

South Africa must reclaim African unity

There is a deep and troubling contradiction unfolding in South Africa today. A nation whose liberation was shaped, sustained, and celebrated by the collective will of the African continent now finds itself grappling with recurring waves of xenophobic violence against fellow Africans. Shops looted, homes burned, lives lost; these are not just criminal acts; they are a betrayal of history and a rejection of the very values that once defined the struggle against apartheid.

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Robert Okot
African nationalism

It is worth recalling that South Africa's freedom was not achieved in isolation. Across African nations stood in solidarity politically, materially, and morally. Frontline States such as Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique and Angola hosted liberation movements, often at great risk to their own stability. They provided training grounds, shelter, and diplomatic backing to those resisting apartheid.

Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, and others raised their voices in international forums, pushing for sanctions and global pressure against the apartheid regime. The Organisation of African Unity made the dismantling of apartheid a priority. This was not charity; it was a shared conviction that the dignity of one African nation was inseparable from the dignity of all.

Mr Alex Mugaga, my former teacher of African Nationalism, always emphasised that the spirit is best captured in the African philosophy of Ubuntu: "I am because we are." Ubuntu is not merely a cultural ideal; it is a moral framework that insists on interconnectedness, compas-

sion, and mutual respect. It recognises that our humanity is bound together, and that to harm another is, in essence, to diminish oneself.

Xenophobic violence stands in direct opposition to Ubuntu. It reduces fellow Africans to outsiders, competitors, or threats, rather than recognising them as part of a shared human and historical community. It forgets that migration within Africa has always been part of our story, driven by trade, conflict, opportunity, and survival. Yet, dismissing xenophobia simply as a moral failure would be incomplete. There are real frustrations that fuel these tensions: high unemployment, inequality, pressure on public services, and perceptions, sometimes exaggerated, sometimes not of unfair competition. These are legitimate concerns, but they are being dangerously misdirected.

Blaming immigrants is a convenient but ultimately hollow response. It diverts attention from deeper structural issues: economic inequality, governance challenges, corruption, and inadequate service delivery. It is easier to attack the visible "other" than to confront complex systemic failures. If there is to be a meaningful response, it must begin with reframing the problem.

There must be a deliberate and sustained effort to revive historical consciousness. South Africans, particularly younger generations, should be reminded of the continental solidarity that helped secure their freedom. Education systems, media, and civic institutions have a role to play in telling this story not as distant history, but as a living legacy that carries obligations.

Economic grievances must be addressed at their root. Policymakers should focus on job creation, skills development, and inclusive economic growth. Instead of framing immigrants as competitors, there should be policies that integrate them into the formal economy, where they can contribute taxes, create jobs, and stimulate local markets.

There must be accountability for violence. Xenophobic attacks cannot be normalized or treated as sporadic outbursts. Law enforcement must act decisively to protect all residents, regardless of nationality, and to prosecute perpetrators. A failure to do so signals tolerance and invites repetition.

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