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## Unpacking the UK's Recent Riots

*By Paul Hedges*

### SYNOPSIS

*Recent riots following a tragedy in the UK bring to light tensions around anti-migrant and Islamophobic discourse. The normalisation of weaponised language against Muslims and immigrants by politicians and media over many years is one key factor explaining the violence and hatred.*

### COMMENTARY

When three children died and others were injured at a Taylor Swift-themed holiday event in the northern British town of Southport, the country as a whole, and Swift too, mourned a tragic loss. Within days, however, this tragedy became a [catalyst for violence](#).

As the alleged perpetrator was only 17, his name and details were not circulated, as is normal for a minor. Into this space, a Russian-based [disinformation site](#), purporting to be a US-based news outlet, stated that the youth was a recent illegal migrant and given a fake "Muslim sounding" name. Circulated within far-right circles, this stoked existing animosity and unrest.

### Anti-Immigrant or Anti-Islam?

For some, the riots were framed primarily about migrants. However, analysis suggests that a key driver, if not the main driver, is [Islamophobia](#). It seems no accident that the false claims about the offender stated that he came from Syria and had a name implying he was a Muslim.

Hotels housing asylum seekers and mosques were [key targets](#) for the rioters. This is not to say that it was all about Islam, and some Eastern Europeans were attacked for being "foreigners" in at least one instance. Nevertheless, for some, there is a clear

distinction between Christian immigrants and Muslim immigrants, seen partly in different treatment for Ukrainians and Syrians. At least as far back as Brexit, some have sought to conflate and create fear of [migrants and Muslims](#).

The riots concerned not only recent migrants but also targeted established South Asian communities. The shortened form of Pakistani, used as a slur, was heard, including from [the mouths of young children](#) brought up to despise their fellow country people because of their religion and skin colour.

### **Preparing the Kindling**

Language attacking both migrants and Muslims has seemingly become part of what may seem the social and political mainstream. The Islamophobia of the [British Conservative Party](#) often goes unremarked, and seemingly uncensored, with a former Prime Minister (and also Foreign Secretary) referring to Muslim women as “letter boxes”. Demeaning Muslims seems not only no bar to office but has been argued by Baroness Warsi to now be [socially acceptable](#).

The anti-migrant discourse of the last Conservative government, likened to [hate speech](#), has been seen as sowing the seeds of the recent riots. Slogans used even by former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, such as “stop the boats”, were words echoed in the [scenes of violence](#) on the streets, language [deemed “corrosive”](#) even before these events. The discredited and now abandoned scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda also seemed to be endorsed by the rioters, and a current Conservative Shadow Minister even blamed Labour for the violence by stopping this policy.

### **Fanning the Flames: Not Just Extremists**

Politicians and media have portrayed the violence as an extremist fringe. The [Nazi insignia](#) on display made it clear that extreme elements were present. Known far-right provocateurs were involved, such as the convicted felon who has fled the UK, Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon). While less extreme in their approach, Nigel Farage and other members of Reform UK now in the UK parliament, equivocated in condemning the violence, suggested people were being misled, and while distancing themselves from Robinson, seemed to use [similar discourse](#).

But more seemingly mainstream figures also stoked trouble online. The wife of a Conservative councillor has been convicted for [provoking arson online](#), asking for hotels with asylum seekers to be burnt down using provocative language. Again, a Tory [Police and Crime Commissioner](#) suggested that the riots and violence were only a symptom, seemingly giving succour to violent offenders by suggesting they did not cause the problem. As noted, some political commentators laid the blame for these riots at the feet of the [last Conservative](#) government.

### **The Muslim Community**

These riots have raised a spectre of [the return](#) of the institutional and embedded violence of the 1970s. For many younger migrant and Muslim families, the stories of endemic prejudice and violence, including from the police, may seem like another world, but now some worry if the hatred and danger have really gone away.

Even the Muslim leader of the Scottish Parliament has asked whether his family has a future in the UK. Meanwhile, especially from Muslim-dominant countries, there has been a concern about whether it is safe to travel to the UK.

As is well known, [Islamophobia](#) targets not just Muslims but also those perceived to be Muslims, and so mosques, as well as such things as a supermarket owned by a [Syrian family](#), were attacked in the recent violence. There are natural fears despite the strong response from Prime Minister Keir Starmer and the heavy police presence.

### **Reasons for Hope?**

If these riots paint a bleak picture, they were quelled not simply by a strong law enforcement response but also by counter-protesters. While slower to respond than the forces of the far-right and opportunistic looters, soon the rioters and anti-migrant protestors were met by equal numbers and then outnumbered by mainly peaceful counter-protestors supporting [migrants and Muslims](#). Police noted that known far-right provocateurs often turned up and sidled away from planned demonstrations.

Positive examples may also be noted. In one case, Muslims defending a mosque were greeted and hugged by [nearby pub-goers](#). It may be said that the decent, pro-migrant, and non-Islamophobic British majority was finally heard. Again, the Imam of the UK's oldest mosque, Adam Kelwick, walked through the lines of people protecting his mosque to talk and engage with those wishing to [attack it](#), offering them drinks, food, hugs, and the chance to enter his mosque.

But there is no room for complacency. Arguably, anti-migrant and Islamophobic elements feel emboldened by the seemingly [far-right Reform UK](#) gaining five parliamentary seats. This suggests significant minority far-right support amongst the British populace, mirroring some other [contexts in Europe](#). Another concerning feature has been the age range of rioters, including not just youths but also radicalised [older men](#) in their 40s to 60s.

### **Lessons and Contexts**

While Islamophobia exists [in Singapore](#), it has never reached the extent seen in the Western world. Singapore's housing policy, where communities in HDB flats (public housing units) live side-by-side, avoids the forming of isolated groups. Singapore's economic stability also mitigates against extremism, while the cost of living crisis, unemployment, and a sense of despair in the UK result in people readily adopting [extremist narratives](#) as the answer to a perceived failing mainstream.

The language of politicians and media, including now social media platforms, is also key. Singapore's government has been clear in its support of all communities in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. Lee Kuan Yew berated the idea of a "free press" if that means freedom to say anything, and with [communal division stoked](#) by parts of the British press, his words may still strongly resonate. These days, social media is a huge concern, and [Elon Musk](#) has promoted extreme right talking points, clashing with Starmer on X (formerly Twitter) about the riots.

Debate exists about how influential social media was in stirring unrest. Nevertheless, it clearly plays a role, and Singapore's POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019) exists to try and [deter misinformation](#) and falsehoods that may lead to such outcomes. Singapore may, at times, be heavy-handed and overly strict, but its policies, even if [controversial](#), mean there is less chance of open division, and there is seemingly [wider coexistence](#) between racial and religious groups.

Community action is also needed, and the example of Imam Kelwick shows why it is helpful to have trained community activists who understand dialogue and counter-radicalisation and can intervene. Such action is surely, in the long run, more effective than legal pressure.

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*Dr Paul Hedges is Associate Professor in Interreligious Studies for the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798