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Everyone's a Thug: The UK Government's Response to Far-Right Mobilisation in
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ABSTRACT

In July 2024, a brutal stabbing in Southport ignited a surge of far-right violence across England and Northern Ireland, fuelled by viral misinformation. In response, the government launched a forceful clampdown, including one of the largest Public Order Public Safety (POPS) deployments since 2011 and accelerated legal measures. This paper examines how this securitised strategy—framed by officials branding participants as "thugs" and "mindless criminals"—prioritised immediate riot suppression over addressing the underlying drivers of far-right extremism. Although large-scale policing and swift prosecutions briefly quelled the violence, underlying xenophobia and digital radicalisation remained largely unchecked. By treating these attacks as mere disorder rather than hate-fuelled extremism, the state bolstered its legitimacy but risked tacitly enabling far-right networks. Highlighting this gap, the paper underscores the need for deeper preventative measures—such as platform regulation and community initiatives—to effectively disrupt far-right mobilisation over the long term.

Introduction

In July 2024, a brutal stabbing in the English coastal town of Southport became the catalyst for a far-right mobilisation that rapidly escalated into a far-right campaign of violence across England and Northern Ireland.[1,2] Against this backdrop, the UK government mounted a highly visible crackdown involving large-scale police deployment, extensive surveillance, and swift legal measures.[3] Yet the degree to which these actions addressed far-right extremism remains uncertain. This paper explores the extent to which policing and narrative control shaped the UK government's approach to far-right mobilisation and questions whether their actions truly amounted to a counter-extremism strategy.

In analysing far-right mobilisation, this paper adopts the UK government's own working definition of extremism as "the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred, or intolerance" that either negates fundamental rights or "intentionally create[s] a permissive environment" for such acts.[4] Nevertheless, there is no universally accepted definition of extremism, and the Southport case reveals how political priorities, and public pressures can overshadow ideological considerations.[5] The core argument here is that the government's swift, securitised response was driven less by the imperative to combat far-right extremism at its roots than by the need to project control and bolster state legitimacy. By prioritising riot suppression over countering extremism, officials signalled that restoring public order, even if momentarily, was paramount—even at the risk of leaving the underlying extremist threat unaddressed.

Existing Research

A core finding across multiple studies is that states commonly combine coercive and accommodative strategies when responding to riots, reflecting both the need to restore public order and the political imperative of maintaining legitimacy. For instance, Bleich et al.,[6] show that liberal democracies often balance "repression" (heightened policing, punitive measures) with "accommodation" (welfare initiatives, community outreach) to contain ethnic riots. They argue that neither a purely repressive nor a fully accommodative approach dominates; instead, governments mix both, guided by electoral incentives and institutional pragmatism. This blending of tactics allows states to appear decisive—by quickly suppressing violence—while also demonstrating a willingness to address the root causes of unrest. Bleich et al.,[6] note that left-leaning governments tend to supplement law-and-order measures with social policies, whereas right-leaning governments emphasise harsher policing and sentencing. Nevertheless, both political camps engage in some degree of "beneficent control," aiming to prevent future upheaval. Critics of these dual strategies warn that, while balanced in theory, they often manifest as symbolic gestures of accommodation overshadowed by a dominant policing agenda. Wallace[7] contends that moralising media and government narratives reduce riots to "mindless criminality," obfuscating deep socio-economic and communal grievances that need sustained investment rather than short-term concessions. Such a disjointed approach risks aggravating community resentment; repressive tactics can escalate tensions unless they are followed by genuine efforts to address alienation, discrimination, and economic deprivation. Similarly, Choonara[8] observes that sporadic government responses to far-right riots—like inconsistent condemnation or inadequate community support—can inadvertently embolden extremists. This tension between visible enforcement and long-term social remedies underpins much of the literature on state riot responses, setting the stage for debates on how discursive framing and policing practices shape outcomes.

The manner in which governments frame riots—whether as symptoms of deeper socio-political grievances or as isolated criminal acts—strongly influence policy and public perception. Morrell et al.,[9] employ speech act theory to examine how UK political leaders portrayed the 2011 England riots as a breakdown of individual morals, rejecting structural explanations like austerity or discriminatory policing. Similarly, Newburn et al.,[10] posit that the dominant "criminality pure and simple" narrative helped justify harsh measures, including swift sentencing and increased police powers. Additionally, Drury et al.,[11] warn that militarised approaches overlook the complexities of crowd psychology and group identity formation. Heavy-handed interventions can inadvertently unify disparate groups under a shared sense of victimhood, intensifying conflict. By foregrounding notions of moral failure or "lawlessness," governments streamline complex social unrest into a crisis requiring immediate, punitive interventions. Yet as Morrell et al.,[9] show, a simplified criminal framing can be politically useful: it consolidates power by legitimising forceful responses and diminishing potential critiques of government policies (e.g., cuts to youth services or immigration policy). Over time, this narrative can become self-reinforcing, leading to entrenched "law and order" approaches. Hence, the literature illuminates how official discourse on riots either opens or forecloses policy windows for addressing deeper grievances, thereby influencing the degree of force used in subsequent policing strategies.

Another key dimension of state responses is the legal aftermath of riots; wherein swift punitive sentencing often serves both a deterrent function and a political statement. Roberts and Hough[12] found that courts imposed strikingly harsher sentences for riot-related offences after the 2011 England unrest, tripling custodial rates and sentence lengths. These decisions were justified by the government and judiciary as necessary to deter future disorder and affirm societal condemnation of riot violence. While public opinion does support somewhat tougher penalties for crimes committed during riots, Roberts and

Hough[12] reveal that the public is far less punitive than judicial practice assumed. Many people favour restorative or rehabilitative measures for first-time offenders, especially young participants. The stark gap between sentencing policy and public sentiment raises questions about whose interest's "exemplary" punishments truly serve. Critics argue that severe sentencing fails to address underlying grievance, particularly if government discourse continues to frame unrest as mere criminality. Newburn et al.,[10] contend that focusing on punishment alone may close off policy windows that could address mobilisation factors. Moreover, disparities in sentencing for different groups can exacerbate perceptions of injustice. Bhui et al.,[13] for example, note that far-right actors often escape the label of "extremist" or "terrorist," resulting in inconsistent prosecutorial zeal compared to cases involving minority communities. This unevenness risks reinforcing cynicism toward the criminal justice system. Thus, post-riot legal measures—while symbolically important for restoring order—can alienate communities and hamper long-term resolution if disproportionate or selectively enforced.

The case of Southport

On July 29th, 2024, the English seaside town of Southport became the site of one of the most horrific acts of extreme violence in recent history. Over the course of just fifteen minutes, a seventeen-year-old male carried out a brutal stabbing spree, inflicting a total of two hundred and seventy-three separate wounds which included stabbing, slashing, hacking, and attempted decapitation.[14] Three children were murdered, while ten others, including two adults, were left in critical condition.[14] There were fifteen other children in attendance.[1]

Within minutes, misinformation spread on social media claiming that the attacker was "Ali Al-Shakati," an "asylum seeker on an MI6 watch list who came to the UK by boat" in 2023.[15,16] Amplification of this fabrication by Channel3Now, British MP Nigel Farage, and other high-profile institutions and individuals not only shaped public perception but also contributed to the far-right mobilisation that followed.[17]

Fuelled by misinformation, proscribed organisations, far-right groups, and individuals swarmed pre-existing online networks to coordinate their response.[8,18] Telegram was identified as the primary platform driving mobilisation.[18] Between July 29th and August 8th, activity on far-right channels increased 327%, with the channel "Southport Wake Up" emerging as the primary hub for inciting violence.[19,20] Pinned to the top of the chat was an arson manual detailing how to evade law enforcement, encouraging attacks against Muslims and Jews.[21] Over time, the chatroom allowed members to orchestrate targeted attacks in cities and towns across the UK.[22]

On July 30th, despite police attempts to discredit misinformation—stating that the attack was "not currently being treated as terror-related" and that "Ali Al-Shakati is incorrect"—members of "Southport Wake Up" had already mobilised, identifying Southport Mosque as their first target.[16,23,24] At 7:45pm members gathered outside, just 483 meters from the crime scene.[25] Three high profile right-wing activists were photographed on site while people hurled bricks, smashed windows, threw incendiary objects, chanted, and looted nearby shops.[8] The situation further deteriorated as the group clashed with law enforcement, attacking officers, police dogs, and setting a riot van aflame while trapped congregants were left in a state of "terror".[16,26] At 1:30am police successfully dispersed the crowd leaving 39 officers injured.[27] Police and government officials swiftly condemned such reactions describing those involved as "thugs who have no respect for a grieving community", a sentiment echoed by Prime Minister Kier Starmer who branded participants as "mindless violent thugs".[16,23,26,28]

Despite attempts by both police and state officials to counter misinformation and delegitimise violence, far-right mobilisation continued. Between July 30th and August 5th, 29 coordinated attacks targeted immigrants, asylum seekers, private businesses, religious sites, police, and other properties associated with immigration across 27 towns and cities in England and Northern Ireland, with arson emerging as the predominant tactic.[29,30] The far-right was not alone. Each time violence erupted, members of the public actively joined in, welcoming and merging with the masked group. Families cheered, mothers recorded as their children attacked police, and teenagers sporadically joined in, drawn by the thrill.[31-33] While the majority of Britons rejected the far-right and its rhetoric, polls indicate that one in three supported the violence.[34,35] In response, communities mobilised in opposition, with counter-protesters defending buildings and steadily growing in number.[36] However, only after the violence subsided did rallies swell to the thousands in rejection of far-right ideology.[37] While community-led mobilisation played a role in deterring violence, the state had already mobilised its response.

On August 1st, following a second night of violence, Prime Minister Keir Starmer declared that the government "will not allow understandable fear to curdle into division and hate," emphasising that violent disorder and mindless crime constitute illegitimate protest and will not be tolerated.[38] Although no attacks occurred on August 1st, violence resumed the following evening and continued until 5 August.[29] Throughout this period, the state pursued a zero-tolerance policy on violent disorder, requiring large-scale police mobilisation and swift legal action.[39,40] Officials repeatedly framed the targeted violence as a severe threat requiring an immediate show of force, warning that "thugs would regret their actions" when arrested and publicly prosecuted.[39,41]

A newly founded national policing capability emerged to tackle large-scale violent disorder, recognising the need for a force that could combine regional resources, integrate intelligence and rapidly deploy across multiple locations.[38] This effort, designated Operation Navette, marked the largest Public Order Public Safety (POPS) deployment since 2011, with 40,000 officer shifts and 6,600 specialists deployed in a single day.[39,40]

Surveillance and intelligence gathering played a pivotal role. Body-worn cameras, CCTV, drones, and aerial surveillance facilitated retrospective investigations, with authorities deploying facial-recognition technology to identify suspects.[39] Regional Organised Crime Units were tasked with pursuing individuals inciting or glorifying violence online, contributing to a large proportion of arrests occurring retrospectively.[39,40]

Legal action escalated alongside policing efforts. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) deployed over 100 additional prosecutors, prioritising charges under Sections 1 (riot) and 2 (violent disorder) of the Public Order Act 1986.[39] By August 30th, 1,280 people had been arrested, 796 charged, and 570 prosecuted, with hundreds more identified as suspects awaiting arrest.[39] By February 2025, total arrests reached 1,804, including 286 minors.[42] The government underscored its punitive resolve, vowing that "there would be consequences for the criminality on our streets".[43]

The scale of arrests presented immediate logistical challenges, leading to the activation of Operation Early Dawn. This measure temporarily held defendants in police custody due to prison overcrowding.[44] To alleviate pressure, the government expanded prison capacity by 567 spaces while considering early-release schemes.[39,45]

The government's heavy response sparked accusations of "two-tier policing," with critics alleging a harsher crackdown on far-right rioters compared to past ethnic minority groups, mainstreaming far-right claims of victimisation.[46-48] Police and government officials rejected these accusations, rendering

the response as a necessary reaction to "serious public disorder" and accusing critics of "peddling far-right rhetoric".[39,46,49]

Ultimately, the State's response signalled a zero-tolerance approach to far-right mobilisation and violent disorder. Through mass deployments, advanced surveillance, swift prosecutions, and emergency measures for remand capacity, officials reinforced the message that "no let-up" would occur until order was restored.[41,43]

Discussion

A surge of far-right attacks following the Southport stabbing prompted the UK government to enact a conspicuously forceful clampdown. Swift police deployments, mass arrests, and severe sentences sought to re-establish order. Yet while these actions quelled immediate disorder, there was scant evidence of a strategic intent to disrupt far-right hostility at its core. This pattern reflects a predominantly repressive posture, wherein the state prioritises law-and-order imperatives over simultaneous outreach or structural interventions that might address deeper drivers of violence.[6] Other studies warn that ignoring the root causes of unrest—ranging from online radicalisation to long-standing social prejudices—leaves targeted communities at renewed risk.[18,50,51] Even short-term successes in quelling riots can be short-lived, as untreated grievances fester and re-ignite future hostilities.[8,10] The UK's response to the Southport unrest, culminating in Operation Navette and mass incarceration, arguably illustrates how efforts to preserve state legitimacy can overshadow focused measures against entrenched far-right networks.

The government's decision to portray riot participants as mere "thugs" or "criminals" is consistent with observations that politicians frequently depict unrest as a breakdown of morals.[7,9] While this rhetoric secures political capital, it also deflects attention from systemic animosities and radicalisation processes.[13,52] By framing the violence as apolitical, "mindless" disorder—rather than recognising hate-motivated attacks on mosques and immigrant communities—the government bolstered an image of swift justice but evaded acknowledging extremist elements.[8,53] As Fekete[51] notes, this diminishes the state's willingness to confront mainstreamed racism or xenophobia as driving factors, thus allowing normalised hate speech to flourish.

Such denial has ethical implications. It circumvents moral responsibility to protect vulnerable groups, as disclaiming hateful motives implicitly minimises the threat. It obscures how far-right hostility often gains traction within mainstream discourse, where divisive rhetoric—such as anti-immigrant slogans or demonisation of asylum seekers—confers a veneer of legitimacy on extremist stances.[9,13] It entirely rejects the complexities of independent mobilisation, shifting discourse away from effective extremist intervention. By insisting that these acts are "mindless" alone, the government appears to maintain deniability about its own role in cultivating an inhospitable climate for minority communities.[51] Finally, it can reinforce a "one-off incident" mentality, treating each outbreak of violence as an aberration rather than a predictable outcome of unaddressed resentments and prejudices.[54,55]

Although research argues that states typically combine repressive policing with limited accommodations, Southport's response appeared heavily weighted toward punishment. This is despite knowing that people rarely disengage in extremism simply through contact with law enforcement.[6,10,56] Police carried out large-scale arrests, corralled suspects with advanced surveillance, and swiftly pursued prosecution under violent disorder rather than riot, terrorism, or hate-crime statutes.[40] This choice

echoes Bhui et al.,[13] who discerns that far-right perpetrators often escape formal extremism or terror charges—even when their conduct parallels such offences.

An emblematic illustration is the partial use of harsher charges only for identified ringleaders—like creators of the "Southport Wake Up" Telegram chat—while those involved in racially and religiously motivated assaults faced public-order offences with a maximum five-year sentence.[7,20,28] Studies point to a perceptible hierarchy of tolerance: violent far-right aggression can appear less subject to unequivocal condemnation than either Islamist-inspired violence or, ironically in the Southport case, non-violent protest activity such as climate activism.[7,57] While the public generally favours restorative or rehabilitative measures over punitive punishment, glaring inconsistencies in sentencing across ideological groups serve only to foster cynicism, particularly when punishments fail to acknowledge the hate-based nature of such attacks.[12,51]

This selective prosecution fosters ethical dilemmas. The state's emphasis on repressing "public disorder" can overshadow the motivations of those specifically targeting Muslims and other minority communities, especially if extremist charges are only rarely invoked.[13] Vulnerable populations may feel further endangered if the system treats these hate-driven outrages as routine anti-social behaviour, rather than a fundamental threat to their safety and dignity.[53] Consequently, failing to label the far-right attacks as extremism will only embolden networks, interpreting such prosecutorial caution as implicit tolerance or political reluctance.[58,59] Additionally, perceptions of government bias can erode trust in policy, weakening participation in the UK's voluntary counter-extremism strategy, CONTEST. If individuals view state measures as unjust, they may refuse to engage, undermining its effectiveness. By framing far-right violence as public disorder rather than ideological extremism, the government prioritises immediate crisis management over a long-term counter-extremism strategy—ultimately reinforcing perceptions of selective enforcement and weakening its own legitimacy.

Arguably the strongest indictment of the government's focus on legitimacy over deeper reform is what did *not* materialise. Though repressive strategies can indeed deter immediate chaos authorities made no significant effort to suggest addressing structural drivers of xenophobic unrest, an approach critical to preventing reoccurrence.[6,9-11] Furthermore, far-right agitators draw strength from societal disenchantment, scapegoating minorities to galvanise supporters; with zero official mention of tackling racism, misinformation, or structural inequalities, these vulnerabilities remain.[8,60] Furthermore, literature shows that extremist and terrorist networks frequently employ victimhood narratives to garnish support, and as minority communities become increasingly victimised by the UK's failure to address far-right violence, independent susceptibility to extremist recruitment may increase throughout minority communities.[61-63]

Digital radicalisation was equally neglected.[18,50] Despite arrests for incitement on social media, the government steered clear of a more systemic overhaul, such as imposing robust platform liability for toxic recommender algorithms.[50] Absent legislative impetus on regulating extremist communities online, far-right networks likely remain intact, retaining the capacity to mobilise at pace. Davey et al.,[58] underscore that purely punitive models fail to contain extremist ideologies for long; absent a robust policy pivot, hateful narratives go unchallenged.

From an ethical perspective, ignoring these structural dimensions leaves minority communities vulnerable to future assaults and radical recruitment. The "lock them up" ethos may placate immediate public fear, yet the government's duty to ensure lasting security for all citizens arguably encompasses extremist prevention programmes, including community engagement to reduce hostility.[39,42,57,61] In

omitting such initiatives, the UK effectively signals to targeted groups that while violent disorder is condemnable, the deeper factors fuelling hostility—like entrenched bigotry, economic alienation, or platform-driven radicalisation—are not priority concerns.

Conclusion

Overall, the UK government's handling of far-right mobilisation delivered a rapid public-order victory but cast those involved as morally degenerate criminals, rather than confronting the deeper underpinnings of hate-fuelled violence and extremist mobilisation. Although, moralistic frames and strict law enforcement can temporarily quell riots, they seldom tackle persistent socio-political catalysts. This stance diverts scrutiny away from the structural inequalities and cultural anxieties that contribute to radicalisation. While officials did invest heavily in surveillance and arrests, the preference for violent disorder charges over riot, extremism, or terrorism laws underscores a broader reluctance to address far-right extremism. Consequently, communities subjected to racist violence may interpret the legal response as partial, fostering a new reservoir of resentment.

Such a "law and order" emphasis—with limited structural remedies—suggests that in this case the UK government prioritised preserving legitimacy over sustained counter-extremism. The digital dimension remains largely unaddressed, and no policy shift has emerged to disengage or rehabilitate those convicted. This strategy may resolve surface-level disorder, but the cyclical nature of far-right mobilisation—further emboldened by any perceived light-touch scrutiny—raises the probability of future violence. Without explicit steps to counter entrenched prejudices and disinformation systems, a superficially pacified environment remains vulnerable to renewed eruptions.

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