



Synthesis Report:

# OVERVIEW AND PROSPECTS

by David Everatt

*The*  
**ATLANTIC**  
*Philanthropies*

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## Introduction: things fall apart<sup>1</sup>

For fifteen years after democracy's birth, xenophobic violence was a barely reported but constant aspect of the South African landscape. Buried beneath the 'miracle' of the 'rainbow nation', it was like a sore tooth, a nagging, incessant but low-level continuance, which erupted in May 2008 in an orgy of violence that spread rapidly from Alexandra to other sites across the country ... and then seemed to have stopped almost as suddenly. Since then, violence directed against African migrants (legal and illegal, documented and undocumented, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants) – including murder, rape and robbery – has continued, but has returned to its side-bar one-liner status in newspapers and near-absence from the broadcast media.

It is argued here that a combination of deep structural social, economic and spatial inequalities, an on-going reliance on cheap labour, housing shortages, township retail competition, racism, a history of the use of violence to advance sectional interests and a traumatically scarred national psyche combined in early 2008 with a desperately low national mood as the economy seemed to be in free-fall and the ruling party was in the midst of factional splitting, to create ripe conditions for the xenophobic outburst.

And it is equally clear that the violence will recur. Since May 2008, it has continued anyway, in its earlier form - sporadic, poorly reported acts of violence, though no less murderous for that – and unless we move South Africa away from 'business as usual', it is reasonable to assume it will recur at scale as well.

As a result, the following assessment of the response of civil society to May 2008 and the fault-lines reflected by the attitudes that fed the violence, the violence itself, and the response of civil society, business and state, is thus not an academic exercise. Virtually every author concludes that violence against African migrants will continue and increase unless some profound socio-economic and attitudinal changes occur. This text thus sounds a loud warning bell to South Africa about our future.

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<sup>1</sup> 'My thanks to Cathi Albertyn and Patrick Bond for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter'.

And it does so not merely based on the opinions of the authors, but because of the views of ordinary South African citizens that informed the research.

Sitting in a focus group immediately after the May 2008 violence, an African male aged between 40 and 49, from Soweto, with a job and house, told the group: 'they were very lucky that the xenophobic attacks did not occur in Soweto, they should consider themselves lucky because if it had happened in Soweto things would be bad currently'. 'He is right', said the man next to him: 'You know that when Soweto sneezes the country catches a cold'.

### 'A sudden thunderstorm'?

Whether it is entirely accurate to describe the May 2008 violence, as Bishop Paul Verryn has labelled it, like a "sudden thunderstorm", even he seems to doubt – "The warning signs were very much in place before the full onslaught happened", he notes, suggesting it may have been shocking but was not unexpected – the thunderclouds had been building for a long time beforehand.<sup>2</sup> Use of the word 'xenophobic' is not uncontested. In his remembrance tribute, then President Mbeki stated:

*As many were killed or maimed during the dark days of May, thousands displaced, businesses and homes looted, and homes and businesses destroyed by arson, I heard it said insistently that my people have turned or have become xenophobic.*

*The word xenophobia means a deep antipathy towards or hatred of foreigners. When I heard some accuse my people of xenophobia, of hatred of foreigners, I wondered what the accusers knew about my people, which I did not know.*

*Over many years, I have visited many parts of our country, both urban and rural, in all our provinces, and met many people from other countries, including African countries, who have not hesitated to announce their countries of origin....*

*Everything I know about my people tells me that these heirs to the teachings of Tiyo Soga, J.G. Xaba and Pixley Seme, the masses who have consistently responded positively to the Pan-African messages of the oldest liberation movement on our continent, the African National Congress, are not xenophobic.*

<sup>2</sup> 'Foreword' to Hassim S., Kupe T and Worby E (ed.s) *Go Home Or Die Here: Violence, xenophobia and the reinvention of difference in South Africa* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008), p.i.

*These masses are neither antipathetic towards, nor do they hate foreigners. And this I must also say - none in our society has any right to encourage or incite xenophobia by trying to explain naked criminal activity by cloaking it in the garb of xenophobia.*

*I know that there are some in our country who will charge that what I have said constitutes a denial of our reality.<sup>3</sup>*

Whether or not it was ‘xenophobic’ – a point repeatedly rejected by Mbeki and most of his fellow African National Congress (ANC) leaders, who insisted it was “naked criminal activity”<sup>4</sup> - or ‘Afrophobic’ or ‘negrophobic’ as others have tried to explain it (see below) – seems rather trite in the face of the murder, rape, injury, theft and displacement that resulted, as it is in the face of the massive popular mobilisation spear-headed by civil society organisations (CSOs) in the face of dithering, bickering and lethargy from the state and its officials. We return to the issue below, but we should be clear from the outset: all the evidence and research data indicate that Mbeki was indeed in denial about ‘his’ people. As this book reminds us, survey after survey, focus group after focus group, have shown deeply xenophobic attitudes rising steadily over time. Ordinary South African citizens despite the heroic anti-apartheid struggle, but surely unsurprising in the context of segregation and apartheid – are deeply uneasy about ‘other’ Africans. These ‘others’ may be from Limpopo, or the rest of Africa. Mbeki counterposed the pan-African visions of Soga, Xaba and Seme, and his own biography, as evidence in support of his assertion that

*...I will not hesitate to assert that my people are not diseased by the terrible affliction of xenophobia which has, in the past, led to the commission of the heinous crime of genocide.<sup>5</sup>*

Yet ordinary citizens were as definite in asserting the reverse, as the following sequence (taken from a focus group of unemployed men from Olievenhoutsbosch) illustrates:

*R; Unemployed citizens don't have food to eat but foreigners are sure that they are going to get three meals a day; they are provided with breakfast, lunch and supper whereas we have to struggle on our own to feed our families.*

*Government is using the taxpayers' money to feed foreigners at the expense of its people.*

<sup>3</sup> Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki at the National Tribute in Remembrance of the victims of attacks on foreign nationals, Tshwane: <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08070410451001.htm> accessed 24/3/2010.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

*R: I don't think that the xenophobic attacks will never happen again; it is going to take maybe ten years to address the various issues surrounding foreigners, xenophobia will take a long time to be addressed in South Africa.*

*Government is talking about reintegrating foreigners back to the communities that chased them away in the first instance. These people are not originally from South Africa; they come from various countries, I think that the only solution is for government to deport them back to their countries. The government must commit itself to taking these people back to their own countries; that is where they belong.*

*R: Government must introduce a system through which it will control foreigners because at the moment they come and go as they please. Foreigners are taking our jobs and houses from us; most of them own houses and businesses in the township. They can afford to do all these things because they are employed whereas we are unable to afford the basic things.*

*R: Foreigners can afford to buy stands and build houses because they have jobs.*

*R: I want to add something; every foreigner who is employed has robbed a South African of that job and every foreigner who does not work commits crime.*



Where Verryn is spot on in his metaphor is in the sudden outburst of the violence and its equally sudden cessation, just like a Highveld thunderstorm (which also implies its inevitable return, of course). Like spring or autumn showers, low-level violence aimed at African migrants preceded and followed the storm, and anti-foreign sentiments had been evident from before the 1994 democratic elections and grown in intensity during the years thereafter. But the May 2008 outbreak was a massive eruption which threw into relief many of the fault-lines of South African society, and provided an opportunity for civil society to play a leading (and creative) role in mobilising funds and people and public opinion, directly intervening to save lives, help the injured, reunite families, challenge and shame the state and politicians into something resembling action, liaise with the international community, organise itself into more relevant structures, get closer to citizens, and generally remind us of its former power as a major player on the South African landscape.

While politicians argued and their parties squabbled, civil society in its truest form – community-based organisations, social movements, faith-based organisations, workers, unemployed people, school-children and students, shop-keepers and any number of citizens from all walks of life, working alongside the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), threw their energies, money, goods and beliefs into helping the victims of the violence. Could it potentially be a new dawn for the civil society sector, once so powerful in South Africa, with its tradition of humanism, of ubuntu? Did the massive mobilisation of goods and services – and the politicisation of a whole new generation including, critically, children and youth – suggest that civil society organisations might be able to regain some of the gains lost since 1994? That question motivated this study at a time when faith in the new democratic government of South Africa was wobbly, at best.

## Purpose

The focus of this book is not xenophobia *per se*; nor is it the migrants, refugees and others who were the focus of so much rage; nor is the state. Rather, the focus is on the intersection that the ‘thunderstorm’ – the causal high-pressure systems – provides, between understanding South Africa’s post-apartheid trajectory, and the conditions, role and prospects of civil society. Some saw May 2008 as a watershed that could be built on to catapult civil society back to the power and prominence it enjoyed during the anti-apartheid struggle, but most particularly in the 1990-94 interregnum; others regard such a notion as hopelessly romantic. The Atlantic Philanthropies funded this wide-ranging research project, involving multiple institutions and authors, in order to better understand what happened in different parts of South Africa; what roles civil society played; if and how coalitions and other forms of united action worked; what gaps were missed; and what is needed to make civil society a strong, permanent feature of the socio-political landscape rather than merely a powerful crisis-response sector. This in turn can only occur when grounded in a sober assessment of the economic, social and political conditions in which the violence occurred, as well as a blunt assessment of the state of civil society today.

This book is based on primary research in different parts of South Africa.<sup>6</sup> It is qualitative, and makes no claim to national representivity – we have no work on the Eastern Cape, for example, where attacks on Somali shop-keepers were early signals of the later crisis (and where they have continued unabated). That said, more than three-dozen case studies have fed into a substantial synthesis and book-length overview authored by a mixture of prominent commentators, academics and activists. We deliberately include the voices of migrants and *migrant civil society* within the country (absent

<sup>6</sup> Amisi, B., Bond, P., Cele, N., Hinely, R., ka Manzi, F., Mwelase, W., Naidoo, O., Ngwane, T. and S. Shwarer. 2009. *Xenophobia and Civil Society: Durban's Structured Social Divisions*; Desai, A. 2009. *Responding to the May 2009 xenophobic attacks: A case study of the Gift of the Givers*; Dube, N. 2009. *'Many shades of the truth' The Ramaphosa case study*; Everatt, D. 2009. *'The violence that was just the beginning...': Views on 'foreigners' and the May 2008 violence expressed in focus groups staged at the time*; Friedman, S. 2009. *One Centre of Power: The ANC and the Violence of May 2008*; Hlwatshayo, M. 2009. *COSATU's Responses to Xenophobia*; Jara, M. and Peberdy, S. 2009. *Progressive humanitarian and social mobilisation in a neo-apartheid Cape Town: a report on civil society and the May 2008 xenophobic violence in Cape Town*; Kirshner, J. Phokela, C. 2009. *Khutsong and xenophobic violence: Exploring the case of the dog that didn't bark*; Ngwane, T. 2009. *Xenophobia in Bottlebrush: An investigation into the reasons behind the attacks on African immigrants in an informal settlement in Durban*; Ngwane, T. and N. Vilikazi. 2009. *Social Movement Responses to the Xenophobia: A Case Study of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the Anti-Privatization Forum & the Coalition Against Xenophobia*; Nyar, A. 2009. *'Business as Usual': Understanding the response of the corporate sector to xenophobic violence*; Phakathi, S. 2009. *The Response of Churches to the Violence of 2008*; Sinwell, L. and Podi, N. 2009. *Towards Addressing the Root Causes of Social Tensions: Evaluating Civil Society and Local Government. Case studies for Atlantic Philanthropies*.

from virtually every other narrative). And we include a critical, progressive review of civil society in South Africa in 2010.

This collection, therefore, is both overdue and makes a considerable contribution to debate. All the participants agree that it is only through debate, based on primary data and rigorous analysis, that we can hope to shake some sections of civil society from a post-1994 torpor and re-ignite the energies that made the sector so important in South Africa, and in the world, in the defeat of apartheid.

## What happened? And why?

In May 2008, any lingering, wistful hopes for the ‘miracle’ of the post-apartheid ‘Rainbow Nation’ were immolated. The wave of violence ripped across Gauteng and then spread like uneven wildfire across the country, with patches spared, but with sufficient viciousness to leave 62 dead, almost 700 injured, and hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes country-wide. While the violence was mainly directed at foreign-born African migrants, it included ‘Shangaans’ – South Africans from Limpopo in particular, who failed linguistic tests such as knowing the isiZulu word for ‘elbow’ (*indololwane*). This was a gruesome re-creation of the infamous pencil test of the apartheid regime, which was used to separate those who would live a white life (with their smooth hair) from those whose hair condemned them to the life of a black non-citizen in white South Africa.

There was of course a context in which the violence occurred. This is important: actual flare-ups often resulted from petty and quite localised moments – as Dube shows in her Ramaphosa case study, a criminal gang comprising South Africans and Mozambicans turned on each other while arguing about how to divide their spoils, and the resulting fight and murder of a gang member triggered a savage wave of violence in the entire area. It could do so because of the broader context, which made the incident – laughable in any other situation – a highly flammable trigger event.

By May 2008, the national mood had reached its nadir. The xenophobic violence occurred at a moment when frustration peaked over spiralling interest rates, recent electricity black-outs endemic in the major centres, soaring oil and food prices, worsening unemployment, increasing complaints (and protest) about poor service delivery and ubiquitous crime. Those looking to the ruling party for leadership found it to be deeply split between the incumbent but distant national President Mbeki and a disparate group clustered around his opponent and ANC President Jacob Zuma, himself having been tried and acquitted on charges of rape and still facing charges for alleged corruption. The electricity blackouts in particular shook the confidence of ordinary citizens of all races, suggesting – in characteristically South African fashion – simultaneously arrogant and fearful - that we may indeed be living in ‘just another African country’ instead of an imaginary First World space where services run uninterrupted, smoothly and affordably. More affluent South Africans of all races spoke increasingly of emigration; and those less well-off blamed ‘foreigners’ for taking ‘their’ share of the national cake: jobs, houses, consumer sales and even women.

Everything came to be blamed on foreigners, as I describe in a later chapter drawn from focus groups being conducted at the time (focusing on socio-political issues<sup>7</sup>). Unemployment was blamed on

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks are extended to the client who commissioned the groups, and gave us permission to re-analyse them for this project without cost, while asking to remain anonymous.

foreigners undercutting locals; lack of housing occurred because foreigners bribed officials; lack of services resulted from the same, which saw foreigners jump to the front of the queue; there were no small-scale market entry opportunities because foreigners had taken them; foreigners were selling drugs to 'the youth' who were increasingly beyond their parents' control; foreigners were committing crime; the ANC government, with its mistrusted exile leadership, was seen to be 'soft on foreigners'; and on and on went the list of complaints.

The focus groups provided a window through which one can see the process of 'othering' foreigners reach its peak as they were accused of 'killing our nation'<sup>8</sup>. Mbeki valiantly argued that '[t]hose who have eyes to see' would see that only better-off foreigners with 'property to loot' were targeted; those with shops were attacked<sup>9</sup>; that criminals were out to make a fast buck at the expense of foreigners. This surreal attempt at attributing xenophobic consciousness to class analysis – blaming the victims by mistaking their terrible desperation and extremely hard work for parasitic wealth – is contradicted by the focus groups (which make no claims to representivity but still tell us volumes about prevailing attitudes). According to sentiments expressed openly in these groups, foreigners are morally bankrupt, they 'make babies with our sisters and then run away after that', they were 'sucking on our system'<sup>10</sup>, 'these guys from outside ... commit crime'<sup>11</sup>, 'they are the ones who commit so much rape'<sup>12</sup>, and 'they sell everything we want to sell'.<sup>13</sup> To add insult to injury, in the midst of tough economic and political times for South Africans, by comparison with other parts of Africa 'this is heaven on paradise for them ... they are living like kings' – this last remark sounding closer to the way Mbeki chose to understand the violence and attitudes to foreigners.<sup>14</sup> In over 20 focus groups of all races and classes, just one individual found something positive to say. For the majority in groups staged before May 2008, the response was clear: 'If we could work together ... we could fight off these foreigners and drive them home'.<sup>15</sup>

And lest we come to see it as a momentary aberration, in a second phase of groups that were staged in August/September 2008, most respondents were clear that 'for now it is silent but it is going to happen again' (African female 30-39 from Olievenhoutsbosch), and our renowned *ubuntu*<sup>16</sup> seemed in short supply: 'I want to add something' said an African male from Olievenhoutsbosch, 'every foreigner who is employed has robbed a South African of that job and every foreigner who does not work commits crime'.

And finally, it is worth noting that attitudes have not changed over time. In late 2009, the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) commissioned a large sample survey in the Gauteng city-region (which includes the whole of Gauteng province and key economic footprints beyond its borders but

<sup>8</sup> African male 40-49, Soweto (in a group that was staged some months after the May violence).

<sup>9</sup> Mbeki 'Tribute' *op cit*.

<sup>10</sup> African women, 36-45, Johannesburg suburbs.

<sup>11</sup> African male 26-35, Ivory Park.

<sup>12</sup> African female 50-59, Orange Farm.

<sup>13</sup> African male, 36-45, Alexandra, April/early May 2008.

<sup>14</sup> White male 26-35, West Rand.

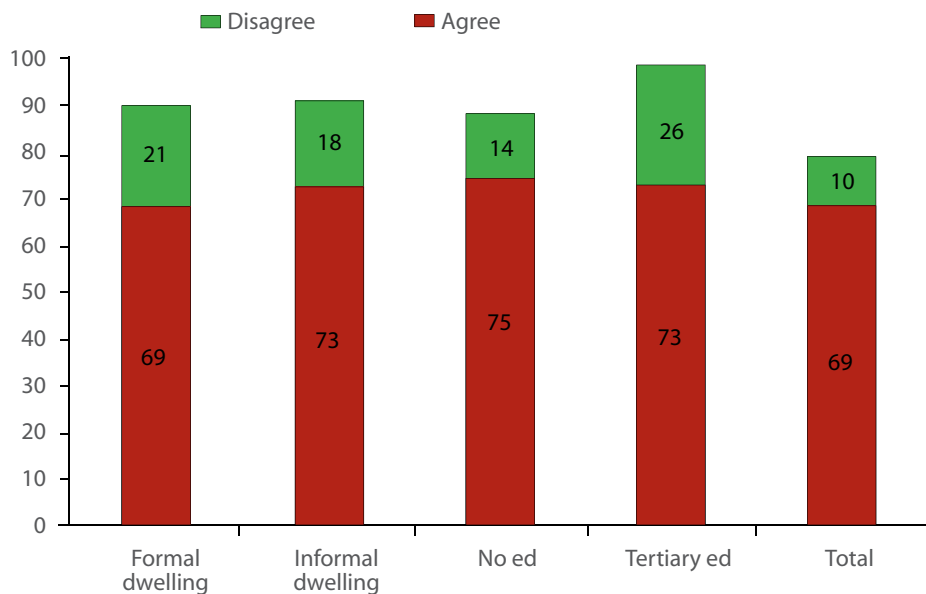
<sup>15</sup> African male, 36-45, Alexandra, April/early May 2008.

<sup>16</sup> The notion that I am because you are – our common humanity ties us all together.

which are fully integrated into the Gauteng economy, such as Sasolburg or Rustenburg). During the survey, respondents were given a 5-point scale (from strongly agree through agree, a neutral mid-point to disagree and strongly disagree) with the statement: 'Foreigners are taking benefits meant for South Africans'. The statement is a Likert item, in which deliberately provocative statements are read to respondents, who respond against a scale permitting more nuanced analysis.

**Figure 1: 'Foreigners are taking benefits meant for South Africans' (all respondents) (Source: GCRO Quality of Life survey, 2009)**

A shocking 69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. As the graph makes clear, there was no significant difference between those living in a house and those in shacks, or those with a degree and those who had never been to school at all. Across the race/class divide,



one thing seemed to unite respondents, namely their dislike of foreigners. We can argue that this does not equate with xenophobia, that the question could have been better phrased, and on and on, but the bottom line remains: South Africans, black and white, do not seem to like black African migrants.

Given the massive psychological damage done by South Africans to each other – under colonial rule, segregation and apartheid, and in the violence of 1990-1994 – it is surely not surprising to find that people capable of enormous bravery in support of noble ideals are also capable of more base motives, and that they can harbour suspicion of 'others' from whom they were insulated and taught to look down at? 'Everything I know about my people tells me [they]...are not xenophobic', pleaded Mbeki. Perhaps there were things about 'his people' he chose not to look at sufficiently closely; but any decent research effort will uncover the deep-rooted hostilities towards black foreigners that lie close to the surface of most South Africans.

But where Mbeki may guide us, if we are observant, is that xenophobia, Afrophobia or negrophobia are overwhelmingly symptoms of a deeper malaise, the hang-over of dispossession, violence racism, intolerance, and the use of force to settle disputes. This has been 'the South African way' for centuries,

and has bequeathed to those living in the present a deeply scarred national psyche. Without genuine, deep-seated healing – which is coupled to genuine redistribution and the reduction of inequality – no progress is conceivable. Xenophobia is a reflection of the deeper damage done to us.

The point was made strongly by a group of women speaking in a recent focus group convened by the GCRO, to discuss service delivery protests and when and why they turn either violent and/or xenophobic. Speaking to a room of strangers, knowing they may be watched from behind a viewing mirror, the women told us of their experiences living in Tokoza in the early 1990s:

*R: Our kids and those who fought were never treated; now they should be taken for counselling to get rid of that horror, because we saw horrible things like a person burning right in front of your eyes or hacked in front of you, so we still have the trauma and we never had counselling to help us*

*R: We used to hide our kids in the wardrobes; we took our sons and hid them because when the fighting broke out they would come and check if your child is a boy or girl, if it was a boy they would grab him by the leg and swing him head first to the wall...*

*R: In front of you...*

*R: Right in front of you; so we never had counselling to rid us from what we saw<sup>17</sup>*

The irony was complete: the women live in the former single-sex hostel which had been the epicentre of the ANC/Inkatha war, and is now a set of family units. 'Development' has happened – but the damage remains. The point is clear: government has done some remarkable work in meeting basic needs, but any number of roads, taps, telephones, toilets and the like – critical as they are – will not heal the psychological scarring afflicting so many South Africans. And while we are not advocating individual therapy for 45 million people – desirable though that might be! – creative solutions are required to address these complex, messy issues that are far more resistant to easy solutions, budget votes and outsourcing.

<sup>17</sup> Quotation supplied by GCRO, taken from a focus group of Tokoza residents, September 2009.

## Civilised and uncivilised society?

There is a debate within this book about civil and uncivil society, the latter being organised and semi-organised community-based groups who undertake ‘illegal’ action for ‘legitimate’ reasons, such as re-connecting electricity to the houses of poor people disconnected as a result of their inability to pay, or rioting against corrupt councillors. In this important debate, there is a clear appeal to a higher moral authority – services for the poor – and a sense that state failure requires an unprecedented degree of pressure against authorities, rather than mere warlordism and opposition to “rules of the game” that are considered illegitimate from start to finish. The debate surfaces in a number of the papers in this book, and should carefully be followed, given how many recent “service delivery protests” move from burning a councillor’s house or municipal library to looting an immigrant’s shop.

But there is a parallel debate about how to understand what ‘civil society’ meant in the context of the May 2008 violence, and of on-going deeply uncivil attitudes to foreigners. As economic and political instability swirled around citizens in May 2008, they broke in two ways. On the one hand, citizens – including political and civic organisations – had been blaming ‘foreigners’ – by which they meant black, African migrants – with a terrifying verbal ferocity in focus groups and on film<sup>18</sup> that was soon reflected in the savagery meted out to African migrants – and some South Africans with darker skin or Limpopo origins and accents – just days after the focus groups ended. Mbeki and some of his leadership colleagues may have firmly believed that these were all criminal acts – hence their initial reaction that a ‘third force’ must be behind the attacks – but that perspective proved no more sustainable than the same claim made by Inkatha in the 1990s (i.e. that there was a plot to kill their leaders while setting them up to take the blame). Such a ‘third force’ would require a major degree of co-ordination, communication and resources, which have never been identified. Nonetheless, Mbeki was unequivocal in his view:

*“The dark days of May which have brought us here today were visited on our country by people who acted with criminal intent. What happened during these days was not inspired by a perverse nationalism, or extreme chauvinism, resulting in our communities violently expressing the hitherto unknown sentiment of mass and mindless hatred of foreigners – xenophobia.”<sup>19</sup>*

But while citizens were engaged in murder and looting, other citizens rose to defend, protect and help foreigners – those who were already victims, those who were displaced, and those who were simply foreign and thus potential victims. South Africans savagely attacked foreigners, stole their goods, raped women, and behaved in every degrading way that they accused ‘foreigners’ of doing. Members of political organisations, social movements, churches, civic associations and other organs of civil society, as well as ordinary citizens, took part in the violence, or stood by cheering or laughing as it occurred.<sup>20</sup> And yet many of their fellow citizens, members of those same organisations, rose

<sup>18</sup> See the Anti-Privatisation Forum protesting against ‘foreigners’ in the film ‘Affectionately known as Alex’ (Filmmakers Against Racism, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Mbeki ‘Tribute’ *op cit*.

<sup>20</sup> The most famous image of the time sees a Mozambican man burning to death while school-children in neat uniforms look on, laughing.

to the challenge of stopping violence, helping victims, litigating to force the state to act, soliciting donations, offering humanitarian assistance, and shaming their political leaders. Were these both acts of civil society, more or less civil? We return to this question below.

Civil society was at the heart of responding to the humanitarian crisis, while the state seemed torn by contradictory responses from different spheres and leaders, the Tripartite Alliance<sup>21</sup> dithered and bickered, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) leadership in many areas seemed frozen into immobility but in others acted swiftly to stop violence (compounding the notion of a deeply fractured, rudderless party), and the private sector (here meaning the larger corporate entities) made a lot of noise but did little more. Civil society – individuals and organisations – filled the gap. Humanitarian relief, advocacy, lobbying, litigation, taking statements, treating injuries, providing massive amounts of goods (blankets, food and so on in a cold winter) and a range of other interventions were provided by faith-based organisations, trade unions, social movements, non-profits and the general public.

Coalitions sprang into existence in different provinces – analysed in detail in this book – to draw in new individuals and organisations, build on the strengths of existing NGOs (in particular), and maximise impact. Some 5 000 people marched against xenophobia in Johannesburg – led by the ‘independent left’ social movements and with the ANC and COSATU notably absent – while shops donated food, workers at small businesses gave food and blankets, and school children held all-night vigils to raise money and goods for displaced people. Police stations in many areas were swamped with donations, as were churches, many located scores of kilometres away from the violence itself.

For some, all this activity was mere dressed-up white racism – affluent whites and former activists rode on a wave of moral high-ground-ism fuelled by criticism aimed at their black compatriots who, despite democracy, self-evidently remained heathen savages, as television sets showed to a global audience.<sup>22</sup> Other commentators were less interested in whites generally but reserved especial scorn for *former* activists emerging from 15 years of gluttonous feeding at the democratic trough to march again, blinking in the rays of the sun. This remarkable attempt to extract something unedifying from a moment generally regarded as the largest and most significant mobilisation of the public and of civil society since the voter mobilisation of 1994 and public participation in constitution-making of 1995-6 is jarring. For the first time in over a decade, South Africans of all races – thousands of them, all over the country – were working together for a noble ideal of equality and solidarity, but their treatment at the hands of some commentators is quite breath-taking in its mean-spiritedness.

The first substantial work to look at the May 2008 violence was a volume published by the University of the Witwatersrand, following a colloquium on ‘Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa in late May 2008. It is remarkable how some contributors to the volume *Go Home Or Die Here* who looked at civil society, felt the need to single out for scorn the actions of civil society – ‘middle class civil society’<sup>23</sup> for one author, ‘former radical activist[s]’<sup>24</sup> for another, ‘white liberals’ who were ‘mobilis[ing]

<sup>21</sup> Comprising the ruling African National Congress, Congress of South African trade Unions (COSATU) and South African Communist Party (SACP).

<sup>22</sup> A point made by at least one of the participants during a research workshop for this project.

<sup>23</sup> Landau L. in Hassim S., Kupe T and Worby E (ed.s) *Go Home Or Die Here: Violence, xenophobia and the reinvention of difference in South Africa* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008),

<sup>24</sup> Pillay D. in Hassim *et al* *Go Home op cit.*, p.97.

assistance for the refugees, not entirely altruistically<sup>25</sup> for a third, 'the lapsed left of yesteryear [which had] come out of the woodwork. The golf course can wait until later'<sup>26</sup>

Landau sought a reasonable explanation, namely that while South Africa seemed to be becoming more equal and tolerant, former activists could take a back seat, but were spurred to action by the violence of May 2008; but even he goes on to warn that it was the 'nativism' at the heart of the violence threatening middle-class (white and Indian, in this instance) privilege that was the catalyst. The 5 000 people who marched through Hillbrow, it would appear, were to a person white (or possibly Indian), middle-class, Croc-wearing, 60s-loving former activists who had betrayed the cause and were now desperately afraid of losing their privileges. Mngxitama notes that some blacks also marched – they are invisible in other narratives – but, in his typical faux-ironic fashion that ends up biting its own tail, they too (he argues) were driven by fear of 'some atavistic unexplainable black lashing out at black', and by the failure of 'white education' and 'civilisation' to touch 'the deep recesses of these barbarians'.<sup>27</sup>

Setting aside the weak stereotypicality of the jibes (golf clubs, Crocs, hippies), and accepting that no doubt some whites did look askance at 'black on black violence', it is nonetheless striking how these academics and commentators felt the need not to celebrate the ability of South Africans to unite and help victims of violence, nor to pour fear and loathing onto the shoulders of the murderers and rapists, but rather to scorn 'the human rights industry'<sup>28</sup> and belittle its actions, and to single out whites in particular for special treatment. Their role as the omniscient author (debunked by literary theory decades ago, but apparently able to operate freely in political commentary) allows the authors to see beyond the moral outrage, empathy and human solidarity that marchers *claimed* were motivating them, and see that this was a moment 'which moved the middle classes to feign concern [but had] little to do with concern for the victims or for the wellbeing of fellow human beings'.<sup>29</sup> The obvious question is what made these authors turn their gaze away from the violence and look rather at civil action against xenophobia, and in such terms?

Albertyn, writing in the same volume, made the point that even in the highest court in the land, a duality existed: progressive rulings were on offer for foreigners with permanent residence, but not for economic migrants looking for the most basic employment rights and protection.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps this dualism – 'good' versus 'bad' foreigners – commingling with a parallel dualism – good citizen/bad citizen, the same blind spot Mbeki's speech reveals – is at work in other pieces in the same volume. Is the awfulness of what 'our people' were doing what made people look away from the violence meted out by South Africans to South Africans and foreign nationals, and scorn those opposing it rather than to accept that 'our people' – all of us, in other words – are capable and to a degree, culpable? This book seeks to avoid falling into similar traps, but aware of the complexity of confronting such atavism among ourselves, we make no claim to have succeeded in doing so.

<sup>25</sup> Mngxitama, A. in 'We are not all like that: race, class and nation after apartheid' in Hassim *et al Go Home op cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>30</sup> Albertyn C. 'Beyond citizenship: human rights and democracy' in Hassim *et al Go Home op cit.*, pp. 175-188.

## Xenophobia?

As indicated above, South Africans looking closely at South Africans killing foreigners seems to create analytic blind-spots. This feeds into and is fed by an on-going debate about 'naming the violence', exemplified by Mbeki (quoted extensively above) and his blank refusal to countenance the possibility of xenophobic South Africans. Was the violence xenophobic, was it negrophobia, was it Afrophobia (as Amisi argues in a chapter of this book)? Was it merely criminal, recidivist? In an energetic search for more palatable causes, poverty, inequality, relative deprivation and black self-hatred, all get an airing. As this book describes, some authors are uni-causal, others suggest a mixture of factors.

In the *Go home or die here* volume referred to above, Glaser is more blunt: xenophobia is evident in every research outing that tests attitudes on the issue (confirmed by this study). He notes with blunt sarcasm that '[t]his xenophobia really is coming up from below – it is profoundly democratic...'.<sup>31</sup> We asked above: was the organisation and mobilisation to commit violence part of the work of a segment of or a parallel civil society – a morally warped civil society, one that lacked any progressive agenda but was very clear about its short-term material needs and how to achieve them? This book does not take up that line – without a moral let alone an ideological compass, anything and everything can be ascribed to 'a civil society', rendering the concept meaningless. Uncivil society appeals to our notions of fairness and justice and asks why reconnecting electricity for the poor is wrong, when the only 'crime' is the poverty of the recipient. That is a world away from mob murder.

That said, we do also ask – and Amisi makes the point strongly – to what extent civil society organisations (CSOs) were part of the problem in the first place, through acts of commission or omission? How many South African CSOs included foreign-born nationals as members? How many included on their agenda migrants and their concerns? How many have changed, and do so today?

Xenophobic sentiment has been evident in polling in South Africa from before the 1994 democratic elections. It has grown in intensity and breadth – though retained a focus on black African migrants – over time, moving from a generalised snootiness to a sharp focus on specific groups – primarily Mozambicans and Zimbabweans, as well as Somalis and Pakistanis – who are seen to have 'taken our houses/women/jobs' or, in the case of Pakistanis, to be central to scams involving falsified marriage papers and fake identity documents (IDs).<sup>32</sup> It has also moved from frustrated admiration at the entrepreneurial skills and better education of foreign-born Africans to a generalised anger and in many cases a deep-seated loathing of their presence in 'our' cities and towns where they take benefits meant for South Africans.

It is notable that the ruling party has remained in denial through this period. The editors of *Go Home Or Die Here* rightly point to then President Mbeki's speech at the memorial service for the victims, where he played the insider race card – 'I wondered what the accusers [of xenophobia] knew about

<sup>31</sup> Glaser, D. '(Dis)connections: elite and popular 'common sense' on the matter of 'foreigners' in Hassim *et al Go Home op cit.*, p.53.

<sup>32</sup> This latter point, about ID scams involving Pakistanis, was repeated in many of the focus groups. As one participant put it, "women when they get a passport find they are married to a Pakistani!"

my people which I did not know?' and went on to claim that the violence was 'visited on our country by people who acted with criminal intent'.<sup>33</sup> It seems Mbeki knew as little about 'his people' as he did about 'his' party, which soon unceremoniously recalled him from the Presidency. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, researchers had pointed to rising levels of deep-seated hostility to 'foreigners' – black ones, from Africa – and the political leaders of the country, many of whom had spent years in exile in various African countries, repeatedly rejected any notion that 'our people' were capable of xenophobic sentiments, projecting their own image onto ordinary South Africans.

And while most commentators agree that xenophobia was more symptom than cause, we should not shy away from a blunt assessment of the remarkable anti-African racism, fear, ignorance, anger and loathing shown towards non-South African Africans by South Africans of all races; just as we should not avert our eyes from the murder taking place, even though it was being committed by our fellow South Africans. The ANC's own history, on which leaders based their rejection of xenophobia, was itself being re-written by ordinary citizens as the sequence below suggests:

**R:** *But guys, let's talk about this issue of foreigners. We went to their countries, but we are not like they are here. We didn't do all the things they are doing. We had left our country because we wanted to fight a war with the boers because of apartheid but that's not why they have left their countries.*

**R:** *They are here because of hunger in their countries.*

**R:** *You see, we went to all these African states, but we didn't commit crime though we were running away from the boers. They are running away from hunger in their countries and come here and commit crime.*

Some authors in this volume explore whether xenophobia is an appropriate label; most accept the massive weight of research (over the last 16 years as well as in this book) and call the violence as they see it: xenophobic.

## Not yet uhuru

In the 1990s, as authoritarian regimes collapsed world-wide, O'Donnell and Schmitter's work on transitions from authoritarianism to democracy was an influential text consulted and quoted by many involved in the South African transition. In their work *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*<sup>34</sup>, the authors identified three steps in a transitional process: liberalisation, democratisation, and socialisation. In the first, liberalisation, a range of rights and liberties are extended to the populace previously denied them, as occurred in South Africa. In the second, democratisation,

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Hassim *et al Go Home op cit.*, p.4.

<sup>34</sup> O'Donnell, G., Schmitter, P. and Whitehead, L. (1998): *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*.

citizenship, participation and representation for all in the political process is extended, again as occurred here. However, in the third phase – socialisation – social and economic equality are the goal. And here South Africa has failed. We are not alone in this. The key weakness of their approach was to assume an *automatic* sequence from one phase to another, which has not occurred here or elsewhere.

That this full transformation was on the agenda is not questioned – in the early 1990s, most progressives saw a genuine rupture in social, political and *economic* life as a *sine qua non* for sustainable democracy. And rather like the current debate, the focus was on nationalisation and the likely results thereof. But the National Economic Forum brought together key private sector, labour and civil society players and an economic RDP (the Reconstruction and Development Programme) was expected. And it was not just leftist activists who spoke in these terms:

*...a glaringly obvious reality of the South African economy [is]: the deep structural inequality between black and white in access to opportunity, managerial and corporate control. Democratising the economy must mean increasing and effective participation in all aspects of economic life by groups and individuals that have been excluded from such participation. ... It is almost futile to assess the prospects of a negotiated transition to democracy, and the challenges of democratisation in the future constitution, civil service and the budget, if the same ethos of bargaining, tolerance and joint responsibility is not also developed in the economic life of the country. .... Business cannot simply go on as before. Its role is crucial in determining the success of the process of negotiated transition.<sup>35</sup>*

These words were written by van Zyl Slabbert, formerly leader of the Progressive Federal Party, and at that time running Idasa while teaching at the Wits Business School. Reading them in 2010, they sound like the words of a radical activist.

It is common cause that despite remarkable achievements in some areas, despite social grants and free basic services, despite development programmes in virtually every sector, despite Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and its follow-up, Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE), government has signally failed to address inequality. Poverty levels have slowly but steadily decreased over time.<sup>36</sup> But South Africa is in the top three most unequal countries on earth, and Johannesburg among the most unequal cities on earth, joined by Pretoria.

The private sector has glaringly failed: van Zyl Slabbert's injunction that business as usual was incompatible with sustainable democracy were ignored, apart from some elite pacting and adding black directors to company boards, and there is a growing national consensus that a second transition

<sup>35</sup> Van Zyl Slabbert, F. (1992) *The quest for democracy: South Africa in transition* (Penguins Books, Harmondsworth), pp. 66-70.

<sup>36</sup> See Everatt D. 'The undeserving poor: poverty, politics and provision in the poorest nodes of South Africa' (*Politikon*, 36/1, July 2009)

is required. Nationally, business as usual cannot continue. The political rules have been re-written, the administrative and judicial systems have been re-wired if not fully transformed, but at the social and economic levels – the third phase of transition, according to O’Donnell & Schmitter – South Africa has failed to move to a point where we can truly regard ourselves as post-transitional, as having arrived at the place envisioned by those struggling for freedom from white rule.

Moreover, the period since 1994 has been punctuated by sporadic calls for ‘an RDP of the soul’, or moral regeneration, based on an acceptance that psycho-social damage has been done to all – in different ways and to different degrees, certainly. But if all South Africans are to be liberated from their past, all South Africans need a new moral compass, just as the economic order needs to be fundamentally restructured and the social order re-imagined.

Without this third, delayed phase of transition, South Africa remains in limbo – post-apartheid but not yet the non-racial, non-sexist democracy envisioned in the Constitution; still a transitional society, yet without sign-posts telling citizens when they will have arrived at post-transitional ‘real’ South Africa. And while that obtains, the fertile breeding ground remains in place for xenophobia, as it does for rape, for violent crime, for racism and the other social ills by which we are increasingly identified in the world.

This book offers a series of recommendations – some easily implemented, others less so – for seeking to reinvigorate civil society and to attack xenophobia. But underlying those recommendations is a basic reality that business as usual – economic, social, political – cannot continue. The book details the impact of poverty and in particular inequality – economic, spatial, social – that provides the space in which xenophobia (and so many other phobias) takes root. Xenophobia, we repeatedly argue, is a symptom of a deeper malaise. And what all of this points to is that a rupture with the 1994-2010 period is now required.

The 1994-2010 years should be seen as the interregnum (rather than 1990-1994), a moment when the country bowed before the fear of ‘market jitters’, ‘capital flight’ and other bogeymen but has come to realise that radical shifts are needed regardless of what ‘the market’ threatens to do, precisely because ‘the market’ – as currently configured – has failed to transform or to assist the broader national transformation project. It is a period during which black and white learned that we *can* live together – but we don’t know how. New rules are needed. A new society is needed. All South Africans, and all others living in South Africa, need to jointly re-imagine ourselves and South Africa, as we were asked to do in the early 1990s. The inevitability of gradualism – trickle-down, in other words – will not suffice. If the cause is to be tackled, rather than the symptom treated, then the transition – the socio-economic transition – needs to be completed.