



What's Trump's beef with South Africa?

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By

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South African President Cyril Ramaphosa delivers the State of the Nation address at the Cape Town City Hall on Feb. 6.
Rodger Bosch/AFP via Getty

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — This week, President Trump, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Trump appointee and billionaire businessman Elon Musk all attacked South Africa in a flurry of social media posts.

The South African government, which is made up of a coalition of diverse political parties, responded firmly but diplomatically. President Cyril Ramaphosa said the country would "[not be bullied](#)."

By Friday the White House had issued an [executive order](#) to cut financial assistance to South Africa, citing disapproval of the country's recent change to land policy and for bringing a [genocide case against Israel](#) to the International Court of Justice.

The White House added it would make plans to "promote the resettlement of Afrikaner refugees escaping government-sponsored race-based discrimination." Afrikaners are the mainly white descendants of predominately Dutch colonists.

So why is the new U.S. administration taking potshots at one of Africa's most developed democracies, and what are the facts behind the allegations?

How did this start?

On Sunday President Trump posted on [Truth Social](#), "South Africa is confiscating land and treating certain classes of people VERY BADLY." He continued, "I will be cutting off all future funding to South Africa until a full investigation of this situation has been completed!"

He followed this post up with [comments to reporters](#) later in the day. "Terrible things are happening in South Africa," he said. The leadership is "taking away land, they're confiscating land, and actually they're doing things that are perhaps far worse than that."

By Wednesday, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [posted on X](#), "I will NOT attend the G20 summit in Johannesburg. South Africa is doing very bad things. Expropriating private property."

South Africa is the first country on the continent to hold the rotating leadership for the Group of 20. The foreign ministers from the group of the world's biggest economies are due to meet in Johannesburg at the end of February.

The third salvo fired against South Africa came from one of its own: Musk, who was born and grew up in apartheid South Africa.

Musk reposted Trump and Rubio's comments about his birth country and added his own, replying to Ramaphosa's statement [on X by saying](#): "Why do you have openly racist ownership laws?"

What is Trump referring to?

Trump's social media post and comments were referring to a land expropriation law South Africa [passed in January](#) that aims to address the legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

While Trump didn't specify which "classes of people" were being ill-treated in South Africa, he was widely understood to have been talking about the country's white minority.

The law has been controversial in South Africa because it allows land expropriation with no compensation in some rare circumstances, including if land is not being used in what the act calls a "productive manner."

However, the law does not allow for land to be seized arbitrarily and there has to be an agreement with the owner. Any land expropriations would still also have to go through South Africa's independent courts.

Ramaphosa [issued a statement](#) denying Trump's accusations: "South Africa is a constitutional democracy that is deeply rooted in the rule of law, justice and equality. The South African Government has not confiscated any land."

He also pointed out that Trump's threat about cutting funding has little relevance, saying: "With the exception of PEPFAR Aid, which constitutes 17% of South Africa's HIV/AIDS programme, there is no other funding that is received by South Africa from the United States."



GOATS AND SODA

Trump's 'stop-work' order for PEPFAR cuts off anti-HIV drugs for patients

And with Trump's recent freeze on almost all foreign aid, it's no longer clear if PEPFAR — the [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief](#) — is likely to survive anyway.



Elon Musk listens as Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump speaks at a campaign event at the Butler Farm Show in Pennsylvania, on Oct. 5, 2024.

Alex Brandon/AP

What is the debate about land reform in South Africa?

Many Black South Africans are frustrated with how [long land reform](#) has taken since the end of apartheid in 1994. According to government statistics, the vast majority of private farmland in South Africa — some 72% — is still owned by the country's white minority, which makes up around 7% of the population.

"The conversation about land reform in South Africa dates back to 1994 and the dawn of democracy," Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist of the Agricultural Business Chamber of South Africa, tells NPR.

"The land ownership at the time was massively skewed, for example if you consider farmland in South Africa it occupied about 86 million hectares of South African land, South Africa is a country of about 122 million hectares. Of that the majority was owned by white farmers and you fast forward to today, the numbers have not changed that much."

However, he said, "The idea that land reform policy in South Africa has changed and now there are land grabs, that is not true, there are strong property rights in the country."

Right-wing South African groups, like [AfriForum](#), which aims to protect the rights of Afrikaners, have been lobbying Washington on issues surrounding the white minority. As well as concerns over land reform, they claim white South African farmers are particularly targeted in murders, but statistics show by far the biggest victims of [violent crime in South Africa](#) are poor Black people.

Farm murders and a myth of a "white genocide" taking place, which [Fox News](#) has run segments on and Musk has also made public statements about, [caught Trump's attention](#) in his first term in office too. He posted on Twitter in 2018 that there was "[large scale killing of farmers](#)," drawing swift rebuke from the South African government.



Achild holds a flag at the No-Moscow school in Qunu, South Africa, in 2012.
Schalk van Zuydam/AP

What's been the reaction in South Africa?

After the attack on twitter from the world's richest man, Ramaphosa phoned Musk directly. He said he spoke to him about "[issues of misinformation and distortions about South Africa](#)." [Ramaphosa's spokesman Magwenya](#) also replied to Musk's X

post, saying: "My brother, you would know that owing to a devastating legacy of centuries of oppressive and brutal colonialism and apartheid, our constitution provides for redressing the ills of the past."

Trump's post has also helped bring South Africans together.

The Democratic Alliance, the second-biggest party in government after Ramaphosa's African National Congress, had been against the expropriation bill for a number of reasons, but corrected Trump's misinformation in a statement reading: "It is not true that the act allows land to be seized by the state arbitrarily and it does require fair compensation for legitimate expropriations."

As for Rubio's announcement that he's not turning up at the G20, China was also quick to respond amid rising geopolitical rivalry between global superpowers in resource-rich Africa. The Chinese ambassador to South Africa posted on X that his country was looking forward to the G20 summit hosted by their [BRICS](#) counterpart.

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