

ANTI-IMMIGRANT PROTESTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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How Did It Begin?

By early 2026, official unemployment in South Africa had reached 32.7 percent, and youth unemployment had climbed to 60 percent.[1] Public services built under apartheid since 1994 have collapsed severely under chronic underinvestment and corruption. Analysts estimate that roughly 91 billion dollars in state resources were consumed during former President Zuma's tenure.[2] Because of the country's chronic history, immigrants have borne the blame for this economic collapse.

The process that turned public anger into an organized movement began in late 2025. Social media figure Nkosikhona Ndabandaba told his 1.7 million Facebook followers for months that undocumented immigrants were stealing South Africans' jobs and running the drug trade, and he then set June 30 as the deadline for immigrants to leave the country.[3] He warned that he "would not be able to control the public" if undocumented immigrants failed to leave by that date, thereby laying the groundwork for organized demonstrations. Forged government documents circulated and further manipulated the angry crowds, and June 30 became fixed as the deadline. Even though data have refuted most of these claims, the protests that followed show that anti-immigrant manipulation has taken hold because of the country's prevailing economic conditions. Immigrants make up only 4.1% of South Africa's population. The World Bank has calculated that roughly two jobs are created for South Africans for every immigrant who is employed.

1 Statistics South Africa, Quarterly Labour Force Survey Q1 2026 (Pretoria: Stats SA, 2026). https://www.statssa.gov.za
2 Daily Maverick, "State Capture Wipes Out Third of SA's R4.9-Trillion GDP – Never Mind Lost Trust, Confidence, Opportunity," 1 March 2019. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-01-state-capture-wipes-out-third-of-sas-r4-9-trillion-gdp-never-mind-lost-trust-confidence-opportunity/
3 BusinessDay NG, "Meet Nkosikhona Ndabandaba, the Zulu Cultural Activist at the Forefront of South Africa's Anti-Immigrant Campaign," June 2026. https://businessday.ng/africa/article/meet-nkosikhona-ndabandaba-the-zulu-cultural-activist-at-the-forefront-of-south-africas-anti-immigrant-campaign/

June 30 marks the beginning of a new process rather than its end. In the short term, a temporary spike in vigilante actions against the remaining immigrant communities is highly likely to occur as police visibility declines.



Spread Process



The first violence erupted in Mossel Bay on May 30, 2026: more than 55 homes were set on fire, and the Mozambican government announced that five of its citizens had lost their lives.[4] Throughout April and May, March and March held marches in Pretoria and KwaZulu-Natal, and Human Rights Watch documented armed attacks against foreign traders in Durban.[5] By June, the movement had spread to inner-city Johannesburg, Hillbrow, Tembisa, Benoni, Soweto, Pretoria, Eastern Cape, and Limpopo, expanding to a national scale. On the morning of June 30, the Johannesburg Central Business District (CBD) fell unusually silent. Most foreign-owned businesses in Oriental Plaza and Fordsburg pulled down their shutters. Three separate legal marches took place in Durban with 5,000 participants, while incidents of stone-throwing were recorded in Tembisa and looting was recorded in Soweto.[6]

Table of Leading Figures and Movements:

Movement	Founded	Leader
March and March	2024	Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma
Operation Dudula	2021	Zandile Dabula, Nhlanhla Dlamini (founder)
Put South Africa First	2020	No official leader
ARDF-SA	2019	Freeman Bhengu

4 Africanews, "Mozambique Says Five Citizens Killed in South Africa Xenophobic Attack," 2 June 2026. https://www.africanews.com/2026/06/02/mozambique-says-five-citizens-killed-in-south-africa-xenophobic-attack/
5 Human Rights Watch, "South Africa: New Waves of Xenophobic Attacks," 20 May 2026. https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/05/20/south-africa-new-waves-of-xenophobic-attacks
6 eNCA, "Live Coverage: #30June Anti-Migration Protests," 30 June 2026; France 24, "South Africa Deploys Police, Foreigners Brace for Violence as Anti-Immigrant Protests Begin," 30 June 2026. https://www.enca.com/news-top-stories-videos/live-coverage-30june-anti-migration-protests


Vatsonga
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ARE

Statements Reactions

This time, the response of neighboring countries was faster and more coordinated. Malawi evacuated 8,000 of the roughly 10,000 citizens who had been waiting in open camps in Durban, transporting them out of the country by bus.[7] Zimbabwe moved 3,624 of its citizens across the border, and Mozambique confirmed the deaths of five of its citizens and launched an evacuation. Nigeria and Ghana arranged flights, and Ghana additionally summoned South Africa's ambassador to its foreign ministry and filed an appeal with the African Union.[8] According to the South African government, more than 25,000 immigrants left the country before June 30.[9]

Solomon Ayele Dersso, Country Rapporteur of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, stated that they were "particularly concerned" about allegations of attacks and harassment carried out by vigilante groups, and he called on the South African government to conduct an investigation and disband these organizations.[10] The Spokesperson for the United Nations Secretary-General likewise emphasized that violence and incitement to hatred "have no place in a democratic society grounded in the rule of law."[11] On behalf of the South African government, President Ramaphosa responded to Ghana's appeal to the African Union by recalling that they "did not walk to freedom alone," while Foreign Minister Lamola stated that the country would continue to lead "with a Pan-African heart."[12]

7 IOL, "South African Government Seeks 1,000 Buses for Repatriation of 7,000 Malawians Stuck in Durban," 14 June 2026. https://iol.co.za/news/south-africa/2026-06-14-south-african-government-seeks-1000-buses-for-repatriation-of-7000-malawians-stuck-in-durban/
8 Bloomberg, "Ghana Asks AU to Probe Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa," 7 May 2026. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-05-07/ghana-petitions-au-to-examine-xenophobic-attacks-in-south-africa; Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), "South Africa's Response to the Request by the Republic of Ghana for a Debate at the AU on the Xenophobic Attacks in the Republic of South Africa against African Nationals," 8 May 2026. https://dirco.gov.za/south-africas-response-to-the-request-by-the-republic-of-ghana-for-a-debate-at-the-au-on-the-xenophobic-attacks-in-the-republic-of-south-africa-against-african-nationals/
9 Al Jazeera, "Migrants in South Africa Fear Violence Ahead of June 30 Deadline," 29 June 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/30/migrants-in-south-africa-fear-violence-ahead-of-june-30-deadline.
10 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), "The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Deplores the Xenophobic Attacks and Vigilante Conduct Perpetrated on Nationals of Other African Countries in the Republic of South Africa," 26 April 2026. https://achpr.au.int/en/news/press-releases/2026-04-27/xenophobic-attacks-and-vigilante-conduct-perpetrated-nationals-other
11 United Nations, "Statement Attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General – on the Situation in South Africa," 27 April 2026. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-04-27/statement-attributable-the-spokesperson-for-the-secretary-general-the-situation-south-africa
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Government Response

President Ramaphosa declared June 30 a "normal working day" and announced that immigrants with legal status remained under constitutional protection. He unveiled a five-point plan to tighten migration policy and met personally with protest leaders the night before the deadline.[13]

Article	Content
Restriction	Asylum applications from a safe country will be rejected
Quota system	Country-based quotas will apply to residence permits and naturalization
Digital identity	A digital registration and identity system will be established for all foreign nationals
Employer sanctions	Employers hiring undocumented migrants will face criminal penalties
Anti-corruption measures	Investigations are to be launched into bribery and forgery networks within the MoI.

Acting Police Minister Firoz Cachalia canceled all leave, the SANDF was placed on standby to protect critical infrastructure, and an emergency budget of 600 million Rand was allocated.[14] However, in a statement on June 1, the SANDF denied these reports, stating that it had not actually issued a deployment order, and it clarified that the security measures amounted only to a temporary state of alert specific to June 30. As the November 2026 local elections approach, the fact that the ANC, ActionSA, and the MK Party have turned migration policy into a battleground for political competition will keep increasing the pressure on the government. This crisis represents the latest link in a long chain. New waves followed in 2015-2016 and 2019[15] after the deadliest wave of xenophobia on record, which claimed 62 lives in 2008.[16] The same cycle has repeated every time: economic crisis, political opportunism, social media manipulation, and then statements of condemnation. What sets 2026 apart is that the movement rests on a far broader base, a coordinated structure, and mass mobilization built around a concrete deadline. Human Rights Watch describes South Africa as a country that "refuses to address xenophobia systematically."

13 The Guardian, "Police Units Deployed Across South Africa Before Anti-Immigration Marches," 29 June 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/30/south-africa-police-anti-immigrant-protests; Semafor, "South Africa Braces for Wave of Anti-Migrant Violence," June 2026, https://www.semafor.com/article/06/28/2026/south-africa-braces-for-wave-of-anti-migrant-violence.
14 eNCA, "Planned 30 June Protest Has R600 Million Price Tag - Cachalia," June 2026. https://www.enca.com/top-stories/planned-30-june-protest-has-r600million-price-tag-cachalia; Al Jazeera, "South Africa Deploys Police as Anti-Immigrant Protests Prompt Fears," 30 June 2026. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/30/south-africa-deploys-police-as-anti-immigrant-protests-prompt-fears; DefenceWeb, "SANDF Refutes Deploying Soldiers in Anticipation of Protest Action," 1 June 2026.
15 South African History Online, "Xenophobic Violence in Democratic South Africa," 2016. https://sahistory.org.za/article/xenophobic-violence-democratic-south-africa; Human Rights Watch, "South Africa: Punish Xenophobic Violence," 13 September 2019. https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/13/south-africa-punish-xenophobic-violence
16 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2009: South Africa (Human Rights Watch, 2009). https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2009/country-chapters/south-africa*

OUTLOOK

June 30 marks the beginning of a new process rather than its end. In the short term, a temporary spike in vigilante actions against the remaining immigrant communities is highly likely to occur as police visibility declines. If the Ramaphosa government delays in implementing its five-point plan, it is expected to face the risk of losing both its electoral base and its international interlocutors at the same time. At the regional level, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Ghana appear to be preparing for sharper diplomatic moves while keeping the option of international litigation open. The tourism sector reported significant booking losses before June 30, and the tension between South Africa's role as the continent's economic leader and its anti-immigrant policies will continue to weigh negatively on the regional investment climate. Structurally, the most critical question is whether the current movement, unlike previous cycles, will harden into a lasting form of political pressure. In 2026 the movement's organizational capacity and political legitimacy appear far more robust than in 2008, 2015, and 2019, and unless the underlying economic problems are resolved, it seems inevitable that the protests will turn into a chronic source of pressure rather than a seasonal flare-up.

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