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## **TOLERANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA: EXPLORING POPULAR ATTITUDES TOWARD FOREIGNERS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In May and June 2008, approximately 60 people were killed in a spate of violence that swept across South Africa. Journalists and academics used the term “xenophobia” to describe the attacks that left many foreigners injured or dead and thousands more displaced<sup>1</sup>. Yet, foreigners were not the only victims of this violence: roughly one-third of those killed were South African citizens. The International Organization for Migration has compiled one of the most comprehensive reports on the attacks to date<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, this report suggests that the xenophobic attacks were rooted in the micro-politics of townships and informal settlements. Essentially, it argues that violence was used as a means to drive foreigners out of South Africa and thereby decrease competition for jobs and other scarce resources.

Violence against foreigners has become common since the transition to multi-party rule in 1994. During this period, South Africa’s borders have become more porous, and individuals from several African countries – especially Zimbabwe – have migrated to the country in search of security and opportunities for social mobility<sup>3</sup>. Prior to the transition to democracy, members of the ruling National Party (NP) tightly controlled South Africa’s borders<sup>4</sup>. Apartheid-era migration policies thus effectively inhibited contact between South Africans and those from other African nations<sup>5</sup>, and are perhaps at the root of isolationist tendencies that are still alive today.

The xenophobic attacks that occurred in 2008 received worldwide attention, raising larger questions about transnational flows of people and issues of identity and citizenship. It is therefore timely to examine individuals’ tolerance of foreigners in the aftermath of one of the most severe outbreaks of xenophobic violence witnessed in South Africa.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

- Afrobarometer data show that, regardless of racial group, the majority of South Africans are distrustful of foreigners (83%) and that there are significant differences in levels of tolerance for immigrants based on levels of trust (See Sections. 1-2)

<sup>1</sup> Democracy and Governance Research Programme. *Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Developing Consensus, Moving to Action*. Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Towards Tolerance, Law, and Dignity: Addressing Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa

<sup>3</sup> Crush and McDonald 2002

<sup>4</sup> Crush and Pendleton 2004; Klotz 2000

<sup>5</sup> Handmaker and Parsley 2001

- Almost two thirds (64%) of respondents would like to restrict the entry of foreigners entirely or tightly limit the number that may enter the country. However, 71% of South Africans are against blanket deportation policies, with a plurality of 34% supporting the deportation only of immigrants who have entered the country illegally (See Section 2)
- Overall, individuals are dissatisfied with the way government handles immigration. Levels of dissatisfaction are most pronounced among those who support “restrictionist” immigration policies (See Section 3)

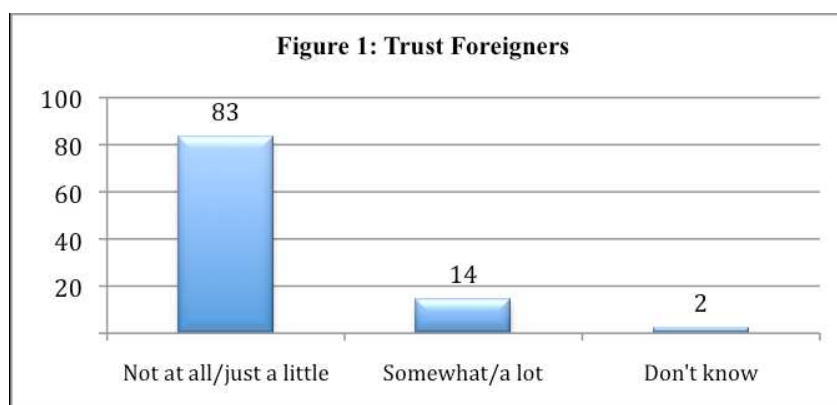
## DATA

The Afrobarometer conducts public opinion surveys across Africa that measure attitudes toward democracy, governance, civil society, and markets. The project now spans 20 countries. Data for this bulletin are drawn from a Round 4 Afrobarometer survey conducted in South Africa from October to November 2008. The survey is based on a nationally representative sample of 2400 South African citizens over the age of 18. A sample of this size yields a margin of error of +/- 2 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.

### SECTION 1: TRUST IN FOREIGNERS

This briefing paper presents a preliminary analysis of individual citizens’ tolerance of foreigners in South Africa. However, to better understand variation in levels of tolerance for immigrants, it may be helpful to first examine more general attitudes toward foreigners. Over the past decade there has been a proliferation of studies that examine micro-level attitudes toward foreigners in South Africa<sup>6</sup>. These works generally show that xenophobia is widespread in the country. They suggest that blacks and whites, the rich and the poor, the old and the young are all hostile in their attitudes toward foreigners from other African countries (Danso and McDonald 2000). Moreover, it has become commonplace for ordinary individuals as well as those in politics and the media to describe foreigners as criminals, job-stealers and disease-stricken<sup>7</sup>.

Negative attitudes toward foreigners are corroborated with data from the Afrobarometer survey, which indicates that South Africans are extremely distrustful of foreigners. In fact, 60% of respondents say that they don’t trust foreigners at all, and another 23% say that they trust them “just a little” (Figure 1). High levels of distrust are prevalent across all provinces and racial groups. However, it is not possible to know from the data whether South Africans afford different levels of trust to foreigners they know versus foreigners they don’t know.



*Q84d\_SAF: How much do you trust each of the following types of people: foreigners living here in South Africa?*

<sup>6</sup> Crush and Pendleton 2004; Dodson and Oelofse 2009; Neocosmos 2006; Nyamnjoh 2006

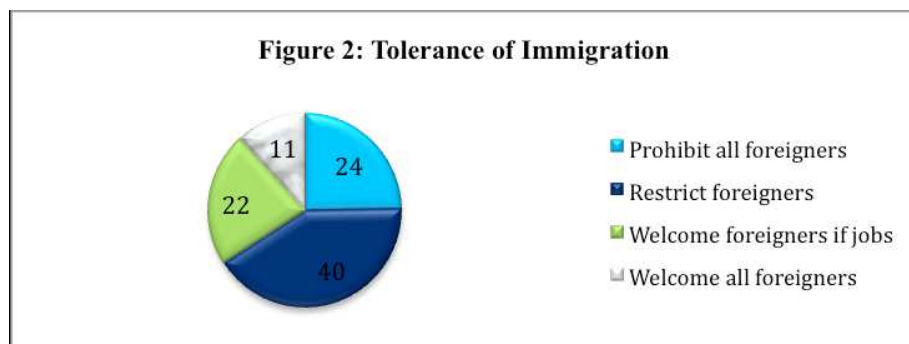
<sup>7</sup> Danso and McDonald 2000

## SECTION 2: TOLERANCE OF FOREIGNERS

In addition to providing data on the levels of trust individuals place in foreigners, the Afrobarometer also includes various measures that can be used to gauge individuals' tolerance of immigrants. Specifically, the survey asks respondents what they think the government's policy should be on immigration and deportation. Responses to these questions can usefully be employed to measure levels of tolerance.

One of the most striking features of current South African immigration policy is its continuity with apartheid-era policy<sup>8</sup>. To be sure, changes were made to the post-apartheid immigration framework that allowed some migrant mineworkers and certain refugees from Mozambique to gain permanent residence<sup>9</sup>. But overall, current regulations make it extremely difficult for those from other parts of Africa to enter the country legally and, if desired, to gain citizenship<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, policing tactics continue to include the arbitrary arrest of foreigners who are legitimately in the country, violations of the rights of those who are in detention, and often the destruction of foreigners' legal documents proving their right to be in the country<sup>11</sup>. It is difficult to know if restrictionist post-apartheid immigration policies have been designed in response to public attitudes toward immigration or if opinion itself is shaped by the prevailing rules. But it is clear from the data presented below that South Africans overwhelmingly support strict immigration protocols.

A plurality of 40% of respondents says that government should place stringent restrictions on the number of foreigners entering the country, while an additional one out of four (24%) feels that people from other African countries should be prohibited from entering altogether (Figure 2). These extreme views might reflect what seems to be a common perception that vast numbers of migrants are flowing into the country, in spite of the formal rules and regulations that are designed to suppress their entry<sup>12</sup>.



*Q76a\_SAF: How about people from other countries coming to South Africa? Which one of the following do you think the government should do? Response options include "Prohibit people entering from other countries", "Place strict restrictions on the number of foreigners who can enter", "Let people in as long as there are jobs available" and "Let anyone in who wants to enter".*

Not surprisingly, as shown in Table 1, levels of trust are related to attitudes toward immigration. Those who are more trusting of immigrants are also more tolerant of their presence in South Africa. Sixty-three percent of those who trust foreigners "a lot" feel that government should maintain a relatively open immigration policy, compared to just 29% of "non-trusters".

<sup>8</sup> Crush and McDonald 2001

<sup>9</sup> Peberdy 2001

<sup>10</sup> Klaaren and Ramji 2001

<sup>11</sup> Klaaren and Ramji 2001

<sup>12</sup> Crush and Pendleton 2004, p.12

**Table 1: Treatment of Incoming Foreigners by Trust Levels**

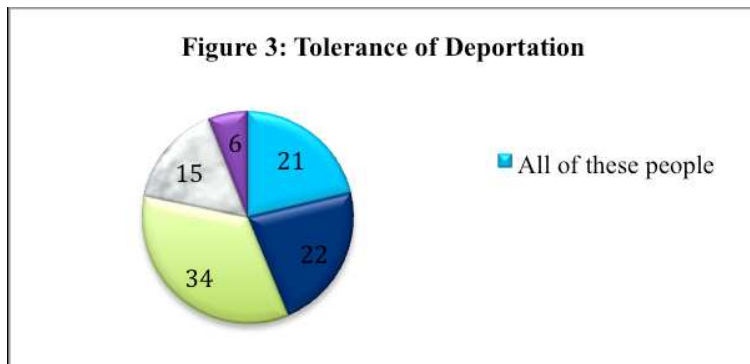
|                 | Level of Trust in Foreigners |               |          |       |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------|----------|-------|
|                 | Not at all                   | Just a little | Somewhat | A lot |
| Restrictionists | 70%                          | 62%           | 56%      | 37%   |
| Tolerants       | 29%                          | 37%           | 44%      | 63%   |

*Restrictionists are those who say that government should either “Prohibit people entering from other countries” or “Place strict restrictions on the number of foreigners who can enter”. Tolerants are respondents who say that government should “Let people in as long as there are jobs available” or “Let anyone in who wants to enter”.*

**Attitudes Toward Deportation**

The Afrobarometer also asked individuals how the government should handle foreigners who already reside in the country. Notably, despite the public’s generally low regard for immigrants, most South Africans feel that the government should only deport foreigners back to their country of origin for very specific reasons (Figure 3). In particular, a plurality (34%) says that only foreigners who are in the country illegally should be made to leave. Another 22% feel that foreigners who do not contribute to the economy should be deported, while 15% say that those who have committed crimes should be forced to leave. In total, 71% of South Africans support deportation only with cause, compared to just 21% who support blanket deportation (and 6% who would allow all immigrants to remain in the country). Given that South Africa appears by other measures to be a xenophobic society, it is somewhat surprising that individual support for deportation is not more indiscriminate.

Moreover, one-third of South Africans’ support for deportation is contingent on the nature of foreigners’ behavior while in the country (i.e. engagement in criminal activity), and not on their official legal status. Since foreigners are often stereotyped as criminals and depicted negatively in the media, these results could demonstrate the potential importance of more positive depictions of foreigners and positive cross-cultural contact in fostering tolerance among ordinary citizens<sup>13</sup>. In fact, Afrobarometer data lends support for a relationship between media exposure and attitudes toward immigration. Notably, restrictionists are twice as likely as tolerants to watch television news “every day”. Similar trends prevail among those who get news via the radio and newspaper.



**76b\_SAF:** How about people from other countries who are presently living in South Africa? Who, if anyone, do you think the government should send back to their own countries?

<sup>13</sup> Danso and McDonald 2000

There is also a significant gap between trusters and non-trusters with regard to deportation (Table 2). For example, one-fourth (27%) of non-trusters take the extreme view that all foreigners should be deported, while only 10% of trusters report the same. But roughly equal percentages of trusters and non-trusters feel that illegal immigrants should be sent back to their own country (34% and 32% respectively).

**Table 2: Deportation of Foreigners by Trust Levels**

|  | Level of Trust in Foreigners |               |          |       |
|--|------------------------------|---------------|----------|-------|
|  | Not at all                   | Just a little | Somewhat | A lot |
| All of these people  | 27%                          | 15%           | 8%       | 10%   |
| Only those who are not contributing to the economy                             | 19%                          | 22%           | 37%      | 37%   |
| Only those who are here without the permission of the South African government | 32%                          | 41%           | 35%      | 34%   |
| Only those who have committed crimes   | 16%                          | 17%           | 13%      | 9%    |
| The govt. should not send back people to their own countries                   | 6%                           | 5%            | 7%       | 10%   |

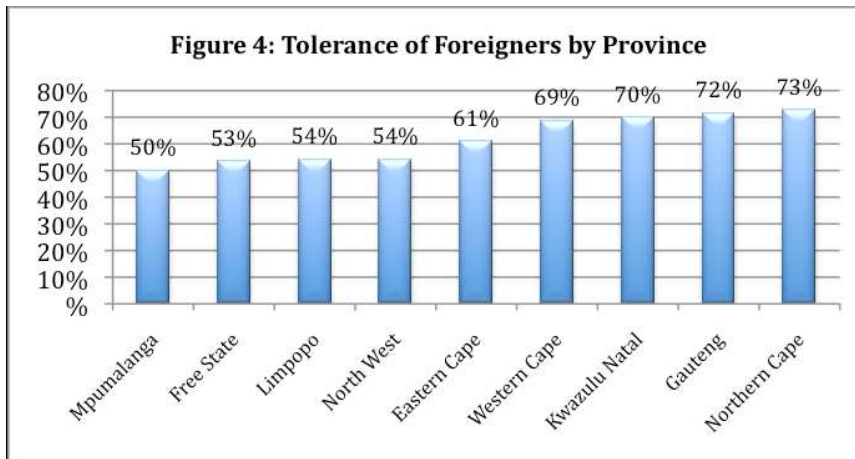
#### Tolerance of Foreigners by Province

The xenophobic attacks of 2008 started in Alexander Township in Gauteng Province and then spread to other townships and informal settlements across the country. Violent attacks against foreigners and their subsequent displacement seemed to be most pronounced in Gauteng province and Western Cape. Given its proximity to crisis-ridden Zimbabwe, Gauteng receives an especially high number of immigrants. It may therefore come as no surprise that tensions between immigrants and South Africans run high in this area. Yet, reports on the xenophobic violence of 2008 suggest that outbreaks are not best explained by structural factors, since many areas where there were even higher numbers of immigrants and higher levels of unemployment experienced no violence<sup>14</sup>.

Figure 4 depicts the percentage of immigration restrictionists, by Province. In every province, 50% or more of respondents hold restrictionist views. People in Mpumalanga (50% restrictionists) are the most tolerant, while those in Gauteng (72%) and the Northern Cape (73%) are the least. The high percentage of restrictionists in Northern Cape Province may have to do with the fact that large commercial farmers in the area often hire seasonal workers from Mozambique and Zimbabwe<sup>15</sup>, contributing to perceptions that foreigners steal jobs. But hired migrant labor is also prevalent in Mpumalanga, perhaps explaining the greater percentage of individuals in this province who say that foreigners should be allowed to come on the condition that jobs are available (36%).

<sup>14</sup> Towards Tolerance, Law, and Dignity: Addressing Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa

<sup>15</sup> Crush and McDonald 2001

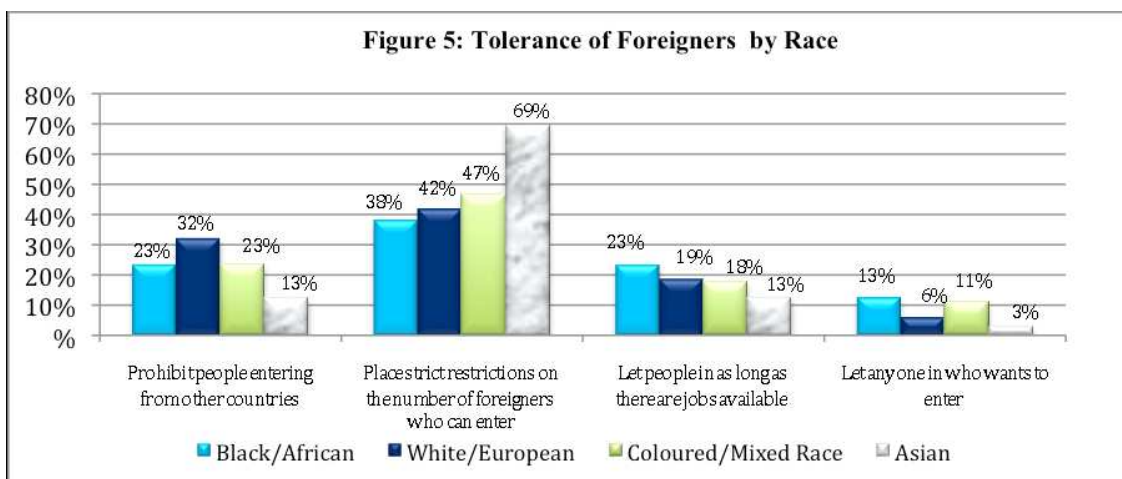


Percentage of individuals, by province, who say that government should “prohibit people entering from other countries” or “place strict restrictions on the number of foreigners who can enter”

As at the national level, strong pluralities support deporting foreigners only for specific reasons in almost every province. Only in the Northern Cape does a plurality (33%) say that all foreigners should be sent back to their countries.

**Tolerance of Foreigners by Race**

Finally, given the history of apartheid, which instituted the racial distribution of income in South Africa, one might expect Blacks to be the least tolerant of immigrants, since they are the most economically disadvantaged members of society. But we find that almost one-third of Whites (32%) support the extreme view that foreigners should be altogether prohibited from entering the country, compared to just 23% of Blacks and Coloureds, and 13% of Asians (Figure 6). It may be the case that more Blacks give the socially desirable response. Since media coverage of the 2008 violence revealed that most attacks took place in largely poor black communities, blacks may have an interest in appearing more tolerant. But on the other hand, blacks are acutely aware of what it is like to live under an oppressive regime. They may therefore support placing tight restrictions on immigration, but be unwilling to prohibit foreigners altogether due to their sensitivity to those who truly are fleeing persecution in their home countries.

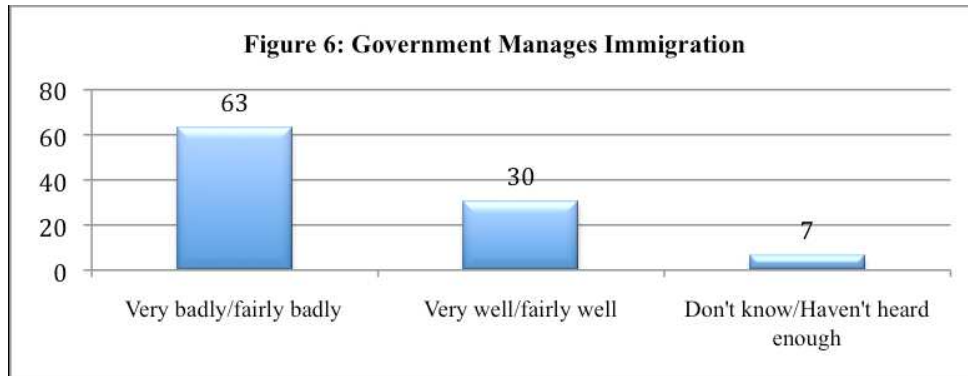


Percentage of individuals, by race, who say that government should “prohibit people entering from other countries” or “place strict restrictions on the number of foreigners who can enter”. Please note that N=72 for Asians.

### SECTION 3: GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE ON IMMIGRATION

A report compiled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) states that “local leaders and police were typically reluctant to intervene on behalf of victims” during the xenophobic attacks of 2008<sup>16</sup>. The report suggests that those in leadership positions often neglected to get involved, either because they shared the community’s xenophobic sentiment, or because they feared losing popular support by intervening to protect foreigners. Officials in law enforcement and local government frequently stated that they lacked the capacity to effectively quell violence in their communities. At the national level, many political leaders condemned the xenophobic attacks and encouraged South African citizens to resist the urge to scapegoat foreigners, but there has been no tangible change in immigration policy as of yet.

Do South Africans feel that government successfully handles immigration-related issues? Data from the Afrobarometer suggest that the vast majority of South Africans are not satisfied with the way government has managed this issue. In fact, nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) say that the government does “fairly badly” or “very badly” managing immigration (Figure 6).



*Q57t\_SAF: How well or badly would you say the former Mbeki government was handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing immigration?*

Given that the majority of South Africans are restrictionists, it seems plausible that dissatisfaction stems from perceived government ineffectiveness in limiting the presence of foreigners. But it may also be the case that perceptions of government performance on this issue shape levels of tolerance. Whatever the causal direction, we find that 74% of those who are extremely dissatisfied with the government’s management of immigration also hold the most restrictionist views, compared to only 25% of tolerants (Table 3).

**Table 3: Tolerance of Incoming Foreigners by Government Performance**

|                 |   | Very Badly | Fairly Badly | Fairly Well | Very Well |
|-----------------|---|------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|
| Restrictionists | Prohibit all Foreigners/Restrict Number of Foreigners | 74%        | 66%          | 58%         | 47%       |
|                 | Welcome Foreigners if Jobs/Welcome all Foreigners     | 25%        | 33%          | 42%         | 52%       |

<sup>16</sup> Towards Tolerance, Law, and Dignity: Addressing Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa

A similar trend holds with regard to attitudes toward deportation. One fourth (26%) of those who feel that the government is doing “very badly” handling immigration support a blanket deportation of foreigners, compared to just 14% of those who feel that the government is doing “very well.” (Table 4).

**Table 4: Deportation of Foreigners by Government Performance**

|                             |  | Very Badly | Fairly Badly | Fairly Well | Very Well |
|-----------------------------|--|------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|
| Restrictionists             | All of these people  | 26%        | 21%          | 14%         | 14%       |
|                             | Only those who are not contributing to the economy           | 18%        | 29%          | 27%         | 18%       |
| Conditional Restrictionists | Only those who are here without the permission of the SAF    | 35%        | 32%          | 35%         | 40%       |
|                             | Only those who have committed crimes                         | 15%        | 15%          | 17%         | 20%       |
| Tolerants                   | The govt. should not send back people to their own countries | 6%         | 4%           | 6%          | 8%        |

#### SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

This briefing paper has presented a preliminary examination of attitudes toward foreigners and, in particular, tolerance of immigrants in South Africa. Overall, it shows that most South Africans support stringent restrictions on the entry of foreigners, that the majority of individuals are very distrustful of those who manage to cross the border, and that individuals are deeply dissatisfied with the way government manages the issue of immigration. Afrobarometer data also show support for a relationship between media exposure and tolerance of immigrants, with a greater percentage of those who access television, radio and print news sources on a daily basis holding intolerant views of immigrants. More in-depth analyses would do well to examine this relationship and to probe the sources of the racial and regional variations discussed above.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Danielle Carter, doctoral candidate, Michigan State University

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