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UK rioters questioned the legitimacy of the state to give themselves moral authority

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The leaders of the recent riots in the UK co-opted ideas from abroad and used them to question the state's legitimacy and claim moral authority for themselves and their followers, writes Tom Kirk. It's a pattern that is being repeated across the world.

Over the summer, headlines in the UK were dominated by racist **rioting and violence**, **sparked by a knife attack in Southport**, and misinformation online about the identity of the perpetrator.

Those who were trying to claim leadership of the riots invoked the accusation of '**two-tier policing**' to justify the actions. The claim is that those who commit crimes from minority backgrounds or while

protesting in support of progressive issues get off lightly compared to their white, often working-class counterparts.

This idea of two-tiered policing has its **roots in the US's Civil Rights Movement** when it became clear that people of colour were (and **still often are**) treated more harshly and violently by the country's police forces. The far- and alt-right then twisted this into **conspiracy theories** in which the "**silent, native majority**" are unfairly persecuted by state institutions that have been captured by a variety of supposed enemies.

Those who make the two-tier claim are challenging the legitimacy of UK institutions by suggesting they are not working as they should. There are two main models of legitimacy. The rational actor view suggests that people follow the rules set by state institutions because they calculate the benefits of doing so are greater than the costs. The procedural model holds that if people believe they are treated fairly by the state they recognise and respect its authority.

But these models struggle to explain the UK's recent riots. If those involved really believed there is two-tier policing, most would have calculated that rioting is very risky. Or, if the unfairness of justice procedures was their cause, how do they explain the lack of evidence for their claims.

An alternative to these models suggests that wannabe leaders can create moral authority for themselves by undermining the state and setting themselves up as a group's moral defender. To do so, they borrow ideas and concepts from international networks, adapt them to local contexts and stoke divisions to entrench insider and outsider identities.

Lessons from abroad

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, a scheme supported by international donors promoted concepts such as 'good governance', 'urbanisation' and 'development' to local leaders. These leaders used the concepts, alongside pre-existing local narratives, to stoke division and undermine and disrupt the state's plans for decentralisation. They subsumed these debates into pre-existing, long-running, and highly militarised local conflicts. They framed themselves as resisting unwanted decentralisation efforts that threatened their followers and thus claimed moral authority.

In Pakistan, local leaders sought moral authority by participating in a development programme designed to increase political participation and the accountability of state services. The leaders were lauded by the programme's foreign donors for connecting it to local communities and for helping them to advocate for better state services.

Unfortunately, in some cases, the desire to praise the leaders' participation in the programme took precedence over worries that they were using private networks to access bureaucrats and politicians. This approach is responsible for the historic marginalisation of certain groups from the state that prevented them from accessing services on the same terms as fellow citizens.

But imbued with the moral authority bestowed on them by foreign donors, the politicians were empowered to act in ways that continued to benefit themselves and their networks and undermined the very democratic norms the programme championed.

Whilst the Democratic Republic of Congo and Pakistan may feel a long way from Britain's streets, similar dynamics are at play. In all three places, leaders are appropriating ideas from international networks and adapting them to local contexts to undermine the state and claim moral authority as protectors of identity groups.

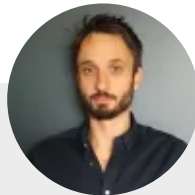
Britain's far- and alt-right leaders portrayed their violent racist riots as an **understandable response** to supposed two-tier policing and their followers' marginalisation by the state. The sub-text is that the rioters' criminality should be forgiven whilst those with different identities should be subject to increased monitoring by the police and their rights curtailed until they are deemed to have sufficiently integrated.

By better understanding these dynamics, we can shine a light on the depressingly familiar tactics used by the leaders of these movements and show them up for the insidious forces they are.

Tom Kirk is the editor of a new special issue on public authority in Global Policy titled *Development Practice, Power and Public Authority*.

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About the author



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Tom Kirk is a researcher and consultant based at LSE. His research interests include the provision of security and justice in conflict-affected regions, protection, social accountability, civil society, activism, humanitarian influencing, local governance and public authority..

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