

South Africa

Donald Trump's championing of Afrikaner grievances sparks backlash in South Africa



US president and his adviser Elon Musk seize on discredited claims to launch economic assault against African nation

Rob Rose in Johannesburg

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The last bastion of Afrikaner blood-and-soil nationalism in South Africa is basking in the attention of the world's most powerful man after Donald Trump took up their cause.

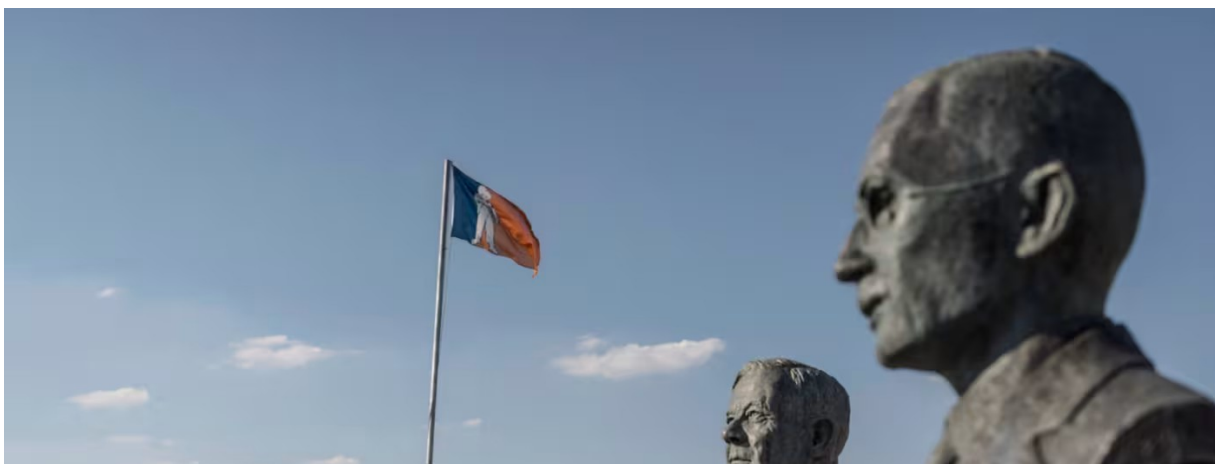
But at the same time, the community in Orania, an all-white enclave of 3,025 people in the remote Karoo desert in the Northern Cape, would rather not take up Trump's signature offer — to become refugees in the US.

“We can sum up Orania's response to Donald Trump in three words: help us, *here*,” said Frans de Klerk, a leader in Orania, which has its own currency and maintains a series of monuments to Afrikaner leaders including the architect of apartheid Hendrik Verwoerd.

“We are very grateful to the White House, because it has been a long time since Afrikaners were recognised on the global stage. But as grateful as we are, we don't want to leave our homeland.”

For years, many South Africans dismissed Orania, which was founded in the dying days of apartheid in 1990, as a bizarre and isolated throwback to the days of racial segregation in what is now a modern multiracial democracy.

But their fringe claims that Afrikaners, who mostly remain a relatively wealthy and privileged minority, are under threat both culturally and from rampant violence have found an audience in the White House.





Bronze busts of past Afrikaner leaders, including Hendrik Verwoerd, second right, in the all-white enclave of Orania © Marco Longari/AFP/Getty Images

The US president appears to have been inspired in part by his South African-born adviser [Elon Musk](#), who has repeated discredited claims of a “genocide” against Afrikaners.

Since coming to office in January, Trump has offered asylum to Afrikaners “escaping government-sponsored race-based discrimination”, cut hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for the country’s HIV/Aids programme, and expelled South Africa’s ambassador to the US.

The onslaught has triggered a crisis for President Cyril Ramaphosa’s [government](#), which has been left struggling to protect economic ties with a vital trading partner. It has also inflamed tensions in a country with a history of racial conflict that the World Bank counts as the world’s most economically unequal nation.

The irony is that the idea of taking refuge in the US is anathema to many Afrikaners, especially those who subscribe to a nationalist mythology. Afrikaners, who trace their roots to the first Dutch settlers in 1652, account for almost 5 per cent of South Africa’s 60mn population today.





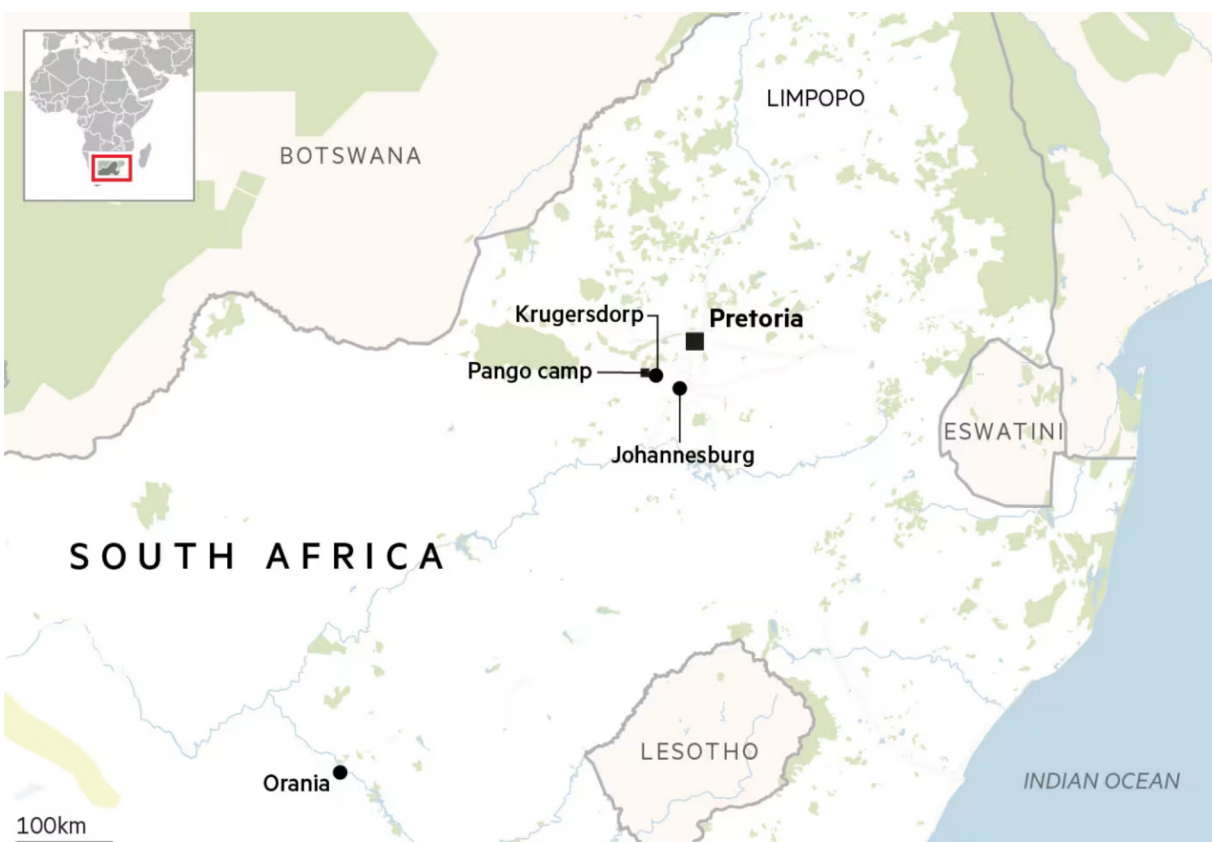
Ebrahim Rasool, centre, arrives back in Cape Town in March after being expelled by Washington as South Africa's ambassador to the US © Esa Alexander/Reuters

Neil Diamond, head of the South African Chamber of Commerce in the US, last month said he had given a list of 67,000 Afrikaners who had “expressed interest” in Trump’s refugee offer to the embassy in Pretoria. Afrikaner groups have disputed this figure, saying they believe genuine interest in asylum is far lower.

“The American government has made an analytical error of thinking that South Africa can be understood through its historical racial prism, when in fact the country has moved far beyond that,” said Frans Cronje, a South African political analyst and former chief executive of the country’s Institute of Race Relations.

Christo van der Rhee, chair of the foundation that represents the legacy of FW de Klerk — the last white South African president who freed Nelson Mandela — said in March that the US offer was an attempt to resurrect “ethnic nationalist” politics after being relegated to the fringes for decades.

In his broadsides against South Africa, Trump has picked up on a central claim repeated by a fringe of rightwing Afrikaners that the country’s post-apartheid governments have enabled a campaign of “violent attacks” against white farmers.



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Musk has also repeated the arguments that affirmative action policies enacted by the African National Congress government, such as Black economic empowerment, are “openly racist”.

Yet South Africans, including moderate Afrikaners, say the narrative of widespread racial violence against white farmers is false.

“The truth is, South Africa faces a problem of rural crime, and all farmers — Black and white — face a sense of insecurity,” said Wandile Sihlobo, an agricultural economist and member of Ramaphosa’s economic advisory council. “No one group is being targeted.”

While policing crime statistics are incomplete, private agricultural groups such as the Transvaal Agricultural Union keep their own figures. TAU data shows that murders reached a high in the early 2000s before falling in recent years. It said there were 32 murders and 139 attacks on farms last year — roughly a third of the 2017 level — against both Black and white people.

The number of attacks on Black farmers is “likely similar to that of their white compatriots”, said Cronje.

“This is happening to all farmers of every race — crime is crime to everybody,” said Victor Mongoato, a Black grain farmer.



Members of AfriForum, an Afrikaner interest group, pray during a demonstration in Pretoria against the murder of farmers in 2017 © Gulshan Khan/AFP/Getty Images

More than 30 years after the end of apartheid, white South Africans — who account for 7 per cent of the population — are typically far wealthier than their Black compatriots. Stellenbosch University estimates that white farmers own 47 per cent of South Africa's land and Black farmers 11 per cent, with the rest split between government and urban areas.

Many South Africans, regardless of race, argue this reflects decades of economic mismanagement under the ANC, which they say has done more to help an elite group of Black businesspeople than foster broader economic upliftment. One in three South Africans is unemployed.

Hugo van Niekerk, a handyman and one of the relatively few Afrikaners who live in low-income townships alongside Black South Africans, said South Africans faced a tough life irrespective of ethnicity.



Hugo van Niekerk, a handyman living in the Pango squatter camp: 'Everyone is struggling — white, Black and Indian' © Rob Rose/FT
“You’ll find a lot of support for Trump here because of what he has done for the Afrikaner,” said van Niekerk, who lives in the Pango squatter camp near the former gold mining boomtown of Krugersdorp.

But, he added: “Everyone is struggling — white, Black and Indian. We all suffer because of the elite on top, who are stealing us bankrupt.”

White South Africans fear that Trump's policies will hurt them — and they're right

Ultimately, South Africans fear that Trump's punitive campaign means they may all be losers.

Ramaphosa has said that Solidarity and AfriForum, two Afrikaner interest groups that lobbied the Trump administration to halt the ANC's "reckless policies", were "unpatriotic" in spreading "misinformation about their own country in the US".

Flip Buys, head of the Solidarity Movement, said his organisation only wanted Trump to pressure South Africa to abandon economically damaging laws. "Our message was that they should not punish the country by stopping humanitarian aid" or imposing economic penalties, he said. "That just hurts the citizens, not the government."

The US has also said it will impose a 31 per cent tariff on the country as part of Trump's so-called reciprocal levies on trading partners, though these have since been suspended for 90 days.

Theo de Jager, a fruit and macadamia nut farmer in South Africa's northernmost Limpopo province, said it was ironic that for all Trump's offers to help Afrikaans farmers, the tariffs would make their lives much harder.

"We compete with the best farmers in Australia, New Zealand and Brazil, but until now, we've been able to get duty-free access to America," he said. The tariffs would make it "more expensive for Americans to eat South African fruit".

De Jager said he would under no circumstances take up Trump's asylum offer. "If the last straw burns down in South Africa, I'll be here to try to put it out," he said. "I could never leave."

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