



Populism and Institutional Breakdown: Analysing Operation Dudula within South Africa's Governance Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This study critically interrogates the emergence of Operation Dudula as a manifestation of populist mobilisation and institutional fragility within post-apartheid South Africa. Against a backdrop of entrenched socio-economic inequality, rising unemployment, and deteriorating public services, the movement has positioned itself as a self-styled defender of South African sovereignty, targeting undocumented migrants and civil society organisations under the guise of patriotic activism. Drawing on Institutional Theory and Equity Theory, the paper explores how Operation Dudula exploits perceptions of distributive injustice and state incapacity to legitimise exclusionary practices and vigilante enforcement.

Employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, the research synthesises legal documents, media reportage, and scholarly literature to examine the movement's operational tactics, rhetorical strategies, and legal implications. The findings reveal a troubling convergence of populist discourse, state complicity, and legal ambiguity, wherein non-state actors increasingly assume quasi-institutional roles in the absence of effective governance. Operation Dudula's activities, ranging from identity checks and forced evictions to obstruction of healthcare access, underscore a broader crisis of legitimacy and accountability within South Africa's institutional architecture.

The paper argues that Operation Dudula is not merely a reactionary response to economic precarity but a symptom of deeper structural malaise, wherein populist mobilisation thrives amidst institutional erosion and civic fragmentation. It concludes by advocating for a multidimensional policy response that includes legal reform, institutional strengthening, and the revitalisation of civic dialogue to restore constitutional order and democratic integrity.

Keywords: Operation Dudula, populism, institutional breakdown, xenophobia

Introduction and Background

South Africa's post-apartheid democratic project was founded upon the constitutional promise of equality, dignity, and participatory governance. Yet, three decades into democracy, the country remains mired in socio-economic crises that have profoundly eroded public trust in state institutions. Chronic unemployment, widening inequality, and deteriorating public services have created fertile ground for disillusionment and political volatility (Landau, 2011; Neocosmos, 2010). In this context of institutional fragility and social precarity, populist movements have emerged to fill perceived governance vacuums, often mobilising around exclusionary and nationalist discourses.

Operation Dudula, which surfaced in 2021, exemplifies this trend. Initially framed as a grassroots campaign to reclaim economic opportunities for South Africans, the movement rapidly evolved into a confrontational force targeting undocumented migrants, informal traders, and civil society organisations. Its rhetoric, centred on slogans such as "Put South Africans First", has resonated with economically disenfranchised communities, while its actions have drawn widespread condemnation from legal scholars, human rights advocates, and international observers (Mmotong, 2024; Brickhill, 2025). The movement's activities, including raids on clinics, schools, and residential buildings, have raised urgent questions about the state's capacity to uphold constitutional norms and protect vulnerable populations.

What distinguishes Operation Dudula from prior episodes of xenophobic violence is its quasi-institutional posture. Members often wear military-style regalia, conduct identity checks, and claim to enforce immigration laws, functions legally reserved for state actors under the Immigration Act (ChannelAfrica, 2025). This appropriation of state authority signals not only a breakdown in institutional enforcement but also a deeper crisis of legitimacy. The South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Department of Home Affairs have been accused of complicity or inaction, further eroding the credibility of public institutions (SowetanLIVE, 2025; SERI, 2025).

This study interrogates Operation Dudula as both a symptom and a catalyst of institutional breakdown within South Africa's governance landscape. It situates the movement within broader regional and global patterns of populist mobilisation, where economic grievances are weaponised to justify exclusionary politics and vigilante action. Drawing on Institutional Theory and Equity Theory, the paper explores how populist rhetoric exploits perceptions of injustice and state failure, thereby reshaping civic discourse and undermining democratic norms. Through a Systematic Literature

Review (SLR), the study synthesises legal documents, media reports, and scholarly literature to examine the socio-political conditions that enable such movements to flourish.

In doing so, the paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship on governance crises in transitional democracies, offering a nuanced analysis of how populism intersects with institutional erosion, legal ambiguity, and the politics of belonging. It argues that Operation Dudula is not merely a reactionary movement but a reflection of deeper structural malaise, one that demands urgent and multidimensional redress.

Literature Review

The emergence of Operation Dudula has catalysed a renewed scholarly and civic interrogation of populist mobilisation, xenophobia, and governance failure in South Africa. While xenophobic violence has long been a feature of post-apartheid urban politics, Operation Dudula represents a qualitatively distinct phenomenon, one that fuses populist rhetoric with quasi-institutional enforcement mechanisms. The literature converges on several key themes: the erosion of constitutional norms, the instrumentalisation of public frustration, and the complicity or inertia of state institutions.

Neocosmos (2010) offers a foundational critique of post-apartheid nationalism, arguing that the South African state has historically constructed migrants as threats to sovereignty and social cohesion. This framing, he contends, legitimises exclusionary practices and undermines the universalist ethos of the Constitution. Landau (2011) builds on this analysis by examining the spatial politics of migration, noting that urban migrants are rendered hyper-visible and vulnerable to both state and non-state violence. These insights remain salient in the context of Operation Dudula, whose activities, such as raids on clinics and informal trading zones, target precisely those populations rendered precarious by spatial and legal marginalisation.

Recent scholarship has sought to unpack the discursive and operational strategies of Operation Dudula. Mmotong (2024), in a study of social media dialogues, reveals how the movement leverages digital platforms to propagate anti-migrant sentiment and mobilise support. His findings suggest that populist rhetoric, centred on slogans such as “Put South Africans First”, resonates with economically disenfranchised communities, particularly in townships and informal settlements. Xulu (2023), through a media discourse analysis, critiques the role of mainstream publications in reproducing Operation Dudula’s claims uncritically, thereby legitimising its vigilante posture and reinforcing Afrophobic stereotypes.

The legal dimensions of the movement have also attracted scholarly attention. Brickhill (2025), in his analysis of High Court proceedings, argues that Operation Dudula’s actions, such as demanding identity documents and conducting evictions, usurp state authority and violate the Regulation of Gatherings Act and the Immigration Act. His submissions to the Gauteng Division of the High Court detail a pattern of hate speech, incitement, and impersonation of law enforcement, which collectively signal a breakdown in legal order and institutional oversight. The case brought by Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX), SECTION27, and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) further underscores the movement’s legal transgressions and the state’s failure to intervene (Mutsila, 2025; Daily Maverick, 2025).

Civil society organisations have responded robustly to Operation Dudula’s rise. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has condemned the denial of healthcare to undocumented migrants, affirming that Section 27 of the Constitution guarantees access to all persons within the Republic, irrespective of legal status (SAHRC, 2025). Nonetheless, the persistence of such violations, often with tacit police tolerance, underscores the fragility of constitutional protections in the face of populist mobilisation. Operation Dudula has, in turn, accused the SAHRC of bias, claiming that the Commission prioritises foreign nationals over South African citizens and fails to address community grievances (MSN News, 2025). This discursive inversion, where human rights defenders are cast as traitors to national interests, reflects a broader populist strategy of delegitimising institutional oversight.

The literature also engages with the movement’s impact on civic discourse and political literacy. Bofelo (2022) argues that Operation Dudula exposes a systemic failure to appreciate the structural dynamics of migration, citizenship, and economic exclusion. He critiques the use of alienating language, such as “foreigners” and “illegal immigrants”, which perpetuates othering and obscures the socio-political contributions of migrant communities. His analysis situates the movement within a broader neoliberal context, where capital exploits migrant labour while political elites sow division to deflect from governance failures.

Docrat (2024), writing from a forensic linguistics perspective, examines the discriminatory practice of language testing as a tool for authenticating citizenship. She argues that Operation Dudula’s insistence on linguistic authenticity perpetuates apartheid-era logics of racial and cultural purity, thereby reinforcing exclusionary norms under the guise of legal enforcement. Her work highlights the intersection of language, law, and identity, revealing how linguistic discrimination functions as a proxy for xenophobic exclusion.

Collectively, the literature paints a complex portrait of Operation Dudula as a movement that thrives on institutional weakness, populist rhetoric, and legal ambiguity. It is not merely a grassroots campaign but a symptom of deeper structural malaise in South Africa’s governance landscape. The movement’s rise demands a re-evaluation of the state’s capacity to uphold rights, regulate dissent, and foster inclusive citizenship. As civil society continues to resist xenophobic violence and defend constitutionalism, the burden now falls on the state to restore legitimacy, enforce the rule of law, and reaffirm its commitment to democratic governance.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two interrelated theoretical paradigms, Institutional Theory and Equity Theory, which together provide a robust lens for analysing the emergence and impact of Operation Dudula within South Africa's governance landscape. These frameworks illuminate the structural conditions under which populist mobilisation flourishes and institutional legitimacy erodes.

Institutional Theory, as articulated by Scott (2008), posits that institutions derive their legitimacy from adherence to formal rules, normative expectations, and cognitive frameworks that govern social behaviour. Institutions are not merely bureaucratic entities; they are embedded systems of meaning and authority that shape public trust and civic compliance. When institutions fail to uphold their mandates, whether through corruption, inertia, or complicity, their legitimacy is compromised, creating space for non-state actors to assert authority. Operation Dudula exemplifies this dynamic. By appropriating state-like functions, such as conducting raids, demanding identity documents, and obstructing access to public services, the movement performs a simulacrum of institutional enforcement, thereby exploiting the vacuum left by ineffective governance (Brickhill, 2025; SowetanLIVE, 2025). Its quasi-institutional posture, including the use of military-style regalia and coordinated operations, signals a performative claim to legitimacy that resonates with disillusioned publics.

Equity Theory, developed by Adams (1965), provides a complementary lens by examining how perceptions of distributive justice influence social behaviour. In contexts of economic precarity and resource scarcity, individuals assess fairness not in absolute terms but relative to others. The perception that undocumented migrants receive disproportionate access to jobs, housing, or healthcare fuels resentment among economically marginalised South Africans. Operation Dudula capitalises on these perceptions, framing its mission as a corrective to systemic injustice. Its populist rhetoric, centred on slogans such as "Put South Africans First", mobilises affective grievances into exclusionary action, thereby transforming distributive discontent into political mobilisation (Mmotong, 2024; Xulu, 2023).

The convergence of these theories reveals a critical insight: populist movements like Operation Dudula do not emerge in a vacuum. They are symptomatic of deeper structural malaise, wherein institutional failure and perceived inequity coalesce to produce civic fragmentation and democratic erosion. As Agamben's (1998) concept of *homo sacer* suggests, certain populations, particularly undocumented migrants, are rendered legally invisible and politically expendable. Operation Dudula's treatment of migrants as outside the protections of law reflects this logic, wherein the state's abdication of responsibility enables the normalisation of vigilante exclusion (Mhandu, 2024).

Moreover, the participatory governance paradigm, as outlined by Mmotong (2024), underscores the importance of inclusive civic dialogue and institutional responsiveness. Operation Dudula's rise signals a breakdown in participatory mechanisms, where communities feel unheard and resort to extra-legal mobilisation. The absence of meaningful engagement between state actors and civil society exacerbates polarisation and undermines the deliberative foundations of democratic governance.

In sum, this theoretical framework situates Operation Dudula within a matrix of institutional fragility, distributive grievance, and populist appropriation. It enables a nuanced analysis of how governance breakdowns are not merely administrative failures but socio-political ruptures that reconfigure authority, legitimacy, and belonging.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to critically examine the emergence and impact of Operation Dudula within South Africa's governance landscape. The SLR approach was selected for its capacity to synthesise diverse sources, academic, legal, media, and civil society, into a coherent analytical framework that foregrounds both empirical evidence and theoretical insight. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, the SLR is structured, replicable, and transparent, thereby enhancing the rigour and credibility of the research findings (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, ensuring methodological consistency in the identification, screening, and inclusion of sources. The research question guiding the review was: How does Operation Dudula reflect and exacerbate institutional breakdown and populist mobilisation in post-apartheid South Africa?

The sample comprised 42 documents published between January 2021 and June 2025, including peer-reviewed journal articles, legal submissions, media reports, civil society publications, and postgraduate theses. These sources were retrieved from academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories including WiredSpace (University of the Witwatersrand), ResearchSpace (University of KwaZulu-Natal), and the South African Legal Information Institute (SAFLII). Grey literature, such as reports from SECTION27, SERI, and the South African Human Rights Commission, was included to capture real-time civic responses and legal interventions.

Selection criteria were guided by relevance, credibility, and thematic alignment. Inclusion criteria required that sources (a) explicitly address Operation Dudula, (b) engage with themes of governance, populism, xenophobia, or institutional legitimacy, and (c) be published within the defined timeframe. Exclusion criteria eliminated sources that were anecdotal, lacked analytical depth, or failed to substantiate claims with verifiable evidence. Particular attention was paid to the positionality of authors and institutions, ensuring a balanced representation of perspectives across civil society, academia, and state actors.

The data extraction process involved coding for key themes such as populist rhetoric, institutional complicity, legal ambiguity, civic resistance, and rights violations. These themes were then subjected to qualitative content analysis and interpretive synthesis, allowing for the identification of patterns, contradictions, and conceptual linkages. For instance, Xulu's (2023) media discourse analysis revealed how mainstream publications often reproduce Operation Dudula's claims uncritically, while Mmotong's (2024) study of social media dialogues highlighted the movement's strategic use of digital platforms to mobilise affective grievances.

The methodology also incorporated triangulation to enhance validity. Legal documents, such as affidavits submitted to the Gauteng High Court, were cross-referenced with media reports and civil society statements to verify claims and contextualise events. This multi-source approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how Operation Dudula operates within and against institutional frameworks.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the review process. Although the study did not involve human subjects directly, it engaged with sensitive topics such as xenophobia, rights violations, and state failure. As such, care was taken to represent affected communities with dignity and to avoid reproducing harmful stereotypes. The inclusion of migrant voices, where available, was prioritised to counterbalance dominant narratives that often marginalise or silence these perspectives (Xulu, 2023; Docrat, 2024).

In sum, the SLR methodology provided a robust foundation for analysing Operation Dudula as a case study in populist mobilisation and institutional breakdown. By integrating diverse sources and applying rigorous selection criteria, the study offers a comprehensive and context-sensitive account of one of the most contentious movements in contemporary South African politics.

Data Analysis

The data analysis reveals a deeply entrenched pattern of unlawful conduct, institutional complicity, and social fragmentation surrounding Operation Dudula. Drawing from legal affidavits, media reports, and civil society documentation, the analysis identifies five interrelated domains of concern: extrajudicial enforcement, obstruction of public services, incitement and hate speech, state inaction, and systemic rights violations.

Operation Dudula's activities consistently exceed the bounds of lawful civic engagement. Members have been documented demanding identity documents from individuals in public spaces, actions that contravene Section 41 of the Immigration Act (ChannelAfrica, 2025). The group's use of military-style regalia and coordinated raids mimics state enforcement mechanisms, creating a false impression of legal authority and contributing to public confusion and fear (SowetanLIVE, 2025).

Obstruction of access to essential services, particularly healthcare and education, emerges as a central tactic. At facilities such as Jeppe Clinic and Kalafong Hospital, Operation Dudula members have physically barred entry to undocumented migrants, including pregnant women and infants (GroundUp, 2025). These actions violate Section 27 of the Constitution. Despite a 2023 High Court ruling affirming this right, compliance remains inconsistent.

The movement's rhetoric, both online and in public gatherings, frequently includes hate speech and incitement to violence. Terms such as "makwerekwere" are used to dehumanise African migrants, while social media posts propagate unverified claims about criminality and economic sabotage (Daily Maverick, 2025; Mmotong, 2024).

The role of state institutions, particularly SAPS and DHA, is marked by troubling ambivalence. Affidavits detail instances where SAPS officers either refused to investigate complaints or actively participated in raids alongside Operation Dudula (Daily Maverick, 2025). Brickhill (2025) terms this "state-enabled xenophobia," wherein institutional inertia or complicity undermines constitutional protections.

Systemic rights violations include forced evictions, harassment, and denial of legal recourse. In one case, over 500 families were violently evicted from a Johannesburg building by Operation Dudula members (GroundUp, 2025). Civil society organisations such as KAAX and Abahlali baseMjondolo have initiated litigation to seek redress and constitutional clarity (The Citizen, 2025).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Operation Dudula is not merely a populist reaction to socio-economic grievances but a profound indicator of systemic governance failure in post-apartheid South Africa. The movement's actions, ranging from unlawful identity checks and forced evictions to obstruction of healthcare access, reflect a breakdown in institutional authority, legal enforcement, and constitutional adherence. These manifestations of chaotic governance are exacerbated by the state's inconsistent and, at times, complicit response.

One of the most salient findings is the movement's appropriation of state-like functions. Operation Dudula members routinely conduct raids, demand documentation, and enforce exclusionary norms, thereby mimicking the role of immigration officials and law enforcement agents (Brickhill, 2025). This performative enactment of authority not only undermines institutional legitimacy but also creates confusion among the public regarding the boundaries of lawful enforcement. The South African Police Service (SAPS) has been repeatedly criticised for either failing to intervene or actively participating in these operations, raising serious concerns about state complicity and the erosion of constitutional protections (SowetanLIVE, 2025).

The denial of healthcare access to undocumented migrants emerged as a particularly egregious violation. Reports from Addington Hospital and other public health facilities indicate that Operation Dudula members have physically barred entry to foreign nationals, including asylum seekers and

refugees, many of whom require chronic or emergency medical care (IOL, 2025). These actions contravene Section 27 of the Constitution, which guarantees healthcare access to all persons within the Republic, regardless of legal status. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has issued multiple statements affirming this right, yet enforcement remains inconsistent, and violations persist (SAHRC, 2025).

The movement's rhetoric further compounds the governance crisis. Operation Dudula frames its actions as patriotic interventions, claiming to protect South African citizens from economic displacement and criminality. This populist discourse conflates legality with morality, portraying undocumented migrants as existential threats to national sovereignty and social order (Mmotong, 2024). Such narratives resonate with economically disenfranchised communities, particularly in urban townships, where competition for resources is acute. However, they also fuel misinformation, scapegoating, and social fragmentation.

Media representations of Operation Dudula have played a significant role in shaping public perception. Xulu's (2023) discourse analysis reveals that mainstream outlets such as Sowetan Live and Daily Sun often foreground the voices of Operation Dudula members while marginalising those of foreign nationals. This asymmetry in representation reinforces the movement's legitimacy and normalises its exclusionary practices. Moreover, the language used to describe migrants, frequently invoking tropes of criminality and illegality, contributes to a climate of fear and hostility.

Civil society organisations have mounted legal and moral challenges to Operation Dudula's activities. Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX), SECTION27, and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) have filed affidavits detailing instances of harassment, forced evictions, and denial of services. These organisations argue that the movement's actions constitute hate speech, incitement to violence, and impersonation of law enforcement, all of which are prosecutable under South African law (Daily Maverick, 2025). However, the judiciary's response has been uneven, and contradictions in SAPS affidavits have further muddled the legal waters (SowetanLIVE, 2025).

The findings also highlight a broader epistemic disconnect between official data and lived experience. A survey conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) found that immigrants contribute positively to the economy and are less likely than citizens to commit serious crimes (The Citizen, 2022). Operation Dudula, however, has dismissed these findings as elitist and disconnected from township realities, insisting that undocumented migrants "steal jobs" and "abuse public services." This rejection of empirical evidence in favour of anecdotal grievance underscores the populist tendency to privilege emotive narratives over factual analysis.

Finally, the study reveals that Operation Dudula's rise is symptomatic of a deeper structural malaise. The movement thrives in a context of institutional paralysis, where governance failures are not merely administrative but existential. The inability of the state to enforce immigration law coherently, protect vulnerable populations, and regulate civic mobilisation has created a vacuum that populist actors readily exploit. As Agamben (1998) theorises, the state of exception becomes the norm, and certain populations, particularly undocumented migrants, are rendered legally invisible and politically expendable.

In sum, the findings demonstrate that Operation Dudula is both a product and a producer of institutional breakdown. Its populist rhetoric, vigilante tactics, and quasi-institutional posture reflect a governance landscape in crisis, where the boundaries between state and non-state authority are increasingly blurred. Addressing this crisis requires not only legal interdiction but also a reimagining of civic dialogue, institutional accountability, and inclusive governance.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, it is imperative that South Africa adopts a multidimensional strategy to address the governance crisis exemplified by Operation Dudula. The movement's rise and persistence reflect not only institutional fragility but also a failure to engage meaningfully with public grievances through lawful and inclusive mechanisms. The following recommendations aim to restore constitutional order, reaffirm institutional legitimacy, and foster social cohesion.

First, the South African government must reassert the primacy of lawful enforcement by ensuring that immigration control and public service regulation are conducted exclusively by authorised state actors. The appropriation of state-like functions by vigilante groups such as Operation Dudula, manifested in identity checks, clinic blockades, and forced evictions, constitutes a direct challenge to the rule of law and must be decisively curtailed through legal interdiction and criminal prosecution (Brickhill, 2025; SAHRC, 2025).

Second, there is an urgent need to strengthen institutional accountability, particularly within the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Department of Home Affairs. Allegations of complicity, inaction, and contradictory affidavits submitted in court proceedings have undermined public trust and emboldened extra-legal actors (SowetanLIVE, 2025). Oversight mechanisms, such as parliamentary inquiries, independent audits, and judicial review, should be activated to investigate institutional failures and enforce disciplinary measures where necessary.

Third, the state must reaffirm its constitutional obligations regarding access to healthcare and other basic services. Section 27 of the Constitution guarantees healthcare access to all persons within the Republic, irrespective of nationality or immigration status. The Department of Health has reiterated this position, noting that undocumented migrants cannot be denied emergency or primary care (SABC News, 2025). Public facilities must be protected from intimidation, and staff must be trained to uphold constitutional norms in the face of populist pressure.

Fourth, civil society engagement must be institutionalised through participatory governance mechanisms that allow communities to articulate grievances without resorting to exclusionary mobilisation. Organisations such as Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX), SECTION27, and SERI have demonstrated the value of rights-based advocacy and legal intervention. Their efforts should be supported through funding, legal protection, and formal consultation in policy processes (EWN, 2025; The Citizen, 2025).

Fifth, the state must invest in public education campaigns that counter xenophobic narratives and promote constitutional literacy. Operation Dudula's rhetoric thrives on misinformation and scapegoating, often conflating undocumented migration with criminality and economic sabotage. Educational initiatives, delivered through schools, media, and community forums, should emphasise the contributions of migrants, the universality of human rights, and the dangers of populist demagoguery (Mmotong, 2024; Xulu, 2023).

Finally, South Africa must engage in regional and international dialogue to develop coherent migration policies that balance humanitarian obligations with domestic capacity. The African Union's Migration Policy Framework and the United Nations Refugee Convention provide normative guidance that should inform national legislation and enforcement practices. Collaborative efforts with neighbouring states and regional bodies could help address root causes of displacement and reduce the burden on South African institutions.

In sum, the response to Operation Dudula must transcend reactive legalism and embrace a proactive, rights-based governance model. Restoring institutional legitimacy and civic trust requires not only enforcement but also empathy, inclusion, and constitutional fidelity.

Conclusion

Operation Dudula stands as a stark embodiment of the governance crisis confronting post-apartheid South Africa. Far from being a mere populist reaction to economic hardship, the movement reflects a deeper structural malaise, one characterised by institutional fragility, legal ambiguity, and the erosion of constitutional norms. Its rise has exposed the vulnerabilities of state institutions, particularly their inability or unwillingness to enforce the rule of law, protect marginalised populations, and regulate civic mobilisation within democratic bounds.

The study has demonstrated that Operation Dudula's quasi-institutional posture, manifested in its appropriation of enforcement functions and its deployment of exclusionary rhetoric, signals a breakdown in the legitimacy and authority of formal governance structures. The complicity or inertia of key state actors, notably the South African Police Service and the Department of Home Affairs, has further exacerbated this crisis, allowing vigilante actors to operate with impunity and eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

Drawing on Institutional Theory and Equity Theory, the research has illuminated how populist mobilisation thrives in contexts of perceived injustice and institutional failure. Operation Dudula's appeal lies not only in its emotive rhetoric but in its ability to exploit distributive grievances and present itself as a corrective to state neglect. Yet, its methods, marked by intimidation, rights violations, and civic fragmentation, undermine the very constitutional principles it purports to defend.

The findings underscore the urgent need for a multidimensional response: one that reasserts lawful authority, strengthens institutional accountability, and revitalises civic dialogue. Legal reform, public education, and participatory governance must be prioritised to counter the corrosive effects of populist demagoguery and restore democratic integrity. South Africa's constitutional democracy cannot afford to cede ground to movements that weaponise public frustration while dismantling the rule of law.

Ultimately, Operation Dudula is both a symptom and a catalyst of institutional breakdown. Its persistence demands not only condemnation but introspection, about the failures of governance, the fragility of social cohesion, and the imperative of inclusive citizenship. Addressing this challenge is not merely a legal or political task; it is a moral obligation to reaffirm the values upon which South Africa's democratic project was founded.

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