
Nativism and narrow nationalism in South African political discourse

By Siphokazi Mbolo and Ashley Nyiko Mabasa

Siphokazi Mbolo is studying an MA degree in Development Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand and Ashley Nyiko Mabasa, an MA candidate in Labour and Economic Sociology at the same university, is the Secretary General of the Wits SRC.

The development of an inclusive South Africa based on a united, democratic, non-sexist, non-racial society needs to take the struggles and realities of the black majority further, building a radicalism that challenges white oppression, racism and all forms of inequality, while ensuring that nationalism seeks to improve the material conditions of black people, without morphing into a narrow nativism or oppressive structures, such as traditional authorities.

With a history riddled with racial and gender oppression, economic inequality and ethnic disputes, contemporary South Africa

is facing mounting and legitimate pressures to resolve profound social challenges. Multiple organisations and political groups have joined the quest to tackle racism, patriarchy, poverty and inequality. What unites these groups is the desire to be a voice for the historically disadvantaged and to build an African nationalism.

How to build such a nationalism in the context of South Africa has historically been called the “National Question”, the question of who belongs in South Africa, where and how. Currently, equality is no more than a hope as the country is one of the most unequal societies in the world. In addition, socio-economic and institutional discrimination continues to undermine the full development of the black majority. South African political groups are rightfully aligned in their pursuit for complete socio-economic and political liberation of the historically disadvantaged. However, the way some of these groups have chosen to respond to these challenges is problematic. They dwell on a racial and ethnic mobilisation centered on fear and intolerance for different ethnicities,

religions and racial groups.¹

Nativism and nationalism can be problematic in contemporary South African politics. Ncube asserts that there is a propensity among some nationalists and Afro-radicals – which in this instance would be the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Black First Land First (BLF) among others – “to appeal to narratives of nativism and indigeneity as the indispensable basis for certain entitlements (particularly the land and its natural resources)”.² Considering the exclusionary and oppressive history of colonisation and apartheid, some of the claims lodged by these groups are justified, particularly considering the inherited inequalities from previous governments and the present-day challenge to eradicate them.

Achille Mbembe uses the analogy of “Nongqawase,” based on the prophetess of the 19th century, who called on the Xhosa people to kill all their cattle. This was done in the belief that the Xhosa ancestral spirit would subsequently resurrect and sweep away the white colonisers to the sea.³ According to Mbembe, “Nongqawuse syndrome is a populist rhetoric and a millenarian form

“

South African political groups are rightfully aligned in their pursuit for complete socio-economic and political liberation of the historically disadvantaged.

of politics which advocates, uses and legitimises self-destruction or national suicide, as a means of salvation.”⁴

It is evident from contemporary politics that some political groups have dragged progressive nationalism into irredeemable disrepute for their own self-enrichment.⁵ Elsewhere we have problematised narrow nationalism and posit that such discourses replicate colonial and apartheid logics based on simplistic conceptions of who belongs and who does not.⁶ Furthermore, we have argued that these discourses do not reflect the reality of a diverse South Africa.⁷ They thus pose a threat to the realisation of a non-racial, inclusive and democratic society. This is particularly problematic for political parties which aspire to one day rule the country – such as the EFF as “their limited conception of the nation will, therefore, yield action and policy that does not account for the complexities and nuances inherent to a culturally and racially heterogeneous society.”⁸

In addition to the existence of black nationalism and nativism in post-apartheid South Africa, the chauvinist narrow white nationalist AfriForum has emerged as a conservative Afrikaner group. AfriForum is concerned with protecting the interest of the white Afrikaners and deterring South



Africa’s economic transformation. AfriForum has constantly opposed the redistribution of land among all South Africans and this shows that their narrow nationalism emerged to protect white minority interests at the expense of the majority of South Africans.

IMPLICATIONS OF NATIVISM AND NATIONALISM

Racism

In the transition to democracy, the ANC was committed to the ideals of inclusion and non-racialism. However, it is becoming trendy to constantly attack white people, regardless of their class position and ideological orientation, in the spirit of nativism and narrow nationalism. This does not mean certain attacks on white racists and organisations such as AfriForum are not justified. These organisations are gatekeepers of white privilege and are resistant to measures that would improve the socio-economic conditions of black people, such as expropriation of land without compensation. The likes of AfriForum feed into the frustrations and sometimes the hatred of white people, especially considering the white population’s historical and contemporary privilege.

Parties such as the EFF and BLF exploit strands of nativism and use

frustrations over the slow wheels of justice under the ANC to advance narrow nationalism and stoke racial tensions. We have argued previously that the use of people’s genuine struggles to advance populist agendas and to score political points misleads the public into getting stuck on differences and current problems rather than focusing on developing and practically implementing sustainable solutions to improve the conditions of black people in the country.⁹

Examples of populism and racial nationalism by these political parties can be found on social media. They are reflected in BLF’s president Andile Mngxitama’s encouragement for supporters to kill five white people for every black person killed. Mngxitama went as far as threatening to take South Africa to the dark ages of apartheid.¹⁰ Duarte asserts that racial nationalism is poisonous as it rejects non-racialism and national reconciliation.¹¹ Ncube contends that this is troublesome because “there is a certain degenerated strand of nativism that is nothing but an embodiment of racism and narrow social chauvinism of the highest caliber that can hardly be associated with the ideals espoused by some of South Africa’s most celebrated bulwarks of the anti-apartheid struggle”.¹²

What the country needs is leadership ►►

“

It is evident from contemporary politics that some political groups have dragged progressive nationalism into irredeemable disrepute for their own self-enrichment.



that is targeted at resolving racial and structural tensions and inequalities that feed racism and narrow nationalism. This would require finding creative strategies to engage all stakeholders to create an equal society where there is an equal distribution of resources.

Xenophobia

One of the most devastating implications of nativist nationalism is xenophobia. Presently in South Africa in areas such as KwaZulu-Natal there are heart-breaking attacks on African foreign nationals. Such attacks have been taking place during the democratic dispensation, with government struggling to discover the root cause of these attacks and how to mitigate them. Claude Ake describes this wave of nativism as a “second” or “new nationalism”.¹³ Ake describes this “new nationalism” as “a rule, no longer

directed toward other countries but against denizens (non-citizens) living within an African state.”¹⁴ The pitfalls of such a nationalism is that it alienates itself from inclusiveness founded in the decolonisation process and promotes exclusivity among Africans.

Socio-economic inequality is a contributing factor to the mounting resentment and attacks against African foreign nationals. The way in which foreign nationals are spoken about by organisations and political leaders breeds contempt and perpetuates xenophobic attitudes. For instance, the EFF has been vocal about dismantling borders and creating an African community, yet at the same time, in their 2019 manifesto the language used to speak about foreign nationals is one of criminality and distrust. The Democratic Alliance (DA) is no better than the EFF, with the former Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba spewing harmful comments that condemn foreign nationals, for example in relation to the Alexandra protest.

Additionally, a meeting between the ANC’s International Relations Minister Lindiwe Sisulu and President Cyril Ramaphosa confirmed that the ruling party believed that the problem of xenophobia was a problem of criminality.¹⁵ This simplistic conception of xenophobia is problematic as it erases accountability from political leaders and does not adequately deal with the threat that the discourses of nativism, Afrophobia and narrow nationalism poses to our country today.

Traditional authorities

The recognition of traditional authorities and land redistribution powers granted to them in the democratic dispensation is one of the cruelest versions of nativist nationalism. It undermines the political freedom of people residing in the countryside and women. Mamdani shows that under the colonial and apartheid states, South

Africa was divided into a bifurcated state – with direct and indirect rule.¹⁶ Indirect rule was presided over by traditional authorities. To enforce ethnic pluralism, urban and rural divisions, the colonial and apartheid governments decentralised their powers, using traditional leaders as instruments for control over black people. These governments collaborated with traditional authorities as they recognised the strength of indigenous rulers in socially organising black people.

What the role of traditional authorities in a democratic state should be has been disputed. Arguments in favour of the preservation of these structures claim that they form part of African culture and identity that predates colonisation. Another view contends that traditional authorities infringe on the rights of people living in rural areas and that they have historically acted as extended authoritarian structures which assisted in the oppression of black people under the colonial and apartheid governments.

The EFF, in its 2019 manifesto, showed great favour towards the continued existence of traditional authorities. Mabasa contends that, “[T]he EFF misses the point. Today’s organized traditional authorities are the culmination of colonization and of Apartheid history. Historically, traditional leaders in Africa were not attached to the ownership of the land, unlike in Europe, because the land was abundant and did not broadcast their power to their subjects”.¹⁷

The EFF’s stance on traditional authorities feeds into the gender-based violence and inequality in land ownership experienced by women. Women’s access to land and tenure security are compromised by predominately two factors; firstly, due to the legacy of racially driven land dispossession, and secondly because of gender discriminatory customary law and patriarchal interpretations of culture. This places women in rural



areas in a unique intersection between the law and traditional practices. This means that women in rural areas do not enjoy the same rights as men in rural areas and people in urban spaces.

Women's inability to access land puts them in precarious socio-economic positions where they are subject to exploitation. Women often remain in violent relationships because of poverty and unequal power relations resulting from their male counterparts owning the land. In these positions, women have little to no power to mitigate their social and material security. However, ownership of land would enable women to enjoy economic liberties and political independence. However, women in rural areas often can only access land through their relationships with men – husband, son, father, uncle, etc. Single women cannot be allocated land and are often unable to inherit it after their parents die. They are evicted from their homes. The same is true of widows after their partners die. This means that women are obliged to take the men in their lives – sons, uncles, fathers, etc as their representatives when going to talk to traditional leaders concerning important decisions about land rights. Women are not allowed to represent themselves before these structures concerning land. This means that women are excluded from key decisions taken about land rights. Even when women are included in these conversations, traditional courts are usually dominated by men who overshadow and undermine women. Subsequently, women often do not

receive impartial assistance in land disputes.

Therefore, if the EFF was committed to the liberation of black people it would be supporting the abolition of traditional authorities instead of advancing nativist nationalism and hereditary, unaccountable and authoritative structures that the very people that the party wants economic freedom for. It is questionable whether strategies to protect women by challenging discriminatory laws and abolishing patriarchal customary customs can be developed by organisations and political parties that advance strands of nativism that empowers elements of sexism, tribalism and patriarchy. Ncube affirms this by arguing that “this strand of nativism is not only a threat to ideals of gender parity that are expected of any democracy, but they also thwart any meaningful attempt to land (re) distribution”.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

For the realisation of equality in a non-racial, inclusive society, it is critical that South Africans remain vigilant and critical to ensure that no claim goes unchecked or is above criticism, whether that claim comes from a colonial or African descendant. These include philosophies and actions taken in the name of nativism and nationalism framed to be for the improvement of the material conditions of black people. This is significant, because unchecked ideologies of nativism and nationalism can be exploited to preserve oppressive structures such as traditional authorities whilst also advancing populism, racialism and patriarchy.

Last of all, it is pivotal to note that this article merely seeks to advance a more inclusive conception of who belongs. It also seeks to advocate for a united, democratic, non-sexist, non-racial and prosperous society. It does not undermine the struggles and realities of the black majority and it therefore fully

supports a radicalism that challenges white oppression and racism and all forms of inequality in our society.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bongi Maseko, “The dangers of the ‘politics of suspicion,’” *Mail & Guardian*, 20 June 2018, Available at: <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-06-20-00-the-dangers-of-the-politics-of-suspicion> on 04 April 2019
- 2 Fairchance Ncube, “The Pitfalls of Nativism in South Africa”, *News24*, 18 November 2014. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/xArchive/Voices/the-pitfalls-of-nativism-in-south-africa-20180719> on 04 April 2019
- 3 Achille Mbembe, “South Africa’s Second Coming: The Nongqawuse Syndrome,” *Open Democracy*, 14 June 2006. Available: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/southafrica/succession_3649jsp/ on 22 May 2019
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ncube, “The Pitfalls of Nativism in South Africa.”
- 6 Ashley Mabasa and Siphokazi Mbolu, “EFF Manifesto: The dangers of exclusive and populist nations of African nationalism,” *Daily Maverick*, 14 March 2019. Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2019-03-14-eff-manifesto-the-dangers-of-exclusive-and-populist-notions-of-african-nationalism/> on 4 April 2019
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Nico Gous, “Mngxitama trying to take SA back to ‘dark ages of apartheid’, says ANC.” *Sunday Times*, 12 December 2018. Available at <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2018-12-12-mngxitama-trying-to-take-sa-back-to-dark-ages-of-apartheid-says-anc/> on 4 April 2019
- 11 Jessie Duarte, “ANC rejects EFF’s racist nationalism,” *Politics Web*, 06 June 2018. Available at: <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/anc-rejects-effs-racist-nationalism-jessie-duarte> on 4 April 2019
- 12 Ncube, “The Pitfalls of Nativism in South Africa.”
- 13 In Norbert Kersting, “New nationalism and xenophobia in Africa – A new inclination?” *Africa Spectrum*, 44(1), (2009). pp.7-18
- 14 In Kersting, “New nationalism and xenophobia in Africa – A new inclination?”
- 15 Peter Fabricius, “SA government flounders in the face of xenophobic attacks” *Daily Maverick*, 5 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-04-05-sa-government-flounders-in-the-face-of-xenophobic-attacks/> on 5 April 2019
- 16 Mahmood Mamdani, “Citizen and Subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism.” *Perspectives on Political Science*, 26, (1997). pp.120-120.
- 17 Ashley Mabasa, “Why does the EFF support the power given to tribal chiefs and kings.” *Daily Maverick*, 28 March 2019. Available: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2019-03-28-why-does-the-eff-support-the-power-given-to-tribal-chiefs-and-kings/> on 4 April 2019
- 18 Ncube, “The Pitfalls of Nativism in South Africa.” **NA**