

Framing *Operation Dudula* and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in South African Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Vigilante groups targeting immigrants have materialized globally, with risks of violence and strained intercommunity relations. South Africa's *Operation Dudula* campaign, claiming to tackle immigrant criminality and job losses, requires academic examination given limited research on media framing of modern anti-immigrant movements. Furthermore, theoretical insights around social construction and what constitutes intolerable vigilantism remain underdeveloped. Therefore, this research conducted a qualitative content analysis of six South African media articles featuring *Operation Dudula* published after its leader's arrest. Explicit focus was placed on analysing dominant frames and social constructions related to immigrant impacts and acceptable actions. Findings reveal key tensions around perceived foreign worker consequences alongside framing of *Operation Dudula* as either countering unemployment or enabling dangerous exclusion. Results indicate that selective discursive representation plays a role in legitimizing anti-immigrant group activities. However, absolute notions of direct construction are philosophically contradictory, necessitating deeper analysis of complex dynamics. Ultimately, this research contributes empirical insights and theoretical refinements to extend conceptualizations of intolerant vigilantism as well as inform policy decisions promoting social cohesion amidst economic frustrations. It concludes by offering contextualized recommendations combining socioeconomic inclusion, human rights protections, and elevating nuanced public discourse.

Keywords: *operation dudula; vigilantism; media discourse; framing theory*

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INTRODUCTION

Research on anti-immigrant movements has analysed their emergence, drivers, functions, and impacts across diverse contexts from the US to Europe (Blee & Latif, 2019; Laryš, 2019). However, few studies have focused on the specific framing of such groups within media discourse, especially for the recent *Operation Dudula* campaign in South Africa. This research gap is significant given evidence on how media representations enable or restrict the activities of vigilante organizations (Ralph-Morrow, 2019). Furthermore, prior literature overlooks theoretical intricacies around notions of "social construction" in relation to anti-immigrant groups. Absolute conceptions of direct construction are philosophically problematic (Aktok, 2022). Therefore, this study's examination of *Operation Dudula*'s multifaceted media framing helps address unresolved complexities in understanding modern xenophobic movements. Applying framing theory and social constructionism, this research conducts a qualitative content analysis of *Operation Dudula*'s portrayal across two South African publications. Analysis of dominant frames and tensions around immigration expands academic insight. Findings are also positioned to inform policy and media responses to balance complex dynamics like underlying economic frustrations versus vigilantism risks in this societal context. Ultimately, illuminating nuances in anti-immigrant discourse has value for



scholars and decision-makers aiming to promote social cohesion. The researcher next presents this study's theoretical framework.

Framing Vigilantism

There is a plethora of studies on vigilante groups targeting migrants globally. Researchers have developed conceptual frameworks to define vigilantism and categorize its various forms, explore its drivers and functions, and examine its relationships with state actors, political movements, and the broader society. Scholars define vigilantism in various ways depending on empirical contexts (Moncanda, 2017). Earlier definitions focused on extra-legal violence by non-state actors, while newer conceptualizations view vigilantism more broadly as informal policing through threats or displays of violence (Gazit, 2015; Mareš & Bjørgo, 2018; Moncanda, 2017). Mareš and Bjørgo (2018, p. 5) define vigilantism as "organized civilians acting in a policing role without legal authorization, using or displaying violence, claiming authorities are unable/unwilling to handle crime." Researchers have developed typologies based on diverse criteria. Rosenbaum and Sederberg (1974) categorized vigilantism by intended purposes: crime control, social group control, and regime control. Kowalewski (2002) distinguished groups based on violence intensity. Marx and Archer (1971) examined relationships with the state. Mareš and Bjørgo (2018) considered organizational forms, political backgrounds, longevity, and geographical scope.

Several vigilante groups have mushroomed globally with varying motives. One study by Ralph-Morrow (2019) discussed Britain First, a far-right, anti-Islam group in the UK. Britain First was founded in 2011 by former BNP members. It opposes immigration and multiculturalism, claiming they threaten British culture and security. The group engaged in vigilante actions like "mosque invasions" and "Christian patrols" from 2014 onward. They filmed these and posted videos online to promote their cause. Britain First justifies its actions by claiming it is protecting Britain from militant Islam and stopping crimes like "grooming gangs". However, critics see the actions as threatening and intimidating Muslims. Though Britain First shares some ideologies with earlier far-right UK groups, its distinctive features are its religiosity and emphasis on vigilantism. It portrays its actions as a religious "battle". According to Ralph-Morrow (2019) the activities of Britain First were being contained through social media crackdowns and legal sanctions have reduced its online reach and ability to engage in vigilantism. Thus, it can be argued from the case study of Britain First that social media crackdowns and legal sanctions are key in curtailing the activities of vigilante groups.

Other vigilante groups that have emerged globally include the Ku Klux Klan in the USA, Soldiers of Odin originally Finnish but is now an international franchise and the Jewish vigilantes in Israel. Blee and Latif (2019) discussed the Ku Klux Klan in the US. They note that the KKK engaged in terrorist violence and lynchings of black people, justified as a way to "enforce white supremacy" (Blee & Latif, 2019). In a study focused on Russia, Laryš (2019) mentions vigilante groups and skinhead gangs that targeted migrants and LGBT people from 2006 to 2010, motivated by anti-foreigner and anti-gay sentiments. While in Bulgaria, Dzhekovska and Stoynova (2019) describe groups that attempted to stop immigrants entering the country to "protect their own country". Kotonen (2019) and Archambault and Veilleux-Lepage (2019) reveal that the Soldiers of Odin, an international vigilante franchise that began in Finland has spread to Canada. Their stated aim is to "protect people from violent behaviour" and "stop migrant crime". However, many members have extremist and racist views. Gazit (2019) state that Jewish vigilantes in Israel have targeted Palestinians in the West Bank. Some Jewish vigilante groups on the occupied West Bank have committed violence against Palestinians. They justify their actions as a fight against "immigrant criminals" and to "protect Israelis". Overall, the literature reveals a range of vigilante organizations operating across the world, targeting minorities through violence and threats, and justifying their actions in terms of protecting

their nation, culture, or religion. These studies reveal that anti-foreigner sentiments and vigilante groups are not a South African phenomenon, but other parts of the world are also grappling with the same scourge.

Scholars have explored external justifications, group strategies, and individual motivations behind vigilantism (Mareš & Bjørgo, 2018). Frontier and countermovement theories explain vigilantism as responses to lawlessness or deviancy (Kowalewski, 2002). Vigilantism serves various functions. It can promote group cohesion, control minorities, and fill governance voids (Gazit, 2015; Johnston, 1996). Vigilante groups relate differently to state actors. Some cooperate with authorities while others operate outside the state (Marx & Archer, 1971). Vigilantism can challenge or fill gaps in state authority (Gazit, 2015; Mareš, 2017b). Groups often form within extremist movements but vary ideologically (Mareš & Bjørgo, 2018). Success depends on broader societal contexts. Vigilantism thrives in permissive environments but repression can weaken it (Blee & Latif, 2018). Vigilante violence can inflict lasting social disorganization (McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012). Vigilantism's success depends on broader societal factors. Groups thrive in permissive environments where authorities are passive and public support exists (Blee & Latif, 2018). But repressive forces can weaken vigilante activities (Blee & Latif, 2018). Vigilante violence can inflict social disorganization that endures after groups disband (McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012). The next section unpacks the theoretical framework that guided this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilizes framing theory and social constructionism as its theoretical lenses. Recent research by Arowolo (2017) states that framing theory explains how selective highlighting of certain aspects in media coverage shapes audience interpretations. Framing theory holds that issues are presented through selective highlighting of certain aspects, shaping audience interpretation. Analysis of media frames reveals how Operation Dudula, and immigration are constructed for public consumption, enabling or constraining the group's activities. Meanwhile, Burr and Dick (2017) posit that social phenomena are constructed through the meanings assigned by society. Social constructionism posits phenomena are constructed based on societal meanings rather than having intrinsic essence. Dominant narratives socially construct Operation Dudula in ways that grant legitimacy to its vigilantism or not. Power relations shape such constructions, as definitions by authoritative actors like media outlets exert disciplinary control over marginalized groups (Foucault, 1977). Together, these theories elucidate how media discourse socially constructs Operation Dudula in ways that can enable or restrict its activities. For instance, Aktok (2022) argues that phenomena cannot be directly constructed by social structures but only indirectly via hidden ontological assumptions he terms "ontoparadigms." Ondoparadigms are hidden, historically a priori ontological structures that indirectly constitute social and natural phenomena as well as the theoretical content of scientific theories, functioning as normative conditions of possibility embodied in societal frameworks.

Applying this to Operation Dudula, dominant media frames may socially construct the group as tackling unemployment while obscuring complex dynamics. Conversely, critical frames could inhibit vigilante actions by disputing perceived immigrant threats. However, absolute notions of construction as an unmediated process are transcendently contradictory (Aktok, 2022). Thus, indirect constitutive links between discourse and phenomena like Operation Dudula are examined. Recent perspectives also highlight how psychological, embodied and affective factors intersect with sociolinguistic constructions (Burr & Dick, 2017). This necessitates analysing multifaceted discursive tensions, power dynamics and emotional undercurrents in Operation Dudula's media portrayal. Fusing critical discourse analysis with social constructionism and phenomenology unpacks nuances around xenophobia while steering clear of

reductive assumptions. Such hybrid approaches advance conceptual rigor and capture lived complexities. This multifaceted theoretical framework centres contextual, constructed, and embodied dimensions around Operation Dudula's media representation. It eschews simplistic causal explanations for richer elucidation of the issues at stake. The researcher next presents the methodology.

METHODS

Data for this study was generated from online media articles published by two major media houses in South Africa. The researcher sampled media articles over a week period (27 March 2022 – 03 April 2022). Articles selected were published within seven following the arrest of the leader of Operation Dudula, Nhlanhla Lux Dlamini. Operation Dudula leader Nhlanhla Lux Dlamini was granted bail during his court appearance at the Roodepoort Magistrate Court, in Roodepoort, near Johannesburg, on March 28, 2022. Dlamini was arrested on 24 March 2022 on charges of housebreaking, theft, and malicious damage to property. The researcher utilised criterion sampling in this study. Criterion sampling involves the identification of a particular criterion of importance, articulation of this criterion, and systematic review and study of cases that meet the criterion. All cases that meet a set of criteria are selected. In criterion sampling it is important to select the criteria carefully, to define cases that will provide detailed and rich data relevant to the particular research problem. Criterion sampling can be useful for identifying and understanding cases that are information rich. The criterion for the inclusion and exclusion of media articles was publication in the two selected media houses within one week. Utilizing this criterion, the researcher sampled three media articles from each of the two media houses. Furthermore, each of these articles that were included in the sample referred to Operation Dudula.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Media House One: Article A

On the 29th of March 2022, in article titled *Put South Africans first, Operation Dudula tells companies in Tshwane*, Shonisani Tshikalange suggests connections between Operation Dudula and the Put South Africans First movement. In the article by Tshikalange (2022), Operation Dudula calls on companies in Tshwane to only hire foreign nationals if there have critical or rare skills. Essentially, Operation Dudula as a movement that appreciates the need for foreigners with critical skills to bridge the gap in the labour force. Additionally, the article states that the Operation Dudula movement demanded that lower-paying jobs be reserved for South Africans. Fundamentally, the article quotes several voices in Tshwane supporting Operation Dudula as advocating for companies to adhere to the law on the employment of foreign nationals. However, companies cited in the same article refuted claims that they were employing foreign nationals at the expense of local South Africans by arguing that the majority of their employees were South Africans "- with less than 1 % of the workforce being foreigners." Therefore, the article appears to balance the views of both the companies and Operation Dudula members on the matter involving the hiring of foreign nationals. The author argues that the lack of consensus between the company voices and Operation Dudula mirrors the wider South African society as there is no consensus on the number of foreign nationals working in South Africa. Hiring companies usually provide low figures as compared to the often-inflated numbers by activists such as Operation Dudula and Put South Africans First movement. The narrative that there many foreigners in South Africa suits the very existence of Operation Dudula and therefore the inflated numbers. In the article, Tshikalange (2022) quotes the Operation Dudula deputy chairperson, Dan Radebe, "We are launching operation Dudula in Rosslyn to ensure that industry prioritises South Africans over foreigners. They [foreigners] must be in possession of

work permits that allow them to be employed in SA because having a passport does not [translate] to a work permit." The view by Dan Radebe reveals the accusation that some employers were hiring foreigners on the strength of being passport holders instead of being permit holders as prescribed by the law. Thus, from this view according to Operation Dudula, employers were in contravention of the law and therefore the government should intervene. In addition, it can be argued that Operation Dudula is constructed as a movement that is not targeting all foreigners in South Africa but only illegal and undocumented foreigners in South Africa.

Media House One: Article B

Another article that was sampled for this study focused the views of political parties on the impending peril on the growth of Operation Dudula. On the 29th of March 2022, the Times ran an article by Lwazi Hlangu titled: *If Operation Dudula isn't stopped, we could see repetition of July unrest: DA*. Hlangu (2022) writes, "The DA on Tuesday labelled the actions of Operation Dudula as criminal and xenophobic, becoming the latest party to condemn the group." The article reveals that the DA has joined other political parties in condemning the actions of Operation Dudula in South Africa. In addition, Hlangu writes, "The DA is joining the EFF, the ANC veterans league and President Cyril Ramaphosa in expressing their disapproval of activities of the movement led by Nhlanhla Lux Dlamini." The article further noted with concern the growth of Operation Dudula across the provinces of South Africa. According to Hlangu, "Operation Dudula, which was announced in June 2021, has since mushroomed in various parts of the country with its main objectives being to root out illegal immigrants." It is interesting to note from this media article that Operation Dudula is constructed as xenophobic and seeking political points. The DA's shadow minister of home affairs, Angel Khanyile is quoted in the article saying, "Politicians, individuals, and organisations that fan xenophobic flames must face the consequences of their deplorable actions. They will see the country in chaos again only to score cheap political points." "Sentiments by political parties like Action SA, the Patriotic Alliance and the EFF cannot go unchallenged. Blaming foreigners for years of destruction caused by ANC greed and corruption is not only foolish and naive, it is dangerous. It ignores the reality that foreign migrants often create jobs and job opportunities for South Africans", Khanyile adds in the article. According to this article there is an apparent nexus between the position by Operation Dudula and some political parties such as Action SA and the Patriotic Alliance.

Media House One: Article C

Another follow-up article on the arrest of Nhlanhla Dlamini, Kyle Zeeman (2022) writes an article titled, *It will just further divide the community' — what you said about 'Lux' Dlamini's arrest*. Zeeman (2022) reports on the arrest of the Operation Dudula leader Nhlanhla 'Lux' Dlamini. The article draws from an opinion poll ran by the Times newspaper. The poll was run on the following parameters, *What do you think of Nhlanhla "Lux" Dlamini's arrest?*

- i) *It is good. Operation Dudula is dangerous.*
- ii) *It will just further divide the community.*
- iii) *Police were doing their job by bringing him in for questioning*

Results of the poll cited in this article revealed that, "Most (41%) believe it will "further divide the community", 31% said it was the right decision because "Operation Dudula is dangerous" and 28% said police were simply doing their job by bringing Dlamini in for questioning." Essentially, most of the participants (59 %) in the poll were of the view that the arrest of Nhlanhla Dlamini was good and the police were merely doing their job. While 41 % believed the arrest of Nhlanhla Dlamini would divide the community. These poll results further buttress the argument that there is evidently a lack of consensus on the contribution of Operation Dudula. As noted by the previous article by Lwazi Hlangu (2022), Operation

Dudula has a substantial following as reflected by the mushrooming of branches across the breadth of the country. In addition, the article by Zeeman (2022) also includes views from the social media. Zeeman (2022) cites a social media contribution by Thulas Ngwenya who writes, "We cannot run away from the fact that what this guy and his crew are doing is vigilantism. They are fighting for the right cause but in the wrong way. We cannot promote lawlessness." This view reveals another interesting construction of Operation Dudula as vigilantism and therefore promotes lawlessness. The view that Operation Dudula is vigilantism is premised on the argument that South Africa has various departments and responsible authorities that are mandated to regulate the entrance and employment of foreigners in South Africa. Therefore, it follows that any action by any individual, movement or organisation that is not legally mandated to regulate the hiring of foreigners that takes the responsibility away from the mandated organs promotes lawlessness. This article confirms findings by a study carried out by Tarisayi (2021). Tarisayi (2021) established that virtual spaces such as Twitter and Facebook were arenas for xenophobic/afrophobic attacks in South Africa.

Media House B: Article 1

Andile Zulu in an opinion piece in the Mail and Guardian on the 29th of March 2022 under the headline *Dear Operation Dudula: Powerful elites, not migrants, are your enemy* that "Movements such as Operation Dudula argue that the presence of foreigners, undocumented or not, is a significant cause of the country's deterioration. Their leaders, such Nhlanhla "Lux" Dlamini, claim that the over-representation of foreigners, in the formal and informal economy, dries up business and job opportunities for South Africans." Zulu (2022) views the objectives of Operation Dudula as short term and not premised on concrete plans. In addition, the article raises several questions that require introspection related to the tendency by Operation Dudula to associate societal ills with the presence of foreigners in South Africa. Zulu (2022) asks the following questions, "Would it repair the infrastructure of debilitated public hospitals or supply vital resources to schools in rural areas? Would a migrant free South Africa dispel corruption and brutality from the police, who torture, harass and kill thousands on an annual basis? Will a migrant free country reduce the cost of food, erase consumer debt or increase wages? Without foreigners, will we revitalise Eskom or be finally motivated to seriously pursue decent public housing?" Essentially, the article critiques the grounds on which Operation Dudula stands on, the view that foreigners are to blame for crime, drug trafficking among others. The problems in South Africa according to the article fall squarely on the mismanagement of the country by the powerful elites. Zulu (2022) holds the interesting view that "Operation Dudula is an ugly spectacle. A hollow movement that gives a platform to rage and frustration at the cost of migrants' livelihoods, safety, and human dignity. While the deeply disgruntled shout at migrants in the streets of Hillbrow and elsewhere in the country, South Africa's elite continue to rule over systems unattuned to the interests of ordinary people." Thus, the article constructs Operation Dudula as a movement that rides on the rage and frustration of citizens while sacrificing the livelihoods, safety, and human dignity of migrants.

Media House B: Article 2

The researcher also sampled another article by Lizeka Tandwa titled *Operation Dudula vows to continue drive against illegal immigrants after leader gets bail*. The article by Tandwa was focused on the court appearance and granting of bail of Operation Dudula leader, Nhlanhla 'Lux' Dlamini. In the article, Tandwa (2022) writes, "Operation Dudula has in recent months acted against immigrants in Johannesburg, a drive that has resonated with mainly poor, angry South Africans who accuse them of stealing their jobs and committing crimes." The article revealed that the message of Operation Dudula resonated with the poor in South Africa as foreigners are blamed for the high unemployment in South Africa. Apparently, it is

easy to convince unemployed youths that their jobs were being stolen by foreigners despite the absence of statistics to sustain that view. The article further states, "The vigilante group's actions have sparked fears of an uptick in the xenophobia that has plagued South Africans, straining relations between President Cyril Ramaphosa's government and those of other countries, such as Nigeria." The article further constructs Operation Dudula's actions as leading to straining of relations between South Africa and other African countries especially Nigeria. Furthermore, the article noted the collaboration of Operation Dudula with other like-minded groups such as Operation Fake Mthetho and Soweto Parliament. It is interesting to note that the article quotes Operation Dudula secretary Zandile Dabula saying. "Tomorrow we are going to Pretoria in Rosslyn to fight for jobs. We have over 5 000 jobs that must be opened in Rosslyn. "We are visiting BMW ... and there is Nissan who hired 100% foreign nationals. This is what we are fighting for. If we can all go out in numbers, we will have a big impact." The above statement natural resonates with the unemployed audience in the sense that if Operation Dudula can create 5000 jobs overnight, then their cause is worthwhile. However, the article does not probe further to establish how 5000 jobs can be created by visiting BMW and Nissan. According to the BMW website, "BMW Group South Africa directly and indirectly employs over 49,000 people (4680 associates at the plant and at the national sales organisation, 4,956 dealer staff and 40,000 first-tier supplier employees)." While, according to Nissan Group, "The South Africa plant employs approximately 2000 employees with additional assembly plants located in Nigeria and Ghana." Essentially, using these statistics and the demand made by Operation Dudula, it suggests that all the employees at the BMW Rosslyn plant and Nissan Rosslyn plant were going to be replaced overnight. These statistics from the BMW Group and Nissan Group websites can be utilised to argue that some of the statements by Operation Dudula are populistic and are devoid of overall understanding of the employment needs of some of the companies there are targeting. For instance, amongst the employees that were targeted for replacement are critical skills and how did they intend to replace them all without disrupting the company's operations? In addition, this view further buttressed the construction of Operation Dudula as lacking long-term planning.

Media House B: Article 3

Lizeka Tandwa and Paddy Harper wrote in the Mail and Guardian on the 1st of April 2022 an article titled *Dudula vigilante group has the ANC stamp of approval*. Tandwa and Harper state, "The vigilante group Operation Dudula has garnered strong support from various political parties including the ANC, which contends that as the governing party, it has been far too "flexible" in dealing with undocumented immigrants." The authors emphasize that the ANC, being the governing party in South Africa, maintains the view that it has demonstrated an excessive level of leniency in its approach towards addressing the issue of undocumented immigrants. This alignment between Operation Dudula and the ANC reveals a complex interplay between political dynamics, public sentiment, and immigration policies, which necessitates a deeper examination to better understand the motivations and implications underlying this association. By delving into this nuanced subject matter, Tandwa and Harper provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of the discourse surrounding immigration and the prevailing attitudes towards undocumented individuals within the political landscape of South Africa.

Discussion of findings

Based on the analysis of the six media articles in this study, the researcher drew three main themes regarding Operation Dudula. The main themes that emerged from the analysis are debates on employment of foreign nationals, political responses and divisions and lastly criticism of Operation Dudula's approach.

Debates on Employment of Foreign Nationals

Operation Dudula sparked debates on the employment of foreign nationals in South Africa. There were differing opinions on the hiring practices of companies, with Operation Dudula advocating for the prioritization of South Africans for lower-paying jobs and the need for work permits for foreign employees. However, there was a lack of consensus on the actual number of foreign nationals employed and their impact on job opportunities for South Africans. This theme highlights the tensions and differing perspectives surrounding the employment of foreign nationals in the country. While the articles highlight differing perspectives on the impact of foreign workers, Operation Dudula's advocacy for prioritizing South Africans and restricting work permits for foreigners mirrors the motivations of vigilante groups who target migrants in the name of "protecting jobs for their own people" (Ralph-Morrow, 2019). Thus, it can be argued that certain framing in media reports may highlight Operation Dudula's role in tackling unemployment, promoting a vigilante identity for the group.

Political Responses and Divisions

Political parties played a significant role in the discourse surrounding Operation Dudula. While some parties condemned the movement as xenophobic and criminal, others expressed support for its objectives. The political landscape became divided, with parties like the DA and ANC veterans league criticizing Operation Dudula, while other parties such as the EFF and Action SA showed some level of alignment with the movement's goals. This theme underscores the political implications and divisions caused by Operation Dudula's activities. The political support shown by some parties for Operation Dudula's objectives, despite condemnation from others, is consistent with the tendency for vigilantism to flourish in environments where political actors signal acceptance for targeting minorities (Bjørgo and Mares, 2019). Hence, this study argues that socially constructing Operation Dudula as a legitimate movement may enable its vigilantism.

Critiques of Operation Dudula's Approach

The articles analysed in this study highlight various critiques of Operation Dudula's approach and objectives. Critics argued that blaming foreigners for the country's challenges was misguided and shifted the focus away from addressing systemic issues such as corruption, infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities. Operation Dudula was portrayed as a movement lacking concrete plans, engaging in vigilantism, and sacrificing the livelihoods and dignity of migrants. This theme emphasizes the scepticism and concerns raised about the efficacy and rationale behind Operation Dudula's actions. The critiques of Operation Dudula portray the movement as engaging in vigilantism through threatening the livelihoods of foreigners. Their actions resonate with other vigilante groups that victimize minorities while lacking concrete solutions (Laryš, 2019; Dzhekova & Stoynova, 2019). Overall, Operation Dudula exhibits similarities to the vigilante groups targeting minorities through threats of extra-legal violence discussed in the articles. Dominant frames in media reports critical of Operation Dudula may constrain its vigilantism by challenging its legitimacy.

Based on the analysis of the media articles, this study finds that Operation Dudula resonates with unemployed South Africans by channelling their frustrations at foreigners who are blamed for high unemployment. However, media reports reveal contradictions in Operation Dudula's claims about foreign workers and expose the populistic nature of some of their demands. While differing perspectives on foreign nationals exist, certain framing in media reports may promote a vigilante identity for Operation Dudula by highlighting their role in tackling unemployment. Although some political parties have aligned with Operation Dudula's objectives, most media articles portray the group as engaging in vigilantism against foreigners who lack protections. Dominant frames critical of Operation Dudula challenge its legitimacy and may therefore constrain its vigilantism. Unfortunately, blaming foreigners distracts from

addressing systemic challenges that powerful elites have failed to solve. To tackle systemic issues, the government could increase investments in infrastructure, service delivery, and programs that create economic opportunities for marginalized communities. Promoting human rights requires bolstering institutions that protect minorities, counter hate speech, and uphold non-discrimination. Misleading claims about foreign nationals can be challenged through public awareness campaigns, fact-checking initiatives, and policies requiring evidence-based discourse on immigrants. Overall, a multifaceted policy approach is required - one that generates socioeconomic inclusion, enforces protections against violence and xenophobia, and elevates factual, humanizing narratives about immigrant populations based on data. Together, these recommendations could redirect public anger towards addressing root causes of unemployment and poverty, while upholding the dignity and rights of all people in South Africa. Vigilante movements like Operation Dudula will continue to thrive if powerful elites fail to deliver on legitimate citizen demands.

CONCLUSION

This study makes several important contributions to understanding media framing of anti-immigrant groups and vigilantism in South Africa. Analysis of media discourse on Operation Dudula reveals tensions around foreign nationals' impact on employment and political divisions regarding the movement's objectives. Dominant media frames position Operation Dudula as either constructively tackling unemployment or dangerously scapegoating immigrants. These frames may respectively enable or constrain the rise of anti-immigrant vigilantism. However, structural constraints around illegal immigration likely also explain Operation Dudula's resonance. Ultimately, nuanced understanding of media discourse and public sentiment is key to addressing the complex drivers of vigilantism. The South African government could consider policies that promote social cohesion alongside evidence-based public discourse on immigrants' economic impacts. This study is limited by its small sample size of media articles. Further research should longitudinally track framing of groups like Operation Dudula across mainstream and social media over time. More comparative work is also needed on media discourse and vigilantism targeting minorities globally. Such studies can enrich theoretical models on the media's role in enabling or inhibiting the activities of extremist movements. Overall, this research underscores the need to counter divisive rhetoric while tackling root causes of unrest that vigilante groups exploit.

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