



The political economy of Xenophobia: Election cycles and the weaponisation of anti-Nigerian violence in South Africa (2008–2026)

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Abstract

Xenophobic violence against Nigerians and other African nationals in South Africa has assumed a recurring, predictable pattern, intensifying notably during election cycles (2008, 2015, 2019, 2026). This study employed Political Economy of Scapegoating Theory to argue South Africa's Xenophobic violence is not random or spontaneous but a systematically weaponised political tool deployed by South African political and economic actors to mobilise domestic support, distract from governance failures, and scapegoat foreign nationals. This study employed a qualitative, desk-based research design utilising policy analysis and secondary sources. The research questions are explored through a conceptual policy analysis drawing on public records, electoral timelines, and diplomatic practice. Data are drawn from publicly available records of xenophobic attacks in South Africa (2008–2026). Findings from the study opine that a systematic, evidence-driven, and consequence-based approach can make xenophobic violence strategically unprofitable for its political sponsors and grassroots perpetrators. The study also submits that a strategic framework of curating consequences will move Nigeria beyond reactive condemnations and citizens evacuations toward proactive, calibrated, and reversible countermeasures. The study recommends that Nigeria Ministry of foreign Affairs should commission "Project Unmask" a report mapping each xenophobic wave against South Africa's electoral calendar, identifying key political figures and movements of Operation Dudula and March for March, translate findings into Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans, and submit executive summary to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the ICC as evidence of state-tolerated violations while diplomatically amplifying the Economic Freedom Fighters to create a domestic anti-xenophobia constituency. Study also recommends that the Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs should deploy targeted economic deterrence without harming Nigeria's economy; freeze new South African portfolio investments by suspending applications for Nigerian securities as a punishment strategy, and impose a temporary moratorium on new business visas for South African corporate executives as a denial strategy. All measures must be reversible, linked to specific South African actions of prosecution of perpetrators, with clear suspension benchmarks to ensure a credible path to normal relations.

Keywords: Diplomatic Strategy, Economic Deterrence, Election Cycles, Political Economy of Scapegoating Theory, Xenophobia

Introduction

The global prevalence of xenophobia has been systematically measured across 151 countries between 2016 and 2020, a global index of anti-immigrant xenophobia using Gallup World Poll data. This comprehensive analysis reveals that xenophobia has stronger associations with cultural variables, such as power distance and allocentrism, and well-being variables, including eudaimonic well-being and positive affect, than with

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economic and social indicators like national wealth, perceived injustice, and good governance. Significantly, globalization itself was found not to be significantly correlated with xenophobia, suggesting that cultural and psychological factors may be more determinative than economic integration per se (Joshano, 2024). Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2026) noted that nearly 73 percent of respondents in social surveys harbour mistrust toward other African nationals.

At the attainment of independence to in 1960, the Nigerian government adopted a policy thrust that made Africa the centre-piece of her foreign policy, Nigeria prioritised the decolonisation of the African continent and eradication of white minority rule called apartheid. The hallmark of this effort was the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994. This also led to the remarkable demonstrations of Nigeria's boycott of the continent's biennial soccer fiesta, the African Nations' Cup, 1996 held in South (Odife & Okeke, 2026). No doubt, Nigeria committed enormous human and material resources in this direction. It is expected that the post-apartheid regime in South Africa would reciprocate this gesture by maintaining cordial relations with Nigeria. Unfortunately, these relations have vacillated between cordiality and hostility

The complex interrelationship between globalization, migration, and xenophobia, demonstrating that while globalization has created unprecedented opportunities for mobility, it has simultaneously exacerbated inequalities that drive migration and fuel resentment toward immigrants (Agaigbe & Akuraga, 2025). The Human Rights Watch (2026) highlighted the systemic failure to protect migrants' constitutional rights, criticizing the blocking of migrants from healthcare and education in South Africa. At the centre of this is the anti-immigrant vigilante groups such as Operation Dudula and March for March blocking migrants' access to health in public health facilities, ransacked Immigrants shops, African Immigrants chased through streets, and children attacked on school ground (Nhyira-Addo, 2026)

and public education, while government failed to adequately protect children from violence and sexual violence (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Legalbrief Africa (2026) reports that the rising incidence of xenophobia in SA is attracting concern across the continent as the victims are almost entirely black Africans, with SA's international standing having taken a knock over the attacks.

The weaponization of xenophobic rhetoric by political actors in South Africa during election cycles has been documented through multiple mechanisms. Netshikulwe (2024) demonstrates that political parties deliberately embed anti-migrant planks in their manifestos, prioritizing "addressing illegal migration" as a vote-catching issue, using divisive language and scapegoating tactics to rally their base and gain electoral advantage. This political discourse explicitly includes blaming foreigners for unemployment, crime, or other social problems, thereby stoking xenophobic sentiments among the South African populace (Netshikulwe,

2024). Misago (2025) provides evidence that existing explanations for xenophobic violence are inadequate, as many lack empirical backing, but his multideterminant model identifies elite mobilization as a critical factor in translating deprivation into collective violence.

Ngcamu (2025) demonstrates that government denialism and ineffective interventions exacerbate the impact of attacks against immigrants, suggesting that state actors either tolerate or passively condone xenophobic violence when it serves political purposes. The election cycle provides the temporal framework within which these political calculations are activated, as parties compete for cheap mobilisational advantage during sensitive electoral periods (Netshikulwe, 2024; Wild, 2024). Economic actors, including business associations and trade unions, may also reinforce anti-foreigner narratives as explanations for unemployment and job competition, as documented by Oyelana and Ngcamu (2024), who identify material or economic factors related to employment opportunities as drivers of xenophobic violence.

If moral appeals have failed, then perhaps economic reality must speak louder. South Africa is Africa's most industrialised economy. It benefits significantly from continental trade, labour mobility, and investment flows. African nations funded the South Africa struggle for liberation, in sheltering activists. There is no gainsaying that SA was liberated by the blood, resources, and solidarity of the Africa continent, now turn into a theatre of hostility by South Africa Xenophobia (Nhyira-Adddo, 2026). Xenophobia is not just a social problem and a structural crises, it is a political failure seen through the lenses; unemployment above 30%, youth unemployment exceeding 60%, rising inequality and crime, and over than 4 million undocumented South African citizens (Nhyira, 2026).

Bilateral relations between Nigeria and South Africa, Africa's two largest economies, have been repeatedly strained by outbreaks of xenophobic violence targeting Nigerian nationals. From the 2008 Johannesburg attacks to the 2015, 2019, and most recently 2026 waves, a troubling pattern has emerged: violence intensifies in the run-up to South African elections, suggesting systematic political exploitation rather than spontaneous social unrest. Nigerian citizens have been killed, Nigerian children molested in Schools by Movements, businesses looted, and property destroyed, yet conventional diplomatic responses condemnations, summons of ambassadors, and evacuation of citizens have failed to deter recurrence.

This study contends that South Africa's xenophobia is a predictable political tool weaponised by political and economic actors to mobilise support, deflect attention from domestic failures, and scapegoat foreign nationals, particularly Nigerians. Therefore, Nigeria must move from reaction to pre-emption and from moral appeals to curated consequences. The study seeks curating consequences as designed to make violence strategically unprofitable for both political sponsors and grassroots perpetrators.

With unemployment stubbornly high and public frustration mounting, foreign nationals many from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho and other neighbouring states have become easy targets for blame. Analysts say the timing is no coincidence: as the 2026 elections draw closer, some political actors appear to be tapping into public anger to mobilise support, echoing patterns seen in previous election cycles. The violence has taken disturbing new forms. Schools, once considered safe spaces, have become battlegrounds. Online videos show Operation Dudula members storming classrooms to remove children of foreign nationals, triggering scenes of panic as pupils fled (Agence de Presse, 2026). The 2008 attacks left more than 60 people dead, while the 2019 unrest claimed at least 18 lives, according to Human Rights Watch. Each wave has followed a similar trajectory: rising economic pressure, political contestation, and the scapegoating of migrants (Agence de Presse, 2026).

Regional governments are now sounding the alarm, Ghana summoned South Africa's ambassador and evacuate 300 Ghanians over recent incidents (Ngcobo & Naadi, 2026; Rukanga, 2026), The Renam's Mozambique party's urged Pretoria engagement, Angola has advised its citizens to avoid unnecessary travel (Agence de Presse, 2026), Botswana hinted at the need for continental consequences if the safety of African nationals cannot be guaranteed within South Africa. AU is absently silent. Concerningly, beyond condemned xenophobia rhetorics no arrest prosecution and sentencing has been recorded (Agence de Presse, 2026). The South African government responded predictably, with condemnation, officials denounced the attacks, Police have promised arrests, diplomatic assurances have been given, despite concerning pattern that shows that in 2008 over 60 killed, 2015 there was renewed violence, in 2019–2021 targeted attacks continue and all been replicated in 2026

[Economic Community of West African States](#) (ECOWAS) Parliament, on May 5, ordered its Committee on Political Affairs to investigate xenophobic attacks in South Africa targeting ECOWAS citizens, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General issued a statement in late April strongly condemning the “criminal acts” and acts of harassment against migrants with reminds that struggle against apartheid was won through international and African solidarity. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), of the African Union (AU), deplores the xenophobic attacks and vigilante conduct, while Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2026) highlights the systemic failure to protect migrants' constitutional rights, criticised blocking of migrants from healthcare and education in South Africa (The Nation (2026)).

A Nigeria Senator and former party chairman, Oshiomole called for decisive economic action, including the potential revocation of MTN's licence and the nationalisation of MTN, and advocated for similar measures against DSTV via the principle of reciprocity, stating, "If you hit me, I'll hit you" (Kazeem, 2026). The need to avoid reactive and self-injuring economical decision cannot be overemphasized, as a boycott or forced sale

of South African linked investment could disrupt services linked to such investment for millions of Nigerians, lead to significant job losses in its extensive local operations.

Away from reactivism, Nigeria in engaging reversible economic pressure should be seen targeting the South African Government Employees Pension Fund (GEPF) which manages pensions and related benefits on behalf of government employees in South Africa and reputed as Africa's largest pension fund with over R2.69 trillion in assets, and Public Investment Corporation (PIC), an asset management firm wholly owned by the South African government which manages investments for about 35 public sector funds, with the GEPF being its largest client. GEPF and PIC, has a long and significant history of investing in key Nigerian corporations, notably Dangote Cement and Ecobank Transnational Incorporated, such that in 2013, the PIC acquired a 1.5% stake in Dangote Cement for \$289 million (Nwachukwu, 2013). Same goes for the PIC as Ecobank's single largest shareholder, holding an 18.35% stake. Their initial investment in 2012 was \$250 million. Through a 19.867% stake in Resilient REIT, the PIC gains indirect exposure to Nigerian commercial real estate, as the REIT's property portfolio is valued at 2.8% in Nigeria. Park's (2017) punishment strategy works by raising the costs of political actions for the people who fund and enable them in this case, the financial backers of the ANC. Nigeria could make the following "reverse decisions" that impose costs without broad self-harm:

The significance of this study lies in its empirical evidence linking South African electoral cycles to the weaponisation of xenophobic violence against Nigerians, thereby shifting diplomatic responses from reactive condemnation to proactive, evidence-based intervention. By exposing the predictable patterns of political exploitation, the study equips the Nigerian government particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of the National Security Adviser, and Nigerians in Diaspora Commission with a forensic tool "Project Unmask" to legally challenge state-tolerated violence at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Criminal Court. Furthermore, the study offers a calibrated menu of targeted, reversible economic deterrence mechanisms such as suspension of South African portfolio investment access, conditional visa regimes, that Nigeria can deploy to alter the cost-benefit calculus of South African political and financial elites who underwrite the African National Congress. Beyond state actors, the findings will empower South African civil society, particularly the Economic Freedom Fighters, with a counter-narrative to anti-foreigner rhetoric, while informing the African Union, ECOWAS, and AfCFTA on binding protocols against xenophobic violence. Ultimately, the study will serve diaspora communities, policymakers, and scholars of African political economy, conflict studies, and diplomatic strategy by transforming a recurring tragedy into a predictable, manageable, and deterrable phenomenon

Statement of the Problem

Despite being Africa's largest economy and a champion of continental unity, Nigeria has repeatedly failed to protect its citizens from recurring xenophobic violence in South Africa, where attacks have intensified during election cycles (2008, 2015, 2019, 2026) in a predictable pattern that suggests systematic political exploitation rather than spontaneous social unrest. The first critical problem is the absence of a rigorous, empirical framework that exposes how South African political and economic actors deliberately weaponise anti-Nigerian rhetoric to mobilise domestic support, distract from governance failures as seen in high unemployment, load-shedding, and scapegoat foreign nationals for electoral gain. Without such forensic documentation, Nigeria's diplomatic responses remain reactive and limited to condemnations, evacuations, and occasional summons of ambassadors which have failed to deter recurrence or hold perpetrators accountable. The lack of a calibrated, reversible economic deterrence toolkit that Nigeria can deploy to alter the cost-benefit calculus of South African elites; pension funds and financial managers underwriting the African National Congress, without harming Nigeria's own economy. Existing measures such as boycotts of South AFRICAN businesses are blunt, self-injuring, and often abandoned. Consequently, xenophobic violence continues to cost Nigerian lives, livelihoods, and bilateral trust, while South African political actors face no meaningful consequences for electoral-cycle scapegoating. This study is therefore designed to fill these voids, by systematically mapping the correlation between election calendars and anti-Nigerian violence (2008–2026); and by proposing a menu of targeted, reversible economic deterrence mechanisms of conditional investment freezes and visa-based incentives that Nigeria can operationalise to moderate violence and protect its citizens

Research Questions

The paper is guided by the following two research questions:

- i. How do South African political and economic actors weaponise xenophobic rhetoric during election cycles against Nigerians?
- ii. What targeted economic deterrence mechanisms can Nigeria adopt to moderate xenophobic violence and protect its citizens in South Africa?

Literature Review

Conceptual framework

Xenophobia

This in the South African context is conceptualised not as spontaneous social unrest but as a structured political tool specifically, a predictable discourse of exclusion historically rooted in apartheid-era divide-and-rule tactics, which resurfaces periodically as a convenient scapegoating mechanism for structural failures. Netshikulwe (2024) observes that the election period in South Africa has been a sensitive time, and it has, in some instances, exacerbated issues related to xenophobia and negatively impacted social cohesion,” leading to tensions and outbreaks of violence. This is not a random occurrence; rather, political parties deliberately use “divisive language and scapegoating tactics to rally their base and gain electoral advantage,” blaming foreigners for unemployment, crime, and other social ills (Netshikulwe, 2024).

The recurring pattern of major flare-ups in 2008, 2015, 2019 and again in 2026 all coinciding with election cycles confirms that xenophobia is systematically weaponised, as noted by analysts who warn of anti-migrant sentiment being weaponised as the country heads towards the November 2026 local government elections (Agence de Presse, 2026). Understood through a political economy lens, this manufactured hostility serves to redirect anger away from the state” and simplify complex economic failures into an enemy with a face (Nhyira-Addo, 2026). The structural drivers unemployment above 30% and youth unemployment exceeding 60% are real, but the choice to channel popular frustration toward foreign nationals, particularly Nigerians, is a calculated political strategy. Thus, xenophobia in South Africa is best understood as a malleable political instrument: a discourse that can be turned on or off depending on electoral calculations, leaving a predictable footprint of violence that can be anticipated and, consequently, deterred (Nhyira-Addo, 2026).

Election Cycles

This function as the master temporal framework that gives xenophobic violence its predictive rhythm. In South Africa, elections do not merely coincide with anti-foreigner attacks they actively trigger them, as political competitors scramble for cheap mobilisational advantage. This dynamic has led to a recurring electoral-violence complex where each major outbreak (2008, 2015, 2019, 2026) has immediately preceded a national or local poll. As the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) (2022) documents that the election period in South Africa has been a sensitive time, and it has, in some instances, exacerbated issues related to xenophobia and negatively impacted social cohesion within communities. Political parties routinely embed anti-migrant planks in their manifestos, prioritising “addressing illegal migration” as a vote catching issue (Netshikulwe, 2024). This strategy has proven effective, Pew Research Center survey (2018) found that 62% of South Africans expressed negative sentiments about foreign nationals, and 61% believed immigrants were more responsible for crime (Raphael, 2026). The electoral logic is brutally simple: by scapegoating foreigners, politicians divert attention from their own governance failures. The President-General of the Nigeria Union South Africa (NUSA), Smart Nwobi, has explicitly stated that “South

African politicians are responsible for the persistent xenophobic attacks on Nigerians... this has been latched upon by the politicians in every election cycle by fuelling xenophobic attacks". Consequently, election cycles are not neutral calendar markers but active catalysts: they provide the political cover, the timing imperative, and the rhetorical framing that transforms latent xenophobia into organised, sometimes fatal, violence. For this study, mapping these cycles offers a crucial predictive tool enabling Nigeria to shift from reacting to violence after it erupts to anticipating and pre-empting it before election season begins.

Diplomatic Strategy (Economic Deterrence)

This is conceptualised here as a novel extension of classic deterrence logic into the economic sphere, adapted specifically to the peculiarities of Nigeria-South Africa interdependence. Unlike punitive economic sanctions which are often blunt, self-harming, and escalatory economic deterrence through engagement focuses on creating conditional, reversible consequences that raise the expected costs of xenophobic violence for South African political and financial elites. As Park (2017) argues that a state might adopt economic engagement in order to increase its deterrent capability over the recipient of economic benefits, employing three distinct strategies: punishment (raising the domestic political costs of aggression), denial (reducing the target's ability to conduct operations), and diminution (shrinking the material gains from aggression). In the Nigeria-South Africa relationship, the most promising lever is financial: South African fund managers, including the Government Employees Pension Fund (GEPF) via the Public Investment Corporation (PIC), are significant investors in Nigerian securities (bonds, treasury bills), drawn by Nigeria's high yields. A quiet suspension of new applications from these managers without freezing existing assets would send a direct signal to the financial elites who underwrite the African National Congress (ANC). This targeted approach avoids the self-defeating bluntness of boycotting MTN or Shoprite. Economic deterrence also includes positive inducements: fast-tracking visas for South African academics, artists, and media figures who sign anti-xenophobia pledges creates a clear incentive for pro-Nigeria voices (Netshikulwe, 2024). The goal is to alter the cost-benefit calculus of xenophobic violence: make it materially expensive for ANC funders, politically costly for candidates who deploy anti-foreigner rhetoric, and visibly unrewarding for grassroots perpetrators. By curating a predictable ladder of economic consequences from diplomatic warnings to investment access restrictions Nigeria can move from a reactive victim to a strategic curator of deterrence, protecting its citizens without destroying its own economy.

Targeted Trade Pressure on South African goods and services, not as punishment, but as pressure for reform. orchestrated consumer boycotts as South African companies operate across the continent hence a coordinated boycott, even symbolic, would send a powerful signal, investment reconsideration as African sovereign funds and private investors must begin asking Should investing in an economy that cannot guarantee the safety of

Africans continue, diplomatic downgrades, continental mobility reciprocity. There must be pro-African accountability measures else the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) dream is under threat with borderless Africa promise, a single market, free movement of goods, services, and people. What is the value of free trade without free safety as we cannot preach integration while practicing exclusion (Nhyira-Addo, 2026).

Empirical Review

Agaigbe and Akuraga (2025) investigated The complex interrelationship between globalization, migration, and xenophobia, demonstrating that while globalization has created unprecedented opportunities for mobility, it has simultaneously exacerbated inequalities that drive migration and fuel resentment toward immigrants. The study employed qualitative research design. Findings revealed that economic insecurity, cultural anxiety, and political opportunism emerge as primary factors behind the rise of xenophobia globally. The study further identifies how xenophobic discourse and policies undermine social cohesion, violate human rights, and impede the potential benefits of migration

Devakumar et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review examining xenophobic attitudes and behaviours towards migrants during disease outbreaks, finding that migrants are frequently blamed for spreading disease, promoting irrational fear, worry, and stigma in various forms, thus leading to health inequities worldwide. The review study factors such as perceived vulnerability to disease, disgust sensitivity, medical mistrust, individualism, collectivism, disease salience, social representation of disease, and beliefs in different origins of disease as significantly associated with xenophobia during epidemics (Devakumar et al., 2022).

Ngcamu (2025) systematically reviews the literature on common themes defining xenophobia in South Africa, examining the impact of xenophobic attacks on victims and the effectiveness of government response strategies. The study's findings demonstrate that peer pressure, failure to provide promised basic needs to citizens, and denialism by the government all contribute to xenophobic attacks. Moreover, the government's ineffective interventions and scapegoating are seen as exacerbating the impact of attacks against immigrants, creating a cycle of vulnerability for foreign nationals.

Misago (2025) advances a multideterminant model of xenophobic violence in South Africa, drawing on extensive comparative qualitative data from nearly two decades of ongoing research. This article responds to inadequacies and limitations of current causal explanations, arguing that existing explanations are inadequate as many lack empirical backing and others are incomplete due to their reductionist approach. The multideterminant model recognizes the complex interplay of structural factors, institutional responses, and individual agency in producing xenophobic violence.

A distinctive feature of South African xenophobia is its temporal patterning around election cycles. Netshikulwe (2024) observes that the election period in South Africa has been a sensitive time, exacerbating issues related to xenophobia and negatively impacting social cohesion within communities. Consequently, issues related to identity, race, and nationality often surface during election periods, leading to tensions and potential outbreaks of xenophobia. Political parties sometimes use divisive language and scapegoating tactics to rally their base and gain electoral advantage, including blaming foreigners for unemployment, crime, or other social problems, as exemplified by xenophobic rhetoric in party manifestos prioritizing addressing illegal migration

Wild (2024) reports that South African researchers have sounded alarms regarding xenophobic rhetoric used during election campaigning, expressing concern that these attitudes are making the nation less welcoming to researchers from other African countries. This concern is particularly acute given that South Africans headed to the ballot box in May 2024 for a general election at which, for the first time in 30 years, the incumbent African National Congress (ANC) party's majority was in question, creating heightened incentives for political elites to deploy xenophobic scapegoating as an electoral strategy.

Ani and Chidi (2024) provide a foundational recommendation for economic deterrence, arguing that the United Nations should impose heavy sanctions on the government of South Africa to prevent other countries from perpetrating such acts in the future. This recommendation reflects the principle that international consequences can alter state behaviour when diplomatic appeals prove insufficient. Oyelana (2024) critically analyses government, international organization, and NGO roles in combating xenophobia, concluding that South Africa's three government tiers have failed to provide adequate security, suggesting that external pressure mechanisms may be necessary to compel effective action.

The broader deterrence literature provides theoretical grounding for targeted economic measures. Park (2017) argues that a state might adopt economic engagement to increase its deterrent capability over the recipient of economic benefits, employing three distinct strategies: punishment (raising domestic political costs of aggression), denial (reducing the target's ability to conduct operations), and diminution (shrinking material gains from aggression). Applied to the Nigeria–South Africa relationship, this framework suggests that Nigeria could deploy conditional economic measures such as suspending new portfolio investment applications from South African fund managers, imposing temporary moratoriums on business visas, or leveraging multilateral forums like the African Union to raise the expected costs of xenophobic violence for South African political and financial elites. Nshimbi (2021) examines what relevant institutions within the African Union can do in addressing xenophobia, proposing that continental mechanisms offer a potential channel for coordinated economic and diplomatic pressure.

Paalo et al. (2025) examine xenophobia as an obstacle to the AU's vision of a united continent, concluding that the AU must reinforce its commitment to inclusivity and cooperation among member states. Their findings support the argument that Nigeria should pursue a multi-layered approach combining bilateral economic measures with multilateral diplomatic offensives at the AU and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, thereby creating overlapping accountability mechanisms that make xenophobic violence strategically unprofitable for its political sponsors.

Theoretical framework

Political Economy of Scapegoating Theory

The Political Economy of Scapegoating Theory as articulated by René Girard (1923–2015), is a social process whereby mounting internal tensions, crises or frustrations within a community are resolved by collectively directing hostility onto a single, arbitrarily chosen victim or a marginalised out-group, who is then expelled or eliminated. This act restores a fragile social order and produces a temporary sense of unity among the persecutors. Scapegoating happens when the community visibly identifies an enemy as evil or invisibly identifies a member of the in-group as sacred (Girard, 1982). Bonacich (1972) argues that a labour market segmented by ethnicity, race or nationality generates a three-way conflict between higher-paid dominant workers, cheaper subordinate workers and employers who seek to replace expensive labour with cheaper alternatives. In this framework, economic distress and competition for scarce jobs cause dominant-group workers to scapegoat subordinate-group workers often immigrants or foreign nationals for declining wages and unemployment, thereby redirecting popular anger away from structural causes and towards a visible “other”.

Interestingly, during periods of economic distress and governance deficits, ruling elites deliberately weaponise scapegoating as a low-cost political tool, redirecting popular anger toward visible foreign minorities in order to consolidate domestic support and deflect blame from systemic failures (Mbembe, 2015). The core thrust of the Political Economy of Scapegoating Theory is that economic crisis and elite self-preservation produce a systematic political logic of blame displacement. When a state faces high unemployment, fiscal strain, service delivery failures or inequality, governing elites face a choice; implement costly structural reforms that threaten their own power, or divert public frustration onto a vulnerable out-group (Nhyira-Addo, 2026). The theory predicts that rational, self-interested elites will predictably choose the latter, especially in the run-up to elections. Politicians use divisive language and scapegoating tactics to rally their base and gain electoral advantage (Netshikulwe, 2024), because the scapegoating and

demonisation of migrants merely draw people's attention away from the real causes of South Africa's economic woes (Wits University, 2024).

This is not random or irrational behaviour but a calculated political instrument: elites manufacture or amplify anti-migrant sentiment because doing so is electoral cheap and operationally easy compared to fixing unemployment, inequality or corruption. In the South African context, the theory explains why politicians regularly deploy xenophobic rhetoric to disguise the causes of South Africa's economic woes (Wits University, 2024). By blaming foreign nationals, particularly Nigerians, for joblessness, crime and housing shortages, elites create a simple, emotionally resonant narrative that absolves the state of responsibility and unites the in-group against a common enemy.

The theory predicts that as elections approach, politicians face heightened incentives to scapegoat foreign nationals because visible out-groups offer a low-cost mechanism for mobilising support and distracting voters from domestic failures. Empirical evidence from South Africa strongly supports this prediction. In the run-up to the 2024 national elections and the 2026 local government elections, candidates in South Africa's forthcoming general elections have been scapegoating and demonising foreign nationals, risking stoking xenophobic violence (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Political parties have systematically embedded anti-migrant planks in their manifestos, prioritising 'addressing illegal migration' as a vote-catching issue (Chin'ono, 2025). The theory explains why this strategy persists despite its moral costs: when unemployment exceeds 30% and youth unemployment exceeds 60%, foreign nationals and Nigerians in particular become ideal scapegoats because they are visible, relatively powerless and easily stereotyped as job-stealers and criminals. The theory further illuminates the electoral timing pattern that characterises South African xenophobia. Because elections provide a predictable calendar, elites can anticipate when scapegoating will be most politically profitable, and they calibrate their rhetoric accordingly. A senior analyst observes that the way in which xenophobia has been mobilised as a scapegoat to misdirect people's energies and anger and fear, is something that is very characteristic of this particular moment in time (Pithouse, 2025).

The theory's core insight that scapegoating is a calculus of political costs and benefits implies that Nigeria can alter elite behaviour by raising the expected costs of xenophobic scapegoating without destroying its own economy. Drawing from the economic deterrence literature, scholars have argued that "a state might adopt economic engagement in order to increase its deterrent capability over the recipient of economic benefits," employing three distinct strategies: punishment (raising the domestic political costs of aggression), denial (reducing the target's ability to conduct operations) and diminution (shrinking the material gains from aggression) (Park, 2017). In the Nigeria-South Africa relationship, the most promising economic lever is the financial interdependence between the two countries. South African fund managers, particularly the Public

Investment Corporation (PIC) acting on behalf of the Government Employees Pension Fund (GEPF), are significant investors in Nigerian securities (bonds and treasury bills), attracted by Nigeria's comparatively high yields. The theory suggests that a quiet, reversible suspension of new applications from these managers a targeted measure that does not freeze existing assets would send a direct, painful signal to the financial elites who underwrite the African National Congress (ANC). This measure is preferable to blunt, self-harming sanctions such as boycotting MTN or Shoprite, which harm the Nigerian economy and are politically difficult to sustain. As one Nigerian official noted, "revoke DSTV" calls for economic retaliation have been publicly debated, but the theory suggests that precision, reversibility and targeting elite financial interests are far more effective than broad consumer boycotts (Oshiomhole, 2026).

The theory further implies that Nigeria should pair negative economic deterrence (punishment) with positive incentives (rewards) for pro-Nigeria voices in South Africa. Specifically, fast-tracking visa approvals for South African academics, artists and media figures who sign a public anti-xenophobia pledge creates a clear incentive structure: cost for inaction (loss of investment access), reward for solidarity (visa facilitation). As the theory predicts, when the political elites who orchestrate scapegoating face rising material costs including pressure from pension funds whose investment returns suffers they are more likely to moderate xenophobic rhetoric and tolerate pro-migrant counter-narratives. Crucially, the theory also warns that deterrence measures must be predictable and escalatory. As one Nigerian senator has argued, Nigeria must move beyond what he described as old-fashioned diplomacy (Oshiomhole, 2026). The Political Economy of Scapegoating Theory suggests that Nigeria should publicly articulate a ladder of consequences: from diplomatic protests, to targeted visa restrictions, to quiet investment freezes, to full economic retaliation, with each rung clearly tied to the severity and recurrence of xenophobic violence. This predictability is the essence of effective deterrence: when South African elites know precisely what costs they will incur for each level of scapegoating, they can rationally adjust their behaviour to avoid those costs, thereby protecting Nigerian citizens without requiring a permanent rupture in bilateral relations.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, desk-based research design utilising policy analysis and secondary sources. The research questions are explored through a conceptual policy analysis drawing on public records, electoral timelines, and diplomatic practice. Data are drawn from publicly available records of xenophobic attacks in South Africa (2008–2026). South African electoral calendars and political party manifestos. Official statements from the Nigerian and South African governments. Reports from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and media investigations. Academic literature on xenophobia, electioneering, and economic diplomacy. The analytical approach is thematic and strategic: the paper identifies recurring

patterns, diagnoses root causes (political exploitation), and synthesises a multi-layered response framework. No primary data collection was undertaken; instead, the paper extrapolates from documented events and established diplomatic principles.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the study shows that a systematic, evidence-driven, and consequence-based approach can make xenophobic violence strategically unprofitable for its political sponsors and grassroots perpetrators. *That* Nigeria and other African Countries should frame the electoral-violence pattern to break the cycle of surprise and denial by the South African government. Nigeria should deliberately Commission a detailed analytical report (“Project Unmask”) that maps each xenophobic wave (2008, 2015, 2019, 2026) alongside the South African political and electoral calendar. Be intentional to identify key political figures and movements as seen in Operation Dudula and March for March, that escalated rhetoric during those periods. Translate the report into local South African languages (Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans). Formally submit the executive summary to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the International Criminal Court (ICC) as evidence of state-tolerated civil rights violations. Nigeria should sustain legal and reputational pressure on Pretoria, making future electoral exploitation costly and visible. Nigeria should Simultaneously, leverage the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), whose leadership has publicly condemned xenophobia as “a betrayal of African unity” and deliberately support EFF’s counter-narrative through diplomatic engagement and amplification. This will create a powerful domestic South African constituency against xenophobia.

The study also submits that a strategic framework of curating consequences will move Nigeria beyond reactive condemnations and citizen evacuations toward proactive, calibrated, and reversible countermeasures. The framework draws centrally on Park’s (2017) theory of economic deterrence, which argues that a state can leverage its economic engagement to increase deterrent capability over the recipient of economic benefits through three distinct strategies: punishment (raising the domestic political costs of aggression), denial (reducing the target’s ability to conduct operations), and diminution (shrinking the material gains from aggression). Importantly, the proposed measures can be implemented without harming Nigeria’s own economy. Study opines that freezing South African portfolio investment access; this align with the position that Nigeria’s Federal Ministry of Finance should suspend processing new applications by South African fund managers seeking to invest in Nigerian securities (bonds, treasury bills). This directly signals financial elites and pension funds particularly the Government Employees Pension Fund (GEPPF) via the Public Investment Corporation (PIC) that underwrite the African National Congress (ANC). As Oyelana and Ngcamu (2024) noted, economic factors related to employment opportunities and resources drive xenophobic

attitudes. By targeting the financial backers of the political class, this measure raises the expected cost of tolerating or orchestrating xenophobic violence. Unlike blunt consumer boycotts of MTN or DSTV which Oshiomhole (2026) debated as publicly popular but economically self-injuring this precision measure imposes pain exactly where political decisions are funded.

Visa restrictions on privileged classes is a denial strategy, whereby a temporary moratorium on new business visas for South African corporate executives. By reducing the ability of South African business elites to access the Nigerian market easily, this measure denies them the benefits of frictionless mobility while their government fails to protect Nigerian citizens. This responds to Ngcamu's (2025) finding that the South African government's ineffective interventions are seen as exacerbating the impact of attacks. Visa restrictions create a direct, tangible inconvenience for the very class that influences ANC policy. Reversibility as an essential condition as opine by Park (2017), emphasized that reversibility is essential to effective economic deterrence, as it allows the target state to alter its behaviour without permanent rupture. All proposed measures portfolio restrictions and visa moratoriums would be clearly linked to specific, verifiable actions by South Africa such as prosecution of xenophobic perpetrators and ensuring a credible path back to normal relations.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Nigeria's response to recurrent xenophobic violence in South Africa has long been defined by reactive outrage and episodic evacuations, a cycle that offers no deterrence and little justice. This study breaks decisively from that pattern by offering a dual-pronged framework that is proactive, evidence-driven, and consequence-based. First, through "Project Unmask," Nigeria would systematically map each xenophobic wave against South Africa's electoral calendar, translating findings into local languages and submitting them to the African Commission and the ICC. This legal and reputational pressure, amplified by strategic alignment with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) as a domestic anti-xenophobia constituency, ensures that future electoral exploitation becomes visibly costly.

Nigeria would deploy targeted, reversible countermeasures: freezing South African portfolio investment access to raise the political costs for the ANC's financial backers (GEPF/PIC), and imposing a temporary visa moratorium on South African corporate executives to deny business elites the frictionless mobility they currently enjoy. Unlike self-injuring consumer boycotts, these precision tools apply pain exactly where political decisions are funded, without harming Nigeria's own economy. By linking portfolio restrictions and visa moratoriums to specific, verifiable South African actions (such as the prosecution of xenophobic

perpetrators), Nigeria creates a credible and transparent path back to normal relations. When South Africa's government knows that each new wave of violence will trigger immediate, measurable financial and mobility costs for its most influential domestic actors from pension funds to corporate executives—the calculus of tolerating xenophobia shifts irreversibly. The framework presented by this study transforms Nigeria from a victim into a strategic actor, one capable of making xenophobic violence strategically unprofitable for its sponsors and perpetrators alike.

Recommendations

- i. Nigeria should commission "Project Unmask" a report mapping each xenophobic wave (2008–2026) against South Africa's electoral calendar, identifying political figures and movements (Operation Dudula, March for March) that escalated anti-immigrant rhetoric. Translate this report into Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans, and submit its executive summary to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the ICC as evidence of state-tolerated violations. Simultaneously, diplomatically amplify the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), whose leadership condemns xenophobia as a betrayal of African unity, thereby creating a powerful domestic South African constituency against xenophobia.
- ii. Ministry of finance and foreign Affairs should deploy targeted economic deterrence without harming Nigeria's economy; freeze new South African portfolio investments by suspending applications from GEPF/PIC to buy Nigerian securities, a punishment strategy that raises political costs for the ANC's financial backers. Concurrently, impose a temporary moratorium on new business visas for South African corporate executives, a denial strategy that removes frictionless mobility for the very class that influences ANC policy. All measures must be reversible and linked to specific South African actions of prosecution of perpetrators, with clear benchmarks for suspension, ensuring a credible path back to normal relations.

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