Protest in Flames:
The Symbolic and Political Power of Self-Immolation, 1963-2024

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Abstract

Self-immolation, the act of lighting oneself on fire as a form of political protest, has a long and complex history across various cultural, religious, and political contexts. This article explores the phenomenon of self-immolation, its symbolic significance, psychological underpinnings, and sociopolitical implications. Through a comparative analysis of case studies from South Vietnam, Tunisia, and the United States from the 1960s until 2024, this article uncovers the relationship between systems of structural violence—war, colonialism, and occupation—and self-immolation. Self-immolation functions as a radical form of communication, challenging authority while raising questions about martyrdom and self-sacrifice. The findings suggest that self-immolation often serves a pivotal role in political change by generating media attention and public discourse.

Keywords
Self-Immolation; Protest; Self-Sacrifice; Symbolic Violence; Political Activism; Human Rights; Mental Health; Authoritarian Regimes; Trauma; Military Occupation; Vietnam War; Arab Spring; Gaza War (2023-25); Thich Quang Duc; Mohamed Bouazizi; Aaron Bushnell

The Burning Question

"He then props up his cell phone on the pavement, pours some flammable liquid over his head, pulls his cap down, and flicks a lighter on around his ankles. When his uniform doesn't ignite, he lights the pool of liquid surrounding him. It erupts into flames, which climb his body. Yelling 'Free Palestine', he bucks and moans in what must be unbearable pain before collapsing on the ground." Nan Levinson on the self-immolation of Aaron Bushnell 2024.[1]

Self-immolation is the act of lighting oneself on fire as a political sacrifice. It has been utilized as a powerful and symbolic act of resistance against war and occupation, serving as a visceral expression of protest when conventional methods, such as sit-ins, marches, and other forms of political expression, fail to achieve policy change or visibility. This article argues that self-immolation is a symbolic political tool used to communicate suffering, often in response to perceived ethical violations. Trauma plays a critical role in shaping one's decision to self-immolate. Some individuals who have experienced sustained violence, oppression, and/or psychological suffering use this act both to reclaim agency and to bring global attention to collective trauma.

The question of what drives a person to self-immolate has become increasingly significant in academic and political discussions surrounding human rights advocacy and protest. Namely, it raises complex issues about the extent to which individuals have the right to harm themselves to make a political statement and the degree to which the state is obligated—or justified—to intervene to prevent such acts. Principles of human rights traditionally prioritize the protection of life, but self-immolation as a form of protest raises difficult questions about freedom of expression. The balance between respecting individual autonomy and ensuring public welfare remains a focal point, particularly in cases where states contribute to the conditions that provoke such extreme forms of protest. Understanding this dilemma is essential for addressing

[1] Nan Levinson, "Aaron Bushnell Told Us Why He Self-Immolated—Why Didn't We Believe Him?," *The Nation*, July 18, 2024, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/aaron-bushnell-self-immolate-palestine-mental-health/.

both the root causes of protest and the appropriate response of the state to protect its citizens without infringing on fundamental freedoms.

Defining Self-Immolation

Michael Biggs, a sociologist and researcher in the fields of political science and social movements, defines self-immolation as "an individual intentionally killing himself or herself (or at least gambling with death) on behalf of a collective cause."[2] One of the most important characteristics of Biggs' definition is the sociopolitical context of these suicides. People could kill themselves by fire; however, if it is not considered to be on behalf of a collective political cause, then it is not considered self-immolation. Publicity and political messaging are defining factors that distinguish the act of lighting oneself on fire as self-immolation rather than self-mutilation. Biggs characterizes self-immolation as an attempt to kill oneself as opposed to self-mutilation because the number of cases in which death is actively avoided is exceedingly rare. Biggs' research finds that the decision to self-immolate is most often the product of lengthy consideration, claiming that people who survived, typically held no regret for their actions.[3]

Biggs claims that the two main motivations behind the decision to self-immolate, which we can understand as politically motivated, are to attract attention and gain sympathy from the public.[4] In other words, self-immolation is meant to influence public perception of an issue faced by a minority population rather than to directly change the opinions of perpetrators or those in power. To maximize its impact, such acts must take place in public. Aiming to better understand self-immolation as a revolutionary act, this article presents an analysis of three cases of

[2] Michael Biggs, "Dying Without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963-2002" in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford University Press, 2005), 173.
[3] Biggs, "Dying Without Killing," 195.
[4] Biggs, "Dying Without Killing," 196.

self-immolations related to protests during the so-called Buddhist revolt in South Vietnam, the Arab Spring, and the recent mobilization of pro-Palestine activists in the United States.

Given that self-immolation is most frequent in countries with Buddhist or Hindu religious traditions, Vietnam, South Korea, and India have the most cases of self-immolation.[5] Biggs attributes these higher rates of self-immolation in Buddhist and Hindu traditions to "an 'ecological' correlation, pertaining to society as a whole rather than the particular individuals who sacrifice themselves…Therefore, religious traditions are significant in shaping tacit preconceptions—the cultural background of action—rather than avowed doctrine."[6] More precisely, the extent of religiosity in the act of self-immolation is not essential; religious traditions shape implicit cultural norms and perceptions of sacrifice, but do not motivate self-immolation through their doctrines. This concept is integral to establishing self-immolation as a political tool rather than as a religious expression.

Further, Biggs observes that self-immolations often happen in clusters. Within his sample of self-immolations between 1963-2002, "47 percent occurred on the same day; 16 percent occurred from one to ten days later; and further 4 percent up to a month later."[7] To some extent, he concludes, this can be explained by particular exogenous events which exacerbate a collective grievance; these events, or political crises, create a heightened emotional and political climate, making individuals more likely to respond with extreme acts like self-immolation in a short time-frame. Thus, self-immolation can be contagious in moments of crisis, as people who share the same grievances may be inspired or compelled to act in rapid succession. This observation is particularly important in terms of this article, which argues political conditions are imperative to self-immolation—i.e., war, occupation, and trauma—conditions experienced by the collective.

[5] Biggs, "Dying Without Killing," 175.
[6] Biggs, "Dying Without Killing," 187.
[7] Biggs, "Dying Without Killing," 188.

The foundation of this paper stands on recognizing the motivation behind self-immolation "[as] not merely to die, to escape the distress that stems from identification with the cause, but to make a final…statement to the world."[8] This distinction highlights the performative and communicative nature of self-immolation; it is not solely an act of personal desperation, but an intentional effort to shift public perceptions and mobilize the masses. Unlike private acts of suicide, which may stem from personal despair, self-immolation is an intentional political and public statement intended to challenge power structures.

Postcolonial Theory and Collective Trauma

Postcolonial theory examines the lasting psychological, social, and political consequences of colonialism, addressing how imperial domination continues to shape global power structures and individual identities. Psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon, a foundational scholar in this field, highlights how colonial rule exploits land and resources, and imposes cultural hierarchies and psychological subjugation. Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, explores the psychological effects of colonial violence, particularly how systemic oppression fosters both individual and collective trauma, often leading to acts of extreme resistance. According to Fanon, "one of the ways the colonized subject releases his muscular tension is through the very real collective self–destruction of these internecine feuds. Such behavior represents a death wish in the face of danger, a suicidal conduct which reinforces the colonist's existence and domination and reassures him that such men are not rational."[9] By linking postcolonial theory to collective trauma, it becomes evident that colonialism does not merely leave behind material consequences but also deeply ingrained psychological wounds. Fanon states, "when colonization remains unchallenged by armed resistance, when the sum of harmful

[8] Biggs, "Dying Without Killing," 198.
[9] Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Richard Philcox, 60th anniversary ed. (Grove Press, 2021). 17-18.

stimulants, the colonized's defenses collapse, and many of them end up in psychiatric institutions."[10] These wounds have the potential to manifest in political unrest, protest movements, and, in extreme cases, acts of self-immolation. For individuals who self-immolate in response to systemic oppression, their actions can be understood not only as personal suffering but as expressions of a broader historical trauma—one rooted in the legacies of colonial rule and the ongoing neo-colonial structures that continue to suppress and exploit marginalized populations.

Self-immolation emerges as a reaction to these conditions, embodying both the psychological toll of postcolonial subjugation and a desperate demand for change. Fanon further claims, "In colonial regions…the proximity and frequent, direct intervention by the police and military ensure the colonized are kept under close scrutiny, and contained by rifle butts and napalm."[11] Self-immolation transforms the body into a site of protest, demanding public recognition of the often-silenced experiences of colonial and neocolonial violence. In contexts where political structures suppress dissent and marginalized voices, the act of self-immolation functions as an extreme form of embodied testimony. Unlike other forms of protest that rely on language or institutional channels, self-immolation circumvents these barriers by using the body as a medium of communication. The visceral nature of this act disrupts dominant narratives, compelling observers to confront the realities of systemic oppression and historical trauma.

Methodology: Roadmap to Understanding Self-Immolation

I chose an explanatory case study analysis because it allows in-depth attention to context, motivation, and impact of examples of self-immolation. This approach is best suited for rare,

[10] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 182.
[11] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 4.

extreme, and symbolic acts like self-immolation because it traces context and meaning across cultures and geographies. The cases detailed here–Thich Quang Duc, Mohamed Bouazizi, and Aaron Bushnell–span multiple decades, from the 1960s through the 2020s, and countries (South Vietnam, Tunisia, and the United States). The individuals involved in these cases of self-immolation were selected for their contrasting identities, geographic locations, and sociopolitical contexts, yet each case reveals a shared use of self-immolation as a symbolic protest against state or systemic violence.

This work investigates the political context and intended message made by the protester, the media and public attention drawn to this event, and the socio-political contributions of the demonstration. This is accomplished by analyzing newspaper articles, video footage, photographs, government statements, and eyewitness journalism. Newspaper reports of self-immolations between 1963 and 1976 are generally accessible from the *New York Times (NYT)* and *The Times* archives. From 1977 onward, self-immolation reports come from newspaper archives, namely from the *Associated Press (AP)* and the NYT. Coverage from *Al-Jazeera,* an English-language news channel based in the Middle East, was also examined to juxtapose potential Western media bias in reporting.

Particularly regarding the self-immolations of Quang Duc and Bushnell, this article utilizes photographs and video footage of the events. Quang Duc's self-immolation was famously captured by the AP photojournalist, Malcolm Browne. The purpose of analyzing Browne's photograph is to better understand Quang Duc's body language, how the event was orchestrated, and how the media shapes perspectives of self-immolation. Similarly, Bushnell live-streamed his self-immolation from his Twitch account—a live-streaming social media platform—which has since been taken down (although a censored version is available on

YouTube). The video footage shows Bushnell's final message before his demonstration as well as the security's response at the Israeli Embassy in Boston. Additionally, Bushnell's decision to live-stream his immolation indicates a desire for mass visibility and communicative impact beyond immediate witnesses.

The article investigates how anti-government protests interact with state authorities, using case studies to examine how these events are shaped by and contribute to trauma, political dynamics, and societal attitudes. This article examines the response by South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem to the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc and the change in the United States foreign policy. Statements from Diem are found in David Halberstam's newspaper reports for the *New York Times*. Additionally, the press conference held by the Pentagon following Aaron Bushnell's self-immolation, which can be found on YouTube, is analyzed.

Lastly, eyewitness journalism is vital for the case of Quang Duc, as NYT journalist David Halberstam reported significantly on the Buddhist struggle in South Vietnam and Quang Duc's subsequent protest. This article also relies on Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era,* which provides a comprehensive eyewitness account of the effect of US foreign policy in Vietnam in the 1960s.

This article applies a theoretical framework across various disciplines to interpret each case study's findings. Suicide theory—primarily Emile Durkheim's altruistic suicide and revised understanding from Ben Park—considers the social conditions required for someone to commit to killing themselves, or at least making the attempt. Theories related to psychological pain, or psychache, by Edwin Schneidman and Thomas Joiner give insight into sustained psychological pain and the conditions that contribute to emotional instability. By combining these theoretical

approaches, each act of self-immolation is situated within larger systems of power, resistance, and trauma.

This research intends not to sensationalize or romanticize suffering, but to honor the political and symbolic intent behind each act. Ethical challenges include media censorship, the absence of first-person testimony, and the need to respectfully represent trauma. By combining explanatory case studies with media and theoretical analysis, this work seeks to contextualize self-immolation acts and interpret their symbolic force within socio-political landscapes.

Surveying Approaches to Suicide: Protest That Involves the Body

This section establishes the connections between suicide theory, self-immolation, political protest, and examples of self-sacrifice. By incorporating hunger strikes and suicide bombing, self-immolation is distinguished from other forms of self-sacrificial protest while reinforcing its psychological, ethical, and political significance. Theories about suicide are integral because even though self-immolation is not commonly labeled as a suicidal act, understanding lethality is necessary to understand what might motivate one to self-immolate. Relying mainly on theories by Emile Durkheim, Edwin Schneidman, and Thomas Joiner, this article examines various definitions of suicide that can be applied to understandings of self-immolation.

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, was the first to attempt a comprehensive theory of suicide in the 19th century.[12] He characterizes four types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic suicide. According to Durkheim, the four main types of suicide exist on an axis of social integration and regulation. Social integration refers to the degree to which individuals feel

[12] Kenneth Thompson, *Emile Durkheim*, (Taylor & Francis, 2003).

connected and involved in their society.[13] Social regulation, on the other hand, conveys the extent to which societal norms, rules, and structures influence an individual's behavior. Rather than attributing suicide to purely psychological or individual distress, Durkheim frames suicide as a product of societal forces.

For this paper, Durkheim's definition of altruistic suicide provides the best context for political self-immolations. Altruistic suicide occurs when a person experiences extremely high social integration, meaning one sacrifices themselves for the greater good of the community. Durkheim claims that in order "for society to be able thus to compel some of its members to kill themselves, the individual personality can have little value…For the individual to occupy so little place in collective life he must be almost completely absorbed in the group and the latter, accordingly, very highly integrated."[14] High social integration and "complete absorption" within a community can be understood as individuals having such close ties to the rituals and cultural beliefs of their community that they lose a sense of individuality.[15]

B.C. Ben Park, a professor of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University, believes Durkheim's definition should be expanded in his study, "Sociopolitical Contexts of Self-immolations in Vietnam and South Korea." Looking at suicide notes, diaries, and letters left behind by 22 self-immolators, Park argues that Durkheim's framework is missing the perspective of immolators, specifically the meaning behind their suicides. Thus, Parker suggests a broader definition of altruistic suicide that acknowledges the commitment to a larger community, social and political contexts that influence suicidal ideation, and the political intention behind such acts:

> [B]y expanding Durkheim's notion of altruistic suicide, we have shown that the self-immolators fit within the model of suicides in which the actors feel compelled to acts

[13] Relationships, shared values, and a sense of belonging shape this idea.
[14] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide,* trans. (Free Press, 2010), 201.
[15] Durkheim describes three different subgroups within altruistic suicide: obligatory, optional, and acute.

> of purposeful or intentional (as opposed to impulsive) self-destruction out of a commitment, or we might say over-commitment, to their social contexts. Their acts, and this commitment, can only be understood in relation to the geo-political and socio-historical contexts in which these people saw themselves existing.[16]

Therefore, self-immolation can be understood as a result of extreme social integration, in which individuals are influenced to commit suicide as an act of protest meant to represent the collective struggle of their community.

Edwin Schneidman's, American psychologist and suicidologist, concept of "psychache" offers further insight into the intense psychological pain that can drive individuals to self-inflicted death. He claims that suicide is caused by psychache, "the hurt, anguish, soreness, aching, psychological pain in the psyche, the mind."[17] Schneidman analyzes depression, suicidal ideation, and psychache and how they differ, but for this article, we must understand that suicide occurs under extreme, prolonged,[18] and unbearable psychological pain, which can come from a myriad of sources.

In his *Why People Die by Suicide* Thomas Joiner introduces his Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS), which utilizes frameworks from Durkheim and Schneidman. Joiner holds that suicide occurs when three factors converge: perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and acquired capability for suicide. This article focuses mainly on acquired capability for suicide as it relates to self-immolation. Acquired capability for suicide means the ability to overcome the innate fear of death, often developed through repeated exposure to painful or provocative experiences, such as self-harm, combat, or abuse. Joiner's theory goes beyond the desire to commit suicide; rather, a person has to overcome the natural fear of death and pain.

[16] B. C. Ben Park, "Sociopolitical Contexts of Self-Immolations in Vietnam and South Korea," *Archives of Suicide Research 8,* no. 1 (2004): 96
[17] Edwin Shneidman, "Suicide as Psychache," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 181, no. 3 (1993): 145.
[18] Schneidman does not define the parameters of "prolonged" or "extreme" because he claims everyone has a different pain threshold, therefore there cannot be a general definition for each.

Self-immolation is one of the most painful ways to die, therefore requiring intense psychological preparation.[19]

The theories of suicide explored in this section provide a crucial foundation for understanding self-immolation as a distinct phenomenon within the broader discourse of self-inflicted death. Self-immolation challenges conventional classifications of suicide by occupying a unique space between self-sacrificial protest and extreme psychological distress. Nonetheless, anchoring self-immolation in suicide theory allows us to contextualize the psychological factors necessary to commit this act.

Suicide Bombing and Hunger Strikes: Similar Acts of Self-Sacrifice

Acts of self-sacrifice in political protest take many forms, each carrying distinct ethical, symbolic, and strategic implications. Among these, self-immolation, suicide bombing, and hunger strikes stand out as extreme demonstrations of commitment to a cause, yet they differ in intent, impact, and societal reception. While all three involve individuals willing to endure suffering or death for a larger purpose, their ethical frameworks and consequences diverge significantly. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for assessing the ethical and political dimensions of self-sacrifice in protest, particularly within the context of self-immolation. By comparing self-immolation to suicide bombing and hunger strikes, this section explores how individuals use their bodies as political instruments. These differences ultimately shape how societies interpret martyrdom, resistance, and political violence.

While self-immolation and suicide bombing may derive from similar political grievances, in practice, they are much different. First and foremost, there is a distinction between self-directed harm in cases of self-immolation and the violence against others necessary for

[19] Thomas Joiner, *Why People Die by Suicide* (Harvard UP, 2007).

suicide bombings. Within the field of suicide bombing studies, there is a lack of common agreement in terminology. Some authors regard suicide bombings as terrorism, others do not. Some scholars even reject the label of "suicide" as a whole, preferring the term "martyrdom" as it accommodates certain cultures.

John Horgan, Director of the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies at the University of Massachusetts, provides a broad definition of terrorism in his *The Psychology of Terrorism*. According to Horgan, "very often, it seems that the goal of terrorism in the short term is simply to create widespread fear, arousal and uncertainty on a wider, more distant scale than that achieved by targeting the victim alone, *thereby* influencing (in the longer term) the political process and how it might normally be expected to function."[20] Terrorism is meant to elicit an emotional response, much like self-immolation, however their public perceptions differ greatly.

According to Mohammed M. Hafez, a specialist in Islamic movements, political militancy, and violent radicalization, there are many explanations for suicide bombings, including psychological trauma. Hafez explains that "in societies befallen by violent conflicts, personal trauma and bereavement create psychic pain that demands a psychological response."[21] Sometimes, in the wake of violence and extreme emotional suffering, for example, when a country is invaded, occupied, or family members are killed, individuals may seek violence towards their perceived enemies. Hafez references "Palestinian psychologist Eyad El-Sarraij [who] attributes suicide bombings [in Palestine] to a generation of Palestinian youth who grew up under the first Palestinian uprising and saw their parents and loved ones humiliated by Israeli soldiers. The appeal of suicide bombings [according to Hafez] is that it offers victims of

[20] John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism,* rev. and updated 2nd ed. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 11.
[21] Mohammed M. Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), 10.

psychological trauma a heroic way out of their misery and powerlessness."[22] Yet, Hafez highlights a few issues within this framework. Hafez argues that if the trauma of the First Intifada is the sole influence for suicide bombing in Palestine, then the number of suicide bombings during that time and in that area should be higher.[23] While trauma and bereavement are prolific throughout the world, suicide bombings are not as widespread. Hafez acknowledges the value of psychological approaches that attempt to understand how trauma influences suicide terrorism. However, he suggests that suicide terrorism is more multifaceted than these explanations allow. To understand organizational decisions to employ suicide bombing—for example, terrorist organizations mobilizing suicide bombers—Hafez explores rationalist approaches, which argue that suicide terrorism is a purposeful method of political contention.[24] He argues, however, that rationalist explanations do not explain why an individual would accept this role. Therefore, a "single-factor explanation of this phenomenon is not possible," necessitating multidimensional approaches.[25]

In examining suicide bombing and self-immolation, it becomes evident that while both acts stem from deep political grievances and involve individuals willing to die for a cause, their methods, intentions, and societal perceptions diverge significantly. Suicide bombing is inherently an act of violence against others, weaponizing the body as a tool of destruction to instill fear, destabilize governments, or advance ideological objectives. In contrast, self-immolation is an act of self-directed suffering that seeks to communicate a message through personal sacrifice rather than external harm. Even though suicide bombing and self-immolation share some similarities, self-immolation tends to elicit sympathy, while suicide bombing is frequently condemned due to

[22] Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs*, 11.
[23] Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs,* 11.
[24] Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs,* 13.
[25] Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs,* 24.

its indiscriminate violence and the moral implications of targeting civilians. Using one's body as a symbol of suffering is fundamental different from using one's body as a weapon of war.

New York University professor Allen Feldman highlights the significance of the uses of the body in political action, notably in Northern Ireland. He specifically looks at "bodily, spatial, and violent practices as forming a unified language of material signification, circulating between and formative of antagonistic blocs."[26] Feldman argues that political struggles are not just fought with words or ideologies but through embodied, spatial, and violent actions that become a shared—yet contested—system of meaning-making in conflict. In the context of hunger strikes, Feldman's study suggests this form of protest is an embodied struggle that sends a direct message. According to Candice Delmas, author of "The Right to Hunger Strike," who applies Feldman's understanding of bodily practices, hunger strikes should be considered "bodily weapons" and representative of violent and self-destructive resistance.[27] Hunger strikes are often symbolic of a refusal to submit, a rejection of the status quo, or a demand for political or social change.[28]

Both hunger strikes and self-immolation serve as extreme forms of political protest, but they differ significantly in their methods, the way they communicate resistance, and how they are perceived by both the individual performing the act and the broader society. Hunger strikes are a form of passive, sustained protest that relies on the protester's endurance and the gradual, sometimes less visible, harm they suffer, while self-immolation is a dramatic, immediate, and violent form of protest that sacrifices the body instantaneously and often results in immediate death or severe injury. The ethical considerations surrounding each act, as well as their varying

[26] Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1.
[27] Candice Delmas, "The Right to Hunger Strike," *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 2 (2024): 850.
[28] Delmas, "The Right to Hunger Strike," 848.

societal receptions, reveal the complex nature of self-sacrifice in political protest and its power to challenge established systems.

Provocative Protest in Practice: 1963-2024

Self-immolation as a form of political resistance reveals striking patterns across the cases of Thich Quang Duc, Mohamed Bouazizi, and Aaron Bushnell. Each act emerged from a profound sense of injustice and a belief that all other avenues for meaningful change had been exhausted. Beyond personal sacrifice, these acts served as deliberate and highly visible statements aimed at exposing systemic oppression and compelling public and governmental response. Quang Duc's 1963 self-immolation protested the persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam, Bouazizi's act in 2010 was a response to economic despair and government corruption in Tunisia, and Bushnel's 2024 protest was a condemnation of the U.S. political and material support of Israel in the war in Gaza. Despite differences in context, each case reflects a common pattern: self-immolation becomes a final resort when individuals perceive no other way to voice opposition. These acts complicate ethical distinctions between suicide and political self-sacrifice, particularly when viewed through Durkheim's concept of altruistic suicide, while also raising questions about autonomy under conditions of systemic violence. Trauma plays a critical role in motivating these acts, as personal suffering intersects with collective grievances, transforming individual despair into a catalyst for social change. Analyzing these cases together reveals that self-immolation is not merely an act of personal defiance but a profound political statement that demands attention to the structural conditions driving individuals to self-immolate.

Thich Quang Duc: A Turning Point in the "Buddhist Crisis" in South Vietnam

The so-called Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam was influenced by an extensive history of political and religious unrest in the country.[29] This section details only the most important events during this period of discontent in South Vietnam, which led to the self-immolation of Buddhist priest Thich Quang Duc. The political unrest during the late 1950s into early 1960s originated from dissent towards President Ngo Dinh Diem's oppressive rule.[30] According to the *New York Times* reporter in South Vietnam during this period, David Halberstam, South Vietnam became, "for all intents and purposes, a Communist-type country without Communism…all the controls, all the oppressions, and all the frustrating, grim aspects of the modern totalitarian state," reflecting the repressive nature of the regime.[31]

When Diem was appointed, he filled his cabinet mainly with his family or individuals with close ties to him, all of whom "belonged to the country's Catholic minority."[32] In reality, these individuals "lacked the requisite experience to perform their jobs effectively."[33] This yielded oppressive policies and policing against Buddhists or anyone who opposed the administration.[34] In fact, Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu,[35] characterized critics as communists and deemed any resistance as acts of treason.[36] Political activists who opposed the Diem regime were consistently silenced, and many leaders of these organizations were jailed, thus creating a society in South Vietnam that passively objected to their government.

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[29] The term "Buddhist Crisis" was primarily used by American journalists to describe the conflict between South Vietnamese Buddhists and the South Vietnamese government.
[30] Diem was a figure supported by former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower following the First Indochina War and Geneva Conference. He was later appointed by Bao Dai due to United States influence. The beginning of Diem's presidency and its connection to United States anti-communist efforts is detailed extensively in Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, (Cornell University Press, 2013), 70.
[31] David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (Random House, 1965), 52.
[32] Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance,* 76.
[33] Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance,* 88.
[34] The overwhelming Catholic presence in 1950s-1960s South Vietnam was due to the United States' anti-communist efforts and close relationship with the Diem family.
[35] Nhu was appointed State Counsellor of South Vietnam during his brother's presidency.
[36] Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance,* 175.

The conflict came to a head in May of 1963 when government forces killed several people in a celebration of Buddha's birthday in Hue. President Diem had issued an ordinance prohibiting Buddhists from flying their flag at the celebration of Buddha's birthday. The government also denied a request to allow the Buddhist leader, Thich Tri Quang, to speak on the local radio. In response, thousands of Buddhists marched to the radio station, and when they were denied entry they began to mobilize in the town square. Police had difficulty breaking up the demonstration; thus, "government troops were brought in; the major in command ordered them to fire, and they shot into the crowd. No intermediate step, such as firing over the heads of the crowd or using tear gas, was taken. Nine people were killed, and an armored car rolled over some of the victims."[37] Following the incident, the government refused to admit fault and instead claimed the Communist Party had orchestrated the violence. The "Buddhist Crisis" began in retaliation for the lack of accountability and corruption from the government.

On the morning of June 11th, 1963, David Halberstam was awoken by a phone call from Nguyen Ngoc Rao, the Vietnamese reporter for UPI. Halberstam recalled Rao's voice being panicky and out of control, telling him to get down to the corner of Le Van Duyet and Phan Dinh Phung—a busy intersection in Saigon—as soon as he could. Halberstam quickly made his way to the intersection and when he arrived, he could hear Buddhist chants and believed it was just another demonstration, which had become a regular occurrence following the events in Hue. However, once Halberstam looked to the center of the circle, he could see Thich Quang Duc burning himself to death. According to Halberstam, "flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear

[37] Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire,* 198.

the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering."[38] Later Halberstam had learned that Quang Duc was a Buddhist priest who had come to the square as part of the Buddhist demonstration, had been doused in gasoline by two other Buddhist priests, assumed the "lotus" position,[39] and lit a match to set himself on fire. Halberstam recalls, "as he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him."[40] Fire and rescue personnel attempted to respond to the scene; however, Buddhist monks blocked trucks from entering the square. After about five minutes, the fire had burned out and all that was left was Quang Duc's blackened and smoking body.

That evening, thousands of monks, students, and laypeople gathered at Xa Loi Pagoda to pay their respects during the funeral ceremony. The sheer scale of the turnout reflected the profound emotional and political impact of Quang Duc's self-immolation, which had already begun to reverberate throughout Vietnamese society and beyond. This highly charged atmosphere did not go unnoticed by the authorities. Increased police presence surrounded the pagoda, a clear indication of the government's unease over the growing Buddhist resistance and the symbolic power of Quang Duc's protest. Despite the watchful eyes of the state, the funeral became a powerful demonstration of solidarity, amplifying the monks' demands for religious freedom.[41]

The night of Quang Duc's self-immolation, President Diem held a nationwide radio address and pleaded for peace.[42] According to Halberstam's initial report for the *New York Times*, published the day following the immolation, President Diem had claimed that Quang Duc's death

[38] Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire.*
[39] The lotus position is a common meditation posture in Buddhism and other spiritual practices. It involves sitting cross-legged on the floor with one foot resting on top of the opposite thigh and hands are placed in the lap or on the knees.
[40] Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire,* 211.
[41] Howard Jones and Nicholas B. Cullather, "Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2003): 270.
[42] Jones, "Death of a Generation," 270.

had "made [him] very sorry."[43] However, he insisted that extremists had "twisted the facts," attempting to defame his administration. Following his statements, the motivations of President Diem and his family were clear to the Vietnamese people and fed the ongoing resentment for his rule. Halberstam claims that "to Madame Nhu, [Diem's sister-in-law], this event was simply a barbecue and an affront, but to thousands of Vietnamese, it was an emotional and momentous occasion."[44]

Figure 1: An image taken of Thich Quang Duc by Malcolm Browne on June 11th, 1963, for the Associated Press (AP). (AP Photo / Malcolm Browne)

The famous photograph captured by Malcolm Browne, Figure 1, quickly spread throughout international news outlets, immortalizing the event and cementing its place in history. Within 24 hours, the harrowing image of Quang Duc's self-immolation appeared on the front pages of major newspapers across the globe.[45] The photograph became a powerful visual indictment of the Diem regime's religious persecution, intensifying international pressure on the South Vietnamese government. It also stirred public opinion in the United States, raising questions about American support for Diem and contributing to a shift in U.S. foreign policy. In fact, President Kennedy had seen the photograph of Quang Duc's self-immolation in the morning newspaper on June 11th and was stunned. He later met with the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, to issue a statement to William Trueheart at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon stating, "FYI—If Diem does not take prompt and effective steps to re-establish Buddhist confidence in him we will have to re-examine our

[43] David Halberstam, "Diem Asks Peace in Religion Crisis; But Buddhists Still Protest–Dispute Seems Worse," *New York Times,* June 12, 1963.
[44] Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire,* 211.
[45] Jones, "Death of a Generation," 269.

entire relationship with his regime."[46] Browne's shocking photo both preserved a critical moment in history and demonstrated the profound impact that media can have in shaping public consciousness and influencing political events.

Quang Duc's self-immolation not only symbolized spiritual defiance but also acted as a catalyst for transforming a localized religious grievance into a nationwide political uprising. This transformation highlighted the interconnectedness of religious and political struggles in South Vietnam, demonstrating how acts of moral and personal sacrifice possess the ability to drive systemic political change.

Mohamed Bouazizi: The Death That Sparked a Revolution

At just ten years old, Mohamed Bouazizi became the sole breadwinner of his family, who lived in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. In his early life, Bouazizi balanced school and work in order to financially support his mother and five younger siblings. According to an interview his family did with the British newspaper *The Independent*, his family had owned farming land with their neighbors where they grew olives and almonds.[47] It had earned the family decent money for a time, but sales eventually went down, and the bank seized their land. One of Bouazizi's siblings, Leila, said that she and her brother had sent appeals to both the bank and the governor; however, nobody listened. By the time he was nineteen years old, he had left school to work full-time. In an interview with Yasmine Ryan for *Al-Jazeera*, his mother said, "he didn't expect to study because we didn't have money."[48] He worked as a produce vendor at a local market until his self-immolation at twenty-six years old.

[46] Ray E. Boomhower, *The Ultimate Protest: Malcolm W. Browne, Thich Quang Duc, and the News Photograph That Stunned the World* (Albuquerque: High Road Books, 2024), 138.
[47] Kim Sengupta, "Tunisia: 'I Have Lost My Son…'" *The Independent*, January 21, 2011.
[48] Yasmine Ryan, "The Tragic Life of a Street Vendor," *Al Jazeera*, January 20, 2011.

On the morning of December 17th, 2010, a municipal inspector by the name of Faida Hamdy attempted to confiscate Bouazizi's fruit, and when he tried to get it back from her, she slapped him. According to *New York Times* Reporter Kareem Fahim, "when municipal inspectors would arrive, the vendors had three options: to run and leave the fruit that some of them had bought on credit, to offer a bribe or to pay a fine of 20 dinars, the equivalent of about $14, or several days' wages."[49] When the altercation between Bouazizi and Hamdy became physical, two of her colleagues joined her in forcing Bouazizi to the ground. Relatives and fellow produce vendors of Bouazizi told reporters that he had become used to police brutality and would be frequently harassed by municipal officers. During this altercation, the officers confiscated his produce and produce scale. Bouazizi then walked to a local municipal building to ask for his stuff back, hoping this would remedy the situation. Instead, he was beaten by officers again. He then walked to the governor's office, demanding that someone hear his grievances; however, officials refused to meet with him. Sometime after noon, Bouazizi returned to the regional council building after buying two liters of paint thinner, doused himself with the accelerant, and set himself on fire. According to an interview *CBS News* did with his friend Jamil, another local food vendor, right before he lit himself on fire, Bouazizi cried out, "How do you expect me to make a living?"[50] People rushed to the scene to help Bouazizi; however, with no fire extinguishers around, they had to wait for the ambulance to arrive. He was immediately rushed to the hospital where doctors

Figure 2: Photo from December 28th, 2010, where former Tunisian President visits Mohamed Bouazizi in the intensive care unit (AP Photo / Tunisian Presidency)

[49] Kareem Fahim, "Slap to a Man's Pride Set Off Tumult in Tunisia," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2011.
[50] Bob Simon, "How a Slap Sparked Tunisia's Revolution," *CBS News*, February 20, 2011.

treated his burns. He stayed in intensive care for almost one month before succumbing to his injuries on January 4th, 2011.[51]

Ultimately, Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation became the catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and the broader Arab Spring, a wave of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) against entrenched autocratic regimes. According to Marc Lynch, an American political scientist known for his work in Middle Eastern studies:

> This was an extraordinary moment in world politics. Millions of people mobilized in the streets across more than a dozen countries almost simultaneously. Participation in these protests transcended social class, religious and ethnic differences, and political ideology. They self-consciously constructed their political struggle as one which transcended national boundaries and rejected the existing rules of politics. The rhythms and dynamics of politics across an entire region were synchronized, with intense interaction and demonstration effects moving from one Arab state to another.[52]

Bouazizi's act of self-sacrifice, born out of frustration with systemic corruption, police harassment, and economic hardship, resonated deeply with the Tunisian people as well as individuals throughout the region, many of whom were facing similar struggles. Lynch describes the order of the region at this time as an "order built around counter-terrorism and containing Iran [which] nurtured its own internal contradictions and consistently failed to produce genuine stability or security. Arab autocrats were firmly in charge, but they were rotting from within. States struggled with massive economic problems, including growing inequality, corruption, and unemployment."[53] In general, autocratic regimes throughout the greater MENA region were increasingly unstable, experiencing economic fragility and growing unrest among civilians. Bouazizi's public protest on December 17, 2010, sparked outrage and ignited mass demonstrations that quickly spread beyond his hometown of Sidi Bouzid to the capital, Tunis, and other countries.[54] These protests, initially centering economic grievances, evolved into a

[51] Suman Gupta, *Usurping Suicide: The Political Resonances of Individual Deaths* (Zed Books Ltd, 2017), 54.
[52] Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (Public Affairs, 2016), 48.
[53] Lynch, *The New Arab Wars,* 18.
[54] Lynch, *The New Arab Wars,* 47-51.

broader call for political change, social justice, and an end to authoritarian rule throughout the greater MENA region.

The momentum generated by Bouazizi's suicide led to sustained protests, labor strikes, and international media attention, which ultimately forced Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country. This marked the first successful overthrow of an Arab leader during the Arab Spring and demonstrated the power of individual acts of defiance to galvanize collective action. Author Suman Gupta, who studied the political and social receptions of suicide, claims, "immediately after Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, and particularly after his demise eighteen days later, it seemed self-evident that an ordinary individual can spur a protesting crowd into being, and that the protesting crowd is composed of ordinary individuals. Moreover, the conceptual line from ordinary individual to protesting crowd seemed not merely to lead from a spark to a single explosion but a series of explosions aimed at a number of oppressive regimes."[55]

Beyond Tunisia, Bouazizi's self-immolation inspired similar protests in countries across the Middle East, where citizens mobilized against long-standing authoritarian regimes. According to Gupta:

> Others were roused to protest because some such accounts of Bouazizi's protest resonated with their individual lives. They understood Bouazizi's tipping point as a plausible experience within their own lives and as a synecdoche, symbol or symptom of malaise within their shared environment. Some recognized Bouazizi's tipping point as a culmination of other tipping points–the act that crystallises the unremarked suicides, failed protests, unobserved gestures of having reached an unbearable impasse, enacted already by other individuals…in that moment, Bouazizi the individual became an aggregate of all those other individuals. And these perceptions took hold and became collectivised, another topping point was enacted: a move from the implosive, where the ordinary individual tips over into self-destruction when faced by something unremittingly unbearable, to the explosive, where ordinary individuals are tipped over into the protesting crowds to confront that which is unbearable.[56]

[55] Gupta, *Usurping Suicide,* 55.
[56] Gupta, *Usurping Suicide,* 65-66.

His death became a symbol of resistance against government oppression and economic inequality, reflecting the shared frustrations of millions across the region. The ripple effects of his suicide not only reshaped the political landscape of Tunisia but also underscored the profound influence a single act of protest can have in igniting widespread social and political transformation.

Aaron Bushnell: Protesting U.S. Support for Israel's Killing of Palestinians

Bushnell's self-immolation was an act of protest against the ongoing conflict in Gaza and oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli government, which intensified on October 7th, 2023, when Hamas, a Palestinian militant group, killed roughly 1,200 people and took another 250 hostages according to Israeli authorities.[57] Since the attack, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has launched consistent bombing campaigns in Gaza and the West Bank against Palestinian civilians. Bushnell's action was specifically in protest of the civilian death toll in Gaza over the course of the four months from October 7th until his death in February. At the time of Bushnell's death, "at least 29,782 [Palestinians had] been killed in the Gaza Strip," according to *The Washington Post*.[58] The United States has had a long-standing history as an ally of Israel, offering military and financial support. According to the U.S. Embassy in Israel, "The U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship is strong, anchored by over $3 billion in Foreign Military Financing annually. In addition to financial support, the U.S. participates in a high level of exchanges with Israel, to include joint military exercises, military research, and weapons development."[59] At the time of Bushnell's self-immolation, the Biden administration had authorized giving Israel the annual

[57] Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Colbi Edmonds, "U.S. Airman's Winding Path Ended in Fiery Protest of War in Gaza," *New York Times*, March 2, 2024.
[58] Emily Davies, Peter Hermann, and Dan Lamothe, "Airman Who Set Self on Fire Grew Up on Religious Compound, Had Anarchist Past," *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2024.
[59] Policy & History, U.S. Embassy in Israel

$3.8 billion in military assistance, as well as asked Congress to approve an additional $14 billion.[60]

On February 25th, 2024 Aaron Bushnell, an active member of the United States Air Force, self-immolated outside of the Israeli Embassy in Washington D.C. Before the act, Bushnell began a live stream on Twitch, an American social media platform, which he would use to document the demonstration. Before dousing himself in flammable liquid, he said, "My name is Aaron Bushnell. I am an active-duty member of the US Air Force, and I will no longer be complicit in genocide. I'm about to engage in an extreme act of protest—but compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers, it's not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal."[61] After this statement, Bushnell set his phone down on the pavement, stood in front of the gate at the embassy dressed in his military combat uniform, doused himself in an accelerant, and lit himself on fire. Bushnell repeatedly shouted "Free Palestine" and then collapsed. A police officer and US Secret Service Members were the first to respond to the scene, scrambling to put out the fire. The video shows one of the security agents had "kept a gun pointed at Bushnell's flaming body, [and] an officer with a fire extinguisher was heard screaming at him, "I don't need guns; I need fire extinguishers!"[62] By the time D.C. Fire and EMS personnel responded to the scene, the fire had been extinguished. Bushnell was then rushed to a local D.C. hospital, where he died that evening as a result of his injuries.[63]

According to a statement made by the Air Force following Bushnell's death, Bushnell "was a cyber defense operations specialist with the 531st Intelligence Support Squadron at Joint

[60] Patricia Zengerle, "US Democrats Push Biden Administration Over Civilian Toll in Israel's Gaza Campaign," *Reuters*, January 19, 2024. For more information on the relationship between the U.S. and Israel, see: Charles Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,* (Bedford/St. Martins, 2013).
[61] Seraj Assi, "Aaron Bushnell Refused to Be Silent on the Horrors in Gaza," *Jacobin*, February 26, 2024.
[62] Assi, *Jacobin*, 2024.
[63] Assi, *Jacobin*, 2024.

Base San Antonio-Lackland in Texas, and had been in the Air Force since May 2020."[64] One of Bushnell's friends, whom he had met in basic training in May of 2020, Levi Pierpont, spoke to *The Washington Post* about the last time he saw his friend. According to Pierpont, "he grew disillusioned with the military over time—concerned with what he saw as flippant attitudes toward violence within the force."[65] Though Bushnell was always interested in social justice, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 initiated Bushnell's interest in protesting state-sanctioned violence, Pierpont claims. As Bushnell's military dissent grew, he considered leaving the military early, however, he ultimately decided that he was close enough to the end of his service that he could stick it out. His service was scheduled to end in May of 2024, just a few months after his death.

The Pentagon held a press briefing the day after Bushnell's self-immolation, where Pentagon Spokesperson, Air Force Major General Pat Ryder, responded to an *Associated Press* reporter's questions. Throughout this exchange, Ryder neglected to call Bushnell by his name, instead referring to him as the "airman", nor did he acknowledge Bushnell's suicide, rather calling it "the incident." He continuously deflected questions regarding his military personnel and their growing concerns about supporting military operations targeting civilians. The reporter's question seemed to ask what the Secretary of Defense's plan was to address internal opposition amongst U.S. service members, to which Ryder responded that the United States' support for Israel was "ironclad." This exposes a fundamental disregard for the concerns of military personnel by the Department of Defense.

Bushnell's act can be interpreted as an extreme expression of solidarity with those he sought to defend, as well as a deliberate attempt to draw attention to systemic violence and

[64] Davies, etc. *The Washington Post*, 2024.
[65] Davies, etc. *The Washington Post*, 2024.

military intervention. It could be argued that Bushnell was motivated by a profound commitment to collective values—specifically, a rejection of state violence and imperialist policies—and that his self-immolation was intended as a catalyst for social or political change. His decision to engage in such a drastic form of protest suggests that he viewed his sacrifice as a necessary and powerful means of confronting injustice. By making his suffering visible, Bushnell not only underscored the moral and ethical weight of his cause but also sought to inspire action, challenge complacency, and provoke public discourse on the issues he condemned.

Figure 3: On February 26th, 2024, demonstrators held a candlelit vigil for Bushnell outside of the Israeli Embassy. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

Bushnell's self-immolation also uniquely reflects the theory of moral injury as defined by American clinical psychiatrist Jonathan Shay. Moral injury, as Shay conceptualizes it, is "present when there has been (a) a betrayal of "what's right"; (b) either by a person in legitimate authority (my definition), or by one's self—"I did it" (Litz, Maguen, Nash, et al.); (c) in a high stakes situation."[66] In Bushnell's case, his self-immolation can be seen as a response to moral injury: a reaction to the perceived betrayal of ethical principles by the institutions—The United States Air Force—he served and possibly a reckoning with his direct or indirect participation in those systems. His act serves as an extreme but deeply symbolic response to the ethical contradictions he confronted, aligning with broader discussions on the psychological and moral toll of military service and state violence.

Patterns of Protest

[66] Jonathan Shay, "Moral Injury," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31, no. 2 (2014): 182.

Self-immolation as a form of political resistance reveals common patterns across the cases of Thich Quang Duc, Mohamed Bouazizi, and Aaron Bushnell. Each act arose from a profound sense of injustice coupled with a perceived lack of alternative avenues for meaningful change. In these cases, self-immolation functioned not only as a form of personal sacrifice but also as a deliberate and highly visible act aimed at drawing attention to systemic oppression. In each case, these individuals viewed their self-immolation as a means to force public consciousness and political accountability when other avenues had failed. In each case, other methods of activism or self-advocacy were attempted before resorting to self-immolation. This pattern suggests that self-immolation is chosen when individuals perceive themselves as having exhausted all other means of protest.

These cases also complicate the ethical boundaries between suicide and political self-sacrifice. Drawing on Durkheim's typology, self-immolation can be interpreted as a form of "altruistic suicide," where the act is performed for a perceived greater good. However, the political intentionality behind these acts challenges conventional notions of suicide as individual pathology. Rather, we can learn from Durkheim that the decision to commit suicide is contingent upon social contexts. Quang Duc was an integral member of his Buddhist community, which was collectively being suppressed by the South Vietnamese government. Similarly, Bouazizi was a victim of economic misfortune and police brutality. It is important to recognize the sociopolitical factors that contribute to the decision to self-immolate rather than pathologizing these individuals. Each case underscores how self-immolation blurs the line between personal despair and political defiance, transforming tragedy into political action.

Trauma stemming from structural violence also plays a critical role in both the motivation for and the impact of self-immolation. Personal trauma, whether from religious persecution,

economic marginalization, or moral injury, intersects with collective trauma experienced by oppressed communities. Quang Duc's act responded to the spiritual and cultural trauma of Buddhist repression. Bouazizi's death symbolized the collective suffering of disenfranchised citizens under authoritarian regimes. Bushnell's protest reflected moral injury related to his identity as a military officer and the ethical weight of state violence. These acts, while individually motivated, resonate with broader societal grievances, transforming personal suffering into a catalyst for collective action.

The self-immolations of Quang, Mohamed Bouazizi, and Aaron Bushnell raise ethical and psychological questions about agency, trauma, and the conditions that drive people to sacrifice their lives by fire. By analyzing these cases together, it becomes clear that self-immolation is not only an act of personal defiance, but also a powerful tool for collective political transformation, demanding sustained attention to the structural conditions that produce such extreme forms of protest. Recognizing all cases of self-immolation within a post-colonial framework challenges a simplistic narrative of individual distress and underscores the need for structural responses to collective suffering. By addressing the legacies of colonial violence and engaging with the systemic conditions that perpetuate trauma, societies can move toward more meaningful and lasting solutions that honor both the memory of those who have self-immolated and the communities they sought to represent.

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