

### Some Observations: South Africa rising against Africa\*

The last two weeks have been a very sad time for Ethiopia and Ethiopians. The events in Yemen, Libya, the Mediterranean Sea and South Africa have been shocking. It is a paradox particularly that South Africans have to unleash such open and blatant violence against foreigners of African origin yet again. What makes the current situation different is its scale and brutality. Otherwise, lower scale muggings, stabbings and murders existed since the late 1990s. The last major flare-up occurred between 2008 and 2010.

I lived in South Africa eight years between 2001 and 2008 mainly in Pretoria and Johannesburg as an employee of an international organization. I added two years in Botswana between 2009 and 2010 and witnessed events in South Africa closely from just next door.

Based on my observation and experience in the country, I am writing to debunk a couple of statements that the South Africans make to justify their brutality. First, they claim that the foreigners took over their job. Many foreigners, particularly Ethiopians and Somalis, are engaged in retail trade (*suke bederette or gulite gebeya* type of businesses). These occupations did not exist before the arrival of these foreigners. The foreigners introduced them to South Africa. The foreigners hire South Africans and provide them their livelihood and instill business acumen in them. The Ethiopians and Somalis start with small capital and work hard to make a living. This type of business, known as the informal sector, is large and could accommodate ever increasing number of workers as it is usually the case in many developing countries. But the South Africans are not willing or unable to dive into it. A typical day for some of these foreigners involves carrying a bulk of merchandise on mini-buses or trucks for some distance, shoulder the merchandize over the head and walk several miles to rural villages to sell to the locals, at times, on credit. During my stay in the country, one or two Ethiopians or Somalis used to be beaten-up or killed by the South Africans in order to snatch their money. These businesses were open to South Africans as well, but the South African would prefer to forcefully snatch the money from the hard working foreigners rather than work like them. The Ethiopians and Somalis worked very hard. Some have transformed their small stalls into middle-size Department stores such as those along Jeppe Street in down town Johannesburg.

Second, the Police did not provide protection to these foreigners. In fact, the Police were among the perpetrators. They would round-up some of these street vendors and snatch their merchandize on grounds that they have violated one or another law. The next day they would turn around return the merchandize by collecting money from the vendors, of course, without any Government receipt. Many in the Police force are criminals. Even the national Police Chief a few years back was found to be a criminal himself and removed from his post.

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Third, losers from the recent incident are not only the immigrants, it is also the South Africans themselves. Some South Africans will indeed be losing their job, but a large number would lose the merchants that supplied them with their daily necessities and some “luxuries” such as curtains, bed sheets, etc, at a price the black South Africans could afford. A bunch of tomatoes may sale for 2 Rands on these street stalls while the same quantity may fetch 10 Rands in a proper store.

Fourth, South Africa is a beautiful country, but it is extremely difficult to make personal friends with South Africans – black, white or other. I worked with some black South Africans during my tenure there i.e. the drivers, offices Assistants, etc. They left to their residence in the townships during the evening. We would not have any social interactions. In the evenings, most of the cafes and restaurants where we went for dinner or refreshments were populated by white or Indian or colored South Africans interspersed by a very few black Africans – South African or others. The situation has changed gradually but this characterization pertained until I left in 2010. If at all you talk to one of them that will be it, as you may not meet them again.

When there is a flare-up among South Africans and the Black African immigrants in town, we asked the views of our South African co-workers. They tend to be blindly xenophobic and asserted in no uncertain terms that the new comers should leave. When we reminded them that these are the people who fought against Apartheid and contributed to South Africa’s freedom to some degree, they would say “there you come again; we have heard this so many times”.

Why are many Black South Africans xenophobic (Afro-phobic)? Most do not know history, geography or culture; not even their own. The Apartheid system wanted them to stay blind of the world around them. To the best I know, the post-Apartheid governments have not made enough efforts to change this darkness and instill a sense of gratitude to many countries – Africans as well as others. The rank and file South African does not know the anti-Apartheid stances and efforts of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). They do not know the contributions of Ethiopia made both militarily and financially. Ethiopia contributed to President Mandela’s military training. Ethiopia spent its meager resources to take the Apartheid Regime to the International Court of Justice in the 1960s to expose its illegality. When I was a University student at the former Haile Selassie I University in the mid- to late 1960s, one of my classmates was a South African Lieutenant having joined the university after his military training at the Harar Academy fully on account of Ethiopia.

Ethnic affiliations and geographic boundaries in Southern Africa are mixed and complex. The flare-up between 2008 and 2010 was mainly against Zimbabweans fleeing the atrocities perpetrated by Mr. Mugabe. The Ndebele of current day Zimbabwean are as much South African

as any South African today. A large number of Malawians were invited to work in the mines and about a quarter of a million used to visit South Africa during the Apartheid years<sup>1</sup>.

In addition, there is large scale unemployment. Successive governments have not done much to address the problem in any serious and systematic way. The leadership today coming from the labor unions or ANC are busy amassing wealth for themselves rather than address the people's business. We all read about Mr. Zuma's multi-million Rands home "refurbishment" on government account while more than a third of the youth is unemployed. Of course, the unemployment situation does not justify the action of the South Africans on the new comers. Their action should be directed to their government.

By way of conclusion, I would suggest that the South African government should be involved in a sustained program of mass education and indoctrination. The unemployment situation should also be given the seriousness that it deserves. The legal status of many foreigners must be established by issuing them residence for 2 or more years at a time (instead of two or three months). Something like a Green Card in the United States is warranted. This would allow them to move around within as well as out of the country. Equally, important they would be able to open bank accounts and put their little savings at a safe distance. For whatever it is worth, the government should provide the telephone number of the Chiefs of Police to community leaders so that it would be possible to reach them when such incidents are likely to happen. Establishing Government-foreigners liaison office (staffed by South Africans and the foreigners) would help avert future catastrophe. For the wealthy Ethiopians, it is time that they consider diversifying the location of their investment. With that wealth and business acumen, there will be more friendly nations that would welcome them. Considering the recent situation in South Africa, Ethiopia should be considered as one possible option.

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Finally, the underlying cause for the exodus and humiliation is the situation in Ethiopia both in economic and political spheres. It would be beneficial if the Ethiopian government gives space for alternative views to be heard in Parliament and in the media. Since a lot is being said in this area, it requires only listening ears, widely open eyes, and a thinking mind. On the economic front, the heavy investment in transportation and energy sectors are commendable. These however do not create large and sustainable employment at home due to the capital intensity of the investments, but they remove key constraints for private sector development. In its upcoming Growth and Transformation Strategy, the Government should create the space for a thriving private sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, April 1991; and Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, 1995. These two books are excellent sources on the culture and history of South Africa from about pre-historic times to 1994.

Ethiopians love their country. They were not known for fleeing their country up until the mid-1970s even when they were invited or encouraged to stay abroad. The author is a living example of that era. During the *Derg* era, some officials and members of one or the other political party opposed to *Derg* started to seek asylum abroad. There is a flood of people leaving the country since the early 1990s either for political or economic reasons. The success of the current government in political and economic transformation will be judged by the change it causes to happen in the balance of the exodus. In 5-10 years, if the out-migration falls below the in-migration, this is a great success. However, if the out-migration still rises and exceeds the in-migration, this would be a sign for an utter failure of governance.