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# The Northern Ireland 'Flag-Riots': A One-Off or a Sign of Things to Come?

Deciding to limit the number of days the Union Flag flies over Belfast recently resulted in sectarian violence, or so many have argued. Alex Mackenzie disagrees. To him, the 'flag riots' reflect something much deeper — continued frustration with Northern Ireland's long-term structural problems.

By Alex MacKenzie for ISN

Generally speaking, peace has been maintained in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998. However, civil unrest recently erupted in Belfast following the decision to restrict the number of days that the Union flag flies over City Hall. During the riots, more than a hundred police officers were injured, over a hundred people arrested, and over 80 people (mainly children) were charged with public order offences.

But were the disturbances really all about the Union Flag or were deeper dynamics at work? The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and other security services suspect, for example, that Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries played a part in orchestrating the violence. But while many Protestants were upset by the City Council's decision on the Union Flag, only a small minority took violent action. Instead, it appears that the unrest served as a ['lightning rod'](#) for a number of underlying issues – including political disenfranchisement and the continued segregation of Protestants and Catholics. It should also be noted that the clashes took place amid ongoing demographic and societal changes which threaten to disrupt the fragile balance between these divided communities.

## Sentiments in the Loyalist Camp

It is also encouraging that the destruction caused by the recent riots was nowhere near the scale of violence associated with ['The Troubles'](#) (1969 – 1998), in which over 3,000 people died. For instance, whereas 250,000 Unionists protested against the Anglo-Irish Agreement outside Belfast City Hall in 1985, the recent protests attracted no more than 2,000 people on any given evening. Moreover, [outbreaks of violence](#) involved only a small minority of people in the Protestant areas of primarily East Belfast. Even so, there are two particular causes for concern: the high number of young people involved and the fear that Loyalist paramilitaries may have been involved in orchestrating the riots.

The involvement of [children in violence](#) has been a feature of Northern Ireland for decades. What appears to have caused a stir on this occasion, however, is the number of [10 and 11 year olds](#) caught up in the unrest. Similar [problems were also highlighted in 2010](#) as a result of clashes over the

Orange Marches to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne. Yet, the involvement of young children this time around appears to have been on a larger scale than before. This almost certainly points to deeper social issues playing an important part in the unrest.

Neither did paramilitary violence immediately disappear after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, with members from both sides forming [criminal gangs](#) involved in smuggling and other illicit activities. Sources even claim that former members of Loyalist groups and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) have [joined forces](#) to smuggle drugs. An equally curious development is the recent emergence of [Prods Against Drugs](#) (PAD), a Protestant group that targets drug dealers in Londonderry in a similar manner to its Catholic counterpart Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD). Over the past year, [RAAD](#) has forced over 200 young men to flee their homes and is thought to be behind the shooting of 85 people in Londonderry.

Of further concern was the [suspected involvement](#) of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Ulster Defence Association (UDA) in orchestrating some of the riots. Their motivation for doing so may have come from the cross-community Alliance Party, who proposed the idea to fly the Union flag on only eighteen days per year. However, Loyalist paramilitary leaders were quick to issue condemnations of the unrest, a move that reflects that there is little appetite among Northern Ireland's Protestant and Catholic communities for a [return to violence](#). Another contributing factor is likely to be the Loyalist [decommissioning of weapons](#) over the last few years, an initiative that commits paramilitaries to exercising restraint and continuing the peace process.

### **Involvement of the Republican Camp**

Although most of the rioting took place in Loyalist-dominated East Belfast, the Republican movement was [not completely detached](#) from the disturbances. While some Catholics [clashed](#) with Loyalists over several nights, dissident Republicans were also committing

MI5 also confirms that there has been a rise in Republican activities over the past few years. In 2012, for example, 115 people were arrested for [dissident Republican activity](#), with 35 eventually charged. However, the UK Security Service is also confident that Republican dissidents no longer enjoy significant [support](#) from the Catholic community and do not appear to have a credible political strategy. So given the general lack of public support for a return to violence, it is important to examine a number of social and economic factors to better explain the causes of the recent unrest.

### **Deeper Dynamics at Play?**

[Poverty](#) and unemployment remain major causes of concern for Northern Ireland's Protestant and Catholic communities. It is currently estimated that 120,000 children live in poverty and roughly 34 per cent of working-age adults are out of work, much higher than the British average. However, poverty alone is not a satisfactory explanation of the recent unrest. Many of Northern Ireland's poorest communities are Catholic and remain just as impoverished as they were 40 years ago. Yet, none of these areas was significantly involved in the recent violence.

A more pressing concern might involve [fears](#) that Protestant customs and traditions - such as marches, music, emblems and now the Union Flag - are being eroded by concessions to Northern Ireland's Catholic community. Over the past few years, Loyalist political parties have also lost a lot of ground to their opponents on Belfast City Council - Sinn Fein, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Alliance Party - which means that they can now be outvoted on most issues. Many working-class Loyalists in East Belfast now feel disenfranchised and disconnected from Northern Ireland's politics. In response, some Loyalists established the [Ulster People's Forum](#) to highlight grievances such as social deprivation and poor educational attainment. However, mixed in with these

concerns are unrealistic demands for the reintroduction direct rule and suspension of devolution.

The emergence of the Ulster People's Forum also reflects that segregation still exists in Northern Ireland, as [statistics](#) on housing and education show. In 2003, for example, 70 per cent of Housing Executive estates continued to be dominated by either Catholic or Protestant communities. Currently, only 6 per cent of Northern Ireland's children attend interdenominational schools. Perhaps as a consequence, two-thirds of those who live near the '[peace walls](#)' that separate the two communities want them to stay.

Finally, the recent flag riots occurred against a backdrop of ongoing [demographic changes](#) across Northern Ireland. A recent census shows that Protestants now represent fewer than 50 per cent of the Northern Irish population. It is also expected that the Catholic electorate will overtake the Protestant voting population within a generation. With the delicate balance between Protestants and Catholics gradually changing, the potential for renewed sectarian violence may increase over the coming decades.

However, concerns that Northern Ireland might be on the verge of revisiting 'the Troubles' need to be tempered by the lack of appetite for a return to the past. There are some on the fringes of the Loyalist and Republican movements who remain committed to violence, but for now these remain outside mainstream opinion. Yet, social and political grievances nevertheless remain closely interlinked in Northern Ireland. Political disenfranchisement, segregation and poverty are among the key challenges that will need to be overcome in what is an uncertain future. If they are not dealt with adequately, further sectarian violence may erupt as demographics change and Loyalists feel that their way of life is increasingly threatened.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Political Developments in Northern Ireland: January 2012 - December 2012](#)  
[Progressing Good Relations and Reconciliation in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland](#)  
[The Role of Education in Reconciliation](#)

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