

Inequality and Political Identity in South Africa

By **Hisham Aidi**

Xenophobic violence against minorities and non-nationals has erupted periodically in different parts of Africa: against Somalis in Kenya, Nigerians in Ghana,¹ Chadians in Libya², and Asians in South Africa.³ Scholars have offered various explanations for these outbursts of violence, focusing on inequality or how simultaneous market reforms and democratization can unleash resentment against “market-dominant minorities.” Others see the violence as linked to elections, noting how political candidates will engage in ethnic-baiting and scapegoating when media and political institutions are weak. Other analysts point to legal institutions and discursive formations created by colonialism but have persisted into the post-colonial state. This paper will use these different approaches (political economy, electoral and post-colonial) to examine the civil unrest that occurred in South Africa in July 2021.

Inequality & Violence:

The arrest of the former South African president Jacob Zuma on July 7, 2021 for contempt of court sparked a wave of looting and unrest that left over 300 people dead. Zuma had resigned in 2018 but was sentenced to 15 months in prison for refusing to testify to a government anti-corruption commission. The

protests started in Zuma’s home province of KwaZulu-Natal and spread to parts of Gaunteg. Officials dubbed the violence an insurrection, deployed the army, and claim it was a plot by Zuma loyalists in the African National Congress (ANC) to undermine President Cyril Ramaphosa’s rule, by stirring up tensions between different groups. Commentators quickly pointed out that while Zuma’s arrest may have triggered the unrest, the underlying cause was South Africa’s deep inequality, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Bank has described South Africa as the most unequal country in the world: the richest 10% hold 71 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 60 percent holds 7 percent of the wealth.⁴ More than half of the country’s population, around 55.5 percent, live in poverty. The pandemic has also hit the South African economy very hard so that the country is undergoing its deepest recession on record.⁵ After the unrest, economist Thomas Piketty’s World Inequality Lab published a report also showing that South Africa as the most unequal society in the world. “There is no evidence that wealth inequality has decreased since the end of apartheid,” the group said. “Asset allocations before 1993 still continue to shape wealth inequality” - with 3,500 adults owning more than the poorest 32 million people in the country of 60 million.⁶

4. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/overview>

5. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-africas-looting-violence-reflect-inequalities-exacerbated-by-covid-19-pandemic-11626189253>

6. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-04/apartheid-legacy-maintains-south-african-wealth-gap-group-says>

1. <https://guardian.ng/opinion/xenophobic-attacks-in-ghana/>

2. <https://www.iom.int/news/chadian-migrants-expelled-libya-growing-concern-says-iom>

3. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202103260466.html>

Xenophobia or anti-outsider sentiment has swept the world over the last decade, and Africa has not been spared. In May 2015, South Africa experienced a wave of xenophobic unrest when violence erupted against migrants in South Africa. Analysts spoke of multiple causes, including Afrophobia (black self-hatred inherited from the apartheid era)⁷, though this wouldn't explain violence against Asian migrants. Others noted a widespread (and wrong-headed) belief that migrants take away jobs from South African youth. Despite research to the contrary, this “fake news” continues to circulate, and political candidates speak of “a human tsunami,”⁸ warning (outrageously) that migrants account for the 30 percent unemployment rate among the black population.

Sociologists would point to another explanatory factor, and that is that migrants from across South Africa and the continent tend to settle in “urban estuaries” – multi-ethnic sites lacking in jobs and social services.⁹ People in these peripheral zones are not incorporated into political institutions or organizations (political parties or civic associations), and there are few ties between ethnic groups. In these areas, violence starts, often abetted by politicians during electoral campaigns.¹⁰ Thus, in 2016, the secretary-general of ANC Gwede Mantashe said the solution to the migration question was refugee camps.¹¹ Other state officials have demanded tighter border controls and banning foreigners from owning land or business.¹² Even Jacob Zuma would make an ambiguous statement saying that those “legally” in the country must be treated “with respect and Ubuntu,” implying, to critics at least, that he was turning a blind eye to violence against the undocumented.¹³

7. “Achille Mbembe writes about Xenophobic South Africa,” *Africa Is A Country*, (April 2015)

8. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/11/political-rhetoric-and-institutions-fuel-xenophobic-violence-in-south-africa/>

9. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13549839.2021.1967900> <https://theconversation.com/what-lies-behind-social-unrest-in-south-africa-and-what-might-be-done-about-it-166130>

10. <https://unu.edu/publications/books/exorcising-the-demons-within-xenophobia-violence-and-statecraft-in-contemporary-south-africa.html#overview>

11. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/south-africa>

12. <https://theconversation.com/what-lies-behind-social-unrest-in-south-africa-and-what-might-be-done-about-it-166130>

13. <https://ewn.co.za/2015/04/10/Zuma-speaks-out-on-xenophobic-attacks>

Markets and Minorities:

In her book *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (2003), Amy Chua introduced the concept of “market-dominant minorities,” to explain the position of minority ethnic groups that dominate economically compared to other communities. Examples of these intermediate groups would be the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, Indians in East and Southern Africa, and Lebanese in West Africa. These groups’ economic success was due to multiple factors - colonial policies, social capital inherited from familial or ethnic networks, and so forth. Whatever the cause, their economic status breeds resentment, which can lead to violence, when economic and political liberalization policies are attempted; that is when austerity measures are put in place, inflicting social pain on the majority, and a simultaneous electoral opening can give political voice to that resentment. As Chua writes, “When free-market democracy is pursued in the presence of a market-dominant minority, the most invariable result is a backlash. The backlash typically takes one of three forms. The first is a backlash against markets, targeting the market-dominant minority’s wealth. The second is a backlash against democracy by forces favorable to the market-dominant minority. The third is violence, sometimes genocidal, directed against the market-dominant minority.”¹⁴ The third type of backlash has occurred in South Africa, as seen in attacks against Indian South Africans perceived as market-dominant. Chua’s study concludes with a call for economic redistribution, though as she underlines, “Redistributive mechanisms are tough to have if you have so much corruption.”

The causes of the economic disparity between various ethnic and racial groups in South Africa are rooted in apartheid. South Africa’s British rulers may have considered both Blacks and Indians inferior to whites, but the Indians, who were brought in as indentured laborers in the 1860s, were given more rights than blacks and better education, housing, and jobs.¹⁵ Such disparities continue to exist. But again, it is elite manipulation that makes resentment turn violent. Observers of the local government elections in November 2021 have observed

14. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/27643/world-on-fire-by-amy-chua/9780385721868>

15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/04/world/africa/South-Africa-Phoenix-riots-deaths.html>

that this was the first time since the end of apartheid that the ANC's share of the vote fell below 50 percent – to be precise, from 53.9 percent in 2016 to 46 percent in 2021.¹⁶ This was also the lowest voter turnout in South African elections.

Analysts warned that with the ANC faltering electorally, and plagued by infighting (the internecine rift between President Ramaphosa's faction and Zuma's Radical Economic Transformation camp), the political void would be likely be filled by ethno-nationalist and right-wing populists. The ANC's percentage of votes in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal – the provinces most affected by unrest in July dropped from 45.84 to 36.09 percent in the former and from 53.91 to 45.84 in KwaZulu-Natal.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the primary beneficiaries of the ANC's decline have been a handful of ethno-nationalist parties like the VF+ and the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party.¹⁸

The Rainbow Nation?

A more nuanced framework than Chua's "market-dominant minority" argument is offered by Carlyne Holmes in her book *The Black and White Rainbow: Reconciliation, Opposition, and Nation-Building in Democratic South Africa* (2021), where the author shows how while Nelson Mandela and post-apartheid leaders aimed for a "rainbow nation," they were faced with two daunting and contradictory tasks – nation-building and democracy.¹⁹ The first challenge was how to get different groups in South Africa, who until the mid-1990s were "racialized" as Zulus, Xhosa, Afrikaners, and Britons, to think of themselves as South African; a task rendered more difficult by the fact that these communities have conflicting historical memories of the apartheid era. South Africa's post-apartheid leadership sought to build a new national identity, says Holmes, by introducing a discourse of "rainbow nation" that embodies "unity through diversity." Likewise, the architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hoped that a degree of reconciliation could be achieved by publicly airing human rights violations committed under apartheid. . Yet, given their material conditions, poor South Africans have not been persuaded by the

16. <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/ancs-support-in-municipal-elections-below-50-ipsos-poll-predicts-20211031>

17. <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/anc-da-eff-zuma-riots-elections>

18. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30126/in-south-africa-anc-is-chastened-by-a-local-election-defeat>

19. https://www.press.umich.edu/11518321/black_and_white_rainbow

symbology of the "Rainbow Nation" or the Truth and Reconciliation Committee.²⁰ As Holmes asks, "How can the contentious past be both remembered and forgotten in the building of a national community?"²¹

Holmes demonstrates how despite the transition to democracy, electoral politics are still shaped by longstanding "racial" and "ethnic" categories. When campaigning, political parties appeal to specific ethnic groups or tribes producing an "identity-based political alignment," which of course undermines the idea of a national identity. She states, "nations ask people to forget their differences, and democracies incentivize remembering them." Holme's thesis is borne out by recent Afrobarometer polling. A survey taken in May-June 2021 by the Accra-based research group found that Jacob Zuma's tenure had withered faith in democracy and state institutions. South Africans rated their situation as worse under Ramaphosa than when Zuma left office on several measures. . Moreover, while democratic governance has declined across Africa, demand for popular democracy remains strong across many African countries. Not so in South Africa: not only has democratic governance declined, support for democracy as the best system of government also fell from 72 percent in 2011 to 40 percent in 2021.²²

Making Minorities:

Another recent work that attempts to explain the persistence of economic inequality and ethnic fissures in South Africa is Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani's recent book *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (2020). Mamdani has long been critical of theories that see violence in Africa as driven by either ancient tribal hatreds or class conflict (market-based identities). In his classic *Citizen and Subject* (1996), he put forth a theory describing colonialism's "regime of differentiation," showing how

20. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/03/black-white-rainbow-reveals-how-hard-it-is-build-rainbow-nation/>

21. <https://books.google.com/books?id=y5cBEAAQBAJ&pg=PA68&ots=kDmo4JmklJ&dq=%22how%20can%20the%20contentious%20past%20be%20both%20remembered%20and%20forgotten%20in%20the%20building%20of%20a%20national%20community%3F%2E2%80%9D%22&pg=PA68#v=onepage&q=%22how%20can%20the%20contentious%20past%20be%20both%20remembered%20and%20forgotten%20in%20the%20building%20of%20a%20national%20community?%2E2%80%9D%22&f=false>

22. <https://afrobarometer.org/blogs/south-africas-turmoil-about-more-jacob-zuma>

colonial rulers created and legally inscribed ethnic and racial identities that separated communities into urban and rural areas, to be governed by civil or customary law.²³ Mamdani's recent book shows how in South Africa, colonial authorities created two types of distinctions between settlers and natives – racial distinction and tribal distinction. One important thing that the anti-apartheid movement did was show that these “differences of race” – African, Indian, White, Colored - were neither permanent nor natural. The anti-apartheid movement and post-1994 South African state did manage to transcend the colonial distinction between settlers and natives, by bringing South Africans into a common political community under a single government and law.

But the success was partial. Mamdani is critical of the TRC in that, following the Nuremberg human rights regime, it sought to place blame on individual perpetrators, providing recompense to individual victims. As a result, the TRC, which documented 20,000 cases of victimization, neglected the plight of millions of Black political prisoners and victims of displacement into Bantustans. As he writes, “the TRC absolved apartheid’s white constituency by putting all responsibility on individual perpetrators.” During the negotiations of the early 1990s, concessions were understandably granted to Whites to avoid a bloody conflict, or a deepening of apartheid rule. Thus, economic redistribution was deferred.²⁴ And while race as a state-sponsored identity has been dismantled, the category “tribe” continues to exist as a sorting mechanism, and in the former Bantustans, customary law remains in effect. “Africans living in the “wrong” tribal homeland” are still denied rights under the customary law system.²⁵

As multiple analysts have observed in recent months, given the decline of the African National Congress, a broad-based social movement will be needed to dismantle apartheid’s remaining institutional legacies and to address South Africa’s inequality. In fact, what we may be currently seeing in South Africa is the birth of a “new civic movement.”²⁶

23. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691180427/citizen-and-subject>

24. <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/15/world/mandela-s-party-publishes-plan-to-redistribute-wealth.html>

25. <https://aeon.co/essays/the-world-can-learn-from-south-africas-ideal-of-nonracial-democracy>

26. <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/anc-da-eff-zuma-riots-elections>

About the Author, Hisham Aidi

Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's *Encarta Africana* project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



Policy Center for the New South

Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street,
Hay Riad, Rabat, Maroc.

Email : contact@policycenter.ma

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : www.policycenter.ma