoly capital to dispossess, oppress and exploit Black people cannot be overstated. The willing and conscious ally, in the form of an African government, routinely places the interests of White capital over Black labour.

Apartheid, literally meaning “apartness”, transformed Black Africans into foreigners on their own land. For as long as Black South Africans continue to be foreigners to their own

economy, living outside the borders of affluent neighbourhoods, violence will continue to tear at the very fabric of the so-called “Rainbow Nation”.

Garikai Chengu is a scholar at Harvard University. Contact him on garikai.chengu@gmail.com

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