



Bart Cammaerts

August 13th, 2025

Banning Palestine Action risks feeding radicalisation and distrust in democracy

0 comments | 8 shares

Estimated reading time: 7 minutes



In July, Parliament proscribed Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation. Bart Cammaerts argues that this move is part of a broader authoritarian turn and an increasing unwillingness to tolerate protest and dissent within democracies like the UK. But rather than quell discontent, such decisions risk of further radicalising dissenting voices, and increasing distrust in democratic processes.

Enjoying this post? Then sign up to our [newsletter](#) and receive a weekly roundup of all our articles.

About a month ago, on the same day that female MPs **smilingly paraded** in front of the media's cameras to be photographed wearing sashes with the iconic colours of the suffragette movement, MPs also voted to proscribe Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation. This is, to put it mildly, deeply hypocritical. Their vote amounted to an utter disownment of the long and successful history of protest, social justice and progressive change which they were supposedly championing.

The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), commonly known as the Suffragettes, were much more violent, disruptive and "extreme" than Palestine Action ever was, but while their **violent struggle** for universal suffrage seems to be worthy of celebration and a photo-op, the latter's largely symbolic and performative actions to condemn and critique what has been widely reported and accepted as ongoing **contemporary genocide**, and the UK's complicity in it, is being criminalised and repressed by 94 per cent of MPs. To be fair the MPs at the time of **the Suffragettes** were also scathing about their agenda and tactic. Many were jailed and those who engaged in hunger strikes were **even force-fed**.

Although I – just as **Amnesty International**, **Liberty**, the **UN Commission for Human Rights**, the **Institute of Race Relations**, the **Quakers**, etc. – condemn this draconian move by the UK Government and Parliament to proscribe Palestinian Action as a terrorist organisation and find this deeply worrisome, the intention of this piece is not to opine about the proscription of Palestine Action and what this means in terms of democratic rights and freedoms. Instead, I want to argue that the designation of a direct-action organisation as a terrorist group is illustrative of a broader and more longer-term shift in the way protest, contestation and disruption are approached and considered in neoliberal democracies. This trend is indicative of an authoritarian turn and an increasing unwillingness to tolerate dissent, all legitimated by a delegitimised neoliberal representative system of government and governance, in conjunction with a gradual (re-)normalisation of fascistic values and practices.

The canary in the coal mine of democracy

The proscription of Palestine Action represents a further escalation of prior **changes to the Criminal Justice Act** brought in by the Tories to criminalise non-violent protest actions such as those enacted by Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil by designating “public nuisance” as an offence punishable with a maximum prison sentence of 10 years and also by expanding the definition of what constitutes a “serious disruption” or “serious annoyance”. It is also noteworthy in this regard that the new centrist Labour government has refused to roll back these serious curtailments to the democratic and civic right to protest introduced by hard-right Tories. On the contrary, Labour is even doubling down on them with yet another **anti-protest bill** in the works.



The right to protest, resistance, disruption, and public nuisances are seen by many political scientists to be an integral part of democracy, as much so as the right to vote every few years is.



After participating, studying and researching democracy, protest and social movements for over 35 years, I have come to believe that the way a society deals with and responds to discontent, contentious action and

resistance from its own citizens, represents a canary in the coal mine for the health, quality and depth of a democracy, and of democratic and civic culture. That last aspect is quintessential, as it is above all democratic culture and values that are strategically being eroded day-by-day in recent years. As we can observe in many countries, past and present, holding elections every 4-5 years to vote in or out political elites, and having seemingly democratic institutions such as parliaments is in itself not enough to be a democratic society. Many have pointed to the need of a strong civil society, and a vibrant civic culture, to be able to speak of what Benjamin Barber called a **strong democracy**. In addition to this, the right to protest, resistance, disruption, and public nuisances are seen by many political scientists to be an integral part of democracy, as much so as the right to vote every few years is.

The nature of direct action is to disrupt

Unavoidably, however, activism and direct action at times pushes against the boundaries of what is legally allowed; it tends to colour outside of the lines with a view of raising awareness, to demonstrate the urgency to act, and to be heard and reported upon. Furthermore, delimiting what is permissible as a means of protest in a democracy and what is not will always be a contentious and unavoidably controversial debate, but **Philosophers** as well as **jurisprudence** have justified certain transgressions by invoking moral and democratic goals such as a higher cause like universal suffrage or the aim to prevent or stop crimes against humanity. That is precisely why there is an Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst Memorial next to Parliament and a statue of Nelson Mandela on Parliament Square; all activists who did not exactly shy away from political violence, disruption and nuisance in the context of their respective struggles.



Emmeline Pankhurst Memorial, London – Prioryman, CC-BY-SA-4.0



Nelson Mandela statue Parliament Square – Prioryman, CC BY-SA 4.0

As already mentioned above, the vast majority of protest actions and activist tactics in Western democracies today are much less violent and radical compared to those of the past. They are in truth all-in-all quite

peaceful and civic, which arguably also dovetailed with what social movement scholars such as Donatella della Porta have called an **accommodation model** in terms of how protests were treated in democracies from the 1990s onwards.

Sure, at times protests were still somewhat disruptive to everyday life and protest absolutely can and probably should be a nuisance to the powers that be, but contemporary protest actions are in the main mostly symbolic and highly performative, producing what I call protest spectacles, or as Greenpeace co-founder Bob Hunter **put it**, *media mind bombs* and today we would probably also need to add *viral social media bombs*. The real bombs and terror from the radical left as well as the extreme right, which marked the 1970s and 80s in Europe, are a thing of the past, and the Jihadist Islamist threat while still present seems to be more or less under control today and justifiably labelled terrorism, which makes the current moves to curtail and severely limit the democratic right to protest in such a virulent way even more suspect, damaging and an indication of unnecessary authoritarian overreach.

Protest bans erode trust in politics

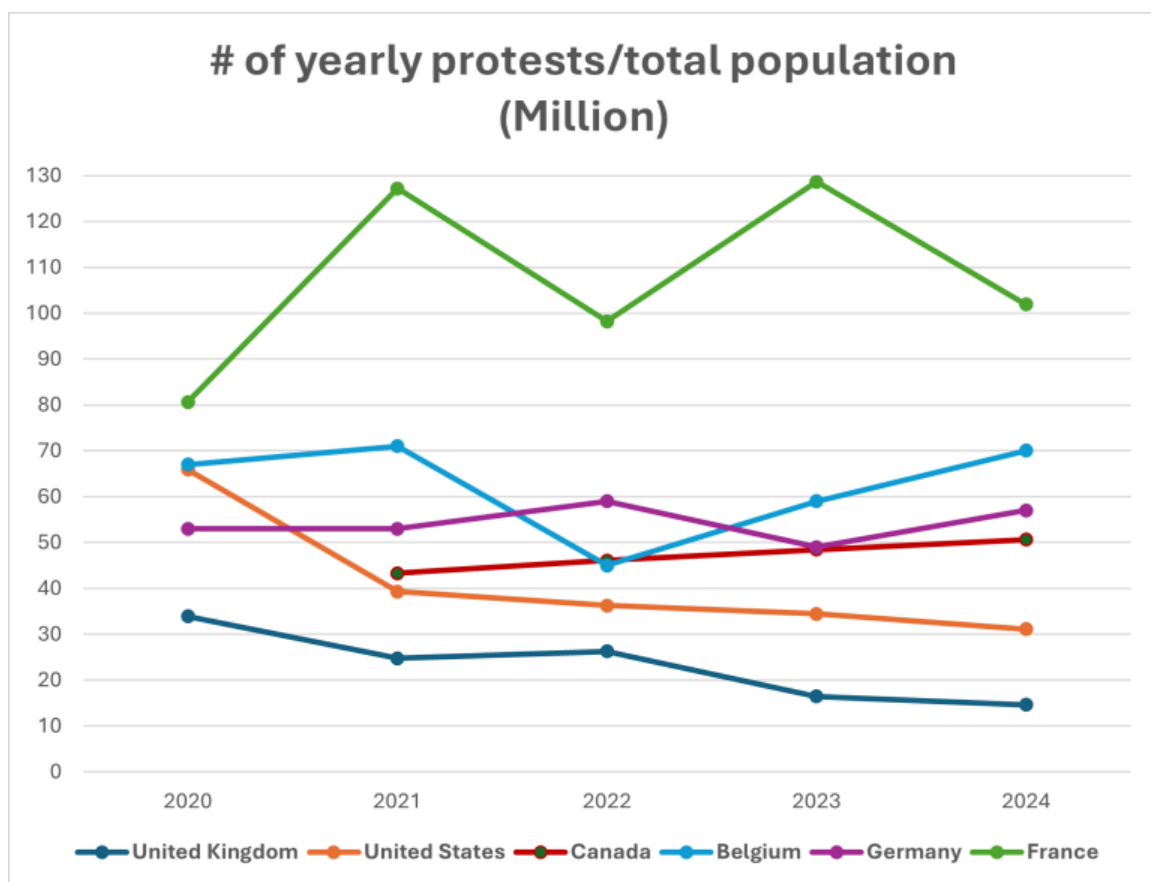
The shift from an accommodation to an authoritarian model in dealing with discontent and contentious action has a number of consequences. The most obvious and intended one is that this will lead to less protest actions being organised and overall less people will be willing to take the personal risk to protest and put themselves in harms way, so to speak. This is already happening.



By eroding the right to protest and in effect silencing morally justified causes and stifling discontent, the trust in the representativeness of the representative system of government and in career politicians risks eroding even further.



The graph below is an analysis based on Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), using the variable “demonstrations”, which is delimited from political violence and civilian targeting. To be able to compare different countries the number of protest events was divided by the total population in millions. This analysis shows that in countries such as Belgium, Germany, Canada and France, which have strong protest cultures and civic rights, the number of protest events has remained somewhat stable over the last couple of years (with some fluctuations due to the pandemic), whereas in countries such as the US and the UK where the right to protest has been fundamentally undermined in recent years, we can observe a marked and steady decline in demonstrations, in real terms but also if we control for total population to make comparisons with other countries possible. In the UK specifically, about 2300 demonstrations took place in 2020, whereas this dropped significantly to about 990 events in 2024.



Source: <https://acleddata.com>

Crucially, this decline in protest events does not mean that the discontent, frustration and a sense of injustice which lies at the heart of protest and resistance has dissipated as well and herein lies an unintended and potentially dangerous consequence for democracy. By eroding the right to protest and in effect silencing morally justified causes and stifling discontent, the **trust** in the representativeness of the representative system of government and in career politicians risks eroding even further, and this is already at an all-time low. History furthermore teaches us that protest tactics and state responses to it are inter-related. As such, closing down protest, banning organisations, criminalising and jailing activists, etc. more often than not feeds escalation, radicalisation and leads to more violent actions rather than the opposite. As the renowned Jewish-American sociologist Amitai Etzioni observed in his famous 1970 book entitled *Demonstration Democracy*,

"When the upward channels of communication are not effective, power relations amongst groups in the society and the distribution of political power will tend to grow further apart. The greater the discrepancies

between the social and the political patterns of a nation, the greater the internal tensions, conflicts and potential for violence.”

A healthy and strong democracy does not close off the upward channels of communication by severely curtailing the right to protest, it needs to build bridges between informal and formal democratic processes, between manifestation and representation, especially when it concerns deeply moral issues such as genocide and crimes against humanity.

Enjoyed this post? Sign up to our [newsletter](#) and receive a weekly roundup of all our articles.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image credit: [Pete Speller](#) Shutterstock

About the author



Bart Cammaerts

Professor of Politics and Communication and Head of the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics.

Posted In: Government | LSE Comment

Read Next