



ashes

A CONTEST OF THOUGHTS

ZUMA
These are the
actions of a 'small'
minority/14

ODERA
Arm yourself, learn
tsotsi taal and how to
dance pantsula/15

PIKOLI
Cry the
beloved
continent/17

KGOMESWANA
A shame that is too
important to
waste/19

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A shame that is too
important to
waste/19

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African goods defy borders

The South Africa where foreigners fear for their lives is not the South Africa envisioned by Nelson Mandela and the Freedom Charter, writes Thebe Kgalafeng

RELECTING on the moment on February 11, 1990 when he was 37 years of incarceration ended and he walked toward the promise of a new South Africa, Nelson Mandela once recalled: "I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." His freedom heralded the opportunity of a new start for the parched nation.

Surprisingly, after being issued with his first South African passport eight days after his release, he embarked on a global thanksgiving tour, starting with the anti-apartheid struggle, supporting African states, including Zanzibar, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Ethiopia.

Many of these nations' leaders, such as Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, sacrificed the welfare of their state to move in the struggle for South Africa's freedom.

As President Jacob Zuma has reminded us at a briefing at the ANC headquarters, Luthuli House, these nations paid more than lip service to the Struggle, providing anti-apartheid cadres with weapons, transporting them across borders at great risk to themselves and accommodating exiles in their homes and communities.

Mandela's remarks at his inauguration as the first democratically elected president of the new Republic of South Africa, summed up the mood of a new nation when he said: "Few of us could suppress the feeling of emotion as we witnessed the terrible pain from which we come as a nation; the great possibilities that we now have and the bright future that beckons us."

For the next decade and a bit, the hopeful republic, "alive with possibility," as Brand South Africa defined it, became an example of a nation that was reborn. The "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" established in 1996 "to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past as a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation," as the late Dullah Omar, former minister of justice described it, became a unique institution and foundation for a forgiving post-apartheid South Africa and for other nations dealing with conflict and reconciliation.

On May 8, 1996, when then-deputy president Thabo Mbeki launched the new constitution, an assembly that represented all political and racial groupings, and, in essence, put it in the broader context, saying: "I am an African."



STANDING TOGETHER: Clerics joined politicians and South Africans from all walks of life in marching through the streets of Joburg in protest at the xenophobic attacks. Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town Thabo Makgoba, Bishop Dalton Daniels and Gauteng Premier David Makhura were among those who took part.

services, many "reasons" have been postulated for this shocking turn of events: an increasingly high unemployment rate, estimated to be more than 30 percent; the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, which has given South Africa a Gini coefficient of 65.6, placing it among the most unequal nations in the world.

About 20 percent of the population live below the foot poverty line – a figure that has decreased from 45.3 percent in 2011, according to Statistics South Africa – and a staggering 14.8 million compared with 2.4 million in 1990 depend on state social welfare. Shaggy economic growth threatens the state's ability to deliver on its 2020 National Development Plan (NDP) to create jobs and reduce poverty and inequality.

The most prominent of the arguments in the debate on xenophobia is that the impressive progress South Africa has achieved since the dawn of democracy has made it a beacon of hope for a better Africa, and a refuge for many across sub-Saharan searching for a better life. As Africa's leading beneficiary of foreign direct investment, according to Economic Development Minister Ebrahim Patel, South Africa sells 120 billion in goods to other African countries, supporting more than 190 000 jobs.

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across its 22 markets in Africa and the Middle East, and international operations account for 74 percent of its turnover.

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The 9.8 million tourists last year 70 percent were from the rest of Africa. According to Statistics South Africa, direct tourism contributes about 3 percent of gross domestic product and more than 800 000 direct jobs, amounting to about 4.6 percent of direct employment in the country.

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The reaction to foreign individuals who have taken their "better life" has cast a negative light on South Africa's identification with their fellow Africans.

There is now a perceived lack of gratitude for the selfless sacrifice made during the apartheid years.

The universal condemnation of these attacks by the majority of South Africans, their call for peaceful coexistence and harmony with foreigners, and the comprehensive response by the government under the banner that xenophobia is not a South African value.

The attacks were a callous and criminal act by a few that has reinforced an unfortunate perception of South Africa as a crime capital. The eventual deployment of the army in the affected areas affirms that this is a war against the ideal of the new South Africa that should be met with the greatest and most decisive force.

This is a defining moment. It is the new struggle, not just for South Africa – but for Africa.

How South Africa responds will shape where other African nations look to South Africa in the future, and how they relate with one another should they encounter similar actions.

It is a struggle, similar to those against Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Kenya, that requires that the affected countries and all of Africa stand together for the better continent.

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