



dying for a cause—

alone?

by michael biggs

After September 11, 2001, dying for a cause became indelibly associated with suicide attacks, at least in North America and Europe. Yet, another kind of politically motivated suicide doesn't intend to kill others or cause material damage—self-immolation.

Since 1963, several hundred—perhaps as many as 3,000—individuals have sacrificed their lives in this kind of protest. They include Vietnamese Buddhists, South Korean leftists, Indian students, Chinese adherents of Falun Gong, and Kurdish nationalists in Western Europe.

Protest by self-immolation provides another perspective on suicide attacks. The comparison undermines some common explanations for suicide attacks, like organizational indoctrination or heavenly rewards. Self-immolation is also important in its own right. It takes us to places sociologists in the West rarely consider, and it also poses the theoretical puzzle of why it makes sense to die without inflicting any tangible cost on the opponent.

the spread of self-sacrifice

Protest by self-immolation has become associated with death by fire, but the etymological root of “immolation” is sacrifice. All methods of self-killing are included in my definition. It also includes attempts where the individual's life was saved. Hunger strikes are excluded because a hunger striker merely threatens death by starvation, whereas self-immolation is unconditional.

This act might appear an archaic survival from the pre-modern era, but it's really a response to two modern developments. One is the mass media, which can broadcast this dramatic act to a far greater audience than is physically present. The other is the transformation of state repression, which put an end to executions organized as a public spectacle and involving the deliberate infliction of pain. These were the preconditions for self-immolation as a form of protest.

Several examples can be found in the first half of the 20th century. Min Yonghwan, a Korean official, stabbed himself to death in 1905 to protest against the annexation of his country by Japan. He addressed letters to the Western powers and the Korean people. Newspaper publication ensured his message had an enormous effect in stimulating resistance to Japan. A Western example is Stefan Lux, who shot himself in the League of Nations in 1936 to protest against the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany. Again, his act was predicated on the media—his final letters were addressed to British and American newspapers. Sadly, his act had no effect.

Before the 1960s, there is no evidence of diffusion across cultures. Self-immolation was an idiosyncratic individual act. This changed after a Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, set fire to himself in Saigon in 1963. He described this as a “donation to the struggle” against the Catholic dictatorship supported by the United States. Killing oneself in this manner was an established, though controversial, monastic practice in Mahayana Buddhism.

But Quang Duc wasn't simply reenacting ancient tradition. The leaders of the Buddhist movement had a sophisticated understanding of Western media, and they orchestrated the death for maximum publicity. An American reporter photographed the scene (left), and the resulting image of the burning monk was transmitted around the world. Quang Duc's death had an immediate effect in South Vietnam, galvanizing demonstrations against the regime and inspiring further acts of self-immolation. The U.S. government was particularly troubled by these acts, which graphically contradicted propaganda about “freedom” in this frontline of the Cold War. Within five months, the United States tacitly approved a coup against the dictator.

Quang Duc's death had an immediate effect in South Vietnam, galvanizing demonstrations against the regime and inspiring further acts of self-immolation.

The impact of Quang Duc's sacrifice spread far beyond Southeast Asia. Individuals in other countries began to adopt this form of protest. Many explicitly mentioned Vietnamese Buddhists as the model; for others, the model is implied by the choice of death by fire rather than another method. In some cases, self-immolation was adopted because of its connection with the Vietnam cause. Thus an American Quaker, Norman Morrison, set himself on fire outside the Pentagon in 1965. Most importantly, self-immolation became a means of protest in unrelated conflicts. The tactic was adopted by diverse groups, from Tamils in South India rejecting Hindi as the official language to East Europeans opposing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

By 1969, more than 80 individuals in at least 15 countries

had killed themselves, or attempted to do so, as an act of protest. Quang Duc was the progenitor of almost all these acts. They were modeled either directly on his action or indirectly on another's action that can in turn be traced back to him. Self-immolation had become part of the repertoire of protest.

gathering numbers

In gathering information about self-immolation it would be easy to focus on the handful of individuals whose deaths earned them an enduring place in historical memory. But this would yield a distorted view. The standard method of compiling data on collective protest is a systematic search of newspapers in a single national state. By contrast, my search was global in scope, extending from 1963 to 2002.

For practical reasons, I searched English-language sources. For reports before 1977, my research assistants and I scanned the *New York Times* and (London) *Times*. For reports after this date we had access to the full text of articles circulated by newswires like Associated Press.

These sources won't provide comprehensive coverage, of course. Totalitarian states can prevent reporters from gathering information. For example, in 1980 tourists in Moscow saw someone on fire in Red Square. Attempting to take photographs, they immediately had their film exposed by security agents. The authorities insisted, absurdly, it was merely a burning cigarette or garbage fire. It's impossible to know whether this was an act of protest or a personal suicide. But even where information is freely available, the space for news is limited—a newspaper has only so many pages to fill—and events in far-away places are less likely to attract editorial attention. However, self-immolation is so rare it's far more newsworthy than routine protests such as demonstrations.

My systematic search gathered information on 533 individual acts in the four decades since 1963. This number is likely the tip of the iceberg. More comprehensive numbers are available for particular times and places, which makes it possible to guess what fraction of cases get reported by the sources I use. The real total could hardly be less than 800; it seems unlikely to exceed 3,000. By far the largest wave occurred in India in 1990, after the government proposed increasing affirmative action quotas for lower castes in universities and government employment. Within 10 weeks, at least 220 people—predominantly students from privileged castes—committed self-immolation.

For perspective on the overall scale of the phenomenon, consider the number of suicide attacks. A truck laden with explosives was driven into the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut in 1981. This was the progenitor, akin to Quang Duc's immolation, of the modern suicide attack. The most comprehensive enumeration for the period from 1981 to 2005 yields a total of 1,100 suicide attacks (remarkably, nearly half of these occurred in Iraq in the last three years). Some of these attacks involved

more than one individual, of course. Nevertheless, we can see the numbers are of similar magnitude.

Compared with suicide attacks, self-immolation has spread widely around the world. My search revealed cases from three dozen countries. Table 1 provides a summary by country. Kurdish refugees living in Europe are counted separately as their acts were part of a struggle against the Turkish state. Three-quarters of the total are concentrated in just three countries. A valid cross-national comparison requires adjustment for urban population. The Kurdish diaspora had by far the highest rate, followed by Vietnam (South Vietnam until 1975), South Korea, and India.

Protest by self-immolation, 1963–2002

Country	Number of self-immolations	Rate per million urban population
India	255	1.4
South Vietnam/Vietnam	92	8.0
South Korea	43	1.6
USA	29	0.2
USSR/ex-USSR	17	0.1
Kurds outside Turkey	14	14.0
Romania	14	1.2
China	9	0.0
Pakistan	9	0.3
France	5	0.5
Japan	5	0.1
Czechoslovakia	4	0.5
East/West Germany	4	0.1
Turkey	4	0.2
Bulgaria	3	0.5
Chile	3	0.0
Taiwan	3	0.2
UK	3	0.1
Malaysia	2	0.3
Thailand	2	0.2
Other countries	13	0.0
Total	533	0.3

cultural prevalence

Why is self-immolation prevalent in some countries rather than others? There's no association with the frequency of protest nor with the overall suicide rate. Emile Durkheim argued that different types of suicide are produced by different types of society. Excessive social integration, when people interact intensively and identify with society as a whole, leads to what he called altruistic suicide. Although social integration is noto-



Norman R. Morrison, who burned himself to death at the Pentagon to climax months of concern and protest over the war in Vietnam, is shown in happier days with his wife, Anne, and two of their three children in a 1961 photo. AP Photo

riously difficult to measure, some measures of attitudes can be derived from the World Values Survey. These measures, however, aren't associated with self-immolation.

The only significant association is with religion. The proportions of Hindus and Buddhists in a country are positively correlated with the rate of self-immolation, whereas the proportions of Christians and Muslims are not. These relationships pertain to society as a whole rather than the particular individuals who sacrifice themselves. The leftists in South Korea, for example, were guided by Marxism rather than Buddhism. Moreover, even those with religious vocations didn't act for specifically religious reasons (as will be discussed below). Nevertheless, religious traditions were clearly significant in shaping the cultural background for individuals' actions.

Looking to the religious valuation of self-inflicted death in sacred literatures, neither Christianity nor Islam reveal prominent exemplars. Jesus and Husayn were martyred by their enemies. By contrast, Hindu Puranas extol the karmic benefits that may be derived by killing oneself in a place of pilgrimage. Tales of the Buddha's past lives include instances of self-sacrifice; for example, a Mahayana sutra describes him killing himself to feed a hungry tiger. Within both traditions the legitimacy of religious suicide was disputed, nevertheless such acts continued into the 20th century. There may also be a more mundane cultural explanation: the method of disposing of corpses. Cremation is deeply rooted in Indic religions. By extension, death by fire seems sacred in a way that's still repugnant in the West despite the recent importation of cremation.

These enduring cultural differences are important but shouldn't be overstated. After all, protest by self-immolation has occurred in the West, and the rate has been highest among Kurds in Europe.

theoretical puzzle

The logic of suicide attacks seems clear—by not preserving their own lives, attackers can inflict greater harm on the enemy. The mass carnage of September 11 was possible only because the attackers planned to die.

However, this logic doesn't apply where the perpetrator is the sole victim. This theoretical puzzle recurs when self-immolation is compared to other kinds of protest. Strikes, boycotts, and sit-ins are effective in large measure because they inflict an economic cost on the opponent. Self-immolation imposes no apparent cost on anyone but the individual. Why, then, did so many people choose to sacrifice themselves?

To answer this question we must understand the individual's own reasons for choosing such an extreme act. Evidence comes from written declarations of intent and comments from survivors, as well as from those who considered the act but didn't carry it out. A few cases are obviously personal suicide disguised as protest. A few others suggest psychiatric disorder.

Although religious belief and discipline undoubtedly prepare an individual for self-sacrifice, the promise of supernatural rewards isn't a significant motivation.

For the most part, however, the reasons for self-immolation make sense.

Two are most common. One is to appeal to bystanders not directly involved in the conflict. Many Buddhists in Vietnam overtly appealed to American public opinion because the U.S. government ultimately determined their own government's policy. At the age of 14, Nejla Coskun set herself on fire in London in 1999 to protest against the capture of a Kurdish leader. She was appealing to the British public who were unaware of her people's plight. "I wanted someone to stop and think about us," she explained afterward. Implicitly, the



Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, burns himself to death on a Saigon street June 11, 1963, to protest alleged persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. AP Photo/Malcolm Browne

appeal derives its potency from sacrifice. Self-immolation isn't merely symbolic. The fact that someone is willing to pay the ultimate price for a collective cause provides a real signal about the extent of injustice—unless the act is interpreted as manifesting psychiatric disorder. As Lux declared in 1936, "When a man dies deliberately after serious reflection he can ask to be heard."

The second common reason for self-immolation is to exhort greater commitment from others who share the collective cause. This is not a matter of altering their beliefs, but rather galvanizing them to engage in protest. An example was Jan Palach, who set himself alight in 1969 to protest against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. "Because our nations are on the brink of despair," went his note, "we have decided to express our protest and wake up the people of this land." He concocted an elaborate threat, based on the fiction that he was the first in a group of volunteers. "If our demands are not fulfilled within five days..., and if the people do not support us sufficiently through a strike of indefinite duration, more torches will burn." Implicitly, this was calculated to induce guilt among his fellow citizens: If they remained passive, then they would be responsible for further deaths.

One might expect desire for a more exalted existence after death would be prominent, as is often suggested for Muslims who volunteer for "martyrdom operations." This motivation is notably absent for self-immolation, even among those with religious vocations. In Vietnam, many embraced Buddhism as a means of attaining national liberation and social justice rather than as a quest for spiritual perfection. Moreover, religious beliefs don't invariably promise eternal reward. Coskun, as a

Muslim, actually expected punishment after death for defiling the body God gave her. Although religious belief and discipline undoubtedly prepare an individual for self-sacrifice, the promise of supernatural rewards isn't a significant motivation.

mixed success

It's difficult to say how often self-immolation succeeds in exhorting fellow adherents or appealing to bystanders. Protest by self-immolation is never the main tactic of any social movement, it is combined with routine forms of protest, like demonstrations and strikes. Therefore it's impossible to attribute the success of any movement, which itself is difficult to evaluate, to this one form of protest.

Most cases of self-immolation had little or no effect. An example is the first American to die in protest against American policy in Vietnam in 1965, Alice Herz. She set herself on fire on a street corner in Detroit, a place of no symbolic relevance for the cause and far from the nation's media centers. At the other extreme, a handful of individuals—including Quang Duc and Palach—had a tremendous impact. Mourners at their funerals numbered in the tens of thousands. Their memories are still revered decades later. Palach's grave in Prague remained such a place of pilgrimage that the pro-Soviet regime eventually moved his remains to a less accessible location. On the 20th anniversary of his death in 1989, police had to use tear gas and water cannons to break up a demonstration in the square

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where he had set fire to himself.

Self-immolation can be so potent because it provokes pity for a victim whose unjust death is attributed to the opponent, and at the same time admiration for a hero who willingly died for the cause. Sociologist Hyojoung Kim has analyzed testimonials by pilgrims to a memorial for Park Sung Hee, a leftist student who set herself on fire in South Korea in 1991. Visitors who experienced a feeling of shame, comparing their own modest contribution to the cause with Park's ultimate sacrifice, were most likely to express renewed commitment. As one wrote: "I resolve that I will become a fighter [metaphorically] who will not be ashamed to stand before you."

comparing sacrifices

Self-immolation may shed light on suicide attacks. In a fundamental sense, the two phenomena are disconnected: Actors do not treat the two methods as alternatives. It's not as if an individual resolves to die for the cause and then chooses whether or not to kill. The fundamental decision is whether the situation is war (in the broadest sense) or protest. Within the horizon of that situation, the decision is then whether to make the supreme sacrifice instead of engaging in a less costly form of action.

Many scholars who study suicide attacks emphasize the supreme importance of organization. By implication, self-sacrifice is only conceivable after an individual has been subjected to ideological indoctrination and social pressure. In the vast majority of cases of self-immolation, however, individuals acted alone. Quang Duc's action was exceptional in being orchestrated and endorsed by a movement organization. Even then the initiative came from him. The comparison proves an organizational context isn't necessary to induce someone to die for a cause.

what the literature says

Few have studied self-immolation or suicide as a form of protest, but their studies do aid our understanding of the act.

Those who commit protest suicide understand the act to be an exchange between themselves and those around them, scholars have theorized. These suicides demand a response from those affected by them, according to studies by Karin Andriolo as well as Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern.

Self-immolation, specifically, relies on the public's understanding of their obligation to respond—if the public sees the suicide as an isolated act, rather than an exchange, it fails as a call to action.

Other scholars have shed light on why some choose to protest through an act of self-immolation rather than a homicidal act like a suicide bombing. In many cases the act serves as both an escape and a protest. Sang-Hwan Jang wrote about Korean laborers who felt forced to commit protest suicide because their survival was threatened by government forces. Similarly, Robert Topmiller found some Buddhist women in South Vietnam used self-immolation as a way of simultaneously protesting while escaping patriarchy and reincarnation.

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Comparison can also alert us to unexpected similarities. Although the logic of suicide attacks treats death as a means to the end of killing the enemy, in some cases death seems to be sought as an end in itself. This is most apparent where escape is feasible. The two successive terrorist attacks by Jihadists in London in July 2005 didn't really require a suicide mission. After all, the bombers in Madrid the year before had killed nearly 200 passengers without dying, and the second set of attackers in London were able to flee after their explosives failed to detonate. In such cases the willingness to die seems as important as the killing.

A suicide attack isn't likely to win sympathy from neutral bystanders. But the example of self-sacrifice may inspire people who already have some identification with the cause—just like protest by self-immolation.

recommended resources

Young-rae Cho. *A Single Spark: A Biography of Chun Tae-il* (Han Chul-hee, 2003). A fascinating biography of the trade unionist whose self-immolation in 1970 left an enduring legacy in South Korea.

Diego Gambetta (ed.). *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford University Press, 2005). A comprehensive volume focusing on suicide attacks, including a chapter on protest by self-immolation by the author.

Hyojoung Kim. "Shame, Anger, and Love in Collective Action: Emotional Consequences of Suicide Protest in South Korea, 1991," *Mobilization* 7 (2002): 159–76. An analysis of testimonials left by visitors to the memorial of a student who committed self-immolation.

B. C. Ben Park. "Sociopolitical Contexts of Self-Immolations in Vietnam and South Korea," *Archives of Suicide Research* 8 (2004): 81–97. Examines self-immolation from the perspective of theories of suicide.

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