

MULTICULTURALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

FORCES THREATENING THE 'RAINBOW NATION'

Introduction

After apartheid ended and South Africa had its first fully democratic election in 1994, Desmond Tutu famously dubbed South Africa a “rainbow nation.” His remark captured the hope that the country could unify to overcome its ugly history and become an inclusive democracy.¹ Just over two decades later, South Africa’s many democratic deficits have failed to deliver upon that original hope. Today the country faces numerous challenges, including widespread corruption, poverty, inequality, crime, and inadequate HIV/AIDS policies. Bearing in mind the powerful legacy of apartheid, these challenges are not surprising, but other recent developments suggest that an unexpected moral weakness has also emerged. These developments raise the question of whether the country is moving away from the message of aspirational multiculturalism embodied by Tutu and is instead moving towards xenophobia and nativism. In the South African context, it is clear that such a shift has been catalyzed by both the considerable pressure exerted by forces of globalization and the corrosive legacy of apartheid. As such, the question becomes whether the nation’s institutions can serve to transcend these pressures and return the nation to a vision of multiculturalism, or whether an entirely new approach is needed to engender tolerance.

Defining Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism can be defined “as a description of the state of cultural diversity in a society, as an ideology aimed at legitimizing the incorporation of ethnic diversity in the general structure of society, or as public policy designed to create national unity in ethnic diversity.”² Multicultural ideologies and policies embrace and respond directly to ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Rejecting assimilation, multiculturalism prioritizes inclusion through the recognition and accommodation of difference, collective identities, and group-specific rights.³ Multiculturalism suggests that groups that have been marginalized or oppressed must be represented and provided power. It is important to note that multiculturalism—in theory or

¹ Alec Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun: The Battle for the Soul of South Africa from Mandela to Zuma* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 30.

² Simon Bekker and Anne Leildé, “Is Multiculturalism a Workable Policy in South Africa?,” *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 5, no. 2 (2003), 121.

³ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

practice—is not monolithic, but such considerations are beyond the scope of this paper. The theoretical framework also has many critics in academic circles (see Chandran Kukathas, Seyla Benhabib, or Glen Coulthard).

In South Africa, multicultural ideology and policy has been embraced and is evidenced in post-apartheid nation-building policies, though the term itself is not often used in policy circles.⁴ In fact, the African National Congress (ANC) governments under Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, and Jacob Zuma endeavored to be inclusive and to empower the very communities that were oppressed during apartheid. For example, after apartheid 11 native languages were rapidly made official state languages, and provincial governments were allowed to choose two of these 11 as their medium of communication.⁵ Furthermore, the news and sports channels were broadcast in English, Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, and Sotho.⁶ The new South African Constitution obligated the state to recognize and promote cultural, religious, and linguistic rights. Black economic empowerment policies, academic attempts at decoloniality, admission quotas and affirmative action, and social safety nets were extensively utilized and remain commonplace in contemporary South Africa.

Evidence of Multiculturalism under Threat

Despite these efforts, evidence suggests that multiculturalism is under threat in contemporary South Africa. This is exhibited in two major ways: 1) in violent attacks on immigrants and refugees in and around South Africa’s major cities; and 2) in the increasingly tribal-centric discourse of President Jacob Zuma.

In recent years, xenophobic attacks have been on the rise against immigrants and refugees who have resettled in South Africa. The violence has been intense and scholars have noted that “nowhere in Africa have such intense and violent episodes of xenophobic violence been witnessed than in post-apartheid South Africa”.⁷ In 2008, one of the earliest attacks was against immigrants and refugees from Mozambique, Somalia, and Zimbabwe, who were attacked in

⁴ Bekker and Leildé, “Is Multiculturalism a Workable Policy?,” 122.

⁵ Bekker and Leildé, “Is Multiculturalism a Workable Policy?,” 123.

⁶ Michael Hill, “From Afrikaans to Zulu: Fragmented S. Africa Settles on 11 Official Languages,” *Baltimore Sun*, (December 12, 1993).

⁷ S.M. Kang’ethe and V. Duma, “Exploring Dimensions of Post-Apartheid Xenophobic Sentiments Towards African Immigrants in South Africa,” *Insight on Africa* 5 no. 2 (2013): 160.

informal settlements outside Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg. These individuals—referred to as *makwerekwerea*, meaning ‘foreigners’ or ‘those who are difficult to understand’—faced harassment, eviction, injury, and death. Over 30,000 people were displaced as a result of the violence, and over 60 were murdered.⁸ The murder of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a Mozambican man, was perhaps the most notorious. Nhamuave was killed by ‘necklacing,’ a method of torturous death which was used during the apartheid era against presumed traitors of the uprising and informants of the apartheid regime.⁹ According to country news bulletins after the incident, the return of necklacing marked a dark turning point for South Africa.¹⁰

Similar attacks resurfaced in April 2015, targeting mainly Burundian and Congolese refugees and immigrants in and around Durban and Johannesburg. Many individuals had shops burned and others experienced burglaries, were kidnapped, or encountered direct violence.¹¹ The violence displaced more than 5,000 refugees, many of whom were forced to reside in temporary camps created by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR)¹². These camps were eventually closed, but because many refugees feared returning to their South African communities as a result of the violence, many were instead voluntarily repatriated to their country of origin, despite significant other risks. Those who did return to their South African homes have since followed recommended safety protocols, including rules such as: “Do not answer your phone while using public transport as they might pick up from your accent that you are not from South Africa. If that happens, they might harm you.”¹³ Unfortunately, in many instances police contributed to the violence and acts of looting, and in the aftermath of the 2015 attacks the South African government initially denied that such incidents took place.¹⁴ The attacks spurred fear that violence could eventually expand to target other minority communities

⁸ Jason Hickel, “Xenophobia in South Africa: Order, Chaos, and the Moral Economy of Witchcraft,” *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (2014): 103.

⁹ Ashwin Desai, “After the Rainbow: Following the Footprints of the May 2008 Xenophobic Violence in South Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* 37 (2010): 99–105.

¹⁰ Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 82.

¹¹ Simon Allison, “South Africa: Attacks on migrants show failure to stem racial tension,” *The Guardian* (July 9, 2015).

¹² Morgan Winsor, “South Africa Xenophobia 2015: Last Refugee Camp for Displaced Foreigners To Close,” *IB Times* (June 30, 2015).

¹³ Francesca Villette, “Foreigners employ safety measures,” *Cape Times* (April 21, 2016).

¹⁴ Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley, *Imagined Liberation: Xenophobia, Citizenship, and Identity in South Africa, Germany, and Canada* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), 201-203

in South Africa, including Coloureds, Whites, or Indians, who make up 8.8%, 8.4%, and 2.5% of the population respectively.¹⁵¹⁶

President Jacob Zuma's ethno/tribal-centric rhetoric provides another indication that multiculturalism in South Africa is under threat. Throughout the apartheid era, the ANC "had proudly insisted it was a nontribal party."¹⁷ Naturally, "a strong sense of tribal identity remained" in rural areas, but the ANC effectively endeavored to distance itself from this rhetoric to ensure its platform paid no homage to ethnicity.¹⁸ This is not to say that tribal or ethnic politics never existed in post-apartheid South Africa, however. The leadership of the ANC was predominately Xhosa, and the Inkatha Freedom Party particularly celebrated Zulu traditions and culture. However, it was Zuma who was the first ANC and national leader to bring tribal discourse into the mainstream.¹⁹ With his emergence on the political scene, ethnic rhetoric was no longer taboo. For instance, in the run-up to the 2009 election that made him president, Zuma supporters wore T-shirts that read "100% Zulu Boy."²⁰ Zuma successfully made KwaZulu-Natal, a Zulu majority state, his electoral stronghold.²¹ Even prior to his election, Zuma was tapping into ethnic politics. For instance, during his 2006 trial for the rape of the HIV-positive daughter of his family friend, he spoke isiZulu in court and "cited Zulu custom in his defense."²²

While this discourse pales in comparison to the horrific attacks that occurred around the same time on immigrants and refugees, the fact that this form of ethnic politics is tolerated may be indicative of a normative shift away from multiculturalism. Furthermore, such an embrace of ethnic politics does not exist in a vacuum: the month prior to the 2015 attacks, Zulu King Zwelithini reportedly announced that foreigners should return to their nations of origin.²³

¹⁵ "The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed June 18, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sf.html>.

¹⁶ Adam and Moodley, *Imagined Liberation*, 201.

¹⁷ Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 234.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Adam and Moodley, *Imagined Liberation*, 201

²¹ Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 235.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ofeibe Quist-Arcton, "South Africa's Xenophobic Attacks 'Vile,' Says Zulu King Accused Of Inciting Them," *NPR* (April 26, 2015).

Forces Threatening Multiculturalism

Contemporary analyses of rising xenophobia and nativism assert that globalization is the central driver.²⁴ Literature on the topic posits that several prominent factors have the potential to threaten multiculturalism: a) neoliberal policies that lead to fierce competition over resources; and/or b) globalization and its subsequent cultural flows that create threats to identity.²⁵ These arguments are compelling, though not entirely explanatory of the South African context.

First, the difficulty in transitioning to a capitalist model is well-established, as its macroeconomic benefits are not universal.²⁶ When developing societies try to implement privatization, deregulation, and free trade, an expanding gap between the rich and the poor often results.²⁷ In South Africa, as the ANC government transitioned from an apartheid-era controlled economy to one of free and open trade, there is no question that these issues emerged.²⁸

Under apartheid, the South African economy utilized set prices and ensured minimal competition. There was also little incentive for improving the quality of goods and services.²⁹ This is because the system was intended to provide advantages to one racial group. After apartheid, the new ANC government attempted a redistributive program—the Reconstruction and Development Program—in the hopes it would lead to growth. The program “promised to build a million new homes, redistribute a ‘substantial amount of land,’ and provide clean water and sanitation for everyone in five years.”³⁰ However, the crippling impact of sanctions and debt from the apartheid-era economy, combined with the fact that capital was not available to implement these policies in their entirety, forced the ANC to shift its focus to a more traditionally capitalist, growth-based program that intended to redistribute income in the long-run rather than in the near-term.³¹ The new Growth, Employment, and Redistribution program embraced “the core ideas of an orthodox free-market macroeconomic policy.”³²

²⁴ Hickel, “Xenophobia in South Africa,” 103-127; see also Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Durhan: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Donald Snow, *Cases in international relations: portraits of the future* (New York: Longman, 2003), 199.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Benjamin Stanwix, “Economic History, Trends, Poverty, and Inequality,” (lecture on May 18, 2016 at the University of Cape Town).

²⁹ Viola Manuel, “Business, Commerce, Women,” (lecture on May 25, 2016 in Cape Town).

³⁰ Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 87.

³¹ Benjamin, “Economic History, Trends, Poverty, and Inequality.”

³² Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 88.

Despite best efforts and considerable success in infrastructure improvements, tax collection, and basic service provision, the 1990s saw modest growth, rising unemployment, a minimal impact on poverty, and increasing inequality.³³ Unfortunately, these issues have continued into the present. In 2015, the South African economy's growth rate was 1.5% and the official unemployment rate was 26%. In reality, these statistics are considered to be much higher, and the percentage of South Africans living below the poverty line is around 36%.³⁴ Most alarmingly, in 2013 the nation's GINI coefficient was 62.5 (where a coefficient of 100 indicates full equality).³⁵ The country's Human Development Index ranking that same year was 118 out of 187 nations.³⁶ Under this difficult context, it is safe to assume that refugees and immigrants who run successful businesses may be perceived as threatening the livelihood of already struggling South Africans.

Globalization may also be contributing to the threat against South African identities. This is because globalization often causes cultural and social interpenetrations (e.g. through the movement of people or ideas) to blur local identities. This can create new incentives for the maintenance of traditional national, cultural, or ethnic identities through violent means.³⁷ In this paradigm, "Minorities, in a word, are metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project."³⁸ For example, globalization incentivized the use of English as the language of instruction in public school, which is challenging for students who speak Xhosa or Zulu as their mother tongue.³⁹ When local communities are anxious about this sort of marginality in the globalized world, members of vulnerable communities like immigrants or refugees are effective scapegoats on which to displace this concern.

While theoretically compelling, the data does not fully support these arguments. Afrobarometer, an Africa-led series of public attitudes surveys, created a report on South Africans' attitudes towards foreigners from 1997-2011. The study found that 1 in 5 South

³³ Ibid., 89-94; see also Stanwix, "Economic History."

³⁴ CIA, "World Factbook."

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Human Development Index," United Nations Development Programme, accessed June 18, 2016, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/income-gini-coefficient>.

³⁷ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

³⁸ Ibid., 43.

³⁹ Buisiswa Dayimani and Zukile Keswa, "Imkhamva Youth Education Project," (lecture on May 25, 2016 in Cape Town).

Africans would support the deportation of all foreigners.⁴⁰ While the study indicates that xenophobia is widespread, this attitude was not strongly associated with levels of education or poverty.⁴¹ In the study, one-third of respondents were ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ to ‘take action’ against foreigners who moved to their community or started a business. When aggregated for poverty levels, no strong association was found. Ultimately, the study finds that “socioeconomic factors such as levels of education and poverty are only weakly associated with the most xenophobic attitudes.”⁴²

The Legacy of Apartheid: Corroded Trust and a Culture of Violence

Typical explanations for the disintegration of multiculturalism are not fully explanatory in the case of South Africa. This is likely due to the corrosive impact of apartheid. Apartheid was a violent, pervasive regime and fostered a culture of marginalization and segregation. Apartheid specifically excluded blacks from jobs, land ownership, residences, athletics, public services, education, and voting. Every facet of black life was restricted and kept under surveillance. The apartheid regime was contemptuous of trust, cultural difference, transparency, and unity, and created a legacy of mistrust within communities, between communities, and between communities and their government. The everyday violence of apartheid exposed South Africans, particularly in townships, to inconceivable acts on a daily basis. This included “the burning of shacks, public whippings, premature death, and even the discovery of corpses where garbage should be.”⁴³ This is not intended to corroborate a false narrative of black-on-black violence, but rather to propose that “the violent eruptions of township life are no more ‘expressive,’ senseless, irrational, or chaotic than the routinized and strategic violence of the apartheid state.”⁴⁴ The legacy of apartheid thus is a legacy of both the banality of violence and the tendency to resort to violence. It is the complete and total absence of trust.

⁴⁰ Matthias Krönke, “Trends in Attitudes toward Foreigners in South Africa, 1997-2011,” *Afrobarometer* (September 4, 2015), 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Who’s the Killer? Popular Justice and Human Rights in a South African Squatter Camp,” in *Violence in War and Peace*, ed. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (Wiley-Blackwell 2003), 156.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Apartheid's legacy of mistrust within communities is most starkly seen in the "breakdown in family cohesion in the mostly fatherless township households."⁴⁵ Students are not provided with strong role models, and they do not receive strong political education. They are also exposed to drugs and gangs.⁴⁶ Moreover, petty crime is endemic across many townships. Such factors make trust difficult even between neighbors.

There is also a significant lack of trust between communities and their government. According to Afrobarometer, 40% of South Africans are dissatisfied with the status of democracy in their country.⁴⁷ Since the apartheid regime was so corrosive to the citizens' relationship with their government, it remains difficult to take public life at face value, to not suspect hidden agendas, or to view compromise as a valuable solution.

In addition, government institutions are still struggling to regain moral legitimacy.⁴⁸ This is true not only of the government as a whole, but of institutions like the education system and the security sector. For instance, the apartheid education system, known as the Bantu Education System, created nine locally- and ethnically-based departments. Across these provinces, funding and provisions were unequal, and the requirements for black teachers were lower.⁴⁹ As such, schools were not viewed as legitimate institutions. In fact, the 1976 Soweto uprising was in response to the installation of Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction in secondary schools.⁵⁰ The destruction of school grounds was commonplace during this period because these institutions provided such little value to the black communities they purported to serve. During apartheid, the role of the police was to uphold white rule, which often meant apathy or antagonism towards black life. This is exhibited most starkly in the Sharpeville Massacre, during which sixty-nine demonstrators were shot to death.⁵¹ Unfortunately, the police remain corrupt to this day.⁵²

⁴⁵ GAPA, "Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS," (lecture on May 25, 2016 in Cape Town); see also Adam and Moodley, *Imagined Liberation*, 202.

⁴⁶ Adam and Moodley, *Imagined Liberation*, 202.

⁴⁷ South Africa, *Afrobarometer*, accessed June 20, 2016, <http://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/south-africa-0>

⁴⁸ Pam Christie, "Education in South Africa" (lecture on May 19, 2016 at the University of Cape Town, South Africa).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 100.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵² Kang'ethe and Duma, "Exploring Dimensions," 165.

Adding to these difficulties is the eroding distinction between the ANC and the state. In power since 1994, the ANC has become deeply embedded into South Africa's new institutions. This allows for corruption at all levels. President Zuma himself has been the center of several corruption controversies. In 2007, before he was elected president, Zuma was indicted "on multiple charges of corruption" related to bribes.⁵³ In 2016, the Constitutional Court found that Zuma used public funds to renovate his Nkandla estate.⁵⁴ "The democratic process can serve...as a guarantor for the social integration of an increasingly differentiated society," so when such democratic processes are absent, it should come as no surprise that multiculturalism comes under threat.⁵⁵

In addition to this absence of trust, centuries of racial oppression—combined with decades of violent resistance and lawlessness—created a culture of violence that continues to pose challenges post-liberation. Force was the language of apartheid, and the oppressive apartheid regime forced the same vernacular into the resistance movement. This process ensured that everyone knew that violence brought attention and change. Furthermore, "people who have been provoked and have been violent are likely to repeat the act at the slightest provocation."⁵⁶ In the post-apartheid years, this culture of violence continues to be exhibited widely. For example, many South Africans were outraged with the decision to prohibit the death penalty prior to the trials of apartheid criminals.⁵⁷ Violent crime is also an enormous problem in the country. In the late 1990s, South Africa's murder rate was 60 homicides per 100,000 people; the rate then declined, with 39 homicides per 100,000 people in 2007-2008.⁵⁸ However, recent reports show that over 49 people are still killed each day.⁵⁹

Pairing these factors (i.e. a culture where violence is commonplace and trust is limited) with the aforementioned realities of economic and cultural marginality that were established by globalization, it is not surprising that any 'outsider' or 'other' would seem threatening. In

⁵³ Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 246.

⁵⁴ Allison Simon, "Nkandla Verdict Shows South Africa's Democracy is Alive and Kicking," *The Guardian* (March 31, 2016).

⁵⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 117.

⁵⁶ Kang'ethe and Duma, "Exploring Dimensions," 162.

⁵⁷ Russell, *Bring Me My Machine Gun*, 116.

⁵⁸ Kang'ethe and Duma, "Exploring Dimensions," 158.

⁵⁹ David Smith, "Calls for Inequality to Be Tackled in South Africa as Violent Crime Rises," *The Guardian* (October 1, 2015).

particular, the continuing mistrust of the ANC government continues to fuel the problem, as any hope in an altered status quo is largely extinguished.

Safeguards for Multiculturalism

While the prospect of a liberal, inclusive South Africa seems unlikely, there are in fact significant safeguards for the maintenance of multiculturalism embedded in the nation's institutions. For example, South Africa's Constitution and Bill of Rights are considered to be among the most liberal in the world, as both embrace the importance of social, economic, civil, cultural, and political rights. These guarantees of rights are not limited to South African citizens.⁶⁰ The Bill of Rights specifically enumerates that "cultural, linguistic, gender and religious rights of individuals are protected from unfair discrimination by the state."⁶¹ Scholars such as Jürgen Habermas have long underscored the importance of such rights:

Multicultural societies can be held together by a political culture, however much it has proven itself, only if democratic citizenship pays off not only in terms of liberal individual rights and rights of political participation, but also in the enjoyment of social and cultural rights.⁶²

The Constitutional Court is another essential vehicle for the protection of multiculturalism in South Africa as it serves the role of adjudicating major constitutional questions.⁶³ In addition to ruling on the rights of non-citizens, the court has also been assertive in addressing democratic deficits in the nation, including in the aforementioned Nkandla ruling. Continued actions like this can help redress many South Africans' distrust of their government.

Finally, according to Freedom House in 2016, South Africa is "home to a vibrant media environment, and press freedom advocacy organizations regularly push back against government

⁶⁰ Mathias Nyenti, Meryl du Plessis, and Lydia Akena Apon, "Access to Social Services for non-citizens and the portability of social benefits within the Southern African Development Community," *The World Bank Group*, September 2007, accessed June 16, 2017,

http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLM/Resources/390041-1244141510600/Nyenti_Plessis_Apon-South_Africa-2007.pdf, 1.

⁶¹ Bekker and Leildé, "Is Multiculturalism Workable?" 123.

⁶² Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 118

⁶³ Bekker and Leildé, "Is Multiculturalism Workable?" 123.

encroachments on the rights that journalists enjoy.” Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest this may not last forever; the last five years in particular have marked a downturn in press freedoms in the country. Further, Zuma has recently begun enforcing laws like the National Key Points Act, an apartheid-era law passed under the auspices of protecting national security.

Conclusion

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has been heralded as a multicultural success story. Yet, the nation’s rapid globalization, combined with its transitioning economy and corrosive political history, has increasingly exposed its citizens to violence and made them susceptible to xenophobia and an inherent distrust of the foreigners. In recent years, this has manifested in violent attacks on immigrants and refugees and in the ethno-political techniques of President Jacob Zuma. While the nation does have several robust institutions—namely its Constitution, Constitutional Court, and media to serve as a bulwark for its status as an inclusive, multicultural democracy—it is clear that additional steps must be taken to address growing violence and insecurity.

This research suggests solutions, which include global, political, and community-based education; reduced corruption in major institutions, including the federal government and the police; poverty reduction; anti-crime initiatives; and other policy approaches. It also suggests the exploration of ideological alternatives to multiculturalism that may more accurately fit local needs and lead to an inclusive, democratic society. If South Africa is to transcend its legacy of apartheid, the importance of undertaking such reforms cannot be understated.

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