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A TALE OF TWO TOWNSHIPS
POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY AND VIOLENT AND NON-VIOLENT LOCAL CONTROL IN SOUTH AFRICA

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A number of recent gains in social science have found that periods of violent civil disorder marked by chaos may actually exhibit an underlying order and a rationale on part of perpetrators in response to specific political conditions of the time. The conjecture is that violent control emerges as a grassroots effort to establish authority in areas experiencing a vacuum of central authority. Given those conditions, can these same theories of violence be applied to incidents of widespread non-violent control as well, where and when the political conditions are similar? Using a variety of accounts, from research conducted by human rights groups and media outlets and government data, this paper considers the actions of residents in two townships in South Africa during a twenty-day period of xenophobic violence in May 2008. While one township acted violently against its immigrant population, the other mobilized to protect its own immigrants. These actions are considered within a similar theoretical framework to demonstrate how both constituted an assertion of local control in the interests of residents during a time of political instability at the national level.

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass."

(Antonio Gramsci 1996: 33)

For twenty days in May 2008, impoverished black townships in cities throughout South Africa experienced an unprecedented wave of xenophobic violence which left 62 people dead and over 30,000 internally displaced (HRW 2008). The events added insult to an injured and, by many readings, inept president, all but ensuring the ascendancy of his longtime rival only months later (Kagwanja 2008).

The period garnered significant attention in both local and international news media and the South African government. The attacks began in the Alexandra Township in Johannesburg, Gauteng Province, but within days, events there were replicated in similar episodes of violence in townships and city centers throughout the nation. A few commentators spoke of a nationwide uprising of the urban poor against a common, if illusionary immigrant enemy (Mngxitama 2008). Analysts at most media and human rights groups took a more conventional approach, pointing to a presumed connection between high poverty and high violence, and the increasing prevalence of poor immigrants, especially from Zimbabwe. Historically, the black townships of South Africa were the location of some of its most desperate poverty, and township residents were prone to act violently, either against state agents (during the Apartheid era) or against each other, in the form of crime. Additionally, since the end of Apartheid in 1994, a majority of native South Africans, but especially townships residents, had been known to harbor increasingly strong anti-immigrant sentiments (HSRC 2008:16). Occasionally, conflict between immigrants and natives had turned violent, though never on the scale exhibited in May 2008. Nonetheless, many observers of that period assumed that whatever tensions that had existed between immigrants and natives in the townships before had simply reached their height in the townships that year, perhaps because the increasing rate of immigration had reached a certain breaking point. The culprit, it was said, was

merely the confluence of poverty, a tendency towards violence, and the proximity of immigrants to these poor, dangerous people.

But a reality which this reading ignores is that not every impoverished township in South Africa violently evicted its immigrant population in May. One in particular, the township of Khutsong, less than fifty kilometers southwest of Alexandra, did not report a single incident for the entire period (Carletonville Herald 2008). In fact, local community leaders there arranged for the protection of immigrants en masse, and residents staged massive shows of solidarity in the township's streets (Mngxitama 2008). What is remarkable is that Khutsong had its own large population of foreign immigrants, proportionally comparable to Alexandra's, and, by a number of measures, the township was as poor as and more prone to violence than Alexandra.

Here, we have a problem: the residents of one township worked very hard to either expel or murder foreign immigrants in their community. During the same period, another township, culturally and conditionally similar to the first, mobilized to protect its immigrants. These facts alone challenge any generalized notion we might adopt which would attribute the difference in outcome to poverty or cultural conditions.

Alternatively, I propose an analysis that connects the violence to the broader political interests at work in either of the two townships. A campaign of protection in Khutsong began as a reaction to the campaign of violence in Alexandra, but the political processes at work were fundamentally the same in both. In either township, native residents used the treatment of their immigrant populations to gain leverage on the common source of their grievances: the national government. The choice to act was not coincidental. Both townships mobilized at a particularly opportune time, when government leaders were weak, divided, and in the middle of a stagnated transitional period.

At the time of the period of violence, the leadership of the national government was in a crisis for the first time since the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), had taken power at the end of Apartheid in 1994. Having failed to deliver on a number of key promises, President Thabo Mbeki's title was being challenged from within his own party by longtime rival and president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, making Mbeki a lame duck in office. By May 2008, it was obvious to all that Mbeki was on the way out and Zuma was on the way in, but neither had reached his destined place. The emergent national political climate was one governed from two centers of gravity and wrought with instability. To take a line from Gramsci, the old was dying and the new could not be born, resulting in a variety of "morbid phenomena" in the townships, including widespread anti-immigrant violence (Gramsci 1996:33).

Using data on housing, crime, and immigrant distribution patterns, in combination, I lay a structural framework for assessing the socio-economic makeup of Khutsong and Alexandra and the varying affects of immigrant settlement on those conditions. On that structural foundation, I propose a micro-political narrative for each township as they relate to the macro-political epic of South African president Mbeki's declining, and ANC president Zuma's expanding influence in the national political arena— two interconnected narratives which had profound reverberations in both Khutsong and Alexandra.

Opportunities worth Exploiting: a Theoretical Framework for Discussion

While some accounts of incidents of inter-ethnic group violence attribute the motives of the perpetrators involved to a fundamental and longstanding conflict between parties, recently, social scientists have begun to criticize this approach for being too narrow. In the last three decades, some analyses of violent ethnic conflicts have invested heavily in the cultural "roots" of the case conflict to show how the parties involved were conditioned to hate each other leading up

to the transition to violence. At least one analyst has even proposed that perpetrators of earlier cases of xenophobic violence in South Africa were culturally predisposed towards violence (see Valji 2003:1). These "culturalist" perspectives fail in a number of areas. Brubaker and Laitin argue that the transition from non-violence to violence is a "phase-shift" deserving independent theoretical consideration, and cannot be explained away as the mere culmination of an otherwise non-violent conflict (426). "Violence is not a quantitative degree of conflict but a qualitative form of conflict, with its own dynamics" (Brubaker & Laitin 1998: 426). From a culturalist perspective, that "phase shift" is effectively ignored (Brubaker & Laitin 1998: 426).

Culturalist perspectives also significantly limit an understanding of the *instrumentality* of violence in a particular conflict. A group's choice to employ violence should not be considered a self-explanatory decision (Brubaker & Laitin 1998: 426) and its instrumentality is not universal in either time or location. Therefore, knowing why violence was employed as a tactic within a particular conflict and at a particular time is as important as knowing why other, non-violent alternatives were not, and if those options even existed in the first place.

Here we might divide the question of instrumentality into two: the question of *viability* (why the option to use violence was available from a practical standpoint in the first place) and the question of *timeliness* (why the choice to exercise that option was made when it was). Since the viability of violence in a particular case may change with time, the properties at work in either of these concepts are no doubt related.

Part of the question of viability may be addressed through an assessment of *governmental capacity*. Tilly (2003) argues that the ability of a given democratic regime to prevent violence within its area of jurisdiction depends on its ability to address claims made against it, or between citizens, effectively (41-52). High-capacity democratic regimes routinize most of the claim-

making process by allowing only a small number of rigorously enforced inroads through which citizens are allowed to make claims against each other or the government (Tilly 2003:50). These inroads include the court system, the police, and a variety of other more specific state agencies. Routine claims may lead to conflict, but those conflicts rarely turn violent. Accordingly, we can expect government agents to only use violence selectively and therefore rarely when resolving conflict (Tilly 2003:52). In contrast, states with low-capacity democratic regimes should exhibit more violence as initially non-violent conflicts turn violent frequently (Tilly 2003:52). Since the government itself is ineffectual, we should also expect it to have less involvement at every level of conflict: as third-party arbiters or managers of violence after it has begun (Tilly 2003:52).

Yet the capacity of a given regime is not always universal within its area of jurisdiction. How effective a regime is at managing or preventing conflict in a given area is determined by its physical presence in that area. This consideration is important when examining states where the regime itself is strong, but its presence in certain locales is extremely weak. (South Africa, with its numerous undeveloped townships, is an example of such a case.)

Assuming that a theory of governmental can be applied to the internal power dynamics of a weak sub-region within a strong state, we would expect specific outcomes. Between residents, we would expect a great deal of violence as they resolved claims amongst each other. However uncertainties arise when we consider the channels which residents of the low-capacity sub-region could access to advance a claim with the high-capacity national government. Being at least tied to a strong democratic regime, residents' expectations for the state would likely be high, but the apparatus of the state, including the police, the court system and any other government agencies, would be distant or ineffectual, even as the state sought to increase its presence.

As government increased its capacity within the sub-region, local stakeholders may be unwilling to cooperate, even resistant, if their own control overlapped with the proposed gains for the state. By the same token, local stakeholders may willingly cooperate with an expansion of government into their area if it guaranteed access to resources not otherwise available. In this latter scenario, expansion of government power would proceed as a sort of *partnership* between state agents and residents, albeit one primarily directed by local stakeholders. Nonetheless, even an initially welcome expansion of government power could lead to conflict if the circumstances which allowed for the creation of that partnership changed. Therefore, any expansion of state power, welcome or not, would expose state agents to a potential conflict with locals powers, and with it, local methods of conflict resolution, including violence. Yet if widespread violence was committed by locals *in spite of* or *in defiance of* powers which had been willfully ceded to state agents previously (i.e., widespread vigilantism), that shift could be considered a termination of the partnership and a reassertion of local control by residents.

Following this assessment of governmental capacity, we might answer the question of timeliness with an application of social movement theory and the role of *political opportunity*. Recent conclusions in sociology have demonstrated that social movements "develop and succeed not because they emerge to address new grievances, but rather because something in the larger political context allows existing grievances to be heard" (della Porta 2008:223). Opportunities can include a variety of events and circumstances, such as "regime shifts, periods of political instability, or changes in the composition of elites"— all of which may provide "openings" for social movements to take hold and gain traction (della Porta 2008:223). Applying this theory of political opportunity to periods of collective violence, we can adjust the question, asking not why violence happens, but what circumstances allow it to gain traction, endure, and take hold as a

social movement in its own right, thus becoming a *period* of violence, instead of just an incident of it. That adjustment makes room for the possibility that, in a given case, group violence had always been a viable option, but its exercisers only became politically motivated and numerous because of changes in the greater political landscape.

A final area worth considering is the relationship between participants of group violence and their targets. Studies conducted on the Rwandan Genocide, the collapse of the Balkans, and other intra-national conflicts in the last two decades demonstrate that what appear to be ethnic or national targets can actually be politically constructed. Accordingly, specific social groups may be targeted not because of their ethnicity or nationality, per se, but because of the political interests they represent, are associated with, or otherwise stand to benefit through their continued presence or existence (Calhoun 1993; Mamdani 2002). This realization exposes a further limit of cultural analyses of violent conflict: such analyses restrict a reading of instrumentality to a question of motives—that is, a so-called "root cause" or a fundamental conflict between parties that *vertically* precedes the violent outbreak. Yet focusing on why the targets themselves were chosen may be beside the point. The real question may be about the *horizontal* factors which allow for violence to catch on at a particular time and spread rapidly.

Research Methodology

Applying this framework to an analysis of the May 2008 period of xenophobic violence is foremost a task of connecting the political wants of the participants to the events themselves. Having made those connections theoretically sound, we might understand why the exercise of group violence against— or the protection of— local immigrant populations was considered an option for advancing those interests at the time. I chose the two townships of Alexandra and Khutsong because the combination of their structural and cultural similarities and the contrasting

difference in outcome exhibited by either during the period clearly present the problem in social science which I seek to resolve in this paper. The period was a nationwide phenomenon, and immigrant communities throughout the country were subjected to violence. Alexandra maintains theoretical significance in that it was the first township where residents acted violently against immigrants in May. It was also one of the townships where the violence was at its most intense, and most enduring.

The theory upon which my analysis hinges is fundamentally about opportunity brought on by conditions of political instability. In that respect, focusing an analysis on Alexandra is valuable because it restricts an assessment of the preconditions of instability to conditions other than those resulting from the prevalence of civil disorder as a result of the period itself. Though the rationale for natives to attack immigrants may have been the same all townships including Alexandra, the initiative exhibited by those in Alexandra may have provided the impetus to act elsewhere. Khutsong also provides a unique case since it was evidently the only township in or near Gauteng to initiate a large-scale effort to protect its immigrant population.

In evaluating a political opportunity and the disparate ways in which it was exploited in either township, both the localized political interests at work and the corresponding actions require contextualization within the greater (in this case, national) political circumstances which beset them. Moreover, since the questions at hand regard *collective* interests and *collective* action, it is only fitting that we evaluate actions as the united effort of a single entity within each township for the purpose of that analysis. For all those reasons, I have elected not to base my research on interview data of my own. Instead, I construct a political narrative for each of the two townships using a diverse array of viewpoints, including journalistic accounts from domestic and international news agencies, government data (where and when it is deemed accurate), and

research conducted by non-governmental organizations, most notably by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria, South Africa.

Background to the Violence and its Political Context

The period of xenophobic violence (known hereafter as "the period") began on May 11, 2008 in the Beirut neighborhood, an informal settlement area with a large immigrant population, in the eastern part of the Alexandra Township north of downtown Johannesburg in Gauteng province. It lasted twenty days and spread across South Africa, gaining attention in local and international news media and intense concern in the national government.

On May 14, the South African Broadcasting Corporation reported that residents had been pelting police with stones, resisting verbal demands to cease their attacks (News24 2008). Police said they were overwhelmed, afraid to confront the mobs for fear of gunfire. On the same day, the main opposition party in Parliament called on the ANC to send the army into Alexandra for the first time since Apartheid, arguing correctly that South African Police Services (SAPS) had already lost control of the situation (SAPA 2008c). After five days in Alexandra, the attacks spread to across the country. President Mbeki vocally condemned the attacks but remained quiet about how to resolve the emergency (M&G & SAPA 2008a). In every township that violence appeared, reports came in of police being either ignored or overwhelmed, cars and shacks being torched, roads being blocked off, and immigrant-owned businesses being looted, suggesting the emergence of a nationwide breakdown of civil order (SAPA 2008a; SAPA 2008b).

On May 19, Zuma announced that he had heard widespread reports a phenomenon that would deeply trouble the ANC: mobs of attackers were seen chanting his trademark campaign song "Umshini Wami," in Alexandra and elsewhere (Mbanjwa 2008). The statement confirmed existing journalistic accounts, some of which even traced the singing of "Umshini Wami" to the

first hour of xenophobic violence in Alexandra (Rubin 2008). Zuma denounced the attacks and expressed his personal disgust with the song's new usage (Mbanjwa 2008).

By May 21, Mbeki could not deny that the nation was experiencing a state of emergency as the violence had undeniably spread beyond Gauteng when large mobs were reported attacking immigrants in Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal province for the first time (McGreal 2008a). 300 arrests had been made in relation to the violence, but the Gauteng premier said the situation there was still "dire" (McGreal 2008b). Finally, Mbeki ordered the South African National Defense Force into Alexandra to assist police (M&G & SAPA 2008b).

On May 31, SAPS reported "a quiet weekend" with "few known incidents" of anti-immigrant violence, signifying an end to the period (SAPA & AFP 2008). A final tally counted 62 dead and around 560 injured (SAPA & AFP 2008). In Gauteng alone, more than 16,000 people, including around 1,000 from Alexandra— mostly foreign immigrants— were internally displaced, (HSRC 2008:14, ARP 2008:1). In Alexandra, the violence had lasted for the entire period. Despite direct threats to the contrary, it had not spread outside Beirut and a nearby area of recently built government houses partly occupied by immigrants called Extension 7. In that neighborhood, mobs raided 36 houses, nine of which were occupied by immigrant families. All the immigrant families were forcibly evicted (ARP 2008:2).

Where there was Violence: Alexandra Township before the Period

Alexandra is one of the poorest townships in South Africa with an unemployment rate at around 60 percent, nearly triple provincial average (Census SA in PPTPPSA 2004:8). With an estimated 15 percent of its population of around 850,000 people having been born outside South Africa, Alexandra claims one of the largest immigrant populations in the country (ARP 2008:1).

In 2001, Mbeki launched the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) to improve the township, partly by replacing informal settlements with formal government housing (ARP 2001). A goal was set for 22,250 total households, 44 percent of which would be RDP "give-away" units to be issued to homeless residents (ARP 2006). By May 2008, 1,400 RDP houses had been built in the Extension 7 area of Alexandra with others under construction (ARP 2008). In accordance with law, the ARP did not discriminate against immigrants when allocating services so long as the applicant had legal residency in the country (NDH 2004; ARP 2008). From its outset, this policy of allocating houses to immigrants was unpopular with residents. Yet while relations between Alexandra natives and the government were at least existent, the same could not be said about relations between natives and the government an hour west in Khutsong.

Where there was Peace: Khutsong Township before the Period

While Khutsong did not exhibit a single incident of xenophobic violence for the entire period, during the time before after the period, the area was overrun with violence. Residents in the township had been engaging in a violent anti-government revolt since the municipality to which it belonged was demarcated from Gauteng and made part of poorer North West Province in December, 2006. Exactly why the South African parliament chose to demarcate Merafong is still unclear, though events leading up to the final decision indicate strongly that it would be an unpopular one.[1] In parliament, the decision had instantly pit ANC leadership against its own members representing Merafong, who, in an unusual move, defied the party to support the will of their constituents and repeatedly tried to block the legislation (Mde & Brown 2006).

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[1] Merafong was a cross-provincial municipality, meaning that it straddled the border of Gauteng and North West Province, making service delivery complicated. Since the government had already declared that it wanted to eliminate all cross-provincial municipalities before the March, 2006 election, demarcation was anticipated by the public. A committee in parliament was formed to recommend a decision for which of the two provinces to consolidate Merafong into and concluded very publicly that it should be fully incorporated into Gauteng, as expected and desired by residents in Merafong. But just a week before the decision was legislated, the committee reversed its position without announcement (Mabuza 2008).

In Khutsong, violent resistance began almost immediately and once more pitted the ANC against its allies in the area (Blair 2008). The local branches of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) — a committed ally of the ANC— railed against the party and began organizing what would eventually become a mass resistance against the government. By the time of the boycotted March, 2006 elections, 13 of the 17 local councilors had been driven from their homes by arson, the library had been burned down, and polling stations across the township had been firebombed (Blair 2006). In scenes reminiscent of the Apartheid era, armored cars and police helicopters patrolled the streets and skies (Blair 2006). When the election happened, only 300 of 30,000 registered voters in Khutsong cast a ballot (IRIN 2007).

Taking Back the Township in Alexandra and Khutsong

Though it should not be considered a causal factor for the period of violence, the fact is that poor, urban black South Africans are a highly xenophobic demographic, and the prevalence of xenophobia had been rising for more than a decade at the time of the period in May (Crush & Pendleton 2004:15, 17; Phlip 2008). 47 percent of urban residents living in informal settlements, said they "welcomed no foreigners" in 2007. Yet while poor urban blacks apparently did not like foreigners and considered them a problem, evidence suggests that this group considered the presence of foreign immigrants a symptom of deeper government inadequacies—inadequacies which evidently demanded they take the situation into their own hands.

An HSRC study conducted immediately after the period found that in focus groups, natives in Alexandra and other participant townships were outraged with government failures to significantly reduce crime and provide jobs (HSRC 2008). In both these areas, immigrants were said to be either the cause of a problem which the government had failed to counteract (crime),

or their competition was seen as a side effect of the government's failure to create enough of the contested resource to go around (jobs).

Regarding crime, the HSRC study confirmed existing research which suggested native township residents considered the immigrant presence to be synonymous with crime.[2] However, the study went further to say that natives were more upset with corrupt SAPS officers (allowing foreign criminals to escape arrest with bribes) and generally failing to substantively reduce crime (which they blamed on immigrants in the first place) (HSRC 2008:28). Respondents also blamed government for the high number of immigrants in the first place, specifically citing its failures to enforce national borders and curb legal and illegal immigration (HSRC 2008:29). Respondents were also angered by Mbeki's failure earlier that year to resolve the political and economic crises in Zimbabwe, which had spurned much of the immigration in the previous eight years from that country (HSRC 2008:8).

In Alexandra and other townships, the HSRC report found that the immigrant presence in government housing had incited some of the most severe outrage among natives (HSRC 2008: 48). Native residents believed the government should prioritize new housing for them. But that immigrants could occupy and were occupying new government-built houses suggested that the national government was either ignoring a moral obligation to the basic needs of South African poor, or it was simply incapable of seeing those obligations through.[3] As with the issue of jobs, the presence of immigrants exacerbated competition for government housing. Yet that there was competition at all highlighted substantial failure on part of the ARP to build enough houses in the

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[2]   In 2006, 66 percent of respondents to one survey said that a major incentive for immigrants to come to the country was "to commit crimes." One in five said that crime was the only reason. A mere 11 percent said the main reason immigrants came was "to seek a better life" (Phlip 2008).

[3]   It is worth noting here that not all the immigrants who were occupying government houses did so by legal means. The HSRC report found that many natives in Alexandra were angered by corruption within the housing administration which had facilitated an underground subletting market with some residents renting out houses assigned to them to undocumented immigrants for profit (HSRC 2008:37).

first place. Both of these problems could be attributed to the government. For natives, fixing the problem would therefore involve a reassertion of local control where the government had failed. To understand why violent uprising was elected as an acceptable means of dealing with those problems, a critical evaluation of the relationship between natives in Alexandra and the national government is necessary.

Governmental Capacity and the Case of Alexandra

With an explicit legal system, an organized court system and a competent police force, South Africa contrasts to most of the rest of Africa in that it has many of the hallmarks of a state with a high-capacity democratic regime. However, most of that capacity does not register in Alexandra. The first police station in Alexandra did not open until 2003, and at the time it only stationed 290 personnel at any given time to police the township's estimated 850,000 civilians, a police to civilian ratio of about 1:3000, or slightly more than ten times the national average in 2008 of 1:345 (Joburg News 2003; SAPS 2008a).[4] SAPS statistics show no significant decline in crime after the station's opening (SAPS 2008b).[5] We might therefore consider Alexandra a low-capacity sub-region within the jurisdiction of the high-capacity regime of the South African national government. If the corresponding theories articulated in the previous section are right, we can assume that government power in the township was only expanded through a partnership between state agents and residents, wherein responsibilities typical of a democratic regime were only ceded to state agents at the will of local stakeholders.

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[4]   Even more unfortunate is that the figure of 290 includes secretaries, clerks and other non-patrol-officers, meaning that the actual number of officers on the street is lower still (Joburg News 2003).

[5]   A curious, but undated statement issued on the website of a Johannesburg-based holdings firm provides some evidence that the station also suffered from under-funding since its opening and benefited from a fundraiser at a golf tournament hosted by the company. From the statement: "Due to a shortage of funds, the Alexandra Police Station relies on donations from the private sector, including organisations and companies" (Micro*mega* N.d.).

As in a high-capacity democratic state, residents had certain options available for making their political will known to the national government such as voting and organizing, and in 2008, these options were not lost on native residents of Alexandra. The township has historically been and continues to be one of the most politicized in South Africa, with more than 70 percent of residents belonging to a political party or organization (PPTPPSA 2004:1).[6] Most are members of the ANC and in the last two elections, Alexandra has overwhelmingly voted for that party (du Preez 2008).

This last truth would appear to challenge the assertion that residents in Alexandra were disillusioned with the ANC, but in reality, the situation is somewhat more complex. Because of the political dominance of the party and its historically central role in the anti-Apartheid struggle, the party maintains a loyal following among even the most frustrated of voters. After Zuma became president of the ANC in 2007, voters had the option of being pro-ANC without being pro-government for the first time since Apartheid. In other words, one could support the ANC but explicitly claim loyalty to and a preference for Zuma, since Zuma had built a platform on dismantling Mbeki from within the party itself. As Mbeki's influence declined with Zuma's ascent from December 2007 onwards, to the point that Mbeki became a lame duck, that duality became an even more acceptable position among party members. However complex the political loyalties of many of Alexandra's voters may have been, then, it would be fair to say those loyalties remained strong, and that voters had them sorted out for themselves. At the time of the period in May 2008, it is evident that many attackers saw their work as an endorsement of Zuma's presidential bid. The singing of "Umshini Wami"— plainly an expression of support for

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[6]   Combined with either the estimated 15 percent foreign-born (and therefore disenfranchised) figure, or the high percentage of youth (of whom a large percentage are also disenfranchised) and the figure of people who can and do belong to a political party is actually quite enormous.

Zuma — by attackers as they moved through townships should be taken as a deliberate attempt to connect an anti-government message with a pro-Zuma message.

Reports of these violent endorsements should not be taken as evidence that all natives in Alexandra or even all the attackers were in support of Zuma. Nonetheless, it seems indisputable that the people of Alexandra were overwhelmingly favorable of change in government in May 2008. For many, Zuma's populist message was worth believing and supporting. Others may have been more cautious about Zuma, or were disillusioned with the entire ANC establishment and not willing to express support for any of its candidates. But even the most fervent opponent of the ANC would have recognized that Zuma's ascendancy to the South African presidency was as inevitable as Mbeki's fall from it. A shift at the highest level of government was approaching, and whatever one's political affiliation, ensuring that the inheritors of that change understood the wants and needs of the people of Alexandra as leaders of the then-current government had failed to was in everyone's interest. Violently evicting immigrants from Alexandra in defiance of the government was a way to make those interests known loudly and clearly.

But the campaign did meet some immediate objectives its instigators as well. The fact is that the evictors did oppose the presence of immigrants in their areas. Thus, forcing a thousand of them out of the township undoubtedly had some tangible short-term benefit. But aside from that gain, the campaign sent a message to the national government: that Alexandra's partnership with it had effectively ended. In reclaiming those means of control which had been earlier ceded to the government willingly, residents became the local housing authority, immigration authority, and the police where the government had failed to adequately fill those roles. Reasserting power demonstrated not only government ineptitude, but also the underlying autonomy of the township itself. Ultimate control of Alexandra was not in the hands of the state, if it had ever been.

This violent shift against the national government in Alexandra should not be read as an attempt at secession. Although the relationship was severed, new leaders in government who were more attuned to local wants could restore the partnership between the state and Alexandra's residents. Government still had resources which the township did not, and those resources could be amassed to the benefit of the people. But any future government presence in the township would have to recognize that such a partnership could only be restored on the terms of residents. Otherwise, new leaders risked having another uprising on their hands in the future. Here, we can see that by reasserting local control, residents exploited the opportunity provided by a stagnated leadership transition to make their own political interests known to both South Africa's existing and future leadership.

Back when Alexandra Loved the Government

An extraordinary comparison to 2008 can be found in Alexandra less than a year after the ANC first took power. For a period of weeks between December 1994 and January 1995, armed gangs, working with an assortment of local civic organizations, collected and evicted immigrants who they claimed were living in the country illegally in a campaign similar to the one observed in May 2008. Yet in a total contrast to 20008, the gangs marched the captive immigrants to a police station in nearby Wynburg and demanded their immediate deportation (HRW 1998:135). A spokesperson for one supporting organization said, "We are simply doing the job of the police by handing them [undocumented immigrants] over and asking them to be deported back to their own countries" (Debutshena in HRW 1998:135). No reports of an appeal to police remotely like this happened in May 2008.

Why the difference? The months following the 1994 election which ended Apartheid and brought the ANC into power was marked by jubilance in South Africa. Urban blacks especially,

such as those in Alexandra, who had suffered the most of any social group under the old regime, believed they had gained politically. For the first time, natives in Alexandra believed they had a government accountable to them and willing to prioritize their needs. Accordingly, the 1994-95 campaign exhibited a mutual, if citizen-directed partnership between the state and anti-immigrant groups, with local gangs functioning as part of a joint mission with police. Campaign organizers simply trusted that the immigrants would be deported en masse. In fact, most of those left at the station were repatriated (Debutshena in HRW 1998:136). Flash forward to May 2008 and after more than a decade of ineffective housing initiatives, high crime, rampant corruption, ambiguous immigration policies and a collapsing political situation in Zimbabwe— already a cause for mass immigration but which Mbeki denied was a crisis at all (McGreal 2008b) — and it becomes clear why the trust poor urban blacks once held in the government had by then virtually disappeared.

The Khutsong Comparison

In many accounts of the period in May 2008, poverty and frustration with the government services were cited as the primary causes of both existing xenophobic attitudes and the violence associated with it that year. Yet the reality of a nearby township that was structurally similar to Alexandra and equally outraged with the national government reporting not only a complete lack of xenophobic incidents during the period, but actually *protecting* foreign immigrants, poses an outright challenge to those assertions. In searching for a link between poverty and violence, some elaborate attempts were made to propose a theory. One of the more thoughtful of these came through *The Christian Science Monitor*, whose reporters suggested that a surge in food prices not long before May 11 had pushed some people in Alexandra over the edge, turning their existing xenophobic attitudes into violence (Baldauf 2008; Yusuf 2008). The theory was backed with data collected through the aforementioned HSRC report, which said that residents from

Alexandra and elsewhere had become more stressed since the price surge (HSRC 2008: 45). Yet the rise in food prices was global, and any affect it had on levels of stress or quality of life would have been felt among the impoverished in Khutsong as well, of which there were evidently many. The unemployment rate for Khutsong, estimated by trade unions, was around 40 percent in 2006 (Carroll 2006) — not as high as the estimated rate in Alexandra, but still very high.

The state of housing was also abysmal in Khutsong. Although the proportion of informal housing was far lower in Khutsong than in Alexandra, the township still exhibited a number of informal settlements at the time of demarcation (Carroll 2006). Since the demarcation, prospects for housing improvements which the government had promised earlier had become significantly worse, since the switch meant that the required funds would have to come from the cash-strapped North West provincial government (Blair 2006). Alexandra had a "Renewal Project" to amass dedicated resources for new housing projects and the guarantee of presidential oversight. Even if the process of constructing and allocating houses was slow and largely ineffectual, houses were being built. In being demarcated, Khutsong effectively got the anti-Renewal Project: a hold on promises to build more housing, and outright neglect from the national government.

Crime rates are also very high in Khutsong and exceed Alexandra in key areas according to the most recent SAPS statistics. Khutsong has a smaller population than Alexandra (150,000 versus an estimated 850,000), but the per capita murder rate in 2003/2004 was virtually the same in both (~1/7000). It should be noted that the attempted murder rate in 2003/2004 was higher in Alexandra (~1/4800 vs. ~1/7,900) however the rate of "assault with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm" (a more accurate description of the majority of the attacks during the May period than "attempted murder") was significantly higher in Khutsong that year (1/340 vs. 1/624). The statistics are similar for the preceding decade (SAPS 2008a; SAPS 2008b). Khutsong was also

rich with immigrants. Though exact figures are unavailable, estimates have put the immigrant presence between 5 and 10 percent of its total— less than in Alexandra, but still constituting a major part of the community and putting the township far above the national average.

It should be noted that Khutsong does exhibit a number of structural factors which make a non-violent or even anti-violent stance during the period at least a little unsurprising. Foremost among these is that the township served as a labor pool for many nearby gold mines. The mines constitute one reason why Khutsong attracted so many immigrants, since the South African gold mining industry has been historically upheld by foreign labor, constituting up to 40 percent of its labor force in 1991 (Crush et al. 1991). Unlike the informal economy of Alexandra, the relative equality of opportunity provided by a gold mine meant that immigrants would not have posed an economic threat to the majority of Khutsong's population. South Africa has some of the most technically challenging gold mines in the world, which make mining skills vastly more desirable. This means that pay scales in South African mines are dependent on a miner's skills, with the more experienced miners earning more money than less the experienced, less skilled newcomers. Therefore, a flood of immigrants from Zimbabwe into Khutsong would have not threatened the earnings of miners; native residents would have had no economic incentive to deter immigration.

Like in any mining town in South Africa, unions also featured strongly in the life of men in Khutsong, most importantly, the local branch of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), part of the organizational powerhouse, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Since NUM membership is open to all mineworkers and because of its fraternal, openly socialist, fervently anti-racist and anti-xenophobic rhetoric, it is logical that the organization would have been instrumental in forming collective bonds between immigrants and non-immigrants— bonds which, when under threat, non-immigrants would have been willing to protect. But the presence

of unions and a lack of economic incentives to drive out immigrants cannot alone explain why Khutsong residents protected their immigrants or rallied in the street to demonstrate their support in May 2008. Reuters reported that the EPRM platinum mine east of Alexandra, where a number of unionized immigrants were employed, had been "hit hard" by anti-immigrant mobs targeting worker settlements around the mine (Macharia 2008). By May 23, twelve days after the period began, two of the mine's workers had been killed and rumors of attacks were flying at the nearby Lonmin platinum mine where many foreign workers had elected to take their vacation and leave until things settled down (Macharia 2008).

It appears then that a purely structural analysis of the protections in Khutsong is a façade with many cracks, but a culturalist analysis fails to hold up any better. If a cultural disposition towards violence was a causal factor to the period, we would expect that township which acted violently towards its immigrant population in May 2008 (in this case, Alexandra) to have more thoroughly exhibited that culture than its more peaceful alternative (in this case, Khutsong) in the preceding years. Crime statistics alone strongly suggest that levels of violence were comparable in both townships.[7] Yet that these statistics were taken before Khutsong underwent a period of widespread civil unrest which overlapped with the period of xenophobic violence is especially damning. Once more, a deeper analysis is necessary to grasp what happened and why.

Theorizing Peace & the Politics of Protection in Khutsong

The demarcation of the Merafong was the single greatest political calamity in Khutsong since the Apartheid era. Its effect on the political consciousness of the township's natives was total, and was the foremost consideration in every aspect of their political workings, including their counteraction to xenophobic violence in May 2008. By protecting immigrants, Khutsong

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[7]   In fact, prior to 2008, it seems apparent that Khutsong was not above xenophobic violence, either. In 2007, anti-government protests turned violent and resulted in attacks on several Somali-owned shops in events which some analysts say precipitated the period in 2008 (IRIN 2008).

residents similarly exploited an opportunity provided by the stagnated leadership transition in the national government. The demarcation divided the ANC against itself, its supporters, and its historic allies, most notably COSATU. One statement issued by the local branch of COSATU accused the government of not caring "about the views of our people, including our children," and calls the ANC "dictatorial" (COSATU 2007). Such strong language from a historic ally is illustrative of the severity of conflict between the two groups over Khutsong.[8]

But like many South Africans, COSATU's outrage with the government and the ANC did not translate into a total break with either. The fiasco in Khutsong was not the first major dispute between COSATU and top ANC leaders. In 1999, COSATU leaders had a falling out with president Mbeki, after which time Mbeki refused to meet with any trade unionists for over a year (Gumede 2007:395). During that time, Zuma emerged as a conduit between COSATU leaders and Mbeki, making it somewhat unsurprising that COSATU all but endorsed Zuma during his political rise. Similarly, leaders in the anti-demarcation movement in Khutsong voiced their own cautious gratitude for Zuma's bid for the South African presidency before meeting with ANC delegates in March 2008 (Tabane 2008). As one analyst put it, the people of Khutsong told the ANC "We are not against the ANC, but for the people" (Brown 2008). A similar conjecture could be made about the people of Alexandra in May 2008.

As immigrants started to be attacked in townships in Gauteng and government control in Alexandra began to break down entirely, Mbeki's weakened regime looked increasingly weaker. COSATU and the leaders of an organization founded to represent the interests of municipality, the Merafong Demarcation Forum (MDF), already considered allies of the people against the national government in Khutsong, had an opportunity to make a stand against the regime in the

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[8] COSATU is part of the ANC tripartite alliance which spearheaded the anti- Apartheid struggle. In the modern South African flag, adopted in 1994, the green, black and yellow middle arrow symbolizes the ANC, while the adjacent blue stripe symbolizes COSATU. Red is for the South African Communist Party.

president's hour of desperation. Like the campaign waged in Alexandra, protection was a way for these two groups to assert local control in spite of the national government in Khutsong. By protecting a group of people at the exact same time when the government had proven it could not, the campaign in Khutsong made the government look ineffective and powerless in a way that may have been even more effective than causing it instability. After two and a half years of firebombing, the campaign of protection may have been a new approach for outraged citizens in Khutsong: highlighting government ineffectiveness while showcasing the organizational capacity of local groups for positive action through non-violent coordination.

Local organizers may have chosen to protect immigrants out of their own self-interest as well. Since immigrants constituted disenfranchised section of the population of Khutsong, it is possible they were not as committed to the anti-demarcation cause as their native peers. But as violence spread, protection may have been offered in exchange for the promise of future support. This is plausible because the MDF was the organization to lead the campaign of protection in Khutsong (Pithouse 2008). The organization also had leadership ties with COSATU—the leader of the MDF was also a leader in the local branch of the COSATU-affiliated teachers union.

There is additionally evidence of an explicit will on part of the MDF to not only protect immigrants, but to connect that project to its original political mission. In May 2008, The MDF joined the Coalition Against Xenophobia, an association of groups that drafted several public statements during the period either criticizing the government or expressing committed support for immigrants. Of 46 groups to join or support the Coalition, almost all others had broad-based national membership or operated only in Gauteng (CAX 2008a:2-3). On May 24, the Coalition sent an open memorandum to the Premier of Gauteng broadly addressing "the South African government." It listed four demands, at the top of which was a demand that authorities "Provide

immediate emergency support for individuals and families displaced by the current violence" (CAX 2008 a:2). The MDF was a signer to that statement. On May 25, the MDF also signed a "Pledge of Solidarity Against Xenophobia," again drafted by the Coalition, committing it to do everything possible to "stop this violence" (CAX 2008b). On June 6, long after the violence had subsided, some 5,000 Khutsong residents marched with MDF leaders to ANC headquarters to present a list of complaints. Most were related to the demarcation, yet one of the grievances was a demand for Mbeki and the Minister of Intelligence to resign for having failed to "predict" the xenophobic attacks in May (Butjwana 2008).

Why did Khutsong residents, untouched by the period of violence, approach the ANC making such an explicit connection between their stances on the demarcation and xenophobia? A likely reason is that the MDF wished to make a case against the ANC and the government, to say simply that for all its anti-xenophobic rhetoric, the government could not back its words with action. That message would have meshed with the results of the campaign of protection in May, which, in a way, proved that Khutsong residents, COSATU and, most notably, the MDF were simply better at protecting people than the government was. Like the evictions in Alexandra, the protections in Khutsong were about making a statement about government ineptitude and, more fundamentally, reasserting local control in spite of government failures.

Conclusion: Two Ways to Defy a Weakened State

By using violent means to take control of the township, the native people of Alexandra both asserted their township's autonomy and demonstrated that their willing partnership with the government had ended with their patience. The government was weak and the township revolted, twisting the arm of the state and daring the state to stop it. In Khutsong, a different scene ensued in a deliberate contrast to the violence in Alexandra and other townships, as renegade political

and community leaders worked with native residents to resist the state by protecting immigrants in ways that the state had failed to. Looming above either township was a crisis of leadership in the national government which led to political instability. For native residents in both Khutsong and Alexandra, outraged with the national government and intent on sending a message to it, the crisis was nothing less than a political opportunity. To exploit that opportunity, residents of both townships took advantage of the inherent vulnerability and political centrality of their respective immigrant populations— not merely to settle an old score or protect old friends, but to make a point with them because they embodied all that was immoral and dysfunctional with the national government of the time. At the same time, these actors reasserted power in the areas of their domain where the government had failed to live up to the responsibilities assigned to it. Only in Alexandra did residents act violently, but in both, the underlying rationale and the processes at work were the same. The difference in outcome cannot be explained by culture, as culture would assume a universal outcome, nor do mere economic incentives explain the difference. How the residents of each township acted or reacted during the period in May, and why they chose to mobilize at the time that they did can only be explained by the political conditions which beset residents at the time. Nothing else can complete the picture.

There are broader theoretical questions raised following these assertions which may inspire future research. Uncertainties remain about the power dynamics of states which exhibit divided governmental capacity. South Africa is one example of the former, but there are others. More research is needed to understand how residents and governments in those states interact, not just during times of civil breakdown but at all times, including— perhaps especially— during the process of routine claim making.

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A Note on Sources

The data for this paper largely came from the online journalistic accounts listed above. You will

notice many of these sources are referenced to one media outlet but the URL is from another

website. This is the case in two particular news outlets, the South African Press Association (SAPA) and allAfrica.com. The reason for this is that SAPA, like the Associated Press in the United States, only publishes stories through other news outlets. On the flip side, allAfrica.com collects stories from other news sites and publishes them on its website.