



Factsheet on anti-immigrant social media conversation in South Africa 1 June - 15 August 2026

Introduction

This factsheet by the [Centre for Analytics & Behavioural Change](#) (CABC) documents a pronounced surge in xenophobia in South Africa. During the reporting period of 1 June to 15 August 2026, anti-migrant formations issued an ultimatum calling on undocumented foreign nationals to leave the country, accompanied by a series of marches and protests. The deadline had no official standing and effectively amounted to a vigilante call for undocumented migrants to leave the country.

The period was also characterised by a significant increase in social media content involving hate speech, incitement to violence, intimidation, death threats and the circulation of images of weapons alongside explicit threats. Platform responses to this content were frequently inadequate.

Background

These developments are particularly significant ahead of South Africa's [November 2026 local government elections](#). Several political parties have endorsed or participated in the marches, while immigration is increasingly being positioned as an election issue. This has contributed to an environment in which anti-migrant sentiment is becoming increasingly prominent and politically normalised.

The online rhetoric has had real-world consequences. Recent reporting [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#) indicates that more than 178,000 African immigrants have left South Africa in recent months, driven in part by an immigration crackdown and sometimes violent anti-immigration protests, with migrants citing fears of attack. This represents one of the most significant migrant exoduses from South Africa in recent years.

The progression from online incitement and narrative-building, to mobilisation and protest, and ultimately to displacement and fears for personal safety demonstrates the seriousness of these developments. Social media and broader media narratives have helped amplify and normalise xenophobic views, contributing to their growing acceptance in public and political discourse.

Undocumented migration is a legitimate concern for South Africa, and the state has a responsibility to enforce its immigration laws. However, individuals and groups have increasingly taken the law into their own hands, assuming powers that properly belong to the state and law-enforcement authorities. Vigilantism, intimidation and confrontation have not been adequately prevented or contained by policing responses.

The result is a climate of fear and insecurity among migrant communities and a growing humanitarian crisis. The distinction between lawful immigration enforcement and vigilante action is therefore critical: concerns about undocumented migration cannot justify violence, threats, intimidation or collective punishment.

Key events

- **30 June ultimatum:** Anti-migrant civic formations, particularly March and March, and Operation Dudula and individuals, called on undocumented foreign nationals to leave South Africa by 30 June 2026. The deadline had [no official government standing](#), but generated significant fear among migrant communities and prompted warnings of possible violence.
- **Nationwide mobilisation:** The 30 June deadline was accompanied by anti-migrant marches and demonstrations across the country. While many protests remained peaceful, government [reported](#) incidents of looting, attempted looting and other criminal conduct. Significant police deployments were required to maintain public order.
- **Vigilantism and intimidation:** Reports documented vigilante groups intimidating migrants, demanding documentation, targeting foreign-owned businesses and engaging in unlawful actions. The government explicitly stated that [immigration enforcement is the responsibility of the state](#) and that private individuals have no authority to demand proof of nationality or prevent access to schools, clinics and other public services.
- **Real-world displacement and humanitarian consequences:** The mobilisation has had consequences beyond the protests themselves. By 3 August 2026, 77,184 undocumented foreign nationals had been [repatriated](#) through coordinated government operations, placing significant pressure on repatriation infrastructure and neighbouring countries.
- **Regional concern:** The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights [expressed grave concern](#) over xenophobic violence, intimidation and vigilante conduct, specifically citing threats against migrants from other African countries and the activities of March and March.
- **Risk of further escalation:** The emergence of a further **30 September deadline**, described by some anti-immigration leaders as a “second wave”, raises concerns that the cycle of mobilisation, intimidation, displacement and humanitarian harm will continue.

Conversation metrics

Mention volume for the period exceeded 1.5 million mentions (see Figure 1 below). A ‘mention’ is any single piece of online content (like a social media post, blog article, news story, or forum comment) that contains the specific keywords, phrases, or topics being tracked. The total estimated reach was 1.88 billion. This modelled potential-impressions figure is estimated from follower counts and should be regarded as indicative, not verified exposure. To put this in context, 1.5 million posts with a cumulative reach score of nearly 2 billion means that we analysed a large dataset posted by medium to large size accounts that reached a huge amount of users over the two and a half months included in this factsheet. Negative sentiment substantially outweighed positive sentiment during the reporting period.

1,519,401	17,608	102,834
TOTAL	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
▲4%	▼2%	▲0%
UP	DOWN	UP

Figure 1: Mentions for 01 June to 15 August 2026

The conversation increased sharply in the lead-up to and on 30 June, as anti-migrant mobilisation intensified. See Figure 2.

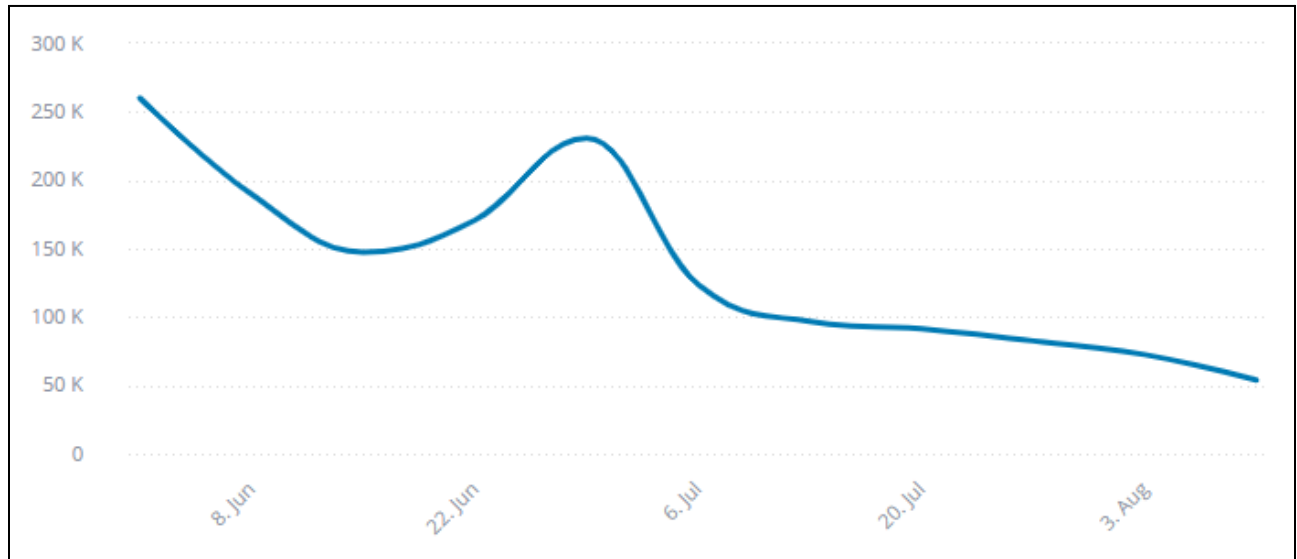


Figure 2: mention volume over time

Facebook accounted for the largest share of online content, with 73.9% of all mentions, followed by TikTok (12.9%) and X/Twitter (9.67%). See Figure 3. The analysis does not reflect content shared through messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram.

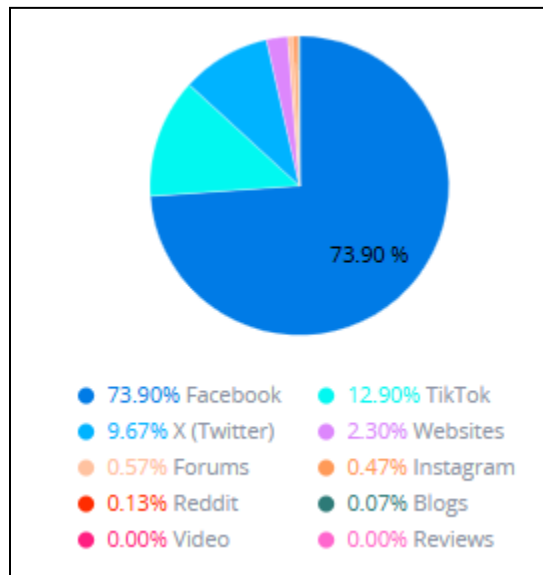


Figure 3: Mentions by platform/source

Recommendations

- **Government:** Clearly distinguish lawful immigration enforcement from vigilantism and communicate that the 30 September deadline has no legal authority.
- **Law enforcement:** Take a preventative, intelligence-led approach, identifying potential flashpoints and acting swiftly against threats, intimidation and violence.
- **Political parties and leaders:** Explicitly reject vigilantism, incitement and collective targeting of migrants, while addressing legitimate concerns about undocumented migration responsibly.
- **Civil society and community leaders:** Strengthen local dialogue, mediation and early-warning mechanisms to counter misinformation and prevent tensions from escalating.
- **Humanitarian and diplomatic actors:** Prepare for potential displacement by ensuring access to emergency accommodation, healthcare, legal assistance and protection for vulnerable migrants.
- **Social media platforms:** Introduce heightened monitoring ahead of 30 September, rapidly remove incitement and threats, limit amplification of harmful mobilisation, and establish rapid-response channels with trusted South African stakeholders.

Conclusion

CABC's analysis has identified a dangerous feedback loop between online incitement, political opportunism and real-world violence in South Africa. The convergence of unofficial ultimatum deadlines set by vigilante groups, such as the 30 June and upcoming 30 September deadlines, with political manoeuvring ahead of South Africa's local government elections has further mainstreamed xenophobic discourse. Social media platforms have acted as force multipliers for hate speech and intimidation. During the reporting period, this climate of hostility culminated in a severe humanitarian crisis marked by widespread displacement, heightened regional human rights concerns, and the departure of over 178,000 foreign nationals fleeing South Africa.

While managing immigration is a legitimate state function, the shift toward public vigilantism directly threatens the rule of law and human safety. To prevent further escalation and harm ahead of the 30 September deadline, immediate and coordinated intervention is essential. The South African government and law enforcement must firmly draw the line between state policy and illegal vigilante action, while social media companies, political parties, and civil society must act decisively to curb digital harms and uphold constitutional order.