

Responding to xenophobia: What can South Africa learn from Côte d'Ivoire?

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Introduction

The recent xenophobic attacks perpetrated against black African foreigners in South Africa, raises many questions regarding the government responses to the problem and the implications of those responses. Using the case of Côte d'Ivoire, this policy brief aims to draw a number of issues which South Africans and their leaders should avoid in the handling of the recent attacks on foreigners. Although Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa differ in many ways, an analysis of the securitisation of identity in Côte d'Ivoire can be helpful to raise awareness regarding the risks of unquestioned securitisation as a possible solution to immigration.

This policy brief will provide an analysis of the securitisation of identity in Côte d'Ivoire and the long-term impact it had on peace and security in the country. Secondly, it will provide an analytical overview of government response to the recent xenophobic attacks.

The securitisation of identity in Côte d'Ivoire and its impact

Côte d'Ivoire gained its independence from France in August 1960 under the leadership of Felix Houphouët-Boigny, who ruled until his death in 1993. In order to ensure a cheap supply of labour and increase cocoa and coffee production, Boigny introduced a system of liberal land ownership laws to attract immigrant workers from neighbouring countries, especially from Burkina-Faso and Mali. This resulted in large immigrant settlements in Côte d'Ivoire.

“In 1998, such foreigners accounted for over 4 million people or roughly 25 per cent of the population... 50 per cent of these foreigners or non-Ivorians were born in Côte d'Ivoire”¹. Despite the economic growth witnessed, Boigny's strategy had an adverse impact in that it heightened a socio-economic North-South divide. Despite his attempts to develop the North, the latter failed to experience the same level of development as that experienced in the

¹ Langer, A. 2010. Côte d'Ivoire's elusive quest for peace. Ireland: University College Dublin. Page 2-3

resource rich South². “In 1975, income per capita in the North was about 22 per cent lower than the national average and as much as 65 per cent lower than in Abidjan”³.

In the post-Boigny era, a number of sensitive issues that had been skilfully repressed or avoided by Boigny’s regime became major causes for concern. The securitisation of identity, ethnicity and citizenship became the main threat to peace.

According to Buzan *et al*⁴, “securitisation is constituted by the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects”. Consequently, a security threat is a social construct aimed at moving an issue from normal day politics to the realm of urgency. A security issue is thus a speech act, with political intent and whose success depends on an audience’s acceptance. As articulated by ⁵Abrahamsen, “securitisation is not... merely a symbolic or linguistic act but has clear practical and political implications for how to deal with particular issues... Securitization is a political choice, a decision to conceptualise an issue in a particular way”. Justifiably, the Copenhagen School warned against the unquestioned use of security, because portraying an issue as a security issue or an existential threat can easily “upset orders of mutual accommodation among units... Security is thus a self-referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue; not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat”⁶.

It is in light of this that Liow⁷ argues that “securitisation theory will experience comparatively less resonance when applied to political landscapes where strong states set the parameters for political and security discourse, and where the state, not the relevant audience of popular opinion, determines what is to be kept in or out”. Although Liow⁸ was analysing the securitisation of Indonesian migrants in Malaysia, his conclusions are nonetheless

² Ibid page 5-7 and Ogwang, T. 2011. The root causes of the conflict in Ivory Coast. Uganda: Makerere University. Page 2-3

³ Langer, A. 2010. Côte d’Ivoire’s elusive quest for peace. Ireland: University College Dublin. Page 5

⁴ Buzan, B. Wæver, O. and de Wild, J. 1998. Security: A new framework of analysis. Boulder: Lynne Rienner. Page 25

⁵ Abrahamsen, R. 2005. Blair’s Africa: the politics of securitization and fear. Alternative, 30: 55-80. Page 60

⁶ Buzan, B. Wæver, O. and de Wild, J. 1998. Security: A new framework of analysis. Boulder: Lynne Rienner. Pages 26 and 24

⁷ Liow, J. C. 2004. Malaysia’s approach to its illegal Indonesian migrant labour problem: securitization, politics, or catharsis? Singapore: Institute of defense and strategic studies, Nanyang Technological University. Page 28

⁸ *ibid* Page 28

relevant and applicable to the Ivorian case. Contrary to the Copenhagen School, he argues that in strong states the government rather than the people initiates, defines, and carries out the securitisation process, with limited popular consent or participation, and as such determines the success of a securitisation act. Thus, the government is the “securitizer”, and also dictates the response of the target audience.

Upon becoming president, Boigny’s successor Bédié played on the existing tensions between the migrants (known as *allogènes*) and indigenes in Côte d’Ivoire to manipulate and mobilise political support. As Konaté⁹ observes, the source of Côte d’Ivoire’s “nightmare” was when Bédié portrayed the *allogènes* as “aliens, foreigners, others who are invading the country and posing a political and economic threat to the autochthones...” In 1994, Bédié ensured passing of the New Citizenship Act, which officially led to the introduction of the doctrine of *ivoirité*, or ivoirity, and the subsequent Electoral Code Law, under which any candidate running for presidential elections must have resided in the country five years prior to his candidacy and must have native Ivorian parents¹⁰.

Although Bédié initially claimed that the use of the concept of ivoirity was only aimed at creating cultural unity among Ivorians, it soon became obvious that the doctrine was a strategic political move aimed at excluding Alassane Ouattara, the leader of the *Rassemblement des Republicains* (RDR) from running for the 1995 elections. Due to Gbagbo’s refusal to participate in the elections and the exclusion of Ouattara – whose parents were allegedly from Burkina Faso – Bédié won the elections by a landslide. The use of ivoirity also had an impact beyond the political sphere, and “led to a general erosion of Northern Ivoirians’ social standing, and cultural status, *de facto* making them secondary citizens in Côte d’Ivoire”, according to Langer¹¹. This exacerbated intergroup ethnic tensions and divisions, and increased resentment among the excluded Northern population.

⁹ Konaté, S. A. 2004. The politics of identity and violence in Côte d’Ivoire. *West Africa Review*, 5: 1-21. Page 5

¹⁰ Akindès, F. 2009. South African mediation in the Ivorian crisis. In *Africa’s peacemaker? Lessons from South African conflict mediation*, edited by Shillinger, K. Johannesburg: Fanele. Page 118

Zouandé, S.F. 2011. *Governance and democratic transition in Africa: understanding Ivoirité and the ethnicity challenges to citizenship and nation-building in Côte d’Ivoire*. Washington: Howard University. Page 58

¹¹ Langer, A. 2010. *Côte d’Ivoire’s elusive quest for peace*. Ireland: University College Dublin. Page 8

A prominent characteristic of conflicts categorised to be identity-conflict, is that “the security of identity [is] framed as an existential situation in which identity can become non-negotiable... Communities in conflict will tend to focus on the perceived danger posed by others as object that threatens them most. New norms of violence and hostility are established between conflicting identity groups, myths and narratives of pain and suffering are emphasized; mutual distrust and opposing mirror-images are perpetuated” creating an intractable conflict¹².

The concept of Ivoirity encouraged the predominantly Christian Southerners to view themselves as true Ivorians, and characterised the overwhelmingly Muslim Northerners as foreigner or non-Ivorians. Bédié, by playing the identity card, justified the mobilisation of state resources and emergency measures to counter the perceived economic and political threat created by foreigners. The ultimate aim was to prevent those considered non-Ivorians access to the highest office of the country and ensure the continued dominance of the Akan ethnic group over power and resources¹³.

By 2002 a failure of the successive governments after Bédié to deal with the identity and economic crises plunged Côte d’Ivoire into a decade long civil war.

Government response to the recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa: a critical appraisal

The recent xenophobic attacks against foreigners and government responses to the problem is a major cause of concern in South Africa. It took government two weeks to acknowledge and condemn the recent attacks on foreigners. When they finally did, South African elites’ nonchalant response was one of denial rather than acknowledgement. According to South African elites, the problem lies in migration, and the violence against foreigners is mere criminal activity rather than xenophobia. As Gumede¹⁴ rightly argues, “not honestly

¹² Schwartz, M. 2009. The hyper-securitization of identity and proacted social conflict: the case of Cyprus. New York: The new school graduate program in international affairs. Page 3 and 15-16

¹³ Akindès, F. 2004. The roots of the military-political crises in Côte d’Ivoire. UPPSALA: The Nordic Africa Institute. Page 27-30

¹⁴ Gumede, W. 2015. South Africa must confront the roots of its xenophobic violence. Internet: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/20/south-africa-xenophobic-violence-migrant-workers-apartheid>. Accessed: 21 April 2015.

acknowledging and facing up to the underlying problems is a big contributing factor”. It is important to note that the National Planning Commission does not identify xenophobia as one of the nine challenges facing South Africa.

Contrary to the Copenhagen School, the Paris School argues that everyday practices play an important role in the securitisation of an issue. “Security is constructed and applied to different issues and areas through a range of routine practices rather than only through specific speech acts that enable emergency measures”¹⁵.

Last year President Jacob Zuma said “South African blacks should not behave as if they were typical blacks from Africa. The African National Congress Secretary-General, Gwede Mantashe, blamed foreigners for stoking unrest in South Africa’s platinum belt. In January this year, small business development minister Lindiwe Zulu, said the businesses of foreign Africans based in township could not expect to coexist peacefully with local business owners unless they shared their trade secret”¹⁶. This year King Goodwill Zwelithini said “African migrants should take their things and go”¹⁷. Whether intentional or not, such rhetoric and narratives constructed by South African elites and government officials can be a powerful polarising and inflammatory force to incite xenophobia from below. This raises questions regarding leadership at the local and national level in South Africa, and its role – whether conscious or not – in inciting violence against black Africans. Notably, government reluctance to strongly condemn the role of King Zwelithini in inciting the violence also leaves much to desire about South African leaders’ response to the crisis.

In such an environment of denial and anti-immigration sentiments, it becomes easy for dissatisfied South Africans to blame foreigners for all their ills and use violence as a mean to voice their frustrations. Foreigners are used as the convenient scapegoats and mask for individual and government failures. As long as the South African government and those involved in the attacks do not take responsibility for their failures, this unfortunate situation is likely to be prolonged. While one cannot deny the criminal nature of the on-going attacks, a

¹⁵ McDonald, M. 2008. Securitization and the Construction of Security. European Journal of International Relations, 14 : 563-587. Page 570

¹⁶ Gumede, W. 2015. South Africa must confront the roots of its xenophobic violence. Internet: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/20/south-africa-xenophobic-violence-migrant-workers-apartheid>. Accessed: 21 April 2015.

¹⁷ Ibid

policy of denial only takes attention away from the real causes of the problem, especially issues of poverty, inequality, poor service delivery etc. The socio-economic and political root causes of the problem should be addressed to avoid recurrence.

Importantly, although foreigners participate in criminal activities, the comments made by Marais¹⁸ in 2008 are still accurate today. According to him, “the institutionalised denigration of refugees and the routine rounding-up of foreigners in “anti-crime” sweeps has helped amplify the common slur that they’re thieves, imposters – and legitimate targets... The routine victimisation and exploitation of foreigners – facilitated by their inability to summon the protection of the state – has legitimised their status as ‘deserving’ targets of outrage and expropriation”¹⁹. Significantly, the tendency of perceiving all foreigners – especially black African foreigners – in South Africa as illegal immigrants is a cause of concern. This creates a narrative whereby there is a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In addition, the practice and narrative of labelling foreigners as ‘*Makwerekwere*’ or the hostile ‘other’²⁰ should be questioned and condemned by government and fellow South Africans. Seeing foreigners as the ‘other’ or ‘outsider’ in relation to the ‘self’ can promote a culture of exclusion, rejection and unease rather than accommodation and integration. This can perpetuate a culture whereby the ‘other’ is seen as the existential threat to the ‘self’.

Another equally important consideration is the pervasive entrenched culture of violence in South Africa carried over from the Apartheid era. One cannot downplay the socio-economic realities of many South Africans. However, violence is never the solution to redress injustices let alone poverty or unemployment. Violence only brings more injustices and dehumanised the perpetrators and those who support them. As a response to the recent xenophobic attacks, President Jacob Zuma launched Operation Fiela. However, the implementation of Operation Fiela has raised various concerns. Many civil society organisations and human rights activists have criticised the operation for targeting foreigners, criticism that the government vehemently rejects. Although the use of the army was an appropriate counter-xenophobia measure, it should not become a long-term measure or an excuse for police brutality and human rights abuses. Military deployment should not become a long term solution, and

¹⁸ Marais, H. 2008. The foreigner in the mirror. Internet: <http://mg.co.za/article/2008-05-25-the-foreigner-in-mirror>. Accessed: 27 Avril 2015.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Nyamnjoh, F. B. 2006. Insiders & Outsiders: citizenship and xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa. Dakar: CODESRIA.

Operation Fiela objectives should be clearly stated by the government, and its timeframe should be respected. The issue should not become militarised and use by politicians for their own political gain.

The rest of the world, especially Africa, is watching as South Africans mistreat their fellow Africans in a country that preaches '*ubuntu*' and togetherness. The need for transformation cannot be overstated. There is a need for collective reflection to come up with a sustainable solution to xenophobia. Responsible leadership is crucial. South Africa but also other African countries need to seriously think about immigration and relations of social interconnectedness on the continent, especially at a time when immigration is becoming a major security debate both continentally and internationally.