

Australian police rapidly declare Sydney church attack a “terrorist” incident

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Within hours of a stabbing at a Sydney church on Monday night, New South Wales (NSW) Police declared the incident an act of terrorism, activating far-reaching police powers. They did so, despite professing to know little about the attacker, and under conditions where other acts of politically motivated violence have not received a prompt designation.

The attack occurred at the Christ The Good Shepherd Church in the south-western Sydney suburb of Wakeley. As Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel was delivering a sermon, a member of the audience leapt up and attacked him with a knife. Emmanuel was injured, requiring surgery, as was another clergyman. The sermon was being broadcast online before a large audience and footage of the attack was distributed widely on social media.

There were also disturbing scenes following the stabbing. A crowd of dozens grew to hundreds. Young men besieged the church building, where police were holding the alleged attacker, demanding that he be brought outside and chanting “an eye for an eye.”

Rocks were pelted at the police, while paramedics were trapped inside the church for up to three hours. The alleged stabber lost at least one finger, with unconfirmed allegations that it was chopped off by members of the mob.

The declaration that the incident was being investigated as a “terrorist attack” was made in the early hours of Tuesday morning, and approved by the NSW Labor government’s Police Minister Yasmin Catley at 1:44 am. On Tuesday, the attack was the subject of media conferences involving not only NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns, but also Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Mike Burgess, director-general of ASIO, the domestic spy agency.

In other words, there was an extremely rapid decision

to elevate what had occurred into a major national and even international incident.

Under draconian anti-terror legislation, defining an incident as a terrorist act triggers extraordinary police powers that override basic civil liberties. These include rights to stop and search a person, their possessions, vehicle or premises without a warrant, as well as provisions for the use of force.

In defending the terror designation, Minns asserted that it was not “performative.” Instead, he indicated the deliberate aim was to activate the police powers: “We’re not trying to judge one crime over another with this particular designation. The reason it’s required is particular changes to the legislation to enhance police powers.”

The details made public thus far, however, do not indicate why those powers are so urgently required.

In the first instance, there is the age of the alleged perpetrator. He was only 16 years old, and police have already stated they believe he was acting alone. The attack was crude, with the teenager allegedly using some sort of flick knife that he does not appear to have even opened properly.

NSW Police have stated the boy was known to them, but “not well known.” It has since emerged that he has had several brushes with authorities and the law over petty offences, including carrying a knife at school and at a train station during an altercation with other youths. There is no indication at this stage that these incidents were of a political or religious nature.

Then there is the issue of the timing. On Saturday afternoon, a man went on a rampage in Sydney’s Bondi Junction Westfield shopping centre, stabbing more than a dozen members of the public, six of them fatally. The proximity of the two incidents could indicate that the Westfield massacre, and its extensive news coverage,

inspired or contributed to the Wakeley church attack.

Already on Sunday, i.e., before the stabbing of the bishop, it had been revealed that the perpetrator of the Bondi massacre was a homeless schizophrenic man, whose actions were most likely the result of a mental health episode.

The primary basis for the terrorism designation in the Wakeley attack appears to be statements made by the boy. In video after the stabbing and as he was being detained, the youth stated that he would not have carried out the attack, but for statements made by Emmanuel critical of his religion, believed to be Islam.

While that may point to a religious motivation, it does not rule out other possibilities, including mental illness.

The response to previous incidents has been very different, with authorities on some occasions exceedingly reluctant to issue a terrorism designation.

In January this year, an improvised explosive device was placed on the car of a Sydney man, accompanied by a note demanding that he remove a Palestinian flag from his home. There were no national press conferences or terrorism designations, and the police, together with the corporate media, were at pains to point out that the device was not built in such a way that it could have been exploded.

When a man was arrested in March over the bomb, there was hardly any coverage and no statements from politicians. Despite the seemingly clear-cut political motivation behind his actions, he has not been charged with terrorism offences, but with relatively minor crimes including stalking and trespassing.

So whether an incident is deemed a terrorism offence or not is essentially a political decision.

The bogus “war on terror,” launched to justify the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, was also a war on democratic rights. Alongside justifying the criminal military operations abroad, it was used to vilify Muslims and incite racism. Almost all of the high-profile terrorism cases of the past two decades have involved extensive police entrapment, convictions for loose talk or both.

A particularly egregious example was revealed in February with the belated release of a transcript from a Melbourne Children’s Court. The documents exposed the entrapment of a vulnerable 13-year-old boy by Australian Federal Police, their Victorian state counterparts and the intelligence agencies.

Parents of the boy had approached the police in 2021, concerned that their autistic son had an unhealthy fixation on the Islamic State terror group. The police responded by deploying undercover agents to feed the boy’s obsession and encourage his radicalisation, before fitting him up on terrorism charges.

The release of the transcript was part of an official damage-control operation, which included limited criticisms of the entrapment. It nevertheless underscored the way in which key state authorities have at times actively encouraged terrorist ideologies and offences for political purposes, including to justify further police powers and to inflame divisions among ordinary people.

That is perhaps the most striking aspect of the response to the Wakeley incident. Albanese, Minns and other government leaders have called for “calm” and have insisted on the importance of “social cohesion.” But the breakneck speed with which they declared it a terror attack was only ever going to do the opposite, creating an atmosphere of panic and increasing the likelihood of communal conflicts.

That is in line with what governments have done over the past six months. As they have supported Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza, they have slandered the mass opposition as antisemitic and at times threatened to outlaw it. Politically and ideologically, they have cynically sought to reframe hostility to Israel’s imperialist-sponsored mass murder as a religiously grounded conflict between Jews and Muslims, knowing full well that this will only incite racism.

Such an atmosphere is conducive to provocations, and is almost guaranteed to agitate unstable and disoriented individuals, raising the danger of violent incidents.

The cultivation of this hothouse environment has been accompanied by major attacks on democratic rights. Minns, who rushed to activate sweeping police powers, was threatening to ban all protests in defence of the Palestinians less than six months ago.



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