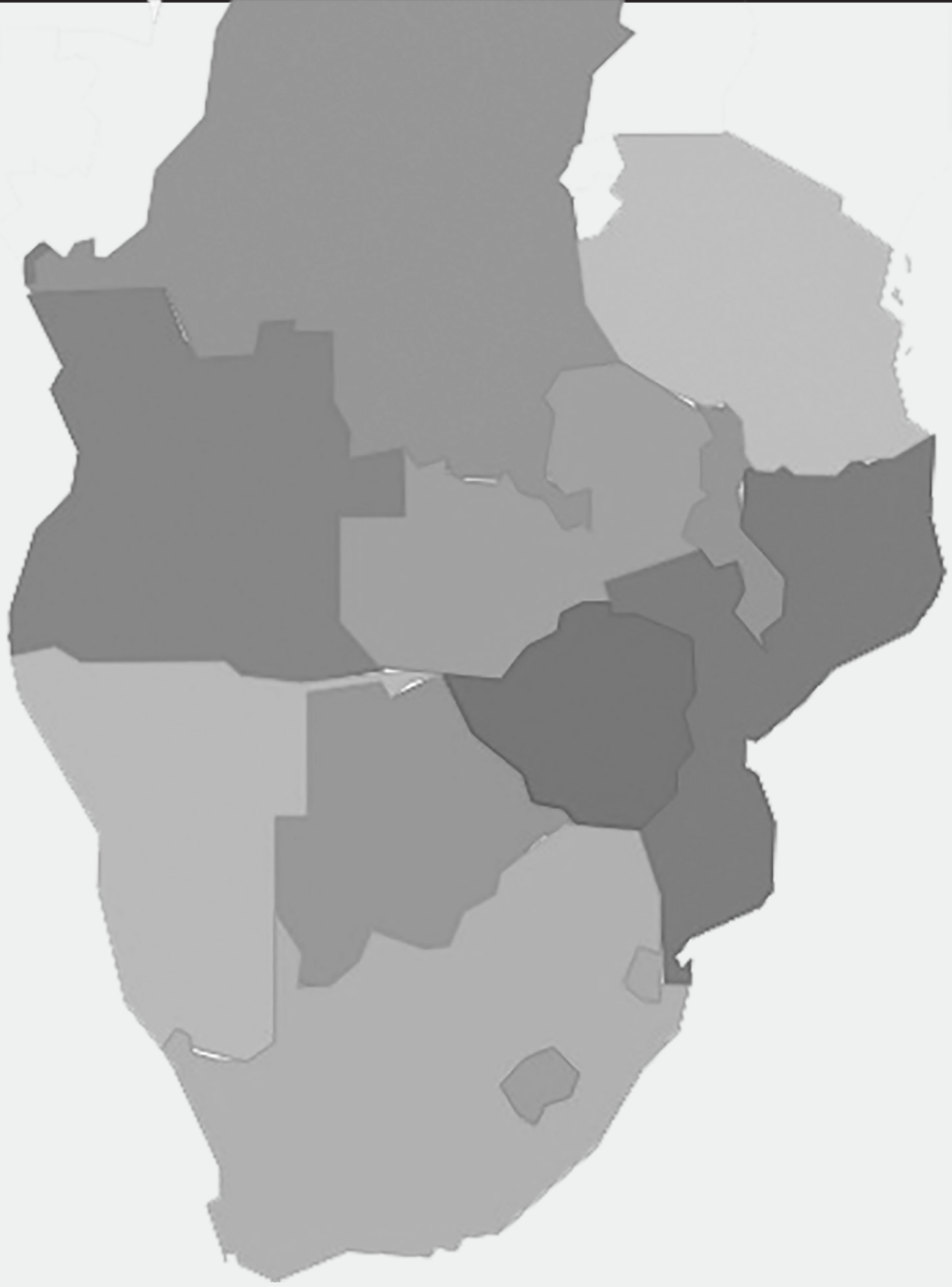

Polarization and Its Manifestations: Xenophobia and Shrinking Civic Spaces in Southern Africa

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About Digital Society Africa

Digital Society Africa (DSA) is a regional organisation dedicated to strengthening the digital resilience of front line activists, human-rights defenders and at-risk communities across Southern Africa.

Founded from the roots of a Harare-based initiative, DSA now operates across multiple countries, offering security audits, digital-risk assessments, tailored trainings, accompaniment and policy support.

By working at the intersection of technology, rights and civic action, DSA advances a vision of empowered communities that can recognise and respond to online threats & thereby protecting their civic space, freedom of expression and socio-political agency.

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Executive Summary

This paper examines how polarisation manifests in Southern Africa in forms, such as xenophobia and the shrinking space for dissent. These interconnected dynamics are explored as key examples of polarisation within the region, with significant implications for democracy, governance, and social cohesion.

Polarisation, characterised as an us versus them dynamic disrupts the social fabric, heightens tensions, and exacerbates socio-political divisions. In Southern Africa, xenophobia is a visible manifestation of societal division, driven by socioeconomic inequalities, nationalist rhetoric, and competition over scarce resources. Simultaneously, the erosion of civic space—marked by increasing restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association—has suppressed dissenting voices, stifled democratic accountability and activism. This has created an us vs. them dynamic even within civil society.

To better understand these dynamics, this research focuses on South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi and Swaziland. These countries share historical experiences of colonisation, liberation struggles, and ongoing post-independence governance challenges, making them ideal case studies for understanding the evolution of polarisation in the region.
This paper addresses three core questions:

1. How do xenophobia and restrictions on civic space reflect and contribute to broader societal polarisation?
2. What are the interconnections between these phenomena, and how do they reinforce each other?
3. What are the implications of unchecked polarisation for democracy, stability, and regional integration?

A mixed-method approach was used, combining quantitative survey data from a limited sample with qualitative insights from interviews and desktop research. Key findings highlight the political and social factors fueling xenophobia, how civic space is shrinking, and the effects of these tendencies on democracy and social cohesion in the region. They also highlight quite clearly the lack of knowledge about polarisation and its implications in the region. This paper concludes with insights from activists and changemakers in Southern Africa and a call to develop community-level depolarisation tools to rebuild trust and cohesion.

Scope of the Research

This research examines xenophobia and shrinking civic spaces as manifestations of polarisation in Southern Africa, focusing on South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, and Malawi. These countries share intertwined histories of colonisation, liberation struggles, and governance challenges in the post-independence era, making them a vital regional lens. Together they reveal regional patterns of socioeconomic inequality and migration that are critical to understanding the drivers and consequences of polarisation.

The research explores three core dimensions:

1. Historical Regional Dynamics: The impact of these phenomena on people-to-people integration, cross-border relationships, and democratic resilience in Southern Africa.
2. Xenophobia: Manifestations of anti-foreigner sentiment and violence, analysing its socio-economic, cultural, and political drivers and how it relates to polarisation.
3. Shrinking Civic Space: The erosion of freedoms of expression, assembly, and association through state actions like restrictive laws, surveillance, and coercion and how it relates to polarisation.

Focus Areas and Boundaries

While this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of polarisation,it intentionally sets these:

- It does not offer a comprehensive historical analysis of all forms of social division or polarisation in the region.
- It refrains from offering bold or direct policy recommendations and does not propose new tools or concepts.
- It does not provide an extensive comparative analysis of xenophobia and shrinking civic spaces beyond Southern Africa to maintain focus and depth.
- Economic policies and trade relations are addressed only where they intersect clearly with the dynamics of polarisation.
- The study's emphasis remains on civil society actors and communities rather than military or security sector dynamics.

Methodological Approach

Drawing primarily on academic literature, civil society reports, and media coverage, this research focuses on the region's people and civil society activities. This focus allows a flexible exploration of how polarisation manifests through xenophobia and shrinking civic spaces, while remaining open to emerging patterns and interconnections identified during the research process.

Introduction and Background

The concept of "polarisation" may resonate differently depending on who you ask. It may be familiar or completely foreign and this disconnect can be attributed to three core factors. First, beyond physics, there is no "silver bullet" definition that fully captures polarisation. Second, much of the conversation is framed by the American political system's "Red or Blue" nature that dominates most contemporary discourse around polarisation. Third, and less visible, is how the discourse of polarisation often is restricted to academic debate, thereby limiting its reach in broader society.

It is critical to hold that polarisation is not locked into specific regions. It is a global phenomenon that has urgent consequences for democracy, governance, social cohesion, and human rights. From the very contentious political landscape in the United States, where divisive partisan politics create gridlocked policymaking, to ethno-nationalism in Europe that has fanned the flames of anti-immigrant sentiments, to the ethno-religious sentiments fuelling violence in West or East Africa and the rise of far-right movements, polarisation is damaging across borders.

Southern Africa faces its own distinct form of polarisation that is shaped by the scars of colonialism and liberation struggles coupled with economic inequality and governance issues. This means that this region offers critical insights into the varying forms of polarisation and how to tackle it.

Recognising this urgency, the need to holistically grasp social dynamics, and for a contextual understanding of polarisation, Digital Society Africa (DSA) focused on identifying the two most notable examples of polarisation in the region. Xenophobia and the shrinking civic space formed the basis of the research, given their significant impacts on social cohesion and human rights. To illustrate the terrible effects of this phenomenon on people and communities, one can recall the 2008 xenophobic riots in South Africa, which resulted in numerous fatalities and displacements. Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe, the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill illustrates or exemplifies how laws curtail NGO activities, stifle dissent, restrict civil society and weaken democratic participation.

To shape our analysis, we utilise clear definitions: Oxford Reference defines polarisation as "an increasingly stark and antagonistic division between political parties, groups, or viewpoints …" It can also be understood as the process where different opinions, beliefs, and behaviours become

increasingly extreme. Xenophobia[1] means fear, dislike, or hatred of strangers or foreigners or anything strange or foreign. The shrinking civic space can be understood as a process in which laws, deterrents, and violence curb the collaborative relationships between civil society and governments or states.

Our research explores how xenophobia and shrinking civic space are examples of polarisation. It also examines their historical roots, as well as their societal and political implications. Our geographical focus serves two purposes: It builds on DSA's existing regional work and enables us to examine local-level dynamics through a broader societal lens.

The project will produce two primary outcomes: a written knowledge product documenting our research insights and an

[1] 'xenophobia' (2024) Merriam-Webster Dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/xenophobia.

interactive learning space. This learning space will share findings and enable collaborative testing of depolarisation tools, assessing their effectiveness in Southern Africa.

To appreciate the relevance of this work in the region, one must endeavour to understand the historical context of Southern Africa. The next section provides a brief yet vivid account of Southern Africa's past - tracing the discovery of mineral resources like coal and gold, their mega-extraction, and the impact these had on the region's people.

Historical context of Southern Africa

The African continent and especially its southernmost region was once home to thriving civilisations, where the movement of culture and people was free-flowing, and agriculture and trade flourished. Artisanal, small-scale mining produced rubies, gems, and gold stretching from the Ashanti region in Ghana all the way to the hills of Great Zimbabwe. This is not intended to romanticise the time before colonisation, nor to deny the existence of bloodshed nor tribal conquests prior to colonial masters arriving with guns. Instead, it is to state what might be obvious: when the first ship reached the shores of the Cape in 1652, everything changed. The subsequent period between 1884 and 1914, known as the "Scramble for Africa," further disrupted and displaced an entire way of being. There are several sometimes varying accounts or books written about the history of mineral resource extraction on the African continent but none paints a visceral historical picture like historian Charles van Onselen.

In his book, The Night Trains, Charles van Onselen[2] explores and alludes to the mental and psychological toll of the long and treacherous train journey that black migrants endured, travelling from the Sul de Save region in Mozambique to the Witwatersrand in South Africa to work in the mines. Too often, we overlook or ignore these mental and psychological scars of history , yet they deeply shape societal sentiments, contemporary culture, stereotypes, and biases. For instance, the scourge of gender-based violence in mining-affected communities in South African communities can be traced to the crude and toxic masculinity cultivated by extractive industries. These industries cultivated a brutal environment, reinforcing harmful norms that persist today. As changemakers, understanding these historical connections is vital to address modern societal challenges effectively. In reading this paper, it is essential to recognise these historical connections, which provide the foundation for addressing regional issues like xenophobia.

At the heart of mining in the region during the 1880s was an exploitative labour system that would shape the societal fabric of Southern Africa. To truly understand the origins of xenophobia in South Africa, we need to examine the black migrant labour system and the harsh conditions it imposed.

The Rise of the migrant labour system

The abolition of slavery in 1834 in the Cape Colony transformed how black African labourers were controlled and exploited. Rather than ending exploitation, the colonial government introduced legislation that aimed at securing cheap black African labour for the booming mining industry and other sectors, especially after the Second World War.[3] Migrant workers were recruited from across the region, with the vast majority coming from Mozambique and Malawi.

[2] van Onselen, C., 2019. The Night Trains: Moving Mozambican Miners to and from South Africa, 1902–1955. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
[3] Malan, T. (1985), 'Migrant Labour in Southern Africa', Africa Insight, 15(2), pp. 103–107. Available at: https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA02562804_725 [Accessed 10 January 2025].

These black migrant labourers, who were men, endured harsh working conditions and meager wages, and were coerced into indebtedness. Following World War II, South Africa's economy diversified, increasing the demand for labour. This shift meant that the mining sector had to compete with secondary and tertiary sectors, which began offering higher wages than mining.

As wages in manufacturing, public, and private construction industries surpassed those in the mining sector, the proportion of black South Africans working in the mines dropped sharply —from 52% in 1936 to just 20% by 1973. Instead of raising wages, the Chamber of Mines chose to keep wages at exploitative pay levels and increasingly relied on foreign migrant labour. By 1973, migrant workers from Malawi and Mozambique accounted for half of the mining workforce.[4] The decision to maintain poor wages and working conditions rather than to draw in foreign black labour has had long-lasting consequences for South Africa and the wider region.

One profound consequence of this system is how it configured the region's economy— labour-sending countries became economically dependent on remittances from the South African mining industry. Today, this legacy means the historical labour-exploiting countries lack sufficient labour-power to build their own economies capable of creating and sustaining jobs. As a result, South Africa emerged as the largest economy in the region that could create and maintain jobs - and the primary route to a better life.

Bilateral colonial agreements between colonial masters facilitated the Chamber of Mines' cheap labour system, and some of these arrangements persisted even after colonisation was dismantled. In The Night Trains, we learn that these bilateral colonial agreements operated as a shadowy private-public partnership shrouded in legal ambiguity. The Chamber of Mines established the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) as its black labour recruitment arm. The WNLA was permitted to operate a private train service on the South African Railways on the Eastern Main Line. This train, carrying migrant labourers, was operated by a private company under a regime that devalued black African lives as important. Thus, the health and safety of these workers was neglected, and the Chamber of Mines' labour practices were largely unscrutinised.

In Mozambique, "Shibalo[5]"—a term Charles van Onselen calls the "bastard child of slavery and indentured labour" —was a state-sanctioned system designed to create a labour "pull" towards the mines in Transvaal. In the 1890s, the Catholic Portuguese government enacted legislation that imposed a moral and legal obligation on black indigenous smallholder farmers to seek waged employment. Employment within Mozambique itself often meant enduring cruel and violent working conditions—making the promise of work beyond the mountains in the Transvaal all the more enticing.

The dehumanisation and disruption of life

The discovery of mineral resources and its monstrous appetite for labour that followed, triggered a colossal campaign for land dispossession and the destruction of rural pastoral ways of life sustained by subsistence dwellers dependent on wage labour. Black Africans forced to travel from the Sul du Save to the Witwatersrand were stripped not only of their way of life but also of their dignity. At the peak of the Eastern Main Line 's operation, black labourers from Mozambique were crammed into trains designed for cargo,

[4] Malan, T. (1985), n3 above van
[5] Onselen, C., 2019 (n2 above)

not people—not human beings. This train notoriously known as the "Kaffir Mail[6]," carried anything but passengers; it dehumanised labour destined for South Africa's gold mines.

The train did not only bring labour in, it also carried it back. After years of grueling, backbreaking work, Mozambican miners were packed into the same cargo trains that brought them to the Transvaal. Although there isn't a vast repository of historical accounts of these mineworkers' lives, some testimony reveals a painful glimpse of the harsh realities into the journey between Mozambique and Johannesburg. In The Night Trains, a young miner recounts life at the labour recruitment camps in Mozambique, where men performed menial tasks like crushing peanuts—often without proper tools—before boarding the trainheading to Johannesburg. During the journey, the train would sometimes stop, and Swati-speaking police would board to search their personal belongings—and sometimes eat the miners' provisions. Those who resisted would be beaten or had marijuana planted on them to justify harassment. New recruits were ordered to distribute bread and jam to fellow passengers/mine workers and refusal meant punishment. The journey was egregious; there were no proper ablution facilities, no proper protection from the harsh weather, and no proper seating in the 14-carriage train that would be carrying approximately 450 labourers biweekly. The young miner recalls that some recruits arrived sick with colds and were forced into lines and beaten with shamboks before starting work.

These testimonies and insights Charles van Onselen shares in The Night Train provide a vital foundation for understanding how deep-seated stereotypes and biases emboldened people to mistreat others—as seen in the police's harsh treatment of new recruits on the train—and how such treatment bred resentment—as seen in how the young miner recalls the police speaking 'Swati'. One can only imagine the many personal stories these miners had and shared with their families and communities. These stories are often told as accounts of a treacherous time, told as cautionary tales that warn young people of the perils of life. Many of us remember when elders in our families cautioned us to stay away from "those" people. The meaning of "those" depends on a personal account that we cannot challenge beyond critique or nuance. This fractured broken telephone nature of storytelling is common across the continent, reflecting and reinforcing the manifestation of divide and rule. At some point, you were told that some groups in society are lazy or subhuman and that you are better than them and so anything that happens to that group is not your concern.

The Chamber of Mines and the South African Railways (SAR) deliberately refused to recognise e black labourers being transported to and from Johannesburg as "mine workers". In the books from the 1910s, these black labourers were dismissively referred to as Native Batches[7], reducing them to cargo rather than people. Therefore, the Eastern Main Line train was transporting "native batches" to work in the mines. It was clear that acknowledging black labourers as mine workers would have consequences of seeing human beings as human beings. There was also the risk of provoking demands like fair wages, better working conditions, and basic dignity-demands under colonial rule and capitalism, that would have been an abomination. These subtle, negative and degrading attitudes by colonial masters towards black African people permeated through how black Africans treated each other. A parallel can be drawn with the plantations in the southern region of the United States of America, where enslaved people who worked in the house were often

[6] Onselen, C., 2019 (n2 above) [7] van Onselen, C., 2019 (n2 above)

treated better than those picking cotton, and the household slaves frequently ill-treated those who worked the land. While there are complex l psychological reasons for this, for the purposes of this paper, it is vital to hold that this behavioural pattern forms the deep roots of the "us vs them" mentality in Southern Africa.

Literature Review

What is polarisation?

Engaging with the concept of polarisation makes one appreciate the statement that polarisation means different things to different people[8]. Most literature on the subject initially delves into the physics of magnets-opposing poles that attract and repel. However, this physical metaphor shapes how polarisation is understood in a socio-political context or process. Yet polarisation is more complex than simply opposing sides. As the Global Initiative on Polarisation notes, there is an urgent need to develop consensus on the fundamental meaning of this process[9]. This clarity is critical because it contributes quite organically to the work towards understanding polarisation. Andreas Schedler, in his paper Rethinking Political Polarization,[10] writes that contemporary discourse or debates about polarisation have been divorced from earlier debates about it. This might explain the absence of a single, clear definition. Polarisation has evolved beyond its original definition, but despite this complexity, we still need to define it or at least attempt to capture its shifting essence—one that continues to profoundly shape societies today.

Engaging with varying forms of literature, polarisation can be loosely defined as a profound fracturing of society that extends far beyond typical political or social disagreements. The first recorded political entry of the word polarisation dates back to 1862, when a commentator of British politics said, "that wretched polarization of our whole national thought…into the two antagonistic currents of common Whiggism and common Toryism." [11] Later, Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori refined this concept within comparative politics, helping us to understand that political polarisation involves conflict beyond mere disagreement on political fundamentals. However, political polarisation understanding is insufficient to capture how polarisation has developed over time.

Toxic polarisation: when divisions become entrenched

Some degree of polarisation is natural— even necessary—for democratic debate and political competition. However, the real concern arises when polarisation turns toxic. Toxic polarisation happens when divisions harden to the point where dialogue breaks down, trust between opposing groups disintegrates, and democratic participation is severely weakened. In this state, differences stop being part of the democratic fabric and instead become seen as existential threats. Such entrenched divisions reduce people to mere group identities, breeding an "us vs. them" mentality, where opposing groups are viewed not just as different but as dangerous, immoral, or illegitimate[12]. The Horizons Project describes toxic polarisation as a condition where "group loyalty overrides critical thinking" and disagreement escalates into dehumanisation. This dynamic is

[8] Coleman, P.T., 2021. The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization. New York: Columbia University Press.
[9] First principles: the need for greater consensus on the fundamentals of polarisation—IFIT (2024). https://ifit-transitions.org/publications/first-principles-the-need-for-greater-consensus-on-the-fundamentals-of-polarisation/.
[10] Schedler, A., 2023. Rethinking Political Polarization. Political Science Quarterly, 138(3), pp.335–360. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqad038 [Accessed 9 September 2024].
[11] chedler, A., 2023 (n10 above)
[12] Coy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, vol. 681, no. 1, 2019, pp. 234–271. online:https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0002716218818782 [Accessed 20 April 2024)

particularly evident in cases when political leaders, media, and institutions actively fuel division to consolidate power, framing opposing groups as existential threats to society[13].

At its core, toxic polarisation's definitions can be stripped away and reduced to an 'us vs them' dynamic, where one group perceives others as a real threat that often can turn into violence. It is critical to hold two key features of toxic polarisation are the dehumanisation and moral vilification of the "other", and an inability to cooperate or find common ground, even on issues of shared concern. In Southern Africa, this fractured discourse is familiar as government officials often vilify activists and civil society, labelling protest actions as barbaric or criminal acts.

The roots of toxic polarisation lie both in social psychology (our tribal instincts) and structural, systemic issues (such as inequality).. While there are other factors that exist, many of them relate back to these two foundations. Media and social media are often cited as drivers, however; the type of media we consume depends largely on how we are socialised and what technologies we have access to. The critical discourse around algorithms creating echo chambers that bad actors can exploit to perpetuate divisive narratives opens us to reimagining technology beyond capitalism. However, this discourse is often embedded in tech fear-mongering that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Indicators of toxic polarisation include a zero-sum mindset, emotions overriding reason and processes of othering and outgrouping. A zero-sum mindset treats politics like a game of winners and losers, where one side's gain is the other's loss. Othering and outgrouping describe how people develop an us vs them mentality and favour their own group while harbouring hostility towards those that they see as outsiders. At face value, these dynamics might seem harmless, like playground disputes, but this playground involves guns, and the consequences are far more insurmountable.

Toxic polarisation feeds on moral absolutism, casting the opposition not merely as wrong but as beyond redemption. It turns disagreement into exclusion, reshaping political, cultural, and economic life into arenas of identity conflict. In Southern Africa, these fractures are deeply rooted in historical inequalities, economic insecurity, and shifting political landscapes, with profound consequences for democracy and social cohesion.
One of the prominent manifestations of this is xenophobia. In Southern Africa, xenophobia evolved beyond economic competition—it is anchored in exclusionary histories, colonial legacies, and deliberate political narratives that frame foreign nationals as threats. The following section explores how xenophobia functions both as a symptom and a driver of toxic polarisation, deepening social divisions and advancing specific political and economic agendas.

Xenophobia in Southern Africa

The severe, painful, and often violent nature of xenophobia in South Africa dominates much of the literature and public discourse on the . However, xenophobia is neither confined to South Africa nor rooted solely in the violent outbreaks of e 1994 or 2008. Engaging with both literature and lived experience reveals a broader reality; it is not just about foreigners; it is that we are African and that there is synthetic competition for scarce economic opportunities. For purposes of this

[13] "Good vs. Toxic Polarization." The Horizons Project, 2021. online:https://horizonsproject.us/good-vs-toxic-polarization-twitt/ [Accessed 5 March]

paper, we use xenophobia and Afrophobia interchangeably, though it is important to emphasize that what truly plagues the continent is Afrophobia-fear and hatred directed against African people themselves-and not solely xenophobia.

Some of the earliest recorded instances of xenophobia in Africa occurred between Ghana and Nigeria in the 1960s. In Ghana, Prime Minister Kofi Abrefa enacted the 'Alien Compliance Order' to drive out undocumented migrants in Ghana[14]. This led to the deportation of approximately 1.2 million Nigerian migrants over the course of a year[15]. Scholars like Everatt argue that xenophobia's roots are complex, arising from intertwined structural social, economic, and spatial inequalities, reliance on cheap labour, entrenched racism, and a history where is frequently used violence to advance sectarian interests[16]. In Southern Africa, the demand for cheap black migrant labour initially drove migration into South Africa. The profitable large-scale mining boom that began in the 1880s with the discovery of diamonds and gold created a voracious appetite for labour to meet the colossal global demand for minerals.

Colonial powers in the region devised multiple strategies to secure a steady supply of cheap black labour for the mines. The displacement and dispossession tied to colonisation were deeply connected to mineral extraction, especially in South Africa. However, black Africans were reluctant to leave their families en masse to work in dangerous underground mines. To address labour shortages and control the black people in South Africa. , British colonisers to the labour reserves in their other colonies[17].

In one of Ruth First's essays written while in Mozambique, explains how the Portuguese maintained their power over their colony—Mozambique, unevenly by proxy.[18]Portugal, struggling financially in Europe and unable to hold firm control over Mozambique, leased parts of its colony to other imperial powers like Germany and Britain. Facing mounting financial challenges and rebellions in Mozambique, Portugal became dependent on foreign capital, making profits i through companies like the British Sena Sugar Estates[19]. These pressures transformed Mozambique into a labour reserve feeding into the cheap labour system started by South Africa's mining boom.

Mozambique's example shows how when a country's labour force works primarily to build another nation's economy, the home country's economy suffers. This forces many migrants to remain where they work, sending money back home. Social complexities arise when the migrant labour force, predominantly men, establishes new families in the country or region where they work, thereby supporting two households. This phenomenon is evident in the consequences of the Marikana Massacre, which profoundly impacted women in mining communities. Capitalism's relentless race to the bottom has created economies across Africa that are structurally incapable of sustaining or creating sufficient economic opportunities for post-colonial African states.

Xenophobia unpacked: othering mentality.

The socio-economic challenges mentioned above have created an enabling environment for scapegoating and harmful laws such as Ghana's 'Alien Compliance Order' and its variants in South Africa. Politicians and those

[14] Paalo, S.A., Adu-Gyamfi, S., and Arthur, D.D. (2022), 'Xenophobia and the challenge of regional integration in Africa: understanding three cardinal dynamics,' Acta Academica, 54(2). https://doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa54i2/2.
[15] Paalo, S.A., Adu-Gyamfi, S. and Arthur, D.D. (2022), n5 above
[16] Paalo, S.A., Adu-Gyamfi, S. and Arthur, D.D. (2022) n5 above
[17] Simpson, T., 2021. History of South Africa: From 1902 to the present. Penguin Random House South Africa.
[18] Ariana (2023) Ruth first. https://thetricontinental.org/text-ruth-first-selected-writings/. Simpson,
[19] Ariana (2023) Ruth first (n9 above)

wielding power often blame migrants for socio-economic ills, reinforcing stereotypes and biases of migrants that link migrants to unemployment and crime[20]. Honing in on South Africa as a contemporary case, xenophobia has become deeply rooted in the country's socio-political fabric. It emerges prominently during periods of social and economic instability and political shifts, revealing a complex interplay between xenophobia and democratic governance.

The social ill of "othering" exploited by capitalism and historically used by the apartheid regime to justify human rights abuses against black South Africans; this is central to understanding xenophobia. Paolo, S.A., Adu-Gyamfi, S., and Arthur, D.D. (2022) explore how xenophobia generates new discourse of 'othering' and belonging. While their definition of 'othering' differs somewhat, their argument aligns with the idea that when perceptions and feelings about the 'other' become extreme, violence and exclusion are rationalized as justifiable.

This "othering" mentality is not only rooted in historical systems of exclusion but is continually perpetuated by today's socioeconomic pressures and political opportunism. By portraying migrants as the root cause of societal issues like unemployment and crime, political actors divert public anger and frustration away from systemic failures and onto vulnerable groups. This manufactured division legitimizes exclusion, violence, and discriminatory policies, all under the guise of protecting local interests. At its core, xenophobia thrives on the belief that the "other" threatens both community survival and identity, reinforcing a vicious cycle of marginalisation and conflict that benefits those who exploit it for political or economic gain.

Narratives and the role of the media

Several hypotheses aim to explain xenophobia in South Africa. The scapegoat hypothesis suggests that foreigners are frequently blamed for limited resources, such as housing, education, healthcare, and employment. The biocultural hypothesis focuses on visible differences or otherness, such as tribal marks and inability to speak indigenous South African languages. Meanwhile, the isolation hypothesis argues that apartheid's end brought South Africans into direct contact with other nationalities, creating space for hostility[21]. These theories manifest in everyday social perceptions, where untested myths about resource competition for resources and economic threats provide justifications for xenophobic attitudes.

A common but unproven myth holds that black African foreigners are taking jobs and resources away from South Africans. Although there is little evidence to support this claim, economic and political circumstances are often used to fuelxenophobic sentiments in South Africa. Between these tensions there is an underlying conflict between migrants and native South Africans. Many South Africans perceive foreigners as carriers of diseases and unfair competitors of local businesses, while some foreign nationals believe that South Africans are lazy and unwilling to work. These mutual myths and stereotypes trace back to the colonial and apartheid rule of "divide and conquer." Moreover, it has also been noted that xenophobic patterns tend to benefit and protect the interests of the white minority, which continues to control a disproportionate share of economic power.

[20] Paalo, S.A., Adu-Gyamfi, S. and Arthur, D.D. (2022), n5 above

[21] Harris, B., 2002. Xenophobia: A New Pathogen for a New South Africa?. In: D. Hook & G. Eagle, eds. Psychopathology and Social Prejudice. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, pp. 169-184.

In contemporary South Africa, media portrayals and political rhetoric have influenced public perceptions and attitudes towards migrants. Politicians have failed to unequivocally condemn xenophobic violence decisively or at times perpetuated such sentiments by citing exaggerated claims about migrants' impact on crime and unemployment. Some local leaders in South Africa have linked crime rates to foreign nationals. Politicians' and government agents' commentary fuels xenophobic attacks. For example, King Goodwill Zwelithini's 2015 statement was widely considered anti-foreigner. In contrast, former President Thabo Mbeki said in July 2008, "I heard it said insistently that my people have turned or become xenophobic... I wonder what the accusers knew about my people, which I do not know" Similarly, Jacob Zuma, stated during a 2023 National Assembly debate in, "I think at times there is a bit of exaggeration where people say xenophobia is a big problem in South Africa. I think that is a bit of an exaggeration, although I am not saying it is not there."

Similarly, media coverage often depicts African migrants negatively, bolstering stereotypes and fear-mongering that exacerbates xenophobia and violence. Some newspaper articles sometimes depict Africans as 'flooding into South Africa,' treating the continent as a homogenous entity with no regard for diverse interests and nations. Instead, Africa is viewed as 'the troubled north', a vague, distant space defined by wars, woes, and poverty. In this way, South Africa is divorced from the rest of the continent. Africa appears as a negative space 'out there', wholly disconnected from the space 'in here'[22]. Undocumented migrants are portrayed as 'Africa flooding across our borders'; and the media often has the inability to distinguish between different categories of migrants. This has led to a generalized hatred of all black foreigners, labelled as 'illegals'. Unfortunately, these perceptions erode public recognition of migrants' human rights, and in turn, contribute directly to increased cases of xenophobic violence.

The Media Monitoring Project (2006)[23] reports that highly emotional media images portraying South Africa as "flooded" or "overrun" by undocumented migrants profoundly shapes public attitudes a. Their study criticizes the media for simplistic coverage that overlooks the complexities inherent in xenophobia and the varied experiences of African migrants in South Africa. Although many migrants enter the country legally, media outlets often categorise all migrants as "aliens" or "illegal immigrants," a particularly damaging catchall phrase.

Print, social, and news media in South Africa have played a significant role in spreading harmful narratives about migrants. Critics condemn print media perpetuating negative stereotypes that fuel xenophobia. Print media has often been cited as a reason for inflammatory anti-foreigner sentiments that have continued to fuel xenophobia in South Africa. Scholars Danso and McDonald[24] identified three main stereotypes that the South African media perpetuate: African immigrants are criminals, job stealers, and carriers of disease. They also observe that media narratives are highly polarised, with one side often focusing only on the negative aspects of African immigrants. Furthermore,

[22] Danso, R. & McDonald, D., 2001. Writing xenophobia: Immigration and the print media in the post-apartheid South. Africa Today, 48(3), pp. 122-131
[23] Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), 2014. Revealing Race: An Analysis of the Coverage of Race and Xenophobia in the SA Print Media. [online] Available at: https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/revealing-race-an-analysis-of-the-coverage-of-race-and-xenophobia-in-the-sa-print-m edia/ [Accessed 26 April 2024]
[24] Danso, R. & McDonald, D., 2001 (n13 above)

this coverage tends to lack critical analysis, uncritically reproducing flawed research and anti-immigrant language.

Broader Implications

Xenophobia disrupts social cohesion, undermines the economic contributions of migrants, and damages regional relationships. Violence against migrants not only violates human rights but also jeopardises the stability and partnerships essential for Southern Africa's future. The roots of xenophobia are deeply complex, demanding interventions that go beyond addressing symptoms to tackling the underlying causes. The following section will examine another critical manifestation of polarisation in the region: the shrinking space for dissent.

On the Shrinking Civic Space in Southern Africa

Civic space means different things by different actors within civil society across the globe. However, some key concepts are common to all definitions. At its core, civic space is an enabling environment where civil society actors can influence policy and engage in political, economic, and social issues of a particular society[25]. Civicus defines civic space as the respect for law and practices that protect the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression[26].

Irrespective of the varying understanding of civic space, its importance to democracy and the human rights system is profoundly invaluable. In Southern Africa, many human rights and social justice victories were won through political struggles enabled by civic spaces where civil society can operate freely. For example, South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) successfully fought for access to HIV/AIDS treatment and the transformation of the healthcare system. Protecting human rights is not through the benevolence of political leaders but it is the result of the tireless efforts of civil society actors working within the civic space.

Discussions on the changes or shifts in civic space brings us to another concept of the shrinking civic space or the shrinking space for dissent. The Transnational Institute (TNI)[27], in a framing paper on "shirking space," defines it as the dynamic relationship between repressive state methods and political struggle. Viewing civic space as a dynamic relationship and not a static concept is critical to understanding the many interconnected factors shaping this reality.

The Context: Then and Now

The literature on the history of civic space and civil society in Southern Africa is limited but does not preclude the vibrant and prominent role civil society has played. If civil society is understood as Mukute and Taylor (2013)[28]describe— civil society being the arena outside the family, the state, and the market. Therefore, this definition connects with our collective memory of thriving community and church groups. We remember social clubs, stokvels and societies that our mothers, aunties, uncles, and fathers belonged to. These groups supported our families and communities to cope and organise against the many painful and undignified hardships imposed by colonisation and liberation struggles.

Mukute and Taylor (2013)[29] write that the

[25] OHCHR (no date) OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space. [online] https://www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space.

[26] Langmar, C. (2019). Do We Still Exist? Experiences and the art of surviving shrinking civic space . [online] Forum SYD. Available at: https://www.forumciv.org/int/latest/report-do-we-still-exist

[27] Transnational Institute. On "shrinking space": a framing paper. [online] https://www.tni.org/en/publication/on-shrinking-space [Accessed 2 August 2023]

[28] Mukute, M. and Taylor, J. (2013), 'Struggles for systems that nourish: southern Africa civil society contributions and challenges to the creation of flourishing societies,' Development in Practice, 23(5–06), pp. 609–616. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2013.800840 . [Accessed 19 March 2024]

[29] Mukute, M. and Taylor, J. (n20 above)

nature of civil society is determined by the context and identify three interrelated phases that define the context for civil society in Southern Africa and the type of interventions available to it. During colonisation, civil society organised and fought for racial justice. For example, Zimbabwe's ,Inter-Racial Association of Southern Rhodesia was founded in the 1950s.[30]The second phase identified by Mukute and Taylor (2013)[31]is decolonisation, when civil society supported liberation movements helped form these movements and engaged in things like civic education to bolster liberation movements. The third,[32] independence phase was characterised by a post-independence honeymoon period where civil society worked closely with the post-independence governments, hopeful that these leaders would address the legacies of past atrocities and transform lives.

As efforts to rebuild and transform society progressed after the liberation struggles, many members of civil society grew frustrated that transformation was not a top priority for new governments. Civil society had to play a more significant role in truth and reconciliation processes needed after colonial settler rule and undemocratic or authoritarian rule such as those led by liberation heroes like Dr. Hastings Banda. In Malawi, government departments addressing reconciliation and reparations were formed. In Zambia and Mozambique, integration programs for ex-combatants were created. However, justice for victims was often incomplete and the recommendations from reconciliation commissions frequently went unimplemented. The lack of political will to address years of violence and subjugation forced civil society to become both "pressure groups" and "service providers." [33] Civil society had to push governments to fulfil promises while simultaneously working to ensure justice for victims.

SADC and civil society

Broken promises and weak governance and a lack of accountability in post-independence and post-liberation struggle in Southern Africa compelled civil society to focus its work on upholding democracy, the rule of law, protecting human rights, and providing humanitarian support.

Incumbent governments prioritised holding onto power and enriching themselves, while socio-economic living conditions for ordinary people were worsening, and something needed to be done. In response, civil society emerged as a critical voice which, at times, vocally challenged the incumbent liberation governments for failing to deliver on their promises.

Political contexts in many African states post-independence were characterised by the rise of African nationalism and a growing intolerance of opposing views[34]. This created the perfect conditions for ethnic/tribal conflicts and authoritarianism. During this period, civil society actors who took the role of "pressure groups" meant that they found themselves as enemies of those incumbent governments. The post-independence and post-liberation eras, the role of civil society as pressure groups, and the establishing an arms-length relationship between governments and civil society signalled early signs of a narrowing civic space in the region.

One example lies in the role of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and its Tribunal. Established in 1992, SADC was a key milestone for civil society in the region's

[30] Mukute, M. and Taylor, J. (n20 above)
[31] Mukute, M. and Taylor, J. (n20 above)
[32] 32Mukute, M. and Taylor, J. (n20 above)
[33] Colvin, C.J. (2007), 'Civil society and reconciliation in Southern Africa,' Development in Practice, 17(3), pp. 322–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701336717. [Accessed 19 March 2024]
[34] Mukute, M. and Taylor, J. (n20 above)

second wave of the post-independence and liberation efforts. SADC succeeded the Frontline States, which was an alliance of seven countries united against apartheid in South Africa.[35] With the end of apartheid, South Africa joined the alliance, and there was a shift towards fostering regional integration under SADC.

SADC established various bodies and committees tasked with advancing equitable economic growth, good governance, and durable peace and security[36]. The assumption was that this would also be a space for civil society to shape regional protocols or decisions. However, reality proved otherwise. The suspension of the SADC Tribunal in 2010 was triggered after the Zimbabwean government rejected a ruling protecting the land rights of 78 white farmers exemplified the fraught relationship between civil society and regional governments. The Tribunal had ruled that the Zimbabwean Land Reform Programme was discriminatory towards these white farmers[37]. The Mugabe administration challenged the ruling's legality, lobbied, and won in convincing the SADC Summit to suspend the Tribunal.[38] At the time, civil society criticised this suspension for occurring without thorough consultation and involvement of other SADC bodies like the SADC Parliamentary Forum.[39]

This move by SADC member states was not unexpected, as civil society groups that challenge governments and refuse to conform to the SADC governments' "cookie-cutter" model, have consistently been marginalised or excluded from key processes such as protocol development. To this day, there are no formal processes for civil society to engage directly with SADC, and the broader civil society continues to lack meaningful influence over SADC processes.

The state of things now

A snapshot of 2010 is a reminder that shifts have occurred and efforts in addressing the shrinking civic space have developed parallel to persistent efforts by those in power to disrupt political struggles. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic became an apex moment exposing new stages of shrinking space for civil society and human rights defenders. The shifts made by governments during the height of the pandemic restricted movement and, by extension, restricted civil society's capacity to work. The interesting and somewhat draconian restriction that did not align with what was necessary for a health emergency warranted donors from the global North to research how the pandemic shrank civic space.[40]

Research by Christian Aid Zimbabwe showed that government imposed restrictions on access to information made it challenging to monitor government activities[41]. Similar restrictions on gatherings and the movement of people hampered civil society operations across the region. Door-to-door support stopped and community-based organisations offering home-based care suspended activities. In a region that suffers from a severe digital divide, shifting activities to online platforms disadvantaged many, especially women and marginalised groups who struggled to connect and access various types of support.

A Good Governance Africa (GGA) report on

[35] Open Society Foundations. The Civil Society Guide to Regional Economic Communities in Africa (2016). (online) https://www.opensociety-foundations.org/publications/the-civil-society-guide-to-regional-economic-communities-in-africa. [Accessed 15 March 2024]
[36] Open Society Foundations. (n27 above
[37] Open Society Foundations. (n27 above)
[38] Open Society Foundations. (n27 above)
[39] Open Society Foundations. (n27 above)
[40] How Covid-19 has shrunk civic space - Christian Aid (July 2022). https://www.christianaid.org.uk/news/policy/how-covid-19-has-shrunk-civic-space(online) [Accessed 20 March 2024]
[41] How Covid-19 has shrunk civic space - Christian Aid (n32 above)

civic space in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic mentions alarming abuses in countries like South Africa and Nigeria, including people being arrested, sexually assaulted, or killed by law enforcement. This period was characterised by an increase in human rights abuses and arbitrary arrests[42].

Human Rights Watch's 2024 World Report documents that in 2023, governments in Southern Africa targeted journalists, activists, and political opposition. While repression and other socio-economic drivers created the conditions for turmoil in the region, the growing clampdown on democratic rights and intolerance of political plurality is a growing concern.

The 2023 People Power Under Attack reported by CIVICUS highlights an even clearer picture of shrinking civic pace in Sub-Saharan Africa. It identifies the top five human rights violations linked to a shrinking space, and these are journalist detention, intimidation, protest disruption, excessive force, and attacks on journalists[43]. The report also highlights the dire risks facing human rights defenders and whistleblowers find themselves[44]. The assassinations of influential and prominent human rights defenders in countries like Swaziland, use of live ammunition against protestors, and widespread intimidation are reminders that civil society actors face worsening and severe changes in civic space.

To understand the historical context of civic space, we must simultaneously know how it shifts or shrinks. Across Southern Africa and the continent, the evolution of civic space is deeply intertwined with our independence and liberation struggles. Therefore, the size of civic space and the strength of civil society depends on its relationship with post-independence or post-liberation governments, whether critical or compliant. Today, the status quo remains, new trends, causes, and implications have changed, with ordinary people bearing the most significant impact of a shrinking civic space. Based on this context, the following sections will explore the causes and governments mechanisms behind this shrinking civic space, the u, its implications, and a comparison between Southern African context and other parts of the world.

Narrowing the Space: what makes a shrinking space

The Transnational Institute's framing paper on the shrinking space identifies at least nine trends contribute to this phenomenon[45]. These trends are neither an exhaustive or absolute list. They manifest differently across contexts. The first trend is 'philanthropic protectionism', describing government-imposed constraints on local civil society organisations (CSOs) receiving international funding. Another trend is domestic laws regulating CSOs' activities. Additionally, risk aversion and securitisation occur when civil society donors or funders limit or suspend funding for grassroots activism or marginalised groups[46].

Interestingly, the same causes of shrinking space can also be seen as evidence of its existence. This train of thought leads us to consider governments' mechanisms to shrink civic space, often grounded in legal restriction or regulation. For instance, Burundi's use of the law as a mechanism is evident in two non-governmental organisation (NGO) bills proposed in 2016 and enacted in 2017. These bills were initially touted as a remedy for affirmative action imbalances. However, upon closer examination, scholars and other members of

[42] Abrahams, N., Wünsche, F., Van Schalkwyk, F., Chidzero, N., Guhr, K., Harrer, A., Heisig, A.-M., and Szilat, J. (n.d.). Shrinking or Opening? Civic Space in Africa during COVID-19. [online] Available at: https://d-nb.info/126701010X/34 [Accessed 20 March 2024].
[43] Africa: Civicus Monitor (2024). https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/africa/. [Accessed on 22 March 2024]
[44] Africa: Civicus Monitor (2024) (n35 above)
[45] Transnational Institute. (n19 above) [46]
Transnational Institute. (n19 above)

civil society discovered a different reality. The incumbent government viewed international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local NGOs involved in political governance as part of an international conspiracy against the government.[47]

In Zambia, the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act of 2021 that was officially meant to protect children online and quell hate speech, is widely seen by civil society in Zambia state that while the law is , it was developed to act as a gag for critics of the government[48]. Similarly, in November of 2021, the Zimbabwean government gazetted a Private Voluntary Organisation Amendment Bill meant to counter terrorism and prevent political lobbying from non-government organisations[49]. In a Daily Maverick article, Thandekile Moyo writes that the bill targets two issues: preventing terrorist organisations using NGOs as fronts to fund their activities, and ensuring that private voluntary organisations do not partake in political lobbying[50]. The article states that, in essence, the bill intends to monitor or even cease funds NGOs received from donors and to silence dissenting voices against the government[51]. A common trend related to this is the wording of each bill is vague, and there is no clear enforcement process, leaving room for arbitrary enforcement[52].

TNI also highlights another mechanism that is not as explicit, that is governments capturing spaces that are traditionally occupied by CSOs.[53] In Southern Africa, this is visible through the establishment of Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs), which create parallel civil society structures favoured by governments and used to delegitimise independent civil society[54]. The use of GONGOs as tools of suppression is evident in how SADC engages with civil society.

Currently, the only entities that have signed an MOU with the SADC Secretariat can engage or collaborate with SADC. Networks like the SADC Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (SADC-CNGO) do not entirely represent the region's diverse civil society. Other networks like the Southern Africa Peoples Solidarity Network (SAPSN) brings together civil society actors interested in SADC but excluded from the SADC-CNGO.[55]

It is concerning that SAPSN consists of people's movements, smallholder farmers, and communities affected by extractivism, which is a significant portion of civil society that does not enjoy the same access to a regional body as government-sanctioned NGOs. Other critical trends highlighted by the TNI framing paper[56] are intimidation, violent attacks, the restriction on freedom of expression or freedom of assembly and association, and the criminalisation of activists and/or human rights defenders. Forms of intimidation range from online slander,harassment, and blackmail to legal actions lawsuits. These trends or suppression mechanisms pose challenges to civil society, significantly affecting how CSOs do their work.

[47] Vandeginste, S. (2019) (n39 above)
[48] Mwango, K.L. (2022) CYBER LAW IN ZAMBIA: Should it be Repealed? Thoughts From a Female Human Rights Defender.(online) https://paradigmhq.org/cyber-law-in-zambia-thoughts-from-a-female-human-rights-defender/. [Accessed on 25 March 2024] [49] Amnesty International (2023) Zimbabwe: President Mnangagwa must reject proposed new law that threatens rights and civic space.(online) https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/zimbabwe-president-mnangagwa-must-reject-proposed-new-law/. [Accessed on 25 March 2024]
[50] Moyo, T. (2023), 'Zimbabwean government passes law designed to throttle independent civil society,' Daily Maverick, 23 January. (online https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-01-23-zimbabwean-government-passes-law-designed-to-throttle-independent-civil -society/. [Accessed on 25 March 2024
[51] Moyo, T. (2023), 'Zimbabwean government passes law designed to throttle independent civil society (n31 above)
[52] Vandeginste, S. (2019) (n39 above)
[53] Transnational Institute. (n19 above)
[54] Wangmar, C (n18 above)
[55] Open Society Foundations. (n27 above) [56] Transnational Institute. (n19 above)

Comparing civic spaces and the implications of the shrink

Recent CIVICUS reports[57] clearly outlines the violation trends affecting civic space. In Africa, five major violation trends, though some are more pronounced in other regions. For instance, in West Africa, the infringement of press freedoms reached new heights, including media suspensions and restricted internet access[58]. In Central Africa, ongoing armed conflicts weaken rule of law and democratic governance. Similarly, in regions like the Middle East, North Africa, and the Americas, human rights defenders are under attack, conditions mirrored in Southern Africa. A recurring theme is journalists being attacked, harassed, and detained. In El Salvador, independent media confront several forms of intimidation.[59]

Available literature reveals that while the mechanisms shrinking civic space are broadly similar in different contexts, the severity of restrictions varies depending on factors like the historical rule of law and respect for civil liberties. Some themes and trends warrant further exploration, including the linkage between extractivism and the mechanisms used to silence dissent from human rights defenders in Africa, a challenge shared by Africa and Latin America, which faces similar challenges in its civic space.

To grasp the full impact of shrinking civic space is to understand its implications, not only for civil society, but the beneficiaries of the communities they serve. It is then critical to understand 'philanthropic protectionism' where local NGOs receiving funds from international donors face funding cuts they need to operate and, in some instances, to provide the much-needed services people need, such as home-based healthcare or shelters for victims of abuse and violence. The persistent assaults on civil society's operational space reveals power dynamics aimed to perpetuate impunity and systemic harm. When CSOs navigate numerous regulatory requirements for their existence and operation, it significantly diverts their time and resources to their core activities. Attacks on freedom of assembly and association prevent civil society from organising, campaigning or engaging in visible political struggle. When the government muzzles the opposition, preventing civil society from speaking out or engaging with the government, we risk a collapse in governance and democracy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, movement restrictions trapped many women living in abusive households, forcing them to remain in close proximity to their abusers. CSOs, often unrecognised by governments despite providing basic services, found it increasingly difficult to meet

[57] Africa: Civicus Monitor (2024) (n35 above)

[58] Africa: Civicus Monitor (2024) (n35 above)

[59] Americas: Civicus Monitor (2024) (n35 above) https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings2023/Americas.pdf [Accessed on 27 March 2024]

[60] Southern Africa Litigation Centre (2018), 'Reflecting on the Closing of Civic Spaces and its impact on Marginalised Groups in Southern Africa', (online) https://www.southernafricalitigationcentre.org/2018/11/13/publication-reflecting-on-the-closing-of-civic-spaces-in-southern-afric-a/ [Accessed on 18 March 2024]

[61] Hodgkinson, D. and Nizalov, A. (2015), 'The Effect of Civil Society Space on Aid Allocation', Journal of Development Studies, 51(5), pp. 523-537. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2014.979166

While this might very well be true, those who benefit the most from shifts in the civic space often include GONGOs or NGOs that adopt a non-adversarial, diplomatic stance towards the government.[62] Despite all these dynamics, we are still seeing new trends of mechanisms of suppression that are enabled by technological advancements.

At its core, the shrinking civic space is underpinned by a tug-of-war for power. Governments endeavour to consolidate control through legislation that hinders civil society's ability to operate effectively. This manifests in many forms, including legal restrictions to physical violence, digital surveillance, and censorship.

The implications of shrinking civic space are extensive and profound, affecting not only CSOs but also the democratic governance in the region. When civil society is prevented from performing its crucial functions, society's most vulnerable suffer the most. The COVID-19 pandemic's movement restrictions exposed the essential role that civil society plays in delivering services for marginalised groups.

Some may argue that shrinking civic space for some sectors of society creates opportunities for others. However, this paper attempts to posit that the overall impact is detrimental. The rise of GONGOs and the "strategic non-confrontational" stance adopted by certain NGOs do not compensate for silencing critical independent voices that confront power, advocate for substantive change, and defend human rights.

The future of civic space in Southern Africa hinges civil society's ability to anticipate and counteract both traditional and emerging threats. This requires advocating for policies that promote transparency and accountability, while leveraging digital tools to foster an inclusive and participatory democratic culture. Through this lens, current trends, challenges, and strategies for civil society must be understood within the broader global landscape of shifting power, rights, and freedoms.

Polarisation Unveiled: Grounded Insights

This section captures the insights and observations from our 12-month research project on polarisation in Southern Africa. Our goal was to understand how polarisation manifests in the region and integrate it into the discourse among activists, changemakers, and human rights defenders. Drawing on the experience of activists, media practitioners, technologists, and existing literature, we bring these perspectives to the forefront.

How xenophobia and the shrinking space relate to polarisation

Polarisation, introduced earlier in this paper, is the intensification of social, political, and economic divisions to the extent that they significantly hamper societal cohesion and undermine democracy. In Southern Africa, polarisation is prominently reflected by xenophobia and the shrinking space of dissent. Both serve as symptoms and a catalyst of deeper societal divisions.

Xenophobia in Southern Africa, particularly in South Africa, exemplifies how economic insecurity and historical grievances can foster intense social divisions. The scapegoating of migrants, especially from other African countries, for various socio-economic issues like unemployment and crime not only exacerbates existing tensions but also solidifies 'us versus them' mentalities. Such

[62] Wangmar, C (n18 above)

'othering' deepens social divisions, creating an environment where hostility and violence become justified responses to perceived threats. Ultimately, this polarisation reflects not just attitudes towards foreigners but is emblematic of deeper issues related to identity, belonging, and economic competition that plague the region.

Similarly, the shrinking civic space in Southern Africa highlights how restrictions on civil society's ability to operate, engage, and dissent fuels societal polarisation. As governments impose legal and physical constraints on activists, NGOs, and media, they narrow the space for constructive criticism and meaningful debate. This exclusion deepens the divide between the state and its citizens. The curtailment of civic freedoms often leads to select voices being heard and legitimised, while marginalising and alienating those who oppose or critique the status quo. This environment discourages dissent and demonises opposition, thereby contributing to intensified polarisation.

The linkages among xenophobia, shrinking civic spaces and polarisation are further compounded by the role of media and political rhetoric that often reinforce divisive narratives. Negative depictions of foreign nationals and oversimplifying complex social issues, shape public perceptions and attitudes, further entrenching polarisation. Political leaders who fail to address

these issues constructively or exploit them for political gain contribute to a polarised societal landscape where consensus and mutual understanding become increasingly elusive.

Engagement Instances and moments to learn

Digital Society Africa (DSA) convened three critical engagements focusing on polarisation, involving various individuals and activists. These forums enabled us to share our understanding of polarisation and assess participants' familiarity with the concept or process, their prior exposure to it, and their ability to identify its manifestations in their respective fields of work and contexts. Complimenting this, we held closed-focused interviews and conversations with regional activists and media practitioners for deeper insight.

In May last year, as part of DSA Network Huddles, short online learning sessions with 15 to 20 participants addressing critical socio-political and digital rights topics, focused deeply on unpacking polarisation, examples of it, and its fundamental tenets. Activists in the huddle noted that they were either unfamiliar with the term or had not fully understood its relevance to their work. Some participants initially viewed polarisation as a mere linguistic concept, not recognising its broader socio-political implications.

Insights from the May Network Huddle informed the conception and design of the polarisation session at the annual DSA #ConnectCon. This session brought together a diverse group of participants who would be attending #ConnectCon. Our goal was to share and refine ongoing work on polarisation with activists, journalists, technologists, researchers, and experts.

We designed the space to have a dual purpose —act as a roundtable and as a mini-panel discussion. The session was a bold mix of hard truths and ideas delivered by three panellists leading regional voices on the media, polarisation, and activism. One panellist challenged participants to reflect on whether polarisation is harmful for society. Another, from the Institute of Integrated Transitions (IFIT), shared their work on polarisation, revealing alignments and synergies in our approach. The third panellist, head of the

Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), analysed the shrinking civic space through the lens of attacks on journalists in the region.

Based on the panellists' contributions, we (DSA) shared our ongoing research grappling with polarisation. This allowed us to test assumptions and identify future areas, such as exploring the relationship between big tech and governments and the potential rise of digital authoritarianism. Audience engagement helped shape the next steps for the research. Participants posed invaluable questions around polarisation concepts and began mapping its manifestations in their work and contexts. One attendee reflected xenophobia as polarisation manifestation in Southern Africa as they drew from lived experiences of tensions that exist in public discourse around migrants and labourers in contemporary South Africa.

Two critical insights emerged from these engagements: First, polarisation is not universally understood, even among those who experience its effects daily. Second, polarisation in Southern Africa is deeply embedded in systemic inequalities, historical grievances, and the evolving role of technology. These insights reinforce our research findings, which are the urgent need for tailored tools and a shared vocabulary to collaboratively confront polarisation.

The last and most significant moment of engagement was the DSA Polarisation Learning Space, a three-day program that brought together 21 participants from Southern Africa for collective learning and tool testing. The program explored how toxic polarisation manifests through xenophobia and shrinking civic spaces. It evolved organically in response to the indepth participant engagement. Day one began with an introduction to polarisation, sparking intense and insightful discussions. These conversations proved so valuable in surfacing real-world experiences that we extended the plenary, allowing participants to thoroughly explore how polarisation manifests in their work and communities.

The final day proved pivotal not just for the learning space but for the overall research project. The most consequential element of the research project was identifying tools, techniques or tips for depolarisation tailored to our regional context, such as resources to empower changemakers confronting polarisation. We drew quite extensively from the work of Peter T. Coleman and his book The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarisation. As mentioned above, DSA has been focusing not just on polarisation as a whole, but on toxic polarisation. Peter Coleman's research and the efforts of his teams provided some tangible building blocks and guiding insights that shaped DSA learning.

We distilled key tools and activities from Coaleman's work, such as identifying the difference between cloud and clock problems and "attractors" that we think are a critical nugget in depolarisation work. Coleman defines attractors as change-resistant patterns,habits, or states of being that we tend to get stuck in[63]. Understanding attractors is crucial to the process of identifying that polarisation can manifest in ways outside US-centric understandings. It serves as a compass pointing to us vs them dynamics and what might cause them. For instance, what are the behavioural patterns that emerge during an election cycle? Or what sentiments or discourses arise when there is a protest or unrest? More crudely, how do f SADC member states behave when hosting the SADC Heads of State Summit? Regional activists have shared personal accounts of what they have observed or been subjected to.

[63] Coleman, P.T., 2021 (n8 above)

The learning space explored the basic building blocks of depolarisation tools, such as the difference between 'debate' and 'dialogue', and conversational techniques like 'reframing conversations' or 'focusing on creating common ground'. Participants practised some of these techniques through group work and role-playing exercises. What was helpful was that activists who regularly confronted state power or government officials found these techniques implementable in meetings with these officials. One deeply sobering, yet thought-provoking session examined shrinking civic space through the practical lens of cyber security and the emerging trends of soft digital authoritarianism in the region.

The learning space collected learning data through two concise online surveys. The first survey assessed participants' knowledge and understanding of polarisation, and the second tracked progress and evaluated the effectiveness of the learning space. Participant selection was highly intentional, with some having engaged DSA through the network huddle and #ConnectCon and now the learning space - allowing us to track and understand the levels of comprehension on polarisation over the course of the research project.

A Shift from Theoretical to Practical Understanding

By the end of the learning space, 80% of participants felt confident explaining polarisation to others. A major shift occurred where participants moved from seeing polarisation as a distant or abstract concept to recognising it as something that directly affects their activism, organising, and advocacy work. The most significant change was in participants' capacity to identify how polarisation manifests in their communities, with several reflecting on how divisive narratives are reinforced through local politics, media, and even civil society spaces.

From Awareness to Action: Identifying the Most Useful Strategies

Participants were highly receptive to practical depolarisation tools introduced in the learning space, particularly those that could be integrated into activism and political work. The most frequently cited technique was 'reframing conversations'—an indicator of activists' preference of practical, interpersonal strategies with immediate application rather than broad theoretical interventions. Additionally, methods such as finding common ground, deep listening, and recognizing attractors were seen as valuable in contexts where engagement with opposing perspectives is necessary, such as policy advocacy and coalition-building.

Barriers to Implementation: Structural Resistance and Entrenched Narratives Despite growing confidence in understanding polarisation and applying depolarisation techniques, participants flagged several barriers to implementation. These included:

- Resistance to new approaches – Many expressed concern that communities deeply entrenched in division would resist depolarisation efforts. Some noted that political leaders and media actors actively reinforce divisions for their own gain, making structural change difficult.
- Contextual Adaptation – While depolarisation frameworks were useful, several participants felt that existing tools were better suited for formal political spaces and required adaptation to fit grassroots activism and community organising.

These findings underscore quite significantly two key takeaways. The first is that curated, focused or topical learning sessions on polarisation are critical. Second, ongoing

support for changemakers, activists and human rights defenders to navigate practical challenges of implementation in their contexts is to effectively address toxic polarisation. This reinforces the critical need for context-specific depolarisation tools. While existing techniques offer a foundation, participants expressed a strong demand for tools that are tailored to their socio-political realities.

Observations through conversations and research

In a conversation with a woman human rights defender from the region, we were able to gain insight into their lived experiences of a shrinking civic space. Although the conversation was initially focused on this, it took an interesting turn when we shared our research project. A standout question emerged: Why did DSA focus on the two manifestations of polarisation: xenophobia and the shrinking civic space? The short answer is that DSA is a regional organisation, so the issues we grapple with are prevalent in Southern Africa. The long answer is linked to the unanswered questions and gaps that exist in the contemporary work around polarisation.

A fundamental truth is that most depolarisation work is quintessentially reactive. Therefore, the tools and techniques respond to an already volatile or highly charged situation. One often sees some of the tools and depolarisation techniques mirroring peace and conflict resolution strategies seen in religious or ethnic tensions/conflicts across the continent. While this is important work, this reactive stance contrasts with DSA's approaches. By focusing on xenophobia and the shrinking civic space, we invite a deeper exploration of polarisation, the us vs them dynamic, from its potential roots. We view polarisation not as a destination but as a process of constant inertia (borrowing from the physics definition).Most importantly, we aim to implement proactive efforts that foster common ground in the fight for justice, equality and the protection of human rights, thereby shifting focus from crisis mediation to prevention before violent rupture takes place.

Other conversations throughout the project related to xenophobia and the role media plays in perpetuating harmful narratives, especially about migrants. This pattern extends beyond South Africa to countries like Swaziland, where crime reporting is sometimes skewed towards portraying black migrants in a stereotyped, negative way. Intriguingly, was the dispelling of an assumption that is nurtured by a left tradition of thinking, that the media is a function of the elite and it is as organised as the elite that seeks to exploit for profit.

A seasoned media practitioner shared a contrasting view about what happens in a newsroom. The notion that media content is a deep and serious orchestrated process by nefarious puppet masters is not entirely true. There is a chaotic buzz in the newsroom as journalists chase stories,

follow up on leads, and produce segments. Most editorial decisions are based on what would generate the most buzz and, bluntly, what would make the media oligarchs the most profit. This is not to deny that some elite nefarious puppet masters seek to manipulate public discourse for personal gain. What this point offers us is vigour and hope. We can leverage our energy as changemakers to collaborate with media practitioners to explore new forms of media or new platforms that decenter sensationalism and profit but focus on sparking conversations and informing people.

This media insight organically links to the call for contextual depolarisation tools. Imagine the sustained development and support for community media platforms serving as proactive depolarisation tools. Picture community-developed newsletters,

zines, and radio shows prioritising informing people and providing a space to debunk any misinformation. This concept can be expanded into creating small regional hubs as civic centres. The idea is not to scale them so these sites are local and serve their immediate communities. Such spaces can offer different forms of education and training, such as digital and cyber security training as well as depolarisation techniques. They could also serve as advice offices.

Conclusion

This research makes clear that polarisation in Southern Africa is more than ideological differences or political divides—it is deeply historical, systemic, and structural. It is embedded in how societies were built, economies were structured, and how power is continually contested. Xenophobia is not simply a result of recent political shifts or economic downturns—it is rooted in colonial labour exploitation, post-independence governance failures, and the enduring struggles over belonging and access. Similarly, the erosion of civic space is not incidental—it is a deliberate strategy used to control narratives, suppress opposition, and consolidate power.

A crucial insight emerging from this research is how xenophobia and the shrinking civic space mutually reinforce each other. While xenophobia is often framed as a response to economic precarity, it serves as a political instrument—a convenient way to redirect public frustration from governance failures and towards a constructed “other.” Consequently, the shrinking civic space and attacks on independent media increasingly target those who challenge harmful narratives or attempt to hold the state accountable . This results in a feedback loop of exclusion, where political and economic crises deepen public mistrust, and mistrust fuels further polarisation.

Addressing polarisation requires intentional, sustained efforts that move beyond merely diagnosing the problem toward interventions that build trust, encourage dialogue, and create alternatives to entrenched divisions. These efforts must tackle root causes and not just symptoms. While existing tools, techniques and frameworks are phenomenal and have taken years of work to develop; they still fall into the trap of being solely reactive. As readers are

acutely aware of the challenges humanity faces, it is clear that we, amongst many things, need to shift toward proactive approaches. We need to equip activists, changemakers and human rights defenders with tools to empower them to move beyond constant defence and reaction.

The research provided three concise proposals for stakeholders;

- Activists and civil society urgently need to create more spaces to collectively unpack polarisation, test depolarisation tools, and develop new strategies for resistance.
- Policymakers and regional bodies like SADC, need to move beyond securitised, knee-jerk responses to migration and civic unrest, and instead develop frameworks that strengthen inclusion, protect civic freedoms and human rights, and address the root causes of inequality.
- All stakeholders, monitoring emerging trends is essential.
- Beyond xenophobia and shrinking civic space, digital authoritarianism, misinformation, and algorithm-driven division are deepening polarisation. Ongoing research and action must track these shifts and their impact on democracy and civic engagement.

Addressing toxic polarisation goes beyond reducing tensions but requires fundamentally rethinking how democratic spaces are built and sustained . The patterns of exclusion, othering, and shrinking civic space outlined in this paper are not inevitable—they are from deliberate systems and political choices. Breaking these cycles requires intentional, sustained efforts to challenge the status quo, create shared engagement spaces, and dismantle barriers that sustain division.

This research project is an experiment striving to surface complex ideas and unexpected intersections. Like any collaborative and evolving research process, it has undergone shifts and pivots—some driven by internal reflections, others by external constraints. One ongoing challenge is the gatekeeping of knowledge and tools, a barrier that should not exist in a world facing multiple intersecting crises. The systems we operate within often starve plurality and restrict access to transformative knowledge, making it all the more critical for changemakers across sectors to build collaborative solutions rather than replicating existing silos.

One lesson remains clear as we navigate these tensions: we share more than we differ—a powerful reminder from Peter T. Coleman that resonates deeply in a world where division is often engineered, but solidarity remains our most incredible tool.

Appendix A:
Expanded Next Steps – Moving from Understanding to Action

This appendix outlines key areas for further exploration and action based on the insights of this research. While this study has mapped polarisation in Southern Africa, particularly through xenophobia and shrinking civic space, it is clear that the understanding alone is insufficient. Addressing toxic polarisation requires ongoing engagement, practical interventions, and collaborative strategies. The following recommendations highlight critical areas for continued research, tool testing , and collective resistance to the structural drivers of polarisation.

1. Expanding the testing and development of tools

While the research project explored depolarisation techniques, their effectiveness requires further testing and proactive reimagining. Future work should involve structured experimentation in activist spaces, media landscapes, and community organising efforts. Facilitating pilot programs enabling activists, journalists, and civic actors to apply these methods in real-world scenarios will provide valuable insights into what works and what needs adaptation for local contexts like Mozambique, Lesotho or Zimbabwe.

2. Strengthening Digital Resilience Against Polarisation

As digital authoritarianism, misinformation, and algorithm-driven polarisation intensify, it is critical to monitor and counter digital spaces that are reinforcing polarisation in the region. A dedicated follow-up study might assess:

- How state-led surveillance, disinformation campaigns, and algorithmic bias contribute to shrinking civic space.
- What digital tools and strategies activists can use to counter these threats.
- How regional actors can advocate for online protections while pushing back against repressive digital policies.

3. Deepening Community-Centric Approaches

Polarisation is not just a macro-level issue but it is deeply embedded within communities. Interventions must be community-driven rather than externally imposed . Future work should focus on:

- Strengthening grassroots conflict resolution that fosters trust across divides;
- Training local mediators and facilitators to navigate community tensions;
- Developing alternative media platforms that counter dominant, divisive narratives with nuanced storytelling and community engagement.

4. Building a Regional Network of Polarisation Researchers & Practitioners

Sustaining this work requires a network of researchers, activists, and civil society actors who can share insights, track emerging trends, and test interventions. Establishing a regional working group on polarisation would:

- Create a space for ongoing dialogue and resource-sharing.
- Enable cross-border collaboration addressing xenophobia, shrinking civic space, and misinformation.
- Build a collective body of knowledge on polarisation extending beyond Southern Africa to other affected countries.

5. Advocating for Open Civic Spaces and Anti-Xenophobic Interventions

- Polarisation thrives amid exclusion and repression. Civil society must actively engage policymakers, regional bodies, and international partners to push for:
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- Legal protections for civic freedoms and human rights defenders;
- Policy shifts that address xenophobia not just as isolated incidents but as a systemic issues linked to governance and economic inequality;
- More vigorous regional and continental advocacy is needed to ensure that frameworks like SADC protocols and AU human rights mechanisms are leveraged to counter polarisation.

Final Thoughts

This research project is not the final word on polarisation in Southern Africa. Instead, it serves as a starting point for deeper engagement, experimentation, and strategy-building. The challenge ahead lies not just in studying polarisation but in actively confronting it—through shared knowledge, strengthened networks, and collective action.

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