

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations
The power of ideas

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Violent protests have increased substantially in SA – IRR

According to an organisation called Africa Check the IRR is 'wrong' in reporting that there has been a 96% increase in social protest action since 2010 - a figure we have calculated from data supplied by the police.

Social protest action is a term used by the IRR to describe 'violent public order events' that have their roots in the social fabric of the country and could therefore range from political protests to service delivery protests.

The South African Police Service (SAPS) record such protest action in significant detail, but Africa Check argues that the police wrongly classify protest action as violent when it is not. While we have long assumed that some incidents may be wrongly classified, it matters little when the overall number of incidents is considered. Indeed, the SAPS provided a clear explanation to Africa Check of their methods. If anything the police data would present an undercount of levels of violent protest action as they tend to classify an incident as violent only where police members are forced to intervene to restore order.

We also know that the sheer volume of incidents means that many are not being recorded by the SAPS at all. We suspect that the 96% figure is, therefore, a conservative minimum increase.

Africa Check also relies on arguments that political protests are different from social protests. This misunderstands our position - that it is impossible to say where politics starts and social pressures end and they are all one and the same.

Some leftist circles within South African academia often argue that the police are manipulating the number of protest actions upwards in order to justify draconian clampdowns on the right to protest. We have followed protest action and its causes for many decades and see no evidence of this being the case.

The SAPS is facing a barrage of violent protest action resulting from the broken social fabric of our society. While only higher levels of economic growth will fix that fabric, the police need to be given the resources, budgets, and equipment they need to safeguard the lives and property of the protestors and the public alike.

Ends.