



# Project Name: Xenophobia

## Social Media Analytics Report 2

01 March - 31 March 2023  
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## Findings Summary

- The dominance of the Economic Freedom Fighter's national shutdown protest within the conversation speaks to the extent to which the conversation about immigrants in South Africa is being politicised. Those advocating against immigrants display an anti-EFF sentiment given the latter's stance on pan-Africanism and the popularity of the hashtag #voetsekEFF.
- As we have previously identified, "national pride" - which could be more accurately described as ultranationalist sentiment - continues to be mobilised in the production and reproduction of xenophobic rhetoric and sentiment.
- The official twitter handles of the Patriotic Alliance and its leader Gayton McKenzie occupy the 1st and 2nd spot respectively in terms of the most mentioned tweeters within the conversation over the reporting period. The Patriotic Alliance and Gayton McKenzie have espoused strong anti-immigrant rhetoric in their political campaigns.
- In light of the upcoming national elections in 2024, there is great potential for and concern that the targeting of immigrants as a political tactic will be mobilised to garner support from dissatisfied South Africans whose everyday reality includes increasing cost of living, high unemployment (especially among the youth), extreme inequality, deepening poverty, rampant crime, load shedding and severe lack of basic service provisions. As has been the case in many democracies around the world, anti-immigrant sentiment has been effectively mobilised by 'strongman' styled leaders to win over electorates who are disillusioned with the political establishments in their countries.

## Introduction

Xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment is currently being heavily mobilised in South Africa for political gain. New political formations such as ActionSA, the Patriotic Alliance (PA) and Put South Africans First (PSAF), liberally espouse rhetoric that scapegoats immigrants and refugees - through mis/disinformation and distortion of facts and narratives - to garner electoral support. Given South Africa's recurring incidences of xenophobic and anti-immigrant public violence, the rhetoric that has been deployed is of grave concern. It exploits pre-existing social fractures in South African society particularly around access to resources and opportunities such as housing, social grants and employment, respectively. These efforts mirror the rise of xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric in other parts of the world, particularly that which unfolded during the Brexit campaign in the UK and in the US elections, which led, in part, to Donald Trump's ascendance to the presidency. Examples also exist in the Global South where minority communities are used as scapegoats to distract from more pressing socio-political and economic concerns, and deflect the electorate's attention away from those in

power who are - in reality - responsible for their predicament(s). Social media played a key role in seeding and amplifying xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment in these cases and the same is true of South Africa today. The effectiveness of these efforts was evidenced by the gains that smaller parties made during the 2021 local elections in South Africa<sup>1</sup>. This serves as an indicator of the extent to which South Africans are currently willing to accept political posturing that is populist in nature and is disguised as promoting nationalistic pride and sentiment. Understanding how social media is being used to artificially amplify and spread xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment is hence critical for understanding and anticipating how this rhetoric is being mobilised for real-world political gain in the national political spectrum.

Accordingly, this report focuses on xenophobia and looks at conversations on social media in South Africa (SA). It covers the period from 01 March 2023 to 31 March 2023. It is the second of a series funded by the European Union (EU) to support the The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) Xenophobia programme. The report is designed to provide bimonthly analysis and reporting on problematic and socially divisive narratives on South African social media about xenophobic content. The CABC has been monitoring this conversation since 2020 and released a [Lay of the Land](#) report in June 2022, which described the key narratives driving the xenophobia conversation in South Africa up until that point. This report is the second of a series of reports that falls under the title of *Promoting Human Rights, Democracy and an Equitable Society*; where the main objectives are to reduce discrimination and hate speech against migrants and minorities by countering disinformation and social division. [Report 1](#) released in March 2023 established a foundational understanding of the targeted xenophobic narratives by looking at the data through the lens of known xenophobic behavioural drivers. Report 2 takes a more general approach to better understand the volume, key authors and prominent hashtags within the conversation.

## Research Methodology

To obtain the information presented in this report (and subsequent reports), social media listening tools were used. Keywords were gathered in a qualitative phase of the research during which the researchers and dialogue facilitators drew on their existing knowledge, conducted desktop research, a literature review and a review of social media. This informed the keywords used to isolate the conversation about xenophobia in South Africa. The keywords were then enriched by manually checking each keyword identified during the research phase. We entered this list of words into a social media analytics tool to create a query into the conversation about xenophobia on public social media in South Africa. The social media listening tool that is used for this research collects data and supports analytics from multiple sources, however, Twitter is by far the

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<sup>1</sup>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-11-03-local-parties-announce-themselves-as-unambiguous-election-shepherds-in-a-period-of-uncertainty/>

largest source. Twitter has outsized influence when compared to other social media platforms as most South African politicians have Twitter accounts and all media houses make extensive use of the platform; hence conversations about key topics of public concern can move rapidly between traditional media and social media platforms, like Twitter. Other sources include websites such as blogs, digital media publications and forums. A sample of social media content about foreign nationals in South Africa was obtained for the reporting period. The query returned a sample rate of 100% for 01 March to 31 March 2023, which means that the social media analytics tool is returning every example that it can, based on the keywords that have been used.

When the conversation is particularly large, the extent of content volume will be a sample rather than all of the content. In this case the conversation size does not exceed the level at which the tool starts to pull through a percentage rather than 100% of the content. Of utmost importance, is that if a sample is selected, it must be representative and the results thereof must be replicable and robust.

It is estimated that SA has between 3.65 and 9 million active twitter users according to *Data Reportal's Digital 2023: South Africa* report<sup>2</sup> and *World Wide Worx's Social Media Landscape 2022*<sup>3</sup> report. According to the former report, there are 43 million internet users in SA, resulting in an internet penetration of 72% of the entire population and almost 26 million social media users in SA, equating to 43% of the entire population. The lower estimate of 3.65 million twitter users represents approximately 6% of the entire population. Twitter activity often serves as an early warning of what conversations and narratives may penetrate the broader societal ecosystem and become normative<sup>4</sup>. This, however, does not exclude the relevance or importance of other social media platforms (like Facebook or WhatsApp) within the xenophobic conversation. WhatsApp for example has historically been used to incite, mobilise and organise xenophobic violence in SA.

## Conversation Volume

More than 388k mentions (see Figure 1) were collected in this dataset, and they were created by more than 68k unique authors over the reporting period. Every unique author accounts for roughly six mentions. From Figure 1 it is clear that total retweets (more than 405k) outnumber total mentions (more than 388k), suggesting a high prevalence of retweeting within the conversation. While we are still understanding updates to the social media analytics platform used, a possible reason for total retweets outnumbering total mentions could be the popularity of quote tweets. This occurs when someone either retweets the main tweet or they retweet the retweet or they quote tweet the main/retweet - in each of these scenarios, if the keywords used in the quote tweet are not in the query, they will not be counted under total mentions but will be under total retweets. The

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<sup>2</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-south-africa>

<sup>3</sup> <https://website.ornico.co.za/2022/06/29/social-media-landscape-2022/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Nimmo\\_influence\\_operations\\_PDF.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Nimmo_influence_operations_PDF.pdf)

CABC tracked the recent “national shutdown” conversation and volumes related to this topic can be [found here](#) for comparison.



Figure 1: Key insights metric over reporting period.

A clear peak in the conversation (in mention volume) over the period occurred on 20 March, as shown by point A in Figure 2. This is the day the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)-led political protest took place to mobilise citizens against the electricity crisis in South Africa and to remove the sitting president Cyril Ramaphosa. The EFF have taken a strong pan-African stance within the South African xenophobia conversation, for which they have come under attack by other political parties and [public personalities](#). The mention volume reached on 20 March was close to 30k, almost 3 times the average daily volume (10k) over the reporting period. The sustained volume of the conversation without any other clear peaks is indicative of anti-foreigner related content being tweeted and amplified on a daily basis.

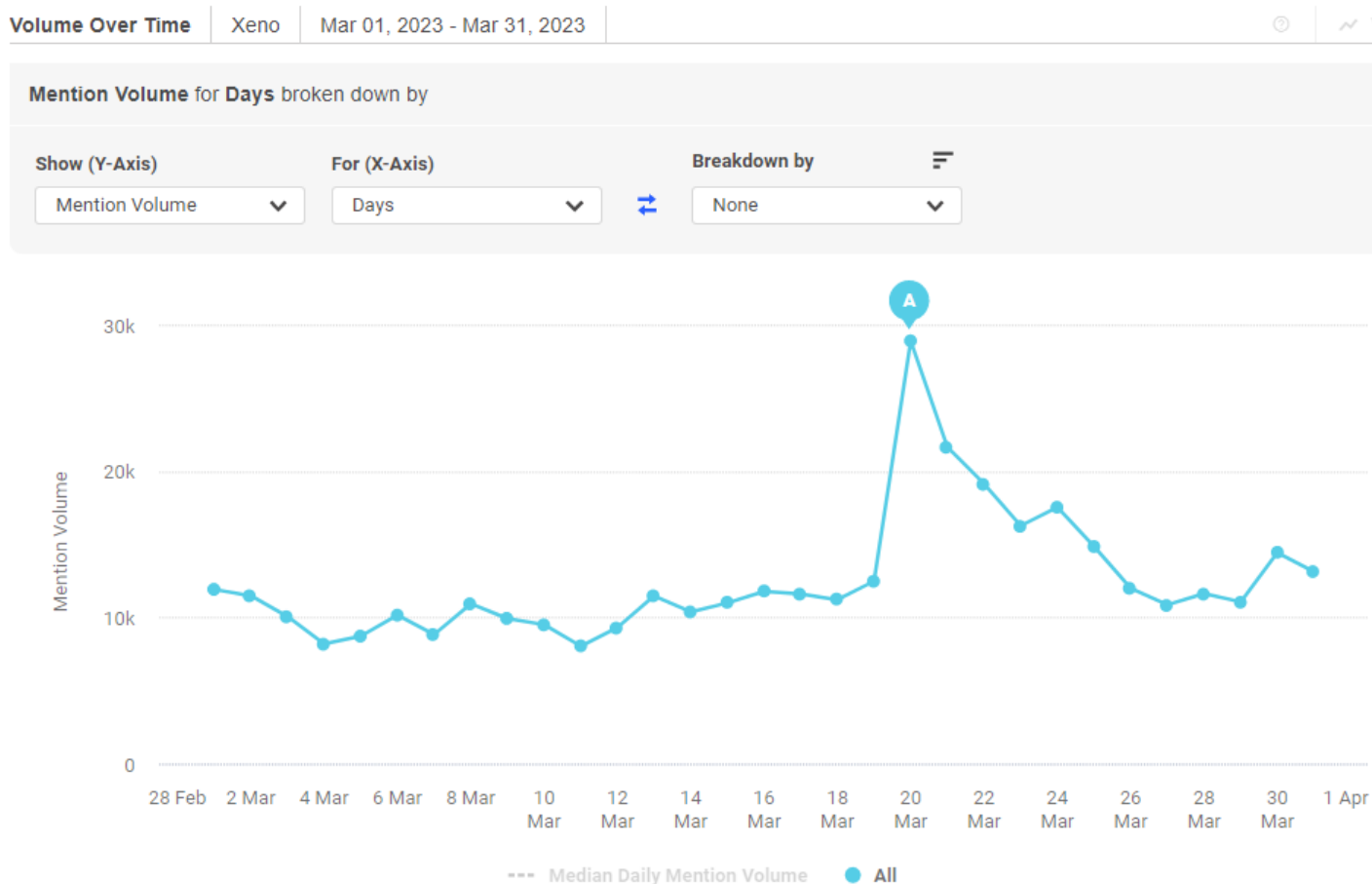


Figure 2: Volume over time graph for reporting period.

A clear peak in unique authors occurred on 16 March, as shown by Figure 3 below. A week prior to this date the leader of the aforementioned South African political party the Patriotic Alliance (PA), Gayton McKenzie, gave a keynote speech at the 5th BizNews conference in which he spoke about how illegal immigrants are stealing the jobs of South Africans<sup>5</sup>. Following an EFF media briefing on 15 March, McKenzie added his voice to the message of the need for citizens to remain calm<sup>6</sup> as the EFF spoke about the potential for outbreaks of violence during their protest. A post containing information about McKenzie's [BizNews speech](#) that included #NationalShutdown and a [#PutSouthAfricansFirst post](#) were the primary drivers of the peak seen in Figure 3. McKenzie's views and actions are xenophobic and his rhetoric is fundamental to the politics and appeal of the PA to its supporters. The leader of the PA has made many xenophobic statements over the past two years, the most shocking being that he would turn off the oxygen supply of a foreigner in a state hospital if it means saving the life of a South African<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdrVriK9vKc>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/pa-leader-gayton-mckenzie-calls-for-calm-ahead-of-planned-national-shutdown-0f9edab3-ea5f-4f08-ac53-d38fa84b51b1>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2022-08-30-watch-gayton-mckenzie-would-switch-off-foreigners-oxygen-to-save-a-south-african/>

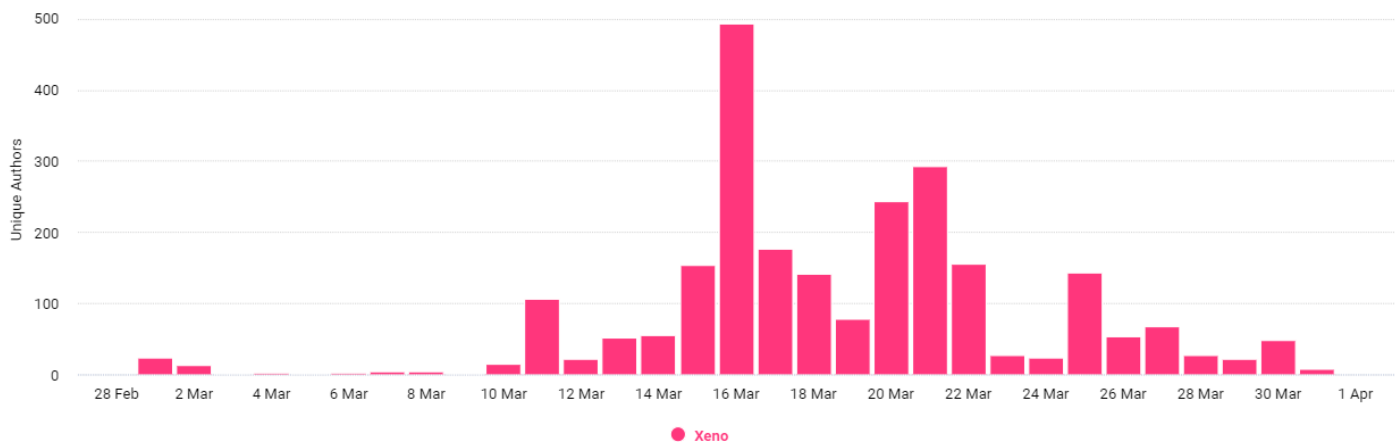


Figure 3: Unique authors over time graph for reporting period.

### Conversation Trends

The word cloud below (see Figure 4) highlights the most popular hashtags within the conversation over the reporting period. The larger the size of the word, the more it has been used in the conversation. The cloud provides insight into the key drivers of the conversation and acts as a precursor to identifying themes and focus areas, which are further explored in this report. Hashtags such as #nationalshutdown, #putsouthafricansfirst, #voetsekeff and #nhlanhlalux amongst others were dominant within the conversation over the reporting period. One particular hashtag, #operationdudula, has become synonymous with the South African xenophobia conversation for the last 20 months, given the organisation’s strong anti-foreigner rhetoric and physical mobilisations/raids that have led to violence against foreigners.



Figure 4: Word cloud showing the top 20 popular hashtags within the conversation.

The hashtag #voetsekEFF (see Figure 5) was also popular during the reporting period amidst the EFF's national shutdown protest and their anti-xenophobic stance. The colloquial term "voetsek" means "go away", users of the hashtag are therefore not in favour of the EFF. Many (more than 1000 mentions) xenophobic tweets over the period have used this hashtag to criticise the EFF and their views. The hashtag was also the most popular on the day of the national shutdown and the day after (20 and 21 March 2023) within our dataset.



*Figure 5: A popular #voetsekEFF tweet during the reporting period.*

Narratives that conflate xenophobic sentiment with patriotism are commonly mobilised in the conversation. Take, for example, the tweet shown on Figure 6 below. It invokes both nationalist sentiment and patriotic fervour to position xenophobic sentiment as legitimate.





Figure 6: A popular #NationalShutdown and #voetsekEFF tweet during the reporting period.

Nhlanhla Lux (whose name is in the top 20 hashtags for the reporting period) is the former leader of Operation Dudula (OD). He has since cut ties with the anti-foreigner organisation in July 2022 over a key difference of opinion on foreigners in South Africa<sup>8</sup>. Lux was and is still an advocate for deporting illegal immigrants, but not legal immigrants. Operation Dudula, on the other hand, want all foreigners to leave South Africa, regardless of their legal status<sup>9</sup>. They see the EFF's as selling out SA to the rest of Africa. Lux's home was allegedly bombed on 20 March, the day of the national shutdown, adding fuel to the fire in an ongoing public spat with EFF Commander In Chief Julius Malema. Police investigated claims that the explosives used were commercial grade but it has since been confirmed that petrol bombs were most likely used. Lux has publicly stated that he suspects the EFF are responsible for the bombing.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2022-07-26-nhlanhla-lux-cuts-ties-with-operation-dudula-heres-why/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2022-05-15-operation-dudula-warns-legal-and-illegal-immigrants-are-now-in-its-crosshairs/>

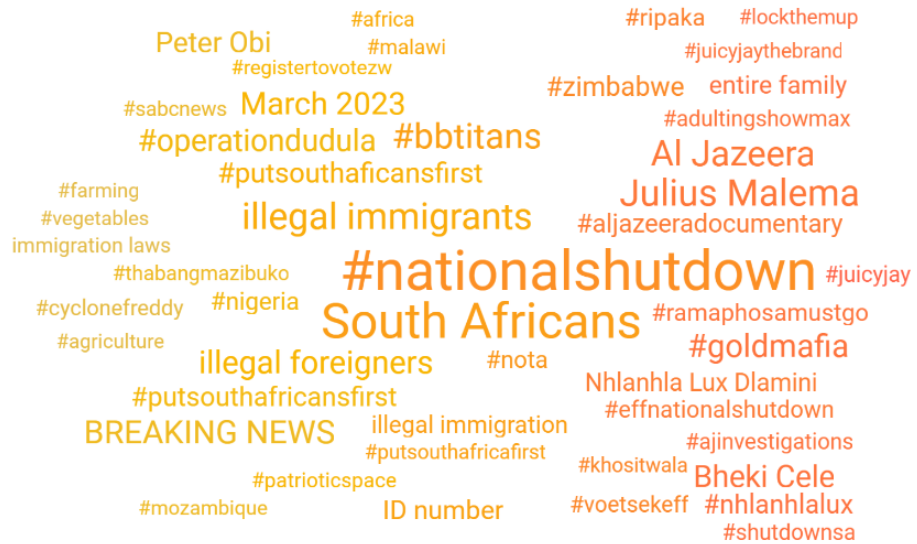


Figure 7: Trending topics graphic showing the top 50 popular hashtags and phrases within the conversation.

In terms of trending topics over the reporting period, the EFF’s national shutdown and leader Julius Malema dominates alongside Nhlanhla Lux whilst OD and another anti-foreigner group *Put South Africans First* (PSAF) take their place as mainstay proponents of South Africa’s xenophobia conversation. A noticeable decrease in trending xenophobic tweets where alleged foreigners are targeted or accused of crimes is apparent. This can be seen when we compare the findings from this reporting period with [report 1](#), where such content was widespread. Whether this is a result of the effect of the national shutdown or a genuine decrease in xenophobic rhetoric is yet to be seen.

Taking a closer look at the OD and PSAF hashtags (see Figures 4 and 7) it is apparent that the stance and rhetoric of these hashtags against foreigners is wholly negative. The messaging from both of these organisations is clear and unabated. It is that foreign nationals are criminals, a burden on the state’s resources and are taking the jobs away from South Africans (See Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8: Tweet highlighting the alleged activities of Operation Dudula.



Figure 9: Tweet stating the criminal activities of foreign nationals and making use of #PutSouthAfricansFirst.

Both OD and PSAF have publicly aligned themselves with the PA and to a lesser extent ActionSA, political parties known to hold xenophobic views. PSAF is a vocal supporter of the PA and regularly shares the political party's content on its official Twitter account as shown in [Figure 10](#). Whilst the PA have doubled down on their xenophobic views, ActionSA has done the opposite and instead focussed its attention on illegal immigration within the country. ActionSA leader, Herman Mashaba, has also warned South Africans not to scapegoat foreign nationals for the lack of border control and documentation services from the government<sup>10</sup>. With this being said, he still remains vocal about alleged crimes being committed by illegal foreigners, as seen in Figure 11. What appears to be emerging here is a nexus of anti-immigrant, ultranationalist political parties and citizen-led movements (such as OD and PSAF) that could well emerge as a new political formation in South Africa.



*Figure 10: Tweet of Gayton McKenzie's keynote speech at BizNews conference shared on official PSAF twitter account.*

<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2022-03-15-its-a-middle-finger-to-unemployed-south-africans-mashaba-slams-das-amnesty-proposal-for-foreigners/>



Figure 11: Tweet by Herman Mashaba, ActionSA leader, about an alleged illegal foreigner getting bail after allegedly committing serious crimes.

From Figure 7, two of the most popular phrases that speak directly to the illegality of foreigners and their actions within the country over the reporting period are *illegal immigrants* (7968 mentions) and *illegal foreigners* (5811 mentions). Mentions from these two phrases are in line with the content that dominated report 1 where specific crimes of alleged foreigners are highlighted and shape the negative sentiment shared towards foreigners. Interestingly, the official PSAF twitter account is responsible for sharing content with high reach<sup>11</sup> using the phrases *illegal immigrants* and *illegal foreigners* (2 out of the top 10 posts for *illegal immigrants* and 7 out of the top 10 for *illegal foreigners*). [Figure 12](#) is a graphic video of alleged illegal Pakistani foreigners physically assaulting a South African woman in what appears to be a shop that they own. What is most disturbing about the video is the brutality of the gender-based violence (GBV) being perpetrated by the men.

<sup>11</sup> Reach is the total number of unique people who have seen a particular post.



Figure 12: Graphic video shared by the official PSAF account in which alleged illegal Pakistani foreign nationals physically assault a South African woman.

The woman is struck multiple times with a broom and choked by one of the men. Such scenes have the potential to rile up South Africans under the banners of both GBV and xenophobia to retaliate with violence towards foreign nationals and especially those foreigners who own businesses. [Figure 13](#) is a popular tweet by the official PSAF account in which 15 alleged illegal immigrants were arrested by police in Welkom. The 15 individuals were all travelling in a bus which allegedly had a foreign registration number. However, the authenticity of many of the posts shared using the *illegal immigrants* and *illegal foreigners* phrases are difficult to verify. This means that the potential for mobilising mis- and disinformation in these posts are high. Mention volume for the phrase *illegal immigrants* peaked on 21 March 2023 (see Figure 14), a day after the EFF's national shutdown while mention volume for *illegal foreigners* peaked on 26 March when the warehouse of an alleged illegal Chinese national was raided in the Free State.



Figure 13: Tweet showing 15 illegal immigrants arrested by Welkom police.

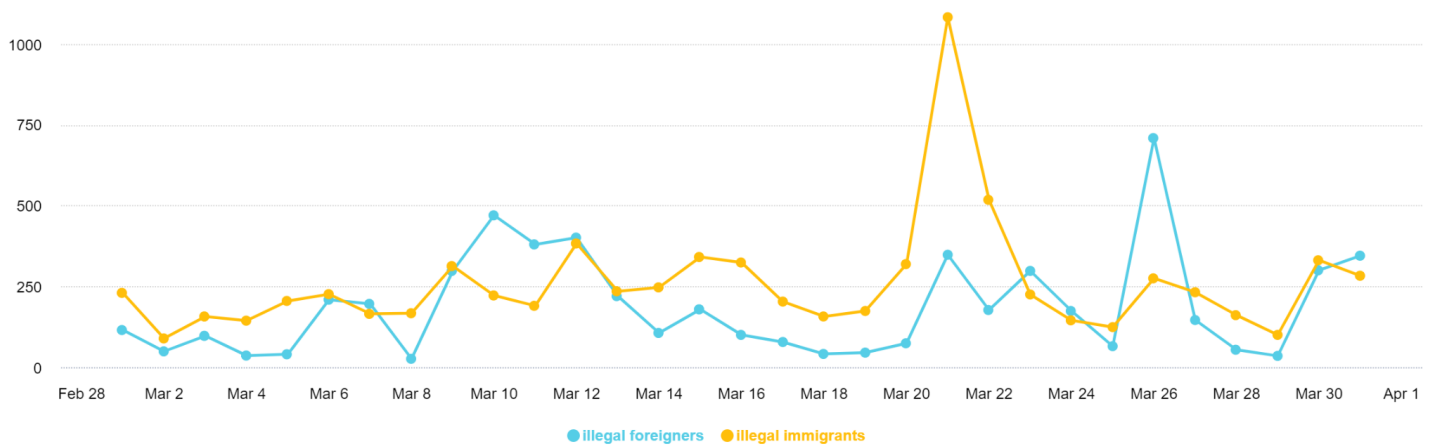


Figure 14: Mention volume graph over time for illegal foreigners and illegal immigrants phrases.

## Themes

The prominent themes during the reporting period were South Africa, South Africans, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Nhlanhla Lux (see inner circle in Figure 16). Lux's prominence and influence on the conversation has been previously highlighted, with his stance on foreign nationals mainly focused on those individuals who are undocumented in the country. Lux has positioned himself as the antithesis of the EFF's leader Julius Malema, strongly opposing the latter's pan African views when it comes to illegal foreigners residing in SA, as well as the EFF's calls for public protest - and intimidation tactics - such as that deployed for the national shutdown. The themes South Africa and Zimbabwe are linked in that a number of tweets highlighted the potential of South Africa to go the route of Zimbabwe (referring to the state of the latter's failing economy) due to the constant influx of foreign nationals into SA. This implies that the reason behind the failure of governance in Zimbabwe has been due to illegal foreigners entering that country when it is well known and documented that the political and economic governance failures of the ruling ex-liberation party are the main reasons behind Zimbabwe's economic downturn. This ahistorical and non-factual reasoning calls into question the user accounts that are spreading messaging of this ilk. There is also a popular narrative that Julius Malema is seeking to destroy SA in a similar manner to which Robert Mugabe's decision-making as head of the ruling party led to the political and economic decline of Zimbabwe's democracy. Malema's (and by extension the EFF's) pan-African stance is one of the main reasons for the popularity of the previously highlighted top 20 hashtag #voetsekeff.

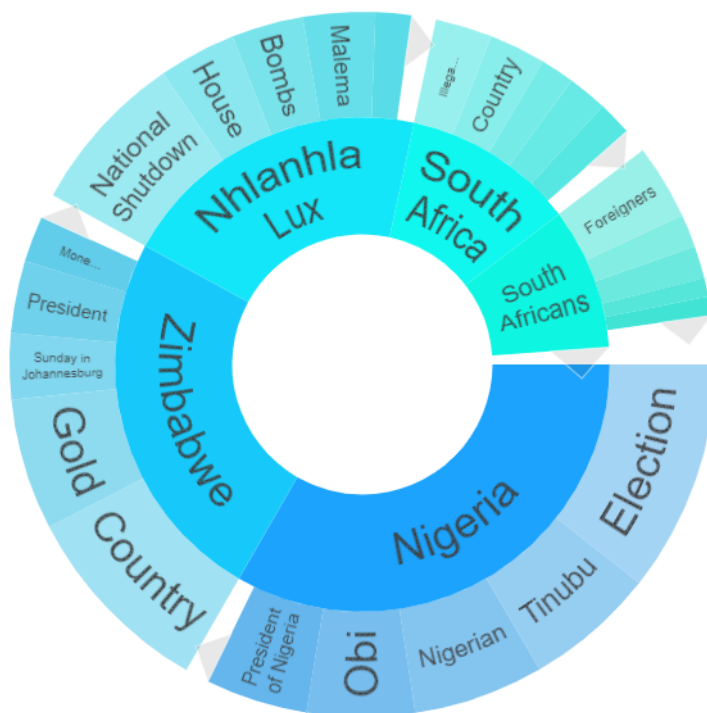


Figure 16: Topics wheel for the conversation over the reporting period.



## Most Mentioned Tweeters and Top Authors

In terms of authors and accounts that drive the xenophobia conversation, Figure 17 displays the most mentioned tweeters over the reporting period. These are the accounts that have been mentioned the most during the conversation, either by retweeting, commenting or replying to the content being shared by these accounts. The account with the most mentioned tweeters @onsbaizanie, is the official Twitter account of the PA and the account with the second most mentioned tweeters is the official account of PA leader Gayton McKenzie. The influence of the PA and its leader on the conversation therefore cannot be ignored. Similarly, the official accounts of PSAF, the EFF, Julius Malema and the African National Congress appear in the top ten most mentioned tweeters list and speaks directly to the extent to which the xenophobia conversation in South African is being politicised. In light of the upcoming national elections in 2024, there is great potential for - and concern that - the targeting of foreigners as a political tactic will be used to garner support from dissatisfied South Africans whose everyday reality includes increasing cost of living, unemployment, crime, load shedding and a lack of service delivery.

Additionally, and of even more concern, is that xenophobic rhetoric has - in South Africa's democratic past - led to significant outbreaks of violence against immigrants in South Africa. While mobilising xenophobic rhetoric for political gain may be strategically astute in the short term for opportunistic actors with political ambitions, the medium and longer-term effects may well prove reputationally devastating for the country - particularly on the continent - leading to loss of life, livelihoods, economic activities, business relationships on the continent and skills in South Africa.











Most Mentioned Tweeters	TWEETS ▼	RETWEETS	ALL TWEETS	IMPRESSIONS
 @onsbaizanie	932	1984	2916	14683564
 @gaytonmck	919	1287	2206	5483966
 @africafactszone	854	301	1155	3358159
 @psalive	555	420	975	2275407
 @effsouthafrica	470	1688	2158	11159299
 @julius_s_malema	367	721	1088	3634596
 @myanc	358	1610	1968	5087739
 @mbalulafikile	350	1031	1381	3565432
 @matinyarare	331	291	622	2610759
 @homeaffairssa	307	1141	1448	16787954

Figure 17: Top ten list of most mentioned tweeters within the conversation over the reporting period.

The top 10 authors over the reporting period include five authors that were previously identified in a periodic report issued by the CABC in November 2022 (the reporting period was 16 - 30 September 2022). These authors are @sirpeey, @masotobe39, @allafrica, @ezenwanonuju and @mpanaemesiheike. It would appear that the aforementioned authors are consistently high-volume contributors to the xenophobic related conversation, at least over the last six months. In a follow-up report, a network analysis will be conducted to determine if and how these authors are related to each other. Some of these authors average more than 50 mentions a day, which is very high and unusual for an average user account<sup>12</sup>. It also comes as no surprise that negative sentiment dominates positive sentiment within the conversation, varying by an order of magnitude, as seen in Figure 18.

<sup>12</sup> <https://medium.com/dfriab/botspot-twelve-ways-to-spot-a-bot-aedc7d9c110c>











Top Authors		Xeno	Mar 01, 2023 - Mar 31, 2023	View		Export	Filters	Columns
AUTHOR NAME	SOURCE	MENTIONS				IMPACT	REACH	
		MENTIONS	POS	NEG	NEU	AVERAGE	AVERAGE	
 @sirpeey	twitter.com	1 817	41	821	955	0	1	
 @kzmediaservices	twitter.com	1 768	8	118	1 642	0.4	22	
 @mpanaemesiheike	twitter.com	1 312	23	651	638	0	0	
 @ezenwanonuju	twitter.com	1 029	91	400	538	0	0	
 @allafrica	twitter.com	943	0	52	891	64.5	32583	
 @OzyBundee	twitter.com	862	55	307	500	2.4	1217	
 @seechibuzo	twitter.com	789	41	347	401	0.1	206	
 @EmekaCharlesCh1	twitter.com	750	18	364	368	0	0	
 @masotobe39	twitter.com	723	23	424	276	25.4	3437	
 @ali_naka	twitter.com	694	24	300	370	62.8	36625	
<b>Total for top authors</b>		<b>10 687</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>3 784</b>	<b>6 579</b>			

Figure 18: Top 10 authors over the reporting period.

## Top Retweeted Content

A large percentage of the top retweeted content paints foreign nationals as criminals. Many of the most popular retweets are concerned with linking foreign nationals to alleged crimes that have been committed. Often, pictures or videos of suspects accompany text that describes the crimes in detail. The illegality of the suspects' residence in South Africa is often also highlighted, along with their country of origin. Figure 19 shows examples of such popular, high reaching, top retweeted content within the conversation over the reporting period.



Figure 19: Collection of top retweeted content over the reporting period.

<https://twitter.com/mpexyber/status/1632981892919177218>

<https://twitter.com/AJUnit/status/1638898355282608129>

<https://twitter.com/HermanMashaba/status/1633729224816181249>

## Conclusion

One of the main themes highlighted and sustained throughout the reporting period is the influence of the EFF's national shutdown protest on the general conversation about xenophobia and the extent to which this conversation about immigrants is being politicised. The popularity of #voetsekEFF affirms this notion, as those advocating against foreigners display an anti-EFF sentiment given the party's pan-African views. In addition, the influence of political parties, organisations and individuals who drive a strong anti-immigrant rhetoric, is apparent in the conversation as evidenced by the fact that that the official Twitter accounts of the Patriotic Alliance and its leader Gayton McKenzie were the most mentioned accounts in our dataset over the reporting period.

Another previously highlighted theme is the use of ultranationalist sentiment disguised as “national pride” to garner support for the production of xenophobic rhetoric and sentiment. This tactic is not only being used by individuals but more alarmingly, it also appears to be a tactic used by well established political parties. In light of the upcoming national elections in 2024, there is great potential for - and concern that - the targeting of immigrants as a political tactic will become widespread as certain political parties look to gain the vote from dissatisfied South Africans whose everyday reality includes increasing costs of living, unemployment, crime, load shedding and a lack of service delivery.

The gravest concern is that the current growth of xenophobic rhetoric within South Africa, which has experienced significant outbreaks of violence against immigrants since the advent of democracy, could lead to more violent outbreaks in the future. While making use of xenophobic rhetoric for political gain may be strategically astute in the short term for opportunistic actors with political ambitions, the medium and longer-term effects may well prove reputationally devastating for the country - particularly on the continent - leading to loss of life, livelihoods, economic activities, business relationships on the continent and skills in South Africa.