

Rule of law: UK's legal profession among those targeted in worst unrest in a decade

Ruth Green, 16 August 2024, International bar association.com

Online misinformation and anti-immigration sentiment have helped fuel the worst unrest seen in the UK for more than a decade.

On 30 July, disorder erupted on the streets of Southport, in the north of England, not far from a peaceful vigil for three girls killed the previous day in a knife attack during a dance class.

The police arrested an individual from a nearby village in connection with this attack, but, given his age, reporting restrictions prevented him from being named immediately. False information about the identity and background of the suspect was shared online, and a large crowd later attacked a mosque in Southport. Dozens of police officers were injured in the chaos.

The identity of the accused has since been confirmed, after reporting restrictions were lifted, and charges including murder were brought against him on 1 August.

In the days that followed these events in Southport, individuals and groups continued to stoke fears and spread disinformation online, including about the Muslim community and those seeking asylum in the UK. Disturbances involving violence, arson and looting broke out across England and Northern Ireland. In many places, mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers were the targets of violence.

The UK Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer KC, condemned the violence as 'an assault on the rule of law and the execution of justice.' The UK last witnessed such civil unrest in August 2011 when violent disorder engulfed London over four days before spilling out to other cities.

Starmer, then Director of Public Prosecutions, led an initiative to keep magistrate courts open 24 hours a day and gave them powers to pass longer sentences.

Given this background, the most recent disturbances have fallen in Starmer's 'sweet spot of law' and meant that the courts, despite ongoing backlogs, were able to hand down sentences quickly to quell the unrest.

Dozens have already appeared in court and been sentenced. As of mid-August, over a thousand people had been arrested and 575 charged across the UK in connection with this summer's disorder, according to the National Police Chiefs' Council.

Although some have raised concerns that the desire for 'swift justice' to deter those planning similar unrest could lead to miscarriages of justice, many have pleaded guilty so far, meaning their sentences can be passed down quickly without the need to go to trial.

Despite the role of online misinformation in both inciting the disorder and allowing it to escalate, courts have been handling this challenge in the absence of the Online Safety Act, which has yet to be fully implemented.

The Online Safety Act is designed to provide greater safeguards for online users against illegal content including hatred, disorder, the provocation of violence or certain instances of disinformation. It'll also require tech companies to assess the risks posed by such content within three months and take 'appropriate steps' to remove it from their platforms.

The disorder took another ugly turn when, several days in, a list purporting to contain the addresses of dozens of immigration law firms and advice centres was circulated on social media to provide targets for further violence, alongside calls for people to 'mask up' and attend the addresses at specific times and information on carrying out arson attacks.

Police deployed around 2,200 additional riot officers to protect those targeted on the list. David McNeill, Director of Public Affairs and Campaigns at the Law Society of England and Wales, praises the 'strong response' by the authorities to the threat. McNeill says it was also heartening to see members of the public support the legal profession, such as in Brighton, where hundreds of counter-protesters took to the streets after a handful of demonstrators gathered outside an immigration law firm.

McNeill says the threat posed by the list should act as a wake-up call of the dangers of anti-lawyer and anti-immigration public discourse such as that witnessed in the UK in recent years. 'These solicitors and advice centres were targeted because they provide immigration law advice and representation to asylum seekers – no other reason than that,' he says.