

Migration and Politics in South Africa: Mainstreaming Anti-Immigrant Populist Discourse

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In 1994, a 'new' South Africa was born out of electoral democracy. While democratization dismantled minority authoritarian rule as well as legalized racial intolerance, prejudicial and discriminatory practices remained, this time directed against foreigners. This is at variance with South Africa's commitment to principles of liberal democracy, human rights, and regional integration. What then explains this paradox? This paper underscores that what feeds and bestows social legitimacy to xenophobia is the foregrounding of an anti-immigrant populist discourse in the mainstream political discourse with the participation of political leaders from across the political spectrum. But how has a morally repugnant anti-immigrant populist discourse been made a sensible and justifiable political narrative? The paper analyzes the mediated populist performances of selected political leaders like press statements, public speeches, interviews, or other statements posted on social media platforms like Twitter, and how these leaders scapegoat foreigners for the challenges the country is facing.

Keywords: xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, South Africa, migration, populism

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INTRODUCTION

In 1994, a ‘new’ non-racial South Africa was born out of electoral democracy and was solidly anchored on principles of liberal democracy and human rights. Nelson Mandela’s vision of a ‘Rainbow Nation’ and Thabo Mbeki’s ‘African Renaissance’ sought to facilitate South Africa’s re-integration into, and strengthen its ties with, the rest of the continent and further reinforce this democratic dispensation. The idea and vision of this ‘new’ South Africa differed strikingly from the apartheid socio-political (dis)order that preceded it. After the end of apartheid, there was an influx of migrants, particularly from other African countries as South Africa was considered to have a relatively stable political and economic climate. However, while democratization dismantled minority authoritarian rule as well as legalized racial intolerance, prejudicial and discriminatory practices remained entrenched, this time directed against ‘outsiders’, especially those from elsewhere in Africa and in particular those perceived as ‘illegal’ foreigners or ‘outsiders’ (Neocosmos, 2006).

Several scholars have characterized South Africa’s immigration policy in the first decade of the twenty-first century as restrictive and exclusionary (Peberdy, 2009; Klotz, 2013). Through this restrictive stance, the South African state sought to distinguish between legal immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and ‘illegal’ immigrants in order to exclude the latter from entering the country and deport them if they entered, even though this was done with little success.

As South Africa continued to receive an increasing number of migrants, most of them undocumented, tensions between local South Africans and foreign migrants were also rising. To this end, discursive and physical attacks on foreigners, especially those perceived to be in the country ‘illegally’, surged, and the most violent and widespread attacks occurred in May 2008 (Hassim et al., 2008), which Crush (2008) christened “a perfect storm”. The violence was a historically significant moment to which Landau (2010) opined that if fortune were to smile, South Africa would never again witness the same kind of violence. This presupposed that the authorities may have derived some lessons on, and sought lasting solutions to, the problem of xenophobia. Unfortunately – but unsurprisingly so – since this ‘perfect storm’, violent episodes against foreigners continue in South Africa as witnessed in 2015, 2019, and recently in 2022 when numerous communities mobilized against undocumented foreigners under the banner ‘Operation Dudula’.

The persistence of violence against foreigners in recent years is at variance with South Africa’s commitment to democratic principles, human rights, and the assumption that the country may have derived some lessons from the 2008 violence in dealing with the problem of xenophobia once and for all. How, then, has this ‘new’ political order built on a solid foundation of human rights and democratic principles, and a commitment to African sisterhood/brotherhood – ubuntu, a common African humanity – continued to witness the very thing that is opposed to these values? Vexed by a question of the same nature and commenting on a Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) survey that showed the prevalence of anti-immigrant attitudes in

South Africa, Botswana and Namibia (see Crush and Pendleton, 2004) – which are the three shining examples of liberal democracy in southern Africa – Neocosmos (2006) notes that it is not impossible to have some connection between liberal democracy and xenophobia, and that xenophobia is not unique to authoritarian regimes.

Writing in the aftermath of the 2008 xenophobic attacks, Pillay (2008) stressed the need to take a step back and ask the question: ‘Why?’ Why is South Africa constantly experiencing different forms of violence targeted at foreign nationals? This current paper offers some explanation to the question why and shows how xenophobic sentiment is becoming more entrenched in South Africa. The paper underscores that what is feeding and somehow bestowing social legitimacy to xenophobia, is the strategic and often opportunistic foregrounding of a crude anti-immigrant populist discourse in the mainstream political discourse with the participation and collusion of many political and other leaders at both national and community levels. The paper further argues that this normalizes anti-immigrant sentiments and practices as acceptable patterns of the mainstream political agenda on immigration. Political parties and politicians from across the political spectrum have been blatantly mobilizing anti-immigrant populist discourse, and this became a strong rallying point, especially in the run-up to the May 2019 national elections (Bornman, 2018; Davis, 2019; Heleta, 2019; New Frame, 2019).

This paper pursues the following question: Why and how is anti-immigrant populist discourse, despite being morally repugnant and at odds with South Africa’s democratic principles and vision of regional integration, becoming a sensible and justifiable way of speaking and thinking about immigration in the mainstream political discourse? While some scholars note that the political terrain in South Africa is plagued by xenophobic sentiment with government officials and parliamentarians being instrumental to this (Neocosmos, 2006), there has been no analysis of how these political actors entrench and propagate an anti-immigrant populist discourse in the mainstream political discourse. To pursue this analysis, I follow Jagers and Walgrave’s (2007) understanding of populism as a political communication style.

In the following sections, I conceptualize populism, identify some of its major signifiers, and highlight the connections between populism and xenophobia. Before examining the mainstreaming of anti-immigrant populist discourse and how this is performed by political leaders, I provide a note on methodology as well as some explanations to the persistence of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa.

POPULISM AS A COMMUNICATION STYLE

Political scientists are increasingly branding as populism certain political phenomena, or a certain breed of politicians, or some ways of doing politics. In the late 1960s, Ionescu and Gellner (1969) wrote about the vagueness of the concept; and almost 50 years later, the term populism maintains its conceptual slipperiness (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). The term is applied to different political parties and actors on the political spectrum because it does not embody a distinctive

type of political regime, neither does it define a particular ideological content. It is often used as a pejorative category with menacing connotations without really subjecting it to critical analysis.

To rescue the concept and its conceptual and analytical substance, Taguieff (1995) maintains that the term must be conceptualized as a type of social and political mobilization, which means that it designates a dimension of political action or discourse. There is some scholarly agreement with this definition of populism as a political strategy (Betz, 2002; Barr, 2019) or political style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) whose political rhetoric is less/not grounded in ideology but gives reference to 'the people', evokes latent grievances and appeals to emotions provoked by these grievances.

The question that some scholars grapple with is why has the same term (populism/populists) been used to describe entirely different political parties or actors? These scholars thus emphasize the need to find the existence of "a lowest common denominator" (Rooduijn, 2014) or "core signifiers" (Stavrakakis et al., 2017) that characterize populism. Three elements are thus considered core signifiers of the different historical and theoretical shapes of populism. First, is the idea of 'the people' – populism always refers to, seeks to appeal to, and identifies with 'the people'. Second, populism is rooted in anti-elitism, but substantial populist energy today, especially in Europe and North America (as is the case in South Africa), is being directed against a demonized foreign 'Other' (Wodak, 2015), particularly the 'illegal' migrant. Third, populism simplifies the political terrain and proposes simple solutions to complex problems.

Scholars refer to populism as a political strategy or style (Betz, 2002; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Barr, 2019), a "thin" ideology according to Mudde (2004), that creates a social imaginary of society as separated into two camps – the perfect 'people' at the core of its articulation and the evil elite or a certain constructed 'Other'. With the rise of right-wing populism across the world, there has been an increasing dichotomization of the society between 'the people' and the enemy camp, with the enemy being increasingly defined in terms of their foreignness. Thus, populists claim to put 'the people' (our people) first, while creating a chasm between and turning 'the people' against the enemy 'Other' that is perceived as obstructing 'the people' from realizing their collective interests (Rooduijn, 2014). The 'Other' is not just a people who happens to be constructed as different from 'the people', they are evil and dangerous (Mudde, 2004). Therefore, when investigating the existence of a populist discourse, it is imperative to examine whether 'the people' or 'our people' or 'us/we' are the central reference point of a given discourse, and whether the reference to 'the people' is used to create a chasm between 'the people' and a perceived enemy to the exclusion of the latter.

Generally, the conceptualization of 'the people' can mean different things to different populists (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2004); it can refer to the electorate, the nation, or to no fixed group at all. However, this does not mean that 'the people'

is devoid of meaning. Instead, the meaning of the term depends on the context in which it is being mobilized.

‘The people’ are often constructed as a monolithic group with no internal differences; oftentimes, as is the case in the mobilization of anti-immigrant populist rhetoric in South Africa, important fissures such as class, race, and ethnicity are neglected, and focus is concentrated on the enemy ‘Other’, the (‘illegal’) foreigner. Populist rhetoric sees ‘the people’ as a virtuous community that can be linked to Taggart’s (2000: 95) populist heartland in which a “virtuous and unified community resides”. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) argue that this heartland is not a utopia; it is a harmonious place which is held to have existed in the past but has been lost because of the invasion of the enemy. However, for South Africa, the populist heartland is more utopian than real. It only exists in people’s imaginations of the past promises of post-apartheid prosperity, which have not yet been realized. The end of apartheid signaled the beginning of the journey towards this virtuous place – the heartland – where people were promised welfare, jobs, free education, free health, and housing. This heartland is imagined as less attainable as long as ‘outsiders’ remain present in South Africa.

Populism is able to achieve its people-centrism and anti-‘Other’ politics by strategically enacting a “moral panic” (see Cohen, 2011) where a particular group is defined as a threat, thus creating a relationship of antagonism between ‘the people’ and the ‘Other’. It is essential in constituting distinct socio-political identities that enhance the identification and exclusion of the ‘Other’. This is the basis for populism’s exclusionary approach in which populists claim to be protecting the integrity and well-being of those who belong from the threat posed by a dangerous and morally corrupt ‘Other’. In the context of migration and politics, the more ethno-nationalistic the conception of the ‘people’ is, the more xenophobic the positioning against the ‘Other’. This antagonistic relationship is intensified with promises for better life once the ‘Other’ is vanquished from among ‘the people’.

Populism is known for its penchant for simple solutions to complex problems; its seductive appeal rests on simple narratives that barely explain or interrogate complex socio-political circumstances (Waisbord, 2018). Populist actors refer to ‘the people’ to show that they care about and are ready to defend people’s interests, or that they are not alienated from the public but know what the people really want (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). To put their message forward, populist actors proclaim a serious crisis that threatens to annihilate ‘the people’ if it is not resolved. Whether the crisis is real or imagined does not matter, what matters is that a sense of crisis is created, and the culprit is pinpointed (Taggart, 2000; Betz, 2002). This “politics of fear” (Wodak, 2015), which is a form of over-emotionalized “anxious politics” (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015), is designed to stimulate feelings of resentment and exploit them for political gain.

Inglehart and Norris (2016) express the widely held view regarding the rise of populism that it is spurred by increased economic inequality and growing

social exclusion. From this perspective and in the context of migration and politics, immigrants and refugees are blamed for the increasing economic insecurity experienced in many countries, which often foments popular resentment against them. In the midst of the proclaimed crisis, the populists proffer simple solutions that are tailored to the language and understanding of the general public and rely on polarizing mechanisms such as scapegoating, witch-hunting and conspiracy theories that appear true but have no basis in fact (Comaroff, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on an analysis of selected political actors' mediated performances like press statements, public speeches, interviews, or other statements posted on social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube, and how these politicians presented their messages with a conspicuous anti-immigrant populist appeal. I examined the political messages of several political actors, who included Bongani Mkongi, the former Deputy Minister of Police (Eyewitness News, 2017); Aaron Motsoaledi, the former Minister of Health (Mbhele, 2018); David Makhura, the African National Congress (ANC) Gauteng Premier (eNCA, 2019); Solly Msimanga, Democratic Alliance (DA) Tshwane Mayor (SABC News, 2018); Herman Mashaba, former DA Johannesburg Mayor (Davis, 2019); Ace Magashule, ANC Secretary General (Modjadji, 2019); Fikile Mbalula, former Minister of Police (eNCA, 2017); Bheki Cele, the Minister of Police (Ndlazi, 2018); Faith Mazibuko, ANC Gauteng Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for community safety (Bornman, 2019a).

My analysis follows a critical discourse analysis in terms of anti-immigrant rhetoric, uncovering key patterns of the political actors' mediated discursive articulations of immigration issues. The analysis examines the ways the political actors communicate their messages presenting a distorted, non-factual and negative account of immigration in South Africa. The analysis aims to show how these messages are strategically disseminated to create a 'moral panic' around immigration. The political actors mobilize an anti-immigrant populist rhetoric by relaying their messages through a spectacularized performance of crisis (Moffit, 2015) in which they identify a failure (i.e., the failing immigration control system), elevate it to the level of a crisis and establish an equivalential relation (Laclau, 2005) with the other challenges the country is facing. They always identify the culprit (i.e., 'illegal' foreign nationals) and propose simple solutions to an otherwise complex set of challenges. While doing this, the political actors often hide behind the veil of xenophobia denialism common in statements like, "I am not being xenophobic" or "This is not xenophobia", implying that their anti-immigrant messages are truthful and factual. I argue that this communication style and xenophobia denialism legitimizes, normalizes, and entrenches xenophobic populist discourse in the mainstream political discourse.

This populist discourse comes in a nationalist garb (Norbert, 2009) and is framed around a "politics of fear" (Wodak, 2015) that constructs foreigners as an ethno-cultural 'Other' who threatens the socio-economic wellbeing of 'the people'. By

contrast, 'the people' are portrayed as pure and whose existence is threatened by the presence of outsiders. For their own convenience, the political leaders always ditch the principles of Pan-Africanism and ubuntu that were integral in the conception of the 'new' South Africa and call for the expulsion of foreigners. This bolsters an already long-standing culture of anti-foreigner attitude and stirs the "demons of xenophobia" in South Africa (see Landau, 2011).

SOME EXPLANATIONS TO XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

Following democratization, South Africa became an attractive destination for migrants from other parts of Africa and beyond because of its relatively stable political and economic environment. Despite a new democratic dispensation being birthed in South Africa, Klotz (2013) considers as vestiges from the apartheid past the country's exclusionary definition of nationality in the wake of an influx of migrants, which is the basis for the contemporary expressions of xenophobic populist discourse today. In this regard, Chipkin (2007) notes that the removal of race as a core determinant of citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa opened a complex question of "who are the people" that should be served by the democratic dispensation. With the new diffuse and inclusive national identity conceptualized with no primary reference to 'black' for making social and political demands, 'South Africans' as an identity became unclear with no obvious content. Colonially imposed national territorial boundaries then became the basis for asserting the meaning of democratic citizenship, of being South African (Geschiere, 2009), and of constructing and excluding the alien 'Other'.

Scholars locate anti-immigrant sentiment within the context of social transition and change and explain violence against foreigners as driven by relative deprivation and frustrations resulting from the failure of the post-apartheid government to deliver on its promises in housing, education, healthcare, and job creation (Morris, 1999; Tshitereke, 1999). In this context, Tshitereke notes, "people often create a 'frustration-scapegoat'" (1999: 4) – a target to blame for their deprivation. When the majority group faces a perilous economic situation, they are more likely to feel threatened by minorities, who in this case are often 'illegal' foreigners.

Advancing the above position, Pillay (2008) dismisses the simple attribution of xenophobia to issues of identity (i.e., that South Africans hate foreigners) and takes a sociological approach that gives more nuance to the idea of identity politics and xenophobia. He analyzes how factors such as socio-economic class, power and access to resources interlink to produce xenophobia. For Pillay, at the root of the May 2008 xenophobic violence, where poor people attacked other poor people, was "class inequality as a systemic problem of uneven development" (2008: 94). Pillay argues that the post-apartheid government, by adopting neoliberal policies, instead of pursuing a redistributive course, unleashed a socio-economic system of market violence against the majority of poor South Africans. Since the perpetrators or beneficiaries of this violence remained increasingly out of touch, the victims (poor South Africans) then turned to the 'soft targets' closest to them who were conveniently

scapegoated for taking up resources and opportunities. However, this understanding of relative deprivation and frustration as causal factors of xenophobia fail to account for the pervasiveness of xenophobia among South Africans of different classes, races, and genders (see Crush and Pendleton, 2004). Again, statistical analysis of incidents of violence during the 2008 attacks illustrates that the poorest areas were not those on the rampage, suggesting poverty and disadvantage cannot alone explain the violence (Landau, 2010).

Adding to the argument that xenophobia in South Africa is fueled by poor people's frustrations at the government's failure to deliver on its post-apartheid promises, Glaser (2008) points out that the violence was not coming from the elites – either the major political parties or major organized civil society actors. Instead, for Glaser, the attacks emerged from below and were “profoundly democratic” (2008: 53). This argument exonerates the leaders from any direct responsibility in the attacks. However, acquitting the leaders of any wrongdoing misses the point. While there were no leaders publicly making anti-immigrant statements, there were also no anti-xenophobic leaders condemning xenophobia. Instead, the leaders were in denial that the attacks were xenophobic even as foreigners were being killed and their properties looted. The argument that the xenophobic attacks were democratic is important in as far as highlighting the social legitimacy behind the attacks, but it ignores politicians' manipulation of the crisis and also other preceding factors that informed and animated the violence.

Crush and Pendleton (2004) show that anti-foreigner attitudes are pervasive and widespread across the South African society. Foreigners are scapegoated as the primary cause of unemployment, and a threat to societal values (Murray, 2003; Landau, 2010). Crush and Pendleton's observation does not absolve any specific group of harboring negative attitudes against foreigners, which contradicts the general belief that certain groups in the population are more xenophobic than others. Research has shown that South Africans generally display high levels of intolerance and hostility against foreigners; they feel threatened by the presence of foreigners and prefer draconian policies such as electrifying borders, denying foreigners basic rights, and having refugees live in border camps (Crush et al., 2013). With these pervasive negative attitudes, it is therefore easier for anti-immigrant populist discourse to find space in the country's mainstream political discourse.

MAINSTREAMING ANTI-IMMIGRANT POPULIST DISCOURSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

There has been a significant rise in right-wing xenophobic populist political parties around the world. These are an “amalgam of differing groups united primarily by their shared hostility to migrants, their provocative, exclusionary, scape-goating brand of ethnic nationalism” (DeAngelis, 2003: 84). In trying to account for this global trend, scholars speak of a “populist Zeitgeist” (Mudde, 2004: 542), or populist times. Some scholars believe that this tidal wave of populism across the globe has been spurred by

the different crises the world is facing (see Moffit, 2015). It is believed that crisis sets the stage for populism as a strategy for politicians to appeal to the people (Knight, 1998).

In South Africa, a state of crisis is on the horizon; the country's social and economic fortunes are in serious decline: unemployment, pegged at 32.5% in 2021, is escalating, wages are declining, the public health sector is crumbling, crime rates are soaring, and municipalities are dismally failing on service delivery. Amid the prevalence of these challenges, South Africa is witnessing a steady rise to prominence in anti-immigrant populist rhetoric in the mainstream political discourse with numerous leaders proclaiming a direct causal relationship between the socio-economic challenges and the presence of migrants (Bekker, 2015; Fogel, 2019). Blatantly anti-immigrant language is becoming a part of mainstream political discourse. The question for this paper is about how these political leaders manage to make anti-foreigner rhetoric a sensible and justifiable part of the political discourse on the challenges the country is facing. Below I demonstrate how they have managed to do this through the populist performance of crisis (Moffit, 2015).

Claiming to be a voice for the people

While scapegoating immigrants for the challenges South Africa is facing is convenient for many populist actors, doing so often raises the ire of rights activists and groups. In such circumstances, the populist actors' strategy is to claim being the courageous voice of the unarticulated sentiments of ordinary people (Betz, 2002). Raising such a controversial subject publicly positions the populist actor as attuned to the issues affecting the people. A good example is Herman Mashaba, the former DA Mayor for Johannesburg who, in a media briefing during his first 100-days-in-office address, expressed his commitment to fight 'illegal' immigration. He said, "They [illegal foreigners] are holding our country to ransom and I am going to be the last South African to allow it" (Mashego and Malefane, 2017). In another media statement that was posted on the City of Johannesburg's website in January 2019, Mashaba indulged in self-praise saying that by publicly speaking against the state of 'illegal' immigration, he "went where angels feared to tread" (Mashaba, 2019). He even expressed dismay about why "it took so long for someone to speak about an issue of such importance to our citizens" (Mashaba, 2019). Predictably enough, Mashaba's boldness to speak publicly against 'illegal' immigration made him an instant celebrity to many South Africans who urged him to remain resolute in "cleaning" the city of 'illegal' foreigners.

In the same media statement, Mashaba writes about how "ordinary people" appreciate him for his efforts to speak about the issue of 'illegal' immigration:

Something strange began to happen. Everywhere I went I was being stopped in the street by ordinary people who were so grateful that someone had said something about it (Mashaba, 2019).

This way, Mashaba positions himself as a political leader who cares about and is ready to fight for “ordinary people”, who he refers to as, “our poor, forgotten people” (Mashaba, 2019), and that he is not out of touch with the everyday realities affecting them. Speaking about how ‘illegal’ immigration makes the people of South Africa suffer, gives Mashaba and other populist leaders ground for xenophobic denialism. Rather, they claim to be speaking about ‘real’ issues affecting the people, and this gives moral legitimacy to their anti-immigrant political message.

A quite effective strategy for anti-immigrant populists when advocating against foreign nationals, is to play the perpetrator-victim reversal. Given South Africa’s robust legal rights framework, the xenophobic utterances of these leaders inevitably generate moral outrage and condemnation from civil society groups, democratic politicians, and public intellectuals. The populist leaders in return bemoan that such strong condemnation is a way by the liberal democratic forces to silence them from articulating issues that affect ‘the people’, which conveniently amounts to perpetrator-victim reversal (Cammaerts, 2018). Mashaba turned himself into a victim after his xenophobic stance received widespread condemnation and in the media statement he laments, “For merely lamenting the state of illegal immigration I was labelled ‘xenophobic’, ‘afriphobic’ and ‘illiberal’” (Mashaba, 2019).

He also took to social media to express rage at the way he had been castigated for speaking against ‘illegal’ immigration. He wrote on his Twitter handle, “Calling against illegal immigration is now labeled Xenophobic & populist in South Africa... Illegal immigration debate must be elevated” (Herman Mashaba, @HermanMashaba, January 14, 2019).

The perpetrator-victim reversal enabled Mashaba to portray himself to his constituents as a selfless leader who practices self-abnegation by continuing to fight for the interests of “ordinary people” despite the backlash he faces. Mashaba, despite receiving a lot of criticism for his discernible anti-foreigner attitude, has managed to establish a huge followership of people who see him as their mouthpiece, and he has since formed a political party called ActionSA.

Identifying and elevating failure to the level of crisis

Another tactic used by the populist actors in South Africa to make their anti-immigrant political message appealing to their constituents, is the spectacularized performance of crisis (Moffit, 2015) whereby they identify a failure, elevate it to the level of a crisis and bring it to attention as a matter of urgency (Betz, 2002; Rooduijn, 2014). Whether this crisis is real or not does not matter; what matters is that a sense of crisis and an urgent call for action to solve the crisis have been made.

Building a sense of crisis is vital for mainstreaming populist discourse because it necessitates the demand to act immediately and decisively. Populists use crisis by linking it to failure – in the case of this study, the failure of the immigration control system – and the impetus to act or make vital decisions emanates from the need to remedy the failure and stem the crisis. This spectacularization of failure makes crisis

a key part of, rather than something external to, populism (Moffit, 2015).

Elevating a failure to the level of crisis requires the identified failure to be of huge political concern; 'illegal' immigration is one such issue in South Africa. Over the past few years, several political leaders have raised concern over the failure of the country's immigration control system to stop 'illegal' immigrants from coming into South Africa. In 2018, leader of the Congress of the People (COPE), Mosiuoa Lekota, was quoted in the media alleging that, "Government, at national [level], is allowing people to flood South Africa" (Madia, 2018). Another example is the ANC government's Deputy Minister of Police, Bongani Mkongi, who in July 2017 during a press-briefing after visiting Hillbrow Police Station to discuss issues of crime and illegal trading, perfectly adopted a typical populist choreography. His statement had all the ingredients of xenophobic toxicity and the video was re-circulated on social media platforms during the xenophobic attacks in early September 2019. He lamented:

How can a city in South Africa be 80% foreign nationals? That is dangerous; that in Hillbrow ... South Africans have surrendered their own city to the foreign nationals. The nation should be debating that issue ... if we do not debate that, that necessarily means the whole of South Africa could be 80% dominated by foreign nationals and the future president of South Africa could be a foreign national. We are surrendering our land, and it is not xenophobia to talk truth (Eyewitness News, 2017).

What makes Lekota's and Mkongi's claims populist, is that they are not based on fact. The most recent data refute that South Africa is being flooded with immigrants or that it will in future be 80% dominated by foreign nationals. The 2011 census from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2015) showed there were about 2.2 million immigrants in 2011, which equates to 4.2% of the total population (StatsSA, 2015). In addition, a 2016 community survey by StatsSA puts the number of foreign-born people at 1.6 million out of a national population of 55 million at the time (StatsSA, 2016). While there may be possibilities of methodological issues of undercounting in the StatsSA data (Gumbo, 2016), Heleta (2019) maintains that it would not be surprising if this figure is correct, especially as the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) has deported close to 400,000 foreign nationals since 2012 (DHA, 2017). Judging by these deportation figures, if the country was indeed swamped by 'illegal' immigrants and given that the country has been known as a prolific deporter of immigrants (Vigneswaran, 2008), one would expect the figure of deportations since 2012 to be in the millions. These politicians' use of aquatic imageries to describe migrants entering South Africa as "pouring" or "flooding" as well as using exaggerated guesstimates, help in manufacturing an atmosphere of crisis so that the issue is elevated in political debate.

To disseminate high-impact messages in populist fashion, the political leaders

link the migration crisis to the socio-economic challenges the country is facing. In doing so, the populist actors attempt to show how the migration crisis spreads to and impacts the different aspects of life for the people of South Africa. In his press-briefing, the Deputy Minister of Police was able to link the presence of ‘illegal’ foreign nationals, or in his own words, “lunatics that we don’t know”, to a host of other problems being faced in Hillbrow – gun violence, hijacking of buildings, illegal trading, lack of housing, etc. Mkongi successfully magnified the impact of the alleged immigration crisis by establishing “an equivalential relation” (Laclau, 2005: 73) to other problems affecting the people of South Africa.

The ANC government’s then Minister of Health, who is now the Minister of Home Affairs, Aaron Motsoaledi, was also recorded on SABC news making a similar equivalential relationship between the immigration “crisis” and the country’s failing health system. He told a nursing summit that was convened by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union (NEHAWU) that when migrants “get admitted in large numbers, they cause overcrowding, [and] infection control starts failing” (Mbhele, 2018). The crisis and the challenges the country is facing do not automatically knit themselves together into an equivalential chain; it is the job of a populist leader to do that, and that is what the populist actors in South Africa are doing to normalize and entrench anti-immigrant populist discourse in the country’s mainstream political discourse.

This populist performance of crisis is also framed by the populist actors in a temporal dimension within which failure to take decisive action will aggravate the crisis. We note this in Deputy Minister of Police, Bongani Mkongi’s address, referred to earlier, when he lamented that if the issue of immigration goes undebated, this may result in South Africa’s population being 80% dominated by foreign nationals and the future president of the country being a foreign national. For Mkongi, this was an invasion and a sign that foreigners were taking over power from South Africans. And if this is not dealt with now, South Africa would end up being occupied and ruled by foreigners.

Mkongi is not the only one preaching about the threat of foreign invasion and a possible take-over of the country by immigrants. In early August 2019, after violent clashes in Johannesburg central business district between the police and shopkeepers and street traders – the majority being immigrants – the ANC’s Gauteng MEC for community safety, Faith Mazibuko, was recorded in the news declaring that, “We can’t co-govern [our country] with criminals, especially foreign nationals who want to turn our country into a lawless banana republic” (Daniel, 2019). The MEC’s statement also demonstrates the urgency with which the issue of crime by foreign nationals should be dealt with. She implied that if they allowed co-governing with these “criminals”, the country will be turned into a lawless country.

Setting the enemy against ‘the people’

As the populists spectacularize systemic failure to crisis levels, they also simplify

complex developments by looking for a culprit who is not only blamed for the crisis, but also construed as quintessentially evil and a threat to 'the people', 'our people'. Most of the populist actors in South Africa impute bad character on immigrants, particularly 'illegal' immigrants, and blame them for the problems the country is facing. In 2017, the Minister of Police, Fikile Mbalula, told news reporters that former Zimbabwean soldiers enter the country illegally to rob and kill. He said:

There are Zimbabwean ex-soldiers who are in this country, robbing banks, promoting criminality ... They enter illegally and they just come here and do not promote goodwill (eNCA, 2017).

The ruling ANC's Gauteng Premier, David Makhura, was also in the news in March 2019, accusing foreign nationals of committing crime, saying, "in some specific crimes, specific nationalities are involved" (eNCA, 2019). In these statements, the political leaders single out foreigners as the lawbreakers responsible for the country's spiraling crime rates.

Conspicuously absent in this populist narrative on crime are South Africans themselves. Herman Mashaba posted a series of tweets about crimes allegedly committed exclusively by African immigrants in Johannesburg under the hackneyed hashtag #WorldCupOfCrime. South African citizens did not feature in the charts. The absence of statistical data on crimes committed by South Africans in Mashaba's #WorldCupOfCrime tweets suggests that crime in South Africa is a world cup match that the hosts do not partake in. Even when African ambassadors met with Ministers Lindiwe Sisulu of International Relations and Co-operation, Bheki Cele of Police and Siyabonga Cwele of Home Affairs to discuss the xenophobic attacks that had erupted in Durban against Malawian nationals in April 2019, several ambassadors were dismayed by the meeting as, "It was all about crimes committed by foreign nationals [against South Africans] and nothing about crimes committed by South Africans against foreign nationals" (Fabricius, 2019).

However, the crime statistics posted by Mashaba on his Twitter page were again rebutted as simply driven by his xenophobic character, particularly given that of the 1.5 million arrests that were recorded in South Africa, over 95% were committed by South Africans (Bornman, 2019b). While it is undeniable that crime rates are staggeringly high in South Africa, and that some of that crime is perpetuated by some immigrants, but to selectively blame non-citizens as responsible for the souring crime rates, implicitly suggests that people are criminal because they are foreign and betrays the populist simplicity behind such a social diagnosis, which works to construct Manichean divisions between the morally upright and virtuous South Africans and evil and dangerous foreigners. This scapegoating of a particular group as responsible for the crisis not only exposes who the enemy is, but is also crucial in constituting the identity of 'our people' as noted by Taggart (2000: 94), that "populists are often more sure of who they are not, than of who they are", and in this case, South

Africans are not involved in crime.

Through this approach, threat scenarios are created in which ‘we’ (our people) are threatened by or deprived because of ‘them’ (foreign nationals). Immigrants are blamed for the suffering of South Africans, as Bongani Mkongi stated in his press-briefing:

We are facing here service delivery protests that we don’t know where they are coming from. Some of the issues is because of we can’t give shelter to our people because these buildings are being occupied and hijacked by people and lunatics that we don’t know [sic] (Eyewitness News, 2017).

For Mkongi, the government was failing to provide shelter to ‘our people’ (South Africans) because the buildings were being occupied and hijacked by foreigners. So, immigrants are the enemy who the people of South Africa consider to be the “demon from outside” that inherently threatens the post-Apartheid renaissance (Landau, 2010).

This demonization and ‘othering’ of the foreigners was also clear when Herman Mashaba executed his first citizen’s arrest of a man who was pushing a trolley full of cow heads in central Johannesburg. Mashaba engaged in a Twitter row and responded thus to someone who had accused him of killing small businesses in Johannesburg:

We are [not] going to sit back and allow people like you to bring us Ebolas in the name of small business. Health of our people first. Our health facilities are already stretched to the limit [sic] (Herman Mashaba, @HermanMashaba, November 13, 2018).

Mashaba clearly presented immigrants as posing an existential threat to the people of South Africa. He equated foreignness to bringing Ebola, which equates being foreign with disease, thus insinuating that foreigners are dangerous carriers of disease. He then talked about the health of “our people” which is a priority as the country is infested with the diseased foreigners who cause a strain to the health delivery system.

Proposing simple solutions to complex problems

Following their simple diagnosis of the crisis that, through the “politics of fear”, create Manichean divisions between “good” and “evil” people, the populist actors propose simple solutions to complex problems, which hardly address the structural causes of the crisis. Since they allege that South Africa’s problems are caused by foreign nationals “flooding” the country, the populist actors propose tight, exclusionist and restrictive immigration control. The DA made immigration one of its key campaign pillars for the 2019 national elections, calling for stricter immigration controls and had banners inscribed “Secure our borders”. The DA was not the only political party

advocating “to close our borders” (Mailovich, 2018); almost all the other parties, except for the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), have been calling for tightening immigration enforcement as a way of dealing with the country’s challenges.

However, research has shown that such anti-immigrant populist solutions do not address the deep-lying structural issues affecting South Africa. An example is crime. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) argues that the call by politicians for the targeting and deportation of undocumented immigrants as a way of dealing with high crime levels in South Africa has little, if any, impact on public safety. The ISS notes that in Gauteng Province, despite the police ramping up their efforts to arrest ‘illegal’ immigrants, there has been no decrease in violent crimes, which the immigrants are alleged to commit. Instead, the police reported that between 2012 and 2017 crime levels increased by 36% (ISS, 2017), which exposes the inadequacy of simplistic populist rhetoric. Nonetheless, proposing tight immigration control measures allows the populist leaders to be seen as doing something to solve South Africa’s problems, which are largely attributed to the presence of ‘illegal’ foreign nationals.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to examine the ways in which anti-immigrant populist political discourse is being entrenched and normalized in the mainstream political discourse and I have done so by demonstrating how several political leaders in South Africa communicate their messages, enacting a moral panic through a spectacularized performance of crisis in the way they speak about immigrants or immigration. I have stressed that anti-immigrant violence runs against South Africa’s commitment to democratic principles, human rights, and regional integration. My submission is that for us to find answers to the pressing questions on the persistence of xenophobia in a liberal democratic context like South Africa, we need to look at how political leaders mobilize an anti-immigrant populist discourse so that anti-immigrant messages become more appealing and justifiable in articulating the problems South Africa is facing. Through a spectacularized populist performance of crisis, the populist actors present themselves as a voice of the people, as leaders who care about and can articulate the issues affecting the people. They also identify a systemic failure, which in this case is the failing immigration control system, and elevate it to the level of crisis by establishing an equivalential relation with the other challenges that the county is facing. In this spectacularized performance of crisis, the populist leaders will name the culprit behind the country’s challenges, which therefore creates a division between ‘morally’ upright people and ‘dangerous’ outsiders. Given the culprit is pinpointed in this populist practice, the politicians finally propose a simple solution to the challenges the country is facing – tight immigration enforcement and expulsion of the culprits.

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