

*Research analysis*

*Violence in the context of decolonization  
through an infrapolitical lens*

*Mégane Verdonckt*

## Introduction

The present analysis focuses on the occurrence of riots and violent protests through an infrapolitical framework to allow a deeper understanding of the political and ideological claims of resistance that are often overlooked. This analysis is based on one sub-theme from my master's dissertation titled: "What is the role of violence in the context of the Belgian decolonization process in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" The research was based on an initial literature study and complemented by a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with various types of participants. The research participants come from diverse backgrounds but share a common connection to decolonization.

## Infrapolitics: violent protests and riots

Protests are often used to decolonize. In 2020, following the death of George Floyd by a police officer, the Black Lives Matter movement got larger and spread to countries worldwide. In Belgium, this also led to more protests that were problematizing police violence against black people. Protests can also address larger systemic issues such as structural racism in general. Although 2020 was a turning point it is crucial to note that protests focused on these issues were already happening in Belgium (Gurcan & Donduran, 2021). More recently there have been many protests in support of Palestine and to end illegal weapon trade between Israel and Belgium. The act of protesting is often effective in spreading awareness to the larger public, and in addressing delicate but pressing matters related to decolonization.

Protests that have decolonization as the main subject typically aim to remain non-violent and use peaceful strategies. Nevertheless, in some instances, protests do turn violent. This prompts the question: "When or why do protests turn to violence?" Not to encourage and preach a violent approach to decolonization but to look at what point protests do become violent and where frictions and tensions lay.

In many cases, it is challenging to identify clear and outspoken forms of violent resistance that are directly related to decolonization. Nonetheless, there are instances of violence or outbursts that appear to be related to decolonizing efforts, even when they are not explicitly a strategy used by decolonial organizations in Belgium. Some examples of such acts of violence are damaging property during protests, setting cars on fire, or it can also be physical altercations between people or with police officers. Although it is often controversial to look at violence and recognize political and ideological claims, especially related to decolonization, it reveals much about people's grievances and perceived inequalities.

The concept of infrapolitics provides a framework for analyzing such acts of violence that may have underlying political and social motivations related to decolonization, which may, at first sight, not appear as such. Despite not conforming with conventional notions of social resistance, these actions hold significance and appear

to have political claims when viewed from the perspective of infrapolitics. Infrapolitics helps to delve deeper into those forms of violence that may not be perceived as having political underpinnings or legitimate political ideologies. Infrapolitics examines politics in everyday interactions and life (Marche 2012).

Upon closer analysis, instances of violence, albeit lacking the aspect of an explicit strategy to decolonize, emerge as reactive responses to the structural violence that is present in Belgium and can have post-colonial claims. In this sense, these manifestations of violence inherently embody a dialectical relationship, in which violence responds to violence with links to decolonization.

There have been academic debates and research in the past concerning instances of riots within the specific context of Belgium. One example involves research into whether discrimination played a role in riots in Brussels in 2009 and 2010. This study focuses on second-generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants. People from both communities experience various forms of inequalities in the labor market or at school for example. The study also focuses on other perceived forms of discrimination experienced by these communities in public places or through interactions with the police. The study looks beyond the question of whether the people in these riots were just 'trouble seekers' and investigates whether there are prevailing feelings of experienced inequalities within these communities. The authors compare the feelings of group inequalities between these minority groups in Brussels and Antwerp.

The research concludes that group inequalities are perceived to a comparable extent and potentially even higher in Antwerp than in Brussels, therefore, they posit that this does not fully explain the riots in Brussels in 2009 and 2010 in itself. However, it underscores that we cannot disregard the problem of the experienced group inequalities within these communities. The riots are however characterized as manifestations of deeper systemic issues such as inequalities and discrimination in the labor market and should be taken seriously. Merely resorting to measures of repression and blaming is not the solution as it overlooks more important questions of structural inequalities that can underlie these events (Vandezande, Phalet & Swyngedouw, 2011).

Another study focuses on riots in the Matongé district in Brussels that took place in 2011 and 2012, and whether they can be seen as having post-colonial claims because of the political resistance claims related to Belgium's colonial past in Congo and the continuing political relation between the two countries. Furthermore, the importance of the future of Congo in general was also an important point. The study aims to look at the underlying reasons behind these demonstrations, often overlooked in the media. A more nuanced analysis reveals that there is a close connection between the riots in the Matongé district and the political situation in Congo. Demonstrators expressed grievances during the riots that directly referred to the ongoing elections in Congo back then culminating in the contested re-election of Joseph Kabila (De Mart, 2013). There were widespread fraud allegations during the election process and the regime under Joseph Kabila deviated further and further away from democratic

principles (Mavungu, 2013). This evoked a strong response from the Congolese diaspora in Belgium which sought a reaction from the Belgian government. After several days of protests escalating into unrest and riots leading to violence, from both the police and protestors, the events were predominantly labeled as merely riots by political officials and the media. Without, or barely, mentioning the strong and brutal repression of the riots. This narrative overshadowed the political demands that the protestors had (De Mart, 2013).

Furthermore, this period coincided with heightened instability in Congo, with the intensification of the war in East Congo. This could have been an additional reason that resulted in more frustrations within the Congolese diaspora in Belgium, stemming from a history in which Belgium has had no problem with interfering in Congo many times. However, when the Congolese diaspora sought attention to address their concerns, they were faced with a feeling of indifference from the government. This caused a lot of frustration among people which is also reflected in the article by De Mart (De Mart, 2013). It is important to look at those political demands, as forms of postcolonial critiques, which were not literally formulated but are visible in that violence. In this way, they fall under the realm of infrapolitics as they are more undeclared forms of resistance (Scott, 1990).

As a matter of fact, some respondents who were interviewed for the research, as well as academics, see forms of resistance in these intensifications of protests escalating into riots. At first sight, they are perceived by many as instances of already marginalized groups returning to violence, leading to dismissive attitudes towards violence in protests and in general. However, a closer analysis reveals a correlation between the escalation of these protests in Belgium and the events in Congo. Consequently, it becomes evident that there are political grievances and post-colonial claims that underly these more violent outbursts consisting of mostly material damage, the use of Molotov cocktails, and also physical violence. The dissatisfaction of the Congolese diaspora with the government's response to the elections and their calls for intervention further underscores the political nature of the demands that came up during these protests (De Mart, 2013).

Existing research such as those by Vandezande, Phalet, and Swyngedouw (2011), and De Mart (2013) reveals hidden possible political claims and acts of resistance. The first research showed that feelings of perceived group inequalities and marginalization lead to frustrations and could be underlying reasons for riots. The second research showed the relation between violence on the street and moments of political unrest in Congo, revealing postcolonial claims with demands for the Belgian state to act. Both pieces of research intersect with the issues that are related domain of decolonization, namely the issue of structural racism and discrimination on the one hand and the regime in Congo along with the dissatisfaction of the Congolese diaspora in the way in which Belgium is involved or responding to Congolese politics.

## Conclusion

Infrapolitics helps examine the underlying causes or reasons that drive riots and reveals the underlying social and political claims of resistance to perceived injustices. Therefore, incorporating infrapolitics as a framework to analyze violent protest can enrich our comprehension of violence and riots in the future, revealing underlying demands that frequently go unnoticed in mainstream media or aren't represented in a just way in the media. Acknowledging the hidden resistance that is present in violent protests and riots through this perspective is essential to facilitate more constructive dialogue and positive outcomes in the process of decolonization.

## References

- De Mart, S. (2013). Émeutes à Matonge et... indifférence des pouvoirs publics ? Brussels Studies, 68.
- Gurcan, E. C., & Donduran, C. (2021). The Formation and Development of the Black Lives Matter Movement: A Political Process Perspective. SİYASAL: Journal of Political Sciences, 30(1), 151–167. <http://doi.org/10.26650/siyasal.2021.30.1.871276>
- Marche, G. (2012). Why infrapolitics matters. Revue Française d'études Américains 1, nr. 131 (3-18).
- Mavungu, M. E. (2013). Stay in power whatever it takes: Fraud and repression in the 2011 elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Journal of African Elections 12, nr. 3 (25-50).
- Phaet, K., Swyngedouw, M., & Vandezande V. (2011). Zijn gevoelens van discriminatie mede oorzaak van rellen in Brussel? Brussels Studies 47, (1-15). <https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/841>
- Scott, J. C. (1990). Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts. New Haven (Conn.): Yale university press.

Pour citer ce texte :

**« Research analysis: Violence in the context of decolonization through an infrapolitical lens », Mégane Verdonckt, janvier 2026/Analyse n°4, Edt. Kwandika de Fémiya asbl, Bruxelles.**