



# South Africa's Xenophobic Eruption

## INTRODUCTION

Between 11 and 26 May 2008, 62 people, the majority of them foreign nationals, were killed by mobs in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and elsewhere. Some 35,000 were driven from their homes.<sup>1</sup> An untold number of shacks were burnt to the ground. The troubles were dubbed South Africa's 'xenophobic riots'. They constitute the first sustained, nationwide eruption of social unrest since the beginning of South Africa's democratic era in 1994.

Between 1 and 10 June, in the immediate aftermath of the riots, I, together with the photojournalist Brent Stirton, visited several sites of violence in the greater Johannesburg area. In all we interviewed about 110 people. We began in Alexandra township, where the violence is believed to have started. There we interviewed several of the township's civic and political leaders, local police managers, officials from the multi-billion rand Alexandra Renewal Project, and dozens of ordinary residents. We also visited the church and the hostel where the violence was alleged to have begun, and interviewed the men who many in Alexandra allege instigated it.

Beyond Alexandra, we spent time at numerous sites and shelters throughout Johannesburg where displaced people had taken refuge. These included the Central Methodist Church in downtown Johannesburg, Jeppe police station, the Boksburg town hall, the Reiger Park police station, and a shelter erected by the South African government in City Deep to accommodate about 2,000 displaced people. At these sites, we took detailed testimony from 47 people who had been forced to flee their homes.

We visited several sites around Johannesburg at which trouble was averted. Typically, in such places, incipient mobs threatened violence, but were confronted by, and dispersed by, ordinary residents. In particular, we spent time in the shack settlements around Mansfield hostel in Soweto, and interviewed foreign nationals who live there as well as their South African landlords.

We also visited two informal settlements in Ekhuruleni: Jerusalem and Ramaphosa. In Ramaphosa, the violence was sustained and severe. At time of writing, four months to the day after the start of the riots, not a single foreign national has returned.<sup>2</sup> In Jerusalem, in contrast, the violence, although severe, lasted a single night, before it was quelled by police and residents. Our visits to these sites were particularly fruitful inasmuch as we were able to conduct six reasonably intensive interviews with young men who claimed to have joined the mobs and participated in the violence.

The first section of this paper recounts at some length the experience of a single victim of the xenophobic violence in South Africa, a Mozambican national by the name of Benny Sithole. The second section explores the genesis of the violence in Alexandra. Finally, in the longest and most interpretive section of the paper, I convey how the violence was understood by the perpetrators and victims interviewed, and how I have made sense of their views.

This paper's contribution is circumscribed and specific. Aside from recording some of the complexity of what happened on the ground, as well as devoting space to the voices of those who experienced the violence, the paper makes one modest analytical contribution to understanding the causes of the violence. It notes that local South African politics at the sites of the violence is consumed by struggles for state patronage. It notes too that the perpetrators interviewed complained that South Africa's wealth was being spirited across the border in the pockets of foreign nationals. Together, these observations suggest something far-reaching about how many South Africans understand their democracy, and the principles of distributive justice that animate it. They suggest an idea of the national economy as a finite lump around which people feed via their access to patrons.

This conception of the economy invites conflict, for it assumes that access to resources is a zero-sum game.<sup>3</sup> In relation to foreign nationals in particular, two pertinent issues arise. First, if the economy is understood as a finite lump, then visible and relative prosperity among foreign

### ***A timeline of the troubles***

- 11 May A mob invades a disused factory outside Alexandra said to be inhabited by Zimbabweans, then chases the occupants into the township itself, looting and burning shacks. Two people are killed.
- 12 May The third person is killed in Alexandra as the violence continues.
- 13 May Thousands of foreigners flee their homes in Alexandra, abandoning much of their possessions, and take refuge in police stations and elsewhere.
- 14 May Peace is restored to Alexandra, but there is rioting in Diepsloot.
- 15 May The violence spreads to the inner city of Johannesburg. Five people are killed in Cleveland.
- 16 May In several parts of Soweto, threatening mobs are dispersed by residents.
- 17 May The violence spreads to various parts of Ekurhuleni including Thokoza, Thembisa, Boksburg, and some of the shack settlements around Reiger Park such as Ramaphosa and Jerusalem.
- 18 May A Mozambican national, Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, is burnt alive in the public square at the centre of Ramaphosa.
- 19 May Images of Nhamuave's burning body are published on the front pages of newspapers around the globe and are viewed on international television channels. The official death toll rises to 22.
- 20 May The violence in central Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni continues. A man is killed in Boksburg. Police announce that they have charged more than 200 people since the start of the troubles with crimes ranging from disturbance of the peace to murder.
- 21 May Violence is reported in other parts of the country for the first time, specifically, in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga. President Thabo Mbeki calls in the army to assist to bring peace. The death toll now stands at 42.
- 23 May The violence spreads further. There are now reports of looting and attacks on people in several shack settlements on the outskirts of Cape Town. There is also looting in the small coastal town of Knysna.
- 25 May Two weeks after the violence began, President Thabo Mbeki finally addresses the nation on television and condemns the violence. ANC President Jacob Zuma addresses a large crowd at Bakerton and is heckled when he condemns the violence.
- 26 May Safety and Security Minister Charles Nqakula claims that the violence has been contained. He says that 1,384 arrests have been made and that 56 people are dead. The figure will later rise to 62.

*Source Interviews with police, residents and local leaders in Alexandra, Soweto and Reiger Park; Mail and Guardian; Business Day, The Star, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation; CNN.com; BBC.com; SAPA, Southern African Migration Project (SAMP).*

nationals is viewed as theft of national resources that ought rightly to belong to South Africans. Secondly, if one understands one's democratic patrimony as something that is acquired by patronage, then the presence of foreign nationals evidently prospering without any access to the state profoundly upsets one's conception of one's own relation to the state, of what it means to be a South African living in a democracy, and of what, precisely, one's entitlements are.

Finally, the paper asks why many South Africans have come to understand their democracy and their economy in this way, and argues that at least part of the answer lies in the character of the country's new political elite, and the bargains it struck with established white wealth at the beginning of the democratic era.

### **BENNY SITHOLE**

Benny Sithole can be forgiven for thinking himself unlucky. Four years ago, he left his home in southern Mozambique with the clothes on his back and the cell phone number of a childhood friend in his pocket. He was headed to Johannesburg, South Africa, to find work and money. Within two years, he had created a stable business, a fruit and vegetable stall just a few hundred yards from the shack he had made his home. It was a modest enterprise, to be sure, but he was earning enough to support a mother and two sisters back home. He had also married a South African woman, a Xhosa-speaker named Kate Ntsaluba, had travelled nearly a thousand miles to introduce himself to her family, and had gathered around him a wide circle of South African friends.

On the afternoon of 18 May, 2008, some of Sithole's neighbours, among them young men with whom he had broken bread from time to time, drove him and his wife, along with every other foreign national in their shack settlement, from their home. After the couple had gone, the invaders looted their shack, distributing its furniture among themselves. Next, they tore down Sithole's fruit and vegetable stall to use for firewood.

'I received no warning,' Sithole said. 'On the Saturday night, they were the same people they had been since the day I met them. By the time the sun set on Sunday, they had told me that I must either leave or die.'

Neither Sithole nor his wife has returned, he for fear of being killed on the grounds that he is foreign, she because she suspects she will be raped for sharing her bed with a Mozambican.

Benny and Kate Sithole are among the tens of thousands of victims of a pogrom, the first to take place on the soil of Nelson Mandela's rainbow nation. Several million foreign nationals have poured across South Africa's borders since the end of Apartheid, the majority of them illegally.<sup>4</sup> They have received a mixed welcome

from ordinary South Africans and state officials alike. This May, South Africans in shantytowns across the country decided to throw them out.

The trouble began exactly a week before the Sitholes fled their home, about 45 kilometres away, in Alexandra, a densely populated township of 400,000 in northern Johannesburg. Although in retrospect it is possible to piece together how it began, at the time it seemed to come from nowhere. In the afternoon of May 11, a crowd of South Africans gathered on the outskirts of the township and attacked the occupants of an abandoned factory said to be inhabited primarily by Zimbabweans.<sup>5</sup> By the following morning the crowd had grown and was moving through Alexandra's shack settlements, driving not just foreigners, but also Venda and Tsonga- (Shangaan-) speaking South Africans, from their homes, looting some shacks, and burning others.

News of the violence only reached Benny Sithole on the following Wednesday. By then, the troubles had spread. Reports of mob violence had come from the suburbs that hug the eastern rim of the inner city, where tens of thousands of immigrants from all over the continent live side by side with South Africans. The attacks would soon spread to Ekurhuleni, the municipality of some two million inhabitants directly east of Johannesburg, where the Sitholes lived, as well as to shantytowns in four other South African provinces. The violence now on his doorstep, Sithole still did not move.

'I just didn't believe it was possible,' he recalled. 'Four years is a long time to live in one place. You are settled. You know many people by name. Maybe in other places, I thought. But not here.'

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30,000 people about 30 kilometres from Johannesburg's city centre. Like dozens of other settlements around Johannesburg, it emerged when recent immigrants to the city erected shacks on municipal land. Over the years, the

government has steadily provided it with one service after another, first clean water, then electricity, then several hundred brick-and-mortar houses. A cross-section of southern Africa lives there: South Africans from all over the country with their manifold languages, Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Malawians, small minorities of Angolans and Congolese. All are first-generation Johannesburgers, and almost none regard this city as home.

The Sitholes' lived in a section of Ramaphosa called Dark City, the last part of the settlement to remain unelectrified.

'The trouble started on the Friday,' Sithole recounted, 'far from Dark City, in the centre of Ramaphosa, where the non-South Africans have set up rows and rows of stalls. They sell everything from vegetables, to meat, to live chickens. A group of young men came to steal the chickens and knock over the vegetables and kick the stalls down.'

By the following day, the crowd had swelled considerably and was working its way through Ramaphosa, gathering numbers as it moved. (Rumours abounded as to who they were, and whether they had come from the outside, but it in the aftermath of the violence it seemed fairly clear that the crowds were composed almost entirely of Ramaphosa residents.) Still, Sithole did not believe that the violence would come to Dark City. But by ten o' clock the next day, a Sunday, the crowd was close enough for Sithole to hear it speak. On the lips of those who had gathered to loot and kill were freedom songs composed during the struggle against Apartheid. Only now, they no longer sang of white minority rule, but of foreigners, and of the jobs, houses and women the foreigners had stolen. As Sithole recounts it:

With the singing in our ears, something happened. The young unemployed South African men of Dark City, people I know very well, people who sit and play dice all day long, started to take things from our stalls. They walked up and took handfuls of tomatoes and cabbages. Some of the older people came and called the younger ones to task, and they went back to playing dice.

The crowd was very close now, and it was clearly going to be amongst us soon. There is this committee in Dark City. It is composed of the South Africans who live among us. It called an emergency meeting; the idea was to form a defence unit to keep the crowd away from our homes. But half way through the meeting, the committee changed its mind. It decided, no, we are not going to stop them. By now, the ones who play dice around my stall had joined the crowd. They knew me to be Mozambican. Some South African neighbours came to me and said you must go. If you stay you will die.

Why the committee changed its mind, Sithole did not say. My guess is that it happened once its members had

calculated that defending their foreign neighbours would entail risking their lives. Sithole continued

I ran to the shack of a South African friend at the other side of Dark City. He has been a customer of mine every day for four years. He let me in. I phoned my wife. She was out working. I told her not to come home. And then my friend sheltered me for four days and nights. I did not dare to come out in case I was recognised. I must have been the last Mozambican left in the whole of Ramaphosa.

On the fifth night, the man who had been sheltering me came to me looking upset. He said: "Listen, this place is not the same, it is run by thugs now, and there is talk that I am hiding foreigners. You must go."

Sithole stole out of Ramaphosa at the two 'o clock the following morning the same way he had arrived, with the clothes on his back. When we met him, he was living in the back of a truck with several other refugees outside the Reiger Park police station, less than a mile from Dark City.

'My South African customers have come out of Ramaphosa one by one to pay their respects to me,' he told us. 'They tell me they are so embarrassed by what has happened. "We need you people," they say. "South Africans will not work hard enough to sell vegetables in Dark City."'

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Sithole is adamant that he will stay in South Africa. 'My wife is here,' he told us. 'I will not find work in Mozambique. There are plenty of places here in Johannesburg where the foreigners are still accepted. I have friends in Soweto from home. Things are peaceful there. It is not yet time for us to run.'

### The Broader Context

Sithole is right. South Africa's cohort of about two or three million foreign nationals has not been expelled. Most of urban South Africa remained quiet during the two weeks of trouble. Often, this was because ordinary South African residents dispersed incipient mobs. At

a shack settlement we visited in the Soweto district of Orlando East, residents of the nearby Mansfield hostel invaded on the night of 12 May and attempted to attack foreigners in their shacks; they were thwarted when South Africans in the settlement banded together and drove them out.<sup>6</sup>

Such stories abound. In some cases, it was local political party branches that quelled incipient violence. In the massive shack settlement of Diepsloot, west of Johannesburg, for instance, the trouble lasted one night. The following day, the local branch of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in Diepsloot began a campaign charmingly dubbed 'Shit On the Criminals'. Party members confiscated looted property and performed citizens' arrests on several dozen young men.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Ramaphosa is among the few places where foreign nationals have been unable to return to their homes. Even at ground zero, Alexandra, the vast majority of foreign nationals who fled their homes had returned ten days later. The violence was quelled by the police, the army, and by South African residents themselves.

Yet few South Africans would deny that has happened is both a catastrophe and turning point in their country's history. Mandela's South Africa was not long ago the world's most celebrated young democracy, the site at which the last vestige of statutory white rule was abolished from the planet. On South Africa's shoulders rested the promise of a continent-wide epoch of renewal. Johannesburg was Africa's Babel, its inner-city neighbourhoods the most cosmopolitan places on the continent (Simone 2001:51 -69; Mbembe 2007:114-170) Many dreamt that it was on these streets that a new African identity might emerge.

The recent violence takes its place in a long sequence of bad news. The ruling ANC, long considered the most sober and unflappable of Africa's liberation movements,<sup>8</sup> seems in recent times to have drifted from its moorings. Over the last two years it has been roiled by the bitterest and most unseemly of conflicts, one that has seen state agencies captured by rival party factions and turned against one another. Last December the ANC ousted its leader and the country's president, Thabo Mbeki, from his position at the helm of the party, and then, four months after the riots, unseated him from South Africa's presidency. Jacob Zuma, who at this point is likely to become South Africa's president by 2009, is a wild card, a populist figure recently acquitted of rape and possibly still to stand trial for corruption. The party is turning into a new creature, one that is as yet unknowable.

And so on May 11, the day the violence began, South Africa already seemed to many to be leaderless and adrift, its future uncertain.

But this was something new. Political infighting and poor governance is one thing, widespread social

eruptions quite another. While there have been many public disturbances in the last few years – violent protests over service delivery for instance, and sporadic instances of mob justice – this is the first outbreak of social unrest on a national scale since the dying days of Apartheid. The return of crowd violence to South Africa’s streets recalls the chilliest images from the country’s collective memory, and invites the direst prognoses of South Africa’s future.

In local parlance, it is said that the ANC government has failed to ‘deliver’ to the poor. Fourteen years after the end of Apartheid, the expanded unemployment rate is a dismal 35.8 per cent. People are pouring into cities without the infrastructure to contain them (Centre for Development and Enterprise 2002). A new democracy, it is said, cannot sustain an accumulation of misery on this scale. Foreigners, many argued after the violence, were merely the unlucky victims of misplaced anger. Mbeki himself has in the past been prone to talk in apocalyptic terms of the cost of failing to deliver on the South African dream. He is fond of misquoting a poem by Langston Hughes: ‘What happens to a dream deferred?’ he has asked. ‘It explodes’ (Gevisser 2007: 17, 558).

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For now, Mbeki has been billed as the chief culprit. Some commentators have blamed the crisis on the government’s failure to police the country’s northern borders (Malan 2008). Others have said that the presence of some three million Zimbabweans in South Africa is a result of the failure of Mbeki’s policy of quiet diplomacy towards Mugabe.<sup>9</sup>

Yet to lay all the blame on Mbeki’s foreign policy is perhaps to miss the point. Visiting the sites of the violence one after the other in late May and early June, we found that, from the beginning, the unrest was not fuelled by xenophobia alone. Among the kindling from which the violence ignited was a nasty feud, part ethnic, part party-political, among South Africans themselves. Mbeki was forced to resign as president less than six months after the riots. But the architecture of a potential conflict far deeper than the one we saw in May remains very much in place.

## ALEXANDRA

Alexandra township, where the violence began, occupies little more than a square mile of northern Johannesburg. Built to accommodate 60 000 people, it is now home to about 400 000. Those who flock there have laid claim to every conceivable space. What were once playing fields on the grounds of a local high school are now occupied by 1 200 shacks. Another 4 200 have gone up below the floodline of the river that runs through the township. The backyards of the formal houses in the heart of the original township are lined with tin shacks. Some tenants pay rent to the family in the main house. Some don’t.

Were the troubles simply a case of a vastly overpopulated place finally snapping? I would argue that it is not as simple as that. The violence was forewarned. It was advocated in public forums in the days before it began. The threats were uttered, of all places, first at a police station, and then inside a church.

‘It happened in the middle of our regular weekly forum at the police station on Tuesday May 6,’ recalled Thomas Sithole (no relation to Benny), chairman of the Alexandra Community Policing Forum.<sup>10</sup> South Africa’s constitution mandates every police station commander in the country to establish such a forum to consult with the civilians in his jurisdiction.

Out of nowhere, the representative from the Beirut section of the township stood up and said that the people in his area were sick and tired of crime, and that the police were doing nothing about it. He said they were ready to gather arms and retaliate.

Then, four days later, on the Saturday, a meeting of the residents association in that area was held at a church on Third Avenue. It ended with a resolution to chase the foreigners out. The violence began, right in that sector, the following day.

The area Sithole refers to has been dubbed ‘Beirut’ because it is no stranger to urban warfare. Most of its residents are Zulu-speaking, its ethnic composition the outcome of a war of attrition waged among township residents in 1996. That year, conflict in Alexandra erupted between the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC in the run-up to municipal government elections. By the time the trouble was over, the demography of the township had been re-arranged. Zulu-speaking IFP supporters were chased from their homes around the township and resettled in Beirut. Non-Zulu speakers fled Beirut. That the area is Zulu is largely a result of violence.

The troubles of this May were concentrated in Beirut. Although there was sporadic looting elsewhere in the township, only in Beirut were shacks set alight. And

when foreign nationals began returning to Alexandra after the violence subsided, those whose homes were outside of Beirut went back to their original shacks. Those from Beirut did not.

To many in Alexandra, the riots were another round of attrition, a campaign to expunge Beirut of the outsiders who had settled there since the last war, and to fill it with more Zulu-speakers.<sup>11</sup> Non-Zulu-speaking South Africans in Beirut reportedly lost their homes too. Joe Mukwali, a veteran civic leader in Alexandra, told us that he spoke to several South Africans who were forced to flee.

The Venda speakers who were chased away were told their that homeland is so close to Zimbabwe that they are not South Africans. Shangaans were told that because they share the same language as Mozambicans, they must run away with their Mozambican brothers.<sup>12</sup>

Why would people in Beirut want to change its ethnic composition by violence once more? One possible answer concerns local party politics. The IFP once controlled the municipal ward that incorporates Beirut. They lost it 2006, when ward boundaries were redrawn to include a large bloc of ANC supporters. It is conceivable that local party activists, bitter for having lost the pork barrel that comes with control of a ward, wanted to change the composition of the electorate. Another source of tension was a R3-billion government initiative to rebuild Alexandra. The politics of deciding who gets what is deeply fraught, and the relationship between the initiative and Beirut had been tense and difficult.

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‘Once it seemed that the life of the project was coming to an end,’ said Noor Nieftagodien, Wits University scholar and co-author of a recently published history of Alexandra, ‘there was a great deal of anxiety among long-time Alexandra residents who were still not yet among the beneficiaries. Many felt that they were going to lose out permanently.’<sup>13</sup>

So, the beginnings of the violence were not uncomplicated. There was a great deal of xenophobia, certainly, but there were also old ethnic tensions among South Africans themselves, and old struggles for shares of local government booty.

Yet if the first days of violence strongly echoed a fight that took place 12 years earlier, the troubles soon

began to resemble something entirely new. Back in 1996, the violence remained party political, and it stayed in Alexandra. This time around, the troubles spread quickly beyond Alexandra, and as they did so their meaning and character began to change. The violence appeared to move by contagion rather than by organisation, and both its party-political and its ethnic character largely evaporated. In Ramaphosa, where Benny and Kate Sithole fled their home, the IFP has little or no presence. ‘The people marching and singing through Ramaphosa were Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, South Sotho: they were all South Africans mixed,’ Sithole recounted. Of the scores of refugees we interviewed who had taken refuge at police stations and town halls, most said they had run from ‘thugs’, ‘young ruffians’ and ‘drunks,’ all speaking a mixture of languages.

Certainly ANC national executive members, such as Jeremy Cronin, who had been briefed by local party functionaries throughout the country, believed that the violence was largely spontaneous. ‘It seems it was mainly groups of young men whose aim was to loot and steal,’ he told us. ‘In general, where ANC structures were relatively strong on the ground, the violence was contained. Where grassroots structure were weak, there was nothing to stop it.’<sup>14</sup>

Victim after victim told us that the violence took them utterly by surprise. And yet, clearly, the news from Alexandra that mobs had turned upon foreigners stirred a powerful current, inspiring people around the city and the country to do the same; the will to loot and to burn, was, it seems in retrospect, lying just below the surface all the while. From where did it come?

## Clients and Entrepreneurs

The mobs sang of foreigners stealing houses, women and work.

‘People say there is a struggle for resources going on between South Africans and foreigners,’ a senior Johannesburg bureaucrat, who asked not to be named, told us. ‘Actually, the struggle is long over. The foreigners have won hands down.’<sup>15</sup>

He is exaggerating only a little. A study recently conducted by the authoritative Centre for Development and Enterprise (2008) found that the unemployment rate among foreign nationals in Johannesburg was 20 per cent. The roughly equivalent figure for South Africans in Johannesburg is 33 per cent. In that astoundingly large difference lies an important story.<sup>16</sup>

Of the 80 per cent of foreign nationals who work, more than half are self-employed (Centre for Development and Enterprise 2008:7). This is all the more remarkable when one considers that the majority arrived here illegally, and thus do not have a bank account, let

alone access to venture capital. Many are what development economists call survivalists, working long and difficult hours to earn the equivalent of an unskilled labourer's wage. But a substantial number are much more than that; the study found that foreign nationals employ 100,000 South Africans across Johannesburg (Centre for Development and Enterprise 2008:9).

This entrepreneurship is the face of immigration in the poor neighbourhoods of South African cities. From sidewalk barbers to fresh produce traders, their work is conducted on the streets and in the roadside stalls.

As for wage labour, the sourcing of foreign workers is not easy to measure, for employers obviously conceal illegal hiring. But anecdotal evidence suggests that employers are recruiting foreigners over South Africans in construction, security and domestic work, according to Prof. Lawrence Schlemmer, who managed the Centre for Development and Enterprise study, and convened a panel of 45 large Johannesburg employers from a cross-section of industries.<sup>17</sup>

So much for work. Why did the crowds sing also of the theft of houses? Since coming to power, the ANC government has built more than two million brick-and-mortar homes, known in South African parlance as RDP houses, for the poor. Walk into any urban shantytown in South Africa and people will show you the document proving that they have been on a waiting list for a house for five or ten years. A common complaint among those waiting is that many RDP homes are occupied by foreigners who have acquired them by corrupting government officials. Yet one need not turn to corruption to find an explanation for foreign nationals owning RDP houses.

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'What an unemployed person needs above all,' observed Julian Baskin, CEO of the Alexandra Renewal Project, 'is income. Give an unemployed person a house and she will be tempted to sell it. The banks won't underwrite the sale. It must be cash. So it's cheap. Foreigners in South Africa working or running a business will have cash. It figures that they'll be well represented among secondary buyers of RDP homes.'<sup>18</sup>

Of the refugees we interviewed, almost all worked, either as wage labourers or as entrepreneurs. Most said that a great many of the South Africans they encountered every day were unemployed. When we asked them why they appeared to find work more easily than South Africans did, many answered by disparaging their South African neighbours. Benny Sithole told us that:

To be selling fresh vegetables by seven in the morning, I must start making my way to the fresh produce market in City Deep at 3am. I can say that there is not a single South African awake at that time. The people on the street preparing for work are foreigners, every last one of them. For the South African, 3am is too cold. He must sleep until eight.

A Mozambican we met, who identified himself as Albino, had run a construction business in South Africa for the last five years. He employed eight people, all recruited from his village in Mozambique. Here is the story he told us:

We arrived in this country without tools. At first, we accepted any job, even if it paid R40 a day. A South African will not work for that amount, especially not for a white man. As we worked, so we saved. We bought tools. When we started the business, we offered to build for very little money. Business picked up. We charged more. As we gained success, so we bought televisions and stereos and other nice things. The South Africans got angry and wanted to steal our nice things. From their point of view, what they saw was foreigners coming to do work they refused to do and then buying things they could not afford.<sup>19</sup>

When we asked refugees why they believed South Africans were work shy, the most common answer was that locals looked to state patronage for their salvation. A Malawian named Napier Banda, who, until the troubles, lived in a small shack settlement on the outskirts of the Ekurhuleni town of Boksberg, told us: 'Many of my South African neighbours were unemployed. Most of them were Zulu. They complained that the reason they had no work was that Thabo Mbeki was a Xhosa. They said that when Jacob Zuma [who is Zulu] comes to power, he will deliver for them.'<sup>20</sup> According to a Zimbabwean refugee: 'All my South African neighbours kept secret from one another how long they had been on the waiting list for an RDP house. Because if someone who had been waiting only two years got a house, he would be in trouble. He would be asked: "Who do you know who we don't know? Is the ward councillor your brother?"'<sup>21</sup>

These comments were made in anger, in the wake of a pogrom; the bile accumulating in the researcher's

notebook was no doubt an expression of cheap and ethereal revenge. And, to be fair, the comments were probably not levelled at all South Africans, but those the refugees believed had attacked them: unemployed young men.

Nonetheless, these observations are not without insight. As we visited one site of violence after another, it became apparent just how overwhelmingly local South African politics was consumed by struggles over state patronage. In Alexandra, many people complained of how the Zulus of Beirut were prepared to use muscle to get their hands on state resources. But the truth is that one did not need to be Zulu or from Beirut to pursue the politics of patronage. A building contractor constructing RDP homes on the eastern rim of Alexandra complained that he was forced to source his labour through a local ANC man, who skimmed off the top of everyone's wage. Those squatting in the abandoned factories to the north of Alexandra were required to pay rent to an executive member of the South African National Civics Organisation, a body aligned to the ANC.<sup>22</sup>

The fusion of politics with patronage was by no means confined to Alexandra. In a shantytown called Jerusalem, just a few minutes' drive from Ramaphosa, we met a South African woman named Grace Obese, who ran a police-sanctioned citizen's patrol group. On the night of May 16, she said, a large mob of young South African men, many of them drunk, made their way into Jerusalem in search of foreigners. She convened her patrol group and confronted them, but she was vastly outnumbered and reluctantly stepped aside. The mob was joined by many of Jerusalem's young South African men, who looted and burned their neighbour's homes.

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We asked her if anyone had ever threatened to take her life, she replied

The only time they tried to kill me was before the 2006 municipal election. There was a fellow in the ANC who very much wanted to stand as a councillor in this ward. But someone else was already standing. So he and his backers joined the Pan African Congress (PAC). I have a big following in this community. They told me I must come with them to the PAC so they could win. I kept

saying no. One night they threw petrol on my shack and lit a match. Thank God I was awake and escaped.<sup>23</sup>

The walls of Obese's office sported two large ANC campaign posters. From one beamed the smiling face of Thabo Mbeki, from the other Obese's ward councillor. Who had access to the local pork barrel was clearly a matter of life and death.

At a workers' hostel south of downtown Johannesburg, inhabited primarily by networks of Zulu migrants from KwaZulu-Natal, we interviewed the local IFP leader, Boy Simelani, and asked him about party politics. He complained that:

The ANC has sewn up the 2009 elections because of the World Cup in 2010. All the construction for the World Cup is controlled by the ANC. They will be handing out the jobs. Our chance to win votes will only come after the World Cup is finished.<sup>24</sup>

Whether true or not, the assumption is striking. To control the state is to dispense jobs; ergo, to lose the state is to lose support.

## AN ECONOMY IN A BARREL

Two weeks after an immigrant was burnt to death in Ramaphosa, the ANC Women's League held a prayer meeting on the spot where the mob had set him alight. Those praying in the marquee had been bussed in from elsewhere; the residents of the shantytown itself stayed away, many, no doubt, because they feared the consequences of expressing solidarity with foreigners.

Outside the marquee, a group of sullen young men gathered to express their discontent. One of them, who identified himself as David, told us that he had joined the crowd and driven out foreign nationals because they were stealing what was rightfully his. 'This entire country is leaking into the pockets of Mozambicans,' he told us.<sup>25</sup> Inspired by his imagery, one of his companions joined in: 'They have flooded this country like water,' he said, 'but they are leaving our land dry.'<sup>26</sup>

Economists call it the lump of labour fallacy: the idea that the amount of work available is fixed; everything a foreigner gets is thus something a South African has lost.<sup>27</sup> It is a fallacy implicit in any patrimonial understanding of the world. To say that the economy is something one gets a piece of through the influence of a patron is to say that it is a static lump off which everyone feeds; the more feeders, the less there is to go around. And if one believes that the lump is an exclusively South African patrimony, a reward for having survived Apartheid and voted a democratic government into power, then the sight of foreigners running their stalls is



an affront. Their presence also upsets what it means to be a South African living in a democracy, and of what, precisely, one's entitlements are. For these foreigners seemed to be doing fairly well without any access to state patronage at all.

If this is right, the problem runs deep. A society that understands its economy as a fixed lump must breed conflict, and not just between locals and foreigners. If foreigners are accused of taking too much today, surely fellow South Africans will be accused tomorrow. It seems, after all, that that the violence was triggered in the first place by a fight for pork barrel among South Africans in Alexandra.

It is certainly arguable that an incipient conflict among South Africans was evident in the targets the mobs chose. Grace Obese, the woman from Jerusalem who told us that she had attempted to hold the mob at bay, described in careful detail whom it had attacked:

Of course they went for the shacks of the foreigners, but they also attacked the two biggest shebeens [informal drinking establishments] in Jerusalem. Both are owned by South Africans. The first, I thought, maybe it is because he employs foreigners. But the second does not employ foreigners, only South Africans.

The mob had formed to loot; it no longer cared for the distinction between being foreign and being relatively wealthy. The two had become the same.

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A society that understands its economy as a fixed lump must breed conflict, and not just between foreigners and locals

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## A Distributive State

Why have many South Africans come to see their democracy as a struggle for state patronage?

One view is that this mentality is in fact very old. In Zulu and Xhosa the verb *pangela* means 'to work for the whites'. Its original meaning was 'seize' or 'grab'.<sup>28</sup> That is an understandable response to white domination. But it also reflects a very particular view of the city, and what one does when one gets there. The city is a large pot of gold, and one journeys there to bring back a small piece of it.

Throughout the twentieth century, this quest was often facilitated by patronage. People established village and ethnic networks in the city and used them to

capture sections of the labour market and the township, to protect themselves, and to defend their gains from outsiders.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps urban South Africans are doing what they have always done. Only now, with the advent of democracy, the prime object to capture has become a piece of the state itself.

There is another story about why South Africans have come to see their democracy as a struggle for state patronage. It is told by Moeletsi Mbeki, the only South African commentator whose opinions make headline news.<sup>30</sup>

The economy the ANC inherited in 1994, Mbeki argues, was caught in a long cycle of stagnation dating from the 1970s. It had become an 'enclave economy', one that catered for the welfare of a diminishing proportion of the population, while locking the rest out. Employment in its mineral resource industries was in irreversible decline, while its manufacturing base was under perilous threat from countries in Asia. The historic task of the black elite that came to power in 1990s, Mbeki argues, was to recalibrate South Africa's national economy, to redevelop it to the end of breaking through the barriers of the enclave and bringing a far greater proportion of South Africans into the economy.

And yet, Mbeki continues, the historical character of the black elite made it an unlikely candidate for such a task. The Afrikaans elite of the early twentieth century was landowning, and was thus animated by the task of building a national infrastructure that would render its land productive. The English-speaking elite was capitalist, and set itself to the task extracting South Africa's minerals; indeed, it reshaped the very structure of South African life to this end. The new African elite, Mbeki argues, is neither property owning nor capitalist; its inclinations are bureaucratic rather than entrepreneurial. Its natural mode of wealth accumulation is through politics rather than through economic innovation.

It is unfortunate, Mbeki argues, that the black elite has been encouraged to pursue its natural inclinations by what he calls South Africa's resource curse. The resource Mbeki is referring to is South Africa's mineral deposits, and the curse resides in the fact that the commodities boom that began in the late 1990s has given the ANC sufficient revenue reserves to distribute resources to black South Africa in the absence of economic innovation.

This redistribution, Mbeki argues, has taken two forms. In regard to the poor, it has come in the form of an expanding welfare bill, a perilous way to tackle extreme poverty in the absence of job creation. In regard to the middle class, redistribution has been the cement of a political deal struck between the new elite and white capital.

When it was clear that Apartheid was dying, this part of Mbeki's story begins, South Africa's captains of

industry asked themselves what to do to prevent South Africa's liberation movement from following through on its long-held promise to nationalise the banks and the mines. Their solution was to offer to buy off the new political elite: to offer it large chunks of equity across South Africa's economy. The new elite said yes, and the pact was sealed.

The government has called the program Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). In official parlance, the rationale of BEE is to 'transform the white-owned economy to be representative of the demographic make-up of the country as a whole' (DTI 2008). Yet Mbeki is fond of pointing out that the major beneficiaries of large equity transfers are all individuals connected to the ANC. For that is precisely the point: what is being traded is political influence.

The ANC, Mbeki argues, is behaving precisely the way the first generation of post-independent African elites did in the 1960s, using the state power it has captured to enrich itself. 'Seek ye first the political kingdom,' he recently quoted the famous line of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, 'and all else shall be given' (Mbeki 2005b:3). The problem, Mbeki argues, is that the political kingdom is not going help South Africa manage its manifold problems. It desperately needs to create new sources of income for its people. Only an entrepreneurial elite can do so. But this elite is not entrepreneurial. It has gathered around a pork barrel and is creating little.

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... the major beneficiaries of large equity transfers are all individuals connected to the ANC ... what is being traded is political influence

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What does all of this have to do with the riots? Nothing, directly, but a great deal *vis-à-vis* the style and pedigree of the local politics from which the riots emerged. I said earlier that local South African politics at the sites of the violence was consumed by struggles for state patronage. I said also that in the language used by members of the mob whom we interviewed, the economy was understood as a static lump off which everyone feeds, and that each morsel taken by a foreigner was thus a morsel lost to a South African.

If Mbeki's argument is right, this conception of the world emerges directly from the manner in which South Africa is being governed. South Africa is becoming, in Mbeki's terms, a distributive, rather than a

developmental state, one in which an increasing proportion of the country feeds off the surpluses generated by a small cluster of industries.

Worryingly, South Africans appear unable to talk much about any of the major ingredients of May's violence. Ethnic differences among South Africans, clearly an important subtext during the troubles, is a taboo subject. 'This business was started by Zulus,' we were told by a journalist whose daily reports were the main source of news for ten of thousands of South Africans throughout the troubles. 'But you cannot say that in the newspaper; it is too sensitive.'<sup>31</sup> It seems that there is no way to raise ethnic differences other than to insult or offend.

Nor can South Africans talk with much freedom about the resentment they feel for having to share their country with five million foreign nationals. 'Our country belongs to all Africans,' is a phrase government officials and ANC functionaries have repeated over and over again since the troubles. Coming from the mouths of those who do not live in shantytowns, it is surely something of a provocation.

Nor is pork barrel politics a subject for polite conversation. Moeletsi Mbeki is perhaps uniquely independent among South African pundits. If other black commentators were to speak as he did, they would surely be branded as Uncle Toms, white commentators as racists.

South Africans find themselves in the midst of a very serious impasse about which they cannot speak.

## POSTSCRIPT

There is a tale to be told that begins after the pogroms; it is about the fate of several thousand of those who were forced to flee their homes.

In the immediate aftermath of the violence, the South African government hastily erected temporary camps for the displaced at several sites around Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. From the start, the status of these camps was a vexed question. The last thing the government wanted was to host a permanent refugee population within its borders. It made clear from the beginning that the camps were temporary, and that its policy was to reintegrate foreign nationals into the South African communities from which they had fled. The only alternative foreign nationals had, the government made clear, was to return to their homes countries. The government steadfastly refused to recognise any of the victims of the pogroms as refugees for fear of the commitments to which such recognition would bind them. By mid-June, the camps the government had erected collectively hosted a population of some 20,000 people. Already, several lobbies and advocacy groups – from the Treatment Action Campaign to the country's Methodist

Bishop – had taken the government to court over matters ranging from conditions in the camps to the security of those who were to reside there.

For the majority of those who fled their homes, the question of where they would resettle was determined fairly quickly. It is impossible to put a number to it, but a great many returned to the communities from which they had fled. Certainly this was so in much of Alexandra save for Beirut, and in many of the informal settlements we visited on the East Rand. Thousands of others returned by the busload to their home countries. And still others, like Benny Sithole, who knew that he could not return to Ramaphosa, but did not wish to go home to Mozambique, scanned the Johannesburg horizon for a more peaceable place in which to settle and make a living. When we last saw Sithole it looked probable that he and his wife would settle among friends in Soweto, the Herculean task of rebuilding an informal business awaiting him.

Yet there is also another story to be told. By the end of July, several thousand residents of the temporary camps, by some estimates as many as 8 000, were locked in confrontation with the South African government. They did not feel safe to return to the communities that had thrown them out, and they did not wish to return home. The government, in turn, told them that the camps were closing in the coming weeks and they would have to leave.

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The government steadfastly refused to recognise any of the victims of the pogroms as refugees for fear of the commitments to which such recognition would bind them

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At time of writing, the matter awaits settlement in the Constitutional Court. The Court has endorsed an interim order that the government maintain the camps until the fate of its residents is decided, probably some time in late September. While the court decision is awaited, the South African authorities running the camps have attempted slowly to push the refugees out of them, primarily by making life as unpleasant as possible. Rations slowly decreased. All service providers, save for the Red Cross, were denied entry to the camps. Officials periodically spread rumours among refugees that all

undocumented migrants would be rounded up from the camps and deported.

The stories of what has happened from camp to camp are too manifold to recount here, but one episode in particular sticks out, primarily because it speaks with such eloquence to the relationship between foreign nationals and the South African state.

In late July, officials from the Department of Home Affairs informed the residents of the Rifle Range camp south of Johannesburg that they were required to register for temporary identity cards. These cards would entitle them to remain in South Africa legally for another six months. Refusal to sign would result in immediate deportation.

Of the 1800 or so camp residents, some 900 refused to sign. Their caution was reasonable. Among them were people with refugee status in South Africa. Under South African law, refugees have all the same rights South African citizens do – including those to healthcare, to settlement, to education – save for the right to vote. Why should a person who holds refugee status register for a temporary identity card that entitles him only to be in the country for another six months? Does a person who registers for such a card forfeit his refugee status? These are reasonable questions. Home affairs officials on site seemed not to have clear answers to them.

On July 22, those who refused to register for temporary cards were rounded up by public order police and taken to Lindela, the detention facility from which undocumented foreigners are deported to their home countries. When it dawned on officials that it was illegal to deport any Rifle Range residents without due process, they released them onto the side of a highway west of Johannesburg without money or provisions. A few hours later, those who had not drifted off were arrested for obstructing traffic. The women were taken to a shelter, the men to police station cells.<sup>32</sup>

This story says so much about the relationship between the South African state and foreign nationals. On paper, South African policy is open and sophisticated. The government has signed all major international instruments concerning the rights of refugees. Refugees are entitled to work, to receive medical treatment, to live where they want, to send their children to South African schools. As for undocumented migrants, former President Mbeki often said that there is little the country can do to stop their influx, and that it is for South Africans to let them be, and to live with them.

Yet between law and the practice of state officials there is a yawning gulf. Foreigners, whether undocumented or with refugee status, are turned away from public hospitals as a matter of course. Their children are at times refused entry to state schools. In parts of the country, law enforcement officials routinely tear up the

legitimate South African identity documents of foreign-born South African nationals on the grounds that their accents are foreign. Across the country, migrants are among the softest targets for government officials in search of graft. The result is that each and every state agency tasked with dealing with foreign nationals is riddled in corruption (Steinberg 2005).

It was pointed out during the pogroms, among others by Gauteng province's safety and security minister, Firoz Cachalia (2008), that conflicting messages about the status of foreign nationals transmitted by state practice may well have been among the causes of the riots. Some have suggested that the rioters took themselves to be carrying out the state's work, doing what police and other enforcement agencies would have done were they not constrained by unpopular laws.

The stories emerging from the temporary camps suggest that South African state departments have learned little from the riots, that business is very quickly returning to normal. If that is the case, the millions of foreign nationals residing in South Africa will remain potential targets for mob violence in perpetuity. For who is to say when mobs of South African citizens will next take it upon themselves to do the state's work?

## NOTES

- 1 South African Police Service figures cited in, 'SA xenophobic attacks death toll rises to 62.' Available at [http://www.africanews.com/site/list\\_messages/18625](http://www.africanews.com/site/list_messages/18625). [last accessed 2 June 2008]
- 2 Telephonic interview with Inspector R. Raphala, Reiger Park Police Station, 11 September 2008.
- 3 The concept of patrimonialism was developed by Max Weber. His account of how it breeds conflict is worth returning to. Weber, M 1978. *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, Chapter 12. For a contemporary account of the inherent instability of patrimonialism, see Douglass, C, North, JJW and Weingast, BR [2009]. *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Recorded Human History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming. For a rich empirical account of a particular instance of a patrimonial system generating conflict, see Ellis, S 2007. *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) New York: New York University Press, 2007.
- 4 The number of foreign nationals in South Africa is uncertain. The number most commonly bandied about in the press during the riots was five million. Scholarly institutions like the Southern African Migration Project suggest that the number is closer to two million. (See, for instance Crush, J (ed) 2008. 'The Perfect Storm: The Realities of Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa,' Southern African Migration Project, Queens University, Ontario, Paper, Policy Paper No. 50. See also, Centre for Development and Enterprise, 'Migration from Zimbabwe: Numbers, Needs, and Policy Options,' Johannesburg, March 2008. Available at [http://www.cde.org.za/article.php?a\\_id=280](http://www.cde.org.za/article.php?a_id=280).
- 5 Interview with Thomas Sithole, chairperson, Alexandra Community Police Forum, Johannesburg, 1 June, 2008.
- 6 Interview with Patrick Ngcube, Zimbabwean national and Orlando East resident, Johannesburg, 7 June 2008.
- 7 Telephonic Interview with Jeremy Cronin, ANC National Executive Committee member, 10 June 2008.
- 8 See, for instance, Lodge, T 1993. *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*, London: Longman; Gevisser, M 2007. *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers; Suttner, R 2008. *The ANC Underground in South Africa*, Johannesburg: Jacana.
- 9 Mbeki's brother, Moeletsi Mbeki, has led the charge on this score. See, for instance, his interview with Channel Four's Jon Snow on 16 May 2008 at [www.channel4.com](http://www.channel4.com).
- 10 Interview with Thomas Sithole, chairperson, Alexandra Community Police Forum, Johannesburg, 1 June, 2008.
- 11 When we conducted this research, Alexandra's leaders were in the process of managing a very delicate political situation, and nobody in senior government, political party or civic positions would say on the record that the non-Zulus chased from Beirut were replaced by Zulu-speakers. Off the record, though, we were told with much confidence that this was so by senior personnel from a variety of agencies and organisations including the South African Police Service, the Alexandra Community Policing Forum, the African National Congress, as well as senior local government administrators.
- 12 Interview with Joe Sikwale, Alexandra, 1 June, 2008.
- 13 Interview with Noor Nieftagodien and Phil Bonner, Johannesburg, 8 June, 2008.
- 14 Telephonic Interview with Jeremy Cronin, ANC National Executive Committee member, 10 June 2008.
- 15 Interview, 6 June 2008, Johannesburg.
- 16 This comparison requires explanation. An interview with the chief writer of the Centre for Development and Enterprise Report, Lawrence Schlemmer, revealed that the methodology of his questionnaire determining the unemployment rate was almost identical to methodology Statistics South Africa uses to determine the expanded unemployment rate. In 2006, Johannesburg's expanded unemployment rate was 33 per cent.
- 17 Telephonic interview with Lawrence Schlemmer, 9 June, 2008.
- 18 Interview with Julian Baskin, 7 June 2008, Johannesburg.
- 19 Interview, 5 June 2008, Johannesburg.
- 20 Interview with Napier Banda, 9 June 2008, Boksberg town hall.
- 21 Interview, 9 June 2008, Reiger Park police station.
- 22 Group interview with residents of an abandoned factory in Wynberg, northern Johannesburg, 10 June 2008.
- 23 Interviews with Grace Obese, 4, 5, and 8 June 2008, at Jerusalem informal settlement, Ekhuruleni.
- 24 Interview with Boy Simelane, 2 June 2008, Johannesburg.
- 25 Interview with 'David,' 8 June 2008, Ramaphosa informal settlement.
- 26 Interview, 8 June 2008, Ramaphosa informal settlement, Ekhuruleni.

- 27 The term of coined in the late nineteenth century by the economist D.F. Schloss. See Schloss, DF 1891. 'Why Working-Men Dislike Piece-Work,' in *The Economic Review*, vol.1 number 3, April, pp. 311-326. The term has been deployed regularly in debates about the effects of the participation of immigrants in labour markets. See, for instance, Bercow, J 2005. 'Why Tories should change policy on immigration and asylum,' London: Social Market Foundation.
- 28 See, for instance, Moodie, D 1994. *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration*, Berkeley & Johannesburg: University of California Press and Wits University Press.
- 29 See, for instance Posel, D 1991. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 30 The following exegesis of Mbeki's views is drawn from: Mbeki, M 2005. 'A Growing Gap Between the Black Elite and the Masses? Elites and Political and Economic Change in South Africa Since the Anglo-Boer War,' in *Vrye Afrikaan*. Available at <http://www.vryeafrikaan.co.za/lees.php?%20id=267>; Mbeki, M 2005. 'Underdevelopment in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of the Private Sector and Political Elites,' Washington DC, Cato Institute, Policy Briefing Number 15, 15 April; Mbeki, M 2008. 'The Curse of South Africa,' in *New Statesman*, 17 January.
- 31 Informal interview with South African newspaper reporter, 8 June 2008, Ramaphosa informal settlement, Ekurhuleni.
- 32 See, inter alia, 'Xenophobia refugees risk deportation over ID card,' *Mail and Guardian*, 21 July 2008; 'Glenanda refugees refuse to be deported,' *Business Day*, 24 July 2008; David Cote, 'Refugees Make Mistake of Knowing Their Rights,' *Business Day*, 11 August 2008.
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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

Between 11 and 26 May 2008, 62 people, the majority of them foreign nationals, were killed by mobs in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and elsewhere. Some 35,000 were driven from their homes. The troubles were dubbed South Africa's 'xenophobic riots'. In the immediate aftermath of the riots, Jonny Steinberg visited several sites of violence in the greater Johannesburg area, and recorded the testimony of several dozen people who had fled their homes. He also interviewed people who joined the violent mobs, as well as civic and political leaders, and security personnel. This paper argues that the riots bore some of the classic features of a fight for resources driven by a patrimonial understanding of economic distribution. This has significant implications for the future of civil conflict in South Africa.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonny Steinberg is the author of four books: *Thin Blue: The Unwritten Rules of Policing South Africa* (2008); *Sizwe's Test: A Young Man's Journey Through a Great Epidemic* (2008); *The Number* (2004); and *Midlands* (2002). Steinberg has also written extensively for the ISS on criminal justice policy in South Africa. He recently authored a monograph titled *AIDS and AIDS treatment in a rural setting*. He was educated at Wits and at Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar.

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