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Manufacturing the Criminal Migrant: Securitization, Digital Amplification, and the Discursive Construction of Anti-Migrant Violence in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the discursive production of the "criminal migrant" in post-apartheid South Africa, arguing that anti-migrant violence is not a spontaneous eruption from below but a politically manufactured phenomenon with traceable elite origins. Drawing on securitization theory from the Copenhagen School and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, the paper traces the pathway through which Black African migrants have been constructed as existential security threats across three registers: elite political speech acts, media and digital amplification ecosystems, and institutional policy. Analyzing primary sources spanning the founding of the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement in April 2020 through the Ghanaian evacuation crisis of May 2026, the paper applies Balzacq's sociological extension of securitization theory to demonstrate how non-state actors such as Operation Dudula and March and March have reshaped the securitization process beyond its classical state-centric formulation. The argument advances a concept of circular securitization architecture: political elites produce securitizing speech acts; digital ecosystems amplify and distort these acts through affectively charged network dynamics; and the resulting public sentiment is subsequently cited to legitimate restrictive policy, completing a self-reinforcing loop that insulates the process from empirical challenge. The paper makes three contributions: it applies securitization theory systematically to an intra-African migration context where it has been under deployed; it introduces a framework for analyzing how non-state vigilante actors function as securitizing agents; and it provides the first scholarly analysis of the 2025 to 2026 escalation cycle, including the November 2025 Gauteng High Court judgment and the May 2026 Ghanaian evacuation, as evidence of securitization's institutional consolidation.

Keywords:
securitization, xenophobia, Afrophobia, Operation Dudula, South Africa, anti-migrant discourse, political rhetoric, digital media

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INTRODUCTION

On 27 April 2020, Freedom Day in South Africa, the hashtag #PutSouthAfricaFirst was used over 16,000 times in a single day on Twitter. It was no coincidence that this surge occurred during the first weeks of the national COVID-19 lockdown, a period of acute economic anxiety, accelerated unemployment, and heightened competition over scarce resources. What began as a trending hashtag had, within eighteen months, become an organized street movement. By June 2021, Operation Dudula had launched its first march in Soweto. By November 2022, it had disrupted healthcare access at public clinics. By November 2025, it had been the subject of a landmark High Court interdict. By May 2026, the Ghanaian government was chartering evacuation flights for its citizens. This trajectory, from viral hashtag to diplomatic incident, is the analytical object of this paper.

The dominant explanatory framework in existing literature treats anti-migrant violence in South Africa as a product of economic grievance: scarce jobs, overburdened services, housing competition. This framing is not without empirical support, but it is structurally incomplete. It cannot explain the timing, geography, or selectivity of violence. It cannot account for the fact that anti-migrant sentiment surged most sharply not during the worst periods of poverty, but during periods of political mobilization. Nor does it explain why African migrants bear almost all of the hostility while White foreign nationals, including undocumented ones, remain effectively insulated from attack (Tewolde, 2020). Above all, it treats violence as a reaction to objective conditions rather than as a product of how those conditions are narrated, classified, and securitized.

This paper argues that what is ordinarily described as xenophobia in South Africa is better understood as a manufactured securitization process. Migrants have not simply become unwanted; they have been systematically constructed as threats through a traceable discursive architecture that moves from elite political speech acts through digital amplification networks to institutional policy. The process does not only describe a threat; it produces the social reality within which that threat appears self-evident. By the time Nhlanhla "Lux" Dlamini told AFP in 2022 that "the majority of the problems in terms of criminality come from illegal foreigners," he was not offering an empirical claim. He was issuing a securitizing move (Skidmore, 1999), performing the existential threat frame before an audience whose acceptance was already being engineered through months of digital priming.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of securitization, as developed by Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde in their foundational 1998 text, holds that security is not an objective condition but a social construction achieved through speech acts (Skidmore, 1999). When an actor designates some object or issue as an existential threat requiring emergency measures beyond normal political procedure, and when a relevant audience accepts this designation, securitization has occurred. The framework distinguishes between politicization, which subjects an issue to routine public deliberation, and securitization, which removes it from that deliberation by invoking exceptional necessity. Migration becomes securitized not when it actually becomes more threatening, but when political actors successfully frame it as existential and audiences accept that framing.

The Copenhagen School formulation was developed primarily in the context of European state-centric security dynamics, and its critics have noted limitations when applied beyond that context. Balzacq's sociological extension, developed in his 2011 edited volume, addresses several of these limitations directly. For Balzacq, securitization is not reducible to a single performative speech act; it is a social process constituted by the interaction between securitizing agents, the dispositif through which they communicate, the audiences they address, and the contextual conditions that render some frames more acceptable than others. Three assumptions structure Balzacq's revision: the centrality of

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audience reception rather than speaker intention; the co-dependency of agency and context; and the structuring force of the dispositif, understood as the ensemble of discursive and institutional technologies through which threats are constituted. These amendments make the framework considerably more useful for analyzing the South African case, where securitization has occurred not through a single authoritative state speech act but through the accumulative weight of dispersed performances across multiple institutional and digital registers.

The paper also draws on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, 2003) to theorize how securitized meanings are produced and received across different social positions. Hall argues that meaning is not transmitted transparently from encoder to decoder; it is produced through codes that are shaped by the ideological positions, institutional frameworks, and lived experiences of both producers and audiences. Applied to the South African anti-migrant discourse, this means that when a politician frames migrants as criminals, the message is not simply received as stated. It enters a media and digital ecosystem that re-encodes it through affective logics: the outrage economy of social media, the tabloid imperative for threat narratives, the WhatsApp group dynamics of closed ideological communities. In many cases, what audiences receive is an amplified and distorted version of the original securitizing frame, stripped of qualifications and saturated with affective intensity.

The integration of these two frameworks produces what this paper terms circular securitization architecture: a self-reinforcing loop in which elite speech acts enter amplification ecosystems that produce a public common sense, which is then cited as justification for further securitizing acts. This architecture differs from classical securitization in two respects. First, the securitizing agency is distributed across state and non-state actors, including vigilante organizations and digital communities. Second, the process is self-insulating: because it generates the very public sentiment it subsequently invokes as legitimation, it cannot be interrupted by empirical counter-evidence alone. As the Institute for Security Studies' systematic empirical analysis demonstrated in 2022, the claims that animate anti-migrant mobilization in South Africa, that migrants cause most crime, that they take most jobs, that they overload public services, are demonstrably false (Kaziboni et al., 2022). Yet the discourse persists and intensifies. Circular securitization architecture explains why.

One further theoretical clarification is required. The existing securitization literature in the South African context, most recently the 2026 Frontiers in Political Science article by Sibanda and Nyere, has focused on whether African immigrants constitute a genuine security threat. This paper takes a different analytical object: not the validity of the threat claim but the social mechanism through which the threat is produced as real regardless of its empirical validity. The question is not whether migrants are dangerous but how the belief in their dangerousness is manufactured, distributed, and institutionalized.

DIGITAL ORIGINS OF THE SECURITIZING INFRASTRUCTURE

The securitization of African migrants in South Africa did not originate with Operation Dudula. It was architecturally prepared by several years of digital mobilization that built the audience infrastructure, normalized the threat frame, and created the organizational networks through which street-level action later became possible. The founding moment was the emergence of the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement on Twitter in April 2020, approximately four weeks after the imposition of the national COVID-19 lockdown. On Freedom Day, 27 April 2020, anti-migrant hashtags flooded South African Twitter, with #PutSouthAfricaFirst used over 16,000 times in a single day (Dratwa, 2024). The timing was not incidental. The lockdown had compressed economic anxiety into digital space precisely at the moment when migrant-owned businesses, operating under different regulatory constraints, appeared to benefit from informal exemptions.

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The digital ethnographic research conducted by Dratwa (2023) on the Put South Africans First movement's Facebook page over fifteen months reveals the narrative architecture that the movement developed. Two foundational narratives structured its community: the story of the "harmfulness of Pan-Africanism," which reframed African solidarity as a cover for the exploitation of South Africans by continental migrants, and the narrative of "modern-day slavery," which constructed future generations of South African children as destined for subjugation by "foreigners." Both narratives recycled colonial stereotypes through an affective register of replacement anxiety: the sense that the authentic South African people were being dispossessed in their own country. These narratives performed the preparatory work of securitization, establishing the existential frame before any explicit state securitizing move had been made.

The movement's digital infrastructure was deliberately designed for scalability and geographic reach. As Dratwa (2023) documents, Put South Africans First and Operation Dudula used Facebook and Twitter for public messaging and organizational coordination, while WhatsApp groups provided the enclosed ideological space where members reinforced their worldview through the daily circulation of negative migrant stories, planned marches, and organized violence. The Centre for Analytics and Behavioral Change analysis of the hashtag corpus found 2.5 million mentions from over 250,000 distinct authors over a two-year period, with the conversation peaking in two distinct waves: September to November 2020, coinciding with the economic reopening, and November 2021 to February 2022, coinciding with political mobilization ahead of local government elections (Centre for Analytics and Behavioral Change, 2022). These peaks reveal the electoral instrumentalization of digital xenophobia: anti-migrant sentiment was amplified at moments of political competitive pressure.

An Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab investigation identified coordinated inauthentic behavior at the origins of the 2019 wave of anti-migrant Twitter campaigns, tracing a central account to a former South African National Defense Force lance corporal connected to the South African First nationalist party. This finding is significant because it establishes that the digital anti-migrant ecosystem was not purely organic; portions of it were deliberately seeded and artificially amplified by actors with specific political interests. The Put South Africans First movement emerged from this digital ecosystem and organized its first street march to the Nigerian and Zimbabwean embassies in September 2020.

Operation Dudula, which emerged from a faction within Put South Africans First in June 2021, represented the translation of this digital infrastructure into sustained physical mobilization. Raborife et al. (2024), in their machine learning analysis of South African Twitter data from 2017 to 2022, found that xenophobic sentiment on Twitter preceded and predicted physical xenophobic incidents, with peaks in online activity systematically anticipating waves of street violence. This temporal sequence is analytically significant: it confirms the direction of causality proposed by the circular securitization framework. Digital discourse does not merely reflect social tensions; it organizes and intensifies them in ways that produce material consequences.

The most recent expression of this dynamic is the June 2026 Mazwi Kubheka episode. Findlay's analysis in the Daily Maverick revealed that a missing-person case involving a young South African was rapidly captured by the pre-existing anti-migrant digital network and redirected into broader nationalist mobilization under hashtags including #BringMazwiBack, despite no evidence connecting the disappearance to foreign nationals. Findlay observed that "narratives that once existed on the fringes of social media have increasingly migrated into mainstream political discourse," and identified an overlapping digital sphere connecting ActionSA supporters, the PSAFLIVE amplification network, and March and March activists. The Kubheka episode demonstrates that by 2026 the anti-migrant digital

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infrastructure had achieved sufficient institutional density that any emotionally charged incident could be processed through it and converted into nationalist mobilization, regardless of its actual relationship to migration.

ELITE SPEECH AND SECURITIZING MOVES

If the digital ecosystem constructed the audience for securitization, elite political actors provided the authorizing speech acts that legitimated the threat frame in the domain of official discourse. The most consequential such actor was not a vigilante leader but the Minister of Home Affairs, Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi, whose tenure from 2019 to 2024 produced the most comprehensive securitizing discourse in the domain of state migration policy (Motsoaledi, 2023).

Operation Dudula's founding leader, Nhlanhla "Lux" Dlamini, was the first non-state actor to achieve mass public amplification of the criminal migrant frame. Speaking to AFP in 2022, Dlamini crystallized the movement's entire threat logic in two sentences:

> *The objective is simple: fight against criminal elements in our communities. And it so happens that the majority of the problems in terms of criminality come from illegal foreigners* (Dlamini, as cited in Mayalo (2022).

The Dlamini formulation does not argue; it asserts. The rhetorical move is to treat as self-evident a causal claim for which no evidence is offered. Kaziboni et al. (2022) have shown that undocumented foreigners constitute 2.3 percent of the prison population against a 6.5 percent population share, making Dlamini's claim empirically inverted. Yet its power lay precisely in its non-evidential character: delivered in military fatigues before assembled crowds, it performed the certainty that the securitization framework requires. Elsewhere in the same interview, Dlamini declared simply: "We were ambushed by foreigners in South Africa" a framing that reversed victim and aggressor with the efficiency of a single sentence (Mayalo, 2022).

Motsoaledi's November 2023 release of the White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection was the most explicit institutionalization of securitized migration discourse in post-apartheid South African policy. Speaking at the Ronnie Mamoepa Media Centre on 12 November 2023, Motsoaledi reframed existing refugee law not as a human rights obligation but as a legal trap, stating:

> *South Africa did not make any reservations in respect of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. This was a serious mistake on part of the government. It is not surprising that South African courts developed jurisprudence regarding asylum and refugees...which is unfavorable to the interests of government* (Motsoaledi, 2023).

This framing is a textbook securitizing move in the institutional domain. By constructing the existing refugee protection framework as a governmental error that produces outcomes unfavorable to the state rather than as a rights architecture that serves asylum seekers, Motsoaledi repositioned migration governance from a protection function to a security management problem. UNHCR's January 2024 observations to the South African government challenged this framing directly, noting that withdrawing from the 1951 Convention would harm South Africa's diplomatic standing and that the government had not sought UNHCR input during the drafting process (UNHCR, 2024). Despite this, the document's overall framing, positioning migrants primarily as security and economic management challenges rather than as rights-holders, was broadly maintained in the final White Paper approved by Cabinet on 10 April 2024.

The Motsoaledi period also produced a series of ministerial public statements that performed securitizing functions in the media ecosystem. His March 2024 briefing on immigration and visa issues explicitly connected internal Home Affairs circulars to broader immigration enforcement priorities at a moment when anti-migrant street mobilization was intensifying ahead of the May 2024 elections. Human Rights Watch's pre-

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election monitoring documented that the DHA minister, alongside opposition party leaders, adopted language suggesting that "limited resources might affect guaranteeing socio-economic rights to refugees," a formulation that reframed asylum protection as a budgetary threat to South African citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Party political actors amplified and extended the ministerial securitizing frame. The Human Rights Watch analysis of campaign rhetoric in the months preceding the May 2024 elections documented a series of explicit securitizing moves by actors across the political spectrum. Herman Mashaba of ActionSA tweeted in December 2023 that foreign nationals operating tuck-shops used their businesses as "illicit drug channels, destroying small businesses in townships." Gayton McKenzie of the Patriotic Alliance told party members at a celebration in November 2023 that foreign nationals "must go home" and were responsible for "crime, drug peddling, unemployment, and other problems" (Human Rights Watch, 2024). These statements meet Skidmore's (1999) criteria for securitizing moves: they identify an existential threat to a referent object, invoke urgency, and implicitly or explicitly call for measures beyond normal political deliberation.

The case of Julius Malema and the Economic Freedom Fighters illustrates the political pressures that make securitizing moves electorally rational. Malema spent much of the 2021 to 2023 period articulating an explicitly anti-securitization position, defending migrants' rights and describing anti-immigrant mobilization as Afrophobia. Yet by August 2025, under competitive electoral pressure and the rising influence of anti-migrant parties, Malema's public statements had shifted toward an emphasis on "jobs for South Africans first," a formulation that, while less explicitly violent than Dudula's rhetoric, occupied the same conceptual territory (Mbete, 2015; Mtimka, 2026). This trajectory illustrates Machinya's (2022) argument that anti-immigrant populist discourse has achieved mainstream legitimacy across the South African political spectrum, such that even parties formally committed to Pan-African solidarity find themselves reproducing its core framings under electoral pressure.

The most analytically significant aspect of elite securitizing speech in the South African case is not any individual statement but the cumulative architecture of threat claims that different actors have contributed to over several years. Taken together, the White Paper, the ministerial press conferences, the party campaign speeches, and the vigilante rally addresses constitute a distributed securitizing text whose coherence lies not in coordination between actors but in their shared structural interest in externalizing responsibility for governance failure onto a scapegoatable population. Machinya (2022) captures this dynamic precisely: what feeds social legitimacy to xenophobia is the "foregrounding of an anti-immigrant populist discourse in the mainstream political discourse with participation of political leaders from across the political spectrum."

MEDIA AMPLIFICATION AND THE AFFECTIVE PIPELINE

Securitizing speech acts do not travel directly from elite producers to mass audiences. They pass through media and digital ecosystems that transform them in specific ways, stripping qualifications, intensifying affect, and embedding them within existing frameworks of meaning that make them appear self-evident rather than constructed. Understanding this amplification process is essential to explaining why securitized anti-migrant frames persist and intensify despite the availability of substantial empirical evidence that contradicts them.

The South African media environment presents a stratified amplification structure. At the elite end, mainstream outlets including the Daily Maverick, Mail & Guardian, and TimesLIVE provide relatively critical coverage of anti-migrant violence, often foregrounding civil society and legal responses. At the tabloid end, however, the coverage has been considerably more permissive. The Daily Maverick's April 2026 coverage noted

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that "wall-to-wall, largely unquestioning media coverage has legitimized Ngobese-Zuma and Dabula as civil society activists," a framing that granted vigilante leaders the discursive positioning of legitimate political actors rather than the perpetrators of organized violence (Haffajee, 2026).

The social media ecosystem operates on different, more consequential logics. The WhatsApp-to-street pipeline documented by Dratwa (2023b) describes a closed information loop in which ideologically homogeneous groups circulate negative migrant stories that are amplified by selection bias, group conformity dynamics, and the absence of counter-voices. In these enclosed spaces, the securitized frame is not tested but reinforced. Each circulation of a migrant crime story, real or fabricated, contributes to what Hall (1980) would identify as a preferred decoding position: a reading in which the criminal migrant is a settled social fact rather than a constructed representation.

The Twitter and X ecosystem operates as an intermediate amplification layer that bridges closed WhatsApp communities and elite public discourse. The machine learning analysis by Raborife et al. (2024), covering South African Twitter data from 2017 to 2022, found that xenophobic narrative peaks systematically preceded violence incidents, confirming the platform's role as an organizational infrastructure rather than a mere sentiment mirror. The finding that 95% F1-score accuracy was achievable in distinguishing xenophobic content, combined with the temporal relationship between online peaks and physical incidents, supports the argument that digital platforms function as a preparatory dispositif for violence, constituting the organized anti-migrant community before it takes physical form.

The 2022 Centre for Analytics and Behavioral Change analysis of the #PutSouthAfricansFirst corpus revealed another amplification mechanism: the selective entry of political party actors into the hashtag ecosystem. ActionSA's Herman Mashaba and members of the African Transformation Movement were among the accounts that amplified the hashtag at its launch in 2020, providing the movement with political credibility and broadening its reach from township communities to suburban middle-class audiences (Centre for Analytics and Behavioral Change, 2022). This cross-class amplification is analytically significant because it demonstrates that digital anti-migrant mobilization was not confined to the economically marginal communities most directly in competition with migrants; it was a broader political formation whose digital infrastructure was co-produced by political party actors with electoral interests.

The affective economy of the digital ecosystem deserves particular attention. The securitization literature has traditionally focused on rational audience acceptance of threat claims. Balzacq's (2010) sociological approach acknowledges the role of context in shaping audience receptivity, but the specific dynamics of digital affective economies exceed what either the classical or sociological securitization framework fully theorizes. In the South African case, anti-migrant content circulates not primarily because it is believed to be accurate but because it is affectively resonant. The imagery of the criminal migrant, the drug dealer, the job thief, the occupier of buildings that belong to South Africans, generates effects of fear, resentment, and indignation that produce sharing behavior independently of epistemic evaluation. This is not simply encoding/decoding in Hall's sense; it is the production of political reality through affective saturation.

The 2026 Mazwi Kubheka episode is particularly instructive here. The rapid capture of an emotionally charged missing-person case by the anti-migrant digital network, and its conversion into nationalist mobilization without any evidence connecting the case to foreign nationals, illustrates what Findlay (2026) describes as the "entrenched, interconnected and politically influential" character that the xenophobic online machine had achieved by mid-2026. The episode

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demonstrates that the amplification ecosystem has reached a degree of institutional density at which it can function as an autonomous narrative processor: any emotionally charged incident can be absorbed, re-coded through the criminal migrant frame, and converted into mobilization material, regardless of its actual content.

POLICY INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SECURITIZED DISCOURSE

The circular securitization architecture reaches its institutional completion when the public sentiment generated through the elite speech/digital amplification loop is cited as justification for policy changes that further normalize the threat frame. This process was most visible in South Africa between 2023 and 2026, as the securitized anti-migrant discourse moved from the periphery of electoral politics into the center of migration governance.

The 2023 White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection represents the most direct instance of policy securitization in the period under analysis. The document's rhetorical structure begins from the premise that South Africa's existing asylum system has been "exploited" by criminal actors and that migration constitutes a governance emergency requiring radical legislative overhaul (Department of Home Affairs, 2024). The proposed withdrawal from the 1951 Refugee Convention, though ultimately abandoned, was explicitly framed in securitization terms: the existing legal framework was described as having "unfavorable" consequences for government interests and as incompatible with national security priorities (Motsoaledi, 2023). UNHCR's formal observations to the South African government noted that the agency had not been consulted during the drafting process, a procedural absence that itself reflects the securitization logic: when migration is framed as a security emergency, normal consultative procedures with refugee protection bodies appear inappropriate (UNHCR, 2024).

The final White Paper, approved by Cabinet on 10 April 2024, retained the core securitization framing even as it retreated from the Convention withdrawal proposal. Its introduction of an "Expanded First Safe Country Principle," which allows the Department of Home Affairs to reject asylum applications from persons who transited through designated safe countries, effectively narrows the protection space for the majority of asylum seekers reaching South Africa through overland routes from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and other neighboring states (Department of Home Affairs, 2024). The policy thus operationalizes the securitized framing that migrants who enter South Africa through informal border crossings are presumptively irregular rather than presumptively in need of protection.

The institutionalization of securitized discourse was not confined to formal policy documents. The *Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia and Others v Operation Dudula and Others (2023/044685)* (2025) judgment, handed down by the Gauteng Division of the High Court on 4 November 2025, provides a detailed judicial record of the ways in which securitized anti-migrant discourse had been translated into physical institutional practice. The judgment documented Operation Dudula's systematic denial of healthcare access at public facilities, its eviction of foreign nationals from homes and trading spaces, and its demands for identity documentation from private individuals, all framed as legitimate community protection activities. The court found that these practices constituted unlawful conduct amounting to hate speech, intimidation, and vigilantism, and issued a final interdict against them. The judgment also directed the South African government to implement the National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, whose non-implementation had itself been a form of institutional securitization through neglect.

The SAHRC, welcoming the judgment in its November 2025 media statement, noted that Operation Dudula had been "ordered to stop the unlawfully evicting non-nationals from their homes; unlawfully removing foreign nationals

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from their trading stalls or interfering with the employment of foreign nationals in shops and businesses" (SAHRC, 2025). The specificity of these interdicts reflects the breadth of the institutional translation of securitized discourse: the criminal migrant frame had been operationalized as a systematic practice of spatial and economic exclusion extending across clinics, schools, markets, and residential buildings.

The circular character of the securitization architecture is most visible in the relationship between the policy institutionalization and the digital amplification phases. Once the White Paper framed migrants as security management problems and the government's non-enforcement of anti-xenophobia commitments signaled permissiveness, these institutional positions re-entered the digital ecosystem as validation of the threat frame. Political actors could now cite government policy as confirmation that the criminal migrant narrative was officially recognized, lending further credibility to vigilante actors who claimed to be performing functions the state had acknowledged but failed to execute. This dynamic constitutes the closing of the circular loop: elite discourse produces policy, policy validates digital discourse, digital discourse demands further policy, and so on.

THE 2025 TO 2026 ESCALATION CYCLE

The period between late 2025 and mid-2026 represents the most acute expression of the circular securitization architecture that this paper has traced. Several developments converged to produce what Human Rights Watch described as "new waves of xenophobic attacks" (Human Rights Watch, 2026): the emergence of March and March as a second major vigilante organization distinct from but operationally aligned with Operation Dudula; the further intensification of anti-migrant social media mobilization following the Mazwi Kubheka episode; and the international diplomatic escalation triggered by the Ghanaian government's decision to evacuate its citizens from South Africa in May 2026.

March and March was founded in 2025 by Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma, a former radio presenter whose public profile had been built on KwaZulu-Natal community radio before the non-renewal of her contract (March and March, 2026; Plaut, 2026). The organization's rapid growth from provincial to national prominence in under a year reflects both the organizational infrastructure that earlier digital anti-migrant mobilization had built and the changed political landscape following the 2024 elections, which had demonstrated that anti-immigrant parties retained limited but real electoral traction. Ngobese-Zuma's public statements exemplify the securitizing speech act in its most direct and affectively saturated form. Speaking at a Cape Town demonstration, she delivered the single most striking discursive inversion of the period under analysis: “Ubuntu is suspended until further notice” (Ngobese-Zuma, as cited in Plaut, 2026)

The rhetorical force of this statement lies in what it reveals about the securitization logic at work. Ubuntu, the Nguni philosophical concept of communal humanity most commonly cited in post-apartheid discourse as the ethical foundation for tolerance and solidarity, is not rejected but suspended: placed in abeyance pending the resolution of the security emergency that migrants supposedly constitute. This is the grammar of securitization precisely as Skidmore (1999) theorize it, the emergency logic that removes normal ethical constraints in the name of an existential threat. In November 2025, addressing Zimbabweans directly over the Gagasi FM radio platform, Ngobese-Zuma made the selectivity of the movement's targeting explicit:

> *The reason we have entitled people like Dube here is because the men of Zimbabwe have become cowards. They no longer want to fight for Zimbabwe; they want to fight for South Africa. Whether there is Operation Dudula or March in March, that is none of Zimbabweans' business. Their job is to fix their country* (Ngobese-Zuma, Gagasi FM, November 2025, as cited in All Africa, 2025).

This statement performs several discursive functions simultaneously. It conflates migration

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with moral failure, constructing the migrant not merely as an economic threat but as a coward who has abdicated his duties to his own nation. It positions the vigilante movement as performing, on behalf of Zimbabwean men, the national duty they have abandoned. And it advances a territorial claim whose logic applies, in principle, to all African migrants: their presence in South Africa is not a right but a dependency that South Africans may revoke. When the Ghanaian evacuation prompted international criticism, Ngobese-Zuma issued a press statement clarifying that Ghanaians were not among the groups being targeted, stating that "Nigerians are their target," a selective boundary management exercise that acknowledged the political problem without abandoning the underlying securitizing frame (Okine, 2026).

The Human Rights Watch report of May 2026 documented killings, serious injuries, forced displacement, and systematic denial of healthcare and education access in the weeks preceding its publication. The report noted that the violent demonstrations organized by March and March in April and May 2026 in Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Durban had resulted in fatal consequences, and that police had provided "little or insufficient apparent response" (Human Rights Watch, 2026). The South African Human Rights Commission subsequently took legal action against Ngobese-Zuma and March and March in its personal and organizational capacity, seeking to extend the judicial protection granted to Operation Dudula by the November 2025 High Court judgment.

The April 2026 statement by the UN Special Rapporteurs, echoing their July 2022 warning, pointed directly to the elite-to-street transmission mechanism:

> *Anti-migrant discourse from senior government officials has fanned the flames of violence, and government actors have failed to prevent further violence or hold perpetrators accountable. Without urgent action from the government of South Africa to curb the scapegoating of migrants and refugees, and the widespread violence and intimidation against these groups, we are deeply concerned that the country is on the precipice of explosive violence* (Achiume et al., 2022).

That this warning, first issued in July 2022, remained precisely applicable to the conditions of April and May 2026 is itself an indictment of the circular securitization architecture: the same speech acts, the same institutional silences, and the same digital amplification mechanisms had reproduced the same escalation cycle four years later with greater institutional entrenchment and more severe international consequences.

The Ghanaian evacuation of May 2026 was, among other things, a demonstration of the limits of the circular securitization architecture when its consequences become diplomatically visible. The evacuation of approximately 300 Ghanaian citizens on 27 May 2026, organized and funded by the Mahama administration following the viral video of the assault of a Ghanaian man, and registered as a diplomatic protest at the African Union level, created a category of international accountability that the domestic securitization discourse had not anticipated (Aggrey, 2026; Distinguished, 2026). Nigeria similarly summoned South Africa's acting envoy. The securitizing frame that had been constructed as a domestic South African political resource suddenly produced foreign policy costs that placed it in tension with South Africa's interests as a regional diplomatic power.

The response of securitizing actors to this pressure itself illustrates the architecture's self-referential logic. Ngobese-Zuma's claim that Ghanaians were not the intended target, issued only after the evacuation drew international attention, was a post-hoc boundary management exercise that acknowledged the political problem without abandoning the underlying securitizing frame. The Daily Maverick's coverage noted that "wall-to-wall, largely unquestioning media coverage has legitimized Ngobese-Zuma and Dabula as civil society activists," pointing to the media amplification mechanism as a key enabler of the escalation. Xenowatch's data, documenting 669 deaths, 5,310 looted shops, and 127,572 displacements between 1994 and March 2024,

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established the historical scale of the violence that this securitization architecture had enabled over three decades (Xenowatch, 2026).

THE GOVERNANCE FAILURE DISPLACEMENT THESIS

A consistent finding across the primary source analysis in this paper is that the securitization of migrants in South Africa functions as a displacement mechanism for state accountability. The circular securitization architecture is not simply a discursive pattern; it serves a political function for governing and opposition actors alike. When Machinya (2022) observes that anti-immigrant populist discourse "allows the populist leaders to be seen as doing something to solve South Africa's problems," he identifies the core political utility of the securitization process: it generates political action and legitimacy without requiring the structural economic and governance reforms that would address the actual conditions producing popular grievance.

The most analytically revealing counter-speech to the securitization architecture came from Julius Malema at the SACP Conference of the Left in Boksburg on 29 May 2026. In a direct challenge to the criminal migrant frame, Malema articulated the structural displacement thesis with unusual precision:

> *Poor Africans from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, or elsewhere on the continent are not responsible for unemployment, inequality, or collapsing public services. Migrants did not privatise state capacity. Migrants did not concentrate ownership of land and industry. Migrants did not construct an economy incapable of absorbing labour. A left that cannot defend African solidarity has abandoned its historical mission* (Malema, SACP Conference of the Left, Boksburg, 29 May 2026, as cited in Mbolekwa 2026).

The analytical significance of this statement extends beyond its content. Malema's willingness to make the governance failure displacement argument explicitly in May 2026, after several years of rhetorical drift toward anti-migrant framing, demonstrates that the circular securitization architecture does not produce uniform ideological compliance. Counter-securitizing speech acts remain possible and are made. But as the preceding sections of this paper have demonstrated, they enter an amplification ecosystem that systematically suppresses counter-frames relative to securitizing ones. Malema's speech received coverage primarily in migrant-origin countries; within South Africa, the dominant media register remained the threat narrative.

The empirical literature is unambiguous on the governance failure diagnosis. Kaziboni et al. (2022) demonstrated systematically that foreign nationals make up approximately 7 to 8 percent of South Africa's population, that undocumented foreigners constitute 2.3 percent of the prison population against their 6.5 percent population share, that there is no statistical relationship between international migration and crime rates, and that claims about migrants "overrunning" South African universities are factually unsupported. These findings, produced by the Institute for Security Studies in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg, did not materially affect the political discourse. The analysis by Sibanda and Nyere (2026) confirmed that the securitization process persists despite contradictory evidence, arguing that it functions as a "deflection strategy to camouflage failures of governance."

The post-apartheid state's failure to deliver on economic transformation commitments, the persistence of spatial inequality rooted in apartheid-era urban planning, the looting of state institutions during the Zuma era, the electricity grid collapse, and the documented corruption within the Department of Home Affairs itself, all of which are well-documented causes of the socioeconomic conditions that produce popular grievance, are systematically absent from the securitized migration discourse. The discourse's ideological function is to make this structural absence invisible by providing an alternative explanation: not state failure but foreign invasion.

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Mlambo (2023), in their analysis of the three facets of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa, note the relationship between the migrant, the state, and the local citizen as a triangulated structure in which the state offloads responsibility for poverty and unemployment onto the migrant while positioning itself as the potential protector of the citizen against the migrant threat. This triangulation is visible in the White Paper's framing, in ministerial press conferences, and in the implicit endorsement of vigilante "community protection" activities through the state's documented failures of enforcement against xenophobic violence. As the SAHRC noted in its November 2025 media statement, the government had been ordered to implement its own National Action Plan to Combat Racism and Xenophobia, whose non-implementation over several years had itself constituted a form of passive institutional endorsement of the securitized discourse.

Yingi et al. (2024) situate this pattern within the longer arc of post-independence disillusionment across southern Africa, arguing that xenophobia is partly a product of "the failure of successive governments of the ANC to correct the wrongs of the apartheid past and make the economy inclusive." This framing is useful but requires refinement. The relationship between governance failure and xenophobic violence is not automatic or mechanical; it is mediated by the securitization architecture analyzed in this paper. Governance failure creates the material conditions of grievance; securitization converts that diffuse grievance into directed hostility against a specific population. The violence is neither a direct consequence of unemployment nor an irrational eruption; it is the product of a political process that selects its target and constructs its justification.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that anti-migrant violence in South Africa is not spontaneous community-level conflict produced by economic competition but a politically manufactured phenomenon whose production can be traced through a circular securitization architecture. The architecture operates across three registers: elite political speech acts that construct Black African migrants as existential threats; digital amplification ecosystems that distribute and intensify these constructions through affective logics that render them resistant to empirical challenge; and institutional policy processes that incorporate and legitimate the securitized framing, thereby completing the loop by generating official validation for further mobilization.

The theoretical contribution of this analysis is threefold. First, by applying Copenhagen School securitization theory in combination with Balzacq's sociological extension to an intra-African migration context, the paper demonstrates that the framework retains considerable explanatory power beyond its original European state-centric domain, provided its classical assumptions about unified state securitizing agents are replaced with a distributed model acknowledging non-state vigilante actors as co-producers of securitization processes. Second, by introducing the concept of circular securitization architecture, the paper provides a mechanism for explaining the empirical puzzle of why demonstrably false threat claims persist and intensify despite extensive contrary evidence: the architecture generates the public sentiment it invokes as legitimation, making the loop self-insulating. Third, the integration of Hall's encoding/decoding model with securitization theory provides a framework for analyzing how digital media ecosystems transform securitizing speech acts through affective amplification in ways that the original securitization framework does not theorize.

The empirical contribution lies in the systematic primary source analysis of the 2020 to 2026 mobilization cycle, including the first scholarly analysis of the March and March movement, the November 2025 Gauteng High Court judgment, and the May 2026 Ghanaian evacuation as linked episodes within a single escalating securitization process. The analysis reveals that the trajectory from the #PutSouthAfricansFirst hashtag to the international diplomatic incident of the Ghanaian evacuation represents not six years of discrete events but a single continuous process of

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institutional consolidation in which each escalation built upon the organizational and discursive infrastructure established by the previous one.

The policy implications are specific. Interventions aimed at reducing xenophobic violence by correcting public misinformation about migrants, while well-intentioned, are structurally inadequate as primary responses because they address the symptom while leaving the production mechanism intact. The circular securitization architecture is not disrupted by evidence; it is disrupted by accountability. The November 2025 High Court judgment, which held Operation Dudula's conduct to be unlawful and directed the government to implement its own anti-xenophobia plan, points in the right direction: accountability for both the vigilante actors who execute securitized violence and the political actors whose speech acts produce and authorize it. The African Commission's April 2026 statement calling for investigation of violence and accountability for perpetrators similarly identifies the accountability mechanism as the critical intervention point.

Several research directions follow from this analysis. First, comparative work is needed on securitization processes in other intra-African migration contexts, particularly in states such as Kenya and Zambia where anti-migrant mobilization has increased. Second, the role of specific media organizations and their editorial decisions in the amplification process warrants systematic content analysis of the type that this desk review approach can only approximate. Third, the relationship between the digital securitization ecosystem and electoral behavior, specifically whether anti-migrant mobilization translates into votes for explicitly anti-migrant parties despite their limited formal electoral performance, requires survey-based investigation. The Xenowatch data, which documents nearly three decades of xenophobic incidents, provides a baseline for longitudinal quantitative work that this paper's qualitative focus has not addressed.

What the evidence from 2020 to 2026 makes clear is that South Africa has not experienced a series of discrete xenophobic incidents attributable to economic stress. It has experienced the operation of a mature securitization machine whose components are now institutionally entrenched across vigilante organizations, political party platforms, digital amplification networks, and formal state policy. Dismantling that machine requires confronting each of its components: the political actors who benefit from it, the media ecosystems that amplify it, the institutional silences that permit it, and the structural economic failures that make its promised explanations attractive to communities with real grievances and few other available targets.

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