

## Immigration remains a challenge for South Africa's government and citizens

---

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 72 | Anyway Chingwete**

### Summary

Last year's resurgence of attacks on foreigners in South Africa gave renewed urgency to long-standing questions about the security of foreign nationals, the prevalence of xenophobic attitudes, and the government's commitment to dealing effectively with immigration issues.

Deadly and widespread attacks on foreigners in April and October 2015 echoed well-publicized violence in the 1990s and early 2000s that led some observers to see xenophobia both as endemic to South Africa and as worsening since the country's democratic transition (Neocosmos, 2010; Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2008).

New findings from the 2015 Afrobarometer survey suggest there has been little change in South Africans' unwelcoming attitudes toward foreigners. The Rainbow Nation remains divided: Four in 10 citizens (42%) say that "foreigners should not be allowed to live in South Africa because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans," whilst the same proportion disagree. Attitudes toward political asylum seekers are similarly divided. And about three in 10 citizens say they would dislike having a foreigner as a neighbour (32%), whilst a similar proportion (28%) say they would like it and 40% say they would not care.

Whilst South Africans are somewhat more welcoming to exceptionally skilled migrants and foreign investors, their stated attitudes make the country one of the most intolerant, with respect to foreign immigrants, among African countries surveyed by Afrobarometer. Though divided in their attitudes toward foreigners, citizens are largely united in disapproving of the government's efforts to address immigration challenges.

### Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. After five rounds of surveys completed between 1999 and 2013, results from Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being disseminated. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in August-September 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011.

## Key findings

- South Africans are evenly divided (42% each) as to whether foreigners should be barred from staying in South Africa on grounds that they outcompete nationals for jobs and benefits.
- About three in 10 South Africans (32%) say they would dislike having a foreigner as a neighbour, whilst 28% say they would like it and 40% say they wouldn't care.
- Tolerance for asylum seekers due to political persecution increased slightly, from 38% in 2011 to 43%, but citizens remain almost evenly divided on the issue.
- Among 33 African countries surveyed in 2014/2015, South Africa ranks near the top in levels of intolerance toward foreigners.
- Close to seven in 10 South Africans (68%) say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in managing immigration issues, an increase from 63% in 2011.

## South Africans divided in attitudes toward foreign immigrants

As Figure 1 shows, South Africans are almost evenly divided in their views of whether foreigners – even those seeking asylum from political persecution – should be allowed to stay. They are somewhat more welcoming in the case of "exceptionally skilled foreigners and foreign investors" who can contribute to their economy.

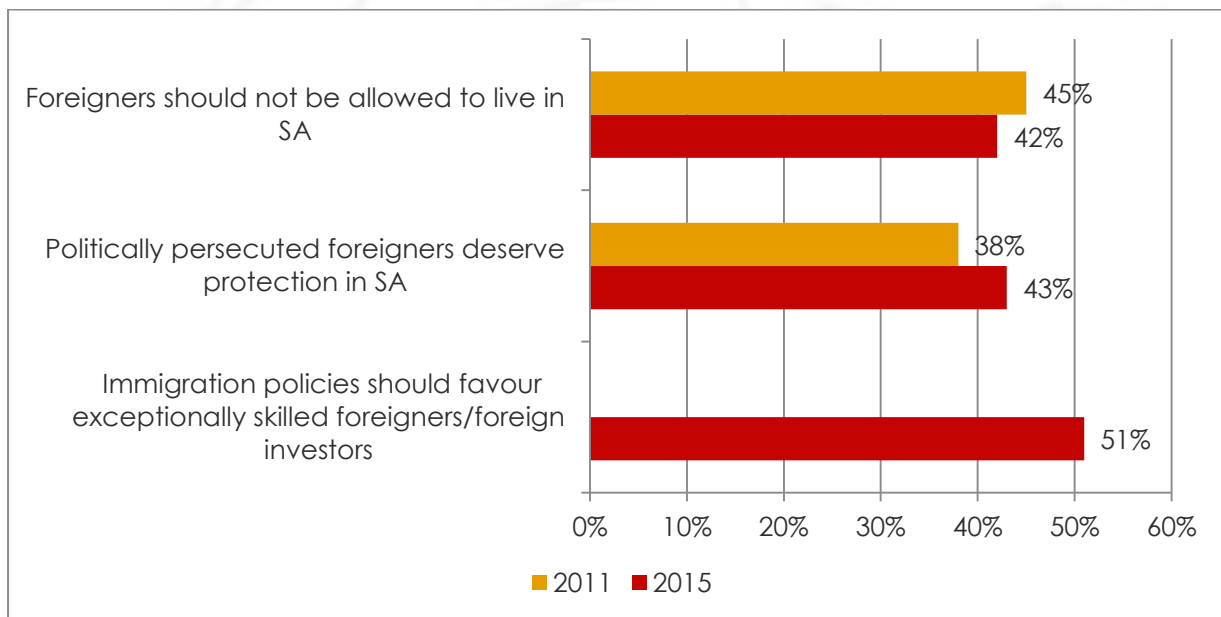
Four in 10 South Africans (42%) agree that "foreigners should not be allowed to live in South Africa because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans" – the same proportion who disagree with this statement. This reflects little change from the 2011 survey, in which 38% agreed and 45% disagreed.

As for asylum seekers, the proportion of South Africans who agree that "people persecuted for political reasons deserve protection in South Africa" increased slightly, from 38% in 2011 to 43%. Nonetheless, the nation remains sharply divided on the issue, and "strong" feelings on the question are more common among opponents (19%) than among proponents (11%) of political asylum.

South Africans are somewhat more accommodating to exceptionally skilled immigrants and foreign investors who can contribute to developing the country: A slim majority (51%) say the country's immigration policies should favour such foreigners, vs. 29% who disagree. Whilst the 2011 survey did not ask this question, it did show a slight increase compared to 2008 in the proportion of citizens who would spare "those who are not contributing to the economy" from being sent back to their home countries (Krönke, 2015).

On all three questions, about one in five respondents (16% to 20%) say they "neither agree nor disagree" or "don't know."

**Figure 1: Attitudes regarding immigration | South Africa | 2011-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** The department of Home Affairs introduced a number of new regulations aimed at improving its ability to manage immigration effectively. For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't heard enough to say:

- A) Foreigners should not be allowed to live in South Africa because they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans?
  - B) People who are persecuted for political reasons in their own countries deserve protection in South Africa?
  - C) South Africa's immigration policies should favour exceptionally skilled foreigners and foreign investors to help the economy grow? (This question was not asked in 2011.)
- (Figure shows % who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement.)

### Differences in tolerance by demographic group

Tolerance toward immigrants varies significantly by race, urban-rural residence, education level, party affiliation, and province, but not by age group or gender.

On the question of barring all foreigners from living in South Africa, the only significant differences by demographic group are for race and urban-rural residence. White South Africans are least likely to hold restrictive attitudes (35%), compared to 43% of black, 41% of Indian/South Asian, and 40% of Coloured citizens. More rural residents (46%) than urbanites (39%) feel foreigners should be barred.

With regard to asylum seekers (Figure 2), Coloured citizens hold more restrictive attitudes: Only 39% agree that "people who are persecuted for political reasons in their own countries deserve protection in South Africa," compared to 44% of white, 46% of black, and 48% of Indian/South Asian citizens.

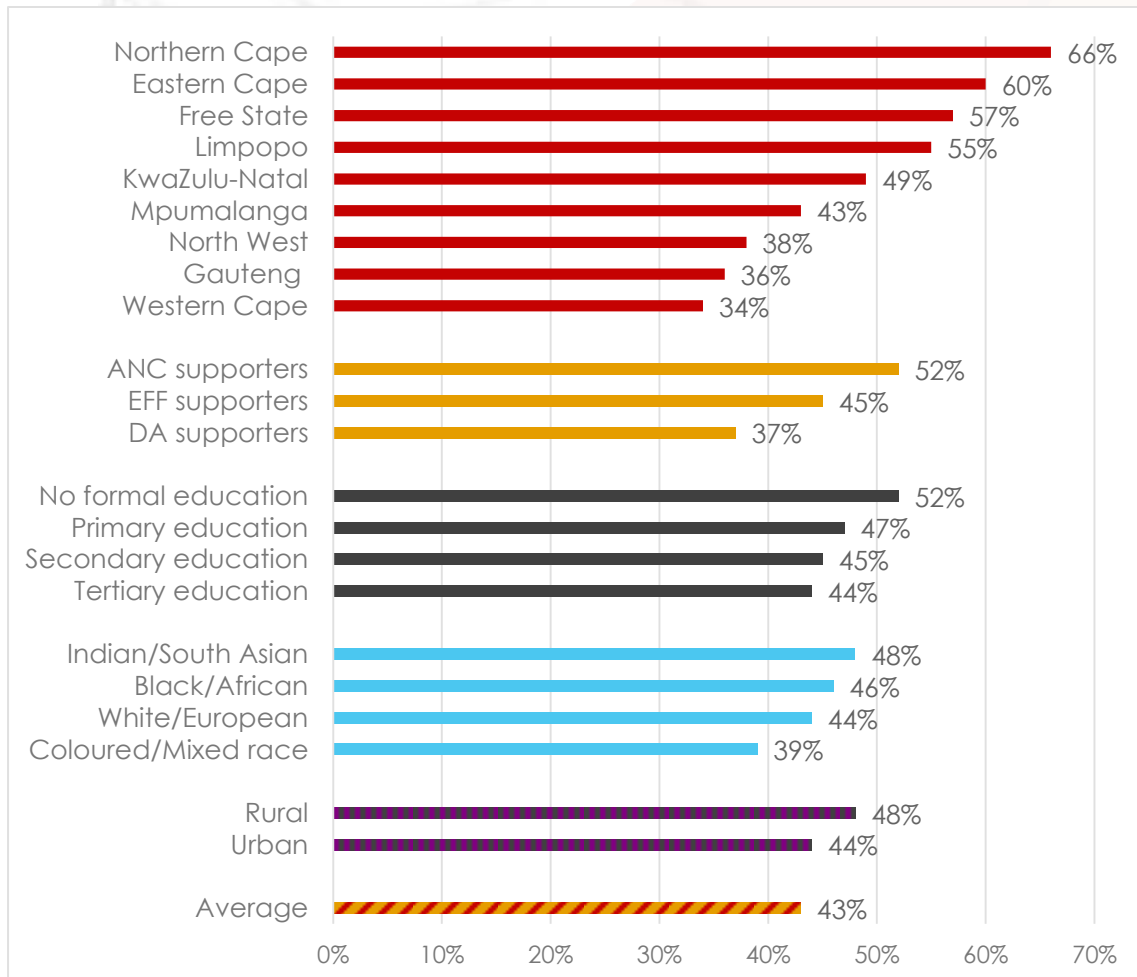
Education shows an interesting dimension in this analysis: The lower the level of educational attainment, the more tolerant respondents are in their attitudes toward asylum seekers. More than half (52%) of citizens with no formal education agree that asylum seekers should receive protection in South Africa, compared to 47% of those with primary education, 45% of those with secondary education, and 44% of those with tertiary education.

Supporters of the Democratic Alliance (DA) party are less receptive to political asylum seekers (37%) than are supporters of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (45%) and the African National Congress (ANC) (52%).<sup>1</sup>

Provincially, the picture resonates with analysis from the political party perspective, as well as with the geographic distribution of xenophobic violence. The Western Cape Province, historically a DA stronghold, displays the least tolerance for asylum seekers (34%), followed by Gauteng (36%) and North West (38%). By contrast, majorities in the Northern Cape (66%), Eastern Cape (60%), Free State (57%), and Limpopo (55%) – provinces where fewer attacks on foreigners have been reported – favour protection for those suffering political persecution.

Rural South Africans are slightly more likely to welcome asylum seekers than their urban counterparts, 48% vs. 44%.

**Figure 2: Tolerance toward political asylum seekers | by demographic group**  
 | South Africa | 2015

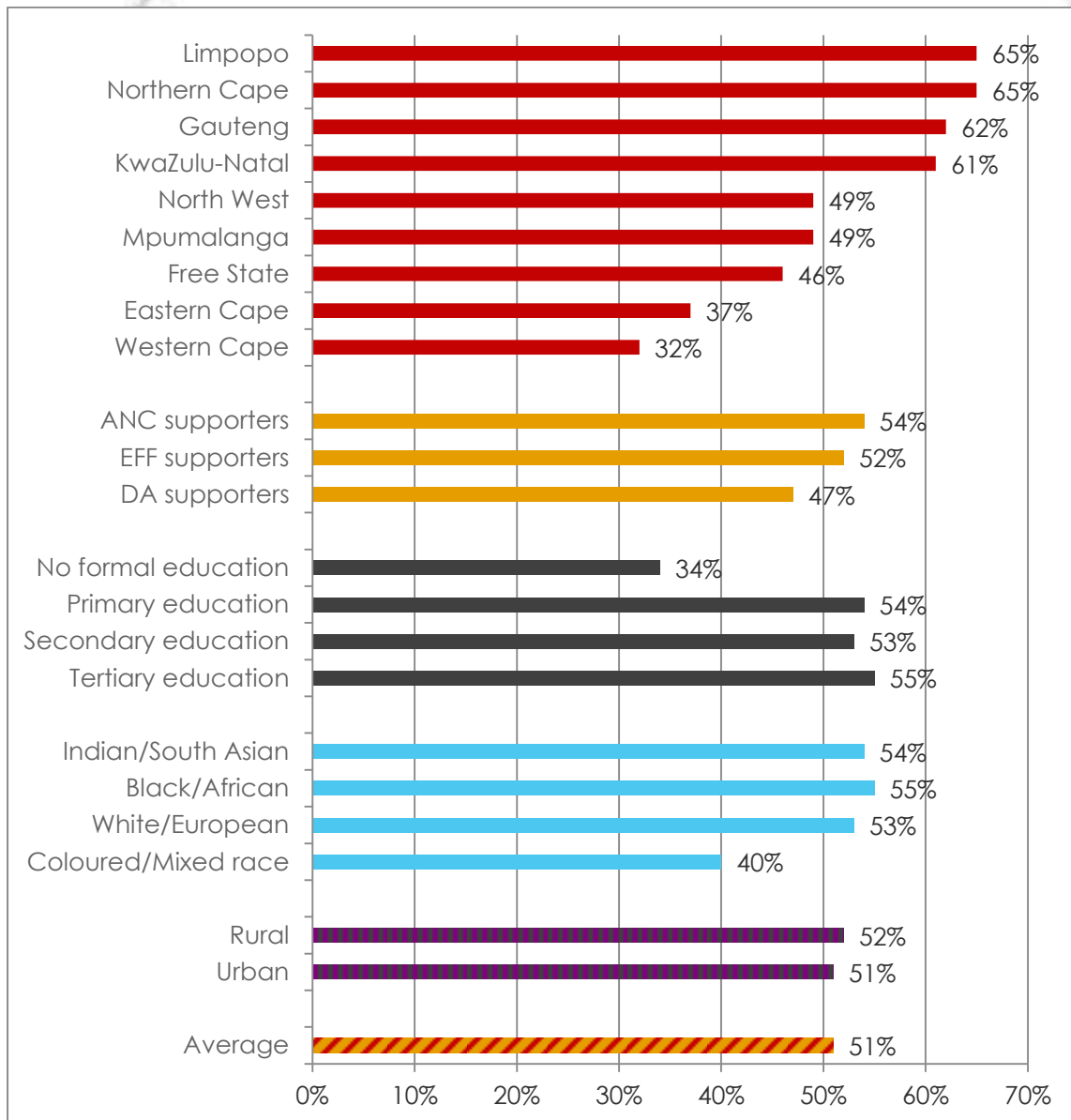


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't heard enough to say: People who are persecuted for political reasons in their own countries deserve protection in South Africa? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

<sup>1</sup> Political party affiliation was determined by asking survey respondents, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and if yes, "Which party is that?"

Similar demographic differences are apparent when it comes to welcoming exceptionally skilled immigrants or foreign investors, with the exception of educational attainment (Figure 3). Coloureds, DA supporters, and residents of Western Cape Province, Free State Province, and North West Province are more likely to endorse a restrictive approach. Unlike on the question of asylum seekers, results show a positive relationship between level of education and acceptance of skilled immigrants and foreign investors. Majorities of respondents with primary (54%), secondary (53%), and tertiary education (55%) say the country's immigration policies should favour such foreigners to help the economy grow, whereas only one-third (34%) of respondents with no formal education support this approach.

**Figure 3: Tolerance toward skilled immigrants and foreign investors | by demographic group | South Africa | 2015**

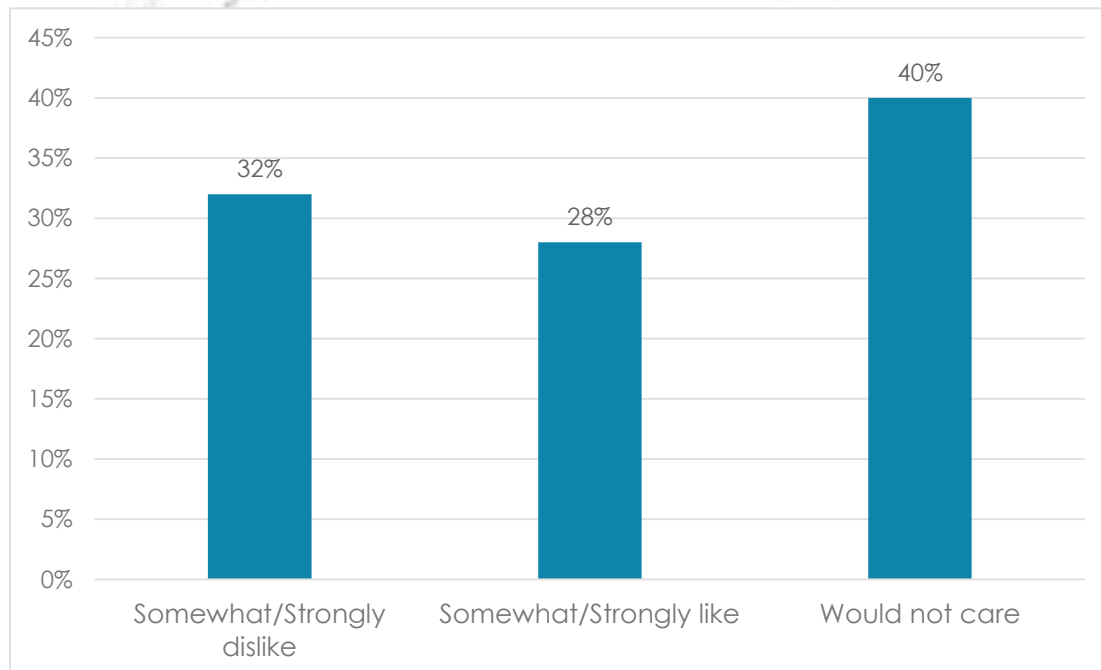


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't heard enough to say: South Africa's immigration policies should favour exceptionally skilled foreigners and foreign investors to help the economy grow? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

### South Africa ranks amongst the least tolerant countries

South Africans' reluctance to welcome immigrants is confirmed in their attitudes toward having foreigners as neighbours. Close to one in three citizens (32%) would dislike – half of whom would “strongly dislike” – living next door to an immigrant or foreign worker. Stated positively, a majority would either like having foreigners as neighbours (28%) or “would not care” (40%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Attitudes toward having foreigners as neighbours | South Africa | 2015**

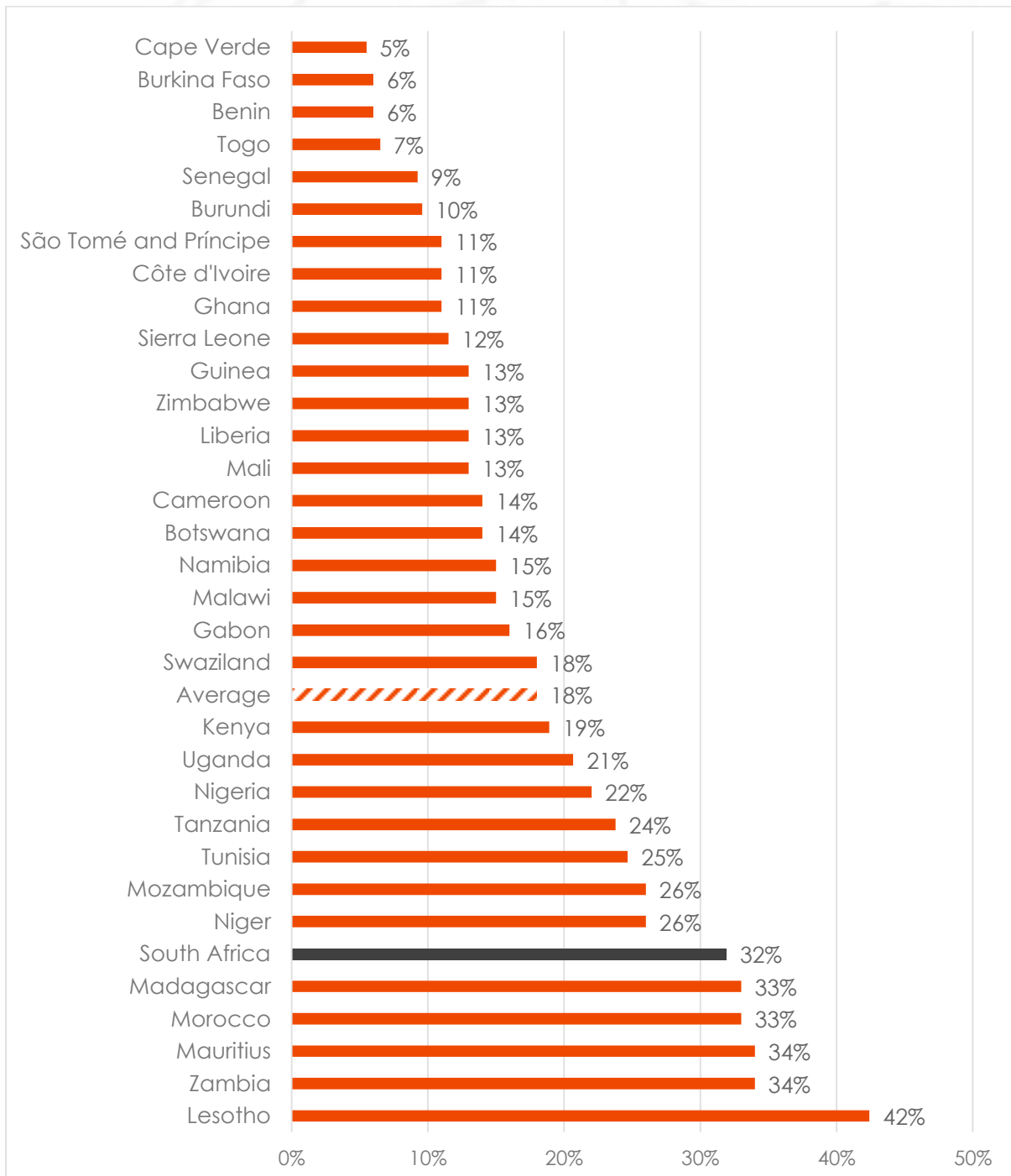


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers?

Still, on this measure, South Africa is one of the least tolerant countries surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2014/2015, surpassed only by Lesotho (where 42% would dislike having a foreigner as neighbour), Zambia (34%), Mauritius (34%), Morocco (33%) and Madagascar (33%) (Figure 5).

Five of the six least tolerant countries are in Southern Africa, which trails only North Africa as the least tolerant regions of Africa (Figure 6). Whilst close to one-third (29%) of North Africans report their unwillingness to have foreign neighbours, 25% from Southern Africa share the same sentiment, compared to 18% of East Africans, 14% of Central Africans, and 12% of West Africans. West African countries stand out in their openness to foreigners: In Burkina Faso and Cape Verde, 94% of citizens would “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “not care” if they had foreigners as neighbours, followed by Benin (93%), Togo (93%), and Senegal (90%).

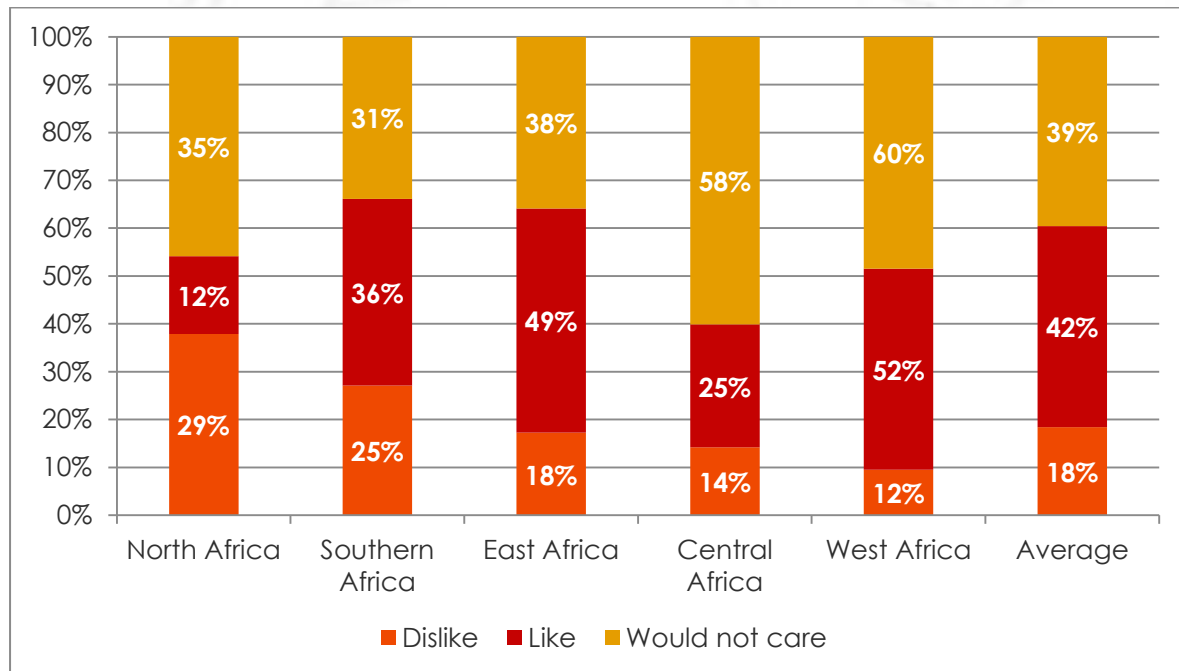
**Figure 5: Dislike having foreigners as neighbours | 33 countries | 2014/2015**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? (% who would "dislike" or "strongly dislike")

**Note:** This question was not asked in three North African countries (Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan).

**Figure 6: Attitudes toward having foreigners as neighbours** | by region | 33 countries | 2014/2015

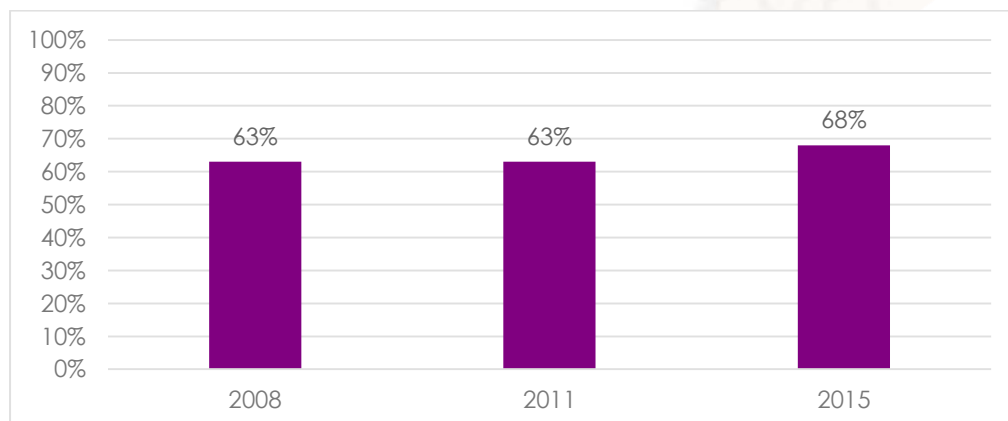


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers?  
**Note:** This question was not asked in three North African countries (Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan).

### Government scores poorly on managing immigration

Asked to assess the government's performance in a wide range of areas, South Africans overwhelmingly gave the government a failing grade on managing immigration (Chingwete, 2016). The 68% negative rating, an increase of 5 percentage points since 2011 (Figure 7), may be a response to a resurgence of xenophobic attacks in 2015, which resulted in worldwide condemnation and a call for the South African government to address the attacks on foreigners in its country.

**Figure 7: Government performance on managing immigration** | South Africa | 2008-2015



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing immigration? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")



## Conclusion

Whilst South Africans express some level of tolerance for exceptionally skilled immigrants and foreign investors who could benefit their economy, they remain fairly intolerant of foreigners in their country. Confirming external perceptions in the wake of xenophobic attacks, citizens' attitudes place South Africa among the least tolerant countries on the continent. Immigration clearly remains a challenge for government and society if South Africa wants to preserve its status as the Rainbow Nation.

---

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

---

## References

- Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa. (2008). Burning the welcome mat. Available at: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/78302/south-africa-burning-the-welcome-mat>.
- Chingwete, A. (2015). South Africans disapprove of government's performance on unemployment, housing, crime. Afrobarometer Dispatch No 64. Available at: <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad64-south-africans-disapprove-governments-performance-unemployment-housing-crime>
- Krönke, M. (2015). Trends in attitudes toward foreigners in South Africa, 1997-2011: Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 44. Available at: <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad44-trends-attitudes-toward-foreigners-south-africa-1997-2011>
- Neocosmos, M. (2010). From 'foreign natives' to 'native foreigners': Explaining xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa: Citizenship and nationalism, identity and politics. Available at: [http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/Neocosmos\\_From\\_Foreign\\_Native\\_to.pdf?2041/65d9f193b0b0e7b0b177ad2f1f21566f1d48ec54](http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/Neocosmos_From_Foreign_Native_to.pdf?2041/65d9f193b0b0e7b0b177ad2f1f21566f1d48ec54).

**Anyway Chingwete** is Afrobarometer project manager for southern Africa, based at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town, South Africa. Email: [achingwete@afrobarometer.org](mailto:achingwete@afrobarometer.org), [achingwete@ijr.org.za](mailto:achingwete@ijr.org.za).

Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Core support for Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6 has been provided by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank.

For more information, please visit [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 72 | 9 February 2016**